

Secrets, lies, and double lives

the counterfeit lover



VERONICA LANCET

THE COUNTERFEIT LOVER

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PREFACE

Dear Reader,

The Counterfeit Lover is the third book in the War of Sins series and continues from where the Foiled Plan left off. This is **NOT** a standalone.

Previously, The Prodigal Son was the third book in the series but after negative feedback that it was a villain origin story set in the past, I've decided to unpublish it. Instead, I've tried to include all the relevant background information in this book.

If you would like to read The Prodigal Son and get the whole picture of Michele and Rafaelo's past, you can download it for free [HERE!](#)

Now for the requisite warnings:

This series is dark. It's **VERY** dark.

No one is a good guy.

Some characters may be **irredeemable**.

Please only read if you are comfortable with the following triggers. The books in the series will get progressively darker.

Trigger Warnings:

abuse, abortion, attempted rape, blood (gore), blood play, death, derogatory terms, death, drugs, guns, graphic violence, graphic sexual situations, depictions of torture, gaslighting, grooming, homophobia, incestuous situations, infertility, kidnapping, knife play, murder, mental illness, non-con/dubcon, necrophilia, ritualistic killing, substance abuse, mentions of suicide.

ONE

NOELLE

"I'M GOING CRAZY," I WHISPER AS I LEAN BACK, STARING AT THE CEILING.

The baggy gym suit I'm wearing is barely warm enough to keep me from shivering. That in itself is a luxury, since at some point I'd thought Michele would keep me naked to freeze to death here.

He hadn't. Instead, he'd barely spared me any attention at all.

None of his actions have made any sense so far, though. He's an enigma I can't decipher. I know what Raf and Cisco told me about him, yet the more information I glean, the more confused I become.

When he'd asked me to strip for the photo he wanted to send to Raf, he'd done his best to avoid glancing at me, almost as if he was disgusted by my naked skin. It hadn't been the first time either, since he'd done a similar thing at the piano recital when he'd ordered me to cover myself, looking away until I'd done so.

For all his attempts at tricking Raf into thinking he raped me, he never once touched me—not even in a clinical fashion. If I were to further speculate, I'd go as far as to say he's thoroughly disgusted by touch, the corner of his mouth curling down every time his hand made contact with my flesh—even with those gloves he usually wears.

And *that* is just plain odd.

The Michele Raf had told me about was an unrepentant fuckboy, going through the female population like one goes through socks. But then, he'd also described him as restless, drug riddled and extremely volatile.

The Michele I'd met? None of those things.

His light eyes seem to catch every single detail in the room, his manner calm and collected. And when he looks at you, there's this unmistakable

feeling that he knows *exactly* what you're thinking—and is already three steps ahead of you.

Maybe that's why we've been on the losing side from the beginning. Because Raf has *never* known the real Michele.

The truth is that he is scary—too scary, one might say.

There's a coldness that emanates from every pore in his body, and it's not because of his highly rational manner. He behaves as if he has *no* emotions whatsoever.

And *that* is where the danger lies.

No emotions means I have absolutely no sway over him. Neither my tears, nor my pleas will help my case, which means I need to get to his level if I have any hope of getting out of here alive.

I still don't know what he plans to do, especially since he's delayed his plans significantly. Otherwise, why keep me here? To torture me? To torture Raf with my absence?

For all his divided heart, Raf cares about me, and will undoubtedly walk right into Michele's trap.

Bringing my hands to my face, I scrub my eyes in an attempt to get myself to focus. I can't lose it. Not now...

I have no idea how many days have passed already.

The windowless room I'm stuck in doesn't give any indication of the passage of time. If anything, it contributes further to my growing mental instability.

Maybe that was his purpose all along—get me alone with my thoughts so I can end up killing myself with my *own* hands.

Aside from the picture he'd taken of me naked and with that white paint over my body, he's only visited me a couple of times—both barely brief enough to get a good look at me.

Does he really expect me to kill myself?

I roll my eyes at that thought. It's not as if I had anything with which to achieve that.

My meals are delivered by one of his men who waits for me to eat, watching carefully, before taking everything away. He always does an inventory of the cutlery to make sure I'm not stealing anything sharp.

As it stands, I doubt I could cause myself bodily harm.

To my psyche though... Well, that's another issue altogether.

I'd already been in a bad state of mind before Michele had conveniently

decided to kidnap me. Now, I'm just forced to face everything I'd tried to hold down for the longest time.

Raf, Lucero, and my own disintegrating sense of self.

I've already replayed everything on a loop, and nothing can stop the anguish that forms in my chest every time I remember Raf calling me by *her* name. Certainly, it's been long enough to realize that being alone with one's thoughts can be more painful than actual, physical pain.

But Raf's words aren't the only ones still echoing in my head.

Tormented screams and angry shouts resound in my ears, the noises so deafening, I can't seem to shut them out.

I see the blood.

On my hands.

Staining my face.

Soaking my clothes.

Blood is everywhere.

There are no particular memories to associate with these sensations. Still, they are part of my being, set to torture me with their mere existence at the drop of a hat.

The few times I've managed to doze off, I've slept poorly, the flashbacks from before clouding my mind and mixing up with my own fears and disillusionments.

I only need to close my eyes and I see Raf—he's draped in rags, his body battered, his eyes tortured. I see him staring at *me*.

His gaze is accusatory, and in that one look I can read the condemnation, the disdain, and most of all the *hate*. He looks at me as if he would like nothing more than to squash me. Take me under his boot and crush me like an insignificant insect.

And I wouldn't say no.

In that dreamworld—or better said, nightmare world—I face him head on, owing to my mistakes, ready to repent for each one of them. A deep sense of guilt and grief fills me to the brim, and taking one step forward towards him—towards that elusive image of him—my knees give out.

I kneel, my eyes cast down as I don't dare to meet his scathing gaze anymore. Not when I know myself guilty of such grievous sins, I should be executed on the spot for everything I've done to him.

Sometimes, the scene feels too real to be a dream. Other times, the background is too distorted for it to be a reality.

Yet one thing never changes—how I interact with the scene. I'm always ashamed. Beleaguered by an ineffable feeling of atonement and regret that weighs me down more and more with each passing second. And no matter how much I feel like I owe him my very life and essence of being, some things don't add up. I know what I've done to him, and why, theoretically, I should feel remorseful towards him.

I killed the one he loves.

But I don't regret it. In fact, I would do it again, and again, repeating the same action but each time more viciously until she'd be erased from this earth and from collective memory.

That is not how someone repentant reacts. It's contrary to everything I feel about him.

And *that* begs the question...

What did I do to him?

For a while now, I feel like I've opened Pandora's box and let every type of evil out into the world. But this time, I personally made sure that *hope* fled too.

Because if I harmed *him* in any way; if I hurt even one strand of hair on his beautiful head, then I could never forgive myself.

That's where I draw the line.

In my insanity, I could live with knowing that I've massacred an entire house full of people, that I've killed my own friend and confidante, but I could *never* forgive myself if I hurt *him*.

My heart beats wildly in my chest as I picture myself at the *hacienda*. Now, more than ever before, I force myself to remember everything—needing to know the magnitude of my sins before I can start repenting. But most of all, I'm trying to find a logic to the things I've blocked out.

Why did I forget only certain memories and not all? Why do I still remember the way Sergio had treated me?

The way I see it, if I blocked out everything traumatic that happened to me, then the abuse should have been the first to disappear from my mind.

I see my wedding day clearly. My family had taken me to Mexico for the wedding. The moment the priest had ended the ceremony, they'd left me alone with my new husband. Even for that time, the memories are shaky. I remember mostly impressions, emotions and pain. I'd barely been able to stand up after the beating I'd taken the wedding night, and as much as I'd like to recall what happened afterwards, I can't.

There's the feel of his belt on my skin, the sting of the leather against my lower back. I remember slaps and kicks, and I can still hear the vicious words ringing in my ear.

Useless.

He'd needed a wife to serve as his decoration and broodmare. I'd been the former but I have no recollection of the latter—thank God.

The image of the *hacienda* flashes before my eyes—the large house in the middle of an industrial field. There were huts and different buildings all around the area. Later, I would find out that's where they synthesized the new drugs.

Foggy at first, but slowly taking shape, I see other constructions. Wood and stone are all around as people work to lay the foundation of a new building. Aside from that, though, there's nothing else.

Picturing a labyrinth, I lead my mind down a dark road as I imagine the succession of events as I know it—my arrival, followed by my stay at the *hacienda*.

There are few moments I remember clearly—aside from the vicious beatings I withstood from Sergio. He'd forced me to play along with his odd brand of god-worship as he'd interacted with his men. I'd stood frozen like the decorative doll he'd wanted me to be—a fake smile in place as I reacted with haughtiness to everything that happened around me.

After all, the master should only have a fitting mistress by his side, and I could only prove that by enforcing the same cruelty that he had. It must be during one of those instances that I had met Raf, though I cannot, for the life of me, remember.

There had also been the times I'd been forced to sit behind an old piano, playing away pieces forced upon me—all to entertain his high and mighty guests. A shiver goes down my back as I recall my fingers on the piano keys, playing sounds forbidden to me when no one was about.

I continue down the dark corridor of my memories, my eyes closed as I try to make sense of *more*.

What else happened?

I recall some of my interactions with Lucero and the staff at the *hacienda*. Sergio is ever present as the villain in that story. But if he was *so* bad, then why can I *only* remember him?

It's almost as if the more I try to make sense of the past, the muddier everything becomes. Even things that until a short while ago I held as true

have disintegrated, showing me that I was hanging on to an illusion—to a side of the truth that I'd created specifically for me.

Dr. Chadwick's words from before come to mind. I'd made myself forget as a protective mechanism. My brain had shut everything away to help me keep on living because the truth would have pinned me down with no hope to ever rise again.

But...

What if the truth I thought I knew so far was also a product of that defense mechanism? What if, in my attempt to recover and keep living, I'd changed reality, shifting my memories to suit a narrative that would be tolerable to remember?

My eyes widen at the realization and I shoot upright, adrenaline charging furiously through my veins.

Moving from one side to the other of my small cell, I begin to put the pieces together, reaching a startling yet painful realization.

Not only had I forgotten things, my mind had also taken it upon itself to reshape my memories, bending reality and molding it into an ideal—something that would help me push forward.

A victim.

A gasp erupts from my mouth as my knees buckle, hitting the floor. Yet the pain radiating from the impact site is nothing compared to the burning sensation I feel in my chest—it's nothing compared to the blinding pain I feel behind my lids.

"They hate you. Everyone hates you, Noelle. They are afraid to meet your eyes when you cross their paths because you might suddenly kill them. What the fuck is wrong with you?" Sergio snaps at me, pacing around.

"So? Better be feared than loved," I snicker back.

"You..." he clenches his fist, no doubt thinking to strike me.

"I'll remind you that your days of messing with me are over, Sergio. Over," I emphasize the word as I take a step forward. What once would have instilled fear in me, now fills me with unimaginable joy at seeing him recoil at my approach.

"You're cursed," he spits at me. "Maldita perra."

Before I know it, I'm back, staring once more at those unchanging dark walls.

Slowly, I bring my hand up, tracing my features with the tips of my fingers and marveling once more.

Who the hell am I?

I'd cherry picked instances from my past so I could convince myself that I was nothing but a pitiful victim, abandoned by everyone and at everyone's mercy.

When in fact...

My breath catches in my throat as hopelessness fills every pore of my body.

Maybe I'd been a victim in the beginning. But if what I've seen so far of the past is any indication, I'd quickly grown out of that role.

And if what I think is right, then...

I had been the nightmare.

But that can't be. No, I refuse to believe that.

I have the physical scars and mental anguish to prove it.

How could I have been the perpetrator? Me, the small girl who can't fight, wield a sword, or shoot a gun? Me, who gets scared and traumatized at the sound of violence.

How?

I keep trying to convince myself that my initial assessment of the situation is correct—that I'd been a pawn in my family's game and I'd ultimately ended up as Sergio's punchbag. There's nothing more and nothing less to it.

How do you explain the people you killed then? Or the fire?

My inner voice won't shut up, and I'm afraid it's my guilty conscience peeking through the protective layers I'd set in place.

Yet there are simple answers, right? In those instances, it had been either me, or them. I'd simply fought my way towards survival.

I'd killed that woman in self-defense, and to be perfectly frank, by sheer luck. The little I can remember of that scene paints the situation clearly—I'd been in well over my head and I'd done my best to keep my life intact.

Fernando's death, while more poignant because I'd intentionally aimed to kill, had still been an accident. It would have never occurred if he hadn't tried to assault me.

The fire, too, I am sure has a similar explanation. I refuse to believe I am capable of cold, calculated murder.

"It's ok. Everything is ok," I breathe out, stretching my limbs as I pace around the room. "That's not me," I tell myself in an attempt to persuade my own damn self.

This is pure torture.

The more time I spend here, alone, between four darkened walls, the more chances I have of going insane.

My thoughts won't quiet down, and the doubts are eating at me.

Logically, I tell myself that everything I had done had been because I'd been backed into a corner. I'd been forced to kill to survive. It's as simple as that.

Yet it's not, is it?

I don't know how to trust my own memories anymore. I don't know what's true and what's not. And I certainly no longer know who I am or what I'm capable of.

If only I'd have all the facts in front of me...

But that is a moot point. I'm the only one who survived the fire at the *hacienda* and as such, I'm the only one who can attest to what really happened—whether I was a murderous maniac or not.

What's even more discouraging is that Raf was counting on *me* to tell him the truth of what happened with Lucero.

The person who killed her.

Sick laughter accumulates in my throat, waiting to be released.

I'm such a hypocrite that I can barely help myself from having a fit of hysterics. I may tell myself that I left primarily because Raf called me by her nickname, but deep down I know.

I left before he could find out what I did.

Before his look of affection would change to one of disdain—this time forever.

More time passes and with it, my own sense of selfhood slips away one flashback at a time. That becomes even clearer when one time, I wake up screaming, my body shivery and cold. Sweat drips from my forehead and on to my flushed cheeks.

My breath comes in short spurts as I will my eyes to focus.

"It's not true," I whisper to myself. "It's not true. It was just a nightmare..."

But what if it wasn't?

I'm breaking down. How long I'm going to be able to keep going like this, I don't know. It's only a matter of time before I either go fully insane, pinned to the ground under the weight of my sins, or I simply give in—erase myself and what's left of my sanity of my own free will. Embrace that side of me that

still lays dormant—though not for long. Accept the fact that I've been *wrong* from the beginning. I've just managed to astutely hide it until now.

My walls are crumbling.

And behind one thick, steel wall, there's another *me*. One that's been buried a long time ago; one that yearns to be let free. I hear her fists banging against that physical barrier, her screams echoing in my mind as she begs me to let her go.

And I'm tempted.

If only to end this torment that won't let me be.

But just as I'm about to take the last step forward, a fear unlike any other assails my being—one not for me, but for Raf.

Now, I can still lie to him with a straight face because I don't know the extent of what I've done. But once I *do* know? What then?

I won't be able to look him in the eye and not feel guilty for everything I've done and for the pain I've caused him—even if that pain comes from losing the one he loves.

I am at a crossroads. More than anything, I am at war with myself and my thoughts. There is an inherent contradiction that languishes in my mind, going to such an extreme that I'm both glad I killed Lucero, but sorry I caused Raf anguish at the same time.

I regret it, and I don't. Isn't that fucked up? I regret hurting the one I love, but I don't feel any remorse for committing murder.

The lock clicks, the door opening to reveal a smug Michele as he makes his way inside my small cell.

"Here to gloat more?" I raise a brow at him, forcing myself not to show any weakness.

"I wanted to see how my little prisoner's been doing, that's all," he shrugs, coming further into the room.

"That's all?" I roll my eyes. "What do you plan to do with me?" I ask squarely.

"Haven't decided yet. Although," he pauses, staring at me intently, "I have a good idea." He whips out his phone from his pocket, dialing a number and putting the call on speaker.

"I told you I'm out. Stop calling me," the man on the other line says through gritted teeth, and my eyes widen when I recognize that voice.

"Pancho, Pancho, you know that's not so easy," Michele tsks, his tone amused yet his face reveals none of that.

He's still looking at me, almost as if he's waiting for my reaction.

"Raf knows. You can't threaten me anymore. He already knows I was feeding you info..."

"And he let you live? I'm impressed," Michele smiles. "But then again, my brother was always the sentimental one."

A muffled curse and Pancho suddenly asks.

"How is Noelle? Did you hurt her? She's innocent in this, damn it!"

"Well, that is exactly why I was calling. You see," his eyes meet mine, "I won't ask you to betray your principles again—not that it was that hard the first time," he chuckles, "but I'm going to ask you some questions that may or may not help Noelle."

"What?" He asks, his tone full of urgency.

"Hmm, Noelle tells me that she's *not* Rafaelo's big love. Do you have anything to add to that?"

My heart stops in my chest at that line of questioning. I blink repeatedly, my mouth opening and closing before Michele quickly shushes me.

"What are you talking about?"

"That's for you to tell me. Who is this illustrious woman everyone keeps talking about?"

"Why should I tell you?" he hisses. "This has gone on for too long. I'm *done*."

For a moment I think he's actually going to hang up.

"Tell me this and I'll have a one year supply of medicine delivered to your place," Michele adds smoothly. A long pause ensues, yet Pancho is still on the line—sign he *is* considering the offer.

"Just this once," he whispers, defeated.

"One last time, Pancho. I trust that after this I won't need your services anyway," he smirks at me, the meaning clear.

"You promise to deliver them?"

"Of course. I may be a scoundrel, but I am a scoundrel who values his word. You have my promise," Michele drawls, his voice full of confidence and I realize he *does* mean to hold his end of the bargain.

Just who is he?

"Fine," he takes a deep breath. "Maybe this way you'll leave Noelle out of your plans, since she has nothing to do with whatever conflict you have with Raf."

"Get to the point."

"There was a woman he was in love with a couple years ago. Her name was Lucero and he met her at Sergio's *hacienda*, where *you* made sure he ended up," Pancho says accusingly.

Michele's lips curl up in a cruel smile.

"Yes, do go on."

"She was his first love and he never forgot her. He only married Noelle because he thought she had something to do with her death and wanted to make her pay," Pancho continues, and I'm rooted to the spot as I listen to our entire history told through the eyes of an outsider—one that is very close to Raf.

"He only married her to get her guardianship signed over to him. Initially, he wanted to commit her to an asylum. But then he realized she was innocent in Sergio's game so he continued with the marriage."

"Intriguing," his brows shoot up. "So you're telling me she's just his consolation prize?"

"Essentially," Pancho agrees.

I gulp down my misery, blinking back tears. I can't show him how much those words affect me, or I'll just give him more ammunition to use against me.

"That's all very interesting. But tell me this, Pancho. If she's *just* the consolation prize, why was my brother willing to offer his life on a plate for her?"

"He would have done that for anyone. You know him. He thinks he bears the weight of the entire world on his shoulders."

The assessment, though it pains me to admit, is entirely accurate. Raf is the type of man who would give the shirt off his back to a homeless man. He *would* have offered his life in exchange for any innocent hostage. And *that* is a blow to my heart that I did not need—the verbal confirmation that I'm not that special to him anyway.

"Are you sure you're not lying to me, Pancho?"

"You can ask anyone who knows him. For the last two years he never stopped loving her. He still wears a necklace that belonged to her in her honor..." Pancho goes on to describe in detail Raf's routine for the past years, mentioning how they'd had to restrain him at times when the grief would become too much.

Every added detail is like a dagger through my heart, yet I can't show that. I'm on the edge of the precipice, but I still keep my poker face on, no

matter how steep the fall is.

Michele, on the other hand, wastes no time in showing exactly how this piece of news delights him—though why would it when his bargaining chip disappears is beside me?

"Right. Thank you for enlightening me. You'll have your delivery," Michele snaps the phone closed before I can find my voice and say something to Panchito.

But what would I even say? I don't know where Michele is holding me. I have no information that could help them find me.

"Leave it to Raf to be hung up on one woman for his entire life," he chuckles, leaning back and regarding me with a dangerous glint, and a much too smug expression.

What are you planning, Michele?

And why would he need confirmation about Lucero? She's dead. That means this was for my benefit alone to get me to lower my guard, maybe devolve into a round of hysterics at knowing that Raf loves another.

"See, I didn't lie," I give him a fake smile, imbuing my voice with enough confidence so he doesn't realize how rattled I am on the inside.

"Indeed. And how does that make you feel, Noelle? Hearing from his friend's mouth that he never got over her? That you were only a replacement?"

"I guess it would piss me off," I tell him sincerely, "if I already didn't know it," I flash him a brilliant smile.

"My, my, aren't you a little too cheeky?"

"Not at all. But that's what you wanted to achieve with this, isn't it? Make me feel insignificant in Raf's eyes? Well, a little too late."

"He still cares about you," he notes.

"Maybe. But does he care enough? Isn't that what you're trying to figure out now?"

He purses his lips, his gaze darkening as it rests on me.

"Maybe he just loves to fuck me," I shrug, taking a seat on the floor and pretending to be unbothered. "You know, I was his first," I add casually. "I'm sure it's the novelty and all that."

"Really?" he drawls severely. "And this doesn't faze you? If I remember correctly, last time you were singing heavenly praises to your *dear* husband. What changed?"

"Michele, you're not very good with women, are you?"

He frowns, a twitch in his jaw announcing I'm heading into dangerous territory.

"What kind of woman appreciates when the man fucking her calls her by another's name?" I arch a brow. "I certainly don't, and I don't know any who would."

"You're a peculiar woman, Noelle," he narrows his eyes at me.

"No, I'm not." I state. "I'm *just* a woman."

And a potential murderer.

"Good try," he suddenly says, his lips spreading into a wide grin. "I *almost* believed you."

I don't get to blink and he's already out of the door, the lock clicking into place.

I'm alone again, and resting my head against the cold wall, I finally exhale in relief. Lifting my hands up, I stare at the trembling limbs, my entire body shaking uncontrollably.

It took everything in me to pretend I was ok even as my heart was further breaking in my chest. Hearing Panchito's words—someone who's known Raf for years—messed something inside me.

This was what Michele wanted all along, wasn't it? To make me crumble, one word at a time. And I certainly am. What he said is completely right—Raf is the type of man to be hung up on a woman his entire life. He *is* the type to hold his first love above all else.

Where does that leave me?

Nowhere.

Absolutely nowhere.

I would be a replacement, as they both shrewdly noted. But I would never be anything more. And no matter how much I love him—and I do love him enough for the both of us—I don't think I could remain by his side knowing all that.

I want all, or nothing.

His heart, or none at all.

It's a while later that the door opens again, Michele striding in confidently. He's sporting a smug smile on his face as he looks me up and down, almost impatient to share whatever the news.

"What is it?" I ask him in a dry tone.

"I thought you'd want to see something," he quickly comes to my side, lowering himself on his haunches but still keeping a moderate distance from

me—as I've come to expect from him.

"What?" I roll my eyes.

He doesn't answer immediately. His confident grin spreads wider on his face as he takes his time—trying to get me to squirm, no doubt.

"Just a little experiment," he shrugs. "Pancho's words got me thinking and I just *had* to test this theory," he chuckles, whipping out his phone and thrusting it in my face.

It's a picture of Raf.

Taken from across the road to our house, it shows him at the window of our room, his shirt off, his torso naked.

My lip trembles slightly as I take in every single detail—drink in the sight of him.

But the one feature Michele wants me to notice is inescapable. Swinging low on his neck, it sits right against his chest. The stone shines in the light, its color a mix between an earthy brown and a brilliant gold, the shade changing with the angle of reflection.

I close my eyes, breathing harshly.

"Here, just so you won't say I'm tricking you," he clicks on the details of the picture, showing me the time and date it had been taken.

"Fine," I snicker. "And how does that help me?" I burst out, unable to keep the hurt from my tone.

"It doesn't. But it helps *me*," he continues to smile in a sick manner, and I'd love nothing more than to wipe it from his face. I do just that as I bring my fist towards him. Yet in my weakened state, I'm no match for him, or anyone—am I ever?

He swipes my arm aside, tsking at me with narrowed eyes.

"Play nice, Noelle. Play nice," he smirks. "There are still more surprises for you," he winks before he stands up, pacing around the cell.

I take a small break to regulate my emotions and get myself under control. Yet seeing him wear the necklace *now*, when I'm at his brother's mercy, irrevocably shatters something in me.

I thought he cared...

Regardless of his feelings for Lucero, I thought he cared for me—at least a little. Yet everything points to the contrary.

"Aren't you curious?" he suddenly asks, and I swing my gaze to him, my eyes widening in question. "Aren't you curious how he *really* feels about you?"

"Didn't you just prove to me that he doesn't?" I raise my brow defiantly.

"Aren't you curious to see if your time with him was all a fraud?"

"How do you plan to find that out?"

"Simple," he exclaims, going to the door and barking an order for Andreas.

"Here," he pushes a sheet of paper and a marker in front of me. "Fill these in, and I'll make sure to quiz Raf on them."

Grabbing the sheet, I let my eyes roam over the questions, my nose scrunching in surprise when I note what his *grand* plan is.

"Really?" I place the questionnaire down. "You plan on quizzing him about my likes and dislikes?"

He shrugs.

"It's just the beginning of the test. Fill this in, and I'll explain everything later."

"And if I don't?"

"You lose on an opportunity. Would you rather die thinking he never cared about you, or that he cared at least a little?"

I don't answer. I can't.

There's a part of me that would take the first one, since I don't want anyone's pitiful affection. But there's another side of me that wants anything it can get. That wants Raf regardless of *anything*.

He casually walks out, letting me stare at the sheet of paper. Before I lose my courage, I pick up the pen and start writing.

Are you going to disappoint me again, Raf?

TWO

NOELLE

ANDREAS COMES IN TO DROP MY LUNCH, BUT INSTEAD OF LINGERING, HE GETS out, letting the way clear for Michele to come inside, a tablet in his hand.

"I didn't realize you missed me so much, Michele," I joke as I dig into the food, too famished to mind his reply.

"Don't flatter yourself," he rolls his eyes. "Although I must say, you're much more agreeable than my brother, so there's that."

"Wow, is that a compliment coming from *you*?"

He mumbles something and I realize it is the most I can get out of him.

Only after I'm done with my food can I concentrate better, and as I push the tray aside to focus on him, I note he's already reading my responses.

"These are good ones," he notes, pointing to the questions I'd come up with as things Raf *should* know about me.

"Now can you tell me what you're up to?"

"Wouldn't you want to know," he drawls, raising his gaze to mine. "I have a tiny surprise for you," he says, giving me the tablet.

"What's this?" I frown as I note there are video feeds on the screen—all of a room containing a woman inside.

"Rafaelo's final test," he states before zooming in on one of the screens.

My fingers tighten on the tablet, my eyes widening in horror.

"That... How is this possible? She's *dead*," I whisper.

It's *her*.

Lucero.

The fucking bane of my existence.

"When you mentioned her name I had to make some inquiries to ensure you weren't lying. Well, I dug a bit deeper, and imagine my surprise when I

found someone who checked all the boxes."

"That's why you confirmed it with Panchito, isn't it?" I blink.

"Indeed."

"But... How... It's impossible."

"I assure you it's quite possible. I don't know the specifics and why you both thought she was dead," he shrugs. "But this is perfect for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Wouldn't it be the best punishment for Raf to see the two women in his life going head to head?"

"You... You're going to make us fight?" I frown, the notion not so far fetched after I'd seen the memory from the *hacienda*.

"Fight? Bah, of course not. Fighting is for those who can't solve things with their brains," he taps his finger to his forehead. "I'm merely going to play some mind games with my brother. And it will all culminate with one choice. He will condemn one to death, while saving the other. Isn't that so Shakespearean?" He sighs in pleasure.

I freeze.

"You don't mean..." I can barely find my voice to speak. My heart is beating loudly in my chest, goosebumps spreading on the surface of my skin.

All of the sudden, I find myself face to face with my worst nightmare.

"It's exactly what I mean. He will kill you with his own hand," he smiles. "Well, *one* of you," he chuckles. "But regardless of whom he'll choose, he will feel that guilt for the rest of his—rather short—life."

I shake my head, dropping the tablet as I sink to my knees on the floor. There's no strength in my body, nothing but despair that emanates from my entire being.

"I see you've already foreseen the outcome," he chuckles.

"How can you be so despicable?" I ask in a whisper.

"Despicable? No, no," he takes a step closer. "You don't get to call *me* despicable, Noelle. Not when it was your *dear* husband who made me who I am today," he states in a grave voice.

"Yet you won't tell me what that is," I retort sarcastically.

"Oh, you will find out when the time is right—when *everyone* will find out."

He narrows his eyes at me, no doubt relishing my anguish and the fact that I know I'm heading straight for the guillotine.

Because if Lucero is alive... Then I simply stand no chance.

The choice is clear.

I know it. Now Michele knows it.

Everyone knows it.

I was just the replacement, and my job's already done.

He's halfway to the door when my voice echoes in the room.

"You said you value your word," I call out.

He turns, narrowing his eyes at me.

Getting up, I straighten my spine, raising my head and looking him square in the eye. I want him to see he doesn't scare me—nor does the thought of dying.

"So?"

"Let's make a deal," I confidently suggest.

"A deal?" His brows shoot up. "I'm all ears," he says smoothly.

"Let's make a bet on whom he's going to choose."

"Nice try, Noelle. But we both know whom he's going to choose, and it's unlikely to be you," he chuckles, and I note a hint of pity in his gaze.

Great, now even the enemy pities me?

"I'm willing to bet on myself," I push my chin up.

My words take him aback, and for a moment he just stares at me.

"You want to bet on yourself? Even if you know he's unlikely to pick you?"

"Yes," I nod.

"Interesting," he moves closer, bringing his hand up to stroke his chin.

"And what would the terms of this deal of yours be?"

"If I'm right, you let us *both* go. Me and Raf," I clarify, knowing that deals with the devil always have loopholes he can exploit.

"And if you're wrong? If he chooses Lucero over you?"

"If I'm wrong," I take a deep breath, swallowing hard. "Then we both die."

"Let me get what you're saying, Noelle," Michele says, amused. "You're willing to condemn him to death if he *doesn't* choose you?"

"Yes. That is what is exactly what I'm saying."

There's a brief pause as he looks me up and down, his eyes zoning in on me as if he's seeing me for the first time.

He's shocked by my words. Hell, I *am* shocked by them. But the moment they were out into the world, I realized they *were* true.

"You surprise me. You're willing to kill him just so he won't be together

with the other woman, isn't that right?" he laughs.

I shrug.

"At least in death he can finally be mine," I reply blankly.

He blinks twice before he throws his head back, laughing.

"You're funny," he comments. "Very, *very* funny."

"No, what I am is selfish. But I'm willing to live with that if it gets me what I want."

His expression is suddenly serious again, his unyielding gaze on mine, probing deeply—almost as if he's trying to ascertain the veracity of my claim.

"I'll give it to you, I didn't think you'd be this cunning," he notes, a hint of admiration in his voice.

It's in that moment that I get the clearest view at myself—clearer than if I looked into the most polished mirror.

I *am* wicked. And it's not because of my past and who I might have murdered or *not*. Rather, it's in my immediate reactions, and the fact that I would do *anything* to keep Raf as mine. This goes beyond my—obviously—failed attempt at killing Lucero.

I want it all, or not at all.

I'll take him alive or dead—as long as he's mine.

"Do we have a deal?"

"Do we?" He repeats, the corner of his mouth curling up. "Maybe," he shrugs. "Why don't we discuss this over dinner?" He suddenly asks.

"Dinner?" I blink in surprise.

"I'll tell you what you want to know. And if you still see your dear Rafaelo the same, if you still wish to give your life for him, then you're my guest."

I frown at his words, but I nod.

"Andreas will swing by and help you get ready," he says before he swivels, exiting the room.

Just as he said, Andreas drops by to take me to another room, allowing me to shower and change into a new set of clothes. My nostrils flare in pleasure as I take in the smell of cleanliness. After days in that dirty room, this feels like heaven.

Andreas is always in the background, making sure I don't try to escape, but he lets me take my time as I relax for the first time in forever.

Maybe it's also because the resolution in my mind feels clearer than ever before.

One would have thought that Lucero's reappearance would make me spiral further into madness. Instead, it's the opposite.

My mind is lucid, my resolve strong.

I know exactly what I need to do, and how I need to proceed.

She *might* be alive now, but it won't be for much longer.

Closing my eyes, I'm back to that uninhabitable zone in my mind, the one that houses the thick wall separating me from *me*.

Slowly, fragments fall to the floor, a small crack appearing in the wall.

Not even steel is indestructible.

There's a slender beam of light coming from the other side, and as I put one foot in front of the other, reaching the wall, I bring one eye to look through the crack.

The light hits my eye, making me squint. Yet as I blink, clarity is restored to my sight, and I'm met with a wondrous sight.

Another eye meets me. The same color, the same movements.

I blink, it blinks.

At that moment, whether I want to or not, I know I've already chosen my fate.

One punch. Just one punch and the wall will crumble to the ground.

Taking a deep breath, I bring myself back to the present.

One step at a time.

The crack is enough for now. Already there's something sinister enveloping me in noxious waves, poisoning my mind and my soul.

Or is it?

For some reason, I think I've been poisoned all along. I just disguised it well.

When the time comes, Andreas escorts me to a different part of the building. On the way, I let my gaze roam around my surroundings, taking everything in.

It looks like an abandoned factory in some parts, yet some areas look unusually luxurious to belong in a deserted place.

"You don't speak much, do you?" I ask him, curious if I can get anything out of him before we reach our destination.

He doesn't answer. He doesn't even glance at me.

"I know you can speak. I've heard you before."

Nothing.

Rolling my eyes at him, I stop trying. It's clear he has strict orders that

he's respecting rather faithfully.

Leading me to a room in the back, I'm surprised to find it wholly decorated, a big table in the middle with Michele already seated at the end of it.

"Welcome," he stands up, a mock of a bow and a wink as he offers me a seat next to him.

"I'm impressed," I accept, getting myself comfortable. Then again, after days in that hovel, everything is a five star hotel.

A waiter brings our dishes, and I stifle back a laugh at the effort he'd put into this. More than anything, I'm wary about his intention and his sudden change of heart concerning me.

"I'm still a little confused, why go through all this trouble? I was already your prisoner," I mention, my tone skeptical.

"My brother doesn't know, does he?" He ignores my question as he asks.

"What?" I frown.

"*You*. He doesn't know you, does he?"

I blink, taken aback by his words.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say," I lie.

"Rafaelo hasn't changed much since our childhood. Sure, he has his stupid vendetta right now, which admittedly isn't unwarranted. But his core never changed."

"And that is?"

"He wants everyone to be happy. Hard to achieve, but he's an idealist. But most of all, he's a protector, isn't he?"

"I still don't see where you're going with this, Michele," I roll my eyes at him.

"He likes to take those smaller, and weaker than him under his wing. It's his weakness. He can't say no to someone in danger—to someone who cries for help. He has a thing for the underdog and those treated unfairly."

I school my features to not reveal my feelings on his assessment. Because he *is* right. And I can wager a guess where he's going.

"That's how you got to him, isn't it? You made yourself the victim," he smirks.

I blink, a twitch in my jaw at the word *victim*.

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

"You see, I had a very interesting conversation with this Lucero. She was very helpful in answering my questions and clarifying a few things for me."

"Why would you trust anything that comes out of her mouth?" I fire back. "This is a competition of sorts, is it not? After all, it's her or me. Of course she'd say anything to get ahead."

"That's where you're wrong," he leans forward, holding my gaze. "I didn't ask her about Rafaelo. I didn't even tell her about him. I only asked her about you."

I swallow uncomfortably.

"And?" I ask blithely.

He doesn't answer. He merely lets his lips widen in a feline smile.

"We're more alike than you think, Noelle. We see something we like, and we take it. Regardless of the consequences."

"I'm nothing like you," I grit out.

"Sure, keep telling yourself that. But you did propose the bargain. You want him, dead or alive."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I huff out, put on the spot.

I may be wicked, but I'm not *his* brand of evil.

"You've never been in love, have you?" I ask, satisfied when his eyes narrow at me, his hands balling into fists.

"Love is a foreign notion to me," he says carefully—too carefully.

"Who is she?" I demand sharply.

"None of your business," he grunts, his fist making contact with the table.

"So there is someone," I smile. "Then you should know the feeling very well, Michele. When dying is better than seeing the love disappear from their eyes. When death is the *only* option before they can be with someone who is *not* you."

He's quiet as he mulls over my words.

"And you say we're not alike, Noelle," he laughs. "Yet there's also a difference," he says.

"Hm?" I lean back, observing him.

For all my initial apprehension, there's a certain brand of freedom in speaking without a filter—in going all out knowing no one is there to judge you.

"I don't think that's love. Call it all you want, but it's not love."

"Really? You just said it's a foreign notion for you but you're going to school me in the meaning of love?"

He shrugs.

"I can understand the concept of love in its abstract form. I've seen it in

the wild, so to speak," his mouth pulls up. "There's always an essential ingredient to it."

My confusion sparks his amusement as he gives me a full smile.

"Altruism. Love is love because you put the other first, regardless of your own well-being. Regardless of whether their happiness makes *you* happy."

I still, his words hitting me in the chest and making me reel.

He is right. I know he is. Yet I cannot admit it to myself.

"So when you say love is a foreign notion to you, what you really mean is that altruism is the foreign bit, isn't it?"

"Indeed. And I rather think we have that in common."

"If it's not love... Then what is it?" I ask before I can help myself.

"Obsession."

His elbow on the table, he rests his cheek on his hand as he looks at me with pity in his eyes—almost as one would look at an ignorant child.

"We don't love, you and I," he mentions sadly. "We possess. In life, or in death," he adds casually. "We would rather destroy their lives than see them better off, isn't that the truth?"

"I'd never want to see Raf destroyed," I shake my head.

"No, but you wouldn't mind seeing him dead."

"Only if I'm dead too," I whisper.

"How tragic," he mocks.

"All great romances end in tragedy."

"And that's what you want, isn't it? You want a great romance for the books. But does he want that too?"

He has me cornered with that question.

Instead of answering, I swing my attention to my glass of wine, bringing it to my lips to take a sip.

"You're in denial, I can see." He leans back, satisfied with his line of interrogation. "So far you've only told me what *you* want. You don't care about what he wants, do you?"

"You're suddenly the moral authority?" I challenge.

"Not at all. What I am is self-aware. I know myself. I know my limits and I know what I am capable of. But you don't. Even now," he chuckles. "You've revealed your motive to me, yet you're still lying to yourself."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. But I guess I can see why you would. You're well aware that if he knew the real you he'd drop you in a moment."

"That's not true," I deny, though my voice trembles.

"Is it not? Hmm, I wonder," he muses out loud, his eyes crinkling around the corners as he regards me.

"You have your deal, Noelle. *But*, I'm adding another clause."

My ears perk up as I swing my gaze to his.

"Should he choose you, I, of course, will let you both live. For now. But I want it to come from your own lips that you would have had him killed if he chose Lucero."

"You..."

"Got you there, no?" he chuckles, pouring himself more wine. "I'll let you in on a little secret. You can only pretend for so long. At some point, the love *will* leave their eyes. And then you have nothing."

"You speak as if you've already experienced that," I narrow my eyes at him.

"It's the manner of the beast," he muses as he swirls the red liquid in his glass. "Even the most skilled magician will slip up at some point. And when the illusion shatters, you're only left with the shards."

"You're being awfully pessimistic."

"You really think he's going to look at you the same after he knows all that you've done?"

I shrug.

"I'll live and I'll see."

"If he chooses you."

"If he chooses me," I agree. "Although," I wet my lips. "If you can add a clause, then I want to add another one too."

"Really?" he drawls in amusement. "Do tell."

"Lucero," her name burns on my tongue, but the intention is clear.

Michele's eyes sparkle with mischief and he knows exactly what I want.

"Deal," he extends his hand forward.

"Deal," I repeat, brushing my hand against his.

The crack in the wall just became a little bigger.

"He's going to be here soon," Michele nods at me as he takes me in, grunting his approval. "Ready?"

I nod.

"We've gone through everything that will happen, and what you need to know."

"It's fine," I wave my hand.

"I'm still surprised you suggested we use the electric wands," he shakes his head as he leads me down the corridor.

"I want to see his reaction," I shrug.

"And *that* makes you devious, Noelle. I almost feel sorry for my poor brother."

"You still haven't told me why you hate him so much."

"You'll find out at the right time. After all, it's all about the delivery," he winks at me. "The time and the place."

Stopping in front of a door, he unlocks it, motioning me inside. All this time, Andreas has been trailing quietly behind us, no doubt making sure I don't do anything stupid.

As if a five foot woman stands a chance against two giant men.

Then again, Michele's words ring true. Why fight when you can win an argument via mind games? That's the only reason I haven't made my stay here more difficult than it had to be. After all, I'll get my wish fulfilled if I behave.

Lucero will be no more.

But the question remains. Will Raf choose me?

At my best moments, I want to believe he would. At my worst? I know he won't.

I'm gambling away the last bit of sanity I have left.

"She's inside, too?"

"She is. But don't worry, you won't get to interact with her just yet. Andreas will make sure you both stay in your lane," he says as he takes me inside, pointing towards a chair and strapping me to it.

A while later, Lucero is being let through another entrance, strapped to a chair much like my own.

She gives me a wide and confused look, but the moment she's tied to the chair, Andreas is quick to put sound mufflers over her ears and a blindfold over her eyes.

Well, Michele might not be that bad after all.

I don't think I could have focused with her next to me, my instincts primed to end her.

Even now, ugly jealousy churns in my stomach as images flash before my eyes, all of how I'd like to kill her. One more gruesome than the other, I let my imagination loose as I inhale deeply, almost smelling the scent of blood in the air.

Hell, how I'll enjoy that.

There's a screen in front of each of our seats. According to Michele, that's how we'll see Raf and the choices he will ultimately make.

Choose me.

Please choose me...

Yet I know what I signed up for—the madness that will ensue once everything comes to pass.

Maybe Michele was right. Maybe what I feel for him isn't love—because at every step of the way it's been so much more.

To call it an obsession would be to negate everything that happened until now—everything that made me love him the way I do.

It's not a matter of throwing a dice. It's not black and white.

What I feel for him borders on insane, and there is *no* place for altruism. Not when I feel like I begin and end with him—that his death is entwined with mine, just how mine is with his. We don't exist in separate realms—there's just us.

It might be odd.

It might be insane.

And I'm sure as hell it's not normal.

Yet all I know is that we're tied together, him and I. We're connected beyond this reality.

Where he goes, I go.

If he dies, I die.

I'm with him or not at all.

The screen flares to life, and I see him.

The ache in my heart becomes more pronounced as I let my greedy eyes roam over his form. And there it is—in the open for everyone to see.

The necklace.

His shirt has a v neckline, revealing his smooth skin and sexy collarbones, but most of all, it shows that damned stone resting against his flesh.

I refuse to let it affect me.

Putting on a strong front, I watch on, curious to see how everything will play out.

Michele had explained that the first phase was meant to rattle him only, making him answer questions about me. For each wrong answer I will get shocked by one of his men.

The prospect of pain is not particularly appealing, so I do hope Raf won't get any wrong.

But if he does...

Then I want to see the regret on his face. I want him to hurt too.

Another crumb falls to the ground.

The questionnaire starts easy enough, but I'm surprised by his answers.

He counted the freckles on my face?

Somehow that one piece of information makes me blush to my roots, warmth unfurling in my belly.

Raf has an answer to every question, and I become increasingly confident that he *might* choose me.

"What's her greatest fear?" Michele asks.

"Having her control stripped from her."

I blink twice.

"Wrong," Michele announces before I feel the cold metal against my skin, electricity going through my body in rippling waves.

Momentarily, I start convulsing, unable to control myself.

Even as the man steps back, my body still reels from the shock waves.

I breathe sharply, sweat clinging to my forehead from the effort. But most of all, there's a sadness to realizing he couldn't get *that* right.

Blinking away tears, I raise my gaze to the screen, conveying everything I feel through my gaze.

"How is that not correct?" Raf demands.

"It's simply not," Michele replies.

The words I'd written on the piece of paper flash back to me.

Him.

He is my greatest fear. How he will react when he realizes who I am —*what* I am. Losing him. That would forever destroy me.

"What is her dream?" The next question rolls, and I hold my breath, anticipating his answer.

There's a little back and forth between Raf and Michele before Raf finally answers.

"To be independent and become a pianist."

I close my eyes, this time waiting for the shocks to come.

Surely enough, my body starts seizing, the pain double this time. It feels like I'm suffocating. I can barely catch my breath as wave after wave of pain assaults my body.

"Please stop. Give her pain to me," Raf calls out. "Let me feel the pain, just...not her."

God, how I wish those words could warm me. But he got it wrong... How could he get it wrong?

Those are just goals, not dreams.

My biggest dream has always been for him to return my feelings—to hear the word love from his lips. Even after our last conversation, how can he not realize that?

"What is the one thing she's most insecure about?" Michele asks the next question, and the moment Raf fails to answer, panic painted all over his features, I know this is a losing game.

What does he even know?

"Time is running out, Rafaelo," Michele taunts.

"Her scars," Raf states.

Raising my eyes to the camera, I exhale painfully, waiting for the next bout of pain to come.

And as the wands make contact with my damp skin, I feel pure agony.

All the while I want nothing more than to yell at him.

Why?

How?

How could he not know what my deepest insecurity has been from day one? The fact that I'd never measure up to his perfect Lucero. That I'd always be just his second choice.

Michele continues to toy with Raf, making fun of his wrong answers. All the while, I feel dead in my own skin.

He got a lot right, but he got wrong the ones that matter the most.

What does that say about us?

A few more minutes later, a man comes inside to remove Lucero's blindfold and her mufflers.

She blinks, staring in wonder at the screen in front of her. But as she turns, looking at me, her eyes widen in horror.

She stares at me like one would their worst nightmare. Shaking in her chair, she starts moving wildly against her bounds.

Good thing they left her gag on, otherwise I don't doubt she'd be screaming my ears off.

Another reason to kill her.

As I take her in, I have to wonder what it was that got Raf's attention.

Sure, she's pretty with her ashy blonde hair and indigenous features. But she's not *his* type.

But then I remember—it wasn't her looks that made him fall for her. It was her personality—her *kind* soul.

My lips curl into a derisive smile.

I'd like nothing more than to think of all the ways I could ensure she has a painful death, but right at that moment, Michele asks Raf the most important question.

"This, or that?"

Raf is stricken as he looks between me and Lucero, almost as if he can't believe his eyes. The shock quickly wears off, and in its place there is a quiet conviction that settles over his features.

My eyes close on a painful breath.

He's already made his choice.

"But first," Michele chimes in, his tone too cheerful for my liking. "Why don't we tell the girls a little story?"

"What are you talking about?" Raf asks in a grave tone.

For a moment his gaze is stuck on Lucero. But as he wrenches his eyes away, it's to finally look at me.

I wish I could yell at him.

Pick me! Pick me!

But it's a moot point.

I don't want him to pick me with the threat of death hanging over his head. I want him to come to me of his own volition.

Still, I find it a little odd that he's not more reactive to the reappearance of Lucero. Or, maybe he's holding it all inside, not wanting to give Michele any ammunition to use against him.

And giving me false hope.

"Why, Raf, have you already forgotten? Don't you think they deserve to truly know the man before them?"

"Get to the point, Michele," Raf rolls his eyes. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to tell them, with your own mouth, what happened thirteen years ago. Tell them everything you did. You can choose later... If any will have you back," Michele says smugly.

There he goes again with whatever Raf did to him. Why is it that he's never been clear about it? I tried to get it out of him a couple of times, but he

kept shushing me, telling me he would reveal it at the right time. Which, apparently, is now.

"Really? That's your plan?" Raf chuckles.

"How many people know what happened, *Raf*? How many people have you told?"

Silence.

"Right, you haven't told anyone. Is it because you're ashamed? Good guy *Raf* doing something like that, God forbid," Michele prattles on and on in a mocking tone.

"Michele," Raf grits his teeth, looking on the verge of exploding.

"Fine, if you don't want to, I'll start," Michele continues. "But first, I think we all need some background information. So strap in, ladies," he pauses for a moment before laughing. "Wait, you *are* already strapped. How silly of me."

I roll my eyes at his theatrics.

"Do you remember, Raf? Do you remember what you did to me?"

THREE

NOELLE

GUILT RAVAGES RAF'S FACE AS MICHELE BRINGS UP THE PAST. HE RECOUNTS how *Raf* betrayed him, watching him get raped by their cousin and doing nothing. He had been the one to suggest that Michele tell the adults what was happening under their noses, but when he'd mustered up the courage to do so, Raf had in turn denied everything.

That had broken Michele.

But it had been just the start.

Raf looks ill the more his brother speaks, and it's clear there's a semblance of truth there, as much as it pains me to admit. But when Michele mentions the abuse he endured at school, Raf's head whips in his direction, a look of pure shock enveloping him. He shakes his head.

Raf...

My heart bleeds for him and everything that happened in their childhood.

But I am certain my Raf would never spread rumors about Michele at school so he could get gang raped by his classmates. That is so horrific to even imagine, that I doubt anyone would be that evil.

"So you see, Rafaelo, I already did you a favor when I left you alive. You should have stayed far, far away from me and from New York and we would have never gotten to this point," Michele says flippantly.

Does he even realize how much he revealed in that one sentence? The fact that against all odds he *didn't* kill his brother.

Suddenly, all the previous events play before my eyes. Raf had been attacked for the bounty on his head, but it had never been at Michele's express orders. If anything...Michele could have killed him whenever he wanted, regardless of my brother's protection.

If he *wanted* to...

But I have the impression he doesn't *want* to.

And that is...interesting.

Michele tells us his version of events, but he doesn't go in too much depth, seemingly still affected about what happened in the past. He does, however, emphasize that Nicolo had been the only one to take him in when everyone else had abandoned him.

The more he talks, the more I feel sorry for him, and I know Raf feels the same. Yet no matter how guilty or not my husband may be, I could never turn against him. There's still *his* side of the story. And even then, I don't think Raf could do *anything* for me to abandon him.

My tongue peeks out to lick my chapped lips. My body is still reeling from being electrocuted, and a bitter taste of disappointment coats my mind at being reminded that Raf hadn't been able to answer *those* questions correctly.

He doesn't realize, does he? That he is my entire world—has been from the beginning. Each burst of pain brings into focus more what he means to me and unveils more of the things we experienced.

Does he really think that my independence is more important than him?

"I don't know what happened at school," Raf starts, "but I didn't..."

Michele cuts him off.

"I didn't invite you to speak, Rafaelo. In case you've forgotten, this isn't a tribunal to judge who's right or wrong. This is simply the consequence of *your* mistakes and the fact that you couldn't just stay gone. Save your words."

"Michele..."

"Let's go to the last trial, shall we? I think you'll find it infinitely more interesting than the last ones. After all, when are you going to have these two ladies in the same room again?" Michele chuckles.

Suddenly, the man who'd been doling out the electric shocks leaves.

Michele had only told me his plan in vague terms, so I have no idea what to expect. Especially as I continue to peruse Raf's face, starved for his presence.

A few days. Just a few days and I've felt his absence to the core of my being. It might seem odd that someone I've only known for such a short period of time would become so essential to my existence, but he has. I stopped questioning the situation when I realized the lengths I would go to for him—for him to be *mine*.

My greedy eyes take him in, with his blonde hair swept back from his face, his bronzed skin and those blue, blue eyes that always made my heart skip a beat. Those eyes that are the reason I wake up in the morning.

Choose me.

Maybe Michele was right. Maybe this is more than love—maybe it's bordering on obsession. My pulse flutters at that thought, my breathing growing labored as flashes appear before my eyes. Scenes morph into episodes until I'm left with a different reality—one that both excites and terrifies me.

Choose me.

He looks jittery and anxious, his features steeped in pain as he awaits Michele's instructions.

Does he have a hard time deciding? Is he weighting his options?

He must know that ultimately he will have to make a choice, regardless of what Michele has planned. That was the entire purpose of this spectacle.

"Let's get this over with," Raf grits his teeth.

"Wonderful," Michele exclaims. "This last trial is a little more tricky though. Or, should I say life and death?" he chuckles to himself.

Raf stiffens at his words, but I can see he's doing his best to not betray too much.

But I know. I *always* know. I see every slightly move, every twitch in his jaw, every eye motion and I *know*.

He's fighting himself.

"What did you have in mind?"

His eyes rove over the wall in front of him, and I have to wonder if he can still see us—if he can see the anguish on my face at the thought that he would forsake me for another.

"Rather simple. You see, each one of those ladies partook in the meals I supplied. That in turn means they are currently in the digestion stage of a very potent poison that will reach their bloodstream and kill them in about..." he pauses for dramatic effect. "Fifteen minutes. Unless you administer the antidote, of course. But there is only one."

I breathe out lightly. I hadn't expected that and I should have. Of course Michele wouldn't just take a gun and shoot us, or do anything of that nature. Since his objective is psychological torture, what better way to stretch Raf to his limit than by offering the simplest choice.

He'll decide who dies and who survives—by his own hand.

Raf's mouth opens and closes as his fists clench in anger. He's trying to control himself, but I can see he's on the verge of exploding.

Choose me.

"On the table before you, you'll find a syringe with the antidote in it. Once you've decided who you'll save and who you'll damn, simply go through the door to your right. You'll find there everything you need," Michele laughs before his transmission ends. But not before the screen also flickers shut.

Panic unlike any other erupts in my gut at not being able to see him—to gauge his feelings. I'm now totally blind in this and I don't like it.

I try to control my breathing, but nothing works.

He doesn't know. He doesn't know anything. And now...

Andreas removes Lucero's blindfold and ear mufflers before leaving the room as well.

I turn my head, my gaze making contact with Lucero's. There's regret in her eyes, and something more. But I can't dwell on that. Not when it's me or her. And this is *not* just survival. No, this is about who gets Raf.

No one else can get him.

A sharp pain develops in my left side, and I belatedly realize it's my heart seizing in the face of these implications—in the face of the fact that I may lose him forever.

And that's simply out of the question.

I struggle to breathe and my body starts spasming, the hum of errant electricity clogging my ears and drowning me in a sea of what-ifs.

But as my senses shut down on me, as my sight and hearing cease to function, it's to see things through my mind's eye, listen to sounds long forgotten.

Another succession of images appears before me, all showing me one thing—the me before, the *true* me.

I see the love and the passion. But I also see something else.

Destruction. So much destruction.

All in the name of love.

All in the name of that *eternal* love.

I'm hyperventilating from an overload of sensations, of skin on top of skin, sweaty bodies, *bloody* bodies. But there's more. Beneath it all, there's sweet, sweet love.

And guilt.

So much fucking guilt.

My eyes snap open.

In one second, I see my entire life to that point.

I see my young self, with dreams and hopes.

I see those hopes dashed, the entirety of my soul crushed.

But there's one hope.

Throughout it all, there's one hope keeping me alive.

Him.

Always him.

Even when I didn't know it. It was always him.

My sweet, sweet love. My dangerous love.

A door swings open, Raf sauntering in, his eyes wide, his entire body stiff. His gaze swings between Lucero and I, a harsh look crossing his face as he takes another step inside the room.

Raf...

His name is a whisper on my lips.

I could speak out. I could tell him everything. But I won't.

It wouldn't matter anymore, would it?

No, I want him to love me for me—for the me now before he even attempts to love me for the me in the past. I want him to look at me and see his *wife*.

And he does.

He looks at me and my heart bursts in my chest at the sadness I read in his eyes. The weariness. The guilt. The torture.

His soul is crying. It's there for me to see and feel.

Because my soul is crying too. It's weeping tears of blood at everything that happened; at everything I see in his gaze that is echoed in my own.

Anguish clings to him like a second skin.

I don't think anyone else can recognize the turmoil in him more than I do. I've become so proficient at reading him that every single expression is worth more than a thousand words. And in that moment, I realize things I couldn't when the veil of despair had clouded my senses. I see the love that was always there—and the pain at my rejection. I see everything he's feeling.

More than anything, I see the indecision.

And regardless of the love, that uncertain struggle that paints his features cuts me deep on the inside. So deep, I know I'm on the verge of doing something bad.

Something really, really bad.
The clock is ticking.
The fifteen minutes Michele had told us we have left are slowly trickling
by.

Ten more minutes left.

I meet Raf's eyes in a last attempt to communicate to him my desperation
—the fact that there can only be him and I.

No one else. Not now, nor ever.

He averts his gaze, a dagger to my chest.

Moving deeper into the room, he has the syringe clutched in his hand as
his eyes move over my form before focusing on Lucero.

No... No, no, no. This cannot be happening.

Sweat accumulates on my forehead, as my already irregular breathing
becomes out of control. I can hear my pulse in my ears, the drumming of it
maddening as I stare at the image before me.

He's not even looking at me as he takes one step. Then another. Until he's
standing right in front of Lucero.

Her eyes widen as she looks up at him, her mouth parted as she's about to
say something.

Without any preliminaries, Raf jabs the syringe in her thigh, pushing the
liquid inside into her body.

Saving her.

Damning *me*.

I blink.

There's clamoring noise at first. Slowly, though, everything dissipates
until there's an eerie calm inside of me. No more inner voices, no more
flashes of the past.

The wall finally shatters, the remaining crumbs dissipating into thin air.

It's just me.

The me now. The me that's the sum of every past mistake, of every past
event.

There's just only one me left.

The one who cut a deal with Michele. The cynical one who prepared for
this very moment.

It only takes one moment for everything to set in.

Raf barely has time to remove the syringe from her body when I'm out of
my chair, out of my bounds.

My hand reaches for the knife stashed under the chair and without even contemplating the consequences of my actions, I do it.

I move even as my name on his lips becomes an echo in the chamber. I move until I'm standing right behind her.

And with practiced movements, I bring the sharp blade to her neck, cutting from ear to ear and watching with glee as blood gushes out in rivulets.

Lucero struggles to speak, the cut making it impossible for her to do anything but wait for the blood to be drained of her body.

It's a matter of seconds before she slumps again against her chair, her eyes dead, her body unmoving.

Raf is frozen to the spot in front of me, his expression one of horror as he looks at me like he can't recognize who I am.

"You..." he trails off, taking a step back.

My smile dies on my lips as I realize that instead of accomplishing my goal of making sure no one other than me got him, I did something else entirely.

I disgust him.

I terrify him.

"You're a monster," he shakes his head at me, continuing to back away.

"Raf, I..." I try to speak, but the look in his eyes is enough to tell me everything that I need to know.

The me now isn't the me he loves. The me now is...something else.

If before I wanted to make sure he'd always be mine, now I just want to erase that expression from his face, beg him to look at me like he did before.

My bloodied hands reach out for him only to see him recoil.

And then I'm wrenched back to the present. Back to the fact that I haven't moved from my chair, my arms and legs are still tied to the chair, the knife Michele had placed under my chair is still there.

I hadn't moved.

Startling clarity seeps in as I realize the *me* before him is *not* the me he loves—it's not one he would ever love.

And so I'm left staring at him. Staring at everything within my grasp but forever out of reach.

Five minutes.

According to the clock, that's all I have left.

"Raf," I whisper, my throat so dry it's physically painful to get the word

out.

His face whips back to me, his expression stunning me.

He looks...scared to death.

And that's when I see that he's also counting down the minutes. He's also waiting for something.

Lucero speaks, but I can't hear.

Everything converges into one focal point—his gaze.

Those eyes I'd once given my life for.

To my biggest surprise, he's just as affected as I am, returning my stare with the same intensity. He doesn't acknowledge whatever Lucero is saying. He doesn't even glance at her.

He's only seeing me.

God, but he looks as if he's aged ten years in just a few minutes.

Tears stab at my eyes as I will him to come to me. Touch me one last time.

The knife under my chair is always at the back of my mind, as is the plan to *do* something.

Would I? What would I do?

He comes closer. Slowly, reluctantly. His shoulders are slumped as if he's carrying the entire weight of the world on them. And he *is*. He's carrying the weight of my sins—of our sins.

"Raf," I speak again just as he reaches my side.

I want to ask him to hug me, touch me, kiss me. Give me one last memory before I step foot into hell.

And the question is there—it's always there.

Would I take him with me?

His knees give out as he drops before me, his hands hesitantly reaching out to touch my shoulders.

"Noelle," he rasps, his voice thick and heavy, like a nail pinned to a coffin. "I..." he starts, his eyes moistened with tears. His mouth is parted, his face shadowed by fear and terror.

Something is wrong. Something is very, very wrong. He doesn't look like a man who's made the right choice. He looks like a man terrified he made the wrong one.

"Raf, what..."

I don't get to ask the question as a piercing noise dissipates the fog encroaching on my mind.

We both simultaneously turn towards Lucero. Her mouth is agape, her body spasming as one after another, shrilling screams are wrenched from her throat.

Her whole body is seizing, her eyes rolling to the back of her head as she trembles wildly against her bounds.

What...

It goes on for a few minutes.

Harsh screams of pain before deafening silence.

Just as it began, it ended.

Raf moves as if on an automated pilot, going to her side and placing two fingers on the pulse point at her neck.

"Dead," he declares after a moment, his eyes closing as he releases a deep, disappointed breath.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

The word echoes in my head, barely registering.

I'm one step away from losing it—one step away from closing my mind to reality and everything around me. But that one word keeps me from slipping.

On the precipice, it functions as a beckon to lure me back.

She's dead. That means...

He chose me.

Michele planned this from the beginning, didn't he? I would be laughing at his audacity if it wasn't my life on the line. If Raf wasn't the smart man I know him to be.

Even so, this was all a gamble. A simple throw of the coin.

"She's dead," he exhales in relief, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Quietly, he comes to my side, tearing at the rope that holds me chained to the chair and freeing my aching limbs.

All throughout he's quiet.

And that's when more panic sets in.

Is that...what he intended? Did he mean to kill her? Did he...

I can't help the way my mind goes into overdrive, but I need him to spell it out for me. It's not enough that she's dead and I'm not. I need him to tell me he chose *me*.

FOUR

NOELLE

HIS ARMS ARE AROUND ME AS HE GATHERS ME CLOSE, PICKING ME OFF THE chair as if I weighed nothing and cradling me to his chest.

"You're fine. You're fine," he chants in my hair, his voice haunted, almost lost. "Goddamn it, pretty girl, I thought I lost you. I thought..." he chokes on a sob as his arms tighten even more around my battered body.

The discomfort from before is still there, but I stifle a cry of pain as I simply absorb his presence—the physical evidence he's here with me.

"You chose me," I whisper, needing the words more than anything in this world.

"I'll always choose you," he brings his big palms to my cheeks, tilting my head back so he can look in my eyes. "I'll *always* choose you, pretty girl. I love you," he says with so much emotion I can't help but burst into tears, wounding my arms around his neck and bringing my lips to his for a sweet kiss.

I can taste his tears. My tears.

I can taste the love, the sadness, the sorrow.

I can taste *him*.

My Raf. My love. *Mine*.

He's here. He's touching me. He's...

I cry harder, the exhaustion getting to me as I seek to bring my body closer to his, needing the perpetual proof that this isn't a dream. That we're here. After everything that happened, we're here.

He brushes his lips lightly across mine, a heart-wrenching kiss that makes me relive all the horrors of the past—everything I endured to be with this man.

And it all led to now. This moment.

"My, my, my, what a reunion," the sound of hands clapping breaks us apart.

I'm still clinging to him, holding on for dear life. He tries to set me down but I don't let him. I simply tighten my hold around his neck, whimpering in protest.

The screen in front of my chair blares to life, Michele's form appearing before us as he claps mockingly, an insidious smile on his face.

"You took a risk, didn't you, baby bro?" Michele arches a brow.

"You..." Raf's chest rumbles with unreleased pressure. He squeezes me to his chest as he takes a deep breath in an attempt to control his anger.

He's hanging by a thread. I can feel him and the fact that Michele pushed him too far.

"Congratulations for passing the test. You've circumvented my plan and made the correct choice. Or, I should hope it *is* the correct choice," he smiles mockingly.

"Show yourself," Raf grits out. "At least have the decency to challenge me face to face and leave the innocent out of it."

"Innocent? Who? I don't see any innocents there. Or, maybe, the woman you killed. But you'll never know now, will you?"

Raf narrows his eyes at Michele.

"Ah, you're wondering what I'm talking about. Should I tell you myself or should I let your wife tell you?"

My eyes widen as I realize my mistake. This has never been about choice. It was all about pitting Raf and I against each other.

And he managed, didn't he? Because if Raf hears the madness I concocted... The fact that I would rather take him to my grave *with* me than let another woman have him.

I don't know how he will react.

You do. He will look at you like the monster you are.

I thrust that tiny voice inside of me aside. This isn't lost. As long as it's my word against Michele's, nothing is lost.

"I made a deal with him. As long as you chose me, we walk out free," I tell him confidently.

"Don't worry about it, pretty girl. I've got this," Raf shakes his head, barely paying attention to my words. Because that's my husband, always ready to bear everything on his shoulders.

"You just made a deal with me? Why don't you tell him the whole thing, Noelle. You proposed that should he choose you, you'll both walk out of here alive, sure. But should he choose Lucero, both Raf and Lucero would die, isn't that so?" Michele chuckled, and before I can reply, I hear a playback of our conversation—how easily I'd condemned Raf to death simply for not being mine.

I look away, shame eating at me. Yet I find myself unwavering in my conviction.

Raf is mine or no one else's. Just like I am his or not at all...

It's as simple as that.

I *would* have killed him. Then I would have killed myself.

It wouldn't be the first time.

My mind is clear now—too clear. And I know myself for what I am.

Wicked.

Selfish.

So obsessed with this one man I could never function without him again.

And that... That is both my blessing and my curse.

Raf's features are harsh as he stares at the monitor before glancing at me.

"Noelle..." he whispers my name, and I don't know what to make out of his tone. For the first time, I feel completely in the dark about his intentions.

Is he...disappointed in me?

"Does that mean we're free to go?" he suddenly asks, ignoring the previous conversation.

I continue to huddle in his arms, my face in the crook of his neck.

"For now? Yes. I can see the back-up you brought is already in the building." Michele sighs, shaking his head. "I thought I told you to come alone, baby bro."

The alarm in the building suddenly blares.

"It's your brother's men," Raf tells me softly. "We need to get out of here," he says just as he moves.

I'm still in his arms, and I don't have any intention of moving.

"Well, this was fun for how long it lasted," Michele interrupts. "Just an *fyi*, I'm not in the building anymore so don't try to look for me," he chuckles, winking at us. "Oh, and a second *fyi*, since, why not? There's a bomb. The alarm triggered it. So you should have," he pauses, looking at his watch, "less than five minutes to get out. Good luck."

Michele gives us a mock salute before the screen goes black.

I'm about to tell Raf that we should hurry when he shushes me, clicking on his comm and addressing my brother.

"Pull out your men. The building's about to blow up... Yes we're leaving now."

"Raf?" I ask tentatively.

"Hold on tight. We need to find the way out," he says just as he wrenches the door open, moving at full speed as he races through the hallways of the building with me in his arms.

"Three minutes left," I whisper in his hair, trying to keep track of the time.

"This damn building and its infernal layout," he grits out.

A few more dead ends and we finally manage to spot the exit.

He runs towards it, his grip on me tightening as we dash out of the door just as a loud explosion resounds behind us, the building erupting in flames.

The power of it propels us forward, and Raf turns us around at the last minute as he lands on the ground, his back hitting the pavement with me on top of him.

"Raf?" I mumble, worried when I see a smudge of blood on his brow.

My fingers go to his temples, softly caressing his skin.

His eyes snap open, that deep blue shining brightly as he looks intently at me.

"I'm not that easy to kill, pretty girl," he smiles, bringing my knuckles to his mouth for a kiss. My lips tremble as I attempt to return the smile.

Getting our bearings together, Raf swoops me up in his arms again, walking towards a nearby location where my brother and his men are all gathered, geared up and ready for war.

Cisco takes one look at me in Raf's arms and gives a brisk nod before going back to his car and driving away, instructing his men to do the same.

"Well, there goes my welcome," I mutter drily as Raf puts me down when we reach our car.

Waiting for everyone to leave, he doesn't immediately get inside the car to drive off. Instead, he opens the trunk of the car to hand me a bottle of water, spread out some food for me and a change of clothes.

"Raf..." I whisper, touched by his thoughtfulness.

"I got a little of everything," he says awkwardly. "I didn't know how I'd find you and I wanted you to be comfortable."

He's so impossibly sweet my heart bursts in my chest.

I take the bottle of water, drinking greedily.

"I don't think I can eat anything now, but thank you for thinking about it."

"Sure, anything you want, pretty girl," he nods, immediately packing up the food.

He hands me a folded cotton dress and a cardigan.

"You really thought of everything," I smile.

I don't like the gaping silence or the way he looks at me as if he doesn't know what to say to me.

What is he thinking?

As soon as we're completely alone, I shrug the hoodie over my head and I take my leggings off. I'm not wearing any panties and Raf is quick to note that, his eyes snapping to my face in question.

"Did..." his face contorts in pain as he takes a step towards me.

Taking the dress from my hands, he places it over my head, gently pulling it down my body.

As soon as he's done dressing me, I glance at him.

He swallows hard, his eyes on my shoulders—on the marks left by the electric wands—before going lower as he thoroughly inspects my body.

"Did he..." he clears his throat, the question obvious.

"No," I answer as I step closer to him. Grabbing his hand, I place it to my waist, moving it up my body as I meet his gaze. "Only you, Raf. Only ever you," I whisper, though he doesn't realize the magnitude of my words yet.

He exhales in relief.

"Thank God," he sighs, simply pulling me to him for a tight hug. "Thank God, Noelle. I don't think I could have ever forgiven myself for it," he murmurs in my hair, swaying slightly with me.

I cling to him, absorbing his body heat and that tantalizing scent that is simply him.

Finally, I am home.

Yet my optimism doesn't last long as we strap in for a long ride home, the same awkward silence enveloping us.

Raf is driving, focusing solely on the road, his entire body stiff and closed-off.

I'm trying to get a read on him but I can't, and so I end up worrying about the worst.

He'd chosen me over Lucero when all along he'd thought of *her* as his love. Is he mourning her? Is he regretting his choice? Or is he disappointed

about my deal with Michele?

The options are endless, and the more I try to rationalize this maddening silence, I can't.

I *can't* have him upset with me.

Bringing my fingers to my mouth, I bite my nails in anxiety, all the while sneaking glances at his profile.

He's so handsome, I want to cry tears of joy just for being next to him again—for having him in my life.

Alive. Well. Mine.

His sharp jaw, straight nose and plump lips fill my field of view. And as I drag my eyes lower, to those muscles he worked so hard to attain, I feel an even deeper admiration for him. Now that I know everything he's been through, I can't help the way my heart swells in my chest for him.

I'd never thought my love for him could be more. Yet it is, and growing still.

He came for me. He *saved* me.

My lips tremble in a hesitant smile.

He's always saving me, isn't he? Whether it's from others or from myself, he's always there to save me.

My lips pull into a smile, my feelings for him overwhelming me.

He turns his head right at that moment, catching my wistful look and the way I'm eating him up with my eyes. My cheeks heat up, but I don't look away.

Raf's eyes pin me to the spot, the intensity of his gaze so perilous I find myself floundering again.

What is he thinking?

The entire ride is silent. Only when he parks the car a few streets down my brother's house does he finally turn to me, a weary sigh escaping him as he brings his hands to scrub his face.

"Raf?" I ask tentatively.

He brings his hand to the necklace nestled against his chest, his fingers tracing the contours of the stone reverently.

"I need to tell you something," he starts, his voice ominous—so far away I immediately think of the worst.

"What is it?"

"You asked me about Lucero before," he swallows hard. "And I told you I only met her a couple of times in person. That isn't necessarily true."

"I... I don't understand." I frown.

"The few times I met with her was in the darkness of my cell, or when my eyes had been too swollen to be able to see properly. I only worked out what she looked out when I heard other people calling her name while I was working outside. And it was *that* Lucero that responded to that name—the one I killed."

There's so much anguish in his voice that I worry for his next words.

"What do you mean?" I inquire softly, slowly angling my body towards him, instinctively seeking the heat of his body—the perpetual proof that he's next to me.

That he's not a mirage.

"I was wrong," he states in a pained whisper.

I don't reply, merely waiting for him to continue.

His hands shoot out, his palms around my cheeks as he pulls me closer to him—close enough to see the turmoil in those blue eyes I love more than anything in this world.

"I was wrong, pretty girl. I've been wrong all this time..." he shakes his head, averting his gaze as one tear slides down his cheek.

"I've been such a fool. You were under my nose this entire time and I..." his voice breaks, his forehead falling on top of my shoulder as his breathing intensifies. "How can I ever forgive myself for everything I've done? How can I live with myself knowing I hurt the only woman I've ever loved?" he rasps, his hands falling to my waist as he brings his head to my midriff, holding tight as sobs rack his body.

"Raf... You're not making sense," I whisper, a small lie, but one I'm going to ask for forgiveness later.

"It's always been you, pretty girl," he raises his head, looking at me with so much emotion I feel my own throat clog with the magnitude of this moment—of the feelings he evokes in me. "I saw a recording of you before... before Sergio. And I heard your voice. The one from before," he squeezes his eyes shut, biting his lip in pain. "The voice I would never, *never* not recognize—the taste that still coats my tongue."

"What are you trying to say?"

"You don't remember. I know," he sighs. "I don't know what happened, *how* it happened, but it was you. All along, *my* Lucero was *you*," he states.

I freeze. I hadn't expected that. I hadn't expected him to be able to recognize me. Not now, not ever.

Slowly, I blink, still caught in the impossibility of the moment.

"I see..." I add numbly.

"This," he leans back, taking his necklace off. "This is all yours," he continues as he brings it to my skin, fastening it around my neck. "And now it's finally back to its rightful owner."

He proceeds to tell me how he'd gotten to the conclusion, sharing some tidbits from his time in captivity and how I'd been there for him. He tells me with as much detail as he can, but it's still obvious he has severe gaps in his memory.

He remembers a fraction of what actually happened—and I don't have the heart to enlighten him on everything else.

At least not now. Not when I finally have him. After what feels like an eternity without him, he's here—he's finally here.

"Will you ever forgive me? *Could* you ever forgive me?"

"Raf, there's nothing to forgive," I palm his cheek, swiping my thumb over his lips. "You're here now. I'm here now. Why dwell on the past?" I ask, even as the lie burns on my tongue.

The past is always there, one door away from my consciousness. I've done a good job now of keeping everything from spilling, but that's not to say it won't happen in the future.

But not now. Not when I have a modicum of happiness after years of bleakness.

"Noelle, God, Noelle," he groans. "I don't deserve you. I never did," he breathes out, his features contorted in pain.

"Don't. Don't go there, Raf," I murmur. "I admit I'm a bit shocked by what you're telling me. But don't you see it? This is our second chance. We were lucky enough to be given a second chance and I'm not going to squander it, do you hear me? You're mine. And I'm yours. Always."

Even to my ears my words don't make much sense, but there's a frenzy building inside of me—one that only knows one objective.

Him.

It's always been about him.

Everything I've ever done has been about him.

"I love you. So, so much," I confess.

"I love you, too, pretty girl," he gives me the words I'd been yearning for all along and God if they don't hit me right in the chest, warmth spreading all over my being at hearing him say those coveted words. "More than anything

in the world. More than you can realize. Fuck," he rasps. "I feel like a madman, but there is no quantifying the love I feel for you. Even before I knew of the past. Before anything. I just...love you as instinctively as I breathe. There's no other way to explain this feeling that comes so naturally it's like it was embedded in my DNA."

His forehead is on top of mine, his breath on my lips as I listen to his words—the sweet melody of those words of love I've been wishing for all along.

He brings his lips to my forehead, slowly skimming soft kisses all over my skin.

"To think I was about to lose you... That one wrong choice and you would be gone..."

That's when I finally realize why he'd been so aloof. He's been suffering all along, hasn't he? He's been beating himself over everything.

"But you saved me," I try to assure him.

"Barely. I sensed what Michele was about. But it was all a matter of chance. I can't say there was anything more to it than a gamble. And it's something I *never* want to do again. Fuck... You have no idea what those few minutes after I administered the syringe did to me. I thought I was seeing my life flash before my eyes because I don't think I could ever do this without you. Not again. Not ever."

"Raf..." I trace his features, looking into his eyes and seeing the same type of emotion reflected back.

He understands.

He knows exactly how I feel and the fact that there's no life without him.

"Where you go I go, pretty girl. This time forever. I don't care what people think. I don't fucking care if they judge or blame us. But I can only be here because *you* are here. You get me?"

I nod, a tightness in my chest that's about to explode.

"It's you and me, baby," he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "It's you and me against the world."

"Or not at all," I add, a blush going up my cheeks at the implication. At the fact that I'd taken it upon myself to decide his fate should he *not* choose me.

It's selfish.

It's insane.

But it's the only thing that makes sense to me—that will always make

sense to me.

"I don't begrudge the deal you made with my brother. I know you're worried about that," he assures me when he sees me biting my lip in worry, almost as if he could read my mind. "How can I judge you for something I would have done, too? Fuck, Noelle. I know it's not normal. It's anything but normal, but I would have done the same. It's you and me or nothing."

"You'd kill me if there was another man?" I ask softly, pleasure spreading to my core.

"Before I killed myself," he nods severely.

I can tell he has a hard time coming to grips with this side of himself—with how out of control we are. With how we're beyond normal together.

"You're really not mad at me about that, are you?" I repeat in awe.

I know myself. Now, more than ever, I know myself.

For so long, I've had just one purpose—him.

Death isn't an idea that scares me. Not anymore. The only thing that absolutely terrifies me is living in a world without him. So I know what *I* would do.

But to hear that he's the same? That he's pondered the same difficult issues and had come to the same conclusion?

"How could I be mad at you when what I feel for you defies logic? I tried to temper myself. Cool down my feelings for you so I didn't overwhelm you. But that was a mistake, wasn't it?" he smiles, almost sadly. "All along you've been ready for me—for everything I want to give you and take in return."

Before I realize what he's about, his hands are on my waist as he pulls me on top of him. He touches me reverently, all the while staring at me with love, desire and something else. Something that couldn't be captured in just one word.

Something *special*.

"We defied death. Together," I tell him, closing my eyes as my legs come to rest on either side of him, my center against that hard part of him.

"All along you've been my light," he smiles when he sees I don't react negatively to the word. "*Mi luz*. My eternal love," he continues, moving his hands up my body. "Whether I knew it or not, it's always been you."

FIVE

NOELLE

"YOU SURE KNOW HOW TO MAKE A LADY FEEL SPECIAL," I GRIN AT HIM.

He chuckles.

"That's because you're *my* special lady, Noelle."

His hands are on the sides of my face, touching me lightly as if he didn't dare do more—as if he's still afraid this moment is ephemeral.

There's an intensity to his eyes that makes me shiver. Yet he doesn't do more.

It's at that moment that I realize how tightly wound up he is. How his muscles are coiled with tension, ready to burst at any moment. All that fear from before is still packed within him—the what-ifs from before still haunting his mind.

He's looking at me with so much longing it breaks my heart that he feels the need to deny himself, that he's afraid he might scare me with that side of him.

And it's not the first time, is it?

All along, there's been something holding him back. Making him slow down when all he wanted was to go faster, stronger, harder.

While I was becoming increasingly scared of the extent of my feelings for him—of the things that I would *do* for him—he's been doing the same, hasn't he?

The only time when he'd been truly uninhibited had been under the influence of drugs. Then he'd taken me so raw, so out of control.

I continue to look at him, as if by merely looking I could decipher the secrets of his soul. And to an extent I can.

I know about his childhood and about his relationship with his parents. I

know all the expectations placed on him. More than anything, I know he's never allowed himself to be anything more than what was required of him. He'd been neatly placed in one mold and he'd never tried to break out of it.

He'd simply accustomed himself to living life from the shadows, being trapped within his body, that ultimate cage of his own making.

The world doesn't know the real him. It never did.

Only *I* do. Only I am privy to his deepest desires, to the man he is beneath it all—to the person he is when he is stripped of the *Guerra* name.

Only I know his core—his desire to be...more.

It's always been something we both related to. Caught by our circumstances, we could only commiserate while imagining a world where things were different.

"Give me your thoughts," I whisper softly, urging him to open up to me.

His mouth opens and closes, indecision flashing across his face.

Instead of talking, though, he does something entirely unexpected. He grips the hem of my cotton dress, pulling it up over my head. Surprised, I go along, wanting to see what he means to do—excited at the prospect he might do what *I* want him to.

The car windows are tinted. No one on the outside can see us—not that I'd mind at this point. All I want is to have his big hands on my body, feel his calloused fingers as they grip my flesh and remind me we are mortals, yet we are so much more. We're bodies dancing in the night while our souls kiss.

He flings the dress aside, leaving me completely naked for his perusal. The only item still on my body is the necklace, the proof of our undying love.

"You want my thoughts, pretty girl?" his voice is gravelly, thick and so full of emotion it only serves to trigger my own forgotten passion—the one reserved only for him.

"I want every bit of you, Raf. I want the spoken and the unspoken. Every little bit."

"I'm a mess," he admits, vulnerability dripping from his voice. "I'm a fucking mess who loves you more than it should be legal to love someone."

His confession washes over me, infusing me with inexplicable lightness and a pulsing need that starts from the middle of my chest, moving lower until it reaches that spot between my thighs.

"But there's so much you don't know... So much I've kept from you and it's killing me..."

"Shhh," I bring my finger against his lips, shushing him. "I don't care. Not

now, Raf. I know everything I need to know."

"Noelle..."

Slowly, I move my hands down his chest, undoing his buttons and removing his shirt while never once taking my eyes off him.

His lips part, his breathing harsh.

"I know how much I love you and that's enough," I say as I lean forward, pressing my lips against the naked skin at the hollow of his throat.

The space is cramped. Yet because it's so tiny, my skin touches his everywhere, the musky scent of him filling my nostrils just as his warmth envelops my body.

I spread my hands over hard muscle, tracing the puckered scars on his left shoulder, so close to his heart they could have been fatal.

Before, I hadn't seen them for what they were. But now I know.

They are his second chance at life—*my* second chance at life.

Bringing my lips to his skin, I kiss every scar, swirling my tongue around and eliciting a hiss from him.

One hand in my hair, he strokes me gently. The other hand is slowly moving up my ribcage, tracing the contours of my body in the sweetest caress.

"You're my little piece of heaven, Noelle," he whispers. "The only time I can truly be at peace is when I have you in my arms."

I glance up to see his pupils expanding as his desire reaches a new height, his love so evident in every little blink, every breath.

"The only time I feel complete is when I'm in your arms, Raf."

His mouth tilts up right as the hand in my hair tightens over my scalp, his grip unyielding yet painless. With a sudden yank, he brings me to him, my lips meeting his in a violent clash.

I can't help the whimper that escapes me.

The time for playing around is over.

This is the Rafaelo I crave.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I bring my breasts flush against his chest, opening my mouth on top of his and kissing him with everything in me.

I kiss him for the past, for being the one drop of color in my life.

I kiss him for the future, for everything that's still left unsaid.

He bites my lip, drawing back just enough to meet my gaze before he moves his mouth over my jaw, peppering it with kisses until he reaches the

spot below my ear, biting and sucking the skin in his mouth, marking me.

"Love me," I murmur. "Love me, Raf. Show me how much you love me..." My eyes snap closed as a moan escapes my lips when he pinches my nipple, his mouth trailing lower and lower as he nibbles at my skin.

He's leaving his mark on me everywhere, and a shudder goes down my spine at thinking everyone will see me like this.

Stained by him. Smelling of him. Wearing him with me.

His.

They will see the red kisses of his lust and they will know there's only him for me, just like there's only me for him.

His hands grip my waist as he pushes me back until I feel the coldness of the steering wheel against my skin. In contrast, the warmth of his mouth is everywhere, worshipping every inch of my skin.

Sucking one nipple in his mouth, he gives it a light bite that startles me, a low giggle escaping me as I thread my fingers through his hair, encouraging him to do the same to the other.

"You love my mouth on you, don't you?" he speaks against my flesh, goosebumps covering my skin as I feel the deep rumble of his voice reverberate against my ribcage.

I give him a brisk nod, anything to have him continue.

He smiles before he brings his tongue to the valley of my breasts, licking his way up my neck until he reaches my lips again.

"You were my first kiss," he confesses thickly. "The first lips I ever tasted," he continues, his breath my breath. "The *only* lips I've ever tasted."

My eyes flutter open as I look at him—at the way his hair is no longer perfectly styled, his face flushed, his eyes overtaken with lust.

I part my lips to reply, but the words are stuck in my throat. There are so many things I want to tell him, confessions that no one knows. Things that only *he* should know. Yet I can't. Not now. I won't ruin this moment when it's the perfect bliss. I've waited too long to have him like this, with no barriers between us. I won't taint this with revelations that would only upset him—maybe change the way he sees me forever.

So, I settle on something else. Something safe but true.

"You're fully mine, aren't you?"

"Always," he brushes his lips against mine. Once. Twice. "I've never *not* been yours," he whispers, the words making my once dead heart weep with joy.

And as I give into the kiss, I feel his hand sneak between my legs, finding me soaked for him. He pushes one finger between my folds, coating it in my arousal. Bringing it between our mouths, he sucks on it before he swipes his tongue over my lips, giving me a taste of myself—of everything he makes me feel.

"You're so wet for me," he rasps. "Only for me."

"Only ever for you," I readily agree, so consumed by lust I'm about to combust.

I want him inside me, but I also don't want to hurry this since I recognize it for what it is—the true joining of our bodies *and* souls. A slow dance meant to strengthen our already impenetrable bond.

He touches me again, his thumb on my clit as he pushes two thick fingers inside of me.

My breath catches in my throat at the sensation.

Eyes on him, I can only convey to him with my gaze everything that he makes me feel, both fullness and emptiness. My lips part as my breath comes out in short spurts, the heated atmosphere leaving me panting just as his fingers move in and out of me.

"There. Right there, Noelle."

His voice is different, an echo hitting the steamed windows of the car and enveloping the entire space in the decadence of his command.

"Show me how you look when you come for me, pretty girl. Show me what's mine and mine alone," he demands. "*Only* mine."

My nails are lodged in his shoulders as I feel the pressure mount inside me.

He simply regards me, hooded eyes dripping with arousal and a need to see how I react to him—only him.

So I give it to him.

A cry is wrenched from my mouth, my muscles tensing as my head falls back, the climax building up until I'm a quivering mess at the mercy of his fingers.

"That's it, love," his voice gently beckons me back, his lips on my flushed cheeks as he licks at what I realize are tears. No wonder the orgasm felt so unusual. He took me to a different high. One that goes beyond the physical. Beyond biological functions and mechanisms.

"Let it all go," he murmurs softly. "Let it all go, Noelle."

"I need you Raf," I swallow hard. "I need to feel you inside me. I just

need..." words fail me as the urgency to have him fill me overtakes me.

"I know what you need. I'm here, pretty girl. I'm here all the way with you."

My hands go to his belt, fumbling in my attempt to undo it. Throwing it aside, I lower his zipper and my palm meets his soft flesh—so hard and ready for me.

"Noelle, fuck," he rasps as I wrap my hand around him, touching him lightly.

Using my other hand, I reach between my legs, gathering some of my arousal and lathering it up all over his length.

"You're killing me. You're fucking killing me," Raf groans, his fingers back in my hair as he brings me to him for a kiss.

I stroke him, slowly at first before gaining speed, using his sounds of pleasure as my guide. He's so hard and thick, my walls clench in anticipation of feeling him fill me—stretch me to completion.

"God, pretty girl," he rasps, moving his hands to my ass as he brings me into him. "Fuck yourself on me," he commands in that unyielding tone of his. "Fuck yourself on me and take what you want. Take everything."

My hands on his shoulders, I slowly lower myself on his lap. The head of his cock brushes against my wet folds before he positions it to my entrance, carefully pushing inside of me.

"Raf," my mouth opens on a loud moan as I feel him slowly breach me, stretching me with his size, a slight burn giving way to maddening pleasure when he's fully embedded inside me.

We're both breathing hard, our eyes locking just as our bodies are fitted together to perfection.

I can feel him pulsing inside of me, swelling even more in size.

"This is us, Noelle. Right here, right now," he brushes the damp hair from my face, gazing at me so lovingly, so reverently.

The perfection of the moment is enhanced by the fact that I'm the only one who knows this side of him just like he is the only one who knows this side of me.

"Feel it," I grab his hand, bringing it over my heart. "Feel how you're making my heart beat," I tell him on a gasp as he half-thrusts into me.

He replaces his hand with his head, his ear fitted to my chest as he hugs my body, sliding me up and down his cock and slow, precise movements that have me crying out in pleasure.

"I feel it. I hear it, I *taste* it," he murmurs softly. "I can taste the precious sweetness of your heartbeats. Because your heart beats for me, doesn't it, pretty girl? Only for me."

"Yes," I moan, my eyes closed as I cradle his head to my chest, bouncing up and down his cock as he makes the sweetest love to me. "It beats *only* for you, Raf. For so long," I pause, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. I swallow the lump in my throat, focusing to remain in the moment—not tainted this with the pain of the past. "For so long I've been alive but not living. Not like this. Not like when I'm with you. So yes, it beats *only* for you. Because you made it *beat* again."

But there's also the unspoken.

Thank you for being alive.

Thank you for finding me again.

Thank you for saving me.

"Fuck," he curses, "I've told you and I'll tell you for as long as we live, Noelle. You're my heart. My fucking everything. To have you like this... To feel you like this..." he trails off, stuck in the ineffability of the moment.

I cry out harder as he increases the rhythm of his thrusts.

There's only his sweaty body. My sweaty body. The steamed up windows. And two hearts beating in unison.

Reaching to the side, he punches a button to adjust the driver's seat until the back is at the same level as the backseat. And in a swift move, he switches our positions, my back hitting the leather of the seat as he takes his place between my legs.

He pauses momentarily to fully remove his pants before he's back on me. But instead of resuming fucking me, he throws my legs over his shoulders as he brings his mouth to my pussy, giving it a long lick before wrapping his lips around my clit and sucking hard.

"Raf," I scream, scandalized, but also overflowing with pleasure as I feel another orgasm build inside of me.

"Play with your tits for me, pretty girl," he rasps, his eyes finding mine as he swirls his tongue over my clit. "I want to see you pet yourself while I make you come. Over and over again," his breath meets my wetness as he speaks, a shiver going down my back at the sensation.

My cheeks heat up at his request, but I do as he says, bringing my fingers to my nipples, cupping the heavy weight of my breasts just as Raf resumes licking me.

"That's it," he bites on my clit and my hips shoot up, an electrical current going through the entire length of my body as my toes curl with the power of my orgasm. I can't help the succession of whimpers that escape my mouth, the way I feel like I'm flying and I never want to reach the ground again.

"Fucking hell, the taste of your pussy and the taste of your voice as you come are the best meal I've ever had," he tells me, his tongue giving me one last lick before he slowly comes up my body, peppering kisses everywhere.

My hands are still on my breasts as I squeeze them, the aftershocks still too strong.

"Hold on to me," he takes my arms, wounding them around his neck before he cups my ass, his fingers digging into the soft skin of my cheeks as he slides into me in one smooth thrust.

"I'm done going slow, Noelle," his voice is grave, punctured.

"I never asked you to," I wink at him.

A smile on his face, he grabs my ass so hard I'm sure I'll be sporting bruises all over.

It's only when he draws back that I see a new lightness entering his features, his grunts intensifying as he fucks me with rare abandon.

His thrusts become increasingly faster, harsher, more potent.

"More," I demand, knowing he has more to give me. "I want all of you. All that you hide in here. All that you've never let loose," I whisper in his hair, one hand sneaking between our bodies to feel the wild beat of his heart.

Our bodies are covered in sweat and gleaming in the low lighting of the car. Yet it's the look in his eyes that has me enraptured.

It's that intense gaze of his, but this time it's different.

Something snaps in him at my words.

One moment I'm holding on to him as his hips piston in and out of me, the next I find myself flat against the leather of the chair, his hand on my throat as he leans back, watching me as he squeezes ever so lightly, restricting my airflow but not harming me.

I wrap my fingers around his wrist, confirming I want this—anything he wants to do to me.

Relief flashes across his face before it's gone, his features hardening, his gaze an impenetrable fortress and I'm the only guest allowed.

He holds me pinned to the seat, one hand around my throat while the other grips my hip, keeping me in place. He's on his knees, his cock still inside of me, but barely.

A strange smile appears on his face, a playfulness I haven't seen before. Instead of fucking me harder, as I expected of him, he goes slower—painfully slow.

All the while he's watching me, his eyes taking in every play of emotion on my face, his fingers tightening around my throat as he pushes the head of his cock inside of me but before stopping. He teases me with it, pressing into me and retreating, only to slide his length between the wet lips of my pussy.

"You're wicked, Rafaelo Guerra," I playfully chastise, my lips fighting to erupt in a smile.

"I may be wicked, but I'm yours," he gives me a cheeky smile before he moves his hand up, his thumb slipping into my mouth as he thrusts all the way inside of me.

He changed the angle, and the result is...earth-shattering.

I bite hard on his thumb, holding his hand captive to swallow my cries as he starts to thoroughly fuck me. In and out, the power of his thrusts makes me reel, my spine arching, my eyes rolling in the back of my head as I feel my walls contract, squeezing him inside of me.

I come like never before. My entire body starts spasming, my mind a big, blank space as I forget all about my surroundings.

There's only warmth. So much warmth and an inexplicable bliss as I hear his groan of pleasure and the frenzy that accompanies it as he chases his own climax. His hot seed floods my insides just as he collapses on top of me, his mouth on my shoulder as he cradles me to him, licking my skin and murmuring sweet words of love.

Just like that, I'm home.

I'm finally back home.

SIX

NOELLE

MY BODY IS FITTED TO HIS AS WE HUDDLE TOGETHER ON THE STRETCHED OUT seat. Raf is gazing down at me with such gentleness, I cannot believe this is my reality—that he's here, with me.

"Your brother will soon start looking for us," he whispers, tucking a strand of hair behind my ears.

I roll my eyes at him.

"Didn't you see how he ignored me earlier? He's probably relieved I'm off his hands."

"That's not true. He knows I've got you. If anything, he would have felt like a stranger when all your attention was on me, like mine was on you," he explains softly.

"He could have at least tried to talk to me," I grumble. "But I must admit I'm enjoying this little car adventure," I smile sheepishly as I trace my finger over his naked chest. "I kind of like being naughty with you," I whisper, my cheeks heating up at the admission.

"You like being naughty with me, pretty girl?" he chuckles. "Then I'll strive to be more naughty with you in the future," he says right as he moves on top of me, suddenly kissing me and tickling me.

It's not always I get to see this playful side of him, and I know it's one only *I* know. He's never shown anyone this part of him—the carefree, truly laid-back one.

He might put his social mask on, but there's an underlying tension to playing that role—one that doesn't let him be comfortable in his own skin. And if there is anything I want to accomplish in this life, it's to make sure he's *always* comfortable in who he is.

The only expectation I'll ever have of him is his love. The rest... The rest is moot. As long as he loves me and I love him, nothing else matters.

Raf continues his ministrations. If before, everything had been hypersexual, now there's only playfulness and joy—the pleasure derived from laughter and making each other laugh.

I giggle as he tickles a particularly sensitive spot, kicking at him as tears stab at the corners of my eyes.

"Stop. I give up, I give up," I cry out, unable to stop myself from laughing.

Suddenly, he stops.

His blonde locks are damp from perspiration, an intense look settling on his face.

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, Noelle," he declares, the sincerity in his voice my undoing.

"Maybe for you," I mumble shyly.

He shakes his head.

"For me you're the *only* one," he winks cheekily before getting up, nodding for me to do the same and dress.

Reluctantly, I acquiesce since we do need to face the outside world at some point. As much as I'd love nothing more than to have him steal me away, take me to a far, far away place where no one knows us and we don't know anyone, I know we can't.

There are responsibilities. Things we still have pending.

With a resigned sigh, I push myself up, settling on the chair next to the driver's seat as I search for my dress.

Raf is faster, though, grabbing it from the floor and beckoning me to come closer so he can slide it over my head.

A smile pulls at my lips. I know what he's doing. He has an odd fascination with doing everything for me—dressing me, feeding me, just taking care of me. It's such an endearing quality of his that I can only comply, shuffling closer and raising my arms.

He grins in approval, pulling the dress over my body and smoothing out the wrinkles.

"There's my domestic husband. You're good at everything, aren't you?" I raise a brow at him.

"I was born for this, pretty girl. Of course, I'm an expert at everything that is *you*," he winks, making to grab his own clothes.

But if he can take care of me, then I certainly can take care of him too.

I watch as he pulls on his pants, but before he can do more, I simply move, sliding between the seats as I grab his shirt.

A curious look of surprise crosses his face, but he doesn't protest when I help him into his shirt, my fingers focused on getting the buttons right.

He's smiling, watching me indulgently.

Especially as I get lower and lower. As I'm about to zip up his pants, I'm met with the surprise that he's still hard. My fingers brush over his erection as I reach for his zipper, and he hisses at the sensation.

"It's not fair," I whisper, my eyes on that part of him that seems to grow even harder the more I stare at it.

"What's not fair, pretty girl?" his voice is thick, need shadowing his tone.

"That you can make me come so many times but you come only once," I pout.

There's a pause and I lift my eyes to his face, surprised to see an amused expression tugging at his lips. He releases a chuckle.

"You should take that up with Mother Nature," he fires back.

"Still not fair."

"See, that's where you're wrong," he continues in a suave voice, and I find myself frowning in confusion. "Your pleasure is *my* pleasure. You have no idea the high I get from seeing you come," he tells me, his palm cupping my cheek in a light caress. "The look on your face, the sound of your voice as you cry out in pleasure—pleasure *I* give you. There's nothing more satisfying than that. Yeah, blue balls suck, but that little thing aside I'd be happy to pleasure you for the rest of my life without getting anything in return. That's how much I love making you come," he states seriously.

"You're insane," I whisper.

I've always known he was a selfless lover, but I'd never realized to what extent.

"If that's insane, then no, I don't ever want to be sane."

"Well," I lick my lips suggestively. "It's good you have me as your wife, because I could never let you come *just* once."

"Noelle," he groans, but he doesn't make to stop me.

In fact, he leans back into his chair, getting more comfortable just as I brush my palm lightly over his length. I tease him for a few moments before I reach inside his pants to wrap my hand around him.

"What is that devious little mind of yours up to?"

"You'll have to see," I smile sweetly.

Bending across his seat, I swipe my tongue over the head, lathering it in spit and enjoying the way his reaction is immediate. His fingers are wrapped in my hair and he barely catches himself in time to not choke me on his cock.

"Fucking hell, pretty girl. You like having me out of control, don't you?"

"Hmm, maybe," I say just as I blow some air over the spit dripping down his shaft. "I like watching you drop your façade and show me the raw, real you."

I wrap my lips around the tip, hollowing my cheeks and sucking him deep in my mouth.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he swears, his grip tightening as he pushes me lower. Shielding my teeth with my lips, I allow him to push his cock deeper inside my mouth, breathing through my nose as I let him use me.

His hand in my hair, he thrusts in and out of my mouth, the tip hitting the back of my throat, retreating just as I'm about to gag.

His breathing intensifies just as his groans grow louder.

Using my tongue, I play with the underside, knowing exactly what he likes and what gets the most reaction out of him.

"Fuck, almost there, pretty girl. I'm almost there," he mumbles incoherently.

My spit dribbles down his entire length and I use my both my hands to grip him tightly, continuing to suck him until he's mindless with pleasure.

A sudden knock on the window of the car makes me still.

Raf, too, startles.

"Is anyone inside?" an unknown voice asks, still knocking.

His cock is still in my mouth, and as his fingers dig in my scalp, I don't stop. I squeeze the base of his shaft, the head of his cock twitching as it swells in size just before his hot cum coats my entire mouth.

"Noelle," he pants, and even his hand becomes slack in my hair.

The knocking intensifies, but Raf is slow to come to his senses.

"You should check that," I giggle, lifting my head and wiping my mouth. And to show him what a good wife I am, I tuck him in, zipping him up and giving him my most adoring smile.

He releases a loud sigh, bringing his hand to scrub his eyes.

I can see the man waiting outside the car, but most glaring is his uniform.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he gives me a side glance, shaking his head in amusement as he pushes a button to lower the window.

"Officer," he plasters a smile on his face as he greets the policeman. "What seems to be the problem?"

The man narrows his eyes at Raf and me, almost as if sensing we were up to no good in the car.

A smile threatens to overtake me, but I rein it in, leaving Raf to get us out of this mess.

"Your car is parked illegally," he states, deadpan.

Raf blinks, looking around—as if he just *now* recognized his surroundings.

A low laugh escapes me and Raf gives me a severe look.

"I see. Well, we'll just move the car, then," he says, always the polite gentleman.

The policeman doesn't look quite ready to leave, eyeing us suspiciously.

"I've had reports from residents about your car for the past two hours," the man started, struggling to keep a straight face as he continued, "and the various noises coming out of it."

"It must have been the speakers, right, Raf? We were listening to an audiobook," I quickly interject, a pleasant smile on my face.

As if feeling my lips tip up in that semblance of a smile, Raf suddenly turns, giving me an odd look as he pushes me further into the car and away from the man's view.

"My wife is right. We got caught up in the story and didn't realize how much time passed. We'll move now."

"I should remind you that public indecency is punishable by law."

"What indecency?" Raf asks, but his tone changes, the polite persona he put on slowly slipping from him.

"I'm only repeating what the resident reports said."

"Let me get this right. You're saying we engaged in public indecency, despite the fact that no one could actually *see* inside the car. In case it has escaped your notice, the windows are tinted."

"There's also the matter of the sounds," the man persists.

"Which were coming from the audiobook," Raf lies with a straight face.

The policeman blinks, finding himself at a loss for words as he cannot accuse us of anything *but* the illegal parking.

"Let's get one thing straight, Officer Winston. If you have a problem with the illegal parking, please issue a ticket. As for the other *reports*, please go ahead if you think you can prove any of those claims. If not, then I'd

appreciate it if you let us leave. As I've said earlier, I'll move the car," he states matter-of-factly.

"I... I guess I could let you leave," he scratches the back of his head, looking confused for a moment.

"I guess so, too," Raf adds, outrageously. "Please issue the ticket," he says right as he turns the engine on, in two smooth moves getting us out of the parking spot and leaving behind the befuddled cop as he stares at the departing vehicle.

I can't stop myself from laughing, bending over until tears are leaking from my eyes.

"I can't believe you did that," I swipe him playfully over the arm.

He has a satisfied smile on his face as he drives two blocks down, now parking right in front of my brother's place.

"What, you've never run from the cops before, pretty girl?" he winks at me as he stops the engine, this time on a proper parking space.

We both get out but as soon as we come face to face we both burst into laughter.

He throws his arm over my shoulders, guiding me towards the entrance of the house, all the while joking about what just happened.

The moment we step into the house, however, it's to be met by my brother's chilling gaze.

He's by the stairs, his hands folded over his chest as he takes us in, his eyes seemingly seeing everything.

A chill goes down my back.

If there's someone in this world that I should be scared of, it's him. Yet there's also an oddly contradictory side to him—one he always denies having but that shines through nonetheless at the strangest times.

"You've taken quite the detour," Cisco speaks first.

Raf's smiling features harden, his countenance changing immediately.

"I wanted some alone time with my wife," Raf replies, stating it matter-of-factly.

Despite their partnership, they don't see eye to eye—there's no way they would *ever* see eye to eye.

Raf is a completely different person than my brother or Michele. He's not the type to wage senseless wars, or play with human life. His values and integrity would never allow him to do so. And as much as it pains me to admit because I know what Michele's done to him, I don't think he's capable

of killing him.

Not my Raf.

But that's exactly what I love about him. That soft core of his and the way he sees the world that, at times, is antonymous to how *I* see it.

He brings the best in me.

But he brings the worst too.

I shut down that line of thinking, grounding myself in the present.

"I need to talk to Noelle," Cisco mentions, already heading towards his office.

I sneak a glance at Raf and he sighs in annoyance. Bending to kiss the top of my head, he whispers in a soft voice in my ear.

"It's up to you if you want to talk to him. I won't ever prohibit you that, nor will I push you to do it if you don't want to. I've already made some arrangements to move so we can have our own place, away from everything. Just say the word and we'll leave right this moment."

Warmth spreads through my being at his thoughtfulness and the fact that he values my opinion so much.

Isn't that what made me fall for him in the first place?

"I'll talk to him. Don't worry about it," I raise myself on my tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

He nods.

"I'll be upstairs packing," he tells me as I head to Cisco's office. All the while, Raf doesn't move from the landing of the stairs, watching me until I open the door and step inside.

Already my spirits are high, my husband's mere presence charging me with some ineffable type of energy—one that makes me feel like I can take on the world *and* win.

Not even the sight of my brother with his back to me, looking out the window of his study while cigarette smoke envelops me can tamper with that.

"You wanted to see me?"

I step deeper into the room, taking a seat and waiting to hear what he has to say.

He swivels, narrowing his eyes at me.

"You don't look that much worse for the wear," he mentions dryly.

Rolling my eyes at him, I simply ignore the jibe.

"Get to the point."

Coming closer, he doesn't take his eyes off me as he takes the seat

opposite me.

"He hurt you?" This time, the question is serious, his tone *almost* betraying a hint of emotion.

I shrug.

"Depends on your definition of hurt. He didn't do much physical harm if that's what you're wondering."

He nods quietly.

"You're different," he observes as he takes a deep drag of his cigarette.

"Am I?" I smile, suddenly standing up and moving towards his decanter.

I can feel his gaze boring into my back, the tension thick as I wait for his next decree.

Pouring myself a glass of whatever Cisco has around, I take a sip, turning and watching him over my glass.

"You remember," he states.

My lips quiver with unreleased laughter. And as I lower the glass, I can't contain my amusement anymore.

It's just that Cisco doesn't share it.

He's staring at me intently, his body taut, his entire countenance murderous.

Without taking his eyes off me, he reaches for his phone, dialing a number.

"Don't come back to the house with the kids tonight." The immediate switch in his tone tells me exactly who he's speaking to.

"Don't tell me you're scared of little old me," I chuckle.

A harsh look crosses his face.

"You remember. That's enough for me to know I need to protect my family."

"Cisco, Cisco," I tsk at him. "You're being awfully paranoid, you know that?"

"What I know," Cisco grits out, "is that if there is someone in this family who is most like myself, it's you. And I know what *I* would do."

I shrug.

"Maybe I'm biding my time."

"Don't force my hand, Noelle."

"Or what? You're not in charge of me anymore. That means you have no control over me."

"Interesting. What about your husband?"

"What about him?" I play his game, swirling the liquid in my glass as I meet his gaze head on. "In case it has escaped your notice, my husband is head over heels in love with me," I smile sweetly. "Nothing you can say or do can change that."

"Ah," he smirks. "I'd almost forgotten this mercenary side of yours. Rafaelo might be in love with you, but I doubt he knows everything, does he?"

"Oh, he knows enough. In fact," my lips quirk up in satisfaction, "it was *him* who remembered first."

Cisco mulls over my words.

I'd never kid myself that he *wouldn't* kill me if it came down to me or Yuyu. It's the simple nature of their relationship, just as it is of mine and Raf's.

"You have nothing to worry about from me, Cisco," I lean back in my seat. Maybe it would be more fun to truly bide my time and keep him on his toes. But I don't have time for games, and I don't want to think of what he might do to retaliate.

"I won't harm you or your family. You have my promise."

Those words don't seem to appease him. If anything, he looks even more suspicious.

"I don't believe you. Why?"

"Fair enough, I wouldn't believe myself either, all things considered," I nod appreciatively. "But I'm not entirely heartless. Not like *you*," I smile at his scowl. "You took him from me once, but you gave him back to me, too. And that's enough for me."

His cigarette in his mouth, he continues to study me with those shrewd eyes of his.

Too bad his brand of intimidation doesn't work. Not anymore.

"So that's it? You won't do anything? No revenge? Nothing?"

He almost sounds...disappointed?

"Those days are behind me now," I wave my hand dismissively. "I've turned over a new leaf if you haven't been able to tell," I chuckle. "The past is long gone. Everyone is dead. And so is *that* Noelle."

It seems there were some perks to my amnesia and the fact that everyone thinks me a harmless fool—one that's always trying to rebel, but a fool, nonetheless. I'm not about to correct that assumption. Not when I finally have a second chance at life—at *living*.

"Dead doesn't mean buried, Noelle," Cisco adds when I get up to leave. "Some things *never* stay buried."

"This time they will," I assure him, turning my back to him.

"What about your baby?"

My steps falter, a barrage of images assailing me. I stop, my face scrunched up in horror, pain, and the smell of death.

"He's dead," I reply, my voice devoid of any emotion.

If there's one thing I don't want to think about, it's him.

Mali.

The little boy who never stood a chance in this world. The little soul unfortunate enough to have me for his mother.

If I gave in... If I let the despair overtake me... Then everything would be lost.

"He died a horrible death, Noelle. And I know you *saw* it. That's not something you get past easily..."

My eyes squeeze shut at the memory, disgust rolling in my stomach at everything that happened. But like everything else, I push it aside. I can't give in. I simply can't.

"I did see," I pivot, facing him and letting him see the blank canvas that is my face. "But like I said, he's dead. Nothing can bring him back, so why dwell on it?" I say carelessly, though just speaking about it re-opens that big chasm inside my heart—one that will never heal.

Lips pursed, he shakes his head at me.

"It's not normal," he mutters. "You rewrote your entire reality to cope. How is that normal?"

"It's *my* normal. And who are you to question that? I know you did your best to keep me alive when I was sinking, and for that you'll have my eternal gratitude. Because if I had succumbed," I give a bitter laugh. "If I'd given in to my despair, then I would have never found him again."

"You should still speak with your therapist," he suggests, ever the control freak. "You tried to kill yourself three times, Noelle. Three fucking times," he grits out, rising from his chair and coming towards me. "You rewrote your entire past so you wouldn't deal with that pain. Don't tell me that's remotely normal."

"Oh, but it is. You would have done the same if you thought everything was lost," I tell him, watching the way he pales at my words because he knows how true they are.

Cisco is right. We are extremely similar in one regard. We would do anything to protect those we love. And without them... Well, without them there's nothing left. It's as simple as that.

So he can lecture me all he wants because we both know that at the end of the day he would have done the same.

From the beginning there have only been two choices. Death or... forgetting.

And when death had failed me, the only other option had been wiping every memory related to Raf—every little piece of myself that brought me, step by step, to the point of no return. I can see it clearly now, how my brain had acted to protect me from my own damn self.

It had created an alternate reality for me. One in which I could live with myself. One in which I wasn't the bad guy. A reality in which I was finally worthy of my Raf.

Too bad it didn't last.

"That's not to say you couldn't relapse..." Cisco gives me a solemn look.

"I won't," I reply confidently. "Those weren't chronic attempts, Cisco. They were the precise actions of someone who had nothing left to live for."

"I'm worried about you," he awkwardly admits.

Unfortunately, my control only extends so far. I burst out laughing, looking at his *concerned* face and becoming more amused by the second.

"So you care now? Color me surprised," I add sarcastically. "I think we should just agree to not stand in each other's way. I promised I won't retaliate for anything, in *any* way and I will keep that promise," I pause to look at him.

And because I think there might be a small part of him that does care, I assure him that I'll take care of myself, too.

"You gave me back my reason to live, so I *will* live," I give him a tight smile. "I'll even continue to seek therapy. But don't," my voice turns deadly, "*ever* bring up the past again. To Raf, or to anyone."

The last thing I need is for Raf to take a closer look at my lies—my *mountain* of lies. Because it's not just happened at the hacienda. It's everything before that, too.

A sad smile appears on his face as he regards me with an expression bordering on melancholy.

"Fine, Noelle. It will be as you say. I may not know everything you're hiding, but I know one thing. The past *never* stays buried. I just hope, for your sake, it won't come back to haunt you later. Even *I* won't be able to help

you then."

"I won't ask. I know what I'm doing. You've always underestimated me, Cisco. You *all* did. Because as it turns out, I've been capable of helping myself all along."

And with that, I turn, leaving the office and heading back to my room where the one person who's always mattered the most awaits me.

When my memories suddenly returned, I made a harsh decision—and one that I will commit to.

Raf can *never* know the truth about what actually happened at the hacienda.

He may love me. He may love me more than I ever thought possible. But the greatest love can turn into the greatest hate.

And that's when I'll truly break. When the vile memories of the past will infiltrate every crevice of my mind until there's nothing left but madness.

Madness and death.

SEVEN

MICHELE

"YOU LET HIM GO AGAIN," ANDREAS NOTED. HE WAS SITTING BY THE window, waiting for his boss.

Michele strode forward, his towel in his hand as he wiped at his wet locks.

"I never intended to catch him in the first place," he replied dryly, stopping next to his friend.

Andreas removed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, offering Michele one and lighting it for him.

"Then? Sometimes you confuse me, sir," Andreas stated, his brows scrunched together as he regarded Michele closely—almost as if that alone could reveal all his deepest secrets.

Michele's shrewd gaze assessed his surroundings, noting that Andreas had built an entire area for the dog, with toys, food, and a wide variety of soft pillows on which he could sleep.

Noelle had called him Lovely. To an extent, he supposed the name fit, since the dog was awfully endearing even to his jaded eyes. He was nestled between the fluffy pillows, sleeping peacefully as if he had no care in the world.

"Do I?" Michele smiled, taking a deep drag of his cigarette. His gaze swung to the blinding city lights and the breathtaking view from his penthouse.

He confused himself, too.

He was on top of the world, literally and figuratively. He was where he'd set out to be from the beginning, and with each step he took, he was closer to his ultimate revenge—that last blow that would leave the entire world reeling.

Yet why did he feel so restless? Why did his frustration mount when it was supposed to be the opposite? There was no thrill to be had—at anything. Even the blood staining his hands—the blood that in the past would have made his heart race—was now an irrelevant substance that brought neither joy nor satisfaction.

It simply made him...numb.

But that was the root of the issue.

He felt too fucking numb.

Ever since...

A scowl marred his features when he thought about *that*. Until now he'd done his best to cast away all thoughts of his pet—she was never to be thought of again.

Easier said than done when she was the only thing seemingly bringing some type of color into his world—*any* type of thrill.

Maybe he'd finally become *too* jaded. He begrudgingly had to agree that he'd been through so much in the last decade that nothing could faze him anymore. Nothing could surprise him, nor entertain him.

He was a weary traveler at the middle of the journey. And that was unacceptable.

From the beginning, he'd known that his will was the only thing holding this together—holding *everything* around him together.

While his soul had died with his son, his body was still alive and thriving—to Michele's greatest dismay.

But because he had not been afforded death when he'd most wished for it, he'd resolved to see everything to the end—pay back every single person in his life who'd had a hand in his hellish existence.

Seeing the direction of his thoughts, he realized he was more adrift than he'd imagined. And that only made him want to reinforce his own boundaries, fortify his mind and will against all outside interferences.

He needed to focus on the only thing that mattered.

Revenge. Against Lastra. Against McBride. Against the entire fucking corrupt system that had failed his son.

The first was done. Though there had been a moment when his resolve had been tested, he'd prevailed in face of temptation and he'd pushed through, achieving what he'd set out to do—the ruination of the Lastra family.

As such, there were only two goals left pending.

And with a hidden sigh of relief, he confirmed to himself that his brother

had never been his true target. From the beginning, he'd never been at the front of Michele's plans and hunger for revenge. Admittedly, Rafaelo's death would never assuage any such appetite. If anything, it could further interfere with his mindset—the last thing he needed when he was already teetering on the edge of hesitation, ready to fall into an abyss that threatened to swallow him whole.

"I merely wanted to play with him a little. Poke and see if it hurts," Michele eventually added, imbuing some levity into his tone to compensate for the heavy weight of his thoughts.

"And?"

"It hurts," Michele stated in a deadpan voice.

"I just don't understand. You could have killed him. You could have let him die in the explosion but..."

"But I didn't," Michele filled the words in. "That's never been the goal, Andreas."

"Then why? Why go through so much trouble?" his friend frowned.

"Because," Michele cleared his voice, a twitch in his cheek. "The moment they realized Pancho was feeding me information they would have found out that I am still alive. By going after Noelle first, I didn't leave the ball in their court for the next movement."

Andreas nodded thoughtfully.

"And the other woman?"

"Lucero turned out to be the most pleasant surprise of all," his lips curled up. "I never anticipated the truth would be so perverted."

"Perverted?" Andreas blinked.

"You remember my brother was sold to a locale in Mexico after Armand died," Michele gazed down at Andreas.

"Yes. It was odd that he ended up there since I specified no international sales," Andreas frowned.

"You see," Michele turned, bringing his cigarette to his lips. "Noelle, Rafaelo's current wife, was the one who bought him."

"No..." Andreas blinked.

"Lucero was her maid. The maid who knew *all* her secrets."

"And you used that against her," Andreas smartly appraised.

Michele let his lips widen into a telling smile, but he didn't expand on the subject. Not that he didn't trust Andreas—he trusted him above all. It was just that he didn't know yet what he was going to do with the information he'd

obtained.

He hadn't lied when he told Andreas that he never intended to catch Rafaelo.

Maybe in the beginning he'd been pissed about his brother's stupid show of bravery and blatant disregard of Michele's wishes. At that time, he'd impulsively sought out Ortega to wipe out Rafaelo's associates so he could remain alone and helpless—perfect for Michele to swoop in and deliver the last blow.

Yet, with each encounter, he realized his desire to see his brother pay had waned to something...indecipherable.

He was still mad at Rafaelo for what had happened in their youths. That kind of hurt never disappeared, and Michele had done a perfect job of locking all his grudges in one box, using them as fuel whenever it suited him—whenever he needed a little push.

And it had worked.

For a while, he'd been one with his grudges. One with his revenge.

Yet recently, his motivation had been a little sluggish.

He blamed it on the fact that deep down he still harbored some kind of affection for his brother. An affection that had, against all odds, survived all the horrors he'd been through.

He'd never thought it possible, but he supposed time had a way of scarring even the ugliest wounds to something...acceptable. And that's what had happened with him and Rafaelo.

After the initial sea of hurt had worn off, he could see more clearly that there were more factors at play for his brother's perceived betrayal. Now that over a decade had passed, he could judge those situations with more objectivity—an objectivity that had been missing when he'd been in the throes of madness.

He supposed he was still suffering some effects of that madness—small, deadly tendrils still maintaining their hold of him even as he'd shrugged others off. But he was also smart enough to realize that acting in such anger would never bring him any good results.

Michele had only look at the past and how he'd acted after Nicolo and Cami's deaths. Back then, he'd been seething with so much hurt and anger at the world that he'd struck when he shouldn't have. He'd let his emotions cloud his judgement and he'd attempted to get everything at once.

And that never worked.

No, patience was the key.

Yet he'd only learned that through heartbreaking experience. One that had seared itself on his being and told him he deserved nothing less than an empty life and the numbness currently suffusing his being for failing his son. Because if one removed the anger and all the vows of retribution Michele had sworn on his death-bed, only guilt remained.

Guilt and so much self-loathing that sometimes he could barely function under its weight.

Then, he'd acted in haste, thinking himself smarter than all, and he'd paid the biggest price.

His son's life.

And it *had* been Michele's fault. If he had been more careful. If he'd made more subtle inquiries. And if he'd done things gradually instead of all at once, maybe Solomon wouldn't be dead now. Maybe he would still be by Michele's side, saving him every day from his dark thoughts and even darker fate.

But he wasn't. And that also meant Michele had given himself over to that obscure part within himself, selling what was left of his soul for his much sought-after revenge.

Trial and error and here he was. Years and small steps that would lead to a culmination of death and horror.

He was no longer in a hurry. In fact, after killing Cosima and Benedicto and selling Rafaelo, he'd found that his urgency had waned to a simple pulsation beneath his skin—enough that it always reminded him of his goals but not enough to take over his mind in another show of pure madness.

"So that's it? You're letting them go? For good?" Andreas' question startled him from his thoughts.

He spared his right-hand man a glance, narrowing his eyes at him.

"Mayhap," he answered noncommittally, taking one last drag off his cigarette before putting it out and walking away.

Andreas swallowed uncomfortably, his eyes on Michele's back as he tried to understand his boss. Once more, he thought he spotted a glimmer of the old Michele, but he could never be sure with how ambiguous Michele was in his answers.

He could recite strategical plans all day long and not pause once, but when it came to things of a more...*sentimental* nature, one could never pry anything from his lips.

Yet Andreas had one more hope—little as it was.

Venezia Lastra.

The woman who'd put Michele in a monstrous mood ever since he's stopped seeing her a while back.

Maybe it was too optimistic of him to hope his boss would reconsider his plans and allow Miss Venezia in his life. But Michele's behavior regarding her had been anything but carefully rehearsed and planned—completely antithetic to how Michele usually operated.

And *that* told him not everything was lost.

Yet.

Back in his room, Michele shrugged the bathrobe off his body before he donned on a pair of silk pajama bottoms. Threading his fingers through his thick locks, he stopped dead in his tracks as he caught sight of his reflection in the mirror across from the room.

His lip twitched in displeasure.

There were moments, like the one at hand, when Michele simply abhorred his reflection in the mirror for it was a mosaic of his past. Every scar had a hidden meaning. Every mark on his skin spoke not only of physical pain, but of soul-wrenching anguish that still haunted him.

Yet as his eyes drifted up his naked torso, ignoring his many scars, they landed on his face.

The most cursed of all.

He took a step closer, and tilting his head to the side, he simply watched himself.

Silence surrounded him like a comforting cocoon. Slowly, even the sound of his own breaths became muted as he immersed himself in what he was seeing—what he abhorred above all.

"*We're the same,*" a soft voice resounded amid the weeping silence, obliterating the serene atmosphere. "*There's a void inside here that only you can fill. Just like there's a void inside here that only I can fill,*" the voice continued, seducing, hypnotizing.

With an audible snarl, he flung his fist at the mirror, shattering it and turning it into a myriad of shards, all reflecting back his distorted image—just as the sound became distorted in his ears.

"*We're the same...*"

"No," he gritted his teeth. "We're not the same. We're *nothing* alike. I don't *need* you!" He was breathing heavily, blood pouring down his knuckles as he yelled at the mirror.

And he didn't.

She was as expendable in his life like everything before her—like everything that would follow her.

And he'd proved it to himself by committing the worst of crimes.

Theoretically, she should have left his thoughts just as she'd left his home—taking with her any possibility of him ever going back on his word.

But she hadn't.

To Michele's great dismay and even greater displeasure, she hadn't *left*.

She was still there, in the back of his mind, waiting, haunting.

She looked for the moment when he had his guard down and she invaded every crevice of his mind, showing him all the possibilities—all the *unfulfilled* possibilities.

But he'd been strong.

In front of all temptation, he'd been a pillar of strength.

Yet as his gaze dipped to his bleeding hand, he couldn't help but recall *her* blood.

Their blood.

The day she'd left had been the day he'd buried that pendant somewhere deep in the woods just outside of the city. He'd been so enraged with her—with the way she dared defy him—that he hadn't wanted anything to remind him of her.

Anything.

The madness had seeped in at that point, those seductive tendrils coiling around him and whispering things in his ears.

Things that would make a saint weep.

Things that had shred the last bit of control Michele possessed.

And in an episode of pure insanity, he'd gone on a rampage. Andreas, knowing the signs, had simply guided Michele towards a group of men who'd recently been exonerated in a murder case, though the evidence against them had been strong. Knowing his boss' penchant for mayhem, Andreas was always ready to provide an outlet for his anger.

Somewhere at the outskirts of the city, Michele had lured the men with the prospect of debauchery under the moonlight before he'd painted himself red in their blood.

From head to toe. Red.

It still hadn't been enough. So lost to his madness he'd been that he'd ripped at his own self, clawing at his skin until his hands had bumped into the

pendant.

That cursed pendant. Cursed because it housed that which he desired the most, yet could never have. Not while it was either *her* or what little was left of his damned self. Cursed because it embodied her, him, *them*. Cursed because she fucking haunted his mind, never letting him be for one moment.

He'd pulled at the string, breaking it and throwing it to the ground next to the dead bodies. But as he'd set to leave, its allure was still too strong. *Her* voice was still too strong.

It whispered in his ear, detailing all that could happen should he let himself go—should he let himself feel the impossible. It soothed and calmed the beast, but it also awoke it anew with the false hopes and dashed dreams.

Halfway through the woods and he'd come back, grabbing the necklace again, squeezing it into his fist as if, by chance, he could absorb its essence. Then, he'd dug a hole in the ground with his bare fingers, pushing what was left of their union deeper and deeper—so deep it would never see the light of the day again.

And it hadn't.

It was still there.

Yet he was here, and she was...

Scowling at himself, Michele went to his cabinet, opening it and getting some gauze and disinfectant to treat his wound.

But even something as mundane as applying the stinging solution to his open flesh reminded him of tender touches—of someone who'd been far gentler with him than anyone had ever been.

He quickly patched himself up before he grabbed a book to read before bed.

Yet even as he laid himself comfortable in his king-sized bed, even as he felt the luxurious sheets against his skin, and even as he made one last attempt to focus on the contents of the book, he couldn't.

He couldn't fucking do anything. And it was all because of her.

Because of those whispers that sought to drive him insane.

"Fucking hell," he yelled, throwing the book to the side and bringing his fingers to his temples, massaging them in an attempt to assuage the tension inside.

One second. Two. Three.

That was how long his resolve lasted. But he couldn't admit it to himself. In his mind, this was just his intrinsic curiosity and making sure

everything was going according to plan—that his pet had gotten her due just like everyone else in that accursed family.

Swinging his long legs over the bed, he grabbed his laptop from his desk before making himself comfortable once again.

Already, something was simmering inside of him—anticipation, excitement, he couldn't tell. But to lie to himself further, he convinced himself this was just another detail in the grand scheme of things.

After he'd released the video of his pet on her knees, he'd had Andreas monitor the situation and give him a full report on how everything had gone.

Andreas, ever the dutiful worker, had compiled an entire folder of *evidence*.

Of course, Michele had done his best to forget about its existence. But still, here he was.

His pulse quickened, a *thrill* going down his spine.

Opening the folder, Michele's brows shot up as he realized it had an entire compilation of video footage. But of *what*?

He clicked through a few videos, not seeing anything of importance at first. It looked to be the surveillance footage from her high school. In fact, he was about to click out of the video before he saw it.

He saw *her*.

Head bent low, she headed to her locker, fumbling with her combination before opening it to see her entire compartment filled with disgusting stuff. Even from the angle of the camera Michele could tell what some of it was.

His blood boiled.

Then came the boys. The name-calling, dared-to-touch-what-was-not-theirs boys.

His head throbbed. Especially as he heard what obscenities they were shouting at his pet.

But that made him pause.

Hadn't he expected that would happen? That she would become even more of a pariah at her school?

The answer came a resounding *yes*. But in his utopian world where everything happened just as he dictated, he imagined she would never dare show her face to school again after she found out about the video. He'd thought she would just isolate herself from the world and never show her face again.

He definitely didn't think she would *ever* lift her chin up, quiet pride

shining in her eyes as she decked one of the boys with the locker's door.

Again and again.

She didn't stop.

She was a wildcat playing, finally getting to her prey.

And by God, Michele's lips twitched with pleasure as he saw her like that—uninhibited, raw, *real*.

That was what he'd wanted from her, from the very beginning.

And here she was, giving it to some puny boy.

He saw red. Correction. Red turned to black.

He saw pure black. Pitch black. Obsidian black.

The laptop ended up a pile of broken metal on the ground.

In no time at all, Michele put on his clothes and exited his room.

"Andreas!" He shouted, and Andreas immediately showed up. "I want their names. Each one of their names. *Now*."

He didn't have to tell him *what* names, for Andreas was already prepared. Excitement simmered through him when he realized his boss had finally given in—a little later than he'd expected, but he'd given in and watched those videos. He'd known Michele would never stand still if he saw someone *else* touch Miss Venezia, and he'd been right.

"Here, sir. I have an entire list, their addresses and the places they like to frequent. As a matter of fact, this being a Friday night, they are probably at this location," Andreas pointed to the bar written on the note.

"Good. Are you coming with?" Michele barely spared him a glance, already getting ready to head out.

Andreas smiled and followed along.

Jumping in the car, Michele pulled it out of the parking lot and drove straight for the bar. In a matter of minutes they were there.

"Good job, Andreas," Michele nodded at him as he spotted the bullies. "Make sure the cameras are covered."

A perpetual smile on his face, Andreas couldn't help the glee that overtook him at seeing Michele *react*.

Finally.

"Hullo, boys," Michele whistled as he strode to the table currently occupied by three high schoolers.

"Who the hell are you?" One of them asked, just as the others turned their attention to him.

Michele took a moment to study them, his lip twitching in distaste.

These. These motherfuckers had dared touch her—had dare put her name in the same sentence with all types of illicit acts.

"You're from Trinity High, aren't you?" He let his lips curl up in a pleasant smile.

"So?" One asked—another, braver seemingly.

"Nah, nothing. Just that I heard about that girl at your school," he leaned back, feigning a relaxed stance when on the inside he could barely wait to get his hands on them. "The one in the video."

"Oh that one," they laughed. "Don't tell me you want your turn, too?"

"And if I do?" He raised a brow.

"Steven here had the chance to tap and..."

That was enough for Michele's already strenuous control to snap—truly snap.

His hand shot out, and grabbing the boy's collar, he dragged him over the table.

The bar went quiet.

Andreas was quick at work in the background, dealing with the owner and getting everyone else to leave before it got worse. But a bribe here, a bribe there and the promise to pay for anything broken and Michele had full control of the bar.

"Wh-what?"

"You had the chance to tap that?" Michele asked, his words slow and oh, so sinister, they immediately instilled the fear in all the boys.

"N-no. He lied. I didn't. I swear I didn't. Please let me go," he said, his lips trembling with fear as he looked over to his friends, nodding at them to corroborate his story.

"It's true. She hit him for even implying that and..."

"Enough," Michele's voice boomed in the suddenly quiet bar.

Everyone was quiet. Still, and quiet.

"You touched her. You put your fucking hands on her and you dared to put *her* name in the same sentence with what your whores do. That's enough for me," Michele smiled, a wolfish smile that should have clued everyone in that this was just the beginning.

And indeed, it was.

Grabbing the neck of a bottle, he broke it in half before bringing the edge to the boy's cheek, cutting deep.

"Let's see how you're going to get your cock sucked from now on looking

like a fucking circus," Michele spat.

The boy cried in pain, struggling in his hold and trying to land a few punches on him. All in vain as Michele subdued him, and upon finishing with his art, he brought his elbow to his chest, knocking the wind out of him before throwing him to the ground.

The other two were desperately trying to run away, but the exits were locked.

Andreas was to the side, holding one by his nape and the other around his throat.

"Gimme," Michele motioned with his finger.

Andreas threw him one of the boys, still holding on to the other.

Michele's mind slipped from him until only violence remained. Violence and a sweet, soothing voice echoing in his ear. The only tether he had left to normality.

He punched and kicked and beat the shit out of each boy until they had no other choice but to pass out from the pain.

Only then did he stop. When they were all moaning on the ground until even their voices left them.

Getting a cigarette from his pack, he lit it up and slipped it between his lips. Smiling, he took a deep drag as he stretched his limbs.

"That felt good," he breathed out, closing his eyes and grounding himself.

Still, his ears were full of *her* sound. Only her.

It was such an intoxicating sound that he felt himself get drunk on mere whispers alone. So close he could imagine her...

His eyes snapped open, and turning to the side, he caught Andreas' amused gaze.

"Who's next? Who else did you add to the list?"

"There were a few teachers who made fun of her and the principal," Andreas went on to explain that the principal had sided with the boys before Venezia's sister and her husband had paid him a visit. "There are only a couple of days left until graduation and he hasn't issued any apology," Andreas continued, enjoying the way Michele's features contorted with rage.

"Address?" he demanded in a clipped tone.

"Here," Andreas complied, giving him the list of adults who'd dared mock his pet.

That night, he paid a visit to each and every one of them, giving them a true definition of the word nightmare and getting their vow that they would

publicly apologize to his pet.

The best, he saved for last—the principal.

In his frenzy, he'd destroyed his laptop before he could get a glimpse of the principal's behavior, but Andreas, ever so resourceful, had a spare copy that he played for Michele. In it he could clearly see how the principal had insulted her, going as far as to insinuate she was a *whore*.

And as they reached the principal's home, Michele snuck into his bedroom, instructing Andreas to lightly drug his wife and move her elsewhere while he dealt with him.

"W-what's happening?" The man asked in a tremulous voice as he opened his eyes to come face to face with Michele's sinister visage.

But Michele didn't let the old man speak, stuffing his mouth with a sock he'd picked off the floor.

"I will talk and you will listen. You will nod if you understand. If not, you're forfeiting your life," he smiled at him, letting his blade pick up some shine from the beam of moonlight sneaking through the window.

Mr. Landers, the principal, nodded stiffly.

"Good. Then I won't waste your time, nor mine. Venezia Lastra," he simply stated, watching how the man blanched at the sound of the name.

Michele's gaze dipped down to the cast on his finger. Andreas had told him Kuznetsov had cut it—which, he could respect. But why did the bastard have to leave the finger behind so Mr. Landers could reattach it? If it had been Michele, he'd have ground it up and force fed it to the man.

He paused, the idea having merit. Alas, what he wanted right now was a public apology that would set the world straight about his pet.

"Graduation is in two days, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"And you're set to make a speech, aren't you?"

Another nod.

Michele leaned in so the man could look him straight in the eye.

"Good. You will go up that podium and the first thing that will leave your mouth will be an apology to Venezia. You will tell the entire world that you were wrong, and that you were a perverted old man for having insinuated she was anything but a perfect lady. Are we clear?"

There were tears accumulating at the corner of the man's eyes. Slowly, he nodded.

Still, Michele wasn't satisfied. He needed more. An entire fucking

spectacle to show the world *she* was off-limits.

"When she comes up for her diploma, you will drop to your knees and you will prostrate yourself at her feet," he added, his lips twitching in satisfaction at the mental image.

Mr. Landers' eyes widened, and he hesitated when it was his turn to nod.

Michele scowled, removing the sock from his mouth and inviting him to speak.

"Are we clear, Mr. Landers?"

The man blinked, seemingly confused about what to do. Slowly, and ever so reluctantly, he nodded.

Michele smiled, turning to go.

Yet he barely took a few steps towards the door when he heard it. The whispered slur.

Fucking whore.

"What did you say?" He pivoted, his expression monstrous.

"N-Nothing," Mr. Landers stammered.

"Well, I think I heard something."

In two steps, Michele was upon him. With absolutely no hesitation, he wrenched the principal's hand, digging his knife into the finger cast and wiggling it around until he perforated it.

"I will ask once more. What. Did. You. Say?"

"That she's a fucking whore," Mr. Landers screamed.

A sadistic smile appeared on Michele's face, and with one punch, he had Mr. Landers almost passed out—certainly enough for Michele to remove the cast with no resistance.

Finally, he beheld the finger, the suture lines clear at the base, and his glee increased as he brought his knife down onto it, cutting slowly, precisely—enough that Mr. Landers howled in pain from it.

When the finger was finally removed, blood pouring from the wound, Michele didn't stop. One hand around his neck, he pried the man's mouth open and he stuffed the finger inside, forcing him to chew.

"Let me make one thing clear. This is child's play compared with what I will do to you if you don't offer her an apology in front of *everyone*. I will know, Mr. Landers. I will be there and I will be watching for your every move," he said as he thrust the man back.

His mouth was open, his cheeks strained as saliva coursed down his chin. The finger was sticking out from his mouth, his teeth holding it in place as

tears streaked his face. And one look down confirmed what the smell had already told Michele.

The man shat himself.

Good. At least now he knew Michele was serious.

If there was something Michele despised, perhaps more than he'd ever admit, it was anyone else insulting his pet. But to call her a whore?

A whore?

That was completely out of question and just hearing the implication dug painfully at his heart.

She was no one's whore—except his.

Because she was *his*. And for as long as she lived—for as long as *he* lived—she would be his. There was no other alternative for it.

She was his possession. *His* whore. *His* plaything. And because she was his, she could be no one else's. No one would be allowed to touch, speak, or even gaze at her.

The more he thought about all those leery boys and their stupid grins, or the men who'd laughed at her but had probably jerked off to the image of her sweet lips, he lost even more control of himself.

At the back of his mind, *maybe* he realized he'd made a miscalculation. In a moment of pure anger, he'd reacted against her, seeking to chase her away—from his life, from his mind, from his goddamn blood. But even then, unconsciously, he'd only released the video that was least revealing of her form. After all, he'd *never* show anyone what was for his eyes only to see.

But his attempt at ridding himself of the complication that she embodied had backfired.

Instead of going on with his life as if he'd never laid eyes on her before, everything had gone to shit.

His mood. His mind. His fucking daily routine that he'd depended on for as long as he could remember.

Everything that was left was her goddamn voice in his ear—tormenting and haunting him like even his worst nightmares had been unable to.

And so Michele came to a swift, but rather sensible solution. He reduced everything to common-sense and the fact that he was a selfish son of a bitch.

Why did he have to give her up? Why did he have to deprive himself of the pleasure of her body? Why did he have to do any such thing when a second option was right before him?

He would take her. He would use her until he finally had his fill of her.

And then he would get rid of her.

His mistake, he begrudgingly admitted, had been in throwing her away before he'd gotten tired of her—before he'd explored every little hidden corner of her psyche. Because *that* was what haunted him, he convinced himself. The what-ifs. The fact that he knew there was more to her and he'd never be able to enjoy it—never know those sides of her to the fullest.

And he *would* tire of her. Eventually.

He was nothing if not fickle about things and was self-aware enough to recognize that part of himself. Nothing and no one could possibly hold his interest forever.

But for now?

The more he thought about it, the more excited he became as he rationalized all his future steps. After all, wasn't this just another type of revenge? Maybe even more potent as each member of her family realized Michele was tainting her with his touch, that she *was* a whore but only because she was *his* whore.

It was still revenge.

He wasn't going against his vows.

He could have her *and* his revenge.

Yes, he nodded to himself as he stared at the trembling old man covered in blood. That was more like it. How the hell had he been unable to come to this conclusion earlier? He would have spared himself the frustration of trying to *not* think about her, and the pain of weeks of blue balls.

Suddenly, everything made sense.

Reality shifted anew as calmness settled over him. A calmness that he hadn't known since the moment she'd left his home.

She was his to do as he liked.

His fucking toy.

And he wanted to play.

"I want every corner of her room under surveillance. And adjacent rooms. Anything that might be of use. I don't know how you do it, but I want it done, Andreas. And only *I* will have access to the feed. Is that clear?" He told Andreas as they left Mr. Landers home behind.

"Yes, sir," Andreas happily answered.

It struck Andreas only later that he'd agreed to add cameras and bugs to Vlad Kuznetsov's house—the infamous Berserker.

He swallowed nervously, then shrugged.

It was just another day on the job.

EIGHT

MICHELE

ANDREAS HAD TAKEN HIS JOB SERIOUSLY AND WITHIN A WEEK, HE'D MANAGED to get Michele video and audio feed of the Kuznetsov house.

It had taken him some...*cunning* to do it, but he would have done much more for his boss. Especially since this development was something he'd been waiting for a long time.

Yet Andreas couldn't deny that luck had played a big part in the success of his mission. Vlad and his wife were rarely at home these days, always busy with their new academy and gallivanting around the world on their missions.

And so, after a busy day at work, Michele had the pleasant surprise to find his previously bare bedroom wall now filled with screens, all showing different parts of Kuznetsov's house.

Right in the middle, the biggest screen was focused on his pet's bedroom.

Michele smiled to himself, and upon seeing she wasn't yet at home, he decided to take a quick shower and get himself more comfortable for a late night marathon.

As he exited his shower, he noticed the door ajar, a fluff of black hair peeking through. Closing the door, he picked up the little trespasser, cuddling him in his arms as he made himself comfortable on the bed.

Lovely looked up at him with those big, innocent eyes of his—not unlike those of his pet. For a second he found himself lost in them, thrust back in the past. But he quickly shrugged that off, bringing his hand to Lovely's head and petting him lightly, absentmindedly.

Instead, he concentrated on the video footage before him as his pet strutted to her room after dinner.

Immediately, his attention was wholly on her, his eyes eating her up greedily. It hadn't been that long since he'd last seen her, but to him it felt like an eternity as he perused her body, feeling his own stir with an echo of lust.

She was wearing a baggy dress that showed nothing of her curves. Even so, the sight of her alone was enough to send a jolt to his cock.

He'd last seen her a couple of days past at her graduation, but that had been from afar. Even so, it had been well worth it since he'd been able to witness all her teachers making fools of themselves as they'd done their best to apologize, all ending with a bang—literally—as her principal's knees had hit the floor when he'd proceeded to prostate himself to her feet.

Mr. Landers had taken his advice to heart and he'd publicly humiliated himself and elevated his pet, naming her a victim in the whole debacle and offering an apology to her from the behalf of the entire school for not being able to protect her.

His pet had been flabbergasted. Even from afar, Michele had noted the way she'd stiffened with shock—almost as if she couldn't believe that someone would ever take *her* side.

But he'd noted later, when he'd managed to get a little closer to her, that she'd been brought to tears by the display, thanking Vlad and Sisi for their involvement though it had *not* been them.

Michele had been annoyed that others should take credit for his work, especially since *he* should be the one getting the appreciative hugs and kisses. It had taken everything within him not to reveal himself and proclaim loud and clear that it had been *his* hand that had cut Mr. Lander's finger and fed it to him, forcing him to make his pet the star of the graduation. It had been Michele who'd defended her honor. So what if he'd been the one to sully it in the first place? He'd made reparations and it had been the hardest thing ever to sit by while others claimed the honors.

Soon.

Soon, she would know all about it just as she would know that there was no way out. He'd claim her and take her as his pet once more.

But he couldn't be too rash about it—especially since she was technically Kuznetsov's protégé.

No, he was going to bide his time—just as he always did.

He would wait and when he finally got her, he would let himself enjoy her to the fullest—as he should have done from the beginning.

In the meantime, he had the video surveillance to feed his hunger for her.

And as he focused his attention on her, he noted her appearance.

Her hair was tied in a ponytail at her back, her cheeks flushed as she locked herself in her room, resting with her back against the surface of the door for a moment as she regained her breath.

She looked healthy. *Glowing* even.

His lip twitched in displeasure.

It hadn't been that long and she'd already forgotten him, hadn't she?

"Woof," Lovely barked lightly as he sought to make himself more comfortable in Michele's arms.

"You like her, too, don't you?" Michele asked, still petting the dog while his eyes were riveted to the woman in front of him.

Especially as she crossed the room to enter her bathroom, shrugging the dress off her body to reveal a modest set of white underwear and a bra.

Michele clenched his teeth at the surge of pure want that she triggered within him.

What was it about her?

For the thousand time since he'd started seeing her, he had to wonder what it was about her that made him react so strongly when he'd never reacted to another—ever at all.

He'd never known lust before. He'd never known what it was like to have his body react to another—to have his body at the *mercy* of another in that way.

From a young age, he'd been disinterested in anything of a sexual nature. Then, after what had happened with Antonio and the boys at his school, he'd shunned all human touch, disgust rolling in his stomach at the thought of having another's sweaty hands on his skin.

And for years, he'd lived within his self-imposed boundaries.

Only after he'd started pursuing his pet had he seen a change in his views, inclinations *and* desires. It was almost like his libido had been dormant his entire life and upon meeting her it had resurrected. And when it had, he'd become insatiable—but *only* for her.

She alone owned his cock. And he hated *anyone* having any type of control over him.

That had been one of the reasons why he'd sought to push her away when he'd felt himself slipping—becoming *too* dependent on her.

But, as he'd recently realized, she could own him only if he let her. And he wasn't about to do that.

No, he would retain *all* the control.

After all, she was his pet. Nothing else.

She turned to the mirror, gazing apprehensively at her figure and smoothing her hands over her curves.

Michele groaned at the same time as Lovely startled from his arms, giving him a curious look before limping away from his lap and going to the little bed Michele had set up for him.

His lips tugged up at Lovely's little sighs as he huddled into a ball of fur, closing his eyes to sleep. Yet that was short-lived as his gaze swung back to the screen, blinking at the spectacle before him.

His pet's unclasped her bra, letting it drop to the floor. Next, her hands were on her tits, touching, squeezing. There was an erotically charged atmosphere as she caressed herself reverently, almost as if she imagined it was a lover's touch.

He bit his lip in a muffled curse.

Did she know he was watching? Was she putting on a show for him?

But she couldn't have known—Andreas had done too good of a job.

Yet seeing her intimately like this—touching herself like this—was something he hadn't expected. Something that shook him in a way he'd thought himself unshakable.

In the past, he'd used her. Seeing as she was the *only* object of his lust in existence, he'd decided to slake it on her—and often. But it had always been in a rather clinical fashion, the end goal being his release.

Nothing else.

Yet seeing her like this... He enjoyed it though nothing about it involved *his* physical release. This time it was only his eyes on her body and the pleasure he derived from watching her.

Her hands went lower, to the edge of her underwear as she tugged them down her legs, disposing them before standing fully naked in front of the mirror.

She brought her teeth over her lower lip as she simply watched herself.

Michele watched, too.

She brought her hands to her lower stomach as she caressed the area and he felt a sudden pang in his chest at the thought of what could have been developing in there now.

Their child.

His child.

He swallowed hard, the pain of the past hitting him once more and creating a whirlpool of confusion in his mind. His lungs constricted, his breathing labored as he dared let himself imagine what their child would have looked like.

But every time he tried to do so, he only saw Solomon.

His son, Solomon, as he exited the panic room and asked for his daddy. His son as he took a step towards Michele before a bullet took his life.

A low shiver went down his back as he felt himself slipping—going down that path of no return. And that always happened whenever he thought of Solomon.

Though he professed he had no heart, that non-existent *heart* broke anew every time he recalled his son's sweet visage. Blinking away what he would never admit were tears, he shook himself, burying those thoughts deep in his mind and soul—so deep they couldn't return and haunt him again.

Instead, he focused on his pet. Especially as he watched her dip one hand lower, between her legs. Her brows furrowed as she touched herself, but it didn't seem to be with pleasure in mind. Rather, she was curiously exploring that part of herself she'd never dared to before.

But it wasn't for long. Just as she brushed her hand against the hidden part of her sex, she wrenched it back, a flush enveloping her as she reddened from head to toe. With a weary sigh she simply turned and walked into the shower.

Michele didn't take his eyes off her. Not for one moment. Even those mundane tasks—like washing her hair, scrubbing her body or brushing her teeth—were enticing in a way nothing else was in his life.

He finally felt that thrill that he'd been missing. And it had nothing to do with the fact that he was hard and growing harder by the second. No, anticipation simmered in his blood as he promised himself he would explore her body more at leisure the next time he took her.

He wanted to touch and caress all those hidden curves and all that soft skin. For the first time, he wanted to enjoy the experience, not simply await the end-result.

After she was done with her evening ablutions, she put on a long, colorless nightgown before going to her desk. From a lower drawer, she pulled a little something that she cradled in her palm, touching it almost reverently.

Michele couldn't see what it was, but his curiosity was piqued, so he made a mental note to inquire into that.

She spent a few moments like that, simply holding the item to her chest before she shook her head as if waking herself from a reverie. Then, she laid herself on the bed, closing her eyes to sleep. And sleep she did, soon curling into a fetal position from which she never stirred.

She remained like that, looking so fucking young and vulnerable he felt his pulse throb in his temple, an ineffable anger bubbling inside of him.

That was it?

It struck him as odd that she wasn't doing anything a regular teenager would do. She didn't check her phone, nor did she use her computer. She didn't text, or scroll on social media. She didn't even try to watch a movie.

She simply went from point A to point B in an efficient, brisk manner.

He blinked, unsure how to feel at her bare existence.

After that observation, more things jumped into focus—all just as odd as her.

The room was sparse. She had a couple of school books on her desk, but nothing else. There was one open suitcase in the corner that seemed to house all of her items—items she'd never taken out. That suggested she thought her stay there was temporary. Still, as Michele leaned in to peruse some of the contents he noted a few baggy dresses like the one she'd worn before, and a couple pairs of shoes.

He didn't know why the sight of her meager belongings made his heart squeeze painfully in his chest. Maybe it was because he remembered his own room at the Guerra house, equally as sparse and unwelcoming. He'd never fit in—anywhere he went. He wagered she felt the same.

A couple of hours trickled by as he simply stared at her form in the darkness of her room. He tracked each rise and fall of her chest, entranced by those minuscule movements as he'd been by Bernini's depiction of Apollo and Daphne which he'd seen on his first trip abroad. He studied every detail just as he would a work of art, and he was still left wanting.

Soon...

He'd have her again soon.

That thought pleased him immensely, and a smile pulled at his lips. At the same time, another screen flickered to life, the audio icon blipping to indicate speech. Curious, Michele increased the volume, switching his attention to that screen.

His half-sister, Assisi, walked into the room followed by her husband, Vlad.

She was the first to sit down on the couch, patting her lap for Vlad to join her.

And he did.

Michele frowned, squinting to make sense of what he was seeing.

He'd heard all about Vlad Kuznetsov—the one people called the Berserker in hushed tones. He was someone Michele hadn't wanted to touch since it would have led to time-consuming complications he had no need for.

But what he knew of the man depicted him in a fearsome manner—almost like the devil himself. To see him so relaxed as he laid himself on the couch, placing his head on Assisi's lap and smiling languidly at her was entirely antithetic to everything he knew of the man.

Michele was...intrigued.

She threaded her hands through his hair, caressing him lovingly.

"Do you think she went to bed?" Assisi asked.

Vlad nodded, pursing his lips.

"She doesn't do much else beside go to her summer classes and come home to sleep," she sighed. "I worry about her, Vlad."

"I'm sure she's fine. Maybe she's still smarting from that whole video debacle."

"Did you see how her principal apologized?" she chuckled. "I don't think I've ever seen anything more entertaining."

Vlad laughed.

"Maybe you also noticed that the boys who picked on her weren't there."

"That's true," she nodded pensively. "And all the teachers treated her so deferentially. I was quite impressed."

"Me too," Vlad replied, though Michele could see that the man had some doubts as to why the staff had suddenly done a one-eighty in their attitude towards Venezia.

"Still, I'm worried she might be...depressed."

"Because of that boy?"

Michele's ears pricked.

"Yes. She won't tell us his name, even though it's clear that they're not in touch anymore. I'm just afraid that he..."

"That he took advantage of her?"

Assisi grimly nodded.

"You've seen how boys behave at that age. They see girls as conquests and nothing else. I fear he might have broken her heart and she won't even

talk to me about it," she added with a slight tremor in her voice.

"Hell girl," Vlad sighed, bringing his hands to her face and cupping her cheeks. "Don't. She'll open up to us eventually. You know she's very introverted. Let's win her trust first and I'm sure she'll tell us everything."

"You're right," she took a deep breath. "I told her I want to take her to a doctor appointment."

"An appointment?" Vlad frowned.

"They didn't use protection," Assisi explained in a low voice. "I want her to have a full blood work done for any STDs. I think an unexpected pregnancy is out of the question at this point since she told me they've broken up a while ago. But I want to be safe..."

"I get that. I'll draw up a list of doctors and we can go over it together and set up an appointment. How's that?"

"You're the best," she smiled, leaning down to lay a kiss on his forehead. Then another one on his cheek. Then the other cheek. She started peppering kisses all over his face.

All the while, Vlad had a languid smile on his face as he twirled his fingers in her hair.

"I'm going to take her shopping tomorrow. She needs more clothes. Something other than those odious dresses she wears every day."

"On that we're in agreement," Vlad chuckled. "I thought I was the only one offended by those ugly dresses of hers. I wanted to tell her we're not industrial workers in the mid eighteenth century, but I didn't want to upset her even more," he pouted.

"I'm glad you kept your mouth shut," Assisi smiled. "The last thing we want is for her to feel even worse about herself. She's already dealing with enough as it is. I want her to focus on herself and start making choices about her future."

"That's right," Vlad suddenly moved into a sitting position, effortlessly scooping up his wife and placing her on *his* lap.

Michele frowned. Their dynamic was...odd would be putting it mildly. He'd never seen anything like it. On one hand, he was disgusted by their overly saccharine display of skinship, on the other, he was intrigued by the origin of it—by the fact that it came so naturally to them.

Unlike himself.

He was still locked in that prison of his own making, where every touch, no matter how benign, threatened to make him ill.

Though it was almost summer, he never went anywhere without his gloves and a long-sleeved shirt. No matter how hot or sunny, his body was covered at all times to prevent any unwanted touching.

And though he'd gotten used to that over the years, he couldn't help but be fascinated and maybe a little jealous at the ease with which others touched each other.

That was another extra point for his pet. He could bear her touch unlike any other. Sometimes, he even yearned for it. And deep down, he had to admit to himself that in the time he'd spent with her, he'd spoiled himself with those little touches—those skin-to-skin moments that didn't cause him physical pain or even greater mental anguish.

As he stared at Vlad and Assisi touching and caressing each other as if it was the most normal thing in the world he felt...*jealous*.

"She got into quite a few colleges, didn't she? Which one do you think she's going to choose?" Vlad inquired, and Michele's focus sharpened on that.

He remembered his pet mentioning something about college. So she planned on going, after all?

He narrowed his eyes as he listened more.

"I'm not sure. Yet another thing she won't talk to me about. But I looked into the ones she got into and all have great support for people with learning disabilities," Sisi pursed her lips, bringing her hand to Vlad's cheek and absentmindedly caressing him. "I want her to continue her lessons over the summer so that she's not too far behind, but I don't think she's enjoying them."

"What do you mean?" Vlad's brows drew up.

"I talked to her tutor and she told me Zia is very withdrawn in class. She does her homework and tries her best but... I don't think it's working out for her. The tutor kindly suggested we should arrange for specialized one-on-one lessons since she's having difficulty with some subjects. But you know how self-conscious she already is about her condition. I don't want to make her feel even worse about herself," Sisi explained in a sad voice.

"She's going to do great, hell girl. So what if she has severe dyslexia? A lot of successful people do. She's a hard worker, so I'm sure everything will work out," Vlad tried to soothe his wife, seemingly succeeding as she nestled closer to his chest.

Dyslexia?

Michele blinked.

Why hadn't he known that?

He was supposed to know *everything* about his pet, yet not one report had mentioned she had dyslexia. When he'd witnessed her poor reading skills back in D.C. he'd attributed that to the fact that she'd been neglected for years on end and therefore no one had taken an interest in her education.

Yet hearing that it's *not* a lack of education that caused that but some innate issues?

He didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

A scowl marred his features as he remembered how everyone had laughed at her. How everyone at *school* had laughed at her and called her mentally challenged and stupid—some of those rumors of his own making.

His hands curled into fists and he barely stopped himself from breaking something.

"You're right. She'll do great." Assisi added confidently. "And we'll make sure she has all the resources she needs."

"You're so good, hell girl," Vlad praised, nuzzling his nose in her hair.

"How good do you think I can be?" she batted her lashes at him, licking her lips suggestively.

It all started playful enough, but Michele knew where everything was heading, especially as they started kissing passionately.

His lip curled in disgust as he shut the screen off.

Once more, he redirected his attention to where his pet was sleeping peacefully, the new information he'd gleaned dancing through his brain.

He had work to do, starting with whatever *doctor* Assisi wanted to take his pet to. He wasn't about to allow a *male* doctor to put even one finger on her. As such, that situation needed close monitoring.

But first, there was the matter of that *shopping* Assisi suggested. And if she took his pet shopping and she convinced her to wear *anything* other than the odious dresses he himself had forced upon her, then Michele didn't know how he would react. The best course of action was, of course, to make sure his pet didn't change her style—not one bit.

As for the other matter of her going to college, he didn't need to dwell on that for now. He was sure that once she became *his* once more there would be no more thoughts of college going through her mind. He'd make her see *him* and only him once more and the balance would be restored anew. The world could go on, and most importantly, his *revenge* could go on.

Rationalizing everything and carefully planning his next steps, Michele

could finally go to bed—with the monitor on, of course.

"Good night, pet," he whispered into the night. "Dream of me."

What he didn't know was that on the other side of the screen, his pet did in fact dream of him. But it wasn't a dream as much as it was a nightmare, his mocking laughter following her everywhere. She was terrified of him and what he meant to her safety and that of her unborn baby. Time and time again, the same nightmare repeated itself, of Michele cutting her stomach open to remove the fetus, killing it in front of her before killing her too.

Michele, in his delusion, thought he could take up with her again and everything would be as before. He couldn't even fathom that Venezia had been so traumatized by what he'd done to her she could no longer feel safe anywhere—not even with her own family.

Everything in her life was pure agony and anxiety, and sometimes a mix of the two. Not even her sleep, which had sometimes shielded her from the problems of the real world, could afford her any peace now.

She was simply petrified and living in continual terror.

And the *last* thing she needed was for Michele to decide he wanted her again.

That was simply her nightmare coming to life.

NINE

MICHELE

MICHELE PUSHED HIS SUNGLASSES UP HIS NOSE, THREADING HIS GLOVED HAND through his hair as he leaned against the concrete wall of the building. A cigarette between his lips, he puffed it repeatedly while letting his eyes roam around the bustling street.

True to her word, Assisi had taken his pet out shopping. He'd been surprised Vlad hadn't accompanied them, but instead he'd sent some of his trusted men to act as their shadows.

Across from him, the two walked slowly as Assisi kept pointing towards different window displays in an attempt to entice his pet to try anything on.

He knew that because he'd had Andreas bump into Assisi a while back, slipping a listening device in her bag so he could listen to everything that went on.

As usual, his pet wore a nondescript baggy dress that almost reached her ankles. She'd added a pair of white converse to complete the look and she'd tied her hair in a ponytail. To Michele's eyes, she looked like she was supposed to—perfect.

All his.

To everyone else's eyes, he knew she came across not only as unfashionable, but dull and pitiful. But that had been the goal all along. He couldn't very well let her shine brightly into the world so anyone could pluck her up. No, the power of her shine was for his eyes only, and he'd be the only man to ever gaze upon her like that—closely, intimately.

Anyone else attempting to do so would be as good as dead.

And just as that thought arose, Michele realized his own fault and how this frustration she instilled in him could have backfired in the worst way

possible. She'd driven him so mad, he'd had no other recourse but to push her away. Unwittingly, he'd chased her right into danger—into the open world full of predators who'd take one good look at her innocent eyes and fall to their knees with a desire to possess her.

Michele didn't fool himself for one moment that he was the only one who reacted so strongly to her. No, he could bet that any red-blooded male in her proximity could see just how fresh and unspoiled she was, both in her beauty and temperament. She was like an unpolished gem waiting for that one jeweler who could give her the perfect polish and form.

The situation at her school had been a prime example of it with how those boys had dared to think they could go anywhere near her. It had been pure luck that they had been dealt with before they'd made a move on his pet. He didn't for one second believe they weren't capable of forcing themselves on her just for a taste of her sweet honey.

That mental image was enough to get him on edge, his muscles tensing, his hands curling into fists as the desire for death and destruction sang loudly in his blood.

If anyone had dared do *anything* to his pet... He would unleash a river of blood the likes of which it had never been seen before.

Begrudgingly, he had to admit he'd been so caught up in everything she awoke in him—the loss of control she caused when he hated that above all else—that he hadn't thought anything through.

A first for him.

He was known for weighing every possibility, every detail—no matter how minuscule. Yet he'd acted like a short-sighted fool and he could have very well paid the price for that.

Luckily, Andreas acted like his conscience, cleaning up his messes before they even arose. He'd diligently taken care of everything, compiling an account of everything his pet had been up to while Michele had been shutting himself from the world—and most importantly, from *her*. As such, he was aware of her very step in the last few weeks and the fact that after the debacle at school she'd isolated herself from the world—as she should have done from the first.

No one had been in contact with her—no man.

But that only meant that Michele had been lucky for the first time in his life. From now on, he vowed to himself he would never allow his impulses cloud his judgement again. Until he tired of her—since he didn't think for one

second he would never do so—he would hold her so close no one would dare even breathe in her direction.

Yes, he nodded to himself, pleased about his reasoning. Now that he'd seen the error of his ways he was ready to implement new rules that would ensure both his detachment and, paradoxically, his involvement.

He would make himself indifferent to her as far as she affected his moods, but he would attune himself to her in other ways—fun, *thrilling* ways that did not involve any loss of control or otherwise engage his emotions.

This time, he would create the perfect partnership. He, the master, and her, the pet.

He would be in full control. Always, and at all times.

Michele continued to plan his future involvement with his pet, in his mind delineating all sorts of terms—almost as if he was trying to convince *himself* that he could keep her and still keep himself in full control of his faculties.

"Come on, Zia, you can't say no to every thing I show you," Assisi told his pet as they continued to walk down the street, passing by numerous shops, all of which failed to get his pet's approval.

Michele smiled appreciatively. Of course she wouldn't want any of those *modern* and revealing clothes. His subtle persuasion had worked to perfection to ensure that his pet only went out wearing a certain type of fashion.

"Please make an effort? Summer is right around the corner. You can't possibly wear those long and thick dresses of yours when it's going to be scorching hot outside."

"I don't like wearing revealing clothes," his pet mumbled.

From afar, Michele noted the way her chin went down a notch, her eyes on the pavement.

"We can try to compromise. It doesn't have to be revealing as long as it's comfortable and appropriate for the weather. What do you say?"

Michele waited anxiously for his pet's answer.

"I guess I could try a few," she eventually said, and his fists clenched in annoyance.

He kept a fair distance between them so they couldn't notice his presence, following them as they entered a department store.

His pet's eyes were on the ground, her shoulders slumped. She didn't seem interested in any of the stores. But Assisi wasn't deterred.

"Here, what about this one?" Assisi pointed towards a more youthful store. So it happened that the store contained *everything* Michele despised

about the current generation and their libertine ways. Cropped tops, short jeans that were more underwear than wearable garments, bralettes for tops and other entirely too revealing ensembles.

His nostrils flared.

Assisi, Assisi, what am I going to do with you?

The answer was simple, however. He wasn't going to allow his pet to stay with them for much longer. Not when her sister proved to be such a bad influence on his pet.

As soon as the opportunity would present itself, Michele would remove his pet from that house and resume his *true* ownership over her.

She would live in his home, sleep in his bed, and tend to his cock every day. That was her purpose.

It would be a little tricky to steal her away without declaring an all-out war—something he wasn't very keen on at the moment—but he would make do. Mayhap when she supposedly went to college. He would let everyone think that she was, indeed, studying, when instead she'd be studying ways to please him.

The corners of his mouth tipped up as he imagined her in his home once more. He would fire every member of his staff, since he couldn't allow anyone to be in the same room as her. Instead, he would make *her* do all the chores—cook, clean, and tend to him.

If before he'd turned her into the perfect sexual toy, now he would upgrade her role to a domestic one. That way she would be at his beck and call, and her entire world would revolve *only* around him. In return, he would make sure she lacked for nothing—money, wealth, anything her heart wished. Within reason, of course.

He couldn't help but be impressed with his magnanimity. He was giving her another chance. Of course she was going to take her role seriously and do whatever she could to satisfy him. Anyone else would kiss the tips of his shoes for showing such generosity. And that was another item on his list—show her how special she was for being the one he'd *chosen* to bestow his favor. If she realized just how lucky she was—especially with everything so average about her—she'd be all the more likely to apply herself to her job.

His pet entered the shop, looking apprehensively around as she assessed the assortments of clothes offered by the store chosen by her sister.

Since the store was large enough, Michele entered too, losing himself among the racks of clothes, watching the pair closely as they browsed

around.

"This. Oh, this Zia. The color would suit you so well," Assisi exclaimed, pulling out a pink mid-thigh dress.

Immediately, Michele's reaction was to scowl.

Too short.

Yet he couldn't help but agree that the color would suit her. That particular shade of light pink would highlight his pet's stunning complexion and every blush staining her cheeks. Indeed, he could almost picture her in it—aside from the length, of course.

His pet bit her lips as she perused the dress, her small hands reaching out to touch the material.

"I guess I could try it on?" she added eventually.

Even from a distance, Michele could swear he could see the glimmer of desire in her eyes.

She...liked it.

He narrowed his eyes.

Unacceptable.

Of course, once she was his again, he would buy her all the pink dresses and whatever garments she desired, but only to be worn within the confines of his home where his eyes would be the only ones gazing upon her loveliness.

Placing the dress in their trolley, they continued to walk around the store. Assisi kept pointing out different pieces to his pet, somehow convincing her to try them all on.

He noted they added a pair of shorts, a short skirt, and even a skin tight dress that almost made him groan out loud as he imagined her in it.

For all his attempts to convince her otherwise, Michele had to admit that she had the most delicious little curves. She had a small waist that he could cup with one hand and shapely hips in which he could dig his fingers as he pumped into her. Then there were her tits. Just the right size to fill his palms. If Aphrodite ever had a human incarnation, he supposed it would be her—his pet. Simply put, she had an exquisite shape—for him, because there was no way Michele could admit that his standard of perfection wasn't *everyone's* standard. In his mind, because he found her so desirable, everyone must do so.

Then there was her face. That face that had been haunting him from the beginning. Maybe at the start she'd come across as merely pretty, but the

more he'd stared at her the more he'd become entranced by the pure beauty hidden in her eyes.

Those eyes... He swore under his breath as he recalled how they'd looked from up-close. Big and almond-shaped, they had the power to make him both speechless and breathless. More than anything, they had the power to infiltrate his mind and never leave it.

Assisi and his pet picked up a few more pieces, this time more basic like a couple pairs of jeans and some tops. Though some of the jeans looked to be quite tight, at least his pet had the good sense to choose baggier tops.

It took them a couple of hours to browse everything and his pet's shopping cart was overflowing with stuff to try on. When they finally headed to the dressing rooms, Michele followed suit too, sneaking in an opposite changing room so he could peek at his pet as she tried each item on.

Assisi was waiting outside, immediately dialing up her husband and recounting everything they'd done so far.

It didn't take long until his pet pulled the curtain to reveal the first outfit.

A pair of dark, high-waisted, straight-legged jeans and a black shirt she'd tucked in the waistband, Michele found himself nodding appreciatively.

She looked good, but she didn't look *too* good. He guessed he could allow that, especially as he let his eyes roam over her long legs and the way the jeans accentuated them.

His pet wasn't a short woman and most of her height came from those long legs of hers. Damn, but they were the stuff of wet dreams...

Assisi gave her a thumbs up and his pet nodded tentatively.

"I like this. I think I'll take it," she said softly.

Fuck but he'd missed her voice.

He closed his eyes, inhaling sharply as he felt it wash through him.

Once she was his, he'd wake up and go to sleep with her voice in his ear—until he tired of it, of course.

Going back inside, she changed into a few more outfits, all various combinations of jeans and basic tops. She was still within her comfort zone, Michele realized, rejoicing at the fact that she was *also* reluctant to wear those abominations Assisi had chosen for her.

After she confirmed she would be getting all pairs of jeans and the tops, the only items remaining were the dresses, skirts and shorts Assisi had convinced her to try on.

Keeping a black shirt on, she came out of the dressing room wearing the

skirt.

Michele scowled. *Too short.* It barely reached the middle of her thighs, showcasing her lovely legs to the entire world and serving as a beacon for every man in her vicinity.

"I don't think I like this," she murmured, causing Michele to smile.

Ah, his pet could display some sense after all.

"The material isn't very comfortable and it rides up at the back." She turned to point to the hem, which indeed, was riding up dangerously close to her ass.

"Are you sure? You look so good in it," Assisi commented.

"Yes, I wouldn't feel comfortable wearing this out," his pet added.

Assisi nodded pensively.

"You know you don't have to worry about money, right? I know the situation isn't great with Marcello and the family, but Vlad and I have more than enough. If you like something, get it."

"No, no," his pet put her hands up, immediately trying to placate her sister. "It's not that. I really don't feel comfortable..."

"Ok. Try the others?"

She nodded, pulling the curtain as she retreated in the cabin. And the next time she came out, it was wearing the pink dress.

Michele had to blink twice. As he'd foreseen, that shade of pink was made for her, giving her a youthful and pure look. It caused him to gawk at her like a teenager seeing a woman for the first time. In a way, he supposed he was.

He swallowed hard.

The dress was the same length as the previous skirt, but the material was heavier and as such didn't ride up her legs. It wasn't too tight, but it was just enough to accentuate the contours of her curves. And by Hades... He could barely tear his eyes from her.

She was a vision. A goddamn stunning apparition.

"Oh my God, Zia," Assisi exclaimed, coming closer. "You have to buy this. You look absolutely stunning. Wow," she shook her head, her expression one of awe.

"Really?" his pet inquired apprehensively. She was biting her lip as she took in her image in the mirror, twirling around and assessing her body from different angles. "I like it too," she said quietly—*too* quietly.

Michele almost didn't hear her. But as he shook himself from the shock of seeing her like that, his features darkened, a grim expression marring his face.

His upper lip twitched in displeasure. Her indication that she liked it meant she was going to buy it. Then wear it. And *then* she would be seen like that on the street, wearing that goddamn dress that made her look like she'd been sculpted from the most perfect marble—like she was every artist's inspiration come to life.

Because she was his.

As he let his eyes get drunk on her, he could feel that small thrill start from the base of his skull, traveling down his spine before spreading throughout his body—the thrill of inspiration.

He wanted to paint her. He wanted to capture her like that, with shining innocence and happiness in her eyes.

"Goddamn it," he muttered, his control slipping. Yet this time he wasn't about to descend into the murderous type of madness. No, this time he wanted to give himself to another type altogether—one that wanted to worship at her feet and capture all her loveliness.

She was what every artist dreamed of in a lifetime—the one perfect muse.

His breathing intensified. The more he looked at her, the more he could imagine everything he would do to her—every angle he would capture and the colors he would use for every inch of her.

She was like a goddamn siren with how she enticed him. And it was without even trying.

Of course, in Michele's mind, because he was so close to losing himself to her charms, he assumed *any* man would go crazy upon seeing her.

And that made his mood switch instantaneously. He seethed at the thought of her walking down the street and attracting all those appreciative male gazes. But more than anything, with his skewed perception, he saw others recognizing in her what he himself had—perfection. And who, after feasting upon perfection, would not want to preserve it—forever?

At that moment, every scenario flashed through his mind and he saw faceless men lusting after her, desiring her with as much pathos as he did and therefore doing what he himself wanted to do—steal her away.

He clenched his fists.

No, that would *never* happen. His pet was his and only his.

Only. Ever. His.

Jealousy so ugly reared its head as he pulled the curtain aside, barely avoiding detection as he left the changing rooms. But it wasn't before he saw the way his pet was perusing her body, satisfaction dripping from her features

at what she was seeing. And that solidified his decision.

His eyes quickly scanned the crowd, his shrewd mind at work calculating all possibilities. Choosing the perfect vessel in the form of a young woman who seemed much too concerned about the price of items, he strode over to her.

"Excuse me," he smiled, removing his glasses.

He saw the way her eyes immediately widened, want dripping from them and making him wince in return, disgust already rolling in his stomach. But he kept his expression on.

"Would you like one hundred dollars in exchange for a small favor?" He asked in a pleasant voice.

The woman batted her lashes, clearly intuiting the worst—or in her case the best as she definitely did not seem opposed to exchange *those* types of favors.

"What did you have in mind?" She drawled at him.

"In the changing rooms, there is a woman in a pink dress. Say whatever you need to make her *not* buy the dress. Here's fifty," he removed a note, handing it to her. "I'll give you the other fifty after it's done."

The woman seemed to think on it for a few seconds before shrugging and accepting.

"Anything?"

"As long as she doesn't buy the dress," he nodded, grateful she didn't ask more.

Heading back to the changing rooms, he resumed his place in one of the changing rooms at the end of the hallway, peeking at the spectacle.

His pet was still in front of the mirror, a smile on her face that seemed to grow wider by the second.

"They had this in a few other colors too. The neutral ones would be great, too, don't you think?" Assisi suddenly suggested.

His pet nodded.

"I'll go get them for you and you can try those on, too. It's rare to find something you truly like so why not get it in more colors?" she chuckled and winked at her sister, retreating to the store.

Michele smiled. Wasn't that to his advantage? Especially as right at that moment the woman he'd employed made her way to the back of the changing rooms, pretending to try something in.

"Oh, that's such a pretty dress," she intoned, stopping as she perused his

pet.

"Thank you," his pet murmured bashfully, her cheeks heating up.

"Just not on you."

His pet blinked, taken aback.

"Excuse me?" she whispered in a low, barely audible voice. A look of pure hurt crossed her face, and Michele swallowed a wave of discomfort.

"It would suit someone skinnier. Your belly is showing," the woman pointed to his pet's abdomen. He couldn't really see anything other than a perfect fit, but as long as she got his pet to give up on the dress, he supposed anything went.

"My belly?" His pet stammered, her hands going to her stomach.

"No offense, but you should probably lose some weight before you wear that," the woman shrugged before she went inside her own changing room.

His pet turned to the mirror, her eyes flickering with pure hurt as she took another good look at herself, her hands still on her belly.

Michele tried his best to remain unmoved as he watched disappointment flood her features. This was for the best. This way she would never wear that out.

But if she liked it so much, then he wagered he could buy it for her to wear around his home.

His face lit up at the idea, and he nodded to himself. He was too good to his pet and he couldn't wait to see her happiness once he revealed the dress to her later on.

As the woman left the changing rooms a while later, he held out his hand to give her the remaining fifty dollars. She'd more than earned it.

When Assisi returned a bit later with the other dresses, his pet shook her head.

"I changed my mind. I don't want them."

"No? Why not?"

"They're not my style," she shrugged. "I know I won't wear them and I'd rather buy something I know I would wear," her lips tightened in a fake smile as she went back inside the changing room.

She didn't even try the skintight dress. But she did try the shorts and the crop top, coming out with an uncertain expression on her face.

Faded black and high-waisted, the shorts were on the baggy side. They might not have emphasized her delectable bottom, but they certainly showed enough of her shapely legs. But that wasn't the worst.

His pet had put on a tight crop top that barely reached the band of her pants, thus leaving a bit of uncovered skin in-between. Not much, but enough for Michele to fume.

Especially as he took in the entire ensemble and the way it made his pet look absolutely stunning.

"Don't tell me you don't like this one either," Assisi asked worriedly.

"I actually do," his pet replied, to Michele's dismay. "It doesn't make me look fat, no?" she asked, just in case.

"Of course not. You look stunning, Zia."

His pet nodded.

"I like it too, and it's very comfortable," she said as she smoothed her hands over her stomach, watching that area intently—happy that the baggy cut didn't mold to it.

"I'm getting it," she declared suddenly.

"I'm so happy," Assisi exclaimed, clasping her hands together and looking at his pet like a proud mother.

"Do you think I can keep them on? I really like them..."

"Of course. Don't you worry. Let's go to the register and pay..."

Michele couldn't listen more. He left first, before they could spot him. His anger was mounting by the second. In his mind, everyone was already looking at his pet.

Especially as they exited the store after they paid and continued to walk around the department store.

His eyes were riveted to her, so of course everyone else's must have been too.

Assisi and his pet stopped to get some ice cream before browsing a few more shops.

"Wait a moment, Vlad is calling again. The guy has no chill," she shook her head, leaving his pet alone in front on one of the stores.

Absentmindedly biting into her ice cream, she turned to look at the shop's window, admiring the display.

Michele bit back a groan at the way her plump lips stretched across the large piece of ice cream, some smearing around her mouth and making her look even more delectable.

How the hell was he going to survive until he could find the time to get her back if one outing was sorely testing all his restraint?

As he was contemplating that small dilemma, a man suddenly stopped in

front of his pet. She didn't notice him until he spoke, turning to raise her gaze to him.

"You're very pretty," the man said, his lips widening in a smile. "What's your name?"

His pet blinked.

Michele did, too, flabbergasted that something like that could happen. Suddenly that was all the confirmation he needed that all his predictions would come true. No longer was it only in his mind, now everywhere he looked he could see people staring at his pet appreciatively.

"The fucking cherry on top," he muttered to himself, a twitch in his cheek as he prepared to act should the fucker linger. He'd never been a fan of public spectacles, but on this occasion he would make an exception.

If he dared to put as much as a finger on her...

On her part, Venezia found herself completely speechless as she stared at the man who'd just stopped in front of her. He was a bit taller than her, with fair hair and blue eyes.

"Me?" She felt the need to clarify.

"Of course you. I don't see anyone prettier around."

She'd never before been complimented by anyone—except, on occasion, by Michele. This was completely out of her comfort zone and she found that she didn't know how to reply.

Her cheeks heated, her chin dipping down as she wrenched her eyes from him and stared at his shoes instead.

He told her she was pretty. *She?*

Somehow she couldn't believe that. She knew on her best days she was passable—enough that she'd managed to get Michele's interest when there were no doubt hundreds of women chasing after him daily. Considering his looks and status, of course he would be incredibly sought after.

Her lips pursed as she realized the direction of her thoughts. Why did everything have to come back to Michele? Why did she have to think about him when she was finally free of him. He would never harm her again and he would certainly never make her suffer again.

Except he still did.

Her heart still hurt from his words and his appalling behavior. She couldn't sleep at night because she feared he would come back for her—hurt her some more.

He was perpetually in her thoughts, but not as he'd been before—her

ultimate love. No, that illusion had been long shattered and she'd been able to see him for the devil he was. The devil who'd abused and used her for his own gains, never once seeing her as anything other than a means to an end. He'd lied about his love just as he'd lied about everything.

Now he was just a shadow looming over her—the nightmare that she couldn't rid herself of.

On replay, every little interaction played in her mind just as all the abuse she'd suffered at his hands. Before, when she'd still seen him with rose-colored glasses, she would have denied to her dying breath that he was abusing her. She would have simply said it was his manner, and those were the things he enjoyed. And as bent on pleasing him as she'd been, of course she would mold himself to his wishes and allow him to do whatever he wanted to her.

For a time, the love and happiness had overshadowed the dark thoughts and the hurt he'd caused her.

Until he'd done the unspeakable...

That day, he'd shown her his real self. But he'd also become a dark shadow in her life, haunting her at every turn. She was afraid for her life and that of her loved ones. She was afraid of *everything*—even closing her eyes and going to sleep.

"You're not going to tell me?" The man repeated, apprising her with interested eyes.

Venezia whipped her head up, realizing she'd lost herself in her thoughts—again. But then she was also not used to interacting much with people, preferring to keep to herself and live in her head. There, at least no one could hurt her.

Expectations bred disappointment. And she'd learned from a young age that eventually everyone disappointed her—and everyone left.

"V-Venezia," she stumbled over her words.

"That's a very unusual name," the man commented, taking a step towards her just as she took one back.

She blinked twice, panic taking hold of her.

"Excuse me," she mumbled, holding tightly on to her bags as she dashed out of his way. She'd already spotted the sign for the restroom, so she hurried there, entering the bathroom and breathing relieved at finding it completely empty.

Letting her bags drop to the floor, she turned to the mirror, gazing at her

reflection and wondering, for the first time, what that man had seen.

He'd called her pretty...

But she wasn't. Not like her sister, Sisi. She was the most beautiful woman Venezia had ever seen and she knew she could never compare.

So intent Venezia was on studying her features that it took her a second to realize she wasn't alone in the bathroom anymore. That only registered when she heard a click on the lock, and tuning her head around, she came face to face with her greatest nightmare.

Michele Guerra.

The man she'd once loved more than anything. The man she now *despised* more than anything.

TEN

MICHELE

ANGER RADIATED FROM MICHELE AS HE REGARDED HIS PET, SO ENTRANCED by her own reflection. Was that everything it took to get to her? Call her *pretty*?

He scowled though he let his greedy eyes roam over her this up close.

It had been weeks since he'd been this close to her.

Her scent invaded his nostrils and breathed in deeply.

Goddamn but he was like a fucking addict, and he couldn't allow that. Addiction meant loss of control and he'd already established she would never get influence him that way.

"W-what are you doing here?" she blinked, assessing him with trepidation.

Though inside he was seething, he let his shoulders angle up in a relaxed shrug. The key was to show her she didn't control him.

"I was in passing."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"It's the women's bathroom," she said, her words slow and even.

By God, his pet was being semi-confrontational and he couldn't help the way his heart thundered in his chest in anticipation.

"So it is," he smiled, taking a step closer.

She looked at him warily before studying her surroundings, biting her lip in apprehension when she realized she couldn't escape.

"It's been a while, pet, hasn't it?" he drawled in his smooth, seductive tone—the one he'd always used to keep her in his thrall.

"Don't call me that," she hissed in a low voice—the first time she'd uttered such an objection.

Michele's brows drew up in surprise, but he quickly masked it.

"Why would I not call you that when it's what you are. My pet. Mine," his voice boomed at the last word, and she startled, her eyes flickering with something akin to fear. "Or have you forgotten that, pet?"

"We're nothing," she whispered, moving along the counter of the bathroom in an attempt to get away from him.

He merely chuckled, his movements slow and precise to convey that he was fully in control of himself and the situation.

Taking one step forward, he brought his ungloved hand to her naked shoulder, trailing the back of his fingers down her skin and enjoying the way it erupted in goosebumps.

She wasn't indifferent, was she?

She blinked repeatedly as she raised her gaze to his, her lips parting, her breath labored.

For one moment, he let himself feel her skin under his fingertips. For weeks he'd been depriving himself of this—of the one person he could touch at leisure without experiencing physical pain. It was so soft and warm—so familiar.

And then there were her eyes. So big and growing bigger as she watched him with hidden emotion.

He was surrounded by a sea of sensation and he didn't know on *which* to focus. Her supple skin that made his own come alive through the barest contact, or her eyes, those two big pools of confusion that made him lose himself in them.

It was an overload of feeling as he stepped even closer until the warmth from her entire body met his, proving to him that he was still alive—that he was still capable of things living men were.

But just as he found himself so entranced by her mere presence, he realized it for what it was—his ultimate loss of control.

None too gentle, he wrenched his hand from her shoulder, instead bringing it to the front of her top, pulling on the material.

"What are you wearing?" he did his best to keep his voice under control, but it still came out raspy, harsh.

"Let me go," she reached with her own hand, covering his and trying to pull it away.

"I asked," he gritted his teeth, split between excitement at her obvious fearlessness and anger at her foolish display of bravery. "What the fuck are

you wearing?"

"It's none of your business," she continued, stunning him even further as she dug her nails into his flesh, the pain hitting him like the best of drugs.

"And that's where you're wrong pet," he gave her a wide smile before he pulled at her top, the flimsy material giving way and tearing.

Her eyes widened, her mouth opening but no sound coming out.

"Everything you do is my business," he continued, pulling at other sides of the material until he peeled most of it from her body, leaving her only in her modest bra.

Her reaction was delayed as she brought her arms to her chest to shield herself, raising her head to give him a deadly stare—one filled with a mix of hurt and insolence.

She might be smaller, weaker, more inferior to him. But at that moment, she looked so determined, she might as well have believed she could take him on *and* win.

Excitement thrummed in his blood as he regarded her like that, so on the verge of losing control. Because that was acceptable—*that* was the final goal.

The loss of her control.

His was out of the question. But he *craved* hers in a way he craved little else, because by losing control she would finally show him *everything*—all those hidden facets.

"Change back into your normal clothes," he barked the order, taking her previous dress from her bag and flinging it at her.

She shook her head, her lower lip between her teeth as she remained rooted to the spot, cradling the material of the dress to her chest.

"Change!" His voice thundered, making her jump back and bump into the sink counter.

"You can't tell me what to do," she said softly.

"I can and I will, pet," his lips tipped into a sinister smile.

Bracing himself against the counter, he caged her in, leaning in until his breath was her breath, his eyes fixed on hers.

"You offend me," he started in a low voice. A shiver went down her back at those words before she stiffened. "You offend my eyes with your pitiful attempts at flaunting your body."

"I'm not..."

"You're not what? Trying to get someone to fuck you? You think I didn't see how you were batting your lashes at that man? How you were inviting

him to compliment you?"

"When did you?" she blinked, looking confused.

"You might try," he chuckled. "But do you really think anyone would want you for anything more than a fuck?"

Her eyes widened and she blanched, his words hitting her hard—just as he'd intended.

"But you're not good for that either, are you?"

"Why are you here, Michele? Why are you doing this?"

"Because you offend me with your fucking existence," he told her in a steely tone, his nostrils flared as he took her in—the fact that though shocked, she was still so composed, so fucking dignified.

And him?

He was close to his boiling point.

"You offend me with your fucking hideous clothes. You offend me with your body. Do you think I want to see that?" he spat at her, pulling her arms down to reveal her torso. "Do you think anyone wants to see your ugly body and your gross pale skin?"

She blinked back tears, his insults hitting the mark.

"You offend me with those eyes of yours and the way you're looking at me right now."

"Please let me go," she uttered in a whisper, averting her gaze as one tear fell down her cheek.

"Change," he leaned back, a smug expression on his face as he watched the way she swallowed hard—the way she would surely understand *never* to wear something like that again.

With hesitant movements, she gripped the hem of the gray dress she'd been wearing, slipping it over her head and pulling it down her body.

All the while, she didn't look at him—in fact, she looked *anywhere* but at him.

With even more trembling fingers she undid her pants, sliding them down her legs and placing them in one of the bags.

Michele smirked. Scared as she was and she still managed to be crafty as she hid her body from his view. He had to give it to her, she was truly taking his words to heart.

Suddenly, his mood improved.

"Is this fine?" she inquired quietly, politely.

He tilted his head to the side, studying her.

When he didn't answer, she made to leave, but he wasn't about to let her go so easily.

Not when he'd been craving her for so long, his entire being reacting violently to her proximity.

She moved, taking a step towards the door, but she didn't get far as he yanked her back.

He wrapped his hand in her ponytail, tugging her back and bringing her body flush to his own. He pulled on her hair, tipping her chin up so he could gaze down at her.

Beautiful.

So. Fucking. Beautiful.

She held herself still as her eyes sought his, a flicker of something in those creamy irises of hers. Her cheeks were flushed, her tears dried up. She looked up at him with resignation and defiance and Michele didn't think he'd ever seen anything like that.

It was almost as if she knew what he was going to do to her, was resigned to it physically, but her mind was still her own, and thus, it could rebel.

And that wasn't what he wanted—not at all.

He didn't want *merely* her body.

He wanted her worship and her adoration. He wanted to see the love shine bright in her eyes again.

Her spirit—that was what he wanted the most. And that was what he would ultimately own.

"Is that all you have to say to me after so long, pet?" he murmured in a tender voice, leaning down until his lips were a mere breath away from hers.

She gulped down, not answering. She pressed her lips into a thin line in an attempt to keep herself away from him.

He smiled.

Nuzzling his mouth over hers, he brushed his lips across hers once, twice, groaning the third time.

Damn it all to hell but he'd missed that. He'd missed the feel of her lips—odd as it may be considering it had never been a highlight of their relationship. Yet when he'd been deprived of them for so long, he finally felt the absence.

He loved her lips. Her plump, soft lips.

He particularly loved her lips mated to his own. But she was holding back now, not giving to him what he most wanted.

The first instinct was to apply himself more forcefully.

But then he'd get his wildcat. And much as he loved that version of her, at the moment, he wanted his purring cat.

So instead, he brought his teeth over her lips, nibbling softly at her. Small bites that lacked any aggression, but were full of playful curiosity.

She parted her lips to draw in a deep breath.

A first victory.

Michele continued to pepper small bites around her mouth, all the while keeping his hand wrapped tightly in her hair, his eyes affixed to hers.

She had no choice but to look back at him, revealing everything with one gaze.

She was so expressive, he could imagine himself painting her like that.

All maidenly shyness and a hint of desire. Because there *was* desire. He noted that as soon as her pupils started expanding, the brown of her irises becoming eclipsed by darkness.

She may have held herself still, but she was halfway there already—almost an active participant.

"I know you still want me, pet," he murmured between sweet bites.

She stiffened in his arms, blinking repeatedly.

"Don't," he told her sternly when he felt the first stirrings of her rebellion. "Don't move."

She regarded him warily, and he could see so many emotions battling on her face—so many conflicting feelings.

Yes, she *did* love him still. But it would take a little coaxing to get that to the surface.

Taking a step forward, he pressed her against the counter so there would be no space for her to move or draw back.

With a small yank of her ponytail, he gave her a smile before he finally pressed his lips fully to hers. He gave her a lick, seeking entrance to her mouth.

She didn't grant it—initially.

But as he alternated between small nibbles and licks, he finally got a reaction out of her as she opened her mouth.

That was enough for him to plunge, take everything she'd unwittingly offered him.

Still holding on to her hair, he brought his other arm around her slight waist, inviting her deeper in his embrace.

To his surprise, she didn't protest.

For a moment, she let herself go, giving herself to him as she'd done in the past—with wild abandon.

He opened his mouth deeper on top of hers, his tongue swiping over her own as he tasted her deeply. And at his urging, she opened deeper.

He gave and she took.

She gave and he took in return.

For that brief moment, there was an unprecedented equality to their interaction—to the way they both met halfway.

But Michele, unused to such tenderness—unused to such prolonged titillation—found himself growing impatient. As much as he'd previously told himself he would take his time with her, weeks of abstinence—of *her* marked absence—made him too excited at the prospect of owning her again.

He moved his hand down her thigh, gripping some of the material and pulling it upwards as he sought access to her naked flesh.

The spell was broken.

Her teeth came down on his lip as she bit with all the strength she could muster, drawing blood.

Michele leaned back, surprise flickering over his face at her daring. And as he took in her new expression, he noted none of the previous softness, nor desire.

There was only defiance. Nascent rebellion that seemed to grow with every passing moment as she brought her knee up to kick him.

Yet he was too fast, slapping her knee and pushing it back down before he held her so closely, she couldn't even think to move again.

"Didn't you say I wasn't even good for a fuck?" she snapped at him. "Then what are you doing here? Why are you trying to fuck me if I offend you so much? Why touch me at all?" she demanded angrily.

The taste of iron flooded his mouth, a few drops of blood trickling at the corner of his lip.

"Because you're mine pet. You're fucking mine," he grit out.

He might not make sense, even to himself, but if there was one thing he was completely sure it was that she was his. He might lose his mind, might go utterly insane—if he hadn't already done so—but there would always be that ultimate truth.

Venezia Lastra was his.

His pet. His fucking woman.

And only *he* could ever touch her.

"You're mine and you're *never* getting rid of me."

That sentence seemed to get to her.

"Wh-what?"

"I'm coming for you, pet. Today, tomorrow, or maybe the end of the week. Who knows?" he smiled at her terrified expression. "But I *will* be coming for you."

"Why?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"Because," he smirked, a bored look on his face. "If I can't have you, no one will," he said right before he dipped his head, his open mouth making contact with the skin just below her jaw.

She brought her hands to his shoulders in an attempt to push him away, but it was all in vain.

One moment he was sucking on the skin, the next he bit so hard, he broke the surface of it, blood coating his teeth.

She yelped in pain, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes.

He wasn't deterred.

He continued to bite and suck until an unmistakable mark of ownership took shape on her body—right on her neck where anyone could see it. He held on for what seemed like forever, lost in her proximity, the taste of her blood and her pronounced cries of pain.

Only when he felt he'd made the mark visible enough did he let go, taking a step back to examine his work of art.

He swiped his tongue over his teeth as he attempted to capture all of her taste—take *all* of her essence within him. But as he gazed again upon her, he didn't find what he expected.

Yes, there were tears flowing down her cheeks, but there was no weakness in her eyes. She brought her hand to the red, ugly mark he'd placed on her at the same time as she turned her head to look him dead in the eye.

Before he knew what she was about, she was on him, her nails lodging in his shoulders as she raised herself on the tips of her toes, her open mouth on his neck as he'd done to her. And just as savagely, she bit at his throat until he felt the skin give off—until she stepped away to reveal not only blood but also skin.

He blinked, wholly taken aback by this display.

Especially as she spit out the small bit of skin, bringing the back of her

hand to her mouth to wipe the residual blood.

He pressed his own hand to his neck, realizing his wound was much, much worse than hers.

"I hate you, Michele Guerra. I will hate you until the day I die," she declared with such fierceness, awe overtook him until he gazed upon her as one would do a goddess—a being so holy it blinded with her light.

He felt his knees give out, yet it wasn't from the pain. It was from sheer emotion—from something so unfamiliar he couldn't name or acknowledge. He just found himself speechless in the face of the ineffable.

"And if you come for me again, I *will* die and take you with me to my grave," she stated in a deadpan voice before she grabbed her bags, unlocking the door and leaving.

Michele was still rooted to the spot, staring at the spot she'd just vacated as blood continued to pour down his neck.

He felt lightheaded. And it had nothing to do with the blood-loss and everything to do with her.

Her, his pet.

Her, the most amazing thing he'd ever beheld.

And she was all his—will only ever be his.

Slowly, his lips tipped up in a wide smile before he burst out into manic laughter, the pain she'd inflicted on him only fueling him more.

"I'm coming for you anyway, pet. To the grave, or beyond, I'm coming for you."

Two weeks passed. Michele split his time between his work and watching his pet. He learned everything he could about her—yet this time it was through first-hand observation not merely hearsay.

He saw the way she behaved at home and how alone she truly was, even when surrounded by family. At times, that information made him mad, but mostly it gave him the confidence that he would be able to steer her back to their initial relationship—where he was the god and she the faithful worshipper.

Yet slowly he became tired of waiting.

Though he'd disciplined himself in such a way that patience was his strongest suit, when it came to her, it was his *weakest* one.

He wanted her. Now. With him, near him, *under* him. Any way he could get her.

The interaction in the restroom had only whet his appetite for her and

made him look forward to her reactions more than anything. Would she kick him, scratch him, hit him? Would she then kiss him better, touch him tenderly where she'd previously caused pain? The options were endless—just as his thoughts about her.

Michele had always been a diligent worker, applying himself to everything he started, always making sure the end result was perfect.

That reflected in his work and the way he managed the people working under him. But it also shined the brightest in his revenge and how, step by step, he'd built an entire empire to go after those he hated.

From the first time Nicolo had given him a job, he'd aimed to be absolutely perfect.

He still was.

But frustration gnawed at him, as did an inherent desire to have her in his life.

ELEVEN

MICHELE

AS THE DAYS TRICKLED BY, HE FOUND IT HARDER AND HARDER TO MAINTAIN his usual patience and wait for the perfect opportunity to get her.

He told himself it was purely physical. Their last encounter had aroused him to such a degree, he'd had to suffer the effects for hours afterwards.

Since she'd left, he hadn't tried to take himself in hand anymore, knowing that it was a paltry imitation to the real thing and what he really desired. Instead, he'd tried to exorcise her from his mind and body by pushing himself to new limits in the gym.

It had *barely* worked.

Daily, he had to deal with blue balls and seeing his pet naked on his monitor didn't help.

Not. One. Bit.

He was so high-strung he ended up killing two prisoners he was trying to get information from.

And it was all her fault.

She'd infiltrated every little crevice of his mind. It wasn't enough that his body was already a slave to her. Now she had to own his mind too.

Once more, Michele rebelled at the thought that she might have *that* much control over her.

No, it could never be that. It was merely the fact that he had sex on the mind twenty-four seven and the only thing that could give him some relief was out of bounds—*momentarily*.

But his luck changed the day he heard Vlad and Assisi talking about a potential mission outside of the country. The idea quickly materialized and they left instruction for the whole house to mangle while they were away—

including his pet.

The good girl she was, she didn't even argue.

She offered them a smile, wishing them safe travels and telling them they shouldn't worry about her because she would be at home all day, and thus unlikely to be in any danger.

Michele smiled at the screen, his hand moving softly over Lovely's head.

Did she just offer a challenge?

"You're sure you're going to be alright, Zia?" Assisi asked her for the millionth time. "The kids aren't here either, so it's going to be just you and the guards. We could take you with us," she turned to her husband who shook his head.

"No, no, Sisi. I'll be fine. Really. I'm old enough to be able to spend some time in my own company," his pet cracked a smile just as a chuckle escaped Michele.

He liked this side of her—the sarcastic, *almost* funny one.

"Are you sure?" Assisi bit her lip in apprehension.

"Yes. I'll be perfectly fine. It's only two days, no? What can happen in two days?"

"Don't worry, hell girl. No one would dare come to *my* house. You know that," Vlad came forward, throwing his arm over Assisi's shoulders and drawing her close to his body.

"You won't go out?" Assisi asked.

Damn it, but the woman wouldn't stop. Just as Michele was thinking the subject would be dropped and his pet would end up all alone, Assisi kept going in circles.

"I'll stay in to finish my homework. I have a bit to catch up," his pet assured her in a soft voice.

"I guess we could go then," she sighed.

Finally.

The moment Vlad and Assisi confirmed their trip, Michele started planning his break-in and how he'd get to his pet.

By God, but he was lucky. He'd have one entire night with her—watch her, touch her, simply be near her. And though that wasn't remotely enough, considering how much he *needed* her, it would have to do for now.

Besides, if he managed to get easy access to her room, then it wouldn't be the last time he paid her such a visit. Until he managed the logistics of stealing her away for good, it would have to do.

Vlad and Assisi departed later the following afternoon.

Michele had already scouted the area and Andreas had done an in-depth analysis of the security in place.

Kuznetsov may have a lot of guards, but that wasn't enough to keep Michele from his pet.

Learning the schedule of the guards as well as their placement made it easy for Michele to sneak in when the entire household went to sleep.

By that point, Michele had become so accustomed to the house and its layout that it didn't take him long to locate his pet's room.

His movements slow, quiet and stealthy, he opened her door without making the least of noise.

And when he was finally inside, he was stumped to realize just how small it was—certainly smaller than it had seemed on the monitor.

There was one twin bed on the wall to his left, a desk with books and her various items on the wall opposite it, and the untouched suitcase to his right.

At the end of the room there was a door that led to an even smaller bathroom.

He was...baffled.

He didn't know why the sight of her small room with her sparse belongings and impersonal touches got such a reaction out of him, but it simply tugged at his heart.

Just as he'd seen her on the video feed, she was curled in her bed, holding herself tight as she slept the night away.

She didn't give any indication that she was aware of what was happening around her, or that there was a stranger in her room. Though he felt an unnatural pull to go to her side, be close to her, he didn't want to waste this golden chance of learning more about her.

Curious, Michele started to look around. For weeks now he'd seen her shuffle her stuff on the desk and he couldn't help but be intrigued by their contents.

After all, Michele was nothing if not thorough. And that meant he needed to know *everything* about his pet—including what she was studying.

He wanted to know her strengths and her weaknesses, but most of all he wanted to know what she was hiding in her drawer.

After the first time he'd seen her handle that item, she'd done it almost daily. At some point he'd wondered if it wasn't a rosary or a religious item of sorts and she was saying a prayer before bed. Too bad the angles of the

cameras Andreas had set up couldn't capture everything.

Carefully, he opened the drawer, using the flash from his phone to browse its contents.

To his great surprise, it was almost empty save for a small object covered in a piece of material. Reaching for it, he pulled it out, surprised to see what it was.

The pendant.

The necklace he'd given her with their mixed life essences.

The moment he saw it, unimaginable joy spread through his core at seeing the confirmation that she wasn't, in fact, indifferent to him.

No, she couldn't be if she had not only kept the necklace, but she'd spent time with it on a regular basis—no doubt reminiscing their relationship.

A knowing smile spread over his features as he put the pendant back in its place, closing the drawer before focusing on the other things demanding his attention. He would address that later on when his pet was more receptive to his attentions, and he'd make her wear it once more.

The fact that she'd kept it—that she'd placed it somewhere close for safekeeping—was all that mattered.

Satisfied with that line of thinking, he pointed the flash towards the stack of papers on top of the desk, wanting to see what other mysteries about his pet he could solve that night.

There were school notes and some personal ones. But the one thing that struck him the most was her handwriting.

It was exquisite—exquisitely *her*.

Elegant but minimal, just like her personality.

And Michele couldn't help himself from taking one of the sheets of paper, folding it and depositing it in his pocket.

Research, he told himself. He'd study it in details later.

Yet as he continued to look, he realized there were pages upon pages of the same transcribed material. The earlier ones contained monumental errors, but as he sifted through page after page, he noted fewer and fewer errors.

His pet had been working hard to eliminate the errors from her writing, and his lips pulled in a soft smile as he recognized her effort.

So this was what she was doing when she was spending hours on end at her desk, writing away. She was repeating everything to reach perfection—an error free transcription.

In spite of her inherent disability, she put on double—triple—the work to

ensure perfection, or as close to perfection as she could get.

And *that* he couldn't help but admire.

She wanted to do better and she took the steps towards that instead of complaining about her lot in life—without yelling about the injustices done to her and wallowing in self-pity.

And the moment that thought arose, Michele realized he'd never heard her complain—about anything.

Not even once.

He knew about her home situation, of course. The fact that her father had died when she'd been but five and her mother had run away from home when she'd been even younger. She'd been taken in by Valentino, her older brother, and his wife, Romina. But even that had run afoul when Romina had been murdered and Valentino had dedicated himself to finding her killer.

His pet had soon been forgotten, abandoned to whatever servant was about to care for her. It was no wonder no one had detected her dyslexia, or helped her overcome it.

Yet in all the time he'd known her, even in the beginning when they'd been nothing but friends, she had never complained.

She never spoke ill of her family, never held a grudge against them.

And it would have been so easy to do so. After all, those who were supposed to protect and care for her had simply...forgotten about her.

Michele's lips flattened into a thin line as his mind went in that direction. Somehow the thought of his pet alone—lonely—struck a chord in him.

He didn't like the fact that everyone in her life had simply abandoned her.

And more than anything, he didn't like it that he, himself, was part of that category.

Because he'd done that, too, hadn't he?

He'd used her and thrown her away.

It was for revenge.

He swallowed hard, his throat dry. Yes, it had been for revenge. And *maybe* he'd made a few miscalculations when it came to her, but it was why he was here at the moment. He was rectifying that.

He begrudgingly admitted that in his quest for revenge he'd been rather... rigid in his thinking. From the beginning he'd had a plan and he'd followed it to a t. The fact that the situation had evolved in such a manner that he could achieve his revenge *and* keep her had been just as surprising for him.

But that was the beauty of it. Now he didn't have to deny himself his pet.

And he wouldn't abandon her again for as long as she was his, she'd be only his and forever his—as long as his interest lasted, of course.

He wagered that as soon as she stopped mattering—as soon as she stopped fucking haunting his mind—he wouldn't feel bad about seeing her so small and alone.

She would become like any other in his life—transient.

Yes, indeed, he nodded to himself. That was just the problem. At the moment he felt bad for her because she was still part of his world, part of his mind and part of what made him function properly.

As soon as he exorcised her from his life—for good—she wouldn't matter anymore.

Pleased with his reasoning, Michele continued to look around, his hand brushing over a curious piece of paper. Withdrawing it from the bottom of the stack, he blinked twice as he perused it.

It couldn't be...could it?

He could recognize his own drawing anywhere, just as he could his handwriting.

From Michele to Venezia, the prettiest pink princess.

Suddenly, a long forgotten memory poked the surface as he saw himself as he'd been before—when he'd still had a soul. And then he saw her too—the little pitiful girl she'd been.



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" A SMALL VOICE ASKED, BARELY PENETRATING HIS ironclad focus.

He blinked, the tip of his pencil stopping in place as he lowered his notepad to look in front of him. A child of about five stood in front of him, studying him with curious eyes.

The first thing he noticed about her was the rich mane of auburn hair framing her porcelain skin stained with bits of mud. Her hair was streaked with dirt as well. And as he looked lower, he realized her clothes were dirty, too, the black dress she was wearing completely soiled.

She was a pretty child, her face resembling that of a doll. But she was a very dirty child.

"I'm drawing," he answered in a soft voice, especially as she turned her big eyes towards him and regaled him with a wide smile.

"Can I see?" she squeaked, coming closer.

For a moment, he wondered what she was doing all by herself over here. She was too young to be left to her own devices, and given the condition of her clothes, he suspected she needed constant supervision.

"Only if you tell me where your parents are," he said playfully. He didn't like the thought of her wandering around by herself.

Immediately, the smile died on her lips as she took a deep breath in, turning slightly and pointing her finger towards the crowd of people.

"There," she said with a small shrug.

"Why don't we go find them?" Michele suggested.

"No," she shook her head. "There," she pointed again, this time towards the casket.

"That's your father?"

She nodded, but didn't seem particularly sad.

Odd.

"What about your mother?"

Another shrug.

"She left me. Looong time ago," she said in a high pitched voice, but there wasn't any trace of emotion—almost as if she was reciting something she'd heard one too many times before.

"Then who are you with today?"

"Tino," she gave a tremulous smile, "but he has no time for me," she added dejectedly. "Can I see the drawing now?" she switched the topic immediately, placing her small hands on the bench and jumping in an attempt to haul herself up.

Seeing her efforts, Michele shook his head indulgently, a sad smile playing at his lips. He had the vague feeling she wasn't very cared for, and that broke his heart a little—especially since she was trying very hard not to dwell on it.

"Here," he placed his notepad aside for a moment as he swooped her up and placed her next to him on the bench. And before she could protest, he removed a pack of wet wipes from his bag, taking one out and dabbing it gently at her cheeks.

"Drawing?"

"After," he chuckled, feeling sorry for the state she was in. "Let's get you

cleaned a little and then I'll show you the drawing."

She blinked, looking at him with such awe, he didn't know how to react. He'd always liked children, and he'd spent long periods of time with those younger than him in the hospital, so to an extent he was used to dealing with toddlers.

For some unknown reason, though, the state of this little girl, so dirty and neglected, tugged at his heart. In some ways, she reminded him a lot of himself.

A gentle smile on his face, he continued his ministrations, wiping the dirt smudges from her face and hands.

"Now you're good," he winked at her, grabbing his drawing and passing it to her.

"Wow," she inhaled sharply, staring at the drawing for a few seconds before turning to him. She scooted closer, a mischievous smile on her face.

"I love it," she exclaimed. "You're good. Very, very good," she praised with effusive enthusiasm.

He hadn't managed to draw much. There was the outline of the people and the casket, but he'd focused more on the forlorn surroundings—the tombstones and general atmosphere of the place. It wasn't his best work, but he couldn't deny her praise. More than anything, Michele found that he couldn't stop himself from smiling, her bubbly attitude intoxicating.

"Thanks," he chuckled.

"I'm Venezia," she offered slyly, grinning from ear to ear, the missing front tooth only making her more adorable. But Michele knew the little hoyden had something under her sleeve.

"Michele," he replied, taking her now clean hand and shaking it lightly.

"Can you draw me too?"

"Sure," he answered immediately, happy to indulge her. It wasn't often that he was asked to draw other people, so it was a good opportunity for him too.

"I want to be a princess," she continued. "I want a pink princess dress. And pink princess shoes," she scrunched up her face deep in thought, "*and* a pink bag," she squeaked.

"Slow down," he laughed. "Let me get some colors," he told her as he rummaged through his bag, finding some crayons.

"What type of princess do you want to be?" He asked when he had everything ready.

"Princess," she repeated, frowning.

"Like the ones on TV?" He needed some more information to work with, but she seemed even more confused when he mentioned the princesses on TV.

"Tell me where you saw this type of princess you want," he urged gently when he saw her befuddlement.

Her face fell even more and she fidgeted with her fingers.

"Hey, I need all the information so I can make you the prettiest princess ever, ok?"

She batted her lashes, slowly nodding.

"I saw this doll," she started, her words a little stilted, "she was wearing a pink dress. Everything was pink," her lips tugged up in a smile. "And she was so pretty," she gushed, the word pretty sounding more like *pewtty*. But Michele just nodded along, not bothering to correct her speech.

"Go on," he smiled.

"But the woman there told me to leave," she sighed. "She said it was for princesses, not for girls like me."

"Girls like you?"

"Unkept," she nodded sadly, probably meaning to say *unkempt*.

"She said what?" he couldn't believe someone would be so mean to a child so cute. But he supposed some people only saw the outside—and if she'd called her *unkempt*, it was likely a common occurrence for her to be this neglected. He thought back to the unkind words *he'd* heard from adults all his life, as well as those from other children, and he couldn't help but empathize with her situation.

"She was right," she continued, swinging her legs on the bench. It was then that he noticed the scuffs on her knees, some red and angry. "No one keeps me," she said, still thinking the woman had called her *unkept*.

"She was just mean," Michele told her, "don't listen to her. Some people are just mean."

She stopped moving then, giving him an odd look.

"Can you make me a princess, then?" she quickly switched topics again, forcing a smile on her face.

"Sure thing," he agreed—he didn't think he had the heart to deny her at that moment.

"A pretty princess," she reiterated as she moved closer to him, raising herself slightly to peer over his shoulder as he worked.

His lips stretched into a smile, Michele started with a sketch. It wasn't hard to give her a princess-like look. He was sure that if she was more taken care of she would look every inch regal—especially with her adorable features.

"Am I doing good?" he asked and she readily nodded.

"Love it," she breathed out.

And so he continued with his sketch until he had everything done, her princess dress, her princess shoes and her princess bag. It was when he started adding the colors that she became a little too quiet by his side.

One glance and he found her watching him with a mix of awe, sadness and happiness all in one.

"Do you like it?"

She didn't answer, merely moving her chin up and down, swallowing hard and blinking even harder—almost as if she didn't think it was real.

"It's so pretty," she finally spoke, and he noticed she didn't consider *herself* pretty, merely the drawing.

"Like you," he smiled. "Pretty like you. After all, you were the model."

She blushed, her shyness coming to the surface.

"Here," he took hold of his pencil again and scribbled a few words in the corner.

From Michele to Venezia, the prettiest pink princess.

"It's yours now," he handed it to her.

"Really? I can have it?"

"Of course, I drew it for you."

She held it in both hands as if it was something precious, her eyes greedily drinking in the drawing. He'd tried his best to make her a pretty princess—one to rival any doll out there and any lady that told her she couldn't be one.

And by the look on her face, he thought he succeeded.

She continued to stare at it, but a glance at the crowd still gathered at the casket told Michele they'd dallied enough away from everyone.

Just as he was about to suggest he took her to her family, a low buzzing sound erupted through the silence.

Her hands went still on the paper, her chin tipped down in shame.

The noise continued, and Michele realized it was coming from her.

She was...hungry. And embarrassed.

"Are you hungry?" he asked in a serious tone. He'd only known her for a

little while, but he could read her dire circumstances on her, and if she was *that* hungry, he doubted someone would give her food anytime soon. Especially since no one seemed that interested in her whereabouts.

A spark of anger ignited within him at the thought.

He knew what could have happened to him that night when he'd wandered off alone if not for Nicolo's help. She was a girl. A much younger and defenseless girl. Countless bad things could happen to her.

"Let's get you something to eat," he told her with a smile, all the while thinking to himself that he had to give her a talk about safety.

Clearly no one in her life had done it if she so easily approached a stranger. And he wanted to ensure he was the *last* stranger she approached.

Maybe he could even put in a word with Nicolo, since he *was* her uncle.

Venezia turned her huge eyes on him, biting her lower lip in apprehension.

"Come," he put the backpack over his shoulder as he stretched out a hand towards her. She eyed it for a moment before sliding her much smaller one into it, hopping off the bench and following him.

"I think I spotted a place to eat across the street," he gave her a smile.

She nodded, her eyes on him, unblinking. It was as if she was awestruck by him and the fact that he was considering her needs—as if that had never happened before.

He pushed down the rage he felt at that thought. He knew it on his own skin—knew exactly what the cost of such neglect was in the long run. And he was a boy—almost a man. She was just a small girl.

Her hand was warm in his, and he felt a surge of protectiveness over her. For a moment, he wished he could shield her from all the evils of the world—from everything bad that was out there, just waiting to strike at her. But just as the thought surfaced, he pushed it aside. It wasn't *his* job to do it.

He was just a stranger.

They reached in front of a small fast food restaurant, and he opened the door for her to come inside.

The staff took one look at her and their lips curled in disgust, undoubtedly at her messy appearance. Still, he didn't let that deter him as he led her at a table in the back.

"Wait here and I'll get some food, ok?"

She nodded at him, the drawing still in her hand as she clutched at it as if a precious possession.

That made Michele smile.

It was probably the first time he met someone who prized his art as much as he did.

"I'll be right back," he repeated, slowly leaving her side and heading to the counter.

He pushed one hand into the pockets of his pants searching for cash all the while perusing the prices on the board.

"Damn," he muttered as he felt around for money.

He didn't think he had enough for two portions. He had a meager allowance, and he used most of it on his art supplies. And so what was left was mere pocket change.

Still, he managed to pull together about ten dollars for a large menu, saving some coins to head to the pharmacy afterwards.

He wasn't that hungry anyway. Why, he'd already had breakfast. But her...he had no idea when was the last she ate if the people around her didn't even care enough to change her out of her dirty clothes.

After placing his order, he only had to wait a few minutes before it was done. Grabbing onto the tray, he walked back to their seats and placed everything on the table.

The large menu consisted of a massive portion of fries, a big burger, a side of salad and a drink. By some luck, it had been under ten dollars and he'd been able to also get a small chocolate muffin for Venezia.

Her mouth was hanging open as she looked at the food in front of her.

"Go on, eat," he urged her.

She seemed reluctant to dive in, and a few moments later he realized why. She was trying to wipe her hands on the dress.

"Give me your hands," he said as he took out the wet wipes and cleaned her hands until she was pleased enough with herself to start eating.

Immediately, she took a bite of a fry, smiling as she chewed it.

"Thank you!" she exclaimed. She was a bit of a messy eater, but he didn't mind it. She looked so cute in that moment Michele couldn't help but be glad he had the extra cash to spare.

"Why you no eating?" She asked when he saw him only watching her. "Here," she thrust a fry at him.

"No, I'm not hungry," he shook his head lightly.

"You don't eat," she pointed at him, almost poking his chest, "I don't eat," she pointed back to herself with a pout.

"Come on, Zia. You're the hungry one," he chuckled.

"Zia?" she stopped mid-chew as her eyes grew wide.

"A nickname," he offered. "Hasn't anyone called you that before?" He'd noticed she had a hard time pronouncing her name, most likely as a result of her missing front tooth. But he belatedly realized he should have bit his tongue. He was asking a child that, by the looks of it, barely had someone to care for her, if she'd ever been given a nickname.

She shook her head, pondering the word for a moment before nodding.

"I like Zia. It's easier to say than Venezia," she screwed up her face, making a funny expression before laughing at her own skewed pronunciation.

"There you have it, so now eat," he motioned her playfully.

She shook her head again.

"No. You eat, I eat," she continued, smiling in satisfaction as she leaned back to wait for his next move.

"You're quite the blackmailer, aren't you?" he couldn't stop himself from smiling at her antics. Still, he wanted her to eat. "How about we do this? You have two bites, I'll have one. Then again."

She narrowed her eyes at him, probably thinking if he was trying to cheat her. Eventually, she nodded.

And so she would eat a little, then feed him a fry. It went on like this until the end of the meal. By the time the food was gone, both Venezia and Michele were full.

"Thank you," she sighed in pleasure, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

He tsked at her, cleaning her hand again before noticing her giggle.

"You're doing that on purpose, aren't you?"

She gave a shrug, smiling.

"You're a little troublemaker," he said, amused. But he quickly sobered as he remembered the topic he wanted to address with her. "Zia, from now on, you shouldn't talk to strangers again, especially men." he told her sternly. "And you should *never* follow them anywhere."

"Why?" she frowned.

"Because they can harm you."

"Harm me?"

He muttered a low curse under his breath, searching his mind for a way to explain it better. "There are a lot of people out there that want to take advantage of you. Hurt you. You don't want to be hurt, do you?"

She immediately shook her head.

"No. I fell yesterday and hurt my knee," she complained. "It hurt a lot. I don't like pain."

"Good. Then to avoid it, avoid strangers," he nodded at her, grimly reminding himself of those scuffs he'd seen on her knees.

"What about you, then?" she blinked, the question so innocent yet it felt like the ultimate test.

"I won't hurt you," he smiled. "And I'm not a stranger anymore," he winked at her.

Her lips spread into a blinding smile, even her tooth gap looking cute as hell as she looked at him adoringly.

"Now let's go. There's one more stop before I take you back to your family," he said as he stood up, getting his stuff and taking her hand.

He didn't miss the way her face fell when she heard about her family, and he felt bad for her situation.

If he had a sister her age, he'd protect her at all costs. Like Gianna and Rafaelo had protected him whenever they could. More so even. He would make sure that nothing and no one could harm her, and that she would never complain about being *unkept* again.

Swinging by a pharmacy nearby, he got some band-aids and some antiseptic cream with what little spare coins he had left.

"What's that for?" she asked in confusion as he brought her to sit on a bench by the road.

"For your knee, so it heals faster," he told her gently.

She didn't reply, merely watching him as he took some of the cream and spread it over her injured areas. She winced every now and then but didn't make a sound. When he was done, he put a band-aid over each knee and instructed her to do the same while handing her the rest of the supplies.

"If you hurt yourself again just do like I did," he told her, stretching out his hand to help her hop off, finally ready to return to the cemetery.

He hoped the ceremony had ended.

Zia was already yawning, her eyes droopy as she undoubtedly wished to go to sleep.

When they got back to the cemetery, they saw it was almost empty. The procession of people had already departed.

"What..." Michele blinked as he looked around. Everyone had left—including the girl's family.

Not wanting to let panic overtake him, he went back to where Nicolo had left his car, sighing in relief when he noticed it was still there. Upon noticing him, Nicolo opened the door, his sharp gaze skittering from Michele to Zia and their joint hands.

"She was hungry," Michele merely said, attempting a boyish smile.

Nicolo rolled his eyes and shook his head at them, motioning for the car.

"Valentino and his wife left already," he said when Michele helped Zia take a seat next to him.

"How could they leave and forget about her?" Michele asked, outraged.

Zia didn't seem too concerned about this turn, and she kept her eyes on the floor, quietly ignoring the noise around her.

"It wouldn't be the first time," Nicolo mumbled, his eyes landing on her. "My brother didn't really care for another child. Valentino doesn't have children of his own, and I don't think he *wants* any."

"Who's taking care of her then?"

Nicolo shrugged.

"Whoever can," he answered flippantly.

For some reason, his words made Zia uncomfortable as she snuggled deeper into Michele in search of safety, bringing her knees on the seat and placing them under her. She was so tired, she was struggling to keep her eyes open.

"Sleep," he smiled at her. "We'll take you home, but it's going to be awhile until we get there," he told her as he patted her head lightly.

She gave a small nod, wiggling closer and placing her head on his lap.

His eyes widened, but he didn't move her. She seemed right at home as she was.

Nicolo, though, gave him an odd look as he regarded them languidly.

"You have too big of a heart, son. And one day, that's going to be your downfall," he added cynically.

Michele frowned.

"Maybe," he eventually agreed. "But I'll have my conscience clean."

Nicolo's brows arched in surprise before he burst into laughter.

"You'll have your conscience clean?" he asked in amused outrage. "There is no such thing as a clean conscience in this world. But I guess you still have a lot to learn," he waved his hand. "Go on. Do you. At one point you'll have your wake-up call."

Michele grunted, not wanting to dwell on what his friend was saying.

He'd survived for so long being exactly who he was—who he was comfortable being—that he knew he could continue on just like that.

The journey took some time, and in the meantime, Nicolo regaled him with some stories about his brother and the fact that he'd had four wives, and all had left him one way or another—the last being Zia's mother.

"She ran away," Nicolo told him. They didn't know how she managed, but they assumed she must have had an influential lover to facilitate her escape. She'd cared nothing for her daughter as she'd left her defenseless.

Michele looked down at the sleeping girl, and he couldn't help but compare how similar they were, a fact that served to make him feel even more protective of her.

They reached the Lastra mansion, and taking Zia in his arms, Michele exited the car. Nicolo signaled him to go ahead, and he merely nodded. He could gather his friend wasn't on the best of terms with his family.

She was light in his arms as he stopped at the front door, knocking lightly. A staff member opened the door, appearing quite disinterested as she saw Zia in his arms. She merely pointed the way to her room. And as Michele walked up the stairs and to the designated room, he couldn't help but feel the chill that went down his back when he saw her living conditions. They were...abysmal.

Everything was messy and dirty, as if no one had gone inside to clean in a very long time—as if no one had cared.

She was five, for God's sake.

Muttering a curse, he couldn't in good conscience leave her there. Turning, he found an empty bedroom where he laid her on a clean bed while he went in search of the house staff.

Clearly, her family hadn't returned home from the funeral so there wasn't anyone he could exchange words with—as if anyone would take a thirteen-year-old *crusader* that seriously.

Still, without even thinking, he found a few of the workers and asked them to clean her room. They protested for a while, but eventually Michele managed to convince them to do their job properly.

Half an hour later and the room was clean—or as clean as could be.

"It wasn't that hard in the first place," he shook his head in disgust as he went for Zia, swooping her up in his arms and taking her back to her newly cleaned room.

Just like him, she didn't have many possessions. Almost no toys, and

certainly no dolls. He could see why she'd been so hung up on that one pink princess—she'd probably never had anything of the sort. She had very few clothes as well, with some she'd clearly outgrown and some that were too big for her small frame.

"Home?" she asked sleepily as he laid her down on her bed, startling Michele from his thoughts.

"Home," he attempted a smile that she could not return. Instead, she just sighed.

Did children sigh?

"Thank you for today," she told him in a small voice, watching him with big, innocent eyes. "Thank you for the drawing," she continued, and before he could reply, he felt her lips on his cheek. "I'll keep it safe," she declared with more pathos than anyone living in her conditions should have.

"I know you will, Zia," he added sadly, taking her in for one last time. "It's time for me to go."

The sadness was apparent on her face, but so was another thing—resignation. She'd known it was coming. This was a child used to people abandoning her, and that broke him a little.

"Maybe we'll meet again someday," he tried to placate her, though he knew it was unlikely.

She nodded, plastering a smile on her face, her hands clutching at her little drawing.

"Goodbye, Zia," he whispered as he laid a light kiss on her forehead. He heard a ghost of a goodbye behind him, but he was out of the room before he could come up with worse ideas—like confronting her family and demanding they took better care of her.

Yet, as he'd seen with Nicolo, her uncle, it might all be in vain.



HE... HE COULDN'T PROCESS.

The memory was like a flash, his head throbbing as he remembered her sweet, innocent voice. But also as he remembered that side of himself—the one he'd buried so deep within he didn't think existed anymore.

He pivoted.

The drawing in one hand, he stared at her form on the bed, recalling the outrage he'd felt, years before, when he'd seen her abandoned, hungry and alone. When she'd thought no one wanted to keep her.

Discomfort stabbed at his chest, and he brought his fist over his heart to alleviate the ghost of a pain that seemed to make its home there.

How? Why?

The questions continued in his mind, the answers all out of reach.

Had she known? Had she recognized him when he himself had buried all memories of before deep within his mind, ever to see the light of the day?

Had she...?

Otherwise why still have this?

The sheet of paper itself was worn, the edges of the page already yellowed and some of the colors smudged. It looked like something that had been handled one too many times—looked at one too many times.

It struck Michele that though he'd locked away that part of himself deep within, forgetting all about his past existence, it hadn't been the same for her.

At least that one interaction must have affected her strongly enough for her to keep that drawing for years to come—decades to come.

As the memories reached the surface, he could once more pinpoint the encounter. It had been at her father's funeral.

Thirteen years ago.

Good God. Thirteen years.

Had she held onto the drawing for that long?

Yet looking around her room once more and accounting for all her belongings—all her *few* belongings—he realized it must be something incredibly important to her.

More than anything, it was something she reached for often—evidence being its location at the desk she spent all her free time.

For the first time in forever, Michele was speechless.

He didn't know how to feel. He certainly didn't know how to process the information.

He'd met his pet before—he'd met her at a time where he'd still been himself. And maybe, if circumstances had been different...

No, he couldn't think about that—could *not* dwell on the past and the what-ifs. There was just pain to be had the moment he allowed himself to feel *anything* other than anger at the world.

Before he could give himself to the pull of the drawing, he put the paper

back on the desk, stepping away from it and closer to his pet.

After all, *this* was why he was here. For her. Not for some idiotic past that he'd already completely ejected from his mind.

Moving the chair quietly, he placed it next to her bed as he took a seat, his eyes affixed to her. She was wearing the same bland white nightgown as before, a thin sheet covering half of her body.

She was curled in a fetal position—her default sleeping position. For as long as he'd monitored her, he'd only seen her like this. It was almost as if, unconsciously, she sought to protect herself from the world. Even in her sleep, she was wary—afraid.

Michele's fists clenched in anger. It was because of those boys, wasn't it? Those puny boys who'd laughed at her, later to be joined in by the adults—by her teachers and even the principal. Suddenly, he was pissed that he'd gone too easy on them. They should have suffered tenfold what his pet was suffering, and even then it wouldn't have been enough.

It would have *never* been enough.

He was sure it was *them* who'd made his pet become so terrified and so withdrawn.

Never once did it occur to him that *he* might be the source of her nightmares, of her constant anxiety. His only fault, as he'd convinced himself, had been to leave her unattended for a few weeks and thus without defense for others to attempt to hurt her.

That he could accept.

He couldn't see that he'd permanently broken her heart—destroyed every little bit of love she'd held for him. In his mind, she was merely put off with him because he'd temporarily dashed her dreams of love. Considering her complete adoration of him, anything else was out of the question.

But that was inconsequential as he would rebuild everything once more, ensuring they went back to the way they'd been before. Even better, this time he would make sure there would be *no* boundaries between them, and he would own her unlike he'd ever owned anything—utterly and irrevocably.

Smiling to himself, he leaned closer so he could watch her better.

Her face was tipped upwards, her lips slightly parted as she released a small, breathy sound. Like that, he could take his time studying her—observing and committing to memory every little detail that made her who she was—and what she meant to him.

It was odd to think he'd had so many opportunities to see her like this, but

he'd never truly *seen* her, had he? He'd looked, but he hadn't seen.

The beam of light from the moonlight made its way through the semi-drawn curtains, giving her an ethereal look that bewitched Michele.

There was something about her—something ineffable that could just be felt, not spelled out. It was something that reached deep within and took vicious hold of him, threatening to never let go. It was the only way Michele could describe what she instilled in him, something incredibly violent but equally tender, and the dichotomy confused him more than anything.

He wanted to own her. Even now, as he watched her sleep peacefully, he wanted nothing more than shake her awake so he could imprint himself on her—so she would know it was him and only him. Yet there was another side of him that wanted nothing more than hold her gently, touch her tenderly and kiss every inch of her skin—drape himself in every bit of her.

He continued to gaze at her as one would the wonders of the Ancient world—in awe at the absolute perfection, yet in constant trepidation that everything would be gone in one blink of an eye.

Because, deep down, that was what his pet signified for him.

Utter fulfillment. But also the potential for utter loss.

Unable to help himself anymore, he tentatively reached out, brushing the back of his hand against her soft cheek and stifling a groan at the sensation of pure bliss that assaulted him.

Touch. Pure, incredible touch. Debilitating, yet uniquely supercharging touch.

But then that was specific of her, and only her.

Whereas with others he would already be in agonizing pain just from one brush of skin against skin, this was the opposite. She was able to free him from his cage—show him he didn't have to isolate himself from the world. That he was still a man—a living, breathing man.

Michele's world, at that point in time, was split between the two realms—living, and *not* living. His default setting was the latter as he'd accustomed himself to keep his distance from anything and everything a normal human would derive joy from. He'd closed himself in his icy prison where his anger was the only force pulsing in his veins.

But then there was her, and she pushed him into the former, showing him that there was a life to be lived—that there was living even after death.

Over the years, he'd cultivated such a reputation that no one intuited what lay hidden beneath his mask. A sardonic smile pulled at his lips as he

wondered how people would react if they knew that his pet was the first and only person he'd willingly touched—and allowed to touch him in return—in almost a decade.

They'd probably think him mad, and rightly so. But his pet was part of that madness—she *fueled* it in a way nothing else could.

Bringing his hand lower, he stopped as he reached her lips, his thumb skimming the surface of her plump lower lip as he wet his own in response.

So soft. So pretty. So...

He bit a curse as he imagined her on her knees, her lips stretched to their fullest to accommodate the thickness of his shaft. Fuck, but it had been too long—way too long. And as soon as that thought surfaced, he squashed it down.

He wanted to take things slow—certainly slower than ever before. If he allowed his baser instincts and his unbridled lust to rule him he would make a mess of everything.

Michele had already done his due diligence, studying every material he could find on women and what appealed to them in an attempt to woo his pet even better—coax her to his side and seduce her into giving him power over her again. As such, he knew he had to act carefully, with tact.

It might go against everything they had established in the past, but he wanted to earn her trust again. And more than anything, he wanted her adoration anew.

So he pushed down his frustration and all the visions of her on her knees out of his mind.

Slow. He was going to go slow. Enjoy her. *Woo* her.

Yet his eyes were still stuck on her lips.

It must be witchery, he thought. Though he would never give credence to such foolish notions, nothing else made sense. Nothing else could explain this odd affinity he felt to her, this utterly implacable pull towards her.

Against all odds, she was the exception to the rule.

Once more, the rational side of his mind took the front seat, giving him a list of all the explanations. He was feeling this strongly *because* she was the exception to the rule.

With her he'd done things he'd even entertained the thought with another. She'd given him a taste of what it was like to be free, physical—normal.

Right at that moment her eyes snapped open, widening as she realized who was by her side.

He expected her to move—jump out of his hold.

She did neither.

She merely stared at him, her gaze hardening to the same indifference he'd witnessed in her before—the same type that raked its claws over his insides.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in an even voice, though he detected a slight tremble.

The beast inside of him preened. She was scared—which meant she *felt*.

"I told you I'd come for you, pet," he drawled, the corners of his lips drawing up in a carefree smile—the opposite of what he was feeling at the moment.

TWELVE

MICHELE

COVERING HIS HAND WITH HERS, SHE PUSHED IT ASIDE AS SHE MOVED IN A sitting position. The sheet slid off her body, revealing that odious gown that covered every inch of her—every inch he couldn't see.

She was all prim and proper, looking at him as if she couldn't care less about him.

And *that* pissed the hell out of him.

But he reined it in. He kept a tight leash on all those explosive emotions she awoke inside him. After all, he had a plan—one he'd studied in depth for.

"Why are you here, Michele? Why are you *really* here?" she demanded, her words dripping with skepticism.

"Why do you think I'm here, pet?"

"I told you not to call me that anymore."

"Why? You liked it before. You *loved* it."

She shook her head.

"*You* wanted me to love it. I never did."

He frowned.

Seeing his expression, she snorted.

"I should have seen it from the beginning, but I was too dumb, wasn't I? I can count on one hand the times you called me by my name."

"That's not true," he interrupted.

"Of course it's true," she rolled her eyes. "From the beginning you called me pet to dissociate. Because I was never human to you, was I? I was never anything but an object you could use and abuse," she threw the words at him. Yet her tone remained even. She didn't scream, she didn't raise her voice. She handed him every word like an observation.

An *erroneous* observation.

He pursed his lips. His pet was young. She didn't know better. But he would enlighten her and show her that what had happened between them was just a momentary slip.

"Of course you were human to me," he smiled. "Would you prefer it if I called you by your name? I could do that. But I thought you loved having a term of endearment. Something I used only with you," he added in a smooth voice.

"Only with me?" she faltered for a moment, blinking.

"Only with you," he confirmed, taking advantage of the opening to move closer. "Do you think I would ever use such an intimate term with anyone else?"

She continued to blink, and he realized he'd confused her. Good. That was the first step.

"Venezia," he said her name, *felt* her name on his tongue for the first time. "Zia," he then amended, calling her by her nickname—another way to show intimacy. If that was what she wanted, he would give it to her.

But for him she would always be pet—only ever pet.

Her eyes flickered with a foreign emotion as she raised her gaze to meet his.

In one second he was at the edge of the bed, his palm cupping her cheek as his thumb brushed over her lower lip in a tender gesture.

Yes, this was it. He was doing everything as he'd planned. He was being nice, gentle—*soft*. He was taking his time instead of taking what he truly wanted.

His words seemed to render her speechless, so he took advantage of her silence to continue, beguile her some more with his rehearsed words.

"You're the only woman for me, my sweeting. I thought you realized that. I've never laid a finger on another. Never," he told her emphatically, the words ringing true *because* they were true—regardless of Michele's aim in using them.

"You... haven't?" she wet her lips, regarding him with apprehension.

More emotion seemed to enter her features by the moment and he relished the sight of it—the sight of her.

"You're the only one," he confirmed, bringing her closer to him.

To his surprise, she didn't put up a fight as she shuffled on her knees to the edge of the bed. He held her tenderly, his palms fitted to her cheeks as he

brought his face to hers, closing his eyes and breathing her in.

He recognized the precariousness of the moment so he did everything slowly—almost as if he was a hunter in a meadow, lying in wait for his much awaited deer prize.

He brought his nose to her nose, bumping them close together as he tested the waters. When she didn't object to that type of touch, he got a little more daring as he skimmed his lips on top of hers.

It was pure torture for him to go so slow. It was a first for him to be so careful with her. Not even with their first kiss had he put in so much effort—so much restraint.

Back then, he'd been equally excited and terrified at the prospect of her touch, so he'd done a mess of things.

Now, he knew exactly what he wanted—how he wanted it.

He parted his lips over hers, and she did the same.

Her hands were by her side, unmoving. But she was reacting to his kiss. She was *giving in* to him.

Glee erupted in his chest. All his planning was paying off. He was already halfway there. And as he kissed her more deeply, tasting her and bringing her closer to his body—fitting her soft curves to his hard muscles—he knew his patience would pay off.

Weeks of cursed celibacy would come an end on that night and she would give him her sweetness—maybe sweeter than it had ever been.

He trailed his mouth down her jaw, sucking at her skin as he went lower, to her neck where there was still a slight discoloration from the last time he'd marked her, just as there was one on his skin from where *she* had marked him.

Her breathing intensified as he gave the skin a slow lick, tending to it almost like an apology for the way he'd previously behaved.

Yet it wasn't enough.

He felt such hunger for her that his restraint was sorely tested, second after second.

His hands went lower, too, tracing the contours of her ribcage without touching her breasts—not yet.

Leaning back for a second, he noted her entranced look and the way the slightest moan escaped her puffy, well-kissed lips.

A wolfish smile appeared on his face. That was all the confirmation he needed.

It had required a little more convincing than he was used to, but it hadn't been too hard.

Gaining more confidence that she wouldn't deny him anymore, he lifted the hem of her nightgown, sneaking a hand between her legs and tracing the contour of her panties, right over the top of her mound.

"No," she suddenly said, her hands making contact with his shoulders as she pushed him off her. "No," she shook her head, watching him warily, emotion battling in those clear eyes of hers.

"What do you mean no, pet?" he grit out, his tone harsh before he realized his mistake and he softened his words. "You're my woman, Zia," he amended, using her name as she seemed to prefer. "Mine," he forced a smile on his lips, though he felt least like smiling in that moment.

He was hard, and far too close to the edge.

One kiss was all it took for him to lose his mind and for her to wreak havoc on his goddamn body.

"I won't sleep with you," she said, her words holding a steely quality to them.

He blinked, flabbergasted. It took everything in him not to burst out and demand what she meant by that. Instead, he forced himself to be calm.

"What do you mean you won't sleep with me?"

She lifted her head, pushing her chin up as he'd seen her do before. It was something that both beguiled and confused him.

How could someone so meek come across so strong? So self-assured?

"Do you think I would ever let you have me again after what you did?" she asked in a quiet, unflinching voice.

He frowned.

"So I said a few nasty things," he shrugged. "You got me at a bad time, pet. But now I've reflected and I'm ready to make amends," he gave her his signature smile.

She narrowed her eyes at him, not saying anything for a moment.

A moment in which he let his greedy eyes roam over her.

Fuck but even in that simple white gown that reached her neck she looked delectable. Her hair was flowing wildly over her back, her skin illuminated by the moonlight.

She looked like the apparition that always haunted him. Like a goddamn fairy come to mock him for his human failings.

And he wanted her.

Now more than ever, he wanted her. The more she resisted, the more she compelled him.

Just like the time she'd bit him, taking a chunk of flesh out of his neck, he simply felt awe-struck by her and her countenance.

And by Hades, he would have her. If he did nothing else, he would have her.

"A few nasty things?" she repeated, her lips stretching into a cruel smile. "Is that what you call it?"

"And what would you call it," he shot back, growing more annoyed by the second.

"Murder," she stated. "Infanticide. That's what you did, Michele. You killed your own child in cold blood and you killed my heart with it."

For a second, he felt at a loss for words as he processed what she was saying. Then, almost like a haze covering his mind, his brain went off at the accusation as it hit one spot deep within him—one *deep* spot that he'd always hid from the world.

"Infanticide? Did you have to look that up in a dictionary?" he drawled mockingly.

She didn't react.

"How long did it take you to read the word?" he smiled. "Since you know, you seem to have a problem with that."

She was quick to mask her expression of hurt, but he saw it, nonetheless.

"Go ahead," she nodded. "Insult me," she said, stunning him with her sudden stance. "Yes, I am dumb. I am stupid and anything else you can think of. I am all of those things, I admit. And I'm the stupidest of all for having fallen for you. For buying your lies. For ignoring every single red flag when you were waving them right in my face. So go ahead. You can call me anything you like. But that doesn't change the fact that you," she raised her voice a notch, poking her finger at his chest, "are a murderer. The *worst* kind of murderer. You took my choice away from me. You took *everything!*"

Her words filtered through his brain. He could barely hear her. He could only see the woman in front of him like he'd never seen her before.

It thrilled him. It excited him. It fucking *enraged* him.

"Do you know how they do it?" she continued, coming closer. This time it was her who took the initiative, bringing her face next to his as she braved his gaze with hers, a smug smile playing at her lips. "They use a forceps and they pull the baby's body apart. Limb by limb. Body part by body part until

there's nothing left," she told him in a cold, chilling voice. "And you did that. You ripped your own child apart," she accused, raising a brow as if she dared him to object—to defend himself when there was nothing to defend. "I bled for days. But you don't care about that, don't you? For you I'm just a hole to stick your dick inside, nothing more."

"Careful, pet. Careful," he warned quietly, his fists clenched by his sides as he barely controlled himself.

She was making a mockery of his self-control and everything he'd set to achieve that night.

She was making a mockery of him. Period. Because no matter how much he held himself still—how much he tried to seem indifferent—her words hit him like a fucking atomic bomb, ripping his insides apart just as he imagined those of their child had been. Now, he had the mental image. And by God... He didn't think he'd ever get rid of it.

A twitch appeared in his jaw as he met gaze dead on, hiding underneath every reaction that sought to get out.

"Careful what? Easy for you to speak," she laughed, a dry, ironic laugh that grated on his ears. "I've dreamed of him," she continued in a low voice. "He came for me, and you know what he told me?" A slight smile played at her lips.

He didn't answer, didn't say anything.

"He thanked me," she shook her head, her smile growing bigger. "He thanked me for not letting him be born to a father like you."

At that, he finally blinked—a small reaction, but one, nonetheless.

That one sentence struck him so hard, he had to hold himself still to not physically reel from the force of it.

"And that's why, Michele Guerra," she continued to jab her finger at his chest, her eyes never leaving his. "You're dead to me."

Foreign emotions piled up inside of him until he didn't know what to do anymore—until he didn't know how to react. Pushing her off him, he stepped away, voices crowding his mind, echoes of pain—so much fucking pain.

Yet he didn't let it show.

He kept the same blank expression as he took a step back, even though beneath it all, a war was raging. The worst war of all—the war for his soul.

She was right, one part of him said. She was right to hate him for everything he'd done just as much as he hated himself.

But there was also that other part—the one always in charge; the only one

he'd nurtured so far. And that part told him that she was *wrong*.

He'd done as he'd seen fit, following his plans and keeping himself on track for his revenge. He'd kept himself true to his purpose and that meant that every action he took, as long as it aided his cause, was the right one.

As such, he could never be anything but right. And by default she was wrong.

His mind reeled. It clamored and it rebelled. His entire fucking being bled, yet there were no wounds to show for it.

There was only noise. And pain. And everything he should *not* be feeling.

He swiveled, his eyes making contact with hers.

She was sitting on her bed, her white cotton nightgown riding up her thighs.

Her face was devoid of emotion—of anything. He remembered the way she'd gaze at him before, as if he could do no wrong—as if he could pluck the moon and the stars and give them to her on a plate. And as he superimposed the two images, he couldn't find his pet anymore.

He could only see indifference.

And that triggered something within him, something so monstrous he couldn't leash anymore. He would have her back—her emotion, her adoration, her everything.

Or nothing at all.

So he let go.

He. Let. Go.

In two steps he was in front of her, his hand on her throat.

"Liar," he spat out. "You're a fucking liar, pet."

Slowly, she blinked, a bored expression on her face—one of utter indifference that was cutting him to the bone.

"You love me," he continued, the words purely for his benefit as he wanted to assure himself of her feelings. "You *love* me," he emphasized.

She'd kept the pendant. She'd been gazing at it daily. Of course she must still love him.

But she only laughed.

"You're insane," she shook her head.

"I'm insane?" he asked, his nostrils flaring as he brought her face closer, his hand tightening over the tender skin of her neck. "I'm insane, pet? I'll fucking show you insane," he said as he settled between her legs, pulling her to the edge of the bed.

With his other hand, he pushed her gown up, bunching it around her waist, his fingers on the band of her underwear.

His pet then reacted, *some* type of emotion filling her features.

Finally!

He would get a reaction out of her if it was the last thing he did. He would prove to her that indifference was the last thing she felt for him. That she loved him. That she fucking *adored* him.

"Don't," a whispered sound escaped her. Her eyes were wide and big as she regarded him with trepidation.

He only gave her a lopsided smile.

"Tell me again, pet. Tell me how much you hate me. Tell me I'm dead to you," he murmured in a deadly tone.

She grabbed his hand with hers, trying to wrench it away from her panties. But it was in vain as he slapped it aside before pulling on the band—so hard the material snapped in two.

The sound echoed in the darkness of the night, her expression growing to one of terror as she regarded him.

"Don't do this, Michele," she whispered again.

"Don't do what, pet? You'll have to be more specific," he smirked as he removed the last bit of material of her underwear until that part of her body was completely bared to him.

"Don't touch me. Don't...." her voice broke. Though she was still looking at him, her eyes clear and unyielding, her voice broke.

"Don't what?" he mocked, still holding on to her neck as he used his other hand to undo his pants. "Come on. Tell me," he chuckled. "You were so brave a second ago, telling me how much you hate me. So come on, do tell."

"Don't hurt me," she said in a quiet voice, her expressive eyes suddenly down-turned.

Those words... He faltered.

For a moment he faltered.

There was something in her gaze, something he was seeing but wasn't quite understanding. Something that momentarily stunned him, but that would haunt him for days—*years*—to come.

"Tell me you love me," he demanded, his hold softening. "Tell me how much you love me, pet," he murmured the words in a last attempt to show her he could be gentle—that he could be tender. His hand curled around her nape as he held her to him, cradling her close and inhaling her scent.

"It doesn't have to be like this," he cooed in her ear. "Tell me how much you love me pet," he coaxed gently.

In his mind, this was the perfect opportunity for his pet to take her mask of indifference off and confess she was as far gone as he was—that she wanted him as much as he wanted her. This was the moment he'd awaited all along when he'd look at her again and see that adoration dripping from her gaze.

Excitement thumped in his blood, his brain fogging with too much desire for him to think rationally. He could only envision the moment his pet would welcome him in her open arms, in her body—in her fucking soul.

He was prepared for it, just as he was anxious for it.

Trailing his lips all over her cheek, he prolonged the anticipation by peppering her with sweet, soft kisses. One hand caressed her thigh as he snuggled deeper between her legs while the other gripped his hard cock as he rubbed it against her center in agonizingly slow motions.

He was doing everything in his power to show her he'd make it good for her, that he'd put in the effort—that he'd be gentle. So he continued to touch her softly, even though she was barely responsive.

And when he reached her lips, he laid a quick peck on her mouth before drawing back, ready to see the change in her features—ready to receive those words that had the power to save him.

Instead, the image stunned him.

She was utterly still, her icy glare cutting him on the inside.

"I don't love you," she enunciated clearly, her expression stoic, hard, *apathetic*. "I should have *never* loved you," she declared, with one sentence shattering what was left of his heart, of his control, of everything that held him together.

In the beginning, there was only shock. But in a matter of seconds his armor was up.

Used to a life of disappointment, Michele's defense mechanisms had become one with himself. And she'd just thrown at him the biggest blow, so of course he'd erect the thickest shield.

Before, she'd made him feel human. Now, she took away the one thing that defined him as such.

His lips twitched. Slowly, they spread into a dangerous smile.

"Too bad, pet," he drawled. "Too, too bad," he rasped before he savagely thrust into her.

She gasped, her lips forming an o as her eyes widened, her hands coming on his shoulders to push him off. Yet before she could do that, something switched inside of her—in her expression, in her entire countenance.

Her hands fell to the sides, just as her body became limp in his arms.

Cupping her ass, his fingers dug into her flesh as he brought her down his length until he was buried to the hilt inside of her.

She didn't make a sound.

She didn't cry. She didn't yell. She didn't say anything. She didn't even fucking whimper in pain.

Her expression was just as before. Indifferent. Apathetic.

Nonexistent.

It was so bad even the feel of being inside of her didn't help—though he'd been anticipating it for weeks. Suddenly, there was no joy to be had in *anything*.

And so he could have stopped. He could have backed away and left her alone.

But he didn't. He was too far gone to do anything but march forward.

"You're mine, pet," he sneered. "Hate me, abhor me, fucking despise me," he told her in a harsh voice, an echo of those long ago words. "But that doesn't change the fact that you're mine, and you'll continue to be mine."

Were those proclamations for his benefit, or hers?

But to show her that he didn't lose—that he couldn't possibly *ever* lose—he didn't stop.

He started moving in and out of her, increasing his speed and the power of his thrusts.

She was hot, but lifeless.

She warmed his cock but she killed his heart.

And that only made him angrier—more out of control.

"Hate me," he demanded. At this point he'd take anything, but at least he wanted something—*some* emotion.

She only looked at him as if she wasn't seeing him. Leaning back on her bed, she let him use her, not even bothering to put up a fight.

The only indication that something was happening were the inevitable tears that clung to her lashes and his incoherent grunts as he sought to punish her with his cock.

Yet the more he saw her inactive like that, *unresponsive*, the more his own rage increased, as did the power of his assault.

He fucked into her all the pain in his heart. In return, she only gave him more pain, more...heartache.

"Damn you," he shouted, grabbing her by the neck and shaking her. "Damn you," he repeated, both hands wrapped around her lovely throat as he continued to thrust into her.

Still, she said nothing.

"You're mine. You hear me, pet? You fucking hear me, Venezia?"

The last question made her blink. But she didn't respond.

"Fuck," he cursed in frustration.

No matter how hard, how rough or how wild he took her, he couldn't get any response out of her.

Nothing.

It was like he was truly fucking a lifeless doll.

A couple more thrusts and he came inside of her, yet the end was more bitter than he'd ever experienced.

So bitter, in fact, that he felt bile rise up his throat, threatening to make him ill.

He couldn't look at her anymore. He couldn't stand to *touch* her anymore.

On a harsh breath, he flung her from him, withdrawing from her body and zipping his pants back up.

Half-turning, he didn't trust himself to gaze into her eyes again. So he merely left her with one last warning.

"This isn't over, pet," he said in a barely controlled voice. "I'm coming for you. And when I do...I'm never letting you go."

The bedroom door closed with a thud.



VENEZIA STARTED COUNTING IN A LOW, TREMOLOS VOICE.

One. Two. Three...

Only when she reached one hundred did she allow herself to move, swinging herself off the bed and falling to her knees as her legs gave out.

A harsh breath escaped her.

Something was wrong. Something was awfully, awfully wrong.

With strength she didn't know she possessed, she managed to get herself

to the bathroom, flicking the light on and squinting as her eyes accommodated to the sudden brightness.

Closing the door behind her, she locked it for good measure before she gripped the hem of her dress, taking it off and flinging it to the side, avoiding to look at the red stained material.

Something was wrong...

There was pain. So much pain radiating from between her legs that she didn't know how she had withstood it all—how she hadn't started bawling the moment he'd entered her, almost tearing her apart in the process. She'd been entirely dry when he'd breached her, despite the lingering sweetness of that first kiss. Factor in Michele's size and his daunting girth and he'd simply split her in two.

Every thrust after the first had been more and more vicious, the pain reaching such a crescendo she thought she'd almost pass out from it.

But she hadn't. She couldn't allow herself to do that and show weakness. Because that was the only way to deal with Michele.

To *not* show weakness.

She limped to the toilet, taking a seat as she tried to calm herself down. With a trembling hand, she made the courage to reach between her legs, touching the tender spot and winching out loud at the sensation.

By God, she felt like howling in pain.

Yet just as she suspected, something was wrong.

Her entire palm came out covered in blood, and at the sight of it, she couldn't hold it in anymore. She started sobbing, broken cries echoing in the bathroom.

Her lashes misted with tears, she managed to roll some toilet paper and soak some of the blood, even though every little touch was extremely painful.

Yet even as she wiped once, twice, the blood still wouldn't stop.

Too scared to do anything else, she jumped in the shower, washing herself thoroughly in an attempt to remove every little trace of him from her body.

But it was all in vain.

He was everywhere.

On her body. Inside her body. Inside her mind. Haunting her thoughts.

He was absolutely everywhere.

Including part of the baby she was still carrying. That only made her terror increase tenfold as she wondered if his brutal treatment of her would

have had any bearing on the baby.

She was sure he'd hurt her down there given the throbbing pain and the bleeding that wouldn't stop. But was that enough to hurt the baby, too?

She didn't know...

In that moment she wished she was smarter, more knowledgeable. Maybe then she would know how to deal with this.

Maybe then...

Maybe then she would have never fallen for someone as vile as Michele.

But she wasn't. And now she was dealing with the dire consequences.

THIRTEEN

MICHELE

MICHELE WOKE UP WITH A CRUSHING PAIN IN HIS HEAD, THE IMAGES OF THE night before flooding his brain as did the soreness in his body.

Opening his eyes, he came face to face with the wreckage he'd made of his room—the busted screens, the broken furniture and shattered glass.

He'd destroyed his entire bedroom.

Andreas, bless his heart, had seen his dark mood and had taken Lovely to sleep with him for the night, leaving Michele to drown himself in the bottom of a bottle—purely at the mercy of his guilty conscience.

The first thing he'd noted when he'd arrived back home had been the blood.

The dried blood on his cock.

There had been so much of it that he'd felt himself blanch, his entire body rebelling at the thought that he'd done that—that he'd hurt her like that.

But then he'd looked at his video feed. Right in time to spot his pet in her bathroom, blood running down her thighs as she tried to clean herself up—blood that simply wouldn't stop. She could barely tend to herself as broken sobs erupted in the air. Sounds that stabbed him so deep, they made him want to fucking end himself on the spot.

In his frenzy to get a reaction from her, he hadn't realized something was wrong. He'd been pissed about her indifference, but he'd never intended to hurt her like that.

He'd been rough before with her, but never to that extreme, and that only made him spiral further into self-loathing.

He'd replayed everything that had happened in his head, but even that was skewed as his emotions had clouded all attempts at rationality, the moments

hazy, untrustworthy. So in an attempt to get some clarity he'd played back the footage from when he'd been in her room, watching all his movements as he'd interacted with her.

And that was when he'd seen it.

The monster in him.

The true monster that had...

Closing his eyes, he'd tried to regulate his breathing, panic taking hold of him as never before.

He'd seen everything for what it truly was.

Rape.

He'd...raped her.

Maybe before he could have excused his behavior in light of her love. Because she was so enamored of him, she would agree to everything he wanted—no matter how rough, or how degrading. Since she was in love with him, her consent automatically applied to every dubious situation.

It was a loophole, but one he'd used to the fullest to justify his treatment of her—because back then she was just a means to an end. Just someone to use and discard.

Not anymore.

He'd already decided he was going to keep her—make her his forever.

Then how could he do that to her? How the hell could he...

He'd seen her struggles to clean and patch herself up, the loud cries of pain and earth-shattering sobs.

He'd seen and felt her pain as his own.

Because he, himself, had been on the receiving end of that. And he knew exactly how it felt.

The moment he'd made that connection in his mind, he'd spiraled out of control.

The rest of the night was a blur as he'd sought to physically hurt himself like he'd done to her. He'd cut at his body, slow, precise cuts that had resulted in the greatest amount of pain.

He'd watch her cry her heart out and he'd hurt himself even more for the bastard he was.

Because at this rate... He was never going to get her love back.

And that was the biggest problem of all.

Right at that moment, Michele felt that her love was the most essential thing to his survival. The only thing he needed to go on. And for as long as

she withheld it from him, he was going to suffer unlike he'd ever suffered before.

As the fog from his mind dissipated, he dialed Andreas and told him to deal with the wreckage in his room before he disappeared for the day.

He postponed all his meetings, all his business appointments and he went out into the world.

Since he'd committed to his mission, he'd killed any feelings of guilt he might have had. He'd stripped everything from himself until only anger remained—raw, bleeding but calculated anger. Enough to ensure that his end goal would be achieved while also keeping his wits about him.

In that moment he felt thrust into the past—into a whirlpool of emotions that were as foreign as they were consuming.

The anger was there, but it was at himself, as was the guilt.

And Michele...couldn't deal.

For the entire morning, he wandered about, aimlessly walking the city streets in an attempt to get some mental clarity, yet there was none to gain.

He'd fucked up. And he'd done it in such an uncharacteristic way that he still felt her sobs of pain engrained in his very being.

And though he tried to deal with it in his customary rational manner, he found he could not. There were questions, but the answers did not satisfy him.

Nothing did.

So instead, he did the only thing he could.

He shut down. He completely shut down, killing every bit of emotion within him so he wouldn't have to deal with the pain anymore—so he wouldn't lose himself.

Yet even that one safety mechanism that would have worked in the past seemed flimsy this time. It allowed him to shut out the world. But he couldn't shut *her* out.

She was still there, in his mind, in his heart, in his goddamn blood.

He could still hear her sobs.

He could still see her tears.

And the blood... By Hades, the blood was the worst.

Before he knew what he was doing—for the real Michele would never do something as idiotic—he headed to a supermarket, buying everything he could think was necessary.

He filled his cart with anything that caught his eye.

Pain killers, pads, ointments, vitamins, teas. He also added a various selection of chocolates and things that might sweeten the deal. To make things even better, he also bought a few pairs of underwear to replace the ones he'd torn.

With an entire bag of goodies and the clock that was ticking against him with Vlad and Assisi's arrival, Michele hurried to the Kuznetsov house, doing his best to by pass security with a huge bag in tow.

But he wasn't deterred.

It was as if his entire focus had switched, only one goal remaining in mind.

His pet.

Not to mention the fact that it was close to a suicide mission. He was heading into an enemy's house in broad daylight.

Rational Michele would have been completely opposed it—mocking the idea itself.

This Michele didn't know how to get there faster.

Deep down, he knew he was too far gone. The question of losing himself wasn't so much a question anymore but a certainty.

He *had* lost himself. But not in the manner he'd expected.

Instead, he'd lost everything but the sight of her.

Somehow, he managed to elude the guards and make his way to his pet's room. As he slowly pushed it open, it was to find it empty.

Pursing his lips, he tried to swallow his disappointment. Instead, he told himself it was for the best. He'd leave the items he'd bought on her desk and he'd take his leave before he did more damage, before he got himself killed for good—literally *and* figuratively. Odd how for someone who'd always chased death here he was, of a mind to avoid it—determined to *not* succumb to it. And revenge was the last thing on his mind as he honed in on the state of his mortality.

Michele barely realized how in the span of twenty-four hours he'd thought about his revenge exactly once—when he'd canceled his meetings. And even that, in the most absentminded fashion.

At that moment, he'd only one purpose, and it had nothing to do with the past and everything to do with the future.

Arranging the bag on the desk, he lingered for a moment as he inhaled the scent that was so characteristically hers. It was so comforting, he felt like never leaving the place.

But leave he must.

With a resigned sigh, he turned to leave just the bathroom door opened.

And there she was.

He blinked, his eyes straining to accommodate to the sight before him. She was, quite possibly, more beautiful than he remembered. Which was absolute madness since he'd been watching her closely for weeks now. He knew every little inch of her skin better than he knew his own.

Yet in that moment, as she appeared before him, he was *struck*.

Simply, utterly struck.

Her mahogany hair flowed down her back, a contrast to her beautiful pale skin. She wore no make-up, but she'd never need it. Her face was the type to make poets weep with the beauty of the ineffable and sculptors obsess over angles of perfection.

Certainly, to his trained eye she was the embodiment of pathos—of that driving force that connected him with his inner artist.

She was dressed in a pair of oversized sweatpants and an equally large shirt she'd tucked in the band of the pants.

Her eyes widened as she took him in, an initial expression of terror giving way to a neutral one.

But not before Michele spotted everything—everything he'd done with his own damn hand.

"What are you doing here?" she asked in a small, apprehensive voice.

"I brought you something," he mumbled, doing his best to remain his confident, assertive self though he wanted nothing more than apologize for the brute he'd been.

Yet that was the issue.

Michele never apologized.

"Why?" She took a step forward, leaning to look inside the bag. Her brows drew up in surprise as she spotted the contents.

"Because I hurt you when you asked me not to," he said, slowly. It was completely antithetical to himself to recognize he'd been wrong—at any point.

He only knew how to stride forward regardless of the casualties or the victims of his revenge. Never once had he given them any thought as long as his purpose would be achieved.

And so he'd fulfilled the first step of his plan. He'd annihilated the Lastra family—the man guilty for Nicolo and Cami's death.

He should have moved on.

Once his plan had been accomplished, he should have moved on to the next stage, as he'd previously planned. He should have *never* looked back.

Yet there she was.

The one person who made him doubt himself when he'd thought himself most secure.

The one person who'd hurt him more with one tear than he'd hurt at the hands of his abusers.

She blinked at him, his words clearly surprising her just as they surprised him.

"You... You admit that you hurt me?" she asked in a low voice.

He nodded.

"I lost control," he simply said.

It wasn't an apology—he wasn't quite there yet. It wasn't an explanation—Michele would *never* explain himself. But it was his only way of taking the blame onto himself.

"And so you brought me this," she continued, pointing to the bag filled with every little random thing he'd thought she might need—that she might like.

He nodded.

"Next time it won't be like that again," he assured her. "I'll control myself better. I'll be more gentle," he gave her the semblance of a smile.

She opened her mouth and closed it a few times as she stared at him—almost as if she were looking at a madman.

"There won't be a next time, Michele. I meant it. I don't want you in my life—now or ever. I don't want *you*," she added emphatically, giving him the direct cut both with her words and with her gaze.

"And I told you," he started, feeling himself grow impatient again—out of control. A deep breath and he attempted to stabilize himself. He wouldn't behave like an animal again but he also wouldn't allow his pet to have the misconception that he would *ever* leave her alone. "You're my woman, Zia," he said as he took a step forward. "And I'm not letting you go."

He didn't raise his voice. He merely informed her of the situation as he would someone about the universal state of black and white—there was no debate about it.

"I may have overreacted last night, but I won't do it again," he told her, half of it for his benefit.

"No," she shook her head, bringing her arms over her chest and assuming a combative stance. "And if you don't leave me alone, I'll tell my sister. I'll tell Vlad. I'll tell *everyone*."

He was surprised at her statement, but he was also equally intrigued.

Taking another step towards her, he merely smiled.

"Why haven't you done it until now?" he drawled in a smooth tone. "You could have told them from the beginning. So why haven't you?"

Her lips trembled, a sign that there was something *more* to that story.

"Do tell. Why haven't you told anyone?" he asked, his lips stretched into a smug smile as he caged her in. Her back hit the edge of the table as her hands came to rest on his pectorals for support. She quickly realized her mistake and sought to remove them, but he didn't let her.

He brought his own hands on top of hers, holding them captive.

"Why didn't you tell them that it was *I* who took your virginity, who fucked you in every way imaginable, who filmed you on your knees? Why?"

She blinked, bringing her eyes to him.

"You know why," she whispered.

"Why?"

"Because we're related. Because you're my..."

She couldn't even bring herself to say it. A blush marred her cheeks as she averted her gaze, embarrassed.

"So what? Do you think I care?" Michele asked, tipping her chin up with one finger. "Do you think I care if we're related, Zia?"

She didn't answer, merely wetting her lips as she looked deep in his eyes.

"It wouldn't have mattered. Were you my blood sister, and I would still have you," he told her unequivocally. "Were you my twin, my fucking double. Even then, I would still have you."

"Why?" she inquired in a soft voice. "Why would you go so far when you only wanted to hurt me—my family... From the beginning, I was nothing but a tool for you. Why would you..."

"Because you're my fucking delirium, Zia. You're my madness, my greatest folly. But you're mine, sweet thing. You're *only* mine," he told her huskily, letting his finger roam around her perfectly sculpted jaw. "You belong to me like no woman ever belonged to a man—utterly and perfectly. You know it. Deep down, you know it," he said as he brought his other hand to her chest, trailing it down to her heart and feeling the uneven beats—the way it beat for *him*.

"It's not right," she shook her head. "Nothing about us is right, Michele. You only know how to take, take, take. Only ever take. And the fact that you don't realize what you did to me, *beyond* last night, is the issue. You didn't just hurt me. You...crushed me," her voice broke on a whisper.

"Then let me put you back together," he murmured. "Let me gather each part of you I crushed and glue it back together."

He continued to look in her eyes, thinking he was getting somewhere—that he was getting to her.

But as she gave him a tight smile, he saw the truth reflected in her features.

A truth he didn't want to recognize.

He didn't let her reply as he moved back, putting distance between them before he did something worse again—before he *hurt* her again.

"I'll be back," he said, exiting her room and not looking back.

And he would.

He would be back until he got through to her.

Until she told him she loved him again.

He wouldn't rest until he heard those words out of her mouth again.

Then, and only then, would he finally be able to be himself again.

That night, Michele went into the woods, using his bare fingers to unearth the necklace, just as he'd buried it. And laying it against his skin, he understood its meaning for the first time.

FOURTEEN

RAFAELO

PULLING THE SUITCASES OUT OF THE STORAGE, I MAKE A MENTAL NOTE OF everything we need to take with us. The faster we're out of here the better. I don't want anything to potentially upset Noelle—not now, nor ever.

My heart is still beating loudly in my chest, the anxiety from before still marring my current happiness.

For fuck's sake, how could I ever forget the fact that one wrong choice could have taken my pretty girl from me? And I wouldn't have been able to blame no one but myself since I would have killed her with my own damn hands.

Releasing a weary sigh, I plop myself on the edge of the bed, bringing my hands to my temples as I attempt to alleviate some of the pressure inside.

Noelle wants me to drop the what-ifs, but I've lived my entire life under the harsh shadow of what could have been that it's already second nature for my mind to stray into that territory.

I'm haunted.

I'm a fucking haunted man.

And it's not just *one* event that has me on edge. It's the sum of everything. All my fucking mistakes that will one day come back and hit me right in the chest.

But to think that she was so close to death...

I can't fucking contemplate that. Not now that I've found her—that everything seems to fit into place.

I may have severe memory gaps from my time in captivity and just as many illusions that I question on a daily basis, but one thing is for sure.

How she makes me feel. How she *always* made me feel.

Maybe it's silly to equate what I feel for her now and what we've been through with predestination. But that's exactly how it feels.

From the beginning there had been something. A spark of something just below the surface. But I'd been too stuck in my hate and those scenarios I'd built up over the years to see anything but what *I* had wanted to see.

Isn't that always the issue?

For someone who's always prided himself on logic and tangible facts, I inadvertently get too caught up in my feelings. To a degree, maybe this is all the result of years of conditioning, of pushing all useless emotions to the side so I could be what everyone wanted me to be—the perfect son, the perfect heir.

Just...perfect.

Too much time spent bottling up my feelings and I'm now left with a mess that makes no sense—with too much feeling that threatens to push me to the edge.

Because that's the truth.

I'm having a hard time dealing with a lifetime of pent-up emotion—of guilt, love, regret and despair.

I've always been good at compartmentalizing. That meant that I only focused on one thing at a time—one sole goal.

At first, that goal was to keep my parents happy. My love for them led me to push down who I'd wanted to be in favor of who *they* wanted me to be, because the two could *never* co-exist.

Later, I'd drowned in my guilt, eschewing life in favor of perpetual penance for what I'd done to my brother.

That all came to a culmination in my hate for everyone who'd had a hand in the horrors I lived in captivity, swearing to make them all pay.

My tunnel vision had never allowed me to see things in anything but superlative.

Love. Regret. Hate. Everything to the extreme.

But there is one startling realization. It's never been for myself.

All my life I've lived for the wrong reasons. Always for someone else—always to please someone else.

There are only a handful of times when I'd stepped up, trying to do something for myself.

The first had ended in disaster when my only friend had ghosted me, making me spiral into a pretty bad depression. It had been one of the few

times I'd opened myself to the outside world only to be thoroughly disappointed in the process.

But then there's Noelle. The one person in my life who always gave more than took, who never expected me to be anything but who I am. Loving her didn't negate any part of myself. It was never a burden. Only a reward.

If anything, it unlocked a part of myself I long thought lost—the one that could still dream.

Slowly, with her soothing presence, I'm starting to find myself again. Yet the drawback is that all the things I've kept buried under the surface are waiting to erupt.

"Raf," her voice wakes me from my reverie, and a smile tugs at my lips as I see her enter the room.

Noelle. My wife. The same woman who tended my wounds when I was beaten beyond recognition. The one who smuggled me food, water and medicine. The voice that kept me alive when hell threatened to overtake me.

It's her. It's always been her.

And seeing that necklace around her neck confirms that it wasn't a dream.

It's real, and she's here.

"What did Cisco want?" I clear my throat, my voice clogged with emotion as my eyes take her in, trying to equate her with what I know of past her and everything that we've been through.

"You know my brother," she shrugs, coming to rest by my side. "He wanted to make his position clear, as always. I'm telling you, the man is a control freak," she rolls her eyes.

My hand reaches for hers, squeezing tightly.

"Underneath all that cold demeanor, he does care about you. I'll be the first to admit that he has a strange way of showing it, but I don't think he's wholly made of ice."

"You're right," she nods. "I know he cares about me. But he can be an asshole of the biggest proportions."

"Good thing we're moving then," I wink at her.

She takes in the empty suitcases I've laid around before her questioning gaze finds mine.

"I didn't think you were serious."

"I've been thinking about this for a long time. There are a lot of things I've been working on behind the scenes, and it's all so you can be yourself. And happy. That's all I ever want."

Her face lights up, her beauty making me suck a sharp breath in. I don't think I'll ever get used to the way I react to her—the way one smile from her makes me the happiest bastard alive.

"Wow, I don't know what to say," she breathes out in wonder.

"You don't have to say anything now," I reply as I get up, swooping her in my arms and taking her to the bathroom. "But first I'm pampering you and then we can see about the next steps," I declare confidently.

And this is exactly where the difference lays with Noelle. I want nothing more than to spoil and care for her, but that desire isn't borne out of duty, expectation, or anything other than this instinctual urge to be there for her at every step of the way.

Her happiness is *my* happiness. Dedicating my life to her could never be a hardship. Not when it's for her as much as it is for myself. In giving her all of me, I'm taking all of her in return. And that ensures I'm *never* empty.

That's the missing ingredient I've been searching for my whole life. Giving but without being drained—without feeling sapped of my entire essence to the point that I'm just a shell of a person.

She makes me whole. She makes me feel like myself—like I'm finally finding out the true meaning of that word.

Closing the door with my foot, I set her down, starting the water in the tub and adding a mix of oils and salts before topping it with a cherry-scented bath bomb—her favorite.

All the while, she's watching by the side, an amused smile on her face.

And as I stake a step towards her, she instinctively raises her hands, knowing fully well what I intend to do.

Chuckling, I proceed to divest her of her dress before doing the same to my clothes. Together, we step inside the steaming water, making ourselves comfortable in the tub.

"I'm never going to tire of the sight of you like this," I sigh in satisfaction, my eyes greedily taking her in.

The water reaches the top of her breasts, emphasizing the swell of her tits while contrasting perfectly with the tone of her skin.

Her hair is wet around the tips and strewn over her shoulders. Yet just as I derive pleasure from having her like this before me, there's also the evidence of what happened—the bruises that are still fresh from those fucking electrical wands.

She sees me stare at the slight discoloration, and before I can say

anything, she moves, gliding through the water until she's face to face with me, her palms cupping my cheeks.

"Don't," she whispers.

"It's my fault," I shake my head, finally daring to bring my hands to her shoulders and trace the marks on her skin. "Fuck, pretty girl. You have no idea how much this hurts me."

"Nothing happened, Raf."

"*Everything* happened," I cut her off.

I need to get this off my chest, ease at least *some* of the pressure building inside of me. Otherwise I might go mad.

Her brows draw together in confusion as she simply regards me, waiting for me to speak.

"What Michele said," I take a deep breath. "It's mostly true. I did betray him. I did..." my throat clogs up with emotion as I remember those times in our lives. I'd seen him at his worst, and I'd still betrayed him. Does it matter that I thought I was doing the right thing? Do good intentions matter when the end result is disastrous?

So I tell her. I recount everything that happened in our childhood and *why* I did what I did, giving her an entire snapshot of my early life—of my most glaring flaws. The fact that I'd *wanted* to tell my parents about Antonio—I'd wanted to tell everyone so the bastard would pay. But just as we were about to tell everything, Antonio had pulled me aside and showed me evidence that would damn Michele even more—that would sentence him to death in the eyes of the famiglia. He knew that Michele wasn't Benedicto's biological son, and he was ready to reveal that to the entire world. This would have ensured that either Benedicto would have him killed to avoid being shamed, or other member of the famiglia would so an impostor would not gain control over it. It was a lose-lose situation, and one I could not afford to gamble with.

So I had to choose one option. To my great shame, I chose the one that would keep my brother alive, despite the fact that he would suffer for accusing Antonio of such a grave crime.

I tried to spare him, but I only damned him further.

"Raf," she blinks. "Do you hear yourself? You're blaming yourself for choosing the least harmful option—the *only* thing you could have done."

"No, he's right to hate me because I am guilty. I could have reached out to him. I could have..."

"You were fourteen!" she exclaims. "You were fourteen and you'd just

seen your brother get brutally raped. You did the best you could at the time. Michele would have been *killed* if it got out that he wasn't Benedicto's son. You know that now and you knew it back then."

"Maybe I could have done more," I sigh. I don't think I'll ever be at peace with how everything played out back then.

"I think you need to cut yourself some slack. Yes, you betrayed him," she puts it bluntly, and I can't help but wince at the word. "But you also spent years repenting for that one mistake."

"You're right. The issue is that I *can't* forgive myself. I don't know if I ever will be able to."

She nods pensively, a sad smile pulling at her lips.

"We all have things that can never be erased from our souls, Raf. We just have to learn to live with them. But not the way you've been doing until now. Not drowning yourself in guilt and bending over backwards to make up for your mistake. If there's no one to accept your apology, stop trying."

Her words echo in my brain, and to an extent I can recognize them as true. But it's much more than just that one wrong choice. Now that I'd heard Michele's side, more and more questions swirl in my mind.

"But that's just the thing. I did betray him. But I never spread any rumors about him at school. I would *never* do something so vile."

She purses her lips.

"Why did he seem so sure it was you then?"

"Probably because I was the only one who could have done it? But..." I groan out loud, frustrated at the dilemma. "I didn't do it," I repeat, hoping she won't think I would ever stoop so low.

"I believe you," she gently assures me. "But if you didn't do it, someone else did. Someone who *wanted* to cause a rift between the two of you."

"What are you trying to say?" I frown.

"There were only two people at the time who would have stood to gain from Michele hitting rock bottom," she says in a gentle tone. "Antonio and..."

"No... No, it couldn't have been her," I deny vehemently. "It couldn't have been my mother."

"Are you sure? Are you truly sure?"

The question feels like a dagger to the heart. Because I am *not* sure.

She *had* colluded with Antonio. She'd had knowledge about the abuse and hadn't done anything about it. But being passive doesn't make her an

assailant.

"I... I don't know," I reluctantly admit.

"Is there no way to find out? Because surely, if you explained to Michele everything that happened—*your* version of what happened—he would quit this senseless fight."

"I think my brother is past that," I mutter dryly. "But that doesn't mean I'm not concerned. Because if what he says it's true, then..." I swallow hard, unable to imagine the horrors Michele must have lived through.

"I know," she reaches for my hand, bringing it to her lips for a sweet kiss. "She was your mother, and you loved her. But you need to separate the two."

I nod painfully.

"We'll find a way to get to the bottom of that. Slowly," she offers me a brilliant smile, and I know she's trying to lift my spirits up.

But it doesn't work like that. Not when my brother's issue is a thing of the past. One that I've been grappling with all along but one that I can slowly put behind me.

The most glaring problem is the one in front of me.

The fact that I hurt her, too.

"This" I whisper, caressing her soft flesh with my thumb. "I caused this, Noelle. You asked me why everything is wrong. It's not just my past with Michele, or what happened in my childhood. It has everything to do with you and the fact that I hurt *you*."

"Raf..." her eyes go wide.

"Every little bit of pain you suffered. *I* caused it," I bring my fist to my chest, banging against my ribcage as my voice croaks with the intensity of my emotions.

"Oh my God, how can you believe that?" Her mouth parts in horror.

Water splashes around as she wraps her tiny hands around my fist, stopping me.

"How can you believe that, Raf?"

"I couldn't even answer the most important questions about you, Noelle," I admit the thing that's been eating at me the most.

How can I claim to love her so much but I don't know the deepest parts of her soul?

"Don't you dare go there, Rafaelo Guerra," her tone is unyielding, her gaze even more so. "Do you want the truth? It did hurt me. I was disappointed you couldn't get those questions right," she confirms my

greatest fears.

"But then I realized *why* you got them wrong. It's not because you don't know me, because, technically, the answers you gave were not wrong. It's because you answered them still thinking I am a whole person—one that has independent dreams, thoughts, desires—when that's not the case anymore."

"Noelle..."

"No, let me. If I were a normal person, then yes, those answers would be the correct ones—the only ones. But I'm not. Because there's also you, my love, my other half, the only thing that can bring me any joy—but also the only thing that can take it away. So, you see, my greatest dreams, fears and insecurities all revolve around you."

I open my mouth to speak but no sound comes out. There's only her before me and her raspy voice handing me the keys to the entire universe.

"Without you, I have nothing. But with you, I have everything."

"Pretty girl," I barely let her finish the words as I snake my arm around her waist, bringing her into me. Her chest slides against mine, a small whimper echoing in my ear as she's fully fitted to my front.

My eyes mist with tears of joy, of pure fucking joy as I listen to the most beautiful confession I've ever heard.

"You're not the only one," I whisper in her hair, inhaling her scent and closing my eyes at the little piece of heaven I'm being offered. "I love you so damn much. So fucking much."

Her cheek against my cheek, the wetness of her tears seeps into my skin, touching my goddamn heart.

"If there's one thing you should never doubt, Raf, it's that I love you with all my being. With all that's good and messed up inside of me. And *nothing* you say or do could change the way I feel about you. Do you understand me?"

"That's not all of it," I whisper. "There's more. More I need to tell you..."

My hands around her throat.

My plans to have her committed.

Every fucking little thing I schemed before I knew her. And now it's all hanging over my head, promising to never let me be until it's all out in the open—until I can finally beg for her forgiveness.

She leans back, her moist eyes finding mine as she brings one finger to my lips.

"Shh. Let's not talk about this now. Not when all I want is to feel you,

bask in you. Experience everything I couldn't before."

"But..."

She doesn't let me speak, slipping her finger between my lips just as she brings her mouth to my ear, her teeth nibbling softly at my flesh before whispering.

"Take me on a date. Show me what it's like to be *just* a couple. In love and not caring about anything else that happens in this world."

"Anything," I relent. "Anything for you, pretty girl."

FIFTEEN

RAFAELO

WITH ALL OUR STUFF PACKED AND READY TO MOVE, I LET NOELLE KNOW I'LL be downstairs to organize everything with the moving company.

She's busy sorting through some last-minute items, so she only gives me one airy kiss before she resumes her focus.

Amused, I head down, my eyes on the phone as I await the call.

Unfortunately, due to the location of the piano, we'd decided not to try to take it with us. What Noelle doesn't know is that I've already gotten her another piano—a highly coveted one I'd purchased at an auction a few weeks back.

"I didn't realize you were still around." I note Cisco at the bottom of the stairs.

He's wearing a blue suit, his expression guarded as he measures me carefully with his gaze.

"I wanted to see you off," he smiles, slowly, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

I nod, reaching the landing. Looking around, I count the suitcases, making sure everything is ready. Only some of Noelle's stuff is missing now, and she promised she'd call out when she's ready for me to take it down too.

"That's kind of you," I give him a brief smile.

Easily distracted, I'm back on my phone, waiting for the call from the moving company. It's only when Cisco comes closer that I look up to find him regarding him with an odd expression on his face.

"A word outside?"

My brows shoot up in surprise, but I shrug it off.

"Sure."

He opens and closes the front door behind us, stepping at the edge of the

veranda as he takes a cigarette out, lighting it and staring into the distance.

"Be careful," he finally warns.

I frown, tilting my head in question.

"About?"

"My sister. She's..."

"If you're going to tell me she's not well again, then I think we've already had this conversation," I cut him off, my body tensing as everything in me gets ready to defend Noelle.

It makes me sick to my stomach to think about how she's been treated by her own family. She'd been sold to an abuser and then she'd returned home to receive a similar treatment. Maybe they hadn't beaten her, but they'd certainly laid blows to her psyche.

God, but just the thought of my sweet and pure Noelle in that hell that was the *hacienda* threatens to get me all worked up.

And it's *them*. Her own family had allowed that marriage to take place.

My hands ball into fists as I barely control myself from telling Cisco all I think about him and his *family*.

"Oh, no. Noelle is very well. Thanks to you, she's doing much better," Cisco gives a sarcastic laugh. "That's not at all the issue."

"Then?" I narrow my eyes at him.

He turns, coming towards me as he pops his cigarette in his mouth, his hands on the lapels of my coat.

"You don't know her," he speaks low—ominously low. "You think you know her, Raf, but you never did. The things she's capable of..." his mouth tilts in a lopsided smile. "It would make saints turn in their graves."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"My sister isn't *just* an ordinary woman. She wasn't before her first marriage and certainly not after. Take care how much you idealize her. You might have a rude awakening in the future."

"I don't know what game you're trying to play, Cisco," I swipe his hands aside. "But if there is one thing that is off-limits, it's hearing *anyone* badmouth Noelle. You already tried to screw with my head in the past. Do you really think I'm going to believe anything you might tell me?" I laugh dryly.

"I'm just giving you a heads up," he's not rattled by my hostility—as if he expected it all along. "And I'll leave you with one question. One you should ponder carefully," he pauses, taking a drag off his cigarette as his gaze grows

distant. "Why do you think she was the *only* survivor in that fire? Why do you think she was the only survivor period?"

I blink, not expecting *that* question.

"I was there that night. Whatever you think you know, I saw with my own eyes," I tell him squarely. "It could have never been the hand of someone like Noelle. For God's sake, she could barely hurt a fly," I exclaim, exasperated.

"Could barely hurt a fly, eh," he smiles insidiously. "Good luck believing that."

"Raf?" Noelle's muffled voice reaches my ears.

I give Cisco one last look to show him my distaste and the fact that his words mean nothing to me before I wrench the door open, spotting Noelle at the top of the stairs, struggling to drag a suitcase behind her.

"I got you," I call out, climbing two stairs at once to get to her.

She gives me a dazzling smile.

"I think that's everything. But there's one more thing I'd like to get," she bites her lip.

"What is it?"

"My old computer. It's upstate at my mother's house. I haven't used it in... years," she strains a smile. "But I still have things on it that I can never part with."

"Then we'll go for a visit to get it," I say as I grab the suitcase.

But I don't get to move as her fingers are suddenly on my sleeve, tugging it to get my attention.

"I don't want to go there. I don't want to meet my mother. Could we... Ask someone to get it for me?" she asks shyly, and I immediately assure her that's exactly what we'll do.

Her mood brightens, and together we go downstairs. Just in time, the moving crew is here too.

Cisco takes his leave after he exchanges a couple of tense words with Noelle. I don't mind it, however, as I'm soon distracted by the many suitcases and boxes that need to be loaded in the moving truck.

It's hours later that Noelle and I can finally sigh in relief, both sweaty and tired. Yet it's all rewarded by the sight of the previously bare apartment now teeming with stuff—granted, still *unpacked* stuff.

"I can't believe this is our new place," Noelle breathes out in awe as her eyes scan our surroundings.

A condo a few blocks from Central Park, it's not that far from Cisco's

place. But it's ours—only ours.

The apartment features two bedrooms, two offices, a spacious living room and even a terrace with a lot of open space. I'd already had most of the place furnished, though I'd reserved the essential items for later since I wanted Noelle to have an input in that.

I couldn't help myself, though, and I went ahead to prepare the two offices. The first I'll use for my business while the second will be Noelle's new piano rehearsal room.

"You like it, right?" I turn to ask.

We're both sprawled on the couch in the living room, simply staring at the mess in front of us.

"I *love* it. Just how many surprises do you have under your sleeve, Rafaelo Guerra?" she smiles languidly, stretching like a cat as she lays her head on my lap.

"Let's just say that there are a few more," I chuckle. "But you'll see them when the time is right."

"You spoil me too much."

"There's no such thing as too much, pretty girl. I know you've never had something truly yours, so I want to remedy that."

"You're right," her lips flatten in a thin line. "I've never really had that. You know," she pauses, making herself more comfortable as she turns to face me, "growing up I was so alone, I used to dream about getting attention from someone. But as I went through puberty, I started having no privacy. Everyone in my family wanted to make sure I would not misbehave or sully their name. I went from one extreme to another and I *never* felt comfortable anywhere. Or even wanted," she gives a dry laugh. "Only..."

My brows shoot up.

"Only?"

She shakes her head.

"Nothing. I was always an outsider, and all along I've only wanted one thing. To belong."

I bring my hand to her face, swiping a few strands of hair off her forehead.

She's told me about her childhood and how empty it had been. Everyone had washed their hands clean off her, leaving her to her devices but also expecting her to act circumspectly. In a way, she'd never been allowed to be a child, and my heart breaks for her.

Things had only worsened as she'd neared her eighteen birthday, since her family had suddenly decided they needed to safeguard her virtue so they could sell her off.

"You do now," I gently caress her skin. "This is your place. By my side," I murmur as I bring her small palm to my heart. "Just like my place is with you."

"You've *always* been my place, Raf." There's an odd quality to her voice as her eyes drink me in, so much love reflected in those depths I can feel my pulse start throbbing under her touch.

"Let me make this sweeter," I suddenly say, swooping her up in my arms as I rise from the couch. "I have one more surprise to show you today," I smile sheepishly.

She merely raises a curious brow.

Crossing the apartment, I head to the office space I'd put the piano in, opening the door before placing Noelle down.

Her mouth is hanging open as she takes in the Steinway & Sons masterpiece before her. The piano in itself is a work of art, intricate carvings covering the entire surface.

By her reaction, I gather she knows exactly how much these things can go for in auctions.

"You didn't," she whispers, still unable to take her eyes off it.

"Why don't you give it a go?" I lean to whisper in her ear.

She's slow to put one foot in front of the other before finally reaching the bench. Taking a seat, she spreads her open palms over the carved wood, feeling every little indentation.

"This must have cost at least a million, Raf," she suddenly says. "How... You..."

"Don't worry about money. As it happens, we have enough to live pretty comfortably for the rest of our lives," I smile as I join her on the bench. "The Guerra coffers aren't as empty as I previously thought. Even with everything I gave your brother, we still have properties and quite a lot of money in the bank."

Odd that Michele had not tried to claim the Guerra title again. For all intents and purposes, on paper he's still dead.

"But still... This is... I have no words. It's just so extravagant. I never thought I'd own something as beautiful as this. I've seen one before, but I didn't get to play it," she recounts melancholically.

"I know how much you value your craft," I cover her hand with mine. "And only something this beautiful could complement your talent."

She blushes, a smile pulling at her lips.

"Play for me, pretty girl. Play for me, and this time, show me how much you love me."

Her eyes widen, and I know she recognizes the moment I'm alluding to.

The moment everything changed for us. When she bared her soul to me and I inadvertently fell under her spell.

Looking back, even the most extreme hate could not stop me from falling for her and the musical expression of her very essence.

Feeling for the keys, she brings her fingers down on them, the first notes sounding in the air and landing on my tongue like the sweetest treat I've ever had.

Brahms' sonata No. 2 in F-sharp minor flows from the tips of her fingers, a mix of showy mastership and the fragrance of solitude that meet at the perfect convergence.

My eyes instinctively close as I feel the flavors burst on my tongue, both the bold notes and the more subdued ones, all that speak of a perfect harmony of two different halves, but belonging together, nonetheless.

She plays with reckless abandon, giving herself to the music and the feeling it evokes, living in it, being *transported* by it.

Growing up, I've been to my fair share of piano recitals, some of very famous piano virtuosos. Yet none have been able to move me like this—to make me feel so many things at once.

It's not just the flavor of the song that overtakes me, it's the perfect combinations of all senses—of hearing the sounds, feeling the vibrations, tasting the notes and seeing a magnificent show of red beneath my closed lids.

She makes me live the melody with my entire being. And I know she lives it, too.

When the sonata is done, we don't speak.

She's breathing hard.

I'm breathing harder.

My pulse is racing, my heart thumping in my chest. The silence only serves to emphasize those little sounds that we usually take for granted but in the greater scheme of things are everything.

She turns, slowly, her eyes two huge orbs, her pupils dilated. Biting her

lip, she gives me a look of utter adoration, of love, lust, and more—always more.

My entire body is throbbing with unreleased tension, the sonata only a prelude to what's to come.

I don't know who reaches for whom first. Clothes fly, skin meets skin, and love...love mates with love. It's the ultimate meeting of the souls. An experience so beautiful, it transcends the physical realm.

There's only feeling.

And us.

Only ever us.



A FEW DAYS LATER AND THE APARTMENT LOOKS WHOLLY DIFFERENT FROM when we first moved in. And since I've taken her request to heart, in between little breaks from decorating and moving things around, I started to plan for a date.

It might not be my strongest suit, but I understand why Noelle would want it.

We haven't had a moment of peace since the beginning. Though Michele is still an ongoing problem, I won't let that stop us from living. And with the bounty off my head, that is exactly what I aim to do.

I'd also promised myself that I wouldn't continue with my vendetta for the simple reason that I can't afford to put Noelle in danger just to satisfy some ego boost.

The scare I'd taken the last time is still fresh in my mind, and that feeling of helplessness will likely not disappear anytime soon.

She's more important to me than any revenge, or any grudge I may have held.

And so the planning had started. I may have sought inspiration on the web, but I decided to take her out for a classy date. I'd done everything surreptitiously, booking seats at the cinema, reserving a table for two with the perfect view and going as far as setting up a nice area by the Hudson for a fireworks show.

I want Noelle to have the perfect *normal* date experience, and that

requires all the effort in the world. There's also the fact that she'd been constantly worried about Lovely, feeling his absence. I'm certain he's still with Michele, and I'll definitely tackle that issue at some point.

"I think we're all stocked up now," she nods appreciatively as she peruses the full shelves of food in the fridge before closing the door.

"Come here," I beckon her to me.

Raising a brow, she does as told, skipping towards me, a mischievous smile on her face.

"I have something for you," I wink at her, removing my hands from my back and fluttering two envelopes at her.

Immediately, she jumps up, trying to take them from me.

Enjoying her attempts, I taunt her a little with our size differences, waving the envelopes higher and higher the more she jumps.

"You're not being fair," she pouts.

"Give me a kiss and I'll show you."

She looks put out with me for a second before she jumping on me and wrapping her legs around my waist just as her arms wound around my neck.

Her lips skim the surface on my cheek in a ghost of a kiss. But it's enough to get me distracted as she takes the tickets from my hand.

Getting down, she proceeds to ignore me as she studies the contents of the envelope, her eyes scan the text, her mouth falling open in shock.

"You didn't," she breathes out. "I can't believe this."

"It's not me, pretty girl. It's fate. Imagine my surprise when I was browsing the movie selection and discovered they have a *The Mummy* remake. I know you like it too, so we can watch it together."

When I'd spotted it while looking through the list of available screenings, I'd been ecstatic. Noelle and I had watched the movie during our stay in Newport, so I know it's one of her favorites. But nothing beats the experience of going to the movies—one I plan on having *with* her.

"Oh, God, I can't wait," she exclaims. "This is the best surprise, Raf. When I told you to take me on a date I didn't imagine *this*."

The news of the date puts her in a good mood for the rest of the day. In the afternoon, we make a quick trip to some of the shops downtown since Noelle is adamant about buying some new outfits for the date. But the little minx is sneaky. She doesn't let me see any of the things she ends up buying, telling me it will be a surprise.

It's only the following day when we're about to leave for the movie that I

get to see what she put on.

To say that my jaw hits the floor would be an understatement.

She's wearing a wrap dress in a pale beige emphasizing her bronzed skin, the swell of her generous tits and her tiny waist. She added a pair of six-inch pink stilettos.

"Damn, pretty girl," I whistle, pride swelling in my chest at being the one to take her out. "You look absolutely gorgeous."

A blush stains her cheeks.

"Thank you."

Snaking her arm through my elbow, she kisses my cheek as she tells me she's ready to go.

The cinema is only a few blocks down from where we live, so we go on foot, making small talk and laughing at silly jokes.

As soon as we're inside, we find the way to our seats, making ourselves comfortable as other movie-goers slowly trickle in.

At first, I'd wanted to rent the entire room for the two of us. But then I'd realized that Noelle wants a normal date experience, not an over the top one. I'll have time for that later on—when I become more of an expert at date planning.

"I'm so excited," she whispers.

"Me too," I kiss the top of her head, throwing my arm around her shoulder and bringing her into me.

The entire room is full of people, and I must say I'm a little surprised by how popular the movie ended up being. Maybe they are all fans of the original one and are curious how the remake will stack up.

The credit sequence starts, and immediately a warning flashes on the screen advising the movie contains disturbing imagery together with an age advisory.

"The original one was PG-13, wasn't it?" Noelle frowns.

"Maybe this one is gorier," I frown, looking around us.

No one bats an eye at the warning, seemingly even more excited than before.

We're waiting excitedly for it to start when a loud noise makes Noelle flinch in my arms.

"What..." she trails off when the first scene appears on the screen.

"That is..."

There is a mummy alright. But there aren't any curses, or past life

infatuations. No, this is just...

Mummy porn.

"Raf, what is this?" Noelle asks, amusement in her tone.

I squeeze my eyes shut in embarrassment.

"The mummy?" I internally cringe.

"Well, this mummy has definitely had an upgrade in the last few decades. Especially," she coughs, "package wise."

The next shot is of the mummy sporting quite a big bulge under all the bandages. And soon, the plot becomes quite clear.

An explorer intrudes on the mummy's final resting place and accidentally awakens him and his curse, which, incidentally, involves a lot of sex.

Noelle giggles by my side, one scene after another the movie becoming worse and worse. From mummy sex and sexual cursed frogs to an orgy at the pyramids, I don't think this is something I'm *ever* going to live down.

I consider swooping her in my arms and getting out of here at least once every second, but that would only draw unwanted attention to us.

Instead, I fool myself that she's actually enjoying the mummy's shenanigans and the fact that this remake is clearly an erotic parody.

As we exit the cinema, I wait for her to speak, mentally going over all the excuses I can come up with.

Granted, when I'd seen there was only *one* showing of *The Mummy*, I'd jumped at the chance, thinking this was the perfect movie to watch together. It hadn't crossed my mind to check other things, like previous reviews or even the tags on the damn movie.

"That might be my new favorite movie," she jokes, gazing up at me, her lips pursed as she forces herself to contain her amusement.

"You don't have to say that for my sake," I groan. "Clearly, I made a miscalculation when I booked the tickets," I mumble, feeling my cheeks heat up.

"You know, that was one of the most enlightening movies I have ever seen," she adds pensively. "Now I know I don't have any mummy fetish," she jokes, referring to the way the protagonist had gotten off on the, erm... bandages of the mummy. "And I do hope you don't have one either," she leans in to whisper.

"For sure, completely crossed off the list," I immediately reply. "I don't think I'm ever going to look at bandages the same..."

"Well, there you have it. It wasn't a complete bust. We got to learn

something," she stops, fitting her body to mine as she brings her fingers to trace my jaw. "We can *always* learn something. And I for one can't wait to explore more things with you," she adds suggestively.

"Damn it all, Noelle. You do know how to mend a man's ego," I drawl, tipping her chin up so I can taste her lips.

"Now take me to dinner. I'm absolutely famished," she draws back, winking at me.

SIXTEEN

RAFAELO

I TRY TO PUT THE MOVIE DISASTER BEHIND ME AND FOCUS ON THE NEXT portion of the date. After all, what could go wrong with dinner?"

The restaurant is stunning, the view even more so as we are seated close to the river. The night sky is ablaze in the distance, the city alive still at this late hour.

"This is beautiful, Raf," Noelle praises as she takes her seat, her eyes taking in her surroundings.

"I'm glad you like it. This time I checked the reviews for the place, and their steak is excellent. In fact," I pause as I open the menu, pointing to the spicy steak special they have. "This is the most popular dish and I know how much you like both."

"You're such a dear," she gushes.

A secret smile creeps up my face. I'd scoured the menus of at least ten restaurants to make sure I was choosing a place she'd love.

The waiter comes to pick up our order and I invite Noelle to choose whatever else she wants from the menu, after which I place my own order.

"Can we also have one of your best bottle of Pinot Noir?"

The waiter nods, scribbling down our orders before excusing himself.

"I have a confession to make," I tell her when we're finally alone.

Her brows go up as she tilts her head to the side.

The light from one of the lamps hits her at such an angle, it's like she's bathed in light—a beacon of purity in the darkness of the night. My mouth becomes dry just admiring her like this—especially seeing the necklace resting against her skin and the slight peek of the valley of her breasts.

"Raf?" she calls my name and I clear my throat, faking a cough to mask

the way her simple presence makes me lose my mind.

I wonder if her impact on me will ever lessen with time because so far, it's been the opposite. Every time I wake up in the morning with her by my side it's like I've been blessed all over again. There's a warmth that spreads all over my body as I remember the way she used to soothe and tend to me at the *hacienda*—how she'd kept me alive simply by existing.

Those memories, no matter how faulty, are always at the back of my mind. She doesn't remember—might never remember—and though at times that thought hurts, I'd rather she never did if it would protect her mental state.

It will never change what she means to me.

Heaven.

Light.

Mi luz.

"Right," I strain a smile. I have to admit I *am* the equivalent of a besotted fool. Everything she says or does has the ability to render me speechless, causing my brain to short-circuit until she's all I can think about. And though that has its time and place, sometimes it happens at the most inopportune moments.

Like now.

When I'm trying to use the *logical* part of my brain.

"I spoke with Gianna," I start and her brows shoot up. "I wanted to get her approval to start the dissolve the conservatorship over you."

She blinks, taken aback my words.

"You..." she swallows hard. "What did she say?"

"She wants to perform a few evaluations which we will then have to submit to court. It's a bit more bureaucratic than I would have liked, but it shouldn't take too long."

"I'll do it," she nods effusively. "I'll do anything that needs to be done. Raf..." Tears gather at the corner of her eyes. "I can't express my gratitude in words. That is just..."

"You don't have to," I reach across the table to take her hand in mine. "I don't want you to feel in any way tied down to me, or feel like I'm holding something over your head. I want you to be *free*. Truly free. And then, choose me of your own volition."

"What did my brother say about this?"

"Irrelevant. He doesn't have a say in this. Not anymore. You're mine, but I want you to be mine because you choose so."

"You're the best man I've ever met, Rafaelo Guerra," her voices hitches, her eyes filled with unshed tears. "I don't think anyone else would have done that," she smiles tightly. "Because who would willingly give up control?"

"Control via coercion is like a ruler drunk on the power of the subjects who abhor him," I tell her softly. "Control should be earned. Submission should be earned. Only then it's satisfying. Only then it's worth having."

"You don't think I'm automatically inferior to you just because I'm a woman? That I *need* to be subdued because I don't know my own mind? That," she smiles, "I need someone to lead so I can follow?"

A chuckle escapes me at her examples—actual scenarios of what occurs in our world and beyond.

"I happen to have a deep respect for smart women. And I happen to have an even bigger respect for the woman in front of me. There's nothing inferior about you, Noelle, and I'd appreciate it if you removed that word from your vocabulary," I add sternly.

"It's why you're one of the few good ones, Raf. Not everyone thinks quite like you," she sighs sadly.

"I'm not as good as you make me out to be," my words are clipped, harsher than intended.

"You are to me, and that's all I care about," she says as she plays with my fingers, caressing my hand with the soft tips of her nails. "I don't care about anything else, Raf. I told you once, you can do *no* wrong in my eyes."

I gaze at her intently, trying to gauge the veracity of her words.

She smiles at me.

"You see, I'm not like other women either. You're the only thing of importance for me. The world? It can go to hell for all I care."

"I fear I feel the same, pretty girl," I admit. "And that scares the hell out of me."

"Why should it?" she asks the question as if it's the most natural thing. "Embrace it. I did. When you stop fighting yourself, Raf, when you stop caring about the rest of the world, you'll see how freeing that can be."

"You might be right," I nod.

"I know I'm right," she winks at me.

I don't get to say anything else as the waiter comes with our food. Laying the plates in front of us, he then comes back with the bottle of wine and two glasses.

He pours my glass first before doing the same to Noelle's.

Her eyes are still on me, desire dripping from her gaze.

We're both so caught up in each other that the subsequent accident startles us both. While pouring her glass, the waiter's eyes seem to have strayed to an off-limits area. So did the bottle off the glass, aiming for her neckline instead of the glass.

Noelle reels back, blinking repeatedly as the wine slowly drips between her breasts.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so, so, sorry," the waiter keeps blabbering and a coldness envelops me.

He reaches out for Noelle to help her at the same time *I* reach for him, pulling him back and bringing him at eye level with me.

"Don't," just one word, and he stiffens. "You don't look. You don't touch. You don't see her. Are we clear?"

His eyes flutter at me in confusion, my words slowly sinking in.

"I..."

"You'll go back inside and ask a *waitress* to take over our table."

"But I..."

"If you know what's good for you, you won't argue, you won't talk back and you will *move*." He'd better fucking agree. I'm already doing my best to stay in control and not make a spectacle in the middle of the restaurant. The last thing Noelle needs right now is more attention on us.

"Yes, sir," he said, pivoting and heading back to where he came from.

"I'm so sorry about your dress, pretty girl. Here," I take off my coat, getting out of my chair and coming round the table to place it around her shoulder, swaddling her in it so her cleavage is no longer visible.

And there goes *strike two*. Can we have just *one* perfect date?

"You wouldn't have harmed that boy, would you?" she narrows her eyes at me.

"Of course I wouldn't," I smile sweetly as I spew the half-truth.

"Good," she nods. "Because from where I was standing it looked like you were about to strangle the guy with your bare hands."

"I was just telling him the *polite* thing to do after he messed up," I counter, keeping my defense up.

"I see."

"Ok, fine, I was very close to snapping. But I didn't," I exhale. "I'm not going to ruin this evening for you even more."

"It's not ruined," she frowns. "In fact, come on, dig in, it's going to go

cold."

Duly chastised, I start eating, every now and then sneaking glances at her and fighting a smile at how lovely she is.

"Raf, I have one question..."

I whip my head up, waiting for her to speak.

"The drugs," she grimaces. "How bad is it?"

"Bad," I admit. "Pretty bad. The stuff I was on at the hacienda was highly addictive and it left me close to death when I went into withdrawal. Carlos' men were able to come up with a recipe similar enough, but it messes with my control even more than the original one."

"But you're better, right? I've never seen you take anything, so it can't be that bad?" She adds hopefully.

"It's a slow process," I purse my lips, explaining how the drug affects my nervous system, making it so that if I'm suddenly cut off I could actually die. The only option is to wean myself off it slowly and give my body time to accommodate.

"What if you had the original recipe?"

"Maybe it work better? I'm not entirely sure."

"Let me help," she reaches out, her hand on mine as her features harden with pure determination. "Maybe I can remember something if you take me to the lab and I look through the ingredients..."

"I don't want you to worry about that," I squeeze her hand. "I'm already ashamed as it is that I'm incapacitated once a week," I release a weary sigh. "I don't want you to...keep seeing me at my worst."

"But you forget one thing, Raf," she shakes her head at me. "I've seen you at your very worst and I'm still here. It doesn't matter what side of yourself you show me. I will always be here. Please don't shut me out," she whispers lightly.

Staring at her, I have to wonder. What the hell did I do right in this life to deserve her? I can only find flaw after flaw when I look at myself, yet she only sees the best in me.

"Ok," I nod softly. She's right. I need to trust her with *everything*, not just the good sides of me.

Easier said than done, though.

We chat some more on the subject as I explain to her the intricacies of the drug and what I'd heard from the doctors, as well as what it means for my body and my health. Yet as soon as I have an opening, I change the topic, not

wanting to mar our date with such morbid talk.

I have one more chance to end the night well, though. And as we finish the dinner without any other accident, we pay the bill and leave.

Steering her down the riverbank, I keep practicing my lines as we get closer to the firework place.

Since I'd wanted this to be a special occasion, I'd also gotten her a ring—a special one I should have gotten her from the beginning. Maybe it's a bit late, but I still want to do things properly. That way, people will see the ultimate evidence that she's taken.

My fingers skim the surface of the ring box, my mind conjuring up the perfect moment when I'll get on one knee to give her the proposal she never had.

"Do your feet hurt?" I suddenly ask, seeing her wobble a little.

She shakes her head.

"No, I'm just not too used to wearing heels."

"You should have worn something more comfortable."

"Nope," she pops the p, "I need to be just a *tiny* bit taller so I look good at your side."

I halt.

"What? You *always* look good by my side."

She just shrugs, but there's a hidden smile playing at her lips as she watches me covertly. There's love, and there's *her* love. And God if it's not the sweetest thing in the world. It envelops me, touching every sense as it seeps into my very being.

Holding on to my arm, I can tell my stubborn little wife will not abandon her shoes, despite the obvious difficulty she has with them.

A few more steps later, however, and there's a big pop. Noelle comes to a stop, her huge eyes meeting mine before she glances at her feet...and at the heel currently stuck between two rocks—detached from her shoe.

She blinks twice before giggling.

"I don't think this is my day," she mentions, making me feel even worse for doing such a poor job. One date. Just one date and I get everything wrong.

Not one to despair, though, I lower myself in front of her, urging her to jump on my back.

"No, come on, Raf," she protests lightly. "I'm not a child for you to give me a piggyback ride," she jokes, though I can tell she's not totally put off by the idea.

"Get on," I command her. "You're not going to put a damn mark on those beautiful feet of yours."

"So demanding," she grumbles playfully as she jumps on my back, wounding her arms around my neck while I secure her legs around my lower back, pulling on the material of her dress so everything is completely covered.

Her breath is in my ear as I move, her body heat transferring to mine, and this is exactly how I always want her—so close I could practically become one with her.

"You know," she whispers, threading one hand through my hair. "I used to imagine what my first date would be like for so long," I can feel her smile against my neck.

"What was the perfect date? In your mind?"

"Talking," she simply says.

"Talking?" I ask, thoroughly surprised.

"Yup. Talking, talking and more talking. Maybe holding hands, and *maybe* a kiss at the end of the night."

"I hope I didn't disappoint too much," I grimace just thinking about the day so far. Especially as I think of our very first date when I'd caused her to have a panic attack because of my brutish behavior. Yeah, I don't think I've earned any stars in that department.

"No," she chuckles. "Not at all. This was exactly how I wanted it to be. Just...us," she sighs melancholically, laying her head on my shoulder. "Just us, Raf," she whispers, almost as if there's more to the story.

We walk a while longer, enjoying the night breeze and the way the city flashes in the distance. Even as silence descends, there's a certain comfort, something that tugs at my heartstrings with happiness, pure joy, and so much more—always more.

"Here," I tell her when we reach the designated spot, placing her down on a bench. "Now let me get the *last* surprise," I point to the black box hidden by a tree.

She glances at me in curiosity but simply nods, telling me to go ahead.

Turning my attention to the fireworks, I do as I'd been told, following the instructions to a T to make sure Noelle will get the full experience. And when they're ready to roll, I hurry back to her side, tugging her up and placing her bare feet on my shoes so she wouldn't get dirty.

"So? What has you so secretive?" she raises a brow.

I tug her into me, my mouth caressing her ear as I whisper.

"Fireworks. Just watch."

"Fireworks?" she raises her head to look at me in awe. "I'll be damned, Raf, but you went all out for this, didn't you?"

Heat creeps up my cheeks at her praise.

"Only the best for you," I murmur.

A loud noise alerts me that the fireworks are about to start shooting into the sky. Palming the ring box, I wait, biding my time to make sure I nail the last surprise of the evening.

We both turn our gazes towards the sky, waiting for the magic to happen.

But another bang later, and instead of shooting for the sky, the fireworks shoot...at us.

My reflexes are quick at work, and before I know it, both Noelle and I are on the ground as I blanket her with my body.

"Raf..." she trails off as she turns her head, watching how all my hard work ends up in the Hudson, one firework at a time.

There are some sparks in the air, but clearly not the dazzling show I was expecting.

"Fuck, am I crushing you?" I ask as I roll over when the last one sinks in the water. "You're not hurt are you?" My eyes immediately scan her form. Good thing we'd ended up on soft grass instead of the harder stone just a few steps over.

For fuck's sake...

I groan out loud at my succession of failures.

One thing. Just one thing I'd wanted to do today—impress her and make her happy. Instead... I only managed to make a fool of myself.

"I'm sorry," I say quietly, righting myself in a seating position and helping her do the same.

I push my head down as I wait for her to express her disappointment, but instead, all I'm getting is laughter.

Whipping my head up, I watch in awe how she's laughing with so much gusto she's holding on to her midriff, barely able to contain herself.

"Raf," she starts, but stops herself amid another bout of laughter. Before she can express how much she hated the date, I hurry to act, hoping I can still turn this around.

Fishing the ring box out of my pants, I assume the stance, placing all my weight on one knee as I extend my hand towards her, opening the box to

reveal a simple ring adorned with a small, almost translucent garnet that I'd had custom made to complement the necklace.

She stops. Her eyes go wide, her mouth opening and closing before she meets my eyes.

"For...me?"

"I wanted to take advantage of today to give you the ring I should have gotten you from the beginning—the ring you deserve. I'm sorry this didn't end up quite as I imagined it," I wince. "But I'll do better."

"My God, Raf," she comes closer, her dress hiked over her thighs as she brings herself in front of me. Plucking the ring from the box, she waves it in front of me.

Afraid of making another faux pas, I grab it, jamming it a little too harshly up her finger.

"Auch," she gasps.

"Sorry," I double-wince.

For fuck's sake. I'm a fucking mess, aren't I?

Kill me now.

For a moment, she merely stares at the ring. And I, like the idiot I am, simply wait for her to tell me to *my face* what an idiot I am. I sigh in disappointment. But one second she's in front of me, the next she's launching herself on top of me and tackling me to the ground.

"You're so special, Rafaelo Guerra. The *most* special soul. And I love you more than anything else in the world," she says before her lips are on mine, kissing me with an intensity that obliterates me and any other thought I might have had before.

"Fuck, Noelle, you're going to kill me. Right here, for everyone to see," I breathe harshly.

"I love the ring. I love you. And I even love the accident-prone dates," she whispers. "But next time, *I* get to pick the date."

A smile creeps up my lips.

"Is that so? And what will you choose?"

She looks pensive for a moment before her entire face lights up.

"A club. I want you to take me to a club."

She continues to talk, explaining how she wants to experience what every twenty-something-year-old does. But I'm too caught up on that one word.

Club.

Where there will be other men. Where other men will be able to *see* her,

leer at her and might even try to brush up against her.

Immediately, I see red.

But one glance at her, and I realize she *really* wants this. Especially as I remember how her one stunt at a club ended up—at the police station.

"Fine," I sigh. "But we do it on my terms, ok?"

She looks taken aback by my easy acquiesce. After all, this insane jealousy I feel at anyone who dares look in her direction is *my* issue. And I won't let it affect her happiness.

No, I'll just have to devise certain...ways to make everything bearable.

And make sure everyone knows she's off limits.

"Fine. You pull the strings," she says before she burrows deeper into my chest.

A smile pulls at my lips. Well, it could actually turn out to be a wonderful learning opportunity for us, too.

Happy she's not mad at my abysmal date planning, I take her home, spending the whole night making it up to her in other ways.

SEVENTEEN

RAFAELO

PUNCHING IN THE SECURITY CODE AT THE WAREHOUSE, I STRIDE INSIDE.

To my everlasting surprise, Noelle had suddenly declared that she wanted to have a *girls' day* and that she'd reached out to Sisi herself to set up a date.

Taken aback, I could only nod as she'd recounted how she hadn't had the best time with female friendships but she wanted to make an effort because she'd felt very comfortable with Sisi and Catalina.

"I need to step out of my comfort zone, Raf," she'd sighed, her head on my chest as she burrowed into my embrace. "We can't live isolated from people forever, no matter how much I'd love that."

Though it had taken me a few moments to let the words sink in, I'd soon agreed with her idea. The last thing I want is to isolate her, or make her feel lonely. I may hate the fact that we have to be apart for that to happen, but I promised her I'd make an effort.

Especially after she'd chastised me for conducting all my meetings virtually.

"When's the last time you saw Carlos in person?" she'd sneakily inquired, and rightly so.

After moving in the new apartment, I haven't met with *anyone*. Neither has Noelle.

And so I'd taken her advice at heart with this surprise visit.

The moment I'm inside, everyone stops moving, all turning to look at me as if I were an apparition.

"Raf?" Anita is the first to speak, looking at me through narrowed eyes. Panchito is by her side, sitting a little *too* close to her—so close one has to wonder if there isn't anything else going on.

Since she'd found out that he'd made a deal with the devil—erm, Michele—to save her, she'd stopped teasing him as much, their interactions taking a new nuance.

But that had been my observation before. It's already been two weeks since I've seen them and things might have progressed since then.

"What a surprise," Thomas drawled from the next room, peeking his head through and giving me a mock salute.

"Is Carlos here?"

"He should be in the back," Anita pointed to the storage area.

"Thanks," I say just as I'm about to head there.

But midway, I stop, turning slightly.

"Is everything alright with you guys?"

A part of me feels guilty for being so absent. For two years we've been around each other almost daily, growing together and spending time like a true family. Even as we'd arrived in New York we'd continued to be close and on good terms.

But it had all changed with Panchito's actions. I refrain from calling it a betrayal, though that's exactly what it is, but deep down I can understand why he'd done it—just like I would have done it myself if Noelle's life had been on the line.

And therein lies the dilemma, because my pretty girl *had* been involved. So for that I find myself in the awkward position of being unable to forgive, but also unable to kill him as my gut tells me to do.

I don't have many limits, but Noelle is where I draw the line.

"Yes," Anita replies. Panchito lowers his gaze, sighing deeply. "We've been making some headway into finding the people who killed Thomas' family, and we're focusing on that for now," she adds matter-of-factly.

The plan had been to figure out who'd ordered the assassination in order to find out who'd put the bounty on Thomas.

"What about you?" I nod to the two of them.

"I'm never getting rid of the price on my head," Anita shrugs. "It's dead or...dead. Panchito won't either. Maybe if we get new faces," she muses out loud, looking back at Panchito. "We could do that."

"Or not," he mumbles. "I don't think that's the solution."

"It could be one..."

They start bickering on the merits of plastic surgery, while Thomas is back with his headphones on, running on the treadmill and ignoring me so I

take that as my cue to leave.

Going to the back, I see the door is half-open. Pushing it with my foot, I step inside, finding Carlos sitting on the floor in the far end of the warehouse, his computer in his lap as he furiously types away.

"Interrupting?"

It takes him a moment to realize I'm in the room. Glancing up, he raises a brow, putting his laptop aside and getting to his feet.

"Didn't see you there," he grunts, looking a little disheveled.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"What was that?" I nod towards the computer.

"We have a bit of an issue that I was trying to get to the bottom of," he grimaces. "Come," he motions to a table and a few chairs.

I follow him, taking a seat and waiting for him to speak.

"Ortega is in New York," he suddenly states, going straight to the topic.

"He's what?" I blink.

"I'm surprised about it myself. And I wouldn't have believed he had the guts to come by himself if I didn't run into him."

My eyes widen.

"What happened?"

"Let's just say that it got a little bloody," he smirks as he points at the scraped skin off his knuckles. "He got away before I could do real damage, though. Not surprising considering he's always been a coward."

"Why didn't you tell me when we spoke on the phone?" I frown.

We've been conducting meetings every now and then since we're still together in the weapons trade—for now. Yet he'd never once mentioned it.

"I didn't want to ruin your honeymoon," he chuckles. "I know you needed time with Noelle, especially after finding out who she really was."

A smile tugs at my lips, and bringing my hand to his back, I pat him lightly.

"Thanks. But if you're in danger you know you can always count on me," I assure him.

I may appreciate his intention, but I don't want him risking danger by himself. If I can help, I'll help.

"Is Michele involved in this?" I suddenly ask, remembering their previous connection.

"I don't think so. Panchito and I did some digging and they don't seem to be involved. But that might very well be the reason why he's here. If Michele

refused the partnership, Ortega has no standing. He *needs* someone to back him. Now more than ever," Carlos adds, angling the screen of his computer towards me. "Here," he shows me some excel sheets.

"Those are..."

"His accounts. We managed to hack into his off-shore accounts and lock him out. He's basically a fish on dry land."

"What about the merchandise?"

Carlos smiles.

"I might have started a string of rumors regarding his financial situation and that he might be unreliable. People are refusing to do business with him," he chuckles.

"Damn, man," I whistle. "You really went all out, cornering him like that."

"I needed to draw him here since he's at his weakest in this area. Now it's just a matter of time. But..."

"But? This all sounds great to me. It's just a matter of time now before he falls."

"He's floundering. He might try to hang on to your brother since he needs him. And what's the best way to get in Michele's good graces?"

"Through me," I groan.

Carlos nods.

"He is aware it's just a matter of time before I catch up with him. But if he gets desperate enough... You need to watch your back," he warns.

"I can handle myself. I'm more worried about Noelle, but I'm going to hire some new guards. It's actually one of the reasons I came here today, I need your help. You know I've been trying to get Guerra back off the ground, but there are very few people left. Michele ran through everyone who didn't agree with him, and most ended up dead. I need to rebuild," I sigh. "Which is the last thing I want to do. But now DeVille is involved, too, and I gave Cisco my promise."

Regardless of my dislike for the man, I'm not one to break my word. I'd negotiated certain terms with him, and I'm not going to break them just because I don't agree with his methods. That doesn't mean that I don't intend to take advantage of this and rebuild Guerra *my* way. And there is only one thing I care about.

Safety.

As long as I bear the Guerra name, I will always be a target. Just like

Noelle's association with DeVille will always put her on people's radars. It's just the way of our world. As such, no matter how much I'd like to, I can't just dissolve everything and take up a civilian life—that would simply mean a *short* life.

I might have never wanted this, but it's the situation I find myself in and that means making the best of it. And as long as I steer the ship, I can ensure it goes in the right direction.

For a while now I've been thinking of rebranding and bringing the family back towards a more *legal* venture.

I'd already talked to Carlos about my withdrawal from the weapons trade, since that had been just a necessity in the beginning. He can continue everything as he likes after we sell the last shipment.

"I don't trust DeVille," Carlos mutters.

"I don't trust him either. But I can see why DeVille thrived for so long, even isolated. Nothing escapes the man."

Carlos grunts.

I give him a short summary of my plans and he agrees to help me find some reliable people to hire.

"How has everything been?" he later asks, looking a little awkward while doing so.

"Good. More than good," I smile. "I can't believe how things turned out for us, or the fact that it might have been fate all along, as silly as that sounds. But I still blame myself for a lot of things..."

"It's not silly," Carlos, ever the skeptic, declares as he shrugs, trying to look unbothered. "And you need to cut yourself some slack, for fuck's sake, man. How could you have known?"

I can't help but chuckle at his words, since that's exactly what Noelle had said too—that I need to stop being so hard on myself.

"Ignorance doesn't make my behavior any better. It doesn't excuse it."

"You never saw her face, Raf. You told me yourself that the only times you were physical with her were in your cell, in the *dark*, while your eyes were swollen."

My fists clench under the table at the thought of those encounters. She would visit me sometimes, but only at night, when my cell was shrouded in darkness. And the first time she'd done that... It had also been the first time she'd kissed me—a sweet, sweet kiss that even now haunts me.

"Her voice was different, too," Carlos continues, and inadvertently he

touches the subject I'm most sore about.

"And who's guilty for that?" I give a dry laugh, my features contorting in pain. "You were there, Carlos. You know I did that with my own hands. I... I fucking crushed her windpipe and she still doesn't know about it. She doesn't know *I* am the reason she hates her voice..." I trail off, almost choking on my words.

Carlos is silent for a moment.

"Tell her," he finally says. "The longer you hide it, the harder it will be to tell her. And I don't think she'll like it if she remembers it first."

"You're right," I close my eyes on a sigh. "It's just... It might change everything."

"Or it might not. If she forgave you for how you treated her when you hated her, then she'll forgive you for this too. Let's face it, you did much worse."

He's right.

I did do much worse. And for as long as I will live I don't think I'll stop making up for my mistakes.

For the dark room. For my ugly words. For my hands around her throat...

"You're right," I admit. "I'll consider it." *And* try to find the right moment to tell her. It's not something you sprung up on someone suddenly.

Hey, by the way, I want you to know it's my fault your voice changed because I wanted to kill you. And I almost succeeded, too.

Damn it!

"Enough about me. Tell me about everyone else and if you need any help."

Carlos proceeds to give me an account of the time I've been away, and before I leave we plan my next drug appointment, which happens to be in a couple of days.

Always the good friend, he offers to come to our place to administer the drugs and help Noelle understand how the situation works and to be careful with me in case I get too aggressive.

To my great surprise, when the appointment comes, it goes without a hitch.

Noelle spends the entire night by my side, and though I don't remember most of it, as usual, there's a calmness that wasn't there before when I wake up.

I'm no longer tired, agitated or simply hopeless.

"See, I told you it's not as bad as you made it seem," she winks the following day at breakfast.

With that hurdle out of the way, I can finally focus on organizing our next date—the one she'd demanded.

The club date—the *most* dreaded date.

Just thinking of all the men leering at my pretty girl has me almost feral. But I'd promised myself I would try—for her sake.

For it to work, though, I have to make some arrangements that would leave my claim on her unquestionable.

And so I start devising, going out into town to a specific shop to pick up some items I'm certain she's going to be interested in exploring.

For how sheltered Noelle's always been, she's nothing but adventurous in bed. There are those hot as fuck times when *she* takes the initiative, but there are also those moments when she suggests we try something new that she'd read or seen on the internet.

We'd had various conversations on the topic and we'd discussed our likes and dislikes as well as our boundaries and what we'd like to try in the future. I'd told her I'm open to anything, but that I draw the line at involving someone else. We can do anything, no matter how crazy, as long as it's *just* the two of us.

"You're being so silly," she'd laughed at me. "Do you really think I would *ever* want someone else? *Anyone* else?" She'd arched a brow, and I'd go as far as to say she'd looked mildly offended I had said that.

"Just wanted to be clear, pretty girl. I'll never share *even* an inch of you. Anyone attempting to touch you would be inviting death," I'd replied gravely.

Killing might not be my favorite past-time. But for her, I would become a pro.

"Good," she'd purred, "because I would kill anyone who touched you, too."

Though I'd been serious about murdering anyone who tried to put a finger on her, I couldn't help but laugh when the same line had come from her lips. Mostly because imagining my tiny wife attempting any type of murder is hilarious.

"I'd pay money to see that," I'd joked, after which she'd tackled me, playfully getting on top of me before things had quickly heated up.

But all our discussions on the matter had given me the green light to proceed with this one step.

Friday evening finally comes around, and though I'm still not as excited about going to a club where everyone can see my little treasure, I'm willing to make a small compromise as long as she's happy.

Making myself comfortable on the sofa in our living room, I wait as Noelle starts her fashion try on. We may go, but that doesn't mean she can wear *anything*.

"Next," I tell her when I see where the hem of her skirt lands—barely covering her ass.

"You're no fun," she laughs, but there's no trace of condemnation in her voice. If anything, she has a mischievous expression on her face as she puts on yet another outrageous outfit.

Almost as if she was doing it on purpose.

"Next," I say to the following one too. And the next, and the one after.

"Noelle," I growl at her when she comes out wearing a flimsy see through top and yet another mini skirt for the tenth time.

Getting up, I go to her side, assessing her from head to toe.

"This isn't going to work," I tell her seriously, taking her hand and leading her back to the closet before going through all her clothes.

She leans against the door of the closet, a smile playing on her lips.

"Surprise me, my dear husband. What is club appropriate wear?" she challenges, and I can tell she's enjoying teasing me a little too much.

"You're really testing my patience, minx," I shake my head at her.

Rummaging through her clothes, I select two outfits that I consider semi-appropriate. I know I can't very well ask her to dress as a nun, much as I'd like nothing else.

"This or this," I hold up the two dresses. "You can choose. See, I'm not that tyrannical," I wink at her.

Both are black, long-sleeved, with a high neckline and midi length. Already I'm thinking of everyone who's going to see her shapely legs, and that doesn't help the tension in my body subside.

"Fine," she huffs at me, taking one of them from my hand and putting it on.

Fuck, but even her brusque and angry movements as she removes her previous garments are hot as fuck.

When she's done dressing, she adds a pair of Mary-Jane heels that are only a couple inches high. I'm guessing she's learned her lesson since last time.

Seeing me stare, she gives me a light twirl, looking like a goddamn fairy princess.

"Satisfied now?"

"Not quite," I smile knowingly. "Be a good girl and go sit on the sofa."

She frowns, tilting her head and watching me in confusion for a second before shrugging and doing as told.

She takes a seat, daintily arranging herself, her back straight, her generous tits outlining the front of her dress despite the fact that no skin is showing. Still, her posture is perfect—perfectly ladylike.

"Lean back," I command in a low tone.

She does.

"Good girl. Now, slowly, spread your legs and lift your dress for me," I murmur.

Her eyes widen, but she obeys, placing her hands on her knees as she slowly parts her legs, giving me a teasing view of her pussy.

Even slower, she wraps her fingers in the material of her dress as she lifts it up, her eyes on me, her teeth nibbling at her lower lip.

"Fucking hell," I groan when I get an unobstructed view of her panties, a sheer white piece of material that has a tiny stain of moisture at its center.

My mouth already waters for a taste.

"Like this?" she drawls in that sexy voice of hers, sliding her panties off her legs and dumping them on the ground.

"Fuck," I curse, my eyes affixed to that sweet spot.

I need to keep my head in the game and this isn't helping me at all.

Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and count to ten, hoping to rein myself in. Turning, I grab the small box I'd bought, placing it on the table in front of the sofa.

I drop to my knees in front of her, for a moment just dragging my hands up her shapely calves and soft thighs, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin.

"I have a surprise for you," my lips draw up in a smile as I meet her gaze, so clouded with desire the black of her pupils engulfs her irises.

"Show me," she whispers, the sound breathy and thoroughly intoxicating.

With nimble fingers, I remove the device from its box. Pink and egg-shaped at the base, it extends outward in a small tail.

She blinks in surprise.

"What's that?"

"What do you think?" I raise a brow.

She wets her lips, simply watching me as I handle the device.

"We're going to a club since I promised you. But you're only allowed to think of me. Only see me, only feel me," I tell her in a smooth tone, lulling her into opening her legs even wider for me. "You know I can't stand the thought of anyone else coming near you, seeing you the way only I'm allowed to see you, touching you..."

She draws a sharp breath in.

"But you like to tease me, don't you? You think I don't know *why* you want to go to a club? You want to see me on the edge, don't you? Admit it."

"Yes," her eyes snap closed as I bring the back of my fingers against the lips of her drenched sex, a light caress that seems to make her lightheaded. "Yes, I want to see you on edge. I want to see you *kill* for me," she cries out as I insert one finger into her tiny opening. She's already soaking wet, just from my voice—just from my fucking words.

She wants me to kill for her... Fuck, but she doesn't know what I'm capable of doing for her, does she? I'd take on the entire world just to be rewarded one of her smiles, and I could not find it in me to regret it.

"Shh," I whisper when her breathing intensifies, her hips wiggling on the sofa as she seeks to take more of my finger.

But this is just a taste. No matter how much I want to give her everything, I need to control myself.

Taking hold of the toy, I slide it up and down her pussy, lathering it in her wetness before I push the thick end inside of her.

Her mouth opens on a moan, her eyes wide as she looks at me in awe.

The tail remains on the outside, and before I do *more*, I take her panties, sliding them back up her legs.

"Raf..." she calls my name in confusion, as if she's not sure exactly what's happening.

I simply smile at her, taking my phone out and holding my thumb on the screen.

It's instantaneous. Her back arches, her lips parted as a throaty moan escapes her.

But just as the vibrations start driving her crazy, I stop them.

"You're wicked," she accuses, breathing harshly as she meets my eyes.

"Maybe, but I'm yours," I chuckle as I help her to her feet, smoothing her dress over her body. "Just like *you* are mine. And this is how you're going to keep all your attention on me tonight," I lean down to murmur in her ear,

bringing my lips to the sensitive skin of her neck and laying a soft kiss.

"As if anyone else could get my attention," she rolls her eyes, but there's a sly smile on her lips, as if she can't wait to see what else I have in store for her.

Her hand in mine, we leave, getting a cab to drop us at one of the clubs downtown.

When we reach the destination, we're able to cut the line since we have a booking. The bouncer scans us, nodding when he sees we're clean and handing us some special bracelets.

One of the reasons I'd opted for this specific club is the tight security and the fact that they allow no weapons inside. It's owned by an acquaintance, Enzo Agosti, and I know he keeps a tight leash on the management of his clubs.

The moment we're in, we go down a long-winded hallway swathed in red light. There's the slightest hint of music playing in the distance.

"It already looks fun," Noelle notes, tightening her grip on my hand.

"How was the club you went to last time?"

"It wasn't this fancy for sure," she chuckles. "To be honest, I went inside the first club I saw. At the time, I just wanted to get on Cisco's nerves, and I knew that if he picked me up from a club he would fume."

"Well, he definitely fumed more when he picked you up from the police station," I add, amused.

"You should have seen his face," she laughs. "That alone was worth the trip to the station."

"You're a sneaky little thing, aren't you?"

"Maybe," she flutters her lashes at me.

Just at that moment, I drag my other hand on the screen of my phone.

Noelle jumps up, startled, turning her head towards me and giving me a scandalized look.

"Raf," she gives me a playful slap.

"It's just the beginning, pretty girl," I assure her. "*Just* the beginning."

There's another bouncer at the end of the hallway, and seeing our bracelets, opens one of the doors for us.

As soon as we're inside, we're greeted by flashing lights and blaring music. Instinctively, I bring Noelle closer to my side, holding her flush against my body.

There are two levels to the club. The dance floor and the bar are on the

lower one, while the VIP tables are upstairs.

Before we could step into the crowd, there's yet another bouncer who shows us towards the stairs, walking us to our reserved seats before a waiter comes to take our first orders.

"I didn't expect this," Noelle shouts, trying to get her voice across the loud music.

"What?"

"The layout. It looks more like a fancy restaurant than a club."

"Only the best for you," I wink at her.

Had I secretly chosen this so she wouldn't be in the pit, among sweaty bodies where anyone could cop a feel? Most certainly yes.

She's getting her club experience and I'm getting some peace of mind—and hopefully a sweet reward from her later.

The waiter comes back with a glass of whiskey for me and a low-alcohol cocktail for her.

She takes a few sips before leaving her drink on the table and moving towards the balustrade to look down into the crowd.

"Don't tell me you want to go *there*?" I ask as I join her, still a little horrified at the thought. There's a certain longing on her face as she gazes at the people dancing with wild abandon, moving to the music as they let the freedom of the night envelop them.

"They look like they're having so much fun, don't they?" she sighs.

We spend a little more time sipping on our drinks, but Noelle keeps walking back to the balustrade, simply staring at the crowd.

"That's it," I finally say, resigned.

I won't die for one night, will I?

EIGHTEEN

RAFAELO

SWOOPING HER IN MY ARMS, I TAKE HER DOWN THE STAIRS AND INTO THE dancing crowd, making sure her body is flush against mine.

Once we're safely ensconced in a corner on the periphery, I lead her into a dance, wanting her to experience this to the fullest.

Her eyes sparkle with warmth as she looks at me, and going on her tiptoes, she kisses my cheek.

"You're the best, Raf," she whispers, and somehow, though the music is much louder here, I hear her perfectly.

I don't answer, merely smiling at her as we move to the beat, laughing when both our movements are a bit rusty compared to everyone else.

"Do you even know how to dance?" she laughs.

"Not this type," I grumble.

A mix of techno and pop, it's definitely not the ballroom type I'd been taught when I was younger.

"You can do it," the little minx tells me, taking my hand and dragging me a little further into the crowd.

Cheers erupt when a certain song comes on, and people start jumping up and down.

Both Noelle and I try to emulate the movements. Well, more her than me as I already feel a little awkward for standing out like a sore thumb with my height, with most people shorter than me.

She has such a huge smile on her face though, that soon any self-conscious thought disappears as I lose myself in her, holding her body next to mine as we jump around.

And sneaking one hand into my pocket, I activate her vibrator, increasing

the intensity as she jumps up and lowering it when she's down.

Her mouth opens on a little mewling sound, her hands tightening around my biceps as she erupts right before my eyes.

"Raf," she breathes out harshly, laying her head on my chest to ground herself. Pleased with myself, I simply caress her back, touching her lightly as she comes down from her high.

The song changes. We're both sweaty messes at this point, but I can't find it in myself to care.

Chuckling lightly at her dazed expression, I lead her to the bar, helping her perch on one of the stools and inviting her to order whatever she wants.

Because fuck it. We're here, she might as well feel good. And I trust myself to take care of her.

"I want..." she pauses, scrunching her nose in concentration. "A Long Island," she declares proudly.

"I'll have the same," I tell the bartender.

Our drinks arrive, and I can't take my eyes off Noelle as she slowly sips, her pouty lips wrapped around that goddamn straw...

A groan escapes me as I mentally replace the straw with something else.

Seeing my reaction, she gives me a come hither look, her eyes glazed with desire as she hungrily looks me up and down.

"Have I told you how handsome you are," she comes closer, her hand on my upper arm as she lightly traces my muscles. "How beautiful and absolutely breathtaking you are to me?"

I blink, taken aback by her compliments.

"Are you tipsy?" I chuckle, leaning into her so we're at eye level.

"Do I have to be tipsy to compliment you?" She raises a brow. "You're not the only one jealous, you know," she whispers, her mouth skimming my ear. "Look," she nods to the crowd where a few women are dancing in a group, all with their eyes on me as they talk amongst themselves. "They want you. They want what's mine," she continues, shocking me with her possessive words.

"Do they now?" I retort playfully.

"Every woman here, single or accompanied, turned to look at you when we walked in," she then adds in a serious tone.

"I never noticed," I frown. And I hadn't. My attention was solely focused on her.

"You didn't, but I did."

Her fingers are suddenly wrapped in the material of my shirt, tugging me closer and fitting me between her legs.

"I always do. I see them watching you every time we're out. And I know what they see. A handsome, strong man—a *special* man," she says, conviction shining intently in her eyes as she gazes at me. "They see how perfect you are and they want you for themselves. But I'll never let you go, Raf. You're mine," she rasps. "You've been mine all along."

"I *am* yours, pretty girl," I assure her with equal conviction.

I'd never realized she was so jealous, and for that I need to try harder to make sure she knows she's the only one for me—will *always* be the only one for me.

"You know that's the last thing you need to worry about."

She licks her lips as she smooths her palms over my chest, moving them up until she's cradling my face between her hands. Then, with slow precision, she brushes her mouth over mine.

Once. Twice.

"Make me come," she demands against my lips. "Make me come so everyone can see I'm yours, just like you're mine."

My eyes widen at her request, but I can only comply, feeling for my phone and bringing it between us, laying it flat on the chair, between her legs.

"Your wish is my command," I murmur softly, but I don't immediately go for the remote control.

Instead, I bring my hands to her legs, starting at her dainty ankles as I circle them, feeling how small they are in my grasp. I keep my touch light, so light her skin erupts in goosebumps, her eyes flickering with want every time I move an inch higher.

"The secret to fulfillment is in the anticipation," I whisper, my warm breath fanning her face just as I feel her own hitch in response. "It's in the *what-if*. I could do it right now, stimulate you hard and fast until you come screaming my name. But where would the pleasure in that be? I want to feel your frustration as it mounts, your nails lodged in my skin as you try to tempt me to give it to you. And then I want you to spend in my arms when you least expect it. Then," I pause at the rapt look on her face, her cheeks flushed, her hands already grasping on to my arms, her nails one push away from inflicting pain. "Only then will I give it to you, pretty girl."

Opening her mouth, she's breathing hard as she continues to look me in the eye, begging me with her gaze to give it to her—put her out of her

misery.

I haven't so much as touched the remote control yet, but I see the way her body is reacting, tensing ever so slightly, her thighs caging me to her.

"Raf, you," she gasps, her eyes closing as she moans softly.

She's on the edge of the precipice. And to make the fall sweeter, I sneak my hand between her legs, touching the screen as I activate the toy inside her.

It only takes one level for her nails to bite at my skin. Another level for her to clench her thighs, panting as she's slowly getting there. And at the last level—the highest—she comes.

Her spine arches, and with her ankles locked around me, she comes. So fucking hard, she screams my name.

The music plays away, her shout of pleasure lost amid other sounds.

But they know. The people watching know what happened.

"Fuck! That was the hottest thing I've ever seen," I tell her as she's slowly coming back, her cheek nuzzling the crook of my neck.

Turning her head slightly, she makes eye contact with the girls she'd mentioned earlier, her lips spreading into a satisfied smile as if she's daring them to look now.

Damn, but I never thought I'd be more in awe of her than now. She's such a force to be reckoned with, and she's *my* wife. My fucking wife.

"You need help with this?" she murmurs, bringing her palm to the front of my pants, cupping my very obvious erection.

"Not now. Definitely not here," I rasp, my blood already boiling from her little show.

"Then come," she suddenly says, turning to her drink and gulping it down before jumping down and leading me towards the middle of the crowd.

Fitting her back to my front, she takes my hands and brings them to her tits before lowering them. Seeing what the little minx wants, I drag them down, feeling her up just as she pushes her ass into my hard cock, grinding herself on me like the born seductress she is.

"Fucking hell, Noelle," I bring my lips to her neck, skimming the surface of her skin before opening my mouth and sucking.

I left the toy on low vibrations, and by the way she's wiggling her ass around, I can tell she's riding small aftershock waves, made even better by the hickeys I leave all over her lovely throat.

"Now *they* see," I speak softly, only for her ears.

"Hm?"

"Look," I nod towards some guys who can't seem to take her eyes from her. And I can't blame them, not when she moves with such fluidity, such decadent sexuality that she draws everyone's attention to her.

"Look how they're eating you up. Seeing my hands on you and wishing it was *their* hands," I add, violence punctuating my words.

"They can look, but they can't touch," she drawls. "Isn't that right, my dear husband? Only *you* can. Only ever you."

"Damn right, pretty girl," I grunt as I move my hands lower to her hips, tracing her curves and kneading her flesh with my fingers. "But even looking is too much..."

Suddenly, I turn her, snaking my arm around her waist and bringing her to me.

Her eyes glint dangerously as the hint of a smile appears on her lips.

"One more drink," she whispers. "And then..."

"And then," I nod, knowing exactly what she has in mind.

We rush to the bar, and she downs her third drink of the night with unexpected urgency, all the while giving me lustful glances that promise sweet fulfillment.

And fuck if I'm not so hard I'm nearly bursting.

All night she's done nothing but tease me. And the little minx noticed my hard-on as soon as we got here, so she's been doing everything to force my hand—get me to the edge until my control snaps.

"Done," she quips, wiping her mouth as she jumps from her chair. She doesn't even wait for me to reply as she takes my hand, nodding towards the direction opposite to where we came from.

We try a few doors until we manage to find the emergency exit, which *luckily*, doesn't trigger an alarm as we open it.

Maybe if I'd been a tiny bit less led by my dick I would have tried to stop Noelle. But as it happens, I can only see one thing.

Her.

Her as she shakes her little ass at me, looking at me as if I were the center of her world—looking as if all she's thinking about is me, her, and my cock in her cunt.

Jesus, she's really making me lose all sense.

The door closes behind us, and we find ourselves in the back of a dark alley with not a soul around.

My ears are pulsing, the sudden lack of sound making me even more

aware of her tiny breaths, or the way she moans my name slightly, using one finger to beckon me closer.

But that's all it takes. Because in that moment I snap.

I simply...snap.

One second she's smiling furtively at me, trying to get me to come closer, the next she's flat against the wall, her ass cushioning my cock just as she was teasing me inside.

"Fucking hell, Noelle. You're such a fucking tease, baby," I growl in her ear, my hand quick at work under her dress.

I don't bother with niceties as I rip the panties from her body, palming the remaining piece of material and bringing it to my nose to inhale her essence.

"You drenched them, pretty girl. You fucking drenched them."

"I couldn't help myself," she gasps. "You make me feel so wild, Raf. So...free," she moans deep in her throat as I increase the settings of her vibrator.

"Is that so? Let's see if I can get you even wilder," I chuckle, pocketing her panties before I reach between her legs, feeling her sweet little pussy spasming with every vibration.

"Do it. Please do it," she cries out, one step away from begging.

"Shh," I murmur softly, using one hand to unbutton my pants and free my cock and the other to bring the vibrations to the maximum, setting a timer before pocketing my phone.

Just as she starts moving wildly against me, I line my cock at her entrance, thrusting hard into her just as I bring my hand against her mouth to swallow her cries.

"Fuck," I rasp, unable to help myself when I feel her warmth surround me. And then there's that toy—that fucking toy that's already making me see stars.

She bucks against me, thrusting her ass towards me just as I withdraw only to push hard into her, fucking her with an intensity I would have never thought myself capable of.

Her mouth opens, her teeth clamping on my hand as she bites hard.

I relish the bite of pain, urging her to do more just as I start pumping into her.

"Damn it all to hell, Noelle," I groan at the overwhelming sensation of her pussy clamping down on me and intensifying the vibrations of the toy.

But I want more. I *need* more.

Suddenly, I pull out of her, turning her around to see her mascara running down her cheeks, her entire face flushed and wet with tears.

"More," she whispers. And I give her *more*.

My palms on her ass, I swoop her up, urging her to wrap her arms around me just as I back her into the wall once more, aligning my cock to her entrance and thrusting into her in one go.

She cries out, her eyes closing as she throws her head back.

"Arms around me, pretty girl," I demand, and she does. She's nearly limp, but she still obeys me like the good girl she is. "That's it. Now look at me," I rasp out. "Look at me fucking you, claiming you, *owning* you."

I'm not making sense, but at this point I can only give in to the madness—succumb to everything she makes me feel.

She opens her eyes, her arresting gaze meeting mine and holding.

Holding as I pump into her. As I feel her come again and again on my cock until I can barely hold it in anymore. Until I'm fucking gone.

For her. Only ever for her.

"Please," she moans as I drive into her, my thrusts growing increasingly hectic, out of control. "P-P-Please," she starts sobbing in my arms, holding tightly on to me as another climax washes over her.

But this time I'm there to accompany her.

One more pump of my hips and I still, my shaft swelling in size as I feel myself erupt inside of her just as my eyes roll in the back of my head with the power of my release.

Fuck...

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

What the hell was that...

Moments later—an eternity later—we're both breathing hard.

Time and space cease to exist as I hold her in my arms, trying to regain a semblance of control over myself.

Noelle is the first to speak, leaning back and urging me to look at her.

"Raf," she says my name in that fuck-me voice of hers and I nearly groan at the effect it has on my body—again. "Ask me what my favorite color is," she whispers.

I frown.

Sweat clings to her skin, her makeup already destroyed from the many tears of pleasure I racked off her body. Her eyes are dazed, yet clear. Despite everything, there's an odd clarity to her eyes.

"Ask me what my favorite color is," she repeats.

Taken aback, I can only comply.

"What's your favorite color?"

She smiles—a satisfied cat smile as she opens her mouth to speak.

"*Cadmium Quercitron.*"

I freeze.

Blinking, I fucking freeze.

My dick is still buried inside of her, and those words act like magic as it starts twitching again.

"Wh-What did you just say?" I mutter in awe.

My sluggish brain has a hard time catching up. Coincidence, or fate?

But as she lazily grins at me, I know there's only one explanation.

Fate.

It's been fate all along.

"You..." I trail off, my heart exploding in my chest at the myriad of emotions of the moment. "How is it possible?"

"We're finally together, Blue. Finally..." she whispers before her mouth is on mine, kissing me with years of pent-up longing.

Years of...

Fuck. Me.

Fate.

It's always been fate.

NINETEEN

THE PAST

OPENING HIS SCHOOL LAPTOP, RAFAELO STARTED WORKING ON AN assignment that was due the following day, wanting to get it out of the way before he could allow himself to unwind.

To everyone's dismay, he'd managed to get into college even with his special classes and unfortunate diagnosis. Though he kept his act up at all times, this was one thing he'd made some allowances for, mainly because he *needed* to escape his house.

For a while he'd been floundering, his mental health plunging into dangerous territory as he tried to keep up his act. He'd been suppressing his own self for far too long, and the effects were evident. He was having a hard time finding enjoyment in anything in his life, more often than not preferring to sit in his room, sleep, eat and play video games. He knew it wasn't a proper life, but it was his escape.

The *only* way he could find a semblance of normality was when he pretended to be yet another person in a video game. How fucked up was that?

In those games he could finally use his brain to the fullest, without downplaying his capacities or his affinity with planning.

He'd started with real time strategy games, where he would take control of a faction or an empire and see it thrive, usually going against an enemy force. It was the one area he could apply the knowledge he'd acquired while working with his father—the only time he'd enjoyed the mob business. He loved having control over everything and he'd become specialized in one of the popular games, earning his username a place on the homepage's hall of glory.

But he'd soon moved on from that when it wasn't stimulating him

anymore, going for games that incorporated strategy with role playing. Due to his thirst of *being* someone, he'd managed to get himself noticed by several channels that were hosting professional games, and by the time he turned eighteen, he was already participating in small, localized competitions.

It had all changed the year before, when he'd been extended an offer to play for a bigger company. Of course, all of that involved a lot of time that he could not afford if he was at home, with his mother smothering him and following his every step.

That had been his main incentive to move to his college dorm, pursuing his studies while enjoying his rapidly advancing gaming career. While it wasn't something he saw himself doing in the long run, for the moment it was enough to keep him from actively going insane.

For his studies he'd chosen a relatively safe field—earth science and geology. All in an attempt to put on a front for everyone around him and further hide himself.

But now he wasn't just *retarded Raf*. He was *retarded Raf who talked to stones*—a moniker he'd earned courtesy of his brother.

Finishing his assignment in record time, he glanced at the clock. He had the rest of the night to relax. His earliest class the next day was in the afternoon, so he could sleep in.

Now that he'd joined the bigger gaming leagues, his focus had shifted. The moment the activity had turned into a responsibility, his enjoyment of it had flown right out of the window—or, at least, it had diminished considerably.

That didn't mean he could stop. Not when he was earning money for his playtime, which meant he could one day become independent from his family. He'd put aside every penny, dreaming of the day he could just take off.

That was his ultimate goal.

He would play, earn some money on the side until he had enough so he could leave and never look back—finally find himself. From the moment he'd seen the potential of monetizing his skills, he'd decided he could finally take control of his life in a way that wouldn't influence anyone else—in a way that wouldn't inconvenience his brother.

He'd promised Michele everything, and he was going to give it to him. In all these years, that resolve had not weakened.

What had, however, changed had been his outlook on life.

More than ever, he felt himself drifting.

He'd never had something he particularly loved, or somewhere he belonged. He'd always moved with the wind, too focused on pleasing everyone around him *but* himself.

That was going to change. He was going to put himself first.

After he finished his degree, he would leave. He already had a pretty sum of money saved up, and it would only increase in the next two years until his graduation.

Turning on his gaming computer, he logged into his game of choice—one he used strictly for relaxation purposes. It was a simple RPG that mimicked real life but against a fantastical backdrop. The goal was to make connections and alliances and complete challenges.

And if he were honest to himself, it wasn't the *game* that helped him relax. It was the friends he'd made on the other side of the screen. People who had no idea who he was or the burdens he carried—people who only knew him as his avatar, *bluebird15*.

"You're late," a digitized voice noted the moment he entered the chat.

"I had to finish my assignment," he excused himself. "The others aren't online, either," he pointed out.

There were four people in their group chat, but aside from him only another one was currently online—*curiouscat26*.

Out of everyone, his relationship with *curiouscat26* was the most tense, as they often bickered about everything, from the choice of clothing of their avatars, to their interactions with other teams in the game. Somehow, they were *never* on the same page.

At times, he was sure *Curiouscat* was doing things on purpose just to get a rise out of him. Tiger and Ginny usually served as a buffer between the two of them. And now that they were the only ones present on the server, he could bet mayhem would be unleashed.

He almost groaned out loud.

Still, these were the few times in his day when he could be himself—speak like himself. He'd become so used with his stutter that now normal words posed a challenge for him, and he sometimes slipped into his role without even realizing.

He was just...lost. *There*, he admitted it to himself. He was fucking lost, and he didn't know how to find himself—if that was a possibility at all.

"Tiger is dealing with some stuff at home and Ginny has a doctor

appointment. You're stuck with me today, Blue," curiouscat26 said.

"Right, just my luck," he grumbled under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing," he smiled. Curiouscat was feisty. He didn't know if she was a woman, or a man pretending to be a woman, as sometimes that happened, but she had a pretty volatile temper. Still, he couldn't deny that for all their bickering, curiouscat was entertaining. She'd made him laugh on days he hadn't thought himself capable of any levity, and she certainly always helped him immerse himself in the game and forget the outside world for a few hours.

They'd all met in the game a while back. Curiouscat had already teamed up with Tiger and Ginny, and together they'd reached out to him to complete the team. Back then he'd been a solo player, his experience enough to help him get by. But after a little back and forth and a correct solution to a tricky riddle, he'd accepted to join them. The final formation consisted of two girls and two guys, though he had no idea if any of the people on the other side of the screen were who they said they were.

He, himself, was an impostor. He couldn't discount on everyone else being one either.

"Good," a pause. "We shouldn't start without the others, right?" she asked, slight hesitation in her voice.

The game itself came with a system that allowed for easy anonymity. While they talked to each other via their headsets, their voices were changed inside the game so they wouldn't be recognizable outside of it.

Curiouscat had an annoyingly high-pitched voice that more often than not gave Raf a headache, though he didn't know if it was the effect on the voice or the fact that he just disliked the person behind it. Though, technically, dislike was too strong of a word. It was something more like...antipathy.

They only ever played in their original formation, since it was a moot point to have only half the team. Raf could see why curiouscat wouldn't want to continue without them.

"Then I'll log off. Talk to you next time," he said, his hands already on his headset to remove it.

"Wait," she burst out. "You're really leaving?"

"Well, if the others aren't around and we can't actually play, why would I stay?"

"I don't know... To talk?"

There was a hopeful quality to the tone that made Raf pause.

"About what?"

Although they all got along in the game, they'd set some rules from the beginning, the most important one being *not* asking any personal questions or prying in the others' lives.

At the same time, Raf suspected they were all in the same boat. They had no one in the outside world and simply relied on digital friendships. Certainly, something about the way curiouscat said those words struck a chord in him.

"Is blue really your favorite color?" she suddenly asked, the question so inane it made him smile.

He could sense another person in need of company.

"No, my favorite color is violet," he answered cheekily.

"Violet? Why isn't your handle violetbird then?"

"It sounded too girly."

"Oh, so you wanted to make sure people knew you're a guy. Are you trying to pick up girls in the game?" she sounded scandalized, and Raf could barely hold back a grin.

"So what if I am? I'm clearly not trying to pick *you* up," he fired back.

"What if I told you I have violet eyes?"

"I'm sure you *don't* have violet eyes."

"How do you know? I very well could. Would that make you fall for me, then?"

"There is no such thing as violet eyes," he smiled. "Unless you're an anime girl."

"Maybe I am," she shot back in indignation. "But *maybe*, I really have violet eyes."

"Is it because I said it's my favorite color? Come on, curiouscat, don't tell me *you've* fallen for me?" he chuckled.

A pause.

"Why would I?" she replied in a *very* even tone. "I'd have to be a masochist to fall for someone who enjoys making fun of me all the time," she said with a huff.

"And now you're stalling. What's wrong, curiouscat?" Raf eventually asked, recognizing that she wouldn't engage him in conversation if there wasn't anything bothering her.

"I..." she sighed. "Just family stuff. I guess I needed a moment of

normality before going back to the real world."

"What happened?" he inquired, forgetting momentarily about their rules. She sounded so forlorn, in a way echoing his own loneliness that he couldn't help himself.

"Can't say. Rule one, remember?" her voice was soft, as if she was regretting the presence of the rule but needing to abide by it anyway.

"Circumvent it," he pushed on. "Leave out the recognizable details."

She was quiet for a moment, and Raf didn't know if she was going to say anything. Odd how they'd always been at each other's throats online yet now he wanted to be there for her—at least for a little while.

Due to its marked absence in his life, he knew what it was like to wish for someone to talk to but having no one.

He heard her intake of breath.

"Suppose your family is trying to force you to do something. Against your will. Something that benefits them but only hurts you..."

"Don't do it," Raf immediately said. He had enough experience with that and knew the repercussions of choosing to do only what other people wanted of him. "Don't sacrifice yourself for them."

"But what if there's...no way out? What if it's something that you've been told you need to do your entire life?"

Raf closed his eyes, his lips flattened into a thin line.

"I don't know what it is you're talking about, but from experience, I can tell you that doing what other people want to the detriment of what *you* want will only end badly. Don't sacrifice yourself for anyone, curiouscat. No one deserves that much. Just like *you* don't deserve to be put in that position."

He thought he heard a sniffle.

"You're not that bad, are you, Blue?" she tried to imbue some cheerfulness into her voice.

He merely smiled against his mic.

"I don't know if I can refuse. Not this. I depend on them for everything and... Agh," she cried out. "Why the hell is life so difficult?"

"What would be the fun if it was simple?" he retorted, surprising himself with the words. "I've lived with that dilemma my entire life, whether I should please my parents, or my siblings, or myself. Instead of choosing one clear path, I tried to split myself into three, change myself for every one of them so they would all be happy at the end of the day."

"And how did that end up for you?"

"Maybe they were happy, for a time. But it all imploded. And when it did, it blew in my face."

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "How did you manage to change it?"

"I didn't. I'm still doing it, bending to everyone's whims but my own. And trust me, curiouscat, it's fucking exhausting."

"I can imagine," her voice lost some of its previous high pitch, the tone warmer, softer. If he closed his eyes, he could even feel a slight sweet taste. "I can see the road they want me to take—I can see it clearly even though I have no idea what awaits me there. All I know is that I won't be...*me*. And I happen to like myself as I am, thank you very much."

Raf chuckled. There it was, the usual curiouscat he knew.

"You must be the only one," he muttered under his breath, but it was a light teasing, and she didn't take it to heart either.

"So what? At least *I* like myself. How many people are there that can't even stand to look at themselves in the mirror? I am quite aware of my qualities and flaws, and I would say I have more qualities *than* flaws."

He felt her words like an arrow to the heart. How many times had he looked into the mirror and seen himself as the impostor he was? Hell, he barely knew himself, what was there to like if he couldn't even identify *who* he was?

"There, there, curiouscat. Aren't you going a little overboard? You should wait for someone else to sing you praises. It doesn't look good if you do it yourself," he laughed in an effort to chase away the awkwardness.

"Maybe *you* should be more comfortable in your own skin," she said it so blatantly, it wasn't meant to be an insult. Yet to Raf, that was exactly what it was.

Because he wasn't comfortable in his skin. Far from it.

He looked how he wanted people to perceive him. Nothing more, nothing less. The real tragedy was that he wouldn't even let himself dream of what he'd *wish* he looked like. He was too afraid to put that image in his head when he knew it might never come true.

Yet if he closed his eyes, he could see. He'd like to gain some pounds, maybe turn them into muscle. He'd like to straighten his posture, walk to his full height. And hell, the biggest wish was that he wanted to behave *everywhere* like he did now—without a care in the world.

"You're right," he accepted. "I'm not comfortable in my skin," he admitted his deepest secret. Why, he couldn't tell.

He was aware that his features were passable enough. He'd always been complimented on his eyes and complexion. But because of his lifestyle, he was too thin, his cheeks hollowed out, his bones sticking out and making him look entirely unappealing.

There were so many things standing in his way, he didn't see how he could one day reach his ideal—he just couldn't.

"I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you if it's something you're sensitive about," she quickly said, her tone apologetic.

A sad smile pulled at his lips.

"It's ok. It's the truth. I'm not comfortable with who I am."

"Why don't you change it then? I'm sure if you put in the effort..."

"I can't," he sighed. "Remember those family expectations of yours? I'm in the same boat. I'm just trying to please everyone," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion.

"I'm sorry," she apologized again.

He could tell she *was* sorry for bringing it up. And soon, she switched the topic, approaching lighter subjects and doing her best to make him laugh, teasing him and bickering with him in a way that would bring them back to a comfortable footing.

He appreciated that.

She'd been the one looking for advice for her issue and she'd ended up tending to *his* tender sensibilities.

"Fuck, but what type of man am I?" he muttered, frustrated, as he put his headset down. Curiouscat had gone to bed early, and he'd logged off as well.

In spite of their previous history in the game, the conversation had flowed well, and he'd felt a sense of kinship the likes he hadn't felt in a long time—maybe forever.

For the rest of the night, he simply logged into his other game, working all his frustrations and grievances in the virtual environment as he challenged everyone he could find for battle.

It wasn't a solution to his problems, but it was a damn good way of blowing some steam.

And as usual, he ended up spending the night away, sleeping in the following day and barely making it to class on time.

He hunched his shoulders as he stepped inside the classroom, taking a seat somewhere in the back and laying his stuff on his desk. Getting his glasses from their case, he pushed them over his nose as his eyes skittered to

the clock on the wall. Five minutes. He'd barely made it in time.

It was odd how it was in the days he never had anything particular to do that he would waste his time and squander his sleep for absolutely no reason.

Now, after hours of having his eyes stuck to a screen, he felt worn out. He hadn't even eaten for the day, merely getting out of bed and hurrying to class.

"Rafaelo, right?" Someone asked from his side. He turned his head slowly, recognizing the guy as Steve, one of his colleagues from freshman orientation.

He nodded.

"Haven't seen you in a while, dude," he chuckled, laying his own materials on the desk.

"I-I've been busy," he said slowly.

Whenever he forced his stammer, he also had to slow his words so he wouldn't butcher his routine. It was all practice, and speed never helped.

"I can see that," he laughed as he pointed to his notebook filled with scribbles. It was mostly battle strategies for his upcoming game, but Steve probably thought he was the type to write down every single word the professor uttered.

And in a lifetime ago, maybe he'd been.

Now, it wasn't expected of him, just as it wasn't expected of him to be the best.

Due to his learning disabilities, he had extra time for assignments and during exams, everyone babying him in their own way.

He'd stopped minding it a long time ago, yet he could never shake the way some still regarded him with pity, as if people who had a harder time learning weren't people at all.

But that had been the main lesson he'd learned throughout the years. People didn't show you their true faces when you were strong. They did it when you were weak. Oh, and how they delighted in doing it.

Armed with that knowledge, he'd avoided making any friendships at college, having *some* acquaintances, but mostly keeping to himself unless it was strictly necessary to team up with someone for a class.

Class started and Steve didn't bother him further, which pleased Raf. The less people he talked to, the less he had to pretend.

Yet when the clock struck sharp and the professor ended the lesson, Steve turned to him once more.

"There's a party tonight at my frat, why don't you come, too? It's gonna be

fun."

Raf blinked, taken completely unaware.

He'd been invited to parties before, mostly in his freshman year. And though he'd had some intrinsic curiosity about them since he'd only seen college parties in movies, he'd had to refuse every invite. He was still living at home back then, and Cosima would never allow him to attend anything as scandalous or that could put him in danger.

"I-I'll think a-about it," he said before he could help himself.

Steve grinned and patted him on the back before he left, leaving with Raf the instructions to get to the party if he decided to come.

Raf didn't know why he hadn't refused it. What would he be doing at a party other than embarrass himself? Maybe if he were anyone other than himself... But he could never afford to slip out of character. Should anyone find out, it would be the end of everything as he knew it.

His thoughts soured for the rest of the day, mostly because deep down, he *was* curious about the party. He wanted to be a normal teenager for once, go out and have fun. He wanted...what he couldn't have.



HE SPENT THE FIRST HOUR IN HIS DORM ROOM STARING AT THE WALLS AND debating what he should do. He clearly knew the answer—he should *not* go. Yet he still warred with himself because of that deep rooted desire to be normal, or as normal as he could for one night.

Though it was not the time to meet his friends in the game, he logged on.

They had a schedule that they all abided by, especially since they'd agreed on no personal details. Yet now more than ever Raf felt the need to talk to someone, to...

And there it was.

Curiouscat26 was online.

He thought about it once. Twice. The third time he just pressed her icon, opening her chat.

"What are you up to, Blue?" her suspicious tone rang out in his headset.

"I didn't realize you had no life, too, *Curiouscat*," he shot back.

She grumbled something.

"At least *you* admit you don't have one either."

"Well, as a matter of fact I'm about to have one. I was invited to a party," he retorted smugly.

"A party for clowns? Ha, ha, good try. It doesn't count."

"A frat party, you fool. Not that you'd know what that is."

"I've watched American Pie. I know exactly what that is," she said accusatorially.

Interesting. That at least told Raf she'd never been to college. He assumed she was around his age from what they had talked, but neither had ever revealed a number. That would be too personal.

"Watching and going to one are two completely different things. Nerd," he didn't know why he said that, mostly because he wanted to one up her, but the word came out teasingly, almost *too* teasingly.

"Well, if you're so busy what are you doing on the server? Go to your frat party and leave me alone," she mumbled in annoyance.

"It's a Friday night. You're really not doing anything?" He felt compelled to ask as he detected a hint of sadness in her voice.

"My family is strict," she said matter-of-factly. "I can't go out as I like."

He nodded in understanding. He knew what that was like. If he'd been living at home, his mother would have never allowed him to go anywhere.

"Well, I'll think about you at the party," he forced a laugh.

"You're not going anywhere, are you?"

"What do you mean, of course I am!"

"Come on, Blue. I rather think we're more alike than you care to admit," she added, almost chastising him.

And it was this precise reason why he thought she was around the same age as him, maybe older. She displayed a maturity and self-awareness that he hadn't encountered before. And it fascinated him.

"I was invited to one, ok?" he eventually admitted. "But I'm not sure I'm going yet. Maybe..." he mumbled under his breath.

"Why wouldn't you go? Go out and have fun for us mere mortals too. You can come back and tell me if American Pie lied or not about what goes there."

"I'm not sure," he sighed. "I don't know anyone there. I'm not...popular," he forced the words out, admitting his weakness.

"So? Does it matter what they think? You're not going there to make them happy. You're going there for yourself. So put on your big boy pants and go!"

"You're very bossy, aren't you?" he smiled.

"Damn, Blue, don't tell me you've fallen for me already," she chided playfully.

"No way. You're not my type. I happen to like shy, meek girls," he retorted, though he didn't have the vaguest idea about what he liked. And if he were honest with himself, curiouscat wasn't so bad. She was...real. As ironic as that sounded, she was more real than anyone he'd ever met, regardless that she was just a digitized voice coming out of his computer.

"Of course you would. You need someone to submit to your tyrannical will, don't you?" she asked pointedly, but somewhere along the line, their bickering had lost its edge. It was now a comfortable teasing that didn't fail to put a smile on his face.

"Are you offering?"

"In your dreams," she huffed. "Now log off and go party! I'll be waiting for your stories."

No sooner did she finish her words than her avatar went offline.

Rafaelo supposed it was her way of emphasizing he needed to go out into the world. And maybe... Maybe he did.

He spent another hour dithering before he finally decided to give it a try.

After all, how bad could it be?

Taking a shower, he chose a pair of dark jeans and a clean, white shirt. He'd heard that the polite etiquette to such parties was to bring something to drink, so before he headed to the party, he made a stop at a liquor shop that didn't card. He didn't have a fake ID, and he didn't want to go through the trouble of getting one—not when he risked being found out by his family. And that was the last thing he needed.

He bought a bottle of the more expensive vodka he could find to show his thanks for the invite before going to the frat house.

By the time he made it there, he was right on the dot.

And the house was...kind of empty.

"Rafaelo, good on you to come!" Steve greeted him, coming down the stairs and shaking his hand. "And damn, you really went for it," he whistled as he regarded the bottle of alcohol.

"T-thank you," he strained a smile, keeping up his act as he strode deeper into the house.

"It's a bit early still, but why don't you grab a drink and mingle?" Steve advised, almost absentmindedly before going somewhere else.

Raf blinked, a little confused, but he did as Steve said, going to the bar and getting himself a glass of jungle juice.

He wrinkled his nose at the red liquid, but took a sip, surprised to note the fruity taste as well as the almost nonexistent alcohol.

If he'd come so far, he might as well try to enjoy himself.

The music was blaring out loudly, and soon more people started to trickle in.

He kept to his spot on the couch, nursing the same glass of jungle juice as he observed everyone.

Considering he didn't know anyone aside from Steve, no one really minded him. Especially with how he looked, huddled in his seat, his glasses askew on his nose, his blonde locks covering most of his face.

"I haven't seen you around."

He whipped his head around, noting the presence of a girl on the couch. She was also holding a drink in her hand, sipping casually as she assessed him.

"I-it's m-my first t-time," he strained a smile.

"Really?" she intoned, her voice grating on his nerves. There was something oddly fake about the cadence of her voice, a bitter taste erupting on his tongue. "Then aren't I lucky?" she continued, coming a little closer.

Raf kept his ground, merely nodding as she started talking about some subject he'd never heard of. But he wasn't paying much attention, his eyes skittering around the room as he took in the deluge of people, all moving their bodies to the music.

The room started to fog up as more and more people came inside, and the couch was a tight fit.

"You didn't tell me your name," the girl suddenly said, her hand on his thigh. Out of pure reflex, he jumped up, spilling his glass of jungle juice all over his white shirt in the process.

"Damn," he gave a low mutter. The girl's eyes widened, and she seemed a little put off with him as she soon redirected her attention to someone else. Just as well since Raf had no interest in her. And as he walked a little around the room, he realized he had no interest in what was going on around him either. He'd witnessed enough to realize it wasn't quite his scene.

He didn't get to exit the room, though, as he came face to face with Steve, who looked a little worse for the wear than before.

"Rafaelo! My man," he yelled to be heard over the music. "Come, let's get

you a drink."

Raf was about to tell him that he'd had his drink and he'd spilled it too. But before he could say anything, he found himself led to another room where there were only guys drinking and laughing and smoking.

"This is my friend Rafaelo," Steve made the introductions, saying he'd met Raf in one of his classes while adding a few embellishments to make their relationship seem closer than it was. Why, Raf couldn't tell.

He was too confused by everything going on around him, and when he was offered another glass of alcohol, he simply accepted.

The worst was yet to come. Because one glass became two, then three, and then Raf lost count.

He realized he didn't have to speak, most of the other guys doing the talking for him as they boasted about the chicks they fucked, at some point all laughing when they realized they'd fucked the *same* one.

"We have a tradition here," Steve told Raf. "If a girl fucks all the brothers in a class, she gets to make a wish," he chuckled, saying the girl they were talking about had one more guy to fuck before she'd reach that level.

Raf merely smiled, taking a big gulp of his drink.

His insides were fuzzy.

He was no stranger to alcohol, and he'd had his fair share of blackout moments in the past, most due to drinking to forget the pain of being stabbed. He'd always refused to drink with his father's men for fun, but he found the activity to be much more pleasant than he had imagined. Especially now that he was with *normal* guys his age.

And as he got drunker and drunker, his stammer gave way to a natural slur that did not take into account his made-up persona.

"Rafaelo," Steve started, but Raf held up a hand.

"Raf."

"Raf," Steve smiled. "You're not joining in?" he asked as he brought a bottle of vodka to fill Raf's already half-empty glass. He didn't even notice, bringing it to his lips for another sip as he tried to make sense of what Steve required of him.

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly, the words almost escaping him.

Only then did he notice that more people had joined in, some girls too.

"We're playing never have I ever. You know how to play, right?"

Raf nodded. He had an idea.

"Perfect!" Steve clapped. "Greg, you start," he pointed to the guy on the

other side.

"Never have I ever fucked outside," he grinned as he watched everyone around.

Raf blinked, and for a split of a second, he didn't know whether to drink or not. But then, he supposed that drinking was the punishment if he had *not* done it.

So, he drank.

Everyone was quiet for a second, regarding him funnily before they moved on.

"Never have I ever..." the guy looked around, almost as if he wanted to ask something sneaky, "gotten into a knife fight."

A low sigh escaped Raf as he didn't drink this time. Maybe he'd be lucky, and he won't have to drink for all rounds.

No one else drank either, eliciting a laugh from the guy who asked the question.

The next person went.

"Never have I ever smoked weed," he laughed as he popped a joint into his mouth and lit it up.

Everyone but Raf drank. He frowned. He'd smoked with his father's men. But why was everyone drinking? Including those who were clearly smoking now.

The questions continued, all involving sex, acts of vandalism and things that seemed to be regarded as *cool* by everyone.

Raf was already so gone that even if he wanted to lie, he wouldn't have been able.

Steve's turn was up, and Raf regarded him with slight apprehension, knowing that soon it would be *him* who had to come up with a question.

"Never have I ever been in an orgy," Steve said, looking around expectantly.

Raf, who clearly hadn't, went ahead to drink, realizing too late that everyone was staring at him—including Steve.

"You've been in an orgy," he blinked, taken aback.

"Of c-course not," Raf answered, flustered.

"Then why are you drinking?"

"Oh, no, he must have thought you drank if you haven't done it."

"Wait, wait," another guy put his hand up, standing on wobbly feet. "You mean you've gotten into a knife fight?"

Raf blinked in confusion, slowly nodding. His head was already swimming in alcohol, his confidence suddenly soaring.

"No shit!" more noise.

"Did you get hit?"

"Show us!"

A chorus of voices joined in until it was hard for him to make sense of who was talking. He was vaguely aware of lifting his shirt to show some of the faded marks on his torso.

Everyone was cheering him on, and he lost count of the people who tried to talk to him. For an outsider, he was suddenly very much *in*. So much so that he was once more plied with alcohol until he could barely think coherently.

It was a few hours later that he finally excused himself and left the frat house. At the height of his euphoria, he felt very pleased with himself and how the interaction had gone. He even wagered he might have made some new friends.

Exiting the house straight onto the main road, he squinted as he tried to make sense of where exactly he was. His sight was foggy, his brain even more so.

Regardless, as he wobbled down the street, he couldn't *not* stop every five feet and pick up all the bottles and other types of trash he could find and put them back where they belonged—in trashcans and recycle bins.

At that moment, all he could think of was his civic duty to ensure the cleanliness of the city.

But that wasn't the only one.

As he waited for the light to turn green so he could cross the street, he spotted an elderly woman doing the same a few feet next to him.

He blinked twice as a bright bulb lit up in his brain—an opportunity to *excel* at his civic duty. The moment the light turned, he wasted no time in grabbing the elderly woman's arm, giving her a charming smile and proceeding to help—*drag*—her across the street.

Her protests were only muffled by Rafaelo's mumbled words as he could not even properly convey his intentions.

Instead of *let me help you*, the sound that came out of his mouth was more like.

"Lebe hell-u."

Which, of course, the elderly woman misinterpreted as a threat, especially

given Rafaelo's half-smile since one side of his face was entirely numb from the excess of alcohol. Her eyes widening, she swatted him in the head with her bag, pushing him off her and running away—or as best as she could, given her age.

Raf was stumped.

He was left staring at the woman's retreating figure as his brain tried to catch up with everything.

Why had she hit him? He'd only meant to help her.

The more he pondered, the more he frowned, and he spent several minutes trying to get to the bottom of it before shrugging and deciding he needed to get home.

He was rounding the corner to his building when he heard a scream. With so much vodka in his system, he felt *almost* invincible. Which meant he thought of nothing else but diving headfirst into danger. After all, someone needed help, and he was always up for offering help. It was just that he didn't know when to say no.

Raf was swaying from side to side, his eyes barely making out the shapes in the dark. Yet that didn't stop him from charging immediately when he realized it was a woman struggling against two men. They had her backed against the wall of the building, one of them with his hands on his belt while the other was hiking her skirt up.

Maybe if he'd been sober, he would have done things differently. But as it stood, his first instinct was to get involved and help the woman before he could think things out.

And so, he charged.

Ungracefully.

A little gauche.

He was, after all, barely holding himself together. Yet his inherent sense of justice dictated he should *do* something.

The girl gave a loud yelp as Raf went for the guy who was trying to undress her. He rushed with a fist to the man's jaw, all the while trying to avoid the other one laying hits on *his* body. It was a cacophony of sounds, grunts and groans as everyone hit the others.

But what was odd was the fact that the girl wasn't leaving. She wasn't running for her life. Instead, she was yelling at Raf to let them go, slapping his back and trying to intervene in the scuffle.

If he'd been sober, maybe that would have registered as a red flag. As it

stood, he didn't really see it as a suspicious sign. He only believed her to be frightened, clawing her way out and trying to harm the bad men by herself too.

Admirable, in his view, but foolish.

A fist landed on his face. One in his stomach. He landed a few of his own, too. But it was all such a back and forth that no one was winning.

Until the sirens blared.

The men, aware of what that meant, were trying to disentangle themselves, but Raf wouldn't let go. In the back of his mind, he heard the police sirens and somehow honed in on that thought, knowing he couldn't let go until they showed up so the perpetrators could be punished for attempting to assault the woman.

Yet when the police car drew to a halt, the officers coming out of it, it wasn't the two men who got placed in the back of the car.

It was Raf.

In his drunken stupor, he hadn't heard the men defending themselves and pointing out Raf as the aggressor. And with how drunk he was, the police didn't even question it.

He mumbled some things in his defense, none coherent enough to be taken seriously.

And that was how Rafaelo ended up being placed in a cell for the rest night. After all, the police couldn't deal very well with someone so inebriated.

It was in the early hours of the morning that Raf woke up, startled to find himself cold and without his blanket. As he opened his eyes, he recognized he was *not* in his dorm, and that his surroundings appeared rather bleak.

His state of mind became even worse as he was told why he'd been arrested, and that his parents had been notified.

At that news, he was one step away from punching himself for what an idiot he'd been.

Especially since it wasn't long before his mother's shrill voice rang into the station, his father's low mutter following soon after.

"My poor darling. What did you do to him?" She accused the policemen, one step away from doing them bodily harm as she saw the state Raf was in.

His white shirt was still stained with red from the jungle juice. Along the way, though, he'd also collected some dirt and grime marks, making him look like he hadn't bathed in weeks. And as Cosima stepped into his cell, hurrying to hug her precious baby, it was to be hit by the nauseating smell of alcohol.

"Raf, what happened?" she drew a sharp breath, worry evident in her eyes.

Raf didn't know where to start.

Damn it, but his one night out wasn't supposed to end like that. He wanted a brief reprieve from his lonely existence, not a stint in jail for reasons he still didn't fully comprehend. And he told his mother that much too—a little more embellished, of course.

He emphasized the fact that he wanted to make friends, so he'd accepted an invite to a party and he'd drank a little more than his share—none of it untrue.

She listened attentively, nodding. He could see right away as her focus shifted, from outrage to pity.

For all the love in the world she carried him, there were moments where he could see the pity in her gaze and the disappointment that her previous son would never live a normal life. Yet she'd never told him that. She'd accepted him with his faults and all the issues that came with his *condition*.

It was a bit startling to realize that his mother, the woman who'd schemed and plotted her entire life to get him on top, would be ok with *not* fulfilling that dream.

But if there was one thing his *condition* had helped him with, it had been to see the true of his mother's affection. Yes, she was an awful person—had been awful to everyone but him. Yet no matter how much he hated her for her part in his brother's suffering, he couldn't shake the inherent love he had for her—and he probably never would.

He saw her as she was. Flawed.

That didn't make her any less his mother just like that didn't make her any less guilty for everything she'd done.

And *that* was a dilemma he warred with on a daily basis.

His mother continued to baby him while his father dealt with the logistics of his arrest. It wasn't long before he was let go, but *not* because of his family's influence. Simply because the arrest had been a fluke.

Though Raf had been drunk out of his mind, and he *had* been the one to initiate the brawl, he'd acted as he rightly believed someone was in danger. The CCTV showed why Raf might have thought the men were about to hurt the woman and he'd been given a slap on the wrist when the other participants had been called in, all confessing it had been some kind of kinky game between the three of them.

Raf had to reluctantly agree that it now made sense why the woman hadn't run, instead turning on *him*.

"My darling boy, you can't do that from now on. How can I let you live by yourself if this is what you get yourself in..." his mother continued to drone on and on, coming with him to his dorm to see him settled. Deep down in her heart, she actually wanted to get him to pack his bags and return to living at home with her.

"You know how lonely I get," she sighed, sitting on his bed and watching him with sorrowful eyes.

"B-but t-that's a t-two h-hour r-ride," he'd made the excuse, making himself smaller in his chair and hoping his mother would eventually tire of watching his pitiful self and would finally leave him alone so he could die of embarrassment.

"I know, baby boy," she pursed her lips. "I just worry about you all the time."

"I-I c-come h-home m-most wee-kends," he tried to explain.

And he did. Two or three weekends a month he was home. Was it so bad that he wanted some time to himself?

"Oh, Raf, what am I going to do with you?" Cosima lamented, taking him in her arms for a tight hug.

They talked a little more, or Cosima talked *more* as she tried to convince him to come home. When she realized it was in vain, she finally relented and left him at his dorm with the promise he wouldn't get himself into trouble again.

He happily agreed. He didn't think he'd want a repeat of the other night either, even though all the events were sort of a blur. He remembered the party, he even remembered the fight, but it was like he was a spectator in his own body.

The worst was the nausea he couldn't shake even after a hot shower and a warm meal, his head throbbing, his whole body aching from where he'd been hit.

He was lucky he'd only gotten a few bruises to his face, because if his mother had seen his torso and the many discolorations that marred it, she would have *never* allowed him to remain. Raf knew how his mother's brain worked, and if she got it in her head that her son was in danger, then there was no convincing her otherwise.

He tended to his injuries himself, taking some painkillers and finally

laying down in bed to get some rest, not realizing as he slept the day *and* night away.



WHEN HE NEXT AWOKE, IT WAS ALREADY SUNDAY, AND HIS MOOD HADN'T improved. On the contrary, with the alcohol completely flushed out of his system, he felt even more alienated from everyone around him.

All he could think of was that he was a farce. And he didn't know anymore how *not* to be one.

He spent the day finishing his assignments for the following week and decided to forgo going online. For some reason, he felt his inadequacy to the depth of his soul, the way he was doomed to live a life that wasn't his own—that would *never* be his own.

It wasn't even self-loathing that governed him, though he'd experienced plenty of that in the past. Now it was a simple loathing of the present and of the status quo. It was a dislike of himself and the person he showed to the world but more than anything it was a hopelessness that led to minor bouts of depression that he could barely shake himself out of.

And at that moment, he felt another one coming.

The last time he'd felt like that, Raf had stayed locked inside his room for an entire summer, his routine alternating between sleeping and his computer. He'd go through periods of not eating and almost starving himself, and then he'd switch to the other extreme, eating too much and unable to stop himself.

Now, he could feel himself plummeting again, and Friday night had only served to show him what he was missing, the friends and connection he could make but would forever be out of reach.

Yet he still had one more surprise waiting for him as he went to his classes the following Monday. People were giving him odd glances, furtively laughing at him, their eyes crinkling with unknown amusement.

He noticed, but he didn't know it was directed at him.

Squaring his shoulders, he kept his head down as he took a seat, opening his notebook and scribbling down the date.

"Did you see? I think it's him."

"It's definitely him," someone from another row laughed.

He blinked in confusion, especially as more people joined in, secretly watching something on their phones and turning to Raf to laugh about it.

It continued to his next class too, until he finally saw Steve, who decided to tell Raf the scoop.

"Here, isn't this crazy?" Steve asked with a laugh, clicking play on a video that showcased Raf's drunk ass making a fool of himself at the frat party. He didn't remember that part of the evening, but from the looks of it, some people had dared him to do silly things like dancing on the bar or waiting with his mouth open for an entire bucket of jungle juice to be shoved down his throat.

He felt ill just looking at the videos. But there was more.

Someone had filmed him getting into a fight after the party and had shared the video to the entire campus. The only issue was that no one was calling him a hero or saying he had done a great thing by trying to save a woman from being attacked.

Everyone was calling him lame, a pervert and a creep. As the story went, *he* had been the one to harass the girl and the other guys had only tried to put a stop to it.

He was being painted in the worst light, and *everyone* bought it. Suddenly, *he* was the lowlife, not the men who'd orchestrated the entire scene, and who had conveniently disappeared at this time.

Because of his usual odd manner accompanied by his stutter, the consensus was clear. Raf was the creep.

Suddenly, all the giggles and furtive glances made sense.

They were laughing at him.

Everyone was laughing at him.

The narrative was already set. He had behavioral issues so he could never get a girl, and that was the root of his frustration. The videos only showed his increased thirst for validation and the fact that he was a freak.

"Man, you shouldn't have gone that far," Steve continued. "Stacy told me you tried to pull some moves on her, too," he shook his head in disappointment. "Word of advice, learn how to read the room and when a girl's not into you," he said before he left a flabbergasted Raf standing alone in the center of the campus.

And *everyone* was laughing.

He felt ill.

He barely held it together as he hurried to his room, away from all the

derisive laughter that followed him around.

Opening the door to his room, he locked himself inside, his breathing out of control, his heart pounding in his chest. He felt...disgusted with himself.

Absolutely appalled that he'd let himself fall that low and for what? For a little attention? Without the alcohol fogging his mind he could see that everyone was entertaining him, not out of some kindness or some absurd interest, but merely so they could make fun of him.

A bitter laugh escaped him. Curiouscat had been right. He'd been their clown.

Ripping at his clothes, he threw them around as he stumbled into the shower, the water pouring down on him just as he broke down, his emotions reaching the surface and making him fall to his knees with the intensity of his frustration. His arms on the cold tiles of the wall, he let the water wash over him, tears trickling down his cheeks as he let out a low howl.

In that moment, he hated everything.

He hated his life, and he hated his past.

But more than anything, he detested his own damn self. Because it was all his fault. No one had forced him to do anything.

From the very beginning, he'd done things out of his misguided sense of justice—one that always backfired on him.

He'd always held on to his ideals, thinking himself above everything because he could use cold logic in his judgment, reaching a conclusion objectively, rather than being ruled by emotion. After all, he'd been reared that way. To prioritize facts over emotions.

Yet deep down, he'd never been able to separate the two. Not when he'd had to make the biggest decision in his life and, clearly, he'd made the wrong one.

He'd hurt the one person in his life who'd trusted him unconditionally. And *that*... That still ate him up on the inside, the guilt threatening to drown him worse than the water pouring down on him, or his tears that made his eyes sting, or his screams that made his throat ache. *Nothing* could hurt him more than he'd hurt himself.

He could still remember his childhood, the time when everything had been perfect—or, retrospectively, as perfect as could be. When Gianna had still been with them. When Michele had regarded Raf as his protector—as his true brother.

It had been the most beautiful period of his life. Raf doubted he'd ever

know happiness as he'd known then.

The memories of Michele drawing him personalized characters, or Gianna hugging him and telling him she was proud of him hurt just as they made him happy. They hurt so fucking bad and made the anguish he felt even more intolerable.

And who was to blame for everything he'd lost?

Him. Just...him.

"Why? Why, why, why?" he screamed as he threw his fists against the wall, hurting no one but himself. Yet he needed that—he *deserved* it.

He was on the brink, and he knew it. Though he was living daily with regret, guilt and disappointment, over the years he'd found a modicum of balance by putting it aside. After all, that was his coping mechanism. Locking stuff away and dealing with bits at a time, making sure he wasn't wholly overwhelmed.

Yet the disadvantage was that there were times like this, when everything just came crashing down. When just a little push made everything tumble down on him, unleashing a river of anguish so strong, he didn't know how to put himself together again.

He had to give it to Steve and everyone else mocking him.

Raf *was* a loser. He was a loser of his own making, and wasn't that the worst?

It didn't matter how smart, how capable, or how responsible he was?

Somewhere along the way, he'd lost the notion that he was anything but a loser. He'd lost sight of everything in his life as he'd focused only on the bad.

The incident on campus only served to emphasize the state of affairs and the fact that even something as innocuous as him going to a party could end up so disastrously.

Yet the worst wasn't that people were mocking him, or that he'd become the laughingstock of the university. The worst was that Raf believed he deserved it.

He thought he deserved every little bad thing that happened to him. No matter how much he hoped for a normal life, or how he wished he could stop pretending, finally find his *true* self, he didn't dare try it.

He didn't deserve anything good in his life.

For that, he only had to look at his brother and the way he was actively trying to self-destruct—all a direct consequence of Raf's decisions.

He saw Michele and he knew he deserved absolutely everything that

came his way.

Time passed. He found it harder and harder to get himself together. Even as cold water washed over him, he couldn't move from the spot.

His movements were sluggish, his entire body echoing the sentiments in his heart.

When he managed to get himself out of the bathroom, he pulled a robe tightly around his body, absorbing his heat and trying to calm the clattering of his teeth.

Yet did he deserve anything else but discomfort?

At first, he laid down on his bed, thinking to sleep everything off. But after twisting and turning, his mind too alert for that, he finally relented and opened his computer.

His intention wasn't to talk with anyone, though deep down that was his deepest desire. Instead, he pretended he was only checking his notifications and making sure he wasn't missing any work opportunities in the upcoming week.

No one forced him to log into his game, and definitely no one made him press on the messages icon, seeing all the missed chats.

All from curiouscat.

He blinked, a little taken aback as he scrolled through tens of messages asking if he was alright. Curiouscat actually worried about him because he hadn't been online in a few days. She...

He didn't know why that hit him so hard. Up until then he'd assumed if he disappeared off the face of the earth no one would mourn him aside from his mother. Maybe no one else would notice either because there was no one to care.

Yet it was startling to realize someone was actually checking in on him. His absence affected someone.

He was still staring at the screen when the call came, his fingers absentmindedly clicking to accept it. Yet it wasn't just that, because he also reached for his headset, putting it on.

No, he wanted this—craved this.

He wanted to know he mattered for someone. He *needed* to know that. Why, he didn't know. He had his mother, and that was more than a lot of people could say for themselves. Michele certainly had never had that...

He shook himself. He couldn't go down that road again.

"Blue? You're there?" a tentative voice asked.

"I'm here," he answered. No teasing. No jokes. Just a calm affirmation.

"Thank God," she breathed out in relief.

It struck him that for the first time her digitized voice didn't screw with his brain as much, it didn't sound so painful, or so contrived. It sounded... familiar.

And God knew he needed familiar at that point.

"You're okay? You haven't been online in a few days, and you missed the usual time yesterday..." she droned on, but he just smiled.

"I'm ok. Had a little mishap along the way but I'm ok," he chuckled, tears at the corner of his eyes.

He didn't know what that state was. He was laughing, yet tears kept poking at his eyes, wanting to be let free. It was the oddest thing.

"A mishap? Don't tell me you actually had an American Pie experience," Curiouscat exclaimed, scandalized.

"Maybe? I haven't watched the movie," he admitted.

"Blasphemy! Blue, what age are you living in? How could you? Everyone's watched American Pie!"

"I'm not that well versed in popular culture."

"Ah, I knew it. You're a nerd. Through and through, aren't you?"

"Guilty," he admitted with a low laugh.

"Ok, we can't have that. We need to remedy it. We're watching American Pie."

"We are?" he raised a brow, yet he didn't contradict her. For today, at least, he wasn't going to be his usual teasing self. He would just bask in the joy of having someone to talk to.

"Of course we are. But first, I need to know what happened to you Friday night," she said, and he heard munching noises.

"You're eating?"

"You bet I am. I'm all settled for your story. I have some Cheetos, the super spicy ones, and some Diet Coke by my side. So, I'm waiting."

"So, you like spicy food?" He couldn't help but ask.

"You're stalling. Let's hear it. What happened?"

"Well..." he chuckled to himself as he gave her a quick rundown of everything that had happened and how he'd ended up in jail—for the first time ever.

"My, it seems to me that you had quite a few firsts," she laughed. "How was jail? Damn, my brother would absolutely kill me if I ever got arrested."

"It was...cold. But I was too inebriated to feel it. I only felt the effects afterwards," he explained, though he also stored the information she shared about her brother.

"I can't believe that they think you're a creep for trying to do the right thing. The people at your college sound *very* dumb, no offense."

"None taken," he smiled. "But it was also my fault for drinking too much. I didn't realize until I saw the videos that the night wasn't quite as I remembered it," he admitted, feeling comfortable enough with her to share the fact that he'd been taken for a fool.

Maybe it was the anonymity.

Under that mask, he could be his real self.

"Those people sound awful, Blue. Why would you want to be friends with someone like that? Sorry to break it to you, but decent people don't just bully people for no reason or take advantage of clearly drunk people. That's an asshole move, and I think you know it, too."

He took a moment to answer.

"I guess I do," he sighed. "I don't know how I'm going to show my face around from now on, considering they think I'm a pervert," he tried to make light of the situation.

"Listen," she started, her tone serious. "You know that saying *in vino veritas*?"

"Yup."

"Well, I happen to think that drunk people act as their truest selves. If your first inclination, as drunk as you were, was to save someone else other than yourself, then more power to you. Don't listen to what others say when *you* know the truth, and the police records can also back that up."

"You're right," he chuckled. "You're quite the pep talker, aren't you?"

"I have to be. When no one else hypes you up you have to become your own hype man," she revealed, another piece of information that Raf carefully stored away.

"Don't tell me you have a lot of experience with getting drunk?" he asked, not wanting to focus on something too personal, like why she had no one to hype her.

"No way," she laughed. "My experience is limited to getting the last sip from a glass left on the table before the staff takes it away. I've never had enough to get drunk, but if I did, I don't think my family would take it lightly," she laughed.

Another tidbit revealed. But then again, there could be a myriad of reasons why she wouldn't be allowed alcohol.

"Well, don't. I'll say from personal experience that it absolutely sucks the next morning."

"Note taken, Blue," she said in an amused tone. "But seriously, don't mind those people. They're just mean."

"Thank you," he eventually said. "For listening, and for having my back."

"Of course. I'll have your back every time if you let me. It can get pretty lonely here if you're not online."

"Don't tell me you waited every day for me to appear?" he genuinely laughed; the subject of his adventure dropped just as his spirits started to rise.

For all their previous enmity, curiouscat was easy to talk to—comfortable. He wasn't used to that. Just like he wasn't used to having someone to share his thoughts with. It was...disconcerting. But pleasant.

"Not *every* day," she grumbled. "I don't have that kind of time. I'm busy, you know?"

"Are you now? I thought you wasted your time playing video games."

"Hey," she exclaimed, feigning annoyance. "I'll have you know I have a *very* busy weekly schedule. You should consider yourself lucky that I make time for you."

"If you say so..."

"I'll even watch American Pie with you. See, I'm contributing to your education in pop culture. So, buckle up, Blue. You won't be the same person once I'm through with you," she laughed, still munching on Cheetos as she pulled up a shared screen to load the movie.

"Why do I have a feeling you're right?" he mumbled, amused, as the credits rolled on the screen.

A few hours later he forgot all about his worries. Curiouscat had been right in that respect. He did feel like a new person. And it wasn't because now he had a new appreciation for American Pie. It was because he felt lighter than he had in a long time.

That movie was the first that started an almost daily routine where they would watch a movie while comment on it and have fun.

It was the best way to still keep the anonymity in place while also revealing parts of themselves they'd never shared with no one else. Because at the end of it, what did it matter if they knew the particularities of their living situations, their names, or how the other looked? They knew each

other's ideals and deepest thoughts, and that was enough. At least until they switched from comedy to thriller and noir, their discussions going deeper and deeper into human morality and the implications of life-altering decisions. They shared so much of their core selves, that the person behind the screen didn't matter anymore.

Out of loneliness, a routine was born. Along with snacks and drinks of choice. Curiouscat always went for Diet Coke and Cheetos, while Raf opted for a less spicy version, choosing Pirate's Booty but sticking with Diet Coke, too.

They went through at least three or four movies a week, usually saving an hour or two afterwards for an in-depth discussion.

Suddenly, Raf wasn't so alone.

Though his guilt was always there, in the back of his mind, he finally had someone to ground him—bring him back to earth when his demons were too loud.

It didn't take long for Curiouscat to become his best friend. And though he had no idea, it was the same for her, too.

She had her difficulties, but she always made time for Blue, her faithful friend.



TWO YEARS LATER

"That might be my favorite one," Raf mentioned as he leaned back in his seat as the ending credits rolled on.

"Really?" Curiouscat asked.

"Why? Are you surprised I liked it?" he chuckled.

"No. It's just that it's my favorite, too," she mentioned, her voice going down an octave. She'd already watched *The Mummy* before, and she'd suggested it playfully since Raf had been talking about some of his courses in college involving ancient history.

They alternated in choosing the entertainment, and since it had been her turn, she'd gone ahead and rented the movie for them to watch.

Raf just hadn't expected to like it so much, even turning a blind eye at some of the historical inaccuracies.

"Wouldn't it be so much fun to go hunt for treasures like that?" she sighed dreamily. "It sounds so...free."

"It does, doesn't it?" he smiled, imagining such an adventure for them.

"Well, if you liked it so much, don't come at me when I make you rewatch it in a few months," she giggled.

"Why not? I think we only have a short list of movies we like to rewatch. I'm definitely willing to add this to the list."

"I still can't believe this is your favorite, too," she said, almost in awe.

"Now that I think about it, doesn't it always happen this way? Last time you suggested we watched Buffy and now it's my favorite show, too."

"I was so sure you'd hate it," she laughed. "It was my favorite growing up, but the CGI is not the best."

"But the storyline is damn addictive."

"You know, I never expected you to be Team Spike," she added after a moment, sharing a funny gif with Spike from the musical episode.

His lips drew up in a smile, browsing the gifs and sending a few of his own, most of them consisting of Spike mooning after Buffy and being clueless of his feelings.

"Hey, Spike and Buffy *work*. Their feelings grew naturally, and they also had awesome teamwork. Angel was a little off from the beginning," he commented, grabbing a bottle of soda from his desk. He popped the lid off to take a sip before going into a tangent on why Spike was better than Angel in *every* way.

"I know," she gushed. "Who wouldn't want someone to be as obsessed with them as Spike was with Buffy? Even without a soul he loved her."

"Damn, Curiouscat. Don't tell me you've been a closeted romantic all this time?"

They'd been talking steadily for two years now, and in all that time she'd always tried to come across as cynical towards love and relationships, but from her commentaries on different shows, he'd seen there was more to her—a part of her *wanted* that. But for some reason she was afraid to admit it. He wondered if she thought it would make her seem weaker in front of him since he was a guy.

"I have not," she replied vehemently. "I just happen to believe real romance and fictional romance are two different things," she tried to argue in her defense. "Fictional romance is a place of comfort. Real romance? Nonexistent."

"I don't think you've met the right person," he shot back. "Maybe when you do your views will change."

Raf hadn't met the right person either, but somewhere deep in his heart, he was still hopeful. He knew the whole world was against him, his isolation becoming harder and harder to bear as the years went by.

Yet it was times like this—friendships like this—that kept him afloat. And this relationship reminded him that *everything* was possible. After all, there had been a time when he'd been so hopeless, he'd never thought he was going to have a friend, never mind someone like curiouscat. For all their differences in the beginning, she'd become his best friend over the years, helping him overcome his bouts of depression and being there for him when the rest of the world was decidedly *not*.

He'd never crossed the line, though. He might have wondered if it was possible at one point, but he'd never wanted to do anything to make her uncomfortable. He knew how vulnerable women were on the internet, and the last thing he wanted was to come across as a creep.

They'd talked about sex and romance in abstract terms, but their conversations had *never* strayed into uncomfortable territory. There might have been some jokes that could border on innuendo, but they'd both kept their interactions respectful—*fun*.

Though he could see their relationship becoming *more*, he didn't want to ruin what was already working. And by God, if she rejected him, he didn't want to make things awkward as they would undoubtedly be.

"Maybe," she answered noncommittally. "Anyway, you didn't tell me how your meeting with your advisor went. Did you manage to get his signature?"

His face erupted in a smile.

Curiouscat could be so standoffish sometimes, but she was nothing if not attentive, not one detail escaping him. It was what he valued the most about their friendship. She knew how to listen, and she didn't merely pretend to do so. No, she took notes, making sure to ask for updates and give him her honest opinions on his issues.

He was the same with her, but the exchange was heavily skewed in his favor. She shared facts about herself, certainly more than before. But there was a reluctance to go in depth about her private life that he respected, never pushing for more.

At the same time, he didn't think he was sharing anything out of the

ordinary by telling her about his scholarly projects, or the fact that he was in his last year of college and currently writing his senior dissertation.

"Yes, I did. Finally," he groaned.

It had been a battle to get all the approvals for his project, since it involved using the university's archaeological collection.

"I can't wait to read it," she told him honestly—with a hint of excitement, even.

They'd recently finished reading *The Plumed Serpent* by D. H. Lawrence. Though not entirely pertinent to his study, it had been a fascinating foray into the mysticism of the area. Curiouscat had been particularly taken with it, bringing it up every other day and finding new interpretations for certain passages. She was so enamored with it that Raf had once joked he would gift her a special edition with gilded pages—not that he'd *already* bought it.

"You don't even need to read it anymore," Raf chuckled. "You've heard me talk about it so much you're probably just as much of an expert as I am."

His dissertation was on the ritualistic use of precious stones and minerals in Pre-Columbian Meso-America. He'd had to do plenty of reading on the subject in order to understand the belief system in the area, the pantheon of gods and their respective purposes within the community. It had been particularly fascinating for both of them to find out more about the human sacrifices and ritualistic killings.

It had all started with an anecdote from Raf's reading, but Curiouscat had been so intrigued by the subject that she'd demanded he told her more. And so, he'd started studying with her by his side, sending her some of his reading materials and discussing a lot of the philosophical and anthropological implications with her.

It would be a lie to say his dissertation wasn't a product of *their* discussions. Curiouscat had an inquisitive mind and a great imagination, and she'd offered insights he would not have otherwise explored before.

His major focus was obsidian and its circulation across the region, looking at rituals both as standardized practices and localized ones.

Due to the amount of time he spent with his nose buried in a book on the subject, he'd become more and more narrow in his thinking, which was where Curiouscat helped him, urging him to take a step back and reconsider the wider picture when his tunnel vision was becoming too bad.

"That *is* true," she laughed. "But it's really fascinating stuff. I want to go there someday. See the temples, and the archaeological sites..." she trailed

off on a dreamy sigh.

"Me too. We should go together," he threw the idea out there, more as a joke.

"You know what. We *really* should. After you graduate, you should take me on a trip to Mexico and officially introduce me to Aztec culture."

Raf was quiet for a moment. She seemed like she really meant it. He didn't know whether to continue on with a joke, or say something serious, or actually invite her...

He'd saved up enough money to afford it. That wasn't the issue. The issue was that she might not *want* to meet him—might even not like him if he wasn't behind a screen.

It wasn't the first time Raf had been plagued by thoughts like that. He wasn't bad looking by any means, but he didn't see himself as anything out of the ordinary. What if she didn't like what he looked like?

"Blue? You still there? Don't tell me I shocked you?"

"You... You'd like to meet?"

"Sure, why not?" The way she said it sounded like it was no big deal for him.

"Let me get this straight. You want to meet? *Me*?"

"Of course I want to meet *you*, Blue. Who else? But only if you want that, too. I have a family commitment later this year, but I can do it any time before that," she continued, her voice steady and sure.

It...shocked Raf.

"I'd love to," he eventually answered.

"Good. It's about time you took me on a real date," she chuckled.

Raf was still staring at his screen dumbfounded. This was real. It was happening. She actually wanted to meet him... Damn, but he really felt himself become tongue-tied.

"Where are you? I can come to you," he offered.

"You're a gentleman, aren't you?" she drawled in amusement. "I live in upstate New York. What about you?"

He blinked. He couldn't believe he was *that* lucky.

"I'm in the city."

"No shit," she blurted out. "You're serious?"

"Yep. But first, since we're actually doing this, I have to ask something," he winced, since it wasn't something entirely comfortable, but since she'd opened that gate, he needed to make sure.

"Shoot."

"Tell me you're of age. You're at least eighteen, right?" He asked, already on pins and needles as he awaited her answer. If she was younger... Until now he hadn't wanted to entertain that, but if he had confirmation of her age and she *was* a minor, then he couldn't in good conscience continue with their conversations, could he?

His heart beat wildly in his chest. He was dreading the moment to come...

"I'm twenty," she finally said, and he breathed out in relief.

"Thank God," he murmured.

"What was that?"

"Nothing. I'm happy that issue is out of the way," he tried to make light of it.

"Good. Then we could set something up soon. I'll be in the country until the end of the year, so we need to do it before that."

"Why don't you go ahead and set a date and I'll make it happen," he told her, his eyes widening when he realized how eager he sounded.

From the moment she mentioned a potential meeting he'd done his best to keep his excitement under control, but it seemed he was a little too transparent.

She didn't mind it, though.

"Next week? I can do Friday afternoon. We can meet in the city since I have a class there."

This was the first time she'd mentioned any class, but Raf didn't pay too much attention, a little too happy at the turn of events to mind the details.

"There's this café we could go to. It's pretty popular and this way you shouldn't feel uncomfortable," he gave her the details, listing the features of the café and the fact that it had glass windows. You could see everything from outside, and he would take a seat right near the window. All to make sure she was comfortable with the entire set-up.

"You're really sweet, you know that?" she said in an affectionate tone, and he felt heat creep up his cheeks.

"I'll wear a violet shirt so I'm more easily recognizable. I'm pretty tall, though, so you shouldn't miss me," he went on to describe his appearance, giving her the basic details like hair and eye color, build and anything he felt might help her find him easier.

Somehow, he was reluctant to share a picture of himself, though that

would be the best option. He didn't photograph that well, and he wanted her to give him a chance in real life. For some reason, he was unusually worried about his appearance and what she'd think of it.

She gave him similar details, telling him she had dark hair and brown eyes and that she was a little shorter than average.

"But really, Blue? Violet?" she chortled. "You really wear violet shirts?"

"I'll have you know they are very nice shirts," he mumbled, though a smile pulled at his lips.

"You and your fancy violet," she laughed. "Why don't you just call it purple and be done with it? It's the same thing."

"It's not," the statement came out harsher than intended, which only made Curiouscat more amused. "There are a *lot* of differences between violet and purple," he said with a huff.

"Sorry I offended your color sensibilities, Blue. Please, enlighten me what those differences are," she made fun of him, but it was all in good humor.

"Have you heard about synesthesia?"

"Huh?"

"It's a condition where your senses are linked together. For me, all my other senses converge into taste. Sounds and colors have flavors for me."

"Wow," she breathed out. "That sounds awesome."

He proceeded to give her a rundown of his *curse*d ability, yet she seemed a little caught on the fact that he could taste sounds.

"So, music has flavors for you?"

"Yep. It depends. Sometimes the notes themselves have a certain flavor and sometimes it's the overall melody," he told her about his mother and the music she'd play for him growing up to test his abilities.

Curiouscat was quiet for a while as she digested the information. He got the distinct feeling that she wanted to ask more about that, but she eventually reined in the conversation back into the familiar zone.

"You didn't tell me the difference between fancy violet and purple."

"It's simple. Purple is man-made by mixing colors together. Violet is natural. It works the same with my tastebuds. There's a counterfeit taste to purple whereas violet has a very pleasant aroma."

"So, it all comes down to your interactions with the color and how it affects you, no?"

"Precisely. You're pretty smart, aren't you," he smiled, complimenting her.

She really got him.

"Oh, I bet I can be smarter. Watch me," she declared smugly as she opened the shared screen again, pulling up the search engine and searching for weird color names.

His eyes widened, but he couldn't help his curiosity as he leaned in, watching her brisk movements as she went from page to page.

"Are you really looking for the rarest color names?"

"Of course. If you can be fancy with your violet, then I can be fancy with my favorite color too."

He smiled, waiting.

The names started trickling in, and some of them were *really* amusing, like *mummy brown* or *dragon's blood*.

"Ok, I got it," she eventually said, moving her cursor to highlight two different colors.

Raf's eyebrows went up in surprise before he broke into a low chuckle.

"You have your fancy violet and I'll have..." she paused as she tried to pronounce the very difficult words, her breath into the mic, as well as the whispers of her failed attempts.

She cleared her throat.

"My favorite color from now on is *Cadmium Quercitron*."

Both colors were a type of yellow. But he could admire the fact that they were both natural, though only individually, not in the combination she came up with. It was particularly amusing considering *cadmium* was a highly toxic metal. Out of all the colors she could have chosen, she went for a rare tree bark and a noxious substance.

"Good luck remembering that," he laughed.

"Oh, I will. And this is exactly how I'll introduce myself to you on Friday. I'll be Miss *Cadmium Quercitron*," she added smugly.

"I'll hold you on to that," he challenged playfully, and they both burst out laughing.

The week passed in a blur as both Raf and Curiouscat were looking forward to their eventual meeting.

Raf, for his part, was a little wary of the meeting, scared of not meeting her expectations. He wasn't worried about her, since he didn't mind her appearance. He knew *her* and that was enough for him. Yet his anxiety wouldn't let him be. He had immersed himself into his role for so long, he'd started believing that was all he was—freak, weirdo.

As a result, he went and got a new haircut, improved his grooming, and got some skincare products to make sure he was in top shape. He even bought himself a new pair of jeans and shoes to go with his favorite violet shirt.

And by the time Friday rolled around, he was a mess of nerves and high hopes.

He didn't know what to expect out of the *date*. Though Curiouscat had never brought up romantic notions in their chat, since she used the term date, he expected their relationship to evolve to something of that nature—or, he hoped.

Unfortunately, he couldn't ask anyone for advice since he had no one aside from her. There were his parents, but they were out of discussion. He knew his father would not take him seriously and his mother would likely prohibit him from seeing her since she was just *some* girl.

Throughout the years, she'd told him numerous times her wishes. She wanted him to make an advantageous match with someone from their social circles—likely someone with a similar affiliation as that of his family.

And as she'd told him repeatedly, it didn't matter the fact that he wasn't exactly normal. Not when it was an alliance more than a marriage.

Of course, she disregarded his wishes completely, as he'd told her numerous times that he'd like to have a love match—as Cosima and his father had been fortunate to have. Yet it was a moot point.

He could read the subscript. He wasn't *whole*, he might as well be useful to the family in other ways.

As much as he could, he'd rebelled. His college degree and the fact that he lived on campus attested to that. But he didn't think anything would dissuade his mother from that.

So, he kept his date to himself.

His very first date.

He was excited like the teenager he'd never been. And though he pushed against it, he couldn't stop himself from building scenarios in his head about Curiouscat.

Maybe this was it—what he'd always hoped for. That type of partner that he would get along perfectly with, accepting him with his qualities and his flaws. He couldn't wait to hear her voice—her real voice. He was looking forward to that more than anything.

The moment Friday arrived, he woke up early, showered and put his clothes on.

He'd bought a new cologne specifically for the occasion and he dabbed it around his neck.

Maybe she'd go for a hug. He hoped she would. And then he needed to smell good.

He was worrying about the smallest things, but it was all because he wanted things to go smoothly.

Raf went to the general area where the café was an hour before the set time. He might not have been on a date before, but he knew it was proper etiquette to bring the girl flowers. So, the first thing he did was to search for a flower shop, buying her a pretty bouquet. The next stop was a convenience store where he got her some chocolate, since he knew girls liked chocolate, but he couldn't help himself from adding some hot Cheetos to his basket, since that was a sure way of putting a smile on her face.

Pleased with himself, he paid for the items before going to the café, happy to get one of the window seats as he settled himself nicely on the chair and waited.

And waited.

The hour finally came, yet there was no trace of her—or of anyone matching her description. As a joke, she'd told him she would be wearing a yellow shirt.

Yet as he looked around, there was no one wearing a yellow shirt inside the café. Only outside did he see a girl wearing one a little further down the street, but she wasn't alone. She was with another man, seemingly arguing as he took her by the shoulder and shoved her into a waiting car. Though he couldn't get a good look at her, he was sure it wasn't curiouscat. The girl looked more like a high schooler than a twenty-year-old.

And so, he switched his attention to the other side of the street. Nothing.

In the beginning, fifteen minutes passed. He still didn't move, thinking she would eventually show up.

Another hour passed. Then another.

Raf didn't move. He was starting to worry, yet he was still hopeful.

Surely, she would come. She wouldn't stand him up, would she?

He waited until night fell and the café closed. Only then did he leave, dejected, making his way back to his dorm room.

His first thought was to log on and message her, still thinking that it was a mistake—surely something must have happened to make her miss the meeting.

But as he clicked on her username, it was to find that the account had been terminated.

What...

Suddenly, Raf realized something was, indeed, wrong. And as his insecurities poked their head to the surface, he was convinced there could only be one reason why she would do that—why she wouldn't come meet him and then delete her entire profile.

She must have seen him through the window. Maybe when he wasn't paying attention. And she must have *really* not liked what she'd seen. So sure he was of his line of thinking, that his heart shrank in his chest, his entire being shrouded in misery and disappointment.

"Why did I have to ask her to meet me," he whispered to himself later that night.

All his hopes and dreams of normality were dashed that night, together with a deep sense of loneliness that bloomed in his chest, almost as if a piece of his heart had gone missing, vanishing into thin air.

And it had.

This wasn't *just* about someone rejecting him based on his looks. This wasn't just one date gone wrong. This was his *friend*. His *best* friend.

He feared he'd lost her forever.

Days passed. Raf kept trying to get in touch with her. Yet it was to no avail.

Curiouscat was gone. Forever.

And Raf lost his only friend.

What he didn't know, though, was that curiouscat had, indeed, showed up for the date. She'd seen him, and she'd been just as excited about meeting him, never once questioning his appearance. She'd watched him through the window when he'd not been aware, and she'd thought him *perfect*. She'd seen the flowers, the chocolate, and even the hint of Cheetos packaging and she'd smiled at his thoughtfulness, ready to kiss his cheek at the end of the night, or maybe more.

She'd wanted that date more than anything in the world. And as the time came for her to step towards the cafe, she giddily rushed forward.

But she never made it.

A month passed and Raf didn't move on.

Every day, he logged on the server to check his messages, hopeful that *maybe* curiouscat would come back.

It never happened.

If before he'd felt alone, at least his loneliness had been of his own making. He'd isolated from the world because he found it too exhausting to keep up his charade.

Yet before, he hadn't met curiouscat.

He hadn't known someone who could understand him so well without needing to know his name, his past, or how he looked like. Though, retrospectively, what he looked like must have been the thing to put an end to everything.

But now he knew what it was like to have a friend, someone he could share everything in his life with. And because it had been taken away from him so brutally, he found himself drifting in uncharted territories, his emotional stability hanging by a thread.

In fact, was it even fair to call it emotional stability when there was *nothing* stable about it, or about him?

He'd thought he had hit rock bottom before.

But now he knew the true definition of making friends with his demons for he finally let himself go. Yet it wasn't in the typical fashion.

If before he would have simply let himself languish away, burying himself deeper and deeper into himself in an attempt to forget the outside world, this time he did the opposite.

Raf tried to change himself—all within the confines of his circumstances.

He wiped his diet clean, throwing all the junk food to the side in exchange for healthy food. He finally joined his college gym and he pushed himself to his limits.

He may have done a good thing by taking a step towards change, but it wasn't with the best intentions.

Foremost in his mind was the idea that he needed to look a certain way. Maybe then his friend would come back. Maybe then...

Two weeks after Raf joined the gym he collapsed from overworking himself. His diet may have been healthy, but it was sparse and poor, his current energy levels not fit for the harsh exercises he put his body through.

He pushed himself so much, he ended up in the emergency room after

fainting at the gym. Only by sheer luck did he wake up just as they loaded him into the ambulance, managing to avoid anyone calling his family.

That day, he was admitted to the hospital where he was administered fluids via IV and he was put into contact with a registered dietician to talk about his food choices.

Yet it was clear to anyone looking in that his issues ran deeper than that. So, his attending physician suggested Raf talk to a therapist, even going so far as booking a first consultation for him.

And as it dawned on him that curiouscat was, indeed, not coming back, he realized he needed to reevaluate his life. After all, he couldn't continue living like that, could he?

So, he accepted to see the therapist, making small steps towards becoming the *right* type of person, not just a good person on paper.

Weekly, he attended the therapy sessions. He talked into depth about his past, about his parents and about his brother. He opened himself up for the first time, and he was shocked to realize that the therapist had one simple piece of advice.

Forgive yourself.

He wanted Raf to forgive himself for his role in his brother's downfall, but also forgive everyone around him. In his opinion, only then would he be at peace and ready to move on.

Raf saw the objective truth in his therapist's words. But he couldn't put that advice into practice. Not when his self-loathing was stronger than ever.

He may be putting an effort into getting better, but the demons inside his mind wouldn't rest, always whispering things to him and pushing him further into a corner.

So, though he was making progress, he was also stagnating.

Because forgiveness was too out of the question for him.

It was a few weeks later that he finally gave in, going home for the first time in months. In his short identity crisis after curiouscat had disappeared, he'd shut everyone out, refusing to meet his family for fear he wouldn't be able to keep his act up.

And how could he, when inside he felt like he was slowly dying? How could he focus his strength into a stupid act when he was using all his power to stop himself from going crazy—from effectively shutting himself from the world until he slowly withered away.

At his therapist's advice, he agreed to move home temporarily—if only to

make sure he wasn't a danger to himself.

In the beginning, when he'd been told that he was exhibiting dangerous signs of self-harm, Raf had laughed that off. Yet the more he thought about it, the more he realized his therapist was right.

One way or another, he *was* self-harming—whether consciously or unconsciously. He was self-sabotaging, and he wasn't going to stop unless he made an active effort to better himself.

"My darling boy," Cosima cried out as he carried his bags inside the house, dumping them on the floor to catch her as she wrapped her arms around him.

His mother was a tall woman, but next to Raf, she looked small and fragile. So much so, in fact, that Raf felt a pang of hurt for the first time in... forever.

She'd committed an awful crime. He was aware of that and rightfully acknowledged it. But she was still his mother, and whether he wanted or not, he loved her.

He'd loved her even as he hated her.

Slowly, his arms came around her bony shoulders, returning the hug.

She'd lost weight. Most probably due to worrying about him all the time.

"I-I'm h-home," he whispered, reveling in her warmth.

It felt years since the last time he'd allowed someone to embrace him—to give him any type of affection.

His eyes misted with tears, and he barely managed to keep them at bay.

"Let's get you set up, shall we?" his mother continued, picking up one of his suitcases and leading him up the stairs.

She did all the talking. He smiled tightly at her, allowing himself one brief moment in which she was just his mother. Not someone he inherently disliked, not someone who'd ruined an innocent person's life.

For one moment, he imagined he was back in the past, when he'd been ignorant of what happened around him, when he'd taken her love and his ability to return it for granted.

"I have so much to tell you darling. So much has changed and I never got to tell you," she droned on.

He kept an indulgent smile, yet he only internalized her words when she mentioned Antonio.

"W-what?"

"Antonio is dead. Some hussy killed him at the convent he was visiting.

Can you believe that? She killed him right in the church. Good Lord, I swear I've never heard something like this before."

Raf blinked.

Antonio was...dead?

"And now Franco's in a foul mood, trying to get your father to demand retribution. She's an Agosti, you know. We've never gotten along with them, what with how their son snubbed us with the engagement, years ago. And now his sister killed Antonio? Savages, I tell you..."

Antonio was dead.

Three words and a weight was lifted off his shoulders—one that had been pinning him down to the ground, feeding his nightmares and adding to his constant worry.

He didn't bother to correct his mother when she lamented his death—didn't even try to tell her he probably deserved what he got because she would never admit it.

"So, your father promised he'd help Franco save some face. God knows, we need that after they've dirtied our name through the mud..."

She didn't get to finish her sentence, though, as she lost her balance, her hand shooting out as she caught Raf's arm.

"Mom?" he asked on a whisper.

"I'm ok, darling. Just a little spell," she strained a smile.

But it wasn't just a little spell. Not with how she was behaving, breathing harshly, getting tired every few minutes and needing to sit down.

"You'll come with us, right? To the banquet? We need to show a strong front. Especially in times like this. Beni even convinced that good for nothing of your brother to come," she grumbled under her breath.

Raf wasn't sure he was up to face his brother, not so soon after he'd taken such a powerful hit to his heart. Yet he was also worried about his mother. She didn't seem well. So, to please her, he nodded his assent, promising to join the family for the banquet at the end of the week.

Unbeknownst to him, Benedicto and Cosima had another purpose in mind for the banquet. With the famiglia adding more and more pressure on Benedicto to choose an official heir, the majority of the influential men being on Michele's side rather than Raf's, Benedicto had decided to pull the big guns.

He would use the banquet as an opportunity to show how volatile Michele was while also paving the way for an alliance for his son.

The only way Raf would be accepted as the heir would be if he brought something to the table, and a marriage to a girl from another well-regarded Italian family might just be what they needed. And the banquet was just the way to pave such a connection.

As the time for the banquet arrived, Raf tried his best to stay under the radar. His brother's presence was wreaking havoc on his peace of mind, and instinctively he tried to put himself into a worse light, making himself smaller, more insignificant.

Especially as Michele, as inebriated as always, yelled for everyone to hear what a retard he was.

Though the evening passed without incident, Raf could see that his parents planned something, especially when they approached Marcello Lastra with an offer to merge their two families.

One of his sisters had decided monastic life wasn't for her and she'd returned to civilian life. The downside was that in Benedicto's eyes, her past made her the perfect candidate.

He saw her as meek and biddable—traditional. Exactly what he needed to put Raf ahead in the running for the family legacy.

Raf, on his part, did his best to dissuade his parents from it. But it all came crashing down a few days after the banquet, when Cosima's little spell turned into a trip to the hospital.

The entire situation was grim, especially as the doctor suggested she had an onset of diabetes, likely caused by high stress.

Raf was shocked.

His mother tried to be cheerful about it, saying it was all going to be alright. Yet for Raf it was the last blow he needed at that moment.

If there was something he hadn't blamed himself until that moment, it had been his mother's health. And as he heard the dire news, he couldn't help but feel as if he'd contributed to it—that he'd been the source of that stress and the reason she was now in the hospital, getting ready to make life-altering changes for her health.

Maybe he'd realized it before, but at that point it was the first time Raf realized his self-harm tendencies were not, in fact, only directed at himself. They were making ravages all around himself, affecting every person around him.

And he wasn't sure he liked that.

"Will you do something for me, darling?" Cosima asked him a few days

later, back at home. She was still weak and prone to some fainting spells, and he faithfully stayed by her side, not wanting to cause her more stress.

"W-what?"

"Will you at least meet the girl? You don't have to marry her if you don't like her. But will you? For me?"

Her features were grim, her slight body huddled against him as she released a weary sigh.

He was quiet for a moment, warring with himself. He wanted no part in their plans, yet at the same time, what could go wrong in one meeting? He would satisfy his mother and maybe then she'd stop pestering him about marriage meetings.

"F-Fine."

Not two days later and the first meeting was set. After all, the devil worked fast, but Cosima worked faster.

And so, they found themselves at the Lastra home, where Raf had the unexpected pleasure of meeting Assisi—or just Sisi.

Sisi was, simply put, unusual. She was unlike anyone he'd ever met in their circles. She lacked the artifice and the malice he was used to. And though he was still wary of sharing too much of himself during that meeting, he couldn't help but answer her inquisitive questions, doing the bare minimum to keep his façade up.

So much so, that she saw right through him.

His mouth twitched as she called him out for it, telling him she saw his telltale, that his stutter was a conscious decision and that there was a pattern for the way he paused after a syllable.

He was...stunned.

But then she smiled.

"Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me," she winked at him.

In that moment, he decided to gamble. And he gambled *right*.

"Thank you," he whispered, seeing the understanding in her eyes, but more than anything the kindness.

That meeting would only be the first as the two fell into a comfortable friendship.

"Maybe there's still a chance," he told Sisi in an effort to comfort her.

They were sitting in her drawing room. It was where they usually met since her family was pretty strict about decorum. And though they considered Raf innocuous because of his innocent manner, that didn't mean they weren't

watching them closely. They were alone, but the door was wide open for anyone to walk in at any point.

"No," she declared confidently. "It's done. It's so done," she shook her head.

She'd recently been through a bad breakup that only Raf knew about, her relationship with one of her brother's friends a secret from everyone else.

"I hate that I have to pretend that everything is fine. That..." a sob escaped her lips, and she immediately looked towards the door, making sure there was no one nearby. "That my heart isn't breaking every time I think about him."

"It will get better with time. I know it will," his lips tightened into the semblance of a smile. He knew exactly what she was going through. But compared to her, his situation seemed paltry. Sisi had been with Vlad in all ways a woman could be with a man—they'd been a couple.

Raf... He'd had an internet friendship that he'd hoped would turn into something else. And he'd ended up being ghosted by his only friend. His wasn't a tragic tale. It was simply a pathetic one.

"Has it happened to you?" she blinked the tears away.

"Something like that," he shrugged, yet with a little coaxing, she managed to get out of him exactly what had happened with curiouscat and how that had affected him.

"I don't know what I did wrong," his voice trembled as he ended his story, too much emotion poured into those words.

"Raf, I'm so sorry," Sisi said. "I didn't know you'd been through something like that, too."

"Yeah, but we've never even met. It sounds so silly," he attempted a smile for her benefit.

"It's not silly at all," she drew back, her features steeped in consternation. "You clearly had feelings for this person. What does it matter if you met or not? You spent years talking. If that's not a relationship, then I don't know what is..."

"It wasn't like that," he lamely argued. And it hadn't been. They had only agreed to try to take their friendship to the next level that time.

Raf couldn't see how much curiouscat's disappearance had affected him, and that his reaction had been anything but normal. Yet in his mind, because they'd never taken that official step, it would always be *just* a friendship.

A doomed friendship.

"So what? Your feelings are still valid," she told him sternly before breaking into a smile. "Look at us. We're a pair of lovesick fools, aren't we?" Sisi breathed out.

Raf could see she was doing her best to rein in her emotions. Her eyes were watery, her nose red from holding her emotions at bay.

"I reckon we are," he agreed hopelessly.

Time passed and their friendship deepened.

It wasn't what he had with curiouscat, but it was a system of support that helped him rebuild himself from the bottom up. And with Sisi by his side, Raf started thriving again.

In a way it helped that their friendship was purely platonic, and that he didn't see her *that* way. He was simply content to have another human being by his side, someone with whom he could share his thoughts and worries.

Slowly, he sought to forget his former best friend.

Like Sisi had said about her Vlad. Maybe it wasn't meant to be.

He told himself that until he truly believed it.

His parents, seeing him hanging out at the Lastra house so much, delighted in the potential connection with Sisi's family. His mother, too, was doing better and Raf was happy he wasn't a burden to her anymore.

Yet things weren't going exactly smoothly.

Not when Sisi came to the grim conclusion that she was pregnant. Out of wedlock. With a traditional Italian family.

So Raf did what any gentleman would. He offered to marry her.

From the beginning, he didn't expect a true marriage, his previous dreams of a *great* love long dead. But he knew they could have a pleasant companionship—friendship. How many people could claim that?

In marrying her, he would both protect Sisi and get his parents off his back—this time permanently. He still had no idea that this was exactly what Benedicto and Cosima wanted, if only to get him elected for the head of the family position. Though he recognized a connection with Lastra would help Guerra, he didn't realize the full ramifications of his decision.

Even so, he was ready to face the consequences.

For the first time, he wanted to man up and be responsible, for himself and his future family. He might not love Sisi, or even feel attracted to her, but that only meant they would have a strictly platonic marriage. It didn't mean he couldn't take his role as husband and father seriously.

His decision made; he could only hope for the best.

Benedicto and Cosima insisted on a quick wedding, wanting to make sure Raf wouldn't back out of it. But both Raf and Sisi were fine with it, since that would ensure Sisi didn't start showing before the wedding.

Yet just as Raf got used to the idea of becoming a father, Sisi miscarried.

She was devastated. He didn't know how to help.

Overnight, she became a completely different person, and though he asked her if she wanted to break the engagement, she remained staunch in her answer.

They would marry.

And so, the wedding day came.

No one besides Raf's parents and Sisi's siblings was happy about it.

Even Raf became increasingly nervous as he stood in front of the altar, waiting for Sisi to walk down the aisle. He kept questioning if he was doing the right thing—if maybe, *maybe*, he was depriving himself of something vital in the future. He didn't believe in divorce. For him, marriage was forever.

He'd always wanted a love match. From the beginning, he'd dreamed of his dream girl—a faceless, formless person who would be his in all ways. He didn't know what she looked like, but when he closed his eyes, he imagined someone like curiouscat.

Funny how he hadn't thought about her in a long time. Yet as Sisi walked towards him all draped in white, a forced smile on her face, he could only think of yellow. Of *Cadmium Quercitron* to his fancy violet.

He tapped his foot restlessly against the floor, sweat beading his forehead.

"Damn it, Raf. Calm down," his father whispered from behind.

He swallowed hard.

He couldn't calm down. Especially as Sisi stopped at his side, a tremulous smile on her lips as she hooked her arm through his.

The priest began talking, the words ringing in his ears, dimming and dimming until he couldn't follow what was being said anymore.

He couldn't do it.

He couldn't go through it. It was the most disappointing realization, because he would be breaking the trust of his dear friend. Yet he couldn't...

The priest was about to ask the crucial question. And Raf was prepared to refuse.

But the explosion came first.

Then, Sisi vanished.

And Raf had never felt more relief in his life than in that one moment.

TWENTY

NOELLE

OH. MY. GOD.

I must be drunker than I thought.

Not only did I practically dare Raf to have his way with me in a darkened alley, but I just gave myself away at the least opportune moment.

"Fuck, Noelle... How is that possible?" he breathes out, confusion swirling in his beautiful eyes.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I need to backtrack, or at least make it seem like it's just one isolated episode of my returned memory.

For weeks now I've been imagining the moment I would say those words and I just wasted them like this...in a drunken outburst.

"I don't remember everything, but I've been having some flashbacks," I confess shyly, wrapping my arms tighter around him. He's still pulsing inside of me. "The computer you got me from my mother's house brought some of the memories back. I saw our chats..." I trail off, pretending it's been as confusing to me as it is to him.

"I can't believe this," he mumbles in my hair, holding me closely. "Three times I fell for someone," he rasps. "Three times, Noelle. And every time it was you."

"You..." I draw back, blinking. "You fell for me then too?"

I shouldn't ask more. I should just change the topic. But I can't *not* know.

Not when I've been in love with this man since the first time we bickered online, falling deeper and deeper with each conversation and every moment in which he would seek to listen to me, *understand* me.

No one had done that before.

He'd turned my life around just by being there for me—by telling me my opinion mattered.

Before, I'd never cared what he looked like, for I'd known his soul. I'd known his core values and the fact that he was a good, good man when I'd thought them a myth.

But then I'd seen him.

I'd seen him and I'd fallen so irrevocably in love with him, I hadn't thought myself capable of feelings of that magnitude.

Yet I'd never been sure of *his* intentions, or his feelings.

He'd always been a true gentleman online, never making me uncomfortable, always keeping things strictly platonic. When he'd agreed to meet me I'd been over the moon, but it had still been at *my* incentive.

To hear now that he might have felt something for me, too...

"You were my best friend—my *only* friend. You have no idea..." he chokes on the words. "God, you have no idea what I went through after you cut off contact. I was miserable," he admits in a low voice.

"I didn't want to," I cup his cheeks, softly caressing his flesh as I urge him to look me in the eye. He blinks, a renewed vulnerability evident in his gaze.

I may lie about a lot of things, but not this—never this.

"My brothers caught me. They took away my computer and cut my connection to the internet. I had no way of contacting you, Raf. I'm so sorry."

"It doesn't matter," he shakes his head. "Not anymore."

But it does. Can't he see how much it matters to me? To hear that I was the cause of his anguish cuts me on the inside.

"You're here now," he continues. "The past no longer matters, pretty girl. Not when I have you by my side. Not when I know that despite everything, we found our way to each other. I *love* you," he declares poignantly. "I've loved you under many names, and many guises. But it's always been you. God," he closes his eyes, "I still can't believe this is real."

"It is," I assure him. "I'm here, and I'm never going away."

As long as you don't send me the way.

Those unspoken words are always at the back of my mind. If he finds out everything I've done...for him, for us, for this love that is more potent than any other force in the universe.

But he can't. He can *never* find out.

A smile appears on his lips as he kisses my forehead, slowly pulling out

of me before removing the toy and cleaning me with a napkin. He's silent as he tends to me, first between my legs, before moving up, fixing my clothes and finally, getting another napkin to dab at my face and fix my ruined make-up.

Yet all that silence speaks louder than any other word.

His eyes are damp with unshed tears, the blue of his irises a stormy shade that speaks of restless nights, of pain and suffering, but finally, of light at the end of the tunnel.

"Blue," the word is out of my mouth before I can help it. He's always been Blue to me. Before the *hacienda*, before everything. He'll always be *my* Blue.

"My darling girl," he whispers, gazing at me how I imagined he would all those years ago—with a love to equal my own.

Now I'm not alone in this madness that's been my driving force for so long. No, he's here with me. All the way with me.

When he's finished with his ministrations, he takes a step back, looking thoroughly satisfied with what he's seeing.

"Shall we?"

I nod, a little wobbly from the combination of sex and alcohol. He sees that, tugging me close to his body.

"No more drinks for you tonight."

I pout at him. But he simply chuckles as he leads me towards the entrance of the club where we're immediately received once the bouncer sees our bracelets.

Already a little tired from dancing—and other exertions—we decide to head straight to the VIP section and rest for a while.

We're barely a few feet down the red lit hallway when someone calls us from behind.

Raf stops, frowning as he turns to deal with whatever inconvenience arose, tucking me gently behind him—ever my giant protector.

I sneak a peek, seeing a man saunter towards us, a crooked grin on his face as he whistles slowly.

Raf tenses by my side, keeping one arm around me as he pushes me further behind him.

"What did you just say?" Raf grits out, aggression rolling off him.

I blink. I hadn't heard what the other man had said, but clearly it's something that pissed Raf off.

"Come on, don't play dumb," the man counters.

And as he comes closer, I notice he's swaying from side to side ever so slightly, probably drunk.

"Don't mind him, Raf. Let's go," I tug on his sleeve. The last thing we need is to get eyes on us by getting into a conflict with someone.

"Stay out of it, Noelle," my husband warns, the sweet man from before all but gone. "Let the man repeat what he just said."

His voice is laced with danger, and once more I have to wonder what the man must have said to get him so worked up.

"I said," the guy comes closer, "why don't you share that piece of ass. She has a mouth on her, that's for sure," he chuckles just as my eyes widen in shock. "Aren't you curious what she could do with two c..."

"Raf," I whisper his name, but he's already gone from my side, the reaction immediate.

Using his left hand, he pushes me further behind, and using his right, he simply grasps the other man's nape, lodging his fingers tightly into his flesh before bringing his head into the wall, smashing his face.

"What?" I jump up in surprise, though a certain warmth unfurls in my stomach.

"Say it again," Raf demands in a harsh voice. The man is trying to get out of his grasp, but the position Raf has him in is not to his advantage, nor is the size difference. The man is at least a head shorter than Raf.

"The fuck man," he curses. Seeing he can't grab on to Raf with his hands, he uses them to prop himself against the wall, pushing just as Raf tries to knock him into the concrete again. "All for a piece of ass..."

"Say. That. Again," Raf continues, not even giving him the opportunity to talk before he's on the guy again, his foot making contact with the back of his knee as he pushes him to his knees. Momentarily disoriented, it's enough for Raf to gain momentum and strike his head against the wall again.

Blood pours out of the man's nose. From my angle, I can see his brow ridge is also busted, his teeth stained with red.

At this point, he can't even talk anymore, half limp from all the blows.

But Raf doesn't care.

There's a small crowd forming behind him, no one passing towards the club as they all watch in awe the altercation.

I blink as I realize I'm seeing a new side of my husband. One that...thrills me.

Licking my lips as I watch the one-sided fight and the way he easily subdued the other man, I can't help but feel bubbles of excitement build inside of me.

Maybe I'd half-joked when I'd told him I wanted to see him kill for me. But watching the spectacle before me, I have to admit the sight isn't a bad one.

In fact, my tummy does a somersault when the other guy tries to fight back and Raf parries all his blows, punching him in the gut and putting a stop to all the struggle.

Butterflies dance in my stomach—in my entire body—as I continue to watch my husband, his expression so serious, his features tense and grave. And damn if that doesn't make me hotter, an ache forming between my legs when I should be thinking of anything *but* that.

Blood is spattered on his white shirt and up his neck, his knuckles already drenched in the red liquid.

But it's his ferociousness that strikes a chord in me. The fact that he's defending *me*.

The man who's never been a fan of violence is engaging in it *for me*.

The other guy is on the ground, breathing harshly as more blood pours out of all his orifices. And it's only *now* that the bouncers decide to show up, coming straight for my husband.

Kicking the man to the floor, Raf turns, saying something to them in a hushed voice, and I'm amazed to see they leave him alone.

They do absolutely *nothing*. Taking a few steps back, one of them reins in the crowd while the other whips up his phone to make a call.

Immediately, I fear the worst—that they're calling the police.

But I soon realize that's not the case when Raf bends, grabbing the man by the hair and bringing him to my feet.

"Apologize to the lady," he demands in a deadly tone.

The man blinks, opening his mouth and closing it, as if he doesn't know how to proceed.

"Apologize for the names you called her, and apologize for disrespecting her," Raf continues, his voice chilling.

Even to my ears he sounds different—too different.

I know my husband. I know he's done bad things in the past, things he'd *had* to do as his position required—that he's killed people, but never out of want, only out of necessity.

So, who is this man before me? Who is this man with the cold features and even colder eyes? Who is he and why does he make me feel more alive than ever?

The man is one step away from me, watching me with what I can only describe as terror in his eyes.

He opens his mouth, yet no sound comes out. In fact, one tooth seems to have been displaced.

"Apologize," Raf demands again, kicking him so hard he gasps for air.

"I-I'm s-sorry," he whizzes, coughing more blood which splatters on my feet.

I swing my gaze to Raf, thinking he would accept that apology, but his eyes are affixed to the blood on my feet, his expression turning more murderous than before.

"You piece of shit," he grits out, his hand in his hair as he whips his head back. "I told you to apologize not to sully her skin with your lowlife blood."

It's like I'm in a different reality, watching my sweet husband behave *not* so sweet.

"I-I'm s-sorry," he apologizes again, his eyes so crazed with fear he uses whatever strength he has left to rip some material from his shirt and offer to wipe it for me.

"Good," Raf nods, but I quickly put my hand up.

"I'll do it myself," I say as I use two fingers to pick up the piece of sweaty material and fling it aside. Instead, I merely put my hand in Raf's pocket, withdrawing a napkin and quietly cleaning my legs.

"Now, what do you say to these two gentlemen over here?" Raf continues, seemingly not done with the spectacle.

It's then that I notice that two more men have appeared besides the bouncers. Both tall and muscular, they are dressed in expensive suits, which indicates that they aren't just regular employees or club goers.

One of the men sports a buzz cut, his steely blue eyes devoid of any feeling as he scans the room. The other is more laid back, an easy smile on his face as he glances at the man writhing in Raf's grasp.

"Upstairs," he simply says, pointing to a door to the side I hadn't noticed before. Raf nods, dragging the man with him and asking me to stick by his side.

We go up a flight of stairs, ending up in what looks like an office—one that has a glass view over the entire club. My mouth tugs in a smile as I

realize it's a one-way type of glass since from the inside of the club you can't see anything.

"And what do we have here, Rafaelo," the man makes a tsk sound. "You made quite a ruckus in my club."

Green eyes set against an olive complexion, he looks more like a cover magazine model than the owner of a club. Certainly, he is one of the most handsome men I've ever seen, and I'm not the only one noticing as Raf's cheek twitches in annoyance when he sees me peruse the newcomers.

I raise a shameless brow at him before I wink—my quiet way of letting him know he has nothing to worry about. There may be many handsome men in the world, but there is only one of *him*.

"Why don't you repeat to Enzo here what you were saying about my wife," Raf adds, bringing the man closer to the two men.

He looks wildly between the two of them, and whatever he sees in their gazes convinces him to speak, spelling out all the horrible things he'd said about me.

Good lord, but I see why Raf would take such umbrage. I'm surprised I hadn't heard all of it, but maybe it's for the best since I might have reacted a bit too...vehemently. Every word that comes out of the man's mouth is vile and offensive, and he doesn't shy away from calling me a slut, a whore, and saying I needed another cock up my ass by the way I was moaning in the alleyway.

My eyes widen in shock, and as I look up at Raf, it's to see him barely in control of himself. He's trying to stop himself from killing the man, that much is apparent.

"I see," Enzo nods thoughtfully.

One moment he's in front of the man, the next he's crouching by his side, a knife against his throat as he gives him a deadly look.

"I don't allow this type of behavior in any of my clubs," he starts in a stern tone. "Didn't the bouncer give you the memo? This isn't a hunting ground. Here, you *respect* women."

"What should I do with him, sir?" The man in the back steps forward, leaning to whisper something in Enzo's ear.

"No, that won't be necessary," he puts a hand up, turning to look at Raf and giving him a nod.

Pushing his hand into the man's pockets, he fishes out a wallet, taking it out and perusing his IDs before handing them to the man by Enzo's side.

Surprisingly, he already has a tablet in his hand that he uses to scan the ID.

"You were right, sir," he says in an even voice, handing Enzo the tablet.

Enzo rises up, and getting to Raf's side, he shows him whatever results he found.

"What's that?" I ask, curious when I see a flash of anger cross Raf's face. Taking a step forward, I lean into him, wanting to see too.

Enzo chuckles when he spots me pushing my face into the tablet, but finally, I can see what got them so serious.

When the other guy had scanned his ID, he'd pulled all his info, including police reports. He is currently on bail in a sexual assault case involving... gang rape. My gaze whips up to meet Raf's.

"I know his father," Enzo comments. "He works at the mayor's office, isn't that right, Jonathan?"

Jonathan groans in pain, staining the floor with his blood.

"It's probably how he got out on bail," Raf adds. "And seeing the various records of possession, I'd say you're quite the addict, aren't you Johnny boy?" he asks as he kicks at Jonathan.

"Coke? Rich kid drug of choice," Raf turns to Enzo.

"Maybe in the beginning," Enzo shakes his head. Going down on one knee, he grabs Jonathan's mandible between two fingers, forcing the man to look at him. "I'm guessing meth is more his thing now," he indicates his ruined teeth and the skin lesions running down his neck. "My guess? Daddy stopped funding his habit."

"So he's out here trying to score some?" Raf raises a brow.

Enzo nods.

"I smell the desperation on him," he says right before he throws him to the ground, getting up and taking out a handkerchief to clean his fingers.

"You've seen his file. It's up to you what you want to do since he insulted your wife," he tells Raf. "But I know if he insulted *my* wife what I would do," he smirks.

"Can I borrow your knife?" Raf suddenly asks, and I blink in surprise.

Raf, *my* Raf, is asking for a knife?

"Pretty girl, please look away," he gives me a tight smile, turning me around to face away from Jonathan. "I'll be quick, I promise," he kisses my cheek, leaving my side to go back and...

I can't help it.

My heart is pounding in my chest as I slowly turn, just in time to see Raf leaning in front of Jonathan, the knife against the man's throat. Raf speaks, his words too low for me to hear. Then the tip of the knife makes contact with the man's throat, cutting from ear to ear.

Blood gushes out, flowing down his shirt, with some of it spraying over Raf's form.

For a few seconds, Jonathan's body spasms as he tries to fight his impending fate.

But then it's done.

He's dead.

Raf releases a weary sigh, though his expression is cold—hidden. Looking up, our eyes meet, his growing colder just as mine grow hotter.

A shiver goes down my spine as I imagine him coming to me, embracing me, the blood on his body serving as lubricant for skin on top of skin, for him to...

"Nero will dispose of the body," Enzo interrupts our staring contest. "You did good, Raf. He got what he deserved," he praises, patting Raf on the back.

"Thank you," Raf nods. "If you'll excuse us, I think I need to take my wife home."

"Of course," he turns to give me a pleasant smile. "I'm sorry your evening took a wrong turn. I'll have a word with my bouncers to increase security in *and* around the club."

A few more pleasantries and we say our goodbyes.

Given Raf's bloody state, Enzo offers one of his cars to take us home.

The entire ride home, he's silent.

It's only when we get home that he finally speaks.

"You looked," he says as he more or less rips the shirt off his back. "You looked, Noelle, when I didn't want you to," he draws a tired breath in.

"Does it matter?" I ask quietly. I hadn't realized he didn't want me to see. I'd thought he turned me away simply for my own sensibilities.

"Of course it matters," he grits out, striding towards me just as he flings the bloodied shirt aside. He looks menacing in his full angry glory, and I can't help the way my heart skips a beat as he stops in front of me, the blue of his eyes glinting dangerously.

"I didn't want you to see that. To see me..." he grinds his teeth, stopping himself from adding the words.

See me kill a man.

"You did it for me," I nod quietly, recognizing the struggle within him. "How could I ever reproach you something you did for me?"

"Noelle," he groans, a tortured sound wrenched from his lips as he brings his hands to my shoulders, holding tight but seemingly unable to do much else.

It's in that moment that I realize that despite the cold exterior he's projecting, there's real anguish inside of him—real pain that seeks comfort.

So I give it to him. I give him my touch and my presence, wanting to let him know *nothing* could change the way I see him—the *only* way I could ever see him.

Bringing my hand to his cheek, I caress him lightly, forcing him to look me in the eye and see for himself that there's no reproach, no anger, nothing but love.

"Don't go down that road," I shake my head. "You know I'll *never* revile you for doing what's necessary."

"Was it necessary, though?" he asks bitterly. "Or was it necessary for *me*?"

"Raf..."

"I could have let him go. I beat the shit out of him enough that he would have felt the aftermath of it for days after, maybe even learn his lesson."

"What if he wouldn't have... You saw his record," I try to argue.

"But who am I to judge?" he squeezes his eyes shut. "Who the hell am I to judge? And yet I did it anyway. And you know why?"

I move my head from side to side, awaiting him to speak, knowing he needs this cathartic moment.

"All I could think about was *you*," he continues, meeting my gaze with his intense one. "When I read those charges against him all I could think was...you. Because I can't help it, pretty girl. I see you in every potential victim and I know I would do everything in my power to keep this world as safe as a place as I can in order for *you* to be safe."

"And how is that a bad thing?" I shoot back, surprised he's beating himself up over this.

"Because it's not my place to decide a man's fate just for..." he shakes his head, confusion clawing at his features. "There's something wrong with me, Noelle," he rasps as he brings his forehead to my shoulder, resting his huge frame against me yet not daring to touch me further. "There's something seriously wrong with me because I'm capable of *anything* when you're

concerned. I've never been like this before, so out of control, so..." he trails off.

I don't know how to help him.

It's clear he's internally struggling to make sense of this, and I'm growing increasingly desperate as I can't find a way to help him—soothe and comfort him like I want to.

Instead, I merely thread my fingers through his hair, patting him lightly and listening to him.

"I thought I knew what justice was. I thought I knew what right and wrong was, but the lines are blurring, baby," he breathes hard. "When it comes to you, *all* the lines are blurry," he confesses.

Little does he know that for me, those lines have been blurred for a long, long time. Maybe I struggled with my decisions in the beginning, too. Maybe there was a time I also beat myself for taking a human life. Ultimately, I embraced it.

Later that night, we go to sleep wrapped in each other and a novel urgency borne out of Raf's explosive emotions.

For someone who's held himself so tightly in check all his life, I feel he's about to explode.

Unfortunately, I'm not sure whether that will be a good thing, or a bad one.

TWENTY-ONE

NOELLE

"WHERE ARE YOU TAKING ME?"

"You'll see," he gives me a charming smile, taking my hand in his as he resumes his attention to the road.

I'd expected him to be weirder today after what happened last night, but it's been the opposite. From the moment I'd woken up he'd been extra attentive, bringing me breakfast in bed and brushing off any attempt at talking about the events of the other night.

Still, I can't help but worry about him, and I wish he'd confide in me what he's feeling.

But I won't force him.

I recognize he must be having a hard time, so I'll let him slowly open up to me, being there for him at every step.

We end up somewhere in Brooklyn, in what seems to be an industrial area.

Raf parks the car, and taking my hand, he leads me towards a row of warehouses.

"When I moved back home from college I stored all my stuff in here," he mentions as the security checks his ID before letting us pass to the back where the storage units are.

Raf already has a key, and locating his unit, he unlocks it, opening the door wide for me to go inside.

There are quite a few boxes stuffed to the rim, as well as a few suitcases. Everything is neatly packed, and each box has a tag on it with its contents.

"Even back then you were so organized," I smile.

He shrugs slightly, but his cheeks redden as he clears his throat.

"Here," he calls me over as he pulls one of the boxes, opening it to reveal books, books and more books.

"What is it?" I laugh as he starts taking them out one by one, a look of pure concentration on his face.

"I have something for you," he mumbles, continuing to sift through the books.

Moving to his side, I plop myself on the floor.

"Don't," I startle when I hear his voice, blinking in confusion. "The floor is cold. Don't sit there," he clarifies, and before I can reply, he has one of his suitcases open, taking out a sweater and motioning for me to sit on it. "There, better," he muses to himself in satisfaction before he goes back to his box.

A bewildered expression gives way to one of pure pleasure as I realize he takes care of me even unconsciously. It's second nature to him, and I bask in that feeling of adoration.

"Finally," he exhales in relief, whipping out a big hardcover book from the bottom of the box. Even in the dim light of the storage unit I can spot the play of color—the fact that the edges have been painted with gold.

Almost bashfully, Raf comes to sit by my side as I make some room for him on the sweater.

"What's this?" I inquire as he hands the book to me.

The cardboard cover is sturdy, the materials used to bind it clearly expensive. Yet there's no title on the front.

It's only when I open it to the first page that I spot it, and its significance.

The Plumed Serpent, 1920 Edition.

"You..." I can't even form the words as my eyes instinctively fill with tears at the sight of this precious gift.

It's an absolutely exquisite collector's edition—a rare one, too, going by the year, condition and level of detail afforded to gilded pages.

"I got this for you. Well, for curiouscat," he smiles shamelessly at me. "And now it's finally with its rightful owner."

"You got this for me when you didn't know who I was. When we were just friends," I look up to find him staring at me intently.

"I don't think we were ever *just* friends. Yes, we might have been entirely platonic at that point, but that type of connection... What we had—what we *have*—is rare. It's so much more than I can put into words..."

Closing the book, I place it carefully on the ground before I take his hands in mine.

"You're more than I deserve, Raf," I confess, the only thing I'm able to say without giving everything away.

It was never *entirely platonic* for me. He has no idea how many times I fantasized about him, how his elusive persona or his digitized voice were forever at the center of my teenage dreams. I clung to his words back then, just like now. The only difference is that now I can touch him, feel him... rejoice in him.

"No, no, don't say that," he gathers my face in his big hands, bringing me closer to him as he inhales my scent, his mouth hovering over mine. "Not when I've been the one to mess up time and time again. Not when..." he trails off as he brushes his lips against mine.

But just as release a content sigh, giving myself into him, he's off me, already studying the next box.

"And to apologize for yet another failed date last night, I have a surprise for you," he suddenly declares, taking out a couple hoodies with a university emblem on them.

I raise a brow in question.

"The best date idea," he continues, clearly quite pleased with himself, while I'm still dying to hear what's so great about it.

"I'm taking you to a frat party," he states resolutely before his mouth stretches into a big grin. "I'll give you the American Pie experience, pretty girl, this time no blood and no murder, I promise," he gives me a dazzling smile.

I blink twice before I burst out into laughter.

"You remember," I whizz out. "You really remember all that?" I ask, happiness suffusing my entire being.

"Of course I do," he nods emphatically. "I remember *everything*."

My cheeks redden.

"And that means I have even more data to make you happy," he suddenly winks, this new levity transforming his face and making my heart beat faster in my chest.

"Then I'd love that. But how are we going to go to a frat party when..."

"Let me worry about that," he cuts me off, giving me a loud smooch on my cheek.

We end up taking some of the boxes with us to the apartment and we spend the rest of the day lazily lounging in the living room binge watching the first season of Buffy. We fall into an easy camaraderie punctuated by

diverting banter and it's like we haven't been apart at all—like we've been together all along.

Though I'm a little curious how he plans on getting us into a frat party since we're not students, I keep my mouth shut as he instructs me to put on a pair of jeans and one of his old university shirts that incidentally comes to my knees.

He's amused as he watches me try to arrange it, giving it some shape by tucking the front of it in my jeans.

"You have no idea what seeing you in my shirt does to me," he drawls, looking me up and down with satisfaction evident in his eyes. "And even better," his mouth tips up in a mischievous smile as he takes his cologne and sprays it all over me.

I chuckle, not minding his idea at all as I twirl around so he can douse me in his scent.

He dresses similarly, donning a pair of jeans and one of his university hoodies. Yet no matter how relaxed his outfit looks, there's still a preppy air about him.

At this point, I'm convinced that he can make anything look good.

And to show him he's not the only one who want the world to know he's staked his claim, I put on a bright red lipstick before I wrap my fingers in his shirt, pulling him towards me so I can kiss his neck, leaving my mark behind.

"All done," I quip, satisfied with the way my lips are now visible on his skin.

With that we can finally leave. Taking a cab, we head uptown to where his university is.

I still have no idea how he plans on getting us into a frat party since I know how the last one went for him—absolutely abysmal. On top of that, there's also the issue that neither of us are students.

The cab drops us right in front of the main gate of the university, and grabbing my hand, Raf takes me to the liquor store.

"The first step is to come bearing gifts," he winks as he picks a couple of bottles of more expensive liquor.

"And the second is to find a party."

With two bags will of alcohol, we go down a street Raf says is known for having frat houses. And that is immediately evident as loud noises erupt in the air, students walking around drunk and having a good time.

Music is blasting from a few of the brownstones, and as we walk down

the street, Raf stops in front one of the houses.

"Let's try this," he nods to the entrance. A few of the frat guys are outside smoking.

Holding my hand, Raf ushers me up the stairs and towards the door.

Just as I think the guys aren't going to let us go in, they open the door for us, inviting us in.

The moment we're inside, the music is blasting in the speakers, people walking all over the place with red solo cups in their hands.

"We're in," I blink, the reality of the moment finally hitting me.

"Told you," Raf smiles at me, tucking me closer as we go deeper into the house where the bar is. He places the bottles on the counter, and the guy serving the drinks gives him a surprised look.

"Hell, man, you went all out," he chuckles, shaking hands with Raf. "I haven't seen you around here before."

"Took some time off school," Raf lies. "But now I'm back."

And just like that, he's back to his charming self, engaging in a short conversation and having the other guy eating from the palm of his hand—believing every single lie he's spouting.

I watch the interaction, a little in awe of him, but also curious about how his time in college could have been so bad considering he's so freaking good at striking up conversation even with someone he doesn't know.

"I'll see you around," he eventually nods at the guy—Tobias. He even got his name. Taking two glasses, he asks Tobias to give us some jungle juice.

"And now for the start of the experience," he turns to me, handing me a glass and urging me to try it.

"This isn't bad. Not at all," I exclaim, surprised.

It's sweet and you can barely detect the alcohol.

"And that's the issue. If you're not careful it *will* go to your head."

"You're too good at this," I praise his excellent social persona as he leads me to a couch.

Already we'd been made aware the dance floor is downstairs, in the basement, while the upstairs levels are off limits to strangers.

"Now. You should have seen me when I was in college. I was so bad," he cringes, bringing one hand to his face.

"How could you have been so bad?"

"I had no confidence in myself," he grimaces. "You know most of my embarrassing stories from my time here, but the truth is that I could have

made friends. I could have put myself out there, but I didn't. I was dealing with a lot of mental health issues for which, retrospectively, I should have sought help."

"Raf..." I place my head on his shoulder. "To know what you went through and where you are now... It makes me so proud of you. You have no idea," I smile at the memories of our conversations. "You make *me* want to be better—do better."

He's nothing short of a magnificent example—someone I've always respected and admired.

It's true that during his time in college he was dealing with a lot. I, better than anyone, know of his struggles and the fact that he'd had many identity crises, one after another. He'd been so self-conscious of himself and the image he portrayed to the outside world because, simply put, it didn't fit the image in his own mind.

Yet the man he is now? The man before me?

He learned to love and understand himself. He finally *found* himself. And that alone gives me immeasurable joy.

I've always loved him, regardless of his looks or the past, but to know he loves himself, too, makes everything so much sweeter, so much potent.

He finally knows his worth. Something I've known all along.

"I don't think I told you," he smiles sadly, his voice semi-drowned by the music all around us. "But everything I did to better myself was for you. For the promise I made you before I escaped," he pauses, giving me an odd look. "I promised I'd come back for you, and I promised myself I'd take revenge on my brother for everything he's done to me. It seems I failed at both, didn't I..."

"Don't," I quickly shake my head. "Don't go there. I don't want you to beat yourself over that. And if you want to do something for me, then...love me. Just love me, Raf, and never leave me."

"Never," he murmurs before giving me a quick kiss. "Now let's have some fun. We didn't come here to sit on the couch," he chuckles, helping me up and leading me to where some people are busy playing beer pong.

Now, *that*, I've seen in movies. And as soon as we get closer, I get curious about it.

"Can we try?"

He gives me a nod, and as soon as the people currently playing finish, he reserves the spot for us.

"You'll get so drunk tonight, pretty girl," he teases me, pointing to the newly filled cups with beer.

"Or *you* will get smashed tonight, dear husband," I taunt right back, settling on my side of the table and stretching in an attempt to show him how serious I am about this.

He shakes his head, smiling. Picking up the ping pong ball, he hands it to me, signaling to start.

A smile probes at my lips as I decide to play with him a little.

In the beginning, I miss all the glasses on purpose, which prompts a shameless grin on his face.

In fact, slowly, people gather around us, cheering us on despite not knowing either of us. A few girls gather behind me while some guys are behind Raf. Suddenly, this seems to have turned into a battle of the sexes.

He smirks as he takes down another one of my cups and I'm forced to drink.

So far, I've lost three cups while he lost none.

Not for long.

Rolling my shoulders, I give him a look that says *the war is on* before I pick up the ball, flexing my elbow and throwing it into a cup—right on target.

Raf blinks in surprise before winking at me, all the while picking up the glass to drink and washing the ball in one of the water containers by the side.

He looks so cool and poised, the girls behind me are already swooning about him, their whispers reaching my ears. For a moment, I feel a low current of jealousy pass through my body. But I soon squash it as I sweetly turn to them.

"My husband thinks I can't win this just because I'm a girl. But I think the verdict is still to be determined."

My words work perfectly as they convey our connection and they also enlist some of the girls on my side, cheering me on and wishing for me to win to prove him wrong.

I'm quite surprised at the turn of events and the fact that they back off immediately, instead only gushing about my handsome husband and how lucky I am to have him.

Jealousy soon forgotten, I actually start having fun.

One after another, I sink the ball in Raf's cups while he misses every now and then.

Giving me a look, he chugs the last of his cup before he sets about his turn.

We're both down to two cups now, so the battle is tight.

"If I win," Raf speaks, his voice loud enough to be heard by everyone. "I get to choose the next show we watch," he smiles evilly when he sees me blink at him.

Pursing my lips, I see what he's trying to do.

For a few days now he's been bugging about a new show he'd wanted to watch—one I'd declared a little too cheesy. I'd kept talking him out of it, but it seems he has his hidden weapons.

"Fine," I nod, keeping my head high. "But if *I* win," I pause for the dramatic effect, all the while keeping the eye contact, "we're watching the show *I* want to watch."

Not that I have one in mind, or anything that he could do for me that he isn't already doing. But I can't not issue a challenge of my own, especially seeing how many people are awaiting to see the winner of the game.

We both nod, and adding a second ball to the game, we decide to make it more interesting. We'd both be aiming at the same time, and whoever gets the first shot wins.

"And go," someone gives the signal.

I throw my ball just as he throws his and...

They both hit the glasses at the same time.

"It's a tie!" someone announces.

Belatedly, I see phones around us. Some recorded the moment to see who got it first, but as they start fighting among themselves, Raf and I decide to accept the tie.

There's a choir of cheers on both sides, guys patting Raf on the back and girls whispering in my ear how cool everything had been.

"Why don't you and your girl come with us upstairs?" Tobias, the guy from before, addresses Raf.

I'm a little tipsy—just a little though—so I give Raf my silent assent, sliding my hand into his as we're led upstairs to a room.

"This is so reminiscent of my first frat party," he whispers, "but also flipped on its head. Everyone...likes us," he states in awe.

"Everyone likes *you*," I correct, since I'd seen how many fanboys he'd collected downstairs alone.

Between each pass, he would converse a little with each, his speech and

manner so imposing he'd suddenly become some kind of authority in that little circle. Case in point with Tobias, who'd been so in awe with Raf even though we'd both tied, that he'd invited us upstairs.

"I think I need to stop worrying about girls hitting on you and start watching out for the guys," I joke.

He shakes his head at me, but I can tell he's just amused.

Reaching the landing, we're led towards a big room at the end of the hallway. Inside, there are already seven or so people, all sitting around with a can of beer or a glass of alcohol and chatting. Some are also smoking, even though that was prohibited downstairs.

"Everyone, this is Rafaelo and his girl, Noelle," he introduces us, and one by one, people start making introductions.

We take a seat on one of the couches and Tobias offers us both some drinks.

"Are you ok? You had quite a bit of beer?" Raf asks, ever the thoughtful sweetheart.

"You did notice it was awfully diluted. I don't think you need to worry."

Maybe I'm a tiny bit tipsy, but one more beer won't hurt.

Raf snakes a protective arm around my waist as he tugs me into him.

Though in the beginning I fear things will be awkward since we don't know anyone, it soon becomes quite pleasant as we engage in small talk and funny anecdotes.

I become more comfortable as I see there are two more couples in the room, Max and Ava, and Janice and Aaron. Another girl, Samantha, is currently sitting awfully close to one of the frat brothers, Jason, and I note there might be something there. Aside from Tobias, there's one more guy, Levi.

The conversation becomes more and more interesting, and once again I note the effect Raf has on a crowd.

He's speaking and...well, they're just listening.

Right now he's talking about some business model I know nothing about. I only get to chime in when the conversation verges a little more on the fun stuff—like video games.

"It's funny you say that," Raf smiles. "Noelle and I met in an online game."

"No shit," Aaron comments. "That's so cool. I've tried to convince J to play with me so many times, but she's never been into that."

"What was the game?" Levi throws the question, and suddenly, I'm included in the conversation, too.

Every time I speak, though, Raf finds ways to touch me—visibly touch me—for the other guys to see. It's so blatant, I can't stop my lips from curling up in a smile.

"Why don't we play something?" Ava suggests. "I'm bored of your nerd talk," she huffs and everyone laughs.

"Let's play never have I ever," Sam suggests, her eye straying to Jason as she licks her lips. Oh, there is definitely something there.

"Oh no," Raf groans in my hair. "That game right there landed me in hot waters last time," he bemuses, and I remember exactly what he's talking about.

"You're not drunk now, and you're certainly *not* who you used to be. We've got this, don't worry," I wink at him.

I may not have played the game before, but I've seen it in movies and shows before. Save for Raf's last failed attempt, this seems like a fun activity.

The questions start soon enough, some asking about countries visited, or stunts performed on campus.

Since the rule is to drink only if you've done it, neither Raf nor I drink.

"Never have I ever ridden a bike," I say as my turn comes.

"You've never?" he murmurs the question.

I shake my head. It hadn't been something I'd been allowed to do.

"It seems I'm the only one," I chuckle.

"I can ride one, but not so well," Ava muses, swirling the liquid in her cup.

"Ok, Rafaelo next."

"Never have I ever..." he trails off pensively, "crashed a car."

I groan. The little...

Grumbling something under my breath, I take a drink.

Everyone is on me then, wanting to hear the story. A little embellished, I give it to them.

"You got caught by the cops?"

"Well, my brother helped me get out of the situation," I do my best to explain, though I never reveal one thing—*why* I'd crashed in the first place.

Once the excitement from my story dies down, the game continues. In between, Max whips out a couple weed cigarettes, passing them around.

"We can leave if you want to," Raf whispers when the joint comes our

way.

I shake my head.

"I like being around people my age for once," I assure him. "And I kind of want to try it?" I ask tentatively.

His brows go up, but he doesn't say no. Instead, he holds it to my lips, walking me through the steps of how to smoke it.

I inhale once. A slight cough. Then twice. Three times. And damn, but it starts getting more and more pleasant. Definitely better than the stuff Sergio had at the *hacienda*.

As the joint makes the rounds, the game becomes more and more sexual in nature. One after another, the lines become all about positions, acts, and kinks.

I blush, but when Raf inquires again if I want to leave, I guarantee him I'm comfortable and I'm having fun. Especially as each round ends up with a few stories to fit the subject.

The weed finally gets to me and I become more relaxed as I slump against Raf, a silly grin on my face. I also can't help myself from giggling at every little thing—no matter how funny.

TWENTY-TWO

NOELLE

"YOU'RE HIGH, AREN'T YOU?" RAF REMARKS, THOUGH HIS PUPILS ARE ALSO enlarged. Compared to me, though, he only had one puff since he was worried about his drug tolerance given his history, but also because he wanted to be in charge to take care of me—ever the sweetheart.

"Never have I ever had sex in public," one of the guys says, raising a brow as he scans the room.

I giggle again, bringing the can to my lips just as I elbow Raf to do the same.

It goes on and on like this, and I burst out into a silly laugh every time we've done something. Poor Raf can only keep up with me as I needlessly bring attention to ourselves each time.

"Never have I ever slept with the same person more than once."

"More like only one ever," I giggle and once more, my laughter gives us away as I urge Raf to go ahead and drink just as I take a big gulp of my beer.

Maybe I am a little high. And a little drunk. Maybe both?

But this is so much fun, I want more!

"Wait, so you've only been with each other?" someone asks. I try to squint to recognize who, but my vision is *slightly* blurry.

Draping myself all over Raf, I make sure to let everyone know he's taken—forever.

"He's my first and I am his," I declare loudly, puckering my lips and giving him a loud kiss on the cheek.

"Damn, that's kind of cute," one of the girls comments.

"How long have you been together?" Tobias asks.

"A long, *loooooong* time," I reply before Raf has any chance to say

something. And with me on top of him, barely letting him breathe, I don't think he can say or do much.

Turning to him it's to see him smiling indulgently at me, his hand on the back of my head as he's gently caressing me.

The conversation once more shifts from the game as everyone starts to discuss relationships and the *ideal* relationship, including their deal breakers.

"I don't have many," Jason starts, "but what Andy did to Levi sucked. I don't think anyone would put up with that."

"Did she cheat?" I blurt out, blinking as I look between Jason and Levi. He's the only one not accompanied tonight, and maybe that's why.

"Nah, she did worse," Jason answers instead.

A look of pain crosses Levi's face as he admits.

"She didn't tell me she was pregnant and she gave the baby up for adoption. The records are sealed so I don't know what family adopted him... She didn't even give me the chance to have a say in it."

Everyone is silent.

Raf's arms tighten around my body just as my heart lurches, my throat suddenly dry.

"Maybe she had her reasons?" I add, more on a whisper, my eyes fixed to a random spot on the wall.

"She was a fucking cruel bitch, that's what she was," he spits out.

"It would be a deal-breaker for anyone," Tobias agrees, as do the girls.

Even Raf nods, which jolts me out of my reverie.

"I don't have many hard limits, but I reckon that would be one," he adds pensively, which steers the conversation into an animated conversation about maternal and paternal rights.

All the while, I feel myself slipping, whether from the weed or something else...

"Are you sleepy? We can go home," Raf murmurs when he sees me yawn.

"Maybe in..." I look at my watch, "half an hour?"

"Deal," he kisses me lightly on the lips.

I continue to lay on top of him, my mind so numb from the weed. In the beginning I hadn't realized that the effect is gradual, not all at once. I probably shouldn't have smoked so much.

"That's it, we're going home, you're about to fall asleep."

"But we didn't even dance," I pout at him.

Not one to be deterred, he takes me in his arms, thanking everyone for their company and getting me out of there.

And as we take a cab back home, I can't help but wrap myself around him, hugging him to my chest, simply wanting to melt into him.

"There, pretty girl," he chuckles. "We're almost there."

"I want you," I say out loud, grabbing his shirt and batting my lashes at him. "I need you inside of me," I purr in what I think is a very seductive tone.

But Raf doesn't think so as he places his hand over my mouth, telling me to be quiet until we get home.

Not one to be deterred, I trail my hands all over his body.

Does weed make you horny? Because I am. So, so horny I'll die if he doesn't fuck me right now.

"Fuck me, please," I mumble against his hand, the sound muffled.

Raf sports an amused expression as he continues to look at me. The moment the cab stops in front of our building, he takes me in his arms and in no time we're back to our apartment.

"Let's put you to bed. You're high, pretty girl," he chuckles, but I simply wrap my arms around him.

"I need you," I rasp against his mouth, kissing him with all I have. "I need you. Now, Raf. Now..."

He takes my mouth in a dazzling kiss, and without even breaking contact I bring my hands to my jeans, fumbling to get them off me. It's clumsy—a little too clumsy—but I manage to do it while still sucking his tongue in my mouth.

"Bed," I order him, backing towards the bedroom as he continues to kiss me, his hands now going to the hem of my shirt, wrenching it off me and throwing it somewhere in the hallway.

It's only when the back of my knees meet the bed that we stop.

Chuckling, I lean back just long enough to give him a silly grin and undo his pants, pushing them down his hips before discarding my underwear and inviting him between my legs.

Ever the gentleman, he tries to kiss his way down my body, but I have no patience for it now. Not when I'm so feverish from just being next to him.

"I need you inside of me, Raf. Now!" I cry out as I wrap my legs around him, urging that hard part of him to join me where I want him the most.

And he does. Oh, thank God he does.

My back hits the bed just as he starts pumping into me, the same urgency

overtaking him as I continue to kiss him, our tongues mating just as wildly as our bodies.

"Yes, fuck," I let out half a moan when I feel the head of his cock hit a deep spot within me.

There's a sharp pain that's accompanied by sweet pleasure as he does it all over again.

"You feel so damn good, pretty girl. Too good," he grunts, his scent invading my nostrils and making me clench my walls in response.

"I need... I need..." my mouth opens on a loud cry as he sneaks his hand between our bodies, touching my clit just as his thrusts become more pronounced.

The pain, too, seems to increase.

Yet I can't find it in me to care.

"Come with me, Noelle. I need you to come on my cock, pretty girl..."

A few more thrusts and I do.

So. Fucking. Hard.

No pain in the entire universe could eclipse this feeling of completion, or knowing I belong to him just like he belongs to me. He stills over me as his own orgasm washes through him. His breathing turns harsh, his features tense.

"Damn," he mutters as he moves over so he doesn't crush me. "That was..." he chuckles.

"I know," I add vaguely, staring at the ceiling and feeling the effects of the sex on my body, the fog caused by the weed slowly dissipating, the conversations from before starting to echo in my mind.

Raf is the first to get up, and as he moves to remove the rest of his clothing, he freezes in front of me.

"Noelle," he calls my name, his voice trembling.

I blink, suddenly brought back to the present as I lift my head.

"Did I hurt you?" His expression is one of pure horror.

He points between my legs, and as I look down, it's to see blood everywhere.

"Please tell me I didn't hurt you," he repeats, coming to my side and seemingly *too* distraught.

"I...No, I..." I frown, stilling for a moment before remembering. "My period," I breathe out. "I must have gotten my period. I'm so sorry," I say as I bury my face in my hands, mortification burning at my cheeks and chasing

away any remaining trace of intoxication.

"You have nothing to be sorry about, pretty girl. I had no clue... Fuck," he purses his lips.

Seeing the mess I caused, I can't help but feel self-conscious.

"Can you," I clear my throat, the urge to bury my head in the sand overwhelming. "Can you change the sheets while I clean up?"

"Of course. Do you want me to help you?" he immediately offers, but I shut him down.

There's something about his expression that doesn't sit well with me. Something about the way he looked at me when he thought he'd hurt me. Something like...

I shake my head.

I can't contemplate that now. We had sex. My period came. It happens, right? It's nothing too out of the ordinary.

Taking a quick shower, I put on a new pair of underwear and a fresh pad before I head back to the bedroom.

Raf is already in bed, the sheets changed, the smell of clean laundry drifting in the air.

He's on his side, his back to me. Is he asleep already?

Biting my lip, I slide between the sheets, hugging them to my chest.

There's a gulf between us, and it's more than the current distance between us.

And no matter how much I try to fall asleep, I cannot.

"Noelle," he eventually calls my name, yet he doesn't turn. He's still on his side, away from me.

"Yes?"

Is he embarrassed of me? About how I behaved tonight? That I aired personal details from our life? Is he...disgusted by my period blood? The questions flash in my brain, the implications endless.

"At the hacienda," he starts and I become unnaturally still as I hold my breath. "The night of the fire. I was there," he admits. "I..."

My heart beats in my chest, the sound deafening in my ears.

"I tried to kill you," he confesses. "I've thought of a thousand ways to tell you this, and I still couldn't find the right one, or the right moment, or if there was ever a moment at all. I just know that... I can't hold this inside of me anymore. I can't fucking live while knowing I tried to kill the only woman I've ever loved. And I can't keep pretending everything is ok when you don't

even remember," he gives a dry laugh.

"Raf," I turn, my hand on his back as I will him to turn.

He does, his eyes misted with unshed tears.

"At the time, I thought you were the enemy. I thought you'd harmed Lucero," he lets out a pained groan. "Otherwise I would have never..."

"I don't care," I tell him, coming closer and cupping his cheeks. "What happened before... Can we let it go? Can we move on and let it go?"

"Did you not hear me? I tried to kill you. I almost succeeded. It's my fucking fault your voice is different, Noelle. Because I..." a broken sound escapes him before sobs permeate the air. "I crushed your windpipe. I tried to strangle you and I..."

"Shh," I take him in my arms, hugging him to my chest. "It's not your fault."

It's mine.

Everything is *my* fault.

But I don't say that.

Instead, I simply continue with my lie.

"I don't remember and I may never do, so please stop feeling guilty. Just the fact that you told me knowing I may never remember...that speaks volumes of your character Raf. If anything, I love you even more for it."

"But your voice," he croaks.

"It's *your* voice now. Just like everything that I am, everything that I'll ever be. It's yours. Always yours," I murmur as I brush some unruly locks from his forehead before bringing my lips to his wet skin, tasting his tears and feeling my own stab at my eyes.

"Pretty girl..."

"I forgive you," I give him the words, knowing they are the only ones that could set him free. "But please, forgive yourself, too."

Suddenly, it makes sense why he'd close up at times, why he'd think I'd hate him for things I don't remember. All this time, he'd worried about that one night.

"I don't know if I can," he whispers, his clear blue eyes meeting mine and making my heart weep with pain.

"You can, and you will," I say amid kisses.

I just pray you'll be able to forgive me too when my turn comes.

TWENTY-THREE

NOELLE

I WAKE UP TIRED, THIRSTY AND HURTING ALL OVER. STRETCHING IN BED, MY hand immediately goes to my lower stomach and the ghost of a pain emanating from there, made worse by last night's memories.

Damn it!

I behaved like a cat in heat, rubbing myself all over Raf and blurting the most inappropriate things at the most inappropriate times.

Pulling my pillow over my head, I groan out loud as the memories return, everything that happened at the party but also after, with Raf's confession and the way he'd held me tightly through the night, apologizing all over again.

The door to the bedroom opens, and my dear husband strides in. I lower the pillow just enough to see his sweaty torso and damp hair as he wipes himself with a towel. He must have been to the gym downstairs, and as he heads straight for the bathroom, I don't think he noticed I'm awake.

God, I don't know how to face him this morning. Certainly not with even more lies between us.

I remember that day so clearly, the way he'd looked so out of control as he'd wrapped his hand around my throat, shouting at me to die. At that point, I'd been resigned to my fate. But there had been more. And the events that had followed had put me in a mental institution for months to come, crazed with grief and a lack of will to live.

Yet that's all in the past.

Dead and buried, because at this point, no one else knows.

Everyone who did died that night in the fire, as did Lucero not too long ago at Raf's hands.

"Noelle," Raf calls my name, wrenching the blanket down my body and

assessing me with his shrewd eyes.

"What?" I squeak in surprise.

"How's the pain? On a scale from one to ten?"

I blink, biting my lip as I look at him in confusion.

"Don't lie to me, pretty girl," he threatens.

"I don't know. A five...ish?" I give him a sheepish smile.

It's not as bad as it's been in the past and I can definitely handle it.

Shaking his head at me, he drops a tray with various items on the nightstand, before giving me his full attention.

He does a full scan of my body, from my bare legs and thighs, to the nightgown riding up my hips. For some reason, I feel the urge to cover myself even though he's seen, touched and kissed every inch of my body already.

"Here," he leans into me, his hands on the hem of my gown as he raises it further up, bunching it right under my breasts. Before I can question what he's doing, he places warm patches on my lower belly, wrapping them around my midriff so they are kept in place.

"And this too," he adds as he takes some medicine from the tray, handing me a glass of water and urging me to swallow them.

"Pain meds?" I ask as I wipe my mouth.

He nods, silently arranging me in bed so I'm sitting comfortably against a mountain of pillows.

"Wait a moment," he mumbles, leaving the room for a few seconds before returning with a new tray, this time one filled entirely with food—good, yummy food.

"Raf," my eyes widen in shock as he places it on my lap.

There are chocolate pancakes, raspberry yoghurt, cereal and an assortment of juices.

"Did you make the pancakes?"

He nods eagerly, taking a seat on the edge of the bed and looking at me expectantly.

Oh. Shit. He's waiting for me to try them.

Taking a knife and a fork, I dig in, my stomach already grumbling at the sight of all these delicacies.

"Well? How is it?" he asks as I take the first bite.

The flavor immediately bursts on my tongue, and as I'm chewing I give him two big thumbs up.

He sighs in relief.

"Good. That's good," he mutters, more to himself.

"You're really outdoing yourself here," I praise as I continue to eat.

"I'm just," he takes a deep breath. "I hate that this is happening to you. That you're suffering so much a few days a month and..." he trails off, a flash of hurt crossing himself.

"And what?" I urge quietly, putting the tray aside when I'm done.

He takes it from me, depositing it safely next to the other one.

Still, he has a hard time saying whatever is on his mind, so I reach out to him, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"I know I shouldn't feel this way," he starts, and the words make me worry right away. "I know it's not normal. But it always reminds me of what you went through. That..." he trails off, swallowing hard.

"That?" I ask, meeting his gaze and recognizing the torment reflected there.

"That someone abused you. That someone violated you and that..." he pauses, his mouth a thin, tight line. "That you gave birth in inhumane conditions and that you suffered what no one, *no one* should ever have," he declares with so much intensity, my own heart squeezes in my chest.

"Raf," I move closer to him.

"You must think me insensitive," he continues, "perhaps mad. Here you are, in pain and with so many scars of the past and all I can think about is someone else touching you. Someone else..." he averts his eyes, his fists clenched, his breathing labored.

My mouth hangs open as I register his words for the first time. Yet I can't say anything. I can't tell him what happened, and why I am the way I am. Not now, maybe never.

So I do the only thing I can.

I throw my arms around his broad shoulders, resting my head on his chest as I listen to the beats of his heart.

"You're not mad, or insensitive. Not when I'm the same," I admit bitterly. "I think of everything that happened with Armand and..."

"With Armand it was different," he adds quietly. "I was out of it most of the time, so I only have a few memories of him actually raping me. But he only..." he leans back, his eyes searching mine. "I've never told this to anyone before," he whispers in such a sad tone, I feel like ripping the world apart for what they did to him. Certainly, his brother is first on that list.

"You can tell me anything. You know I wouldn't judge you, or look at you differently."

A tight smile appears on his face as he takes my hands off him, cradling them in his own as he slowly caresses my flesh.

"Armand was married before. To a woman."

I blink in confusion at that one piece of news.

"He wasn't gay. On the contrary, he despised the fact that I was a man and he did everything in his power to forget that, including having me dressed in certain ways," his voice thickens with the intensity of his emotions. "He thought I looked like his dead wife, so..."

"So he used you as her replacement," I fill in the blanks.

Raf nods, a light film covering his eyes. Why did I ever think he moved on from that part of his life? Because the man in front of me, the man finally opening up...he's also opening up a world of hurt in sharing his secrets with me.

And that hurts even more—knowing that he's been burying this deep inside while putting on a happy face.

"Blue, my darling Blue," I whisper.

"But because I do remember some of those moments, I would never want you to experience it. In that respect, I truly wish your memory never came back. I don't want you to suffer even more."

I shake my head at him.

"As long as you're here with me, nothing can break me Raf. That's the truth, the *only* truth."

"I'll always be with you, pretty girl," he assures me as he takes me in his arms, holding me tight and swaying lightly with me.

"Do you ever wonder how we would have ended up had we met back then? Had we gone on that date?"

"All the time," he smiles against my cheek. "But it wasn't our time. Who knows, I may have messed up everything with my low self-esteem and my poor mental health back then. I wasn't a man worthy of you, Noelle. I don't know if I am one now, but one promise I'll always give to you is that I'll do my best to *be* the man you deserve. To be someone worthy of you. I'll work on that every day for the rest of our lives so you never doubt our relationship, our love, or my commitment to you."

"Sometimes you say the sweetest things, Raf," I smile though melancholy tugs at my heart.

"These aren't empty words. I am happy if *you* are happy. I know that sounds completely antithetical to someone who's always lived for others. But trust me when I say this, living for you, *with* you, is living for myself for the first time in my life."

Tears prick at my eyes as I burrow deeper in his embrace, so touched by his promises and his words, but also incredibly afraid for what the future holds for us.

Raf has never been able to see himself objectively, or even positively. Not like I see him. And because of that, he doesn't realize that he is a much better human than I could ever aspire to be.

But I know.

I've always known.

The pain is manageable with the meds for the rest of the day. Raf is in and out of his office as he tries to wrap up his work faster, even though I tell him it's not necessary. Still, he wants to be by my side at all times.

When he's finally finished with all his conference calls, we settle in the living room, alternating between watching some movies and playing video games for old times' sake.

I may be a little rusty in that department, but everything is so much fun that I quickly forget all about worries, the pain only a low echo in the background.

It's a few days later when I'm well on my way back to normality that Raf announces we're going out. Expecting another outrageous date idea—not that I'd mind it—he surprises me by saying we're going to visit Vlad and Sisi.

"Please tell me you're not still jealous of Sisi," he murmurs softly when he sees my expression immediately sour.

"It's not that I'm jealous of her," I roll my eyes. And I'm not. Not really. I'm only jealous of the fact that she was there for him when I couldn't—taking *my* place as his friend and confidante. Then there's also the small fact that they almost got married, which also does nothing to improve my mood. "It's just that I don't want to imagine what would have happened if you'd have actually married her," I pout at him.

"Noelle," he smiles, "pretty girl, we've had this conversation at least a hundred times. I never saw her as anything more than a friend. If we had married, it would have been one of in name only. She was still in love with Vlad and I... Well, I..."

"Well?" I raise a brow at him.

"I was still hung up on you," he admits in a low voice. "I was so messed up after you stopped replying to me. Retrospectively, maybe I had my first heartbreak," he adds pensively, as if he's just realizing that.

"But heartbreak would mean you felt something for me. Something not quite platonic?" I bat my lashes at him suggestively, waiting for the moment he finally recognizes we were meant to be—even then.

"You're right," he nods absentmindedly. "Maybe there was something more."

He doesn't elaborate further, simply turning to put on a light jacket while instructing me to do the same.

I narrow my eyes at him, giving him a look he doesn't seem to notice. Eventually, I realize it's a lost battle, and I simply put on my shoes as I get ready to leave.

Men!

Sometimes Raf can be a little too oblivious, and while most times it's awfully cute and endearing, there are also those times, like now, when I'd like nothing more than jump on him and forcefully demand the words from his mouth.

But this is neither the time nor the place.

I need to put aside this obsession I have with his friendship with Sisi and treat it accordingly. After all, it *is* just a friendship. Especially considering the fact that Sisi is mindlessly in love with her own husband. Granted, that's the only thing saving her from my wrath.

"You've gone quiet," Raf mentions as he starts the car.

"Oh, just woolgathering," I give him a dazzling smile.

I couldn't very well tell him I was thinking of ways I *would* have ended Sisi if she hadn't been already married and thoroughly devoted to her husband.

Raf always makes fun of my jealousy, thinking it's *cute*.

News flash. It's *not*.

I *would* kill someone who tried to make a move on him.

Sadly, he's not ready for that type of truth, or realization.

And so I must count myself lucky for his tunnel vision and the fact that I'm simply untouchable in his mind.

A smile pulls at my lips.

I guess there are some good things about his obliviousness, too.

We chat amiably during the ride to Vlad's place, and once we reach there

I'm surprised at the size of the grounds. Though the house is located in Brighton Beach, it's probably the biggest one in the area, having its own private beach, too.

"So it's just the two of them here?" I ask Raf as he pulls into the parking lot.

"No. They've taken in some kids they rescued from this awful experiment," he starts, explaining that they'd opened up an academy for the kids who had spent their entire lives in captivity, aiming to reeducate them about the world and give them a new purpose.

"I think they have about ten living with them now," Raf mentions.

I nod appreciatively. That's very kind of them, and I can't help but be impressed that they'd dedicated themselves to helping the poor kids.

"Oh, one more thing," he stops me right before we're about to go to the door.

"Hm?"

"Remember the scandal with Sisi's sister? They invited Venezia to stay with them for a while. Don't mention anything about her and Michele. I want to approach her first and get her side before everything blows up."

"Why don't I talk to her?" I offer. "She'd be more willing to open up to a woman, don't you think?"

He mulls it over, eventually agreeing.

"Ok, we'll do that. Just...make sure Vlad doesn't hear of it. The last thing I want is for him to get involved and..." Raf groans as he shakes his head.

"Easy, Blue. If anyone heard you they might think you're protecting your brother," I tease.

"Noelle, not you too," he bemoans, and I chuckle.

Yet at the same time I store one more bit of information away. It seems I'm not the only one who thinks Raf isn't exactly...revenge-focused anymore. Not that I mind it, since I don't want him putting himself in danger by going up against Michele, who, by all intents and purposes, is capable of *anything*.

Yet something isn't sitting right with me.

Maybe it's the fact that, though Raf denies it, he doesn't want to harm his brother—regardless of what Michele might have done to him.

Therein lies the source of my frustration.

Just thinking about the hell Raf went through *because* of Michele puts me in a very murderous mood. It's not fair that he should get away just like that when Raf will have those awful memories forever.

Maybe Michele had gained a few sympathy points with me after I'd found out some of his past, but that doesn't erase everything else.

At the end of the day, I'll always put Raf first.

We barely make it to the door when it opens, Vlad's form filling the entire frame, his eyes scanning us from head to toe before closing the door in our faces.

I blink, giving Raf an amused look

"Is Raf here already?" Sisi's voice echoes from the hall.

"Just the post," Vlad calls back, but not a second after the door is opened again, this time by Sisi.

"You're in big trouble, Vlad," she tells him, shaking her head. "I'm sorry about that. You know how he can get," she turns to us, beckoning us inside. "He's like a big territorial dog that won't let anyone come too close."

"Hey, I heard that," Vlad's incensed voice resounds as he comes back. "You're not being fair, hell girl."

"And you," she points her finger to his chest, "need to remember what we agreed on. Now be a good boy and don't scare our guests off."

Vlad mumbles something under his breath before he gives Sisi a dazzling smile.

"Of course. Where are my manners. Welcome," he addresses us with so much fake enthusiasm we all start laughing.

"Let's move to the living room," Sisi motions to her right. "The house is a little quiet today since the kids are out on a trip with their teacher, so it's only going to be us."

"I heard from Raf what you're doing with the academy and I think it's wonderful," I praise quietly as I take a seat by her side, purposefully or not putting myself between her and Raf. "It can't have been easy to set everything up."

Vlad is by Sisi's side, still giving Raf semi-hostile looks, though at this point I'm unsure if it's because he's still hung up on the past, or he just likes to make people uncomfortable. I might go for the latter.

"Oh, not at all. It's been a work in progress. We have the original cohort that we saved, but we want to expand at some point. Isn't that right, love?" she reaches out to touch Vlad's hand, almost as if she's trying to calm a feral beast with her touch.

The effect is immediate. He blinks once before his entire face lights up in a smile.

"Of course. We've been thinking of buying a much bigger location somewhere upstate and build everything from the ground up. Especially since we might need some...architectural gimmicks."

For a while, the conversation centers solely on their academy and how they are currently running it. Sisi details their curriculum and the steps they've taken to rehabilitate the kids to be fit for society after the trauma and conditional learning they had been subjugated to.

Raf is right by my side, his hand around my midriff in an almost unconscious way that has my heart pounding in my chest with happiness.

Eventually, though, the discussion veers into more uncomfortable territory as Raf finally asks the question we were both curious about.

"How is Marcello doing?"

"Still locked up," Sisi purses her lips. "Lina and the kids are with Enzo for a bit while they figure things out since they're worried about their security alone in the house. And as you know, Venezia is with us. It's just horrible what happened with all of them at once."

"And it's *your* brother's fault," Vlad shoots, without minding his filter as I've come to expect of him.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"Technically, he's Sisi's brother too," I point out.

"Let's not get into particularities," Sisi is quick to intervene, her hand on Vlad's as she gives him a look that says *behave*. "It doesn't matter whose brother Michele is because that doesn't make him any less rotten."

A look of guilt flashes across Raf's face.

"I'm not saying this to excuse Michele's actions," he takes a deep breath, "but in his mind, he's doing this all for a reason."

"Yes," Vlad rolls his eyes, "because he thinks Marcello killed Nicolò."

"Yes and no," Raf winces, and both Vlad and Sisi look at him expectantly.

Just at that moment, though, Venezia appears in the doorway.

She's wearing a long black dress coupled with black tights, her hair unbound and flowing beautifully down her back. She has a hesitant smile on her face as she enters the room, almost as if she's waiting for permission.

Which Sisi immediately gives.

"Do come in, Zia. Take a seat," she smiles at her sister.

Venezia nods, grabbing a chair and sitting across from all of us.

Having heard of her involvement with Michele, I can't help but study her

in an attempt to understand how that could have happened. She comes across as dainty—breakable. The opposite of Michele. And yet, maybe that was exactly what appealed to him about her.

"You can talk, Raf," Sisi tells him. "Zia is aware of what is happening at the moment, especially since it affected her with those awful videos Michele spread," she winces when she sees Zia's face fall.

It's clear they only suspect Michele was the one who spread the videos, not the one who also acted in them.

"Right," he mutters, giving me a look. "There are some things about Michele that you might not be aware. About *why* he's doing this," he starts before recounting what had happened with Antonio Guerra who'd raped and abused Michele for more than a year before someone had intervened.

I furtively glance at Venezia, watching for her reactions. And sure enough, there they are. Subdued, but very much there.

"He raped him?" Vlad's eyes widen.

"Daily," Raf grunts. "Sometimes with other people, too."

Zia's hands clench around the material of her dress, her mouth parting as a soundless moan escapes her. She looks on the verge of tears, but she'd doing a good job of restraining herself.

"What..." Sisi's hand flies to her mouth in horror.

Immediately, as if sensing her distress, Vlad is there with his touch, taking her hand in his and stroking her wrist with his thumb in circular, comforting movements.

"So you see, Nicolo wasn't just his biological father. As far as I understand it, he was the only one who was ever there for Michele. Which is why he's willing to go this far."

"It doesn't excuse his actions, but it does give a context for his behavior," I add.

"I'm so glad Antonio is dead," Sisi shivers visibly. "I can't believe anyone could be so...evil."

"I'm glad he's dead, too," Raf nods. "I'm sure Michele was far from his only victim."

"That still doesn't give us an idea of how to solve this. Save for killing Michele I don't see a way out of this mess," Sisi mentions pensively.

Venezia reels back as if struck by something.

"Kill him?" she asks in a soft voice.

"Don't worry about it," Sisi gives her a smile.

"We'll deal with everything, Z," Vlad nods at her.

But the assurances do nothing to calm her. In fact, she looks increasingly distraught.

And that's when one thing becomes clear.

Venezia cares about Michele.

A lot.

I turn to look at Raf, and he noticed the same thing, tapping my hand lightly in a hidden signal.

The topic is soon dropped as Raf and Vlad get wrapped in their business talk.

It's at this point that Venezia excuses herself as she more or less dashes out of the room.

"She's been very moody lately," Sisi sighs. "I don't know how to help her anymore. She won't tell us anything," she shakes her head. "We haven't even been able to get the name of that boy she was seeing out of her, if you can believe that. Vlad did his best to investigate, but he came up empty-handed. I'm just...worried about her."

"Why don't I try to talk to her?" I offer, thinking this could be the perfect moment. "Sometimes, it's easier to open up to a stranger than to someone close."

Sisi considers this for a while before nodding.

"It's worth a try. The boys are busy anyway," she waves her hand at Raf and Vlad currently getting into a heated argument on some business venture. "Her room is on the second floor," Sisi instructs.

Getting to my feet, I give her a small smile as I head towards Venezia's room.

The door is slightly ajar and before I get to knock, I hear a small sob.

"Venezia," I softly call out, opening the door.

She whips around, wiping the tears off her face though the redness of her eyes betrays her.

"Are you ok?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she immediately replies, plastering a fake smile on her face.

Letting out a sigh, I close the door to her room, locking it.

Her eyebrows shoot up in question.

"Can we talk?"

"About?" She frowns.

We haven't interacted much before, so I see why this could come as a little sudden.

"Michele," I simply say, and she immediately stiffens.

"I... I don't..." she stammers in an attempt to find an excuse.

"I know," I state carefully as I take a seat on her bed.

Her room is small but clean, with only a few items around. Certainly, it doesn't look like a teenager's room. And as I scan it, I'm struck by a certain item on her desk.

"What do you know?" she asks carefully, coming closer and seating herself across from me.

"He took advantage of you," I start but she immediately shuts me off.

"He didn't. That is to say," she wets her lips, "it wasn't like that."

"What was it like then?"

Her big eyes turn to look at me, and I note all those hidden emotions—the fear, the shame, and the longing. All sentiments I'm *very* familiar with.

"Please don't tell Sisi. Or Vlad. Or...anyone..." she breathes out, her hands seeking mine in a small plea. "I don't want anyone to know about us."

"Don't worry," I assure her. "Only Raf and I know for now."

Nodding to herself, she continues to bite her lip in anxiety.

"He was my boyfriend," she finally admits. "For a time."

"But you know he must have gotten close to you on purpose. With hidden intentions," I measure my words so I don't come across as accusatory. Not when it's clear the girl is head over heels in love with him, and even now, after everything he's done, her instinct is to protect him.

She gives a tight nod.

"Then why are you defending him? Why keep this a secret?"

She doesn't meet my eyes as her hands move lower, to her flat stomach. Still, her expression coupled with the protective way she's holding on to her belly are enough to tell me everything I need to know.

"You're pregnant," I whisper, half in horror, half in awe.

"Yes," she confirms. "And if anyone finds out..." she shakes her head, a tear falling down her cheek. "I don't want anyone to know Michele is the father, or that he has anything at all to do with this baby..."

"You think they'd try to make you get an abortion?"

Somehow I doubt *anyone* in her family would do that.

"I know they would," she releases a weary sigh. "They all hate Michele so much they would rationalize it as doing me a favor. They would assume, like

you did, that he took advantage of me. I'm sure they would try to convince *me* that it wasn't consensual when I know what happened—I was there for every step. I might have been naïve, but I wanted him. I...loved him."

"Venezia..."

"Let's not forget the other tidbit," she laughs nervously. "We're technically related, aren't we? Another reason why they would try to convince me to get rid of it, and I won't. I won't do it," she shakes her head vehemently.

"You want this baby that much?" I ask, even as the question burns on my tongue, memories of long ago surfacing in my mind and making *me* shake from too much bottled up emotion.

"I love him. I loved...Michele," she pauses, squeezing her eyes shut in an attempt to find a modicum of calm. "But I know he never loved me back. But this baby... I *love* him," she simply states, and that's reason enough for her to do whatever she can to protect him.

"I'm sorry you have to deal with this," I give her a tight smile. "Anything you need, know I am here. Both Raf and I will be here to help you. If you want us to keep quiet about Michele, we will," I assure her, finally understanding her dilemma.

"Sisi wants to take me to see a doctor soon. I won't be able to hide my pregnancy for too long, but at least then she'll still think it was some boy who got me pregnant. Not..."

Before she can complete her sentence, her hand goes to her mouth, her face scrunching up in discomfort as she dashes to the ensuite bathroom, closing herself inside.

Taking a deep breath, I stand up, going to her desk and the item that had caught my eye before.

Under a few other papers and books, only the corner and a signature are visible. But as I move the other items out of the way, it's to see a drawing.

A drawing of a little girl wearing a pink dress, smiling brightly at the artist. And at the bottom...

From Michele to Venezia, the prettiest pink princess.

My eyes widen in disbelief. Hearing the water flush, I quickly take my phone out to snap a picture before I move the items back into their place and resume my spot on the bed.

"Sorry about that," Venezia apologizes. "It happens more and more often these days. I don't know how Sisi hasn't figured it out already."

"But she will soon. What are you going to do, Zia?"

"If Michele dies," her face tightens with pain, as if someone forcefully pulled those words out of her mouth. "If he's dead, then no one will care about my baby. And no one will try to take him away from me."

I ponder her words for a second.

"Do you want him dead?"

She smiles wistfully.

"Do I?" she murmurs, suddenly looking far older than her age—certainly far more mature than anyone's given her credit until now. "I reckon I do," she finally says, yet her gaze is distant.

TWENTY-FOUR

NOELLE

AFTER VENEZIA REFRESHES HERSELF, WE RETURN DOWNSTAIRS.

And as the Michele debate resumes here and there, a few things become clear.

Everyone wants Michele dead. But no one wants to take the first step and *actually* kill him.

Raf, I can understand, since for all their messed up fate, they were once friends—they had a connection. But everyone else?

Sisi feels conflicted about their biological bond and now that she knows about Antonio, she pities Michele. Then there's Vlad... Well, Vlad does what Sisi says—always.

For all the messed up things Michele's done, everyone is too *lenient*.

The only one I'm sure would go through with *actually* killing him is my brother, since he took the offense to Yuyu personally. Though he might not have the time to actively hunt him down, if the opportunity presented itself, I'm sure he is the one person who would *never* hesitate.

What about me?

I keep thinking about what *I* would do. For everything he's done to Raf, the answer should be an immediate yes, I *would* kill him. But at the same time, I look at my husband and I see that whirlpool of emotions he hasn't completely set free. I see the fact that he does love his brother. And if he died—if he truly died—I fear Raf would never stop blaming himself. Not for what happened in the past, and certainly not for the information that recently came to light about the gang rape at Michele's school.

Raf is already walking a precarious line with the guilt that threatens to weigh him down. So if Michele died in less than ideal circumstances, that

would all come crashing down.

I already witnessed it once, when Michele faked his death, and I now realize what should have been clear all along.

They still have a bond. Regardless of the hate, and everything that happened in between, there is still the seed of affection. And until that gets resolved, Michele can't die.

That thought slowly becomes solidified in my mind until I'm certain about my course of action.

Michele can't die *until* Raf works out his guilt and his regrets and can finally let go.

Because if he dies before that, then I fear I might lose Raf, too.

As soon as Raf and Vlad finish their business talk, Sisi suggests we go out to dinner together.

"We're family," she smiles at me. "I've always seen Raf like another brother. Pity that it's not *him* who's related to me," she jokes, instantly managing to win me over with that one statement.

"Noelle?" Raf gives me a look, telling me it's my decision whether we go or not.

"Let's do it," I smile brightly.

Sisi and Vlad get ready, and surprisingly, Venezia declares she wants to join us too.

Together, we all head to one of Enzo's restaurants downtown.

It seems the man is supplying *everyone* with entertainment in the city.

Just like the club, the restaurant sports a high-end look, the ambiance relaxing and luxurious. As soon as we give our names at the entrance, we are led to the back where only a few tables are occupied.

"Enzo has a separate area for acquaintances," Sisi leans in to explain. "Especially since our talks can become a little...too much for some people's ears."

"That's smart. This way there's also no way anyone could eavesdrop, or plant bugs."

Sisi's eyes sparkle.

"Indeed."

We're seated at a big conference table at the very back of the restaurant. Vlad, Sisi and Venezia are seated on one side while Raf and I are on the other.

As soon as we place our orders, the conversation from before resumes,

and this time, Raf recounts what he'd heard from Carlos about Ortega trying to sneak into the city.

"You know," Vlad starts pensively. "You're not the first one to tell me there have been disturbances in the area. I'm not as in tune with everything that happens as I used to be, but I still get regular reports about the activity in the city. And lately...someone's been causing problems. Not big enough that they would be noticed immediately, but enough that *I* noticed."

"You think it's Ortega?" Raf frowns. "I didn't think he had the resources for that."

"He doesn't," Vlad states with absolute certainty. "At least not yet."

"You're saying someone else is behind him?"

Vlad shrugs, leaning back in his seat and giving us a wolfish look.

"Maybe. I think we might need to reassess the terms your brother set," he nods at me. "He's the one who proposed an alliance to close the market. And what's happening now, is exactly what I predicted a few months back."

"What do you mean?" I frown.

When my brother had thrown in a ball in celebration of my marriage with Raf *and* the fact that DeVille was going public, he'd enlisted everyone's help in creating a closed ecosystem within New York. One that would ensure no newcomers would be able to set their business here. At the time, that had been mainly to corner Michele, which had worked to an extent. After, it had served as a much desired alliance between all the crime syndicates involved in the area—regardless of nationality.

"By closing the ranks, we flashed a challenge to everyone around. Come in if you dare."

"You're suspecting someone," Raf states with quiet conviction.

"Yes, and no. I have some idea who might be so foolish to dare it, but I don't have enough proof to back it up. Yet."

"Who?"

"Marchesi."

"Enzo's in-laws?" I blink.

"Well, technically his in-laws are dead," Raf adds grimly. "But it would make sense. I've been researching all of our family assets locally and abroad, and in doing so I took a look at the competition in Italy. Damiano Marchesi, Allegra's cousin, inherited the titles and the properties after her parents passed. But they were all pretty bankrupt."

"Yes. Damiano is not someone well-known in our circles," Vlad explains.

"Except for Allegra, I don't think anyone's even met the man. But considering the five families' legacy and the fact that we've officially entered an accord, without Marchesi per se, mind you, and I think he'd be the one most interested to break in."

"And once more we find ourselves with the same dilemma. If they want to enter, they will need someone to open the door," Raf groans.

"Indeed. From what I gather, Ortega is trying to chase after Michele for the initial terms of their bargain. Now if he entered a partnership with someone else, for a common goal and a common enemy..." Vlad trails off.

"We're reaching," Raf puts a hand up. "We don't even know if this Damiano guy is involved and we're already placing him with Ortega?"

"How old is Damiano?" Sisi asks.

"Late twenties? Around there," Vlad shrugs.

"I don't think it's reaching," I interrupt, and suddenly all eyes are on me. "What I meant to say," I clear my throat, adding some uncertainty to my tone. "For either of them to get *in*, they will need someone to open that door. It doesn't matter who seeks entry. It matters who can provide it. And in this case," I pause again, looking around the table as I lower my voice, "the only one who can provide the entry is Michele. He has the resources, the money, the manpower. And he doesn't have *any* outstanding promise with anyone else. It doesn't matter that he no longer has the Guerra name. He has everything else."

"Who would have thought," Vlad laughs. "You married a smart one," he taunts Raf, pointing at me.

Immediately, my hand seeks his under the table.

"Thank you," Raf preens, giving me a look of pure adoration. "Noelle is right in that aspect. It all comes down to Michele."

"Then maybe we should start there. Where is he?"

I look surreptitiously to Venezia, noticing her downcast gaze and the blush staining her cheeks.

How the hell no one noticed until now that the girl blushes every time Michele is mentioned?

Raf shrugs at the question.

"He'll show himself eventually. He always does."

To my trained ears, that sounds more like, *I don't care, I haven't been looking for him*. And it just serves to reinforce my opinion about Raf's stance on Michele.

As the conversation turns to the trends of the market, Raf and Vlad are on one side talking, while Sisi, Venezia and I occupy our time with more friendly topics.

The wine flows freely, and both Sisi and I become a little giggly while Venezia gives us a smile every now and then while nursing her orange juice.

"Kuznetsov? Fancy seeing *you* here," a man's voice resounds from behind. Turning, it's to see a man in his fifties and two women around my age coming in. Given that they've been led to this part of the restaurant, it's clear they belong to the inner circle somehow.

"Judge Reynolds," Vlad rises, shaking hands with the man. He does a short introduction to everyone at the table before the judge does the same.

"These are my daughters. Eleanor and Elizabeth."

Eleanor is the oldest, in her early twenties, while Elizabeth just turned eighteen.

"Why don't you join us? Venezia is also eighteen. Maybe her and Elizabeth could get along."

Venezia makes herself look smaller in her seat, clearly getting the innuendo. She has no friends. I'd heard it from Sisi before, and earlier today from Venezia. She never managed to make friends at school and has always been more or less a loner—the perfect target for Michele.

"Why not?" The judge chuckles, inviting his daughters to take a seat.

Elizabeth comes on our side, sitting by Venezia while Eleanor takes a seat next to her father at the top of the table—coincidentally next to Raf.

Or, at least, too close to him for my liking.

"Have you been able to look into Marcello's case?" Sisi asks, and it soon becomes clear that he's one of their contacts within the justice system.

"I'm not personally on the case, but I've made some inquiries. So far, the video is the main piece of evidence. Unless it turns out to be fake, I don't know what to tell you," the man sighs.

"Even if Catalina doesn't press charges?"

"Regardless," he purses his lips.

As they continue their discussion on the different loopholes in Marcello's case, I can't help but notice that Eleanor keeps trying to strike up conversation with Raf.

Her expression doesn't hurt, as she looks at him as if she'd like nothing better than eat him alive.

I narrow my eyes at her just as I squeeze Raf's hand under the table.

"I haven't seen you around," she turns to him. "How do you know Vlad and Sisi?" she asks as she dares to bat her lashes at him.

"We're all family," he gives her a tight smile while turning his body towards me, a quiet signal that he's aware I'm not pleased.

"Really? Then we're probably going to see more of each other."

Raf doesn't reply.

The next course comes, and as we're eating, she keeps brushing her hand against his before bursting out into an *oops*, as if she's not aware of doing it.

Even Raf seems put off by her repeated actions, but is too polite to say anything.

I'm not.

As I lean across the table to get the basket of bread, I brush my hand intentionally against hers, gasping as I do.

"Are you ok?" I ask, doing my best to look concerned. "Your hand's been spasming for a while now. Do you need anything?"

Her mouth hangs open in shock before annoyance takes over.

"I'm so sorry, Rafaelo, did I scratch your sister?"

The little...

"She's my wife," he replies in a dry tone, his features murderous.

"I'm not his sister. I'm his wife," I say at the same time, satisfaction blooming inside of me when her expression turns sour.

She doesn't get to reply, though, as her father finally seems to take notice of her, pausing his conversation with Vlad to check on her.

"Are your hands trembling again?" He asks as if it's a common occurrence. "Did you take your medicine on time? You know you can relapse if you don't."

"I did, daddy. Don't worry about me," she smiles sweetly at him.

But the moment his attention is back on Vlad, so is hers on Raf, blatantly disregarding the fact that he has a wife, sitting by his side, as she continues to shoot annoying questions at him.

"Sorry," Raf mouths at me, holding my hand in his and trying to comfort me in any way he can.

I don't blame him for trying to be polite, especially since it's clear her father is someone potentially important to Marcello's case.

But as I spot her hand on his *thigh*, a few moments later, all bets are off.

Raf, the sweetheart that he is, takes her hand off with a strained smile as he moves his chair closer to me—all in an effort to comport himself civilly.

"I don't know how long my control will hold, pretty girl," Raf whispers in my ear, doing his best to maintain a pleasant smile on his face.

"I know, I know," I sigh, patting him affectionately on his thigh—as is *my* right.

"Noelle," someone calls my name in a low voice.

Looking across the table, it's to see Venezia awkwardly attempting to make conversation with Elizabeth—or, Elizabeth mostly prattling away—and Sisi watching Eleanor with sharp eyes.

Nodding to come closer, Sisi whispers in my ear.

"Eleanor is the worst. She did the same with Vlad the first time we met her, even though I told her straight up I was his wife."

"And? What happened?" I don't think for a second Sisi would have stood by and let that happen.

A smile tugs at her lips.

"I would have done a lot worse, but Vlad saw my mood worsening and he was the one who blurted something out," she chuckles.

"What?"

"He told her to use a deodorant," Sisi chortles, covering her mouth with her hand.

"He didn't..."

"He did, and she was so mortified by the entire exchange she moved a few feet away. Of course, she didn't mention it to anyone."

"Raf is too nice to say something like that," I scrunch my nose.

"True, he is too much of a gentleman for that," she sighs.

Just at that moment, I note Eleanor lean in a little too close to whisper something in his ear.

Raf gives me a pained look that says *help*, and I simply raise a brow at him.

"He might not be able to do anything, but I can," I wink at Sisi before I lean back in my seat.

Raf tries to ignore her attempts at conversation while engaging me in one, his entire body angled towards me as if he'd like nothing more than run away from Eleanor. Yet she's completely oblivious.

Worse yet, her father is even more so as he's wholly focused on his conversation with Vlad.

"Rafaelo..." she starts, and this time, Raf does the *ungentlemanly* thing and ignores her.

"Rafaelo, I'm talking to you," she continues in a low enough tone to not get the attention at everyone at the table.

"Rafaelo," she screeches, her voice going up just a little, and when she sees she's getting nowhere, she lets out a loud huff, getting to her feet and telling her father she's going to the restroom.

"I swear to you pretty girl, I did nothing to encourage that," Raf finally says, his expression one of horror mixed with relief once she's gone from her side.

"I know," I coo lightly, leaning in to brush my lips against his. "You're too nice sometimes," I smile. "But let me deal with this," I wink at him just as I get up, excusing myself and brushing against Eleanor's seat to nick her fork from the table.

Luckily, the bathroom seems to be empty aside from her in her stall. Even better, she left her purse on the sink counter.

With quick efficiency, I open it up, browsing through the contents until I find something rather intriguing—a small container filled with medicine.

She takes quite a bit to do her business, and that gives me enough time to do a quick search on the internet to see what the meds are for.

And the result...

My lips curl up in a smile.

Now, I wouldn't want to make a scandal since her father seems to be someone important. But I can't allow her to continue like this either.

Flushing, she opens the door to her stall, coming out. When she sees me in front of the mirror, she snickers at me, proceeding to get a lipstick out of her purse and apply it all over her pouty lips.

"I have a question for you, Eleanor," I say as I continue to regard myself in the mirror, studying her only from the corner of my eye.

"Huh?" she frowns.

"Have you tried getting your *own* man? Maybe that would help," I smile sweetly.

Her eyes flare in shock.

"What?"

I don't let her move, and before she can turn, I'm on her, gripping tightly on to the fork I'd nabbed from the table as I shove it into her hand. I use enough force that it perforates the skin, remaining lodged into her flesh.

A muffled cry escapes her, paired with an expression of disbelief as if she can't quite believe I did that.

Coming even closer, I lean in to whisper.

"I don't know how you've made it this far, but you were bound to meet someone like me at some point. Better sooner than later, right? Especially since you were lying to your father earlier, weren't you? You're not taking your meds. Why, your prescription is full."

"You bitch," she spits at me, but a moan of pain escapes her as she attempts to move her hand.

"Yes, I *am* a bitch. And that is the problem. If you were a nice girl, took your meds, and didn't hit on *my* husband, we wouldn't be here," I maintain my smile.

The shock wears off on her face, aggression replacing it and I know it's only a matter of time before she jumps on me.

If she's off her meds, then anything is possible.

Before she can do that, though, I simply spill the container of pills in my hand, bringing my fist to her lips and pushing them into her mouth, using my other hand to hold her head still as I force her to swallow.

She gags and chokes, spitting a lot of pills out. But some of them make their way into her system, nonetheless.

And as I see that, I simply step back, letting her deliver the slap she's been itching to from the beginning.

"You're fucking dead!" she threatens, yelling at the top of her lungs as she advances towards me, removing the fork from her hand and waving it around in front of me.

I fall to my ass, schooling my features into an expression of terror I'm decidedly *not* feeling. And right at that moment, the door bursts open, Raf being the first who comes rushing in, the other two men behind him.

Seeing my terrified expression and the bloody fork in her hand, he wastes no time in immobilizing her.

She starts yelling and thrashing, spouting a lot of nonsense that no one seems to be inclined to listen to. Not even when her father comes to me to apologize and ask if I'm ok.

Letting a tear fall down my cheek, I stammer in my explanation.

"I-I found her self-harming with the fork, and there were so many pills around," I choke on my words. "I tried to help her but she..." my breathing turns harsh just as Eleanor starts yelling that I'm a liar.

The entire debacle ends with an ambulance coming to the restaurant and restraining Eleanor, taking her in for observation.

"I'm so sorry for this," her father apologizes again, both to me and Raf. "I was sure she was doing better. I've just been so busy and... I'm sorry for ruining your evening," he nods to the others.

Raf's arms are around me as he holds me tight against his body, peppering my face with kisses.

As we go back to our seats at the dinner table, he doesn't even let me sit in my own chair, keeping me on his lap.

"It's my fault," he sighs. "I should have realized she was unhinged and should have done something. I'm so sorry, pretty girl," he whispers in my ear.

Sisi smiles conspiratorially at me from across the table, the only one who seems to realize that the story I told might not have been entirely truthful.

"It's ok. You couldn't have been rude to them," I assure Raf, melting into him.

And who says I'm not reasonable? I understand women will always find him attractive, just like I have absolute confidence in him because I know he could *never* see anyone but me. But since my dear husband is not the type to get aggressive with a woman, that leaves *me* to deal with those who don't understand the meaning of the word *no*.

With the drama of the night behind us, we can finally enjoy a good meal, and the fact that Raf suddenly doesn't seem to mind if people see us become overly touchy-feely.

He holds me in his arms like I'm his precious treasure and he wants to broadcast that to the entire world.

Hmm, maybe I should do this more often then.

TWENTY-FIVE

RAFAELO

NOELLE NESTLES CLOSER IN MY ARMS AND I REST THE TIP OF MY CHIN ON TOP of her head, holding her back flush to my chest.

The conversation flows and soon, it's like the incident in the bathroom never happened.

Not for me, though. Not when I can still vividly picture the way she'd been huddled in a corner, about to be hurt by that madwoman.

And it's all because of me.

"You know I would never reciprocate another woman's advances, right?" I feel the need to clarify. I don't think I could forgive myself if my pretty girl ever doubted my loyalty. Not when it would *never* waver.

She stiffens in my arms for a moment. It's a fleeting reaction, but I recognize it, nonetheless.

Slowly, she tilts her head to the side, her eyes seeking mine.

"I know. Just like I know you would never raise your hand against a woman," she says as she takes my hand in hers, bringing it to her cheek.

I shake my head.

"But that's just the thing, pretty girl," I take a deep breath. "For you, I find that I no longer have any principles."

Her eyes widen, her lashes fluttering in confusion.

"Raf..."

"For you I'm capable of things I never thought possible. But there's always only one thing holding me back," I whisper in a low voice so that only she can hear me.

Maybe this conversation is best had in the privacy of our home. But I don't want her to doubt that *anything* would ever stand in my way when it

comes to her.

"What?" She asks tentatively, her tongue peeking out to lick her lips as her eyes are glued to mine.

"You," I simply state.

"I don't understand..." she trails off, frowning.

"You see," I give her a sad smile. "It would have been so easy to be rude, or get physical to get my point across. But then *you* would have seen that. You would have seen and..." I swipe my thumb over her lips in gentle, smooth circles. "I never want you to put me in the same category as Sergio. I never want you to look at me and see the past. And I never, *never*, want you to be afraid of me. Whether consciously or unconsciously."

"Raf, you..."

"When it comes to you I'm more than capable to be firm, aggressive—against *anyone*. But you always see the best in me," I chuckle. "You think I'm a gentleman when sometimes my thoughts are as ungentlemanly as they can get. And that's the thing. I don't want you to see me differently. I don't want you to see me as anything but your protector," I tell her sincerely.

"I could never see you as anything else," she whispers, leaning in. "Because I know everything you do is for me. I *know* that," she asserts firmly.

Her breath is on my lips. Time stills as the world becomes just a buzzing noise in my ears—one I can easily shut off.

"I'll never take the chance, Noelle," I confess. "What I can promise you is that I will always protect you, and sometimes that means protecting you from myself too."

She purses her lips, clearly about to argue with that. But I don't let her.

Instead, I simply shush her with my lips, giving myself a taste of her sweetness to serve as relief for the tension mounting inside of me.

It surprises me how forward I am with her. In public. When I know she doesn't like to be the center of attention.

Since that time at her brother's ball, I'd realized she doesn't like to draw attention to herself—especially not in *this* manner. So I've attempted to comport myself accordingly.

I may suffocate with want at times, but it's a small price to pay to ensure she's happy.

Just this time.

She releases a small sigh before returning the kiss full force, her arms

wounding around my neck as she gives herself to the embrace.

It's only an increasingly louder coughing sound that makes us break apart, both of us flushed and already panting.

And as I raise my eyes to the table, my sight already fogged with desire, I realize how improper I've been with her—again.

"I see you're trying to catch up, lover boy," Vlad chuckles, while Sisi has a knowing smile on her face.

Venezia is the only one looking away, a blush staining her cheeks.

"My apologies," I offer, arranging Noelle in my lap once more, this time more setting-appropriate.

"You don't have to apologize, Raf," Sisi waves a hand in the air. "You can't imagine how happy I am seeing you two like this. Vlad is, too," she says just as she elbows Vlad in his side, his cue to add something too.

"Of course I'm happy to see him like that," he grumbles to her. A play of her eyebrows and he turns, directing his words to *us*.

A smile plays at my lips at the silent exchange, especially as Vlad continues talking.

"As a matter of fact, I can officially allow you in my home now."

"You mean we weren't allowed before?" Noelle asks, barely holding a laugh.

"Not...*exactly*," Vlad sheepishly responds, which earns him a look from Sisi. "From now on I won't close the door in your faces. How's that for an improvement?"

"I'm impressed, Vlad," I chuckle. "That is *definitely* an improvement. Your husband is exceedingly generous today, Sisi."

"Right," she adds dryly, shaking her head half in amusement, half in resignation. I can't imagine what it must be like living with Vlad, and I certainly don't envy her that.

"Come on, hell girl. Don't I deserve a prize for that?" He leans into her, fluttering his lashes suggestively before whispering something in her ear.

By the blush that climbs up Sisi's cheeks, I can wager a guess it's not anything PG-13.

"You'll have to forgive Vlad, *again*. He's not used to being social," Sisi makes the excuse for him, her face still red from whatever Vlad told her.

"I reckon we have that in common," I add, surprised to find myself agreeing with Vlad for once, which earns me a playful wink from him.

"We should do this more often. Next time we can invite Catalina too. She

could certainly use the distraction," Sisi suggests. The conversation turns to Marcello and his case once more as we try to come up with ideas that could help him.

Noelle is mostly quiet, listening attentively but not contributing, and I have to wonder if she's still shaken from before.

By God, she'd looked so small and helpless, and her terrified expression just won't leave my mind.

Most of the time, I try to ground myself in the present and enjoy our time together, yet sometimes it's impossible to ignore the past—*our* shared past. To think that someone could have hurt her... Even worse, to think that someone had done it while I'd been languishing in my cell, helpless to do anything to prevent it... That simply kills me.

I've tried not to overwhelm her with my feelings, or the fact that the past is still fresh in my mind, with the good or the bad. She seems content as we are, and I certainly don't want to mar our happiness with my worries and doubts.

Yet seeing her about to be hurt today opened up that door again, threatening to send me in a spiral of *what-ifs*.

My arms instinctively tighten around her.

She's so small, so fucking frail... I squeeze my eyes shut as the images of her hospital records flash before me again—those pictures of her blue and purple, her entire body covered in bruises and bleeding wounds. How could anyone have done that to her? How could anyone have laid a hand against her?

It scares me to consider what I would have done to Sergio had he still been alive. For her, I *would* turn into a monster ready to burn down the entire world if necessary.

Only for her.

Those thoughts alone would terrify me if I hadn't already accepted that our relationship is anything but ordinary. That what I feel for her doesn't need an explanation, or a justification.

It just is—a type of primal feeling that does not require thinking or direction for it has some of its own. Just like how I've fallen for her time and time again, it seems that I'm forever meant to be hers.

I may not deserve her. Not with the blood on my hands and the demons that still plague my mind. But I'm keeping her, regardless.

I'll just have to be careful not to taint her purity with the weight of my

sins.

"We have a spare bedroom. Venezia can come stay with us when you're away," Noelle assures Sisi, since she and Vlad have periods when they go abroad on missions.

"Thank you, that's very sweet of you. Would you mind that, Zia?" Sisi turns to Venezia, asking for her opinion.

She strains a smile, shaking her head.

"I'd like that," she eventually replies, her eyes meeting Noelle's.

"Perfect. It's settled then!"

We finish eating and soon we're ready to leave. Heading through the back, we go to the underground VIP parking where we'd left our cars.

I hold tightly on to Noelle's hand as she laughs at something Sisi says, her entire face lighting up with joy. My chest warms with pleasure at her levity and the fact that she's become more comfortable with Sisi and Venezia. I truly want her to form connections and have the things she was never allowed to have under her brother's tyrannical rule. And though I might be a little jealous at the time she's *not* spending with me, as long as she's happy then I'm happy.

She deserves this after everything she's been through. Hell, she deserves so, so much more. Certainly more than me. But because she *is* mine and I'm hers, I'll do my best to ensure she never lacks for anything.

Still smiling, she tips up her head, her gaze finding mine as she gives me that look of hers—one that promises both sweetness and spice. My lips curl up as I bring her hand to my lips, bending slightly to kiss the inside of her wrist.

"*Home*," she whispers in a low voice, and I know exactly what she has in mind.

Hell if I'm not already looking forward to it.

As I find myself getting increasingly lost in her gaze and everything she makes me feel, I tune out everything around us, the small noises in the background fading away until the only thing I can hear is her breath. Her increasingly heated, probably thinking of all the ways I'll fuck her, breath. And my own picks up in response.

It's a split of a second later that my senses reel, instinct taking over as I pull her in my arms, my back making contact with the hard pavement just as a car drives at full speed towards us.

The fog on my mind immediately dispels and I'm thrust forward into

survival mode. Without thinking, I reach for the gun I have stashed in the back of my belt, getting in position.

Vlad, Sisi and Venezia are just a few feet away, already primed for danger too. Vlad instructs Sisi and Venezia to get cover while I nod for Noelle to follow them and do the same.

His gaze meets mine and I nod, knowing it couldn't be a random act that a car would try to run us over *here*—certainly not without motive.

Vlad has a gun in each hand as he assesses the area, waiting for the worst to come.

We communicate silently with our eyes and hand movements, both of us assuming our stances behind a different car as we wait.

Sure enough, it doesn't take long for a storm of bullets to make their way towards us, hitting the cars and triggering the alarms.

"Automatic," I mouth to Vlad who nods grimly. Due to the velocity of the bullets, they have the technological advantage over us, and with how confined the area is, that advantage might become more marked as our movements become more limited.

"Let's distract them," he suggests, motioning to the other side of the parking lot. By moving away, we'd be taking their attention off the women.

Nodding, I wait until there's a slight break in the shooting before I roll over, more or less dashing for the car on the other side. Vlad does the same, and we manage to get to our designated spots with little issue.

"We only need to hold them off for a while," he says as his back meets mine, our eyes still on the potential targets. "The alarm will inform Enzo's personnel and he will send back-up."

"Going by their weapons, they counted on that. So they either want to take us all out at once, or they want to send a warning."

"If this is a warning, then we should know who issued it soon enough."

Just as he says that, one of the cars next to us takes a hit, the noise from the explosion making my eardrums throb. We don't wait, though, moving immediately and seeking cover behind another car.

"I rather think they're going for the kill—a fast kill," I grimace.

Since we'd moved, they hadn't once focused their attention on the women. That in itself says everything. They're either after Vlad or me. And I reckon this is the type of kill on sight mission, not one to draw things out by taking hostages or playing strategically.

No, it's a simple show of brute force.

"They will have to," he motions to the fire alarms now blaring in the parking lot, the sprinklers already hard at work to extinguish the fire from the car that had been hit. "They won't have much longer."

"Did you see how many there are?"

It had been one car only, but we can't discount the fact that more people could have been hiding here before.

"At least four. Two on that side, and I think they're carrying the heavy artillery," Vlad points to a far right corner. "I also spotted movement towards the other end, but I haven't seen shots from that direction."

"That's too close to the girls for my liking," I purse my lips. Even if they don't have the automatic weapons the others do, I don't want to risk anything.

"Sisi can take care of herself. But I don't think she can cover for both Venezia and Noelle," Vlad comments grimly. We're both wet at this point from the onslaught of water.

"Let's do this, then," I start, my eyes on any potential movement from the enemy side. "Chances are they are after me," I say as I give him a short spiel of why that could be a possibility. "You go back to the girls, and I'll try to get their attention. If they *are* after me, then they will surely take the bait and leave you alone."

"Fine. We can do that. But how are you going to face them alone? Need I remind you they have automatic guns?" Vlad mutters dryly.

"I'll manage it. You go protect them."

He gives me an odd look for a moment before he finally nods.

"Thank you," I nod at him just as he's about to leave.

His lips spread in his signature smile and he give me a mock salute before diving in the open space again, running at full speed through the storm of bullets before taking cover on the other side.

For a moment, I just wait, needing the confirmation he's fine. He gives me a thumbs up from the other side and I breathe relieve.

Knowing what I have to do I simply steel myself, hardening my focus. At this point I can't afford any distraction—no matter how much I may worry about my pretty girl.

If I take out the men, then there will be no more danger to her, too. And with that thought, I thrust myself in the open. Almost like waving a red flag to indicate my location, I stay still for a moment before the shots start.

This time, however, the men are done hiding as they dash out just as I start running towards the other end of the parking.

Like I'd predicted, they don't bother with the others, all of them following me.

To characterize it like a storm of bullets is an understatement, and I'm really taunting fate as I stop, bringing my gun up as soon as I have a clear shot.

It seems I have better aim than some of the men, as my bullet hits one of them in the chest—high enough that it's unlikely it hit a bulletproof vest if he had worn one. But as that moment requires me to stand still, a bullet from the other side makes it almost *too* close to my body. I whirl at the last moment, and the shot catches the fabric of my blazer as the material flies in the air.

Seeing this as the perfect distraction, I simply shrug it off my back, wrapping my fist in the top part of the material and twirling around while whirling it in the air—all in an attempt to distract them from my exact location.

The advantage of an automatic weapon is that it fires a rapid succession of bullets. The disadvantage is that it's not the lightest weapon, and while it continues to fire as long as the person wielding it keeps his finger on the trigger, it's not easily maneuvered—especially since he's not using a tripod for it.

In fact, as I continue to move through the curtain of bullets, I count down the seconds between the change of direction—even if it's half-an inch to the right or left. That tells me the range of movement of the wielder as well as the fact that the more he uses it, the more tired he will become and that range will decrease.

Now that all of them are in the open, I can see that only one of them has a machine gun. Two guys have regular guns while the third one has what looks to be a portable missile.

Military grade equipment.

What the hell? Who could have possibly supplied these guys with those weapons?

That must have been what caused the car to explode.

Using the momentum to my advantage, I fire a few rounds on my own. From the corner of my eye I also see Vlad slowly inching his way closer to the position of the men. Giving me a small signal, I nod as I dash once more, momentarily getting their attention just as Vlad strikes, throwing one knife that embeds itself into the man holding the portable missile's head.

With two out of the way, now there's only the machine gun man and the

other, slightly inconsequential one.

Both are startled to see themselves the last ones standing, so I take advantage of this to aim my gun towards the one holding the machine gun, firing when I'm confident I can get a good shot.

And I do. Just not a fatal one.

My bullet catches him in the side, blood immediately pouring out.

I imagine that the added pain should slow down his movements and the way he wields the gun.

But just as I think I may only need a few movements to take him out, he passes his weapon to the other man, switching to a simple pistol.

Vlad shakes his head at me just as the machine gun starts firing. I barely have time to jump out of the barrage of bullets, avoiding getting hit by rolling between two cars for cover.

Shit!

The switch makes it so the new wielder is not as tired and can now fire with a full range of movement.

Lifting my head above the car's hood to track their positions, I note they are both coming towards me.

Just then, I spot a dark shadow between the cars right across from me. The dark curls are the first giveaway, and my eyes widen in horror.

Noelle.

What the hell is she doing?

In that moment, my brain short-circuits. All my previous strategies go out the window as my only purpose becomes *her*—keeping her safe.

How could she come right into the heat of the battle?

I take my eyes off her for a moment as I search for Vlad's form. He's still where I saw him last and I lift my brows in question, a nerve actively twitching in my jaw.

He simply shrugs, shaking his head and motioning to the gun in his hand—only *one* gun.

I frown, not understanding what he means. But as I bring my gaze back to Noelle, I realize she has the other pistol with her.

"You're fucking dead, Vlad," I grit out, my entire body rife with tension.

How the hell could he have thought it was a good idea to give Noelle a gun when she barely has *any* idea how to use it? More than anything, how could he have let her jump into danger when I told him to fucking protect them—*all* of them!

Done caring about engaging the men smartly, I pause for only one second as I check my ammunition, loading a new cartilage before getting to my feet.

Noelle shakes her head at me, putting one hand up to tell me to stay put. How the hell does she expect me to do that when she's so close to those fucking gunmen?

I march forward, my attention wholly on her. I only keep minimal track of what's happening around me.

Gun raised, I simply lift my arm up as I shoot. One after another, I fire at both men, keeping them busy dodging the bullets as I stride the distance between the two car rows.

I'm taking a risk. I know that.

But it's an even bigger risk to leave Noelle alone. Not when I know she could easily become a casualty of this damn conflict.

Time stills as I put one foot in front of the other, my entire life flashing before my eyes just as an errant bullet flies by me. My breathing intensifies, my heart contracting in my chest.

It feels like I'm fucking suffocating.

One hand still on the gun, firing as fast as I can before my ammo runs out, I bring the other to my neck, loosening my collar right as my gaze collides with hers.

"Don't move," I call out—or I think I do.

There's a buzzing sound in my ears, and I can barely make sense of my surroundings or what's happening. I only know one thing.

I need to get to her.

Another gun joins the shoot-out and I absent-mindedly realize it's Vlad.

That buys me enough time to take the final step, diving between the two cars just as one of the men aims at me.

I spread my arms open, wrapping them around Noelle as I take her to the ground with me, cocooning her to my chest and holding *tight*.

She struggles to move but I hold her still.

"Don't," I rasp out, harsher than intended.

She stills in my arms, slowly raising her head to look at me.

"Stay put, Noelle. I'm not joking with this. Don't you dare do something stupid," I grab on to her chin, looking her dead in the eye so she can see how serious I am about this.

"But you're all alone."

"And I'll deal with it. Just... If you're in danger, I can't think straight. You

get me?"

Slowly, she nods her head, her big eyes still watching me with apprehension.

God, but what could have gone through her head to make her dive like this into danger?

"Good. The more focused I am on them, the faster this will be over. Are we clear?"

She nods again, though something tells me I should doubt her easy acquiesce. Still, I don't have time for this as I hear steps coming towards us.

Sparing her one last glance, I let her go as I get up, assuming my stance as I get ready to aim.

One person appears in my field of view. The man has his gun out, his finger ready to fire as he's undoubtedly searching for a good angle. I don't give him time for that. The moment I have a decent shot, I take it, my bullet hitting him in the shoulder and making him drop his gun.

He curses out loud, bringing his other hand to clutch at his bleeding shoulder. It's then that I realize something.

He's a new one.

Between the one I already hit and the one currently carrying the machine gun, this guy is a new one.

But I don't get to dwell on that as another shot rings out before a wide hole appears between his eyes. He falls to his knees with a thud, a knife dropping from his hand.

My eyes widen as I slowly turn to see *my* wife holding a gun aimed in his direction, her finger on the trigger, her entire face devoid of any emotion.

TWENTY-SIX

RAFAELO

SHE NOTICES ME AND SHE FINALLY LOWERS THE GUN.

"He was going to use the knife," she simply says, fluttering her lashes at me.

"You..."

"It was a fluke..." she smiles timorously, her entire body shaking lightly. "But I couldn't not..."

"Damn it, Noelle," I curse just as I take her in my arms, holding her while I meticulously assess our surroundings.

The screeching sound of a tire resounds through the air as a Jeep bursts inside, more bullets raining down on us. And just as reinforcements are about to arrive, the Jeep crashing into another car and sending it flying right in front of the exit, jamming it and making it so no one can come into the parking lot from that route.

Chaos ensues. I can't even tell how many more people appear, but more and more bullets start flying around, the Jeep driving at full speed inside the parking lot and using another machine gun to shoot at the row of cars.

My eyes go wide as I realize we need to move. Fast. Instinctively, I push Noelle under one of the cars just as I roll in after her.

The bullets rain on the pavement next to us. If we'd been there...

Her hand grasps mine as she squeezes.

"We'll get through this," she whispers.

"Of course we'll get through this," I assure her. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you, pretty girl."

"What about the others?"

"I'm sure Vlad can handle it. Sisi, too. It's just..."

"Venezia that could be in danger," she completes my thought.

I nod grimly.

"She's pregnant, Raf," she tells me, her voice filled with pain. "She's going to have your brother's child."

Though my body is already in fight mode, I can't help but tense at that piece of news.

"Are you sure?"

She nods.

"Nothing's going to happen to her—to them," I promise her. Somehow, I'll make sure of that.

"She doesn't deserve any of this. She—*they* are innocent in everything," she speaks fervently, her eyes begging me to do something—protect them too.

And by God, I don't think I could deny her anything.

So I simply move closer—as close as I can considering my big frame and the small space we're currently inhabiting. Tilting my head, I bring my lips to her forehead.

"Stay put, *please*. You're safe here."

She's quiet for a moment before she reaches for my sleeve, gripping it tightly.

"Don't you dare die on me, Rafaelo Guerra. I could never forgive you," she adds in a low voice.

"I promise you," I kiss her again, taking her mind off the vagueness of my words. Yes, I promise, but I never tell her what.

Handing me her gun, she gives me a tender look before she lets go of my hand. I quickly roll over, knowing that if I don't do it now, I'll never be able to leave her side.

As I stand up, I see Vlad on one side engaged in a shoot off with one of the guys, while Sisi is doing the same a few cars down. I don't spot Venezia, though, so I have to hope she's hiding under a car like Noelle.

This time, though, I know I can't just sit around waiting for them to make the first move.

The Jeep is rounding the corner and before they can spot me, I run at full speed towards it. Just as one man notices me, aiming his gun towards me, I jump, landing on the hood, my hand on the barrel of his gun as I point it in the other direction when he shoots.

Immediately, his foot connects with my shoulder as he tries to push me

off. Holding on even tighter, I concentrate all my strength in my arm as I pull on the gun, the man losing his balance and falling off the car. I have a hard time holding on, especially since the surface is slippery from the water. But just as I push myself up, I find myself face to face with the guy wielding the machine gun from the roof of the car.

He gives me a wolfish smile as his finger tightens over the trigger.

In a split of a second, I swing myself off the car and to the side. But it's not enough. Compared to the first gun, this one has a tripod that makes it easier for him to change direction as he wants.

To avoid the incoming path of bullets, I grasp on to the bumper, lowering myself slightly but without touching the ground. It's a struggle as the moisture on the surface of the car makes me lose my grasp again and again, my fingers red from the pressure I apply to keep my balance.

Fuck!

Unless I can get back up I won't be able to get a clear shot at him.

As the car continues to drive in circles around the parking lot, I get a better perspective of what's happening to everyone else.

The man with the other machine gun is out, and Vlad is currently shooting it at some of the men on foot. And as I look around, I realize there are still ten or more people, with the ones in the car about twelve or thirteen.

The odds are decidedly *not* in our favor.

Just as I swing myself back on the car, the machine gun points at me again. Ready to avoid a direct hit, I gawk in shock as the man slumps down over the roof before he has the chance to pull the trigger. Blood pours down, signaling he'd been hit.

A quick glance around and I can't figure out where the shot came from. Not one to question my good luck—at least not in this moment—I climb up the car, pulling at the ammo and quickly disabling the machine gun.

Something of this caliber... I think we're safer if *no* one uses it for now. After all, one of my first lessons about weapons had been that a powerful weapon can always be taken from you and turned *against* you. As such, *you* must be a powerful weapon in itself.

Satisfied that the gun is now in pieces, I throw parts of it around before I turn my attention to the roof window.

I pull on the man's body until I can throw him out of the way, all the while trying to maintain my equilibrium when the car does some serious drifts.

Finally finding my footing, I grasp the edge of the trapdoor and I lower myself inside the car. Ready to get on the defensive, I see there are only two men. One is driving while the other is in the other seat, his gun out as he shoots out the window.

Removing one hand to grab my gun, I hold myself off the roof with my other hand, concentrating all my strength in that arm. Once I grasp my gun properly, I aim and fire before the man can turn and cock his gun towards me.

Another one out and then I simply lower myself to the backseat.

The man driving takes a gun out and tries to shoot back, but with his attention at the wheel, his aim is very much off. Taking advantage of that, I propel myself feet forward towards the front of the car. My elbow makes contact with his side as I kick him until he drops the gun. With my other hand, I swipe the lock on the door, kicking it open and dumping the body while holding on to the top handles when the driver decides to make a few dangerous moves in order to get me out too.

A few failed attempts but I eventually manage to close to door. Right at that moment, the driver tries to shoot at me again so I lean back, grabbing his arm and making him repeatedly pull the trigger until he empties his barrel. Then it's just a matter of seconds as I aim my own gun towards him, a bullet making contact with his temple.

Disposing of the body, I take control of the car as I try to stabilize my breathing, my adrenaline out of control.

Looking around, I see there are a few more men left. Vlad and Sisi had taken the majority out. So I do the only thing that crosses my mind. I drive at full speed towards one of the men currently aiming a gun at them, crashing into him and sending him flying.

"Not bad, posh boy," Vlad chuckles from the side.

I wink at him, putting the car in reverse as I spot another person in the back and heading towards the place I'd left Noelle.

Pushing at full speed, I catch him with the back of the car, not only hitting him, but dragging him with me as the car continues to move backwards. I can hear the bones crunching as they get mangled under the tire, but I don't stop until I spot the next target.

Yet just as I'm about to repeat the action from before, something else happens.

Venezia.

She's out of her hiding place, looking entirely disoriented as she limps in

the middle of the driving lane. Her expression is one of pure terror as she looks right and left, not knowing where to go. At the same moment, another man turns his focus towards her, his gun angled and ready to fire.

Shit. No. No. No.

I hit the gas pedal, rushing at full speed even as I know I might not make it.

Her eyes widen as she spots the gun aimed in her direction, and I swallow painfully as the seconds trickle down.

Yet just as I'm sure no one will be able to help, a motorbike flies past the jammed entrance, a biker draped in all black and sporting an equally black helmet skillfully squeezing through the narrow spot. Before the man can pull the trigger on Venezia, the biker stops in front of her, his hand around her waist as he does an impressive U-turn before opening direct fire on the other man, killing him on the spot.

There are two more left, and both of them meet the same fate in rapid succession as they focus their attention on the biker and Venezia.

When everyone's dead, I stop the car, getting out but keeping my gun with me as we haven't ascertained yet if he's friend or foe.

Just as Vlad and I rush towards them, though, he drops Venezia to the ground before making his exit just like he came—at the speed of light.

"Are you alright?" Both Vlad and I ask at the same time, our gazes colliding before I shake my head and a smile pulls at his lips.

Still a little shaken, Venezia slowly nods.

Sisi rushes towards her, dropping her gun to the ground and hugging her sister.

Seeing that they are ok, I turn to where I'd left Noelle, calling out her name and telling her it's ok to come out.

She gives a small yelp as she tries to disentangle herself from under the car, and worried as I am, I dash to her side to help her up. We're both wet from head to toe, but somehow the situation turns amusing as we both smile at each other.

"It's done?"

"Yup," I nod. "I think we might need to leave the area before the cops arrive."

"You were quite dashing, you know," Noelle slips her hand through my arm, gluing herself to my side. "I saw some of those stunts you pulled and if I wasn't already flat on the ground I would have swooned anyway," she adds

playfully.

"Happy to serve, my lady," I mimic a bow.

She giggles, hugging my arm tighter.

"I had full confidence in you, Raf. I always do. It's just that..." she trails off, the humorous mood from before all but gone.

"It's just that?" I ask, frowning.

"I know you. And I know that you're always willing to put yourself at risk to save others. And *that* I don't like."

"Pretty girl..."

"I don't like you taking unnecessary risks. Your first instinct is to save people. But I wish your first instinct was to survive no matter what—to come back to *me* no matter what."

I stop abruptly as I realize how serious she is.

Gazing down at her, it's to find her deep in contemplation, hints of worry marring her expression.

"I didn't know that worried you so much," I add carefully.

"I don't know," she shrugs, forcing a smile. "Maybe I'm selfish, but I don't want you to risk your life for anyone else. I don't want you to get hurt from some random act of kindness..." she trails off, almost afraid she said too much.

"Noelle..."

"I love you, Raf. And it's quite funny since I love you *because* of that. Because you're so selfless when I'm not. Because you're always ready to help. Yet at the same time... I hate it," the last words are spoken on a whisper.

I tip her chin up with my thumb, my eyes meeting hers as I see all the turmoil inside of her.

"Is it weird? That the very thing I love about you is making me hate it so bad? And it's all because I know you could be taken from me. That something could happen and..."

"I promise you," I say solemnly, interrupting her. Her eyes go wide, her lashes fluttering in surprise.

"I promise you I won't ever take unnecessary risks, or put myself in danger when I can avoid it."

"Raf..."

"I don't *ever* want you to stress or worry about me, pretty girl. It's why I've been so hands off with the entire business. It's why I've tried to stay out of dangerous situations. But I'll strive to be better. That... I promise you," I

give her the words.

Before I know it, she jumps in my arms, her legs going around my waist as she wraps her arms around my neck.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Raf. You just... You really have no idea how much I love you," she confesses poignantly.

"I love you just as much, Noelle, if not more, pretty girl. I just know that the love I have for you today will double tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow would be twice as much as tomorrow. All the way to infinity. I love you so much that I never want to see you sad, you get me?"

She tightens her arms over my neck, but I feel her nod.

"And I want you to *always* share your worries with me. I'll always strive to do better—no, I *will* do better."

"You're the best man I know, Rafaelo Guerra," she whispers lovingly, her hand in my hair as she plays with a few strands. "You're the best human I've ever met."

"I'm not," a sad smile pulls at my lips. "But for your sake, I'll try to be."

We hug for a few more moments, swaying from side to side as I whisper all the things she makes me feel, and the way my love for her simply has no bounds. Only when I feel her more relaxed do I move to meet the others.

Regrouping, we manage to get back inside the restaurant just as Enzo and his crew arrive to get a read on the situation.

"We already evacuated the restaurant. Just go and I'll handle things on this end."

Nodding, we all make to leave.

Noelle, however, stops by Enzo's side.

"What are you going to tell them?" She asks with a knowing smile.

"Same old, same old. A gas leak that turned into an explosion."

"But there's no explosion," she counters with a raised brow.

"*Yet.*" He just smiles, winking at us before instructing his men to start their work.

As we're led out of the restaurant through another back exit, we say our goodbyes as Sisi and Vlad take Venezia home. She's still very much shaken, and hasn't said a word since the shooting, which could be worrying in her condition.

But just as I move to say something, Noelle's hand tightens over my arm. She shakes her head at me.

"Let's go," she whispers.

With a bit more coaxing, I relent and let the matter go—for now.

But as we're on our way back in a cab, I grimly realize that someone wants me dead. Carlos might have been right that it *could* be Ortega. But with those weapons? I'm more inclined to believe someone else is involved.

Someone like Damiano Marchesi.

There's also the matter of the mysterious biker, which I could wager a guess on his identity.

And that complicates things.

I only know that I can't afford to put Noelle in danger—in any shape or form. And for *that*, I need to put my guard up—and add a few new security measures.

TWENTY-SEVEN

RAFAELO

A FEW DAYS LATER AND THOUGH WE TRIED TO PUT THE INCIDENT BEHIND US since no one got hurt, I still can't help but dwell on it. If someone is out there, gunning for me, then I need to be at my strongest.

It doesn't help that my drug appointment is almost upon us and I've been more restless than usual. The thought of being out for a night, being vulnerable to an attack makes me want to break into a sweat.

I've already recruited more security personnel and I've assigned them around the area for maximum coverage.

The only thing that I've been wary to do, but which might be necessary in the future, had been adding some in-house guards. With how precarious the situation is, we need the best type of security, and that might mean having someone next to us twenty-four seven.

Still, I haven't taken that last step for fear it could make Noelle uncomfortable to have a stranger in the house.

"Soooo," Noelle comes into our bedroom, all rosy cheeks and blinding smile. "Tonight it's my turn to play nurse, right?" she raises a brow just as her nimble fingers pull at the string holding her robe together.

Dropping it to the floor, she takes a step forward so I can get a full view of her outfit.

Fuck. Me.

She put on a fucking nurse outfit. One that leaves *almost* nothing to the imagination.

Yeah, definitely no strangers in the house.

Her shirt has a zipper in the middle, which she'd pulled down to expose most of her chest, her generous cleavage emphasized in the most delectable

way. My eyes roam lower, to the mini skirt that hikes up her shapely legs and that gives me the barest hint of her ass.

Damn.

I'm already on edge, but *that*... That makes me want to jump off a fucking cliff.

"Pretty girl," I groan when she steps further into the room, her hips swaying from side to side as she plays with a stethoscope around her neck.

I gulp down, suddenly not even knowing where to look. Do I focus on her tits? Her ass? Her legs? Her...

"Eyes here, Blue," she suddenly demands, pointing two fingers to her face.

"You're playing with fire, Noelle," I rasp out.

She knows how out of control I get while on drugs—how brutish and how unlike myself. And she most definitely knows that I'll likely have only one thing on my mind—especially with her here.

"Not really," she shrugs as she comes closer to me. So close I can fucking smell her. "I'm just showing you how well I'll take care of you. I take my duties very seriously, you see."

"You're a goddamn tease," I say as I wrap my arm around her tiny waist, pulling her towards me.

"No," she whispers, her eyes on mine. "I'm just giving you a taste of what's to come," she whispers just as she takes hold of my hands, bringing them lower to her ass.

My palms mold to her ass cheeks as I pull her closer to me and in between my spread thighs.

"So this is your version of cheering me on?" I raise a brow, kneading her flesh as she licks her lips, her eyes on me.

"You know I'm your biggest cheerleader," she whispers as she moves my hands yet again, this time lower where her skirt ends.

I continue to look at her in question though I know exactly what my little minx wants.

"I'll always be there for you. Whether you know it or not," she continues, her hands suddenly in my hair as she plays with a few wild strands, twirling them around her fingers as she gazes down at me, conviction shining so brightly in her eyes.

Damn right she is my biggest cheerleader—my biggest champion. But she's also my biggest motivation.

To do better. Be better. *Strive for better.*

From the beginning, this hasn't been just an emotional journey but also a psychological one. I've been tested time and time again, and the subject had always been the same—*myself*.

As ironic as it sounds, I've always failed.

But as I look at her playful smile and feel the closeness of her body to mine—the way our hearts beat into sync—I know what my next steps are.

I need to become a better man not only for *her* but also for myself. I need to become at peace with myself in order to find the calm I've been looking for all along—that tranquility that I could always spot in the distance but never quite grasp.

That starts with *knowing myself*—getting intimately acquainted with the good and the bad. And this is the first step. Confronting my addiction and the ghosts of my past.

"I know that," I give her a smile as I trail my face up the curve of her neck, bringing my lips to her flesh in a light peck—enough to cause her skin to erupt in goosebumps.

I continue to pepper her with ghost-like kisses until I reach her lips.

Her eyes are already glazed with desire, her mouth slightly parted as a harsh breath escapes her.

Teasing her, I enjoy the sound of her errant breathing and her pounding heartbeat—both music in my ear and chocolate on my tongue.

As I note her frustration mounting, I lean in, meeting her lips with mine just as I squeeze on her ass. Using one hand to keep her in place, caging her between my legs, I use the other to explore what hides under her skirt.

And to my—*utterly pleasant*—surprise, *nothing* hides there.

"You didn't wear your panties, pretty girl. Are you being a bad, bad girl for me?" I murmur against her lips, drawing back just enough to watch the play of emotions on her features and the way every touch elicits a small gasp from her puffy lips.

"I need to be bad so you'll be worse," she whispers, barely managing to get the words out.

I can tell she came here with an entire arsenal at her disposal, likely having an entire plan on how to entice me before she went for the kill.

Luckily for me, my wife seems to have a glaring weakness.

My touch.

And as I bring my hand between her legs, I confirm just how mindless

she becomes—how she forgets herself at once the moment I touch her.

"I need," she whimpers when I slide one finger along the seam of her equally puffy nether lips, her wetness sticking to my skin and bathing me in her scent and that luxurious feel of her.

"What do you need?" my voice comes out harsher than intended. While I'd done my best to arouse her, I've been anything but indifferent. My muscles are tense—tenser the usual.

With my drug session hanging over my head, my reactions are all more intense, more out of control even as I try to keep myself in check.

"Raf," she moans, arching her back when I push a finger inside of her just as I brush my thumb against her clit, rubbing her steadily just as I thrust into her.

"I need..." she repeats, each time taking a deep gulp of air as she's unable to finish her words.

"Tell me, Noelle. Tell me," I suddenly demand, bringing her flush against my chest as I continue to pet her sweet little pussy, making her mewl in pleasure.

"I need..." she nestles her head in the crook of my neck, turning slightly so her mouth is close to my ear. Then, she utters the filthiest things I've ever heard—things she wants me to do to her.

"Fuck," I rasp out loud, increasing the speed of my thrusts just in time to feel her teeth on my skin, biting so hard my dick nearly pops in my pants.

"Have I shocked you?" she asks as she leans back, her eyes droopy with satisfaction, her cheeks flushed from her orgasm.

"You could never shock me, pretty girl," I shake my head at her.

Shock is the last thing I feel, not when my own blood is pumping downwards at an alarming speed, the words she'd whispered in my ear becoming dangerous images in my head.

"I want that animalistic side of you. I want you to lose everything that holds you back. I want you to shed your fears, your morality, your principles—everything until pure *want* remains. Want for *me*," she emphasizes, taking my hand and bringing it to her mouth, sucking on the finger that just moments ago was buried in her pussy. "I want you to take me like a man possessed, Raf. Because only then... Only then..."

"Only then?" I ask, my gaze affixed to hers.

"Only then we'll be on equal footing," she states.

I stare at her, those words echoing in my ears just as the things she'd

described play in my mind like a goddamn movie.

"Let me," she murmurs, stepping back to remove the kit from under the bed.

Her movements are slow, deliberate as she takes out all the items in the bag and lays them on the bed, efficiently preparing the syringe before coming to my side.

"Ready?"

I nod, too entranced by her to be able to form words.

Her lips spread into a sinful smile as she takes my arm, feeling for my muscles before finding my vein. Then, as if she's done this a million times before, she injects the drug into my system.

The effect isn't always immediate, and taking advantage of that, she quickly puts everything back in place before coming back to my side.

"I'm going to take care of you, Raf," she murmurs lovingly, biting my lower lip as she drapes herself all over me.

"Fuck me if you're not the hottest thing I've ever seen," I rasp, my sight becoming slightly distorted. Turning my head, I reach for the cuffs at the end of the bed but Noelle stops me.

"No cuffs for you tonight, Blue. Just us. Just me and you," she drawls in the most seductive voice I've ever heard as she gives my cheek a long lick.

Snaking my hand around her waist, I pull her towards me, lips clashing against lips, hands tearing at clothes and bodies moving in an unnatural sync.

Yet even as I find myself slipping, unlike before, there's a quiet certitude—I would never hurt her. She's here now—the object of all my desires and the ghost that's been haunting me for so many years.

She's here, and I'm hers.

My vision distorts as something akin to madness takes over.

Her top is off, that flimsy bit of material that was her skirt somewhere on the floor as she's finally before me in all her naked glory.

My senses, too, are reeling as the drugs slowly seep into my body until I'm one with them—one with this insanity that lives just under my skin.

A blink of an eye and I'm just as naked as she is, her skin rubbing on mine, her heat transferring into me.

"Fuck," I curse against her lips as I hold her captive to me, one palm spread wide on her nape, the other kneading her pert tits.

I swallow her moans and her cries, keeping my last bit of focus on *her*.

With one push against my shoulders, my back hits the sheets.

She moves sinuously down my body until her tiny hands cup my hard cock, her mouth engulfing me and showing me the true definition of bliss.

My eyes squeeze shut, my pulse drums in my ears. Everything converges in this moment and her little touches.

"That's it," I hear myself say in a rough voice, my fingers wrapped tightly in her hair. "Fuck, you're so good at sucking cock, pretty girl."

She pauses momentarily, the flat of her tongue resting against the head as she gives it a few good licks.

"Only for you, Blue," she whispers against my shaft before taking me inside her mouth once more—deeper, faster, *wetter*.

Pleasure spreads all over my body in never-ending, intoxicating waves. There's nothing *but* pleasure and the feel of her as she claims my body and lets me claim hers in return.

Yet the next moment I open my eyes, it's to find a completely different scene unfold.

She's on all fours in front of me, her fingers wrapped around the iron of the bed-frame as she practically yells at the top of her lungs every time I slam into her.

My hands are on her hips, my fingers digging painfully into her softness as I thrust into her like a mad man—like someone who's lost everything *but* the desire to own her.

In the back of my mind, I can hear her words—echoes among savage moans.

Lose your fear, your morality, your principles.

There's that brief moment of awareness, but soon, it all fades away.

"*Mi luz*," I rasp as I snake a hand over her stomach, holding her in place as I increase the speed of my thrusts. Placing my head to her back, I listen for the sounds of her wild heartbeats and erratic breathing, both growing even more out of control as I continue to ravage her body with the intensity of this fucking.

Because at this moment, there's nothing else.

No reality, no sense of self, no sense of...anything.

Anything but her.

We're just two bodies acting out of pure instinct and a spark of kismet.

The room tilts, my eyes opening and closing as I find myself in yet another shift in position.

My field of vision is blurry, and growing blurrier still, but I can make out

the form of her body spread out before me, her hands cuffed to the frame of the bed as she moves from side to side. Her eyes are on me, her teeth raking over her lower lip as she awaits for my next move.

I tighten my hands over her ankles as I spread her legs further, impaling her in one swift thrust.

She lets out a harsh breath as she rotates her hips to angle me deeper inside of her.

"Please," her sweet moan reverberates through the room and surrounds my entire being with a sense of deep satisfaction. Especially when one hand travels up her body, my fingers wrapping around her lovely neck as I hold her securely, controlling each and every breath—each and every sound.

"You're mine," I declare, the ultimate truth.

I know it. She knows it. My goddamn drug-addled brain knows it.

"You're so fucking mine, Noelle. Always mine. *Always*," I growl, mercilessly pounding into her as I tip her chin up so she can look me in the eye—so she can *only* see me.

So she can see I'm the only one fucking her. Owning her. *Destroying* her.

"So fucking mine," I purr as I bring my face closer to hers, inhaling her sweet scent and the way her entire body trembles when she hits her peak. Her walls close around me in the snuggest fit. And as her mouth opens on a half-strained breath, I plunge my tongue inside, tasting her, devouring everything that *is* her.

My own climax is nearing. I can feel the signs just as I go harder, fucking her unlike I've ever fucked her before.

But just as I'm about to come, reality shifts again.

Yet this time... This time all control is wrenched from me.

The first thing I feel is dampness.

My entire body is covered in sweat, but not the type after an arduous workout, or a prolonged lovemaking session. No, it's the type that clings to my skin, clogging my pores and making me detest living in my own body.

I suddenly move, putting one step in front of the other and noting the room I find myself in—an ostentatious bedroom with frilly colors and all types of lace. It's fit more for a woman than a man.

Yet as I continue to walk, looking around and taking everything in, I realize the first odd thing.

It doesn't feel like...me.

I'm still me, deep inside. But it's not me in charge. I can watch myself

move, but I cannot *make* myself move.

I'm just a spectator in this sick show.

My mind is my own—my *thoughts* are my own. But not my autonomy. That is forever out of reach.

As soon as that thought arises, I look down to see the shackles on my wrists.

Were they there before?

I test their strength, surprised by the heavy weight and the way they jiggle as I try to move my hands.

Yet that sound...that sound triggers something within me.

Like lightning flashing in my head, I instinctively know where I am and what is about to happen. And I'm fucking useless to stop it.

Awareness seeps in just like the fact that I've watched this scene before me one too many times.

One too many fucking times.

The door screeches open, and as I turn, I find myself face to face with a foreign man.

His gaze is blank, and in his hands I spot something. A...needle.

I frown, but before I know it, he's on me, the needle pricking my neck and injecting a strange substance in my body.

Even as I struggle, I'm no match for his strength. Especially since whatever he injected me with makes me drowsy, my previous strength all but gone.

His hand on my nape, he drags me to a bathroom in the corner, shoving me to the ground when he reaches the shower stall. I don't get to protest as I feel a jet of water all over me.

My mind clamors at me, disorientation and confusion swimming inside my brain as I wildly move my arms around to avoid the direct hit of the water jet.

"Clean yourself," the man yells at me, throwing some liquid soap my way. A few drops hit my eyes, and I squeeze them shut in an attempt to get rid of the sting.

It goes on and on.

The water isn't cleansing my skin. It's bruising, scalding and raking at my skin until all I want is to peel the top layer off—anything to stop feeling like this.

Then, like it never happened, it's over.

I blink as I realize the scene shifted again.

I'm no longer in the bathroom—no longer being tortured with that scorching hot water and the demeaning way in which it sought to *clean* me.

No, this time I'm already dressed. Still drowsy, but I'm more covered.

Yet as I look down to take myself in, I wish I'd never done that...

A red dress that flows down my body, the garment clearly meant for a woman. Yet here it is. On *me*.

But more than that there's a discomfort that has nothing to do with the feminine outfit. Slowly moving my still caged hands, I lift the skirt up, peering down at the *underwear* biting into my skin...

I blink, thinking my eyes are playing tricks on me.

A black, leather-like contraption hides and almost flattens my entire front. The discomfort is coming from having my genitals squished together to give the illusion that there is nothing there. And as I move, more pain flares from my dick and balls.

Yet that's not the worst.

Moving the heavy material of the dress to the side, I note that the leather acts like a belt, but as I turn, I note that the back is unlike the front. Only a thin string extends between my ass cheeks, connecting to the front between my legs as the material starts thickening again.

Panic flares inside of me, even more confusion accumulating in my mind.

Is this a dream? A nightmare?

My movements are so sluggish, my thoughts even more so as I barely realize what's happening, or where I am.

A man clears his throat, and I drop the skirt to the ground, slowly turning to see who it is.

"Who..." My mouth is dry, my tongue clicking against my top row of teeth as I try to get some words out.

I know I'm capable of language, yet at this moment even incoherent sounds seem beyond my reach.

"You did well, Gustav," the man continues, coming around to examine me. "The resemblance is astounding, is it not?"

Resemblance? What resemblance?

"His shoulders are too broad, but I guess I can overlook that," he mumbles to himself before he stops right in front of me, his fingers tipping my chin up.

"But the eyes and the lips. Yes, marvelous!"

"Everything is as you asked, sir. He's been thoroughly prepared for your enjoyment."

His lips tip up in a malefic smile.

"Then you can leave. Tell everyone I'll be unavailable for the rest of the day."

"Yes, sir."

Some more noise and the door closes shut.

I'm disoriented, but I try my best to root myself in the present and keep my consciousness from slipping from me.

"I'm Armand," the man introduces himself, forcing me to look him in the eye. "And from now on it's going to be just the two of us."

There's something about his tone that rubs me the wrong way. I can't put my finger on it, my thought processes too slow and sluggish. But something inside of me screams to run away.

It's just that I can't.

Physically, and mentally. I am bound to the spot.

His hand trails up to my face, his fingers caressing my skin as he gazes down at me with...tenderness? Or something akin to wistfulness.

"W..." I try to speak again, but my mouth seems to be forever broken.

There's only his smile—that smile that gives me the chills. And that's the last thing I see before I open my eyes again, this time finding myself facing a wall.

My breathing is labored, my muscles tense yet relaxed from the effect of the drug.

Still, there's the unmistakable feeling of being naked. It takes me a moment to realize that I'm wearing a dress, but the skirt had been bunched around my hips, leaving my entire backside revealed. Then there's still that underwear-belt and the fact that I feel hands trail down my back until they reach the string of the contraption, pulling backwards and releasing it to slap against my skin.

I flinch at the slight pain, and a chuckle permeates the air.

"You're going to be a good little slut for me, aren't you?" His breath is on my nape, his voice making my vision swim.

I can't move. I can't even jiggle my wrists anymore because the cuffs had been locked to the table—all to ensure I would be laid out like an offering.

Fear accumulates in my gut, everything inside of me telling me to run, agony suffusing my being at knowing I can't.

The only thing I can do is keep my head down and not engage. Hope for everything to be done quickly—as it usually is.

Every time I want to fight. But every time I arrive at the conclusion that fighting will only make it worse. After all, Armand loves it when I'm disobedient. It gives him a reason to do a show of strength and put me back in my place.

Even though I'm not *her*, he treats me as if I *were* his wife. And that means that I am to sit quietly in a corner, never speak or argue, and *always* let him have his way with me. It's not as if I have much of a choice for any of it since the drugs make me so lethargic I can barely speak, let alone move or be disobedient.

And as that knowledge pours inside of me, so does the fact that I know what's next—what's *always* next.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I can only pray I can hide away in that corner of my mind I've built specifically for these situations.

It's a tiny little corner, but it's clean and *mine*. There, I am free to do as I want, think, speak and dream. There...I'm still a person. One who has aspirations and hopes for the future instead of just a doll to be adorned and abused. My body is still mine—only mine and that person I'll choose to share it with.

Yet even as I try to cling to that tiny space of mine, the pain still has a way of penetrating my mind, making me want to howl in agony—not only at the physical torment but also at the little bits that chip away at my sanity.

Armand continues to laugh, an insidious laugh I'd be able to recognize anywhere. Not only for who owns it but also for what it signifies—the defilement of my soul.

Trailing one finger down the crack of my ass, he pulls the string to the side as he spreads my cheeks.

My cuffs make my position permanent—unchangeable. And as he kicks at my feet, pushing them apart to fit between them, I can't do anything to stop this from happening.

Not as he lowers his zipper and certainly not as he pushes himself inside of me.

The pain is immediate, and he derives pleasure from it. After all, it's all he wants. He *needs* to hear my cries of pain, or the way my lashes coat with tears when I can barely take it anymore.

It's not the first time, nor is it the last.

"My sweet little slut. You thought to escape me, didn't you, Gloria?" His voice turns savage, and my body tenses as I wait for the blow.

What is he using this time? A cane, a metal bar? I can't tell anymore.

The pain mingles together. It's coming from all sides—all directions. Even so, I'm grateful that my body cannot localize it anymore, for then I don't have to withstand the perpetual knowledge that I'm being violated—that my body is being used in the most foul way against my will.

I attempt to retreat to my hiding place, yet just as I feel as I'm close to reaching it, my reality shifts again.

The pain this time is unimaginable. There's nothing that *doesn't* hurt. Even though my breathing is constricted, and as my brain is slowly trying to feed me information, I realize it's likely my ribs.

It takes Herculean strength to open my eyes, but even as I do, I can barely see anything. The room is devoid of light, of warmth, and anything a human might require to survive.

There's only bleakness—so much fucking hopelessness. And it's all around me, enveloping me like a fine glove and keeping me in its clutches.

I don't know where I am. In fact, I'm barely aware of myself.

There's only pain and a drowsiness that makes me titter between a state of semi-consciousness and one of a complete shut-down of my entire being.

As I waver between those two states, I feel something—or, rather, my body detects warmth.

Since coldness is all I know, that hint of warmth threatens to undo me.

And as it slowly seeps into my body, I gain a little more awareness of the situation—maybe a long-lost hope is rearing its head at a hint of light.

But as my consciousness gets a boost with an aching flare of *want*, of thinking not all is lost, all my hopes are dashed as I get a better grasp of the situation I'm in.

I'm on my back. Cold and laying against even colder ground.

Naked.

There's not one inch of clothing covering my body, and I find I can't move any of my limbs. Like being trapped in my own body—caged by my own flesh—I'm only a spectator, not an active participant.

I try to focus on that bit of warmth, but the more I become in tune with it, the more I realize something is wrong.

Something is seriously, seriously wrong.

Hands run up my stomach, reaching my pecs before going back down. It's

a soothing caress, but so very wrong. I'm already intimately familiar with this type of dynamic and it's enough to make me want to break out in a sweat—yet I can't.

I want to slap the hands away, anything to avoid this invasive touch.

I have to wonder if it's Armand, but he would never be so gentle, nor would he *ever* try to touch me from the front. Then, his illusion about Gloria would be shattered.

And as this new person touches me lower, grabbing my dick, I realize there's no way this could be Armand. He *abhorred* that part of me, and would always go out of his way to convince himself it wasn't real—that it was merely an accessory.

My muscles are stiff, perhaps too stiff. When I feel those hands getting bolder, touching and caressing me until my dick reacts, I experience a moment of pure panic as I don't know what's happening to me—or that this could be happening at all.

Terror engulfs me as this person can somehow get me hard and touch me in the one place I'd thought was still mine.

Yet I can't move.

I can't. Fucking. Move.

All I can do is stare at the darkness, feel that accursed warmth as it permeates my skin, every little touch bringing me closer to something—an undefinable something.

Whoever is playing with me must be satisfied when my dick is rock hard, and shock erupts inside of me when lips touch the underside of my shaft before a mouth engulfs the head of my cock, sucking on it.

I blink, my heart jamming in my chest.

But I can't move.

I'm a prisoner in my fucking body.

I want to run away—*hide* away. All I know is that I feel more helpless than I've ever been, and though I've been put in awful situations before when my will had been taken away from me, this is the worst yet. Not only are my senses stripped from me, my sight nonexistent, my hearing barely working. But *this* is being done to *me*. Not to Gloria, or any other imaginary woman.

This is done to *me*.

I don't even know if the person on the other end is a man or a woman, or if they... My flimsy train of thought is interrupted as I feel movement before more warmth envelops me.

Warm flesh brushes against my cold one.

Gripping my dick in one hand, she—because I finally realize it *is* a she—positions me to her entrance, lowering herself on me.

My mouth gapes open, my throat working up a protest.

But nothing comes out.

I'm just *there*. On the cold ground. A piece of meat being used by this woman. And I can't even tell her how much I detest it. What she's stealing from me when I thought I still had *something* left.

This isn't Armand. This isn't him just invading my body and punishing me repeatedly for sins not of my own. No, this is someone stealing the only thing I'd thought remotely safe—that still belonged to me.

A storm of sensations erupt in my body. Despite the lethargy, or the fact that my mind is further rebelling against me, I feel everything.

Even my little corner closes the door in my face, remaining shut no matter how much I try to wrench it open. It's just...locked. And I'm forced to sit still and let this person use me.

Her breath becomes increasingly louder as she lifts herself up and down, fucking herself on me. And the worst thing? It's clear she's deriving pleasure from it from the way she's grasping on to my chest, little moans erupting in this barren place.

I'd never thought I could hate someone so much. More than Armand, more than my brother who purposefully sent me down to this hell.

But I do.

This person. This faceless, nameless person.

I hate her more than I've hated anyone in my entire life.

Because she took what was not hers to take.

TWENTY-EIGHT

RAFAELO

THE SUN FILTERS THROUGH THE SHEER CURTAINS OF OUR BEDROOM. I SQUINT as I slowly get used to the blast of light.

My throat is dry as fuck, my head pounding.

It takes me a few seconds to get myself under control and become aware of my surroundings.

I'm...home. The home I share with my wife, Noelle.

Swinging my legs off the bed, I blink as I look around. The bed is a mess of tangled sheets, but I don't spot Noelle.

Panic bubbles in my chest for one moment before the smell of food wafts through the door.

I release a deep breath as I realize she's likely making breakfast—her usual pastime.

Taking a step forward, I have to grasp the bed's frame to keep myself upright. My legs are wobbly, my entire strength seemingly depleted.

Yet just as that crosses my mind, more information floods me. It's the morning after a drug session. That's why I feel so worn out—so fucking weak.

A few more steady breaths and when I think I have everything under control I try to move again, this time succeeding at putting one foot in front of the other.

I head straight for the kitchen, needing to see my pretty girl.

There's something inside of me that's not alright—a nasty taste in my mouth and even more foul sensation fogging my brain.

My lips tug up when I spot her. She's wearing one of my black shirts which almost reaches her knees. Swaying from side to side, she's listening to

music in her earbuds, not noticing as I advance.

The smell of freshly cooked food fills my nostrils and my stomach grumbles in hunger.

My pretty girl is nothing but thoughtful as I note the array of food and the fact that she'd cooked some of my favorites. God but to think I spent all that time away from her when she was right under my nose...

But she's here now, and that's all that matters.

She suddenly turns, giving a small yelp when she notices me.

"You're awake," she notes, taking her earbuds off and coming towards me.

Rising herself on the tips of her toes, she cups my face as she pulls me down for a kiss.

"Morning," she whispers against my lips.

"Morning, love," I murmur, immediately more at ease.

Yet when she turns to tend to the food, my blood runs cold as I notice the marks on her flesh.

One second. Two. I feel myself rooted to the spot as my brain goes into overdrive, countless possibilities suddenly inundating my mind.

Fuck! Did I hurt her?

No, I refuse to believe that. Not her... I'd never hurt her.

But the seed has been planted, and before I know it I'm on her.

Grabbing the hem of her shirt, I pull it over her head—a bit rougher than intended.

She lets out a low gasp, but doesn't protest as I throw it to the side, her naked body finally meeting my gaze.

And what I see...

I blench at the sight before me.

The area from her tits to her neck is covered in hickeys—big, red hickeys. There are bite marks all around her breasts and her stomach, and as I turn her around, I note even worse on her back.

My fingerprints are all over. Her neck, her back, her ass and her thighs. All areas are bruised and marked.

"Noelle..."

Faced with the evidence, I can't deny it anymore.

"I hurt you," I let out a pained howl, the thought of doing something to my sweet girl killing me on the inside.

Fucking hell...

"What? No! Raf, what are you talking about?" She gives me a slight push, turning around and narrowing her eyes at me. "You didn't hurt me *at all*."

"But..." I trail off, unable to even say the words. Instead, I merely trail my fingers over her bruised flesh, too fucking ashamed of myself.

"I *wanted* this," she stops my hand, grabbing it in hers and pulling me closer. "I wanted everything you could give me. This," she points to the bite marks, then the handprints and the bruises. "All these are because I asked you. I *wanted* you to take me like that. And I loved every single moment of it," she adds confidently, meeting my gaze head on.

"Fucking hell, Noelle. If anyone were to see that they'd think I abused you. And they would be right. How could..."

"Shh," she places a finger over my lips. "I bruise easily. But you didn't hurt me at all. You didn't abuse me. You only gave me pleasure. I know you might not remember the night too well, but all you did was love me, never anything else. OK?"

"Pretty girl... Promise to tell me if I ever hurt you?"

"Of course," she readily agrees. "Now go shower and come back for breakfast," she pokes my chest playfully as she gives me yet another kiss.

"Don't tell me I smell," I raise a brow at her.

"You don't," she smiles. "In fact, I like you better like this. All musky, and male, and *mine*," she bats her lashes. "But I know you'll feel better after a hot shower."

"Wise little thing," I wink at her, which earns me another poke, this time on my ass.

"Go," she mouths.

Shaking my head at her antics, I go back to the bedroom, grabbing a few clean towels before heading to the bathroom for a steamy shower. I'm still slightly disoriented from the drugs, but as the water hits my skin I release a weary sigh, finally finding some comfort after a long night.

Letting the water wash over me, I tilt my head back and relax.

But my mind doesn't seem to want to do that.

Not when the water becomes hotter, and upon meeting my skin, it triggers flashes from the night before—flashes from long ago.

I'm frozen to the spot—so fucking still I can't even control the temperature of the water.

My eyes snap open as my mouth parts in horror, images dancing before my eyes—awful, awful images that make me want to truly rip the skin off my

back.

I see *everything*. Everything that was revealed to me the night before and all the memories that I must have buried inside my brain at some point. I see them and I...

Turning off the faucet, I step out of the shower, donning only a clean pair of sweatpants and mechanically drying my hair off before going back to the dining room.

Like a stranger in my own body, I sit down at the table Noelle laid for the two of us, slowly picking up my utensils and attempting to eat.

But the smell of the food seems foul now.

"Raf?"

I pick at the food, a little hesitant to bring it to my mouth as my stomach still rebels at those images—at those debasing touches I can still feel on my skin. The hottest water could not cleanse the past away from me, or the pain at having it brought back like this.

"Raf," Noelle's hand covers mine as she takes the fork from me. "What's wrong?"

Slowly, I bring my gaze to hers, swallowing hard as I can't bring myself to utter a lie, though that would be the best for her peace of mind. And maybe mine.

I can only stare into her worried eyes, tears pricking at my eyeballs. So I just hold myself utterly still.

"What's wrong, Raf? There's something wrong, I can tell." She abandons her seat opposite me at the table to come to my side.

She's close—*too close*?—and for a moment everything in me rebels at the contact.

But then there's her scent. Her utterly irresistible scent that always soothes me—even now, when I'm on the brink of tears.

"Talk to me please," she whispers, her hand on my back as she slowly strokes me. "What's wrong?"

I should say nothing. Lie and let this rest, not fucking taint her with my past and the fact that I feel like half a man for what happened—or at least what I think happened.

But one look at her and I know I couldn't do that. I owe it to her to know just what a fucking mess I am.

"I had some flashes last night."

"Flashes?" she frowns.

"I think they were memories. From before," I swallow. "When I was on drugs."

Her eyes widen and her hand stills on my back.

"And?"

I purse my lips, not knowing how to tell her this. She already knows some of the details from my time with Armand. She knows how he treated me, that he kept me as a replacement for his wife for my supposed resemblance to her. But what she doesn't know—what *I* didn't know until now—is that Armand might not have been the only one to rape me. Might not have been the only one to...

"Someone else might have...raped me," I tell her before I lose all courage. Before the mere thought of it makes me want to fucking mutilate myself on the spot and remove all traces of that encounter.

"What?" Her eyes flare in shock, her mouth hanging open as she regards me. "What do you mean, Raf?" She asks me in a pained tone.

"It was a woman. She..." I choke on the words, but I tell her. I give her a brief account of what I saw and what I think happened.

"It felt so real," I whisper when I'm done. "I..."

"Oh my God, Raf!" She wraps her arms around my neck, holding on to me. "My Blue. My darling Blue," she murmurs in my ear, slowly laying soft kisses all over my face. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't," I shake my head. "Maybe it's not even real..." I add weakly, though I *know* it must be real. "Maybe..."

"Maybe," she quickly nods. "Maybe it's just a nightmare?" she offers kindly, wrapping herself around me to offer me her comfort—her heat. "It has to be a nightmare," she whispers.

I'm fucking embarrassed of myself, but at this moment, her presence is the only thing I need.

"I hope so, pretty girl. I truly hope so."

After what feels like an eternity, we resume eating and I do my best to put on a face of normality.

Though Noelle is nothing but understanding, there's a part of me that doesn't want her to see me like this, almost tumbling down the black hole that is my psyche. So I do what I always do best.

I pretend.

A few days later, and for all my efforts to move on and relegate everything to a nightmare—maybe one based on *some* truth, but a nightmare

nonetheless—I can't seem to do it.

The images flash in my mind at the most inopportune times. Sometimes even when I'm intimate with Noelle. It takes just a second for me to be jolted back to that flash and feel someone else touching me.

Though I've done my best to put on a blasé front, I know Noelle can sense something is wrong. Yet after the initial time we talked about it I'm wary to approach the subject again. More than anything because I don't want to speak of it again and, God forbid, get more flashes or images of that day.

And as time continues to pass, I have to admit to myself that it feels less and less like a hallucination and more like an actual memory.

Someone had done that to me...

"Will you be back for lunch?" Noelle asks as she buttons up my shirts, a serene look on her face.

"I'll try to," I bring one hand to my lips for a kiss. "I'll let you know if I'm late, but I'll do my best to be back by noon."

"Good. I have a new recipe and I can't wait for you to try it," she adds, mischief sparkling in her eyes.

Since we've moved in our own place, Noelle has taken to cooking daily, enjoying the process of coming up with new recipes. I'd offered to help or even *hire* help, but she'd had none of that, declaring that the kitchen is her space. Not one to argue with that, I'd let her have her fun, happy she found a new hobby.

"I'll see you soon," I whisper as I kiss her lips before going out the door.

She thinks I'm going to see Carlos, and while that is in part true since I will be swinging by his place later, I need to see my sister first. Not in any family capacity, but a professional one.

I need to hear her opinion about what's been happening to me or I won't be able to live like this anymore—when every little touch has the potential to be torturous because I know what was taken from me. I need Gianna to help me make sense of the mess that is my fucking mind.

Getting in my car, I plug in the coordinates for Gianna's office and start the engine.

Driving has generally been a pleasant pastime—one where I could relax and forget about my problems for a moment. Yet as I get closer and closer to my sister's place, I can't help but go over what I remember in an attempt to make some sense of it so I can convey it more properly.

Deep in thought, I don't even realize the car following me until it's too

late. My eyes widen as I spot it into the side mirror. More alarming is the fact that it's too close to me for comfort.

I can't afford to bring anyone dangerous in Gianna's life, so instead of continuing with my course I exit the main road, the other car following suit.

At first, I think it could be just a scout, but as soon as we're out of public eye, the car becomes increasingly aggressive, hitting my bumper and trying to take me off the road.

Veering to the right, I spare a glance to the GPS, noting that I'm somewhere at the periphery of the city—certainly the area looks abandoned enough. There would be no casualties if a fight were to erupt.

The car keeps taunting me, hitting my bumper before retreating.

In the beginning, I'm more than sure I can deal by myself with that.

But I'm not in the right headspace, and that severely affects the speed of my movements.

Where I should try to avoid getting hit, I barely manage to swerve *after* it happens.

"Damn it," I curse out, my hand already reaching for my gun.

Yet one moment is all it takes for my attention to be occupied by something else and for the other car to take advantage of it.

No longer a playful hit, this time it catches me at the right angle to push my car off the road. It's with enough strength that I lose control of the steering wheel.

The road is elevated, which means I'm fucking free falling.

Holding on tightly, I say a small prayer that the car won't get too damaged on the way down—and me with it.

A few flips and bumps on the uneven ground and it finally stabilizes itself in a ditch.

The airbag flies in my face as I draw a deep breath in, trying to calm myself and think straight for a moment.

I need to get out first. Yes, that's the most important. I don't know what got damaged in the tumble to the ground and an explosion could easily be afoot.

Getting my bearings together, I unsnap my seatbelt. Taking my gun with me, I kick at the car's door until it gives way, allowing me to exit the vehicle.

My head hurts like hell, and as I bring a hand up, it's to note blood on my fingers. Blinking, I realize some of it is also pouring down my face.

"Fuck..." I mutter, bringing my arm to my forehead and wiping most of

the blood away.

I must have hit my head against the steering wheel before the airbags got deployed.

Stepping away from the car, I do a quick assessment of the situation while pinging my location to Carlos to ask for backup.

I'm not afraid of facing a few men out for blood, but I'm not yet sure how bad my head wound is, and considering my sight is starting to fog a little, I'd say I have a small window of time before I'm out of commission.

Sure enough, a few seconds later and I see a few men coming down the hill, all dressed in black suits and carrying weapons with them.

One. Two. Three. Four.

Four isn't that bad. If I'm fast.

My aim is also likely faulty, this fucking headache making it hard to focus.

Yet, focus I must.

They don't notice me right away, and I take advantage of that to hide behind a tree nearby.

Two of the men head straight for the car, while the other two look around, one seemingly talking on the phone.

Right as I note the two open the car doors and look around, I aim my gun to the gas canister, shooting.

This time, my aim doesn't fail me as the effect is instantaneous, an explosion erupting from the car and swallowing the two guys up.

The other two are already on me, noting my location and running towards me, guns up, fingers on triggers.

I duck to the ground to avoid the incoming bullets, all the while aiming my own gun towards the closest one to me and managing to hit him in the right shoulder. He drops to the ground with a pained cry, but the other one is a different story. As I try to aim, my sight gets foggy, a ringing in my ear making it very hard to get a clean shot. Instead, my bullet ends up grazing his shoulder. Yet it's enough to get him to drop his gun.

Knowing I can't waste any time with bad shots, I drop my gun in favor of my bare hands. A few steps and I'm on him before he can get his bearings together from the previous shot.

Curling my fingers into a fist, I bring it to his face with enough force that a tooth jumps out of his mouth. Not one to waste a good opportunity, I take advantage of his shocked state to land blow after blow.

He throws some weak punches my way, one which catches me in my right temple and makes me see triple for a moment. But I simply close my eyes and let my other senses lead me as I continue to hit until my knuckles reach bone. Blood spatters all over my front, and as I confirm he's out, I finally step aside.

With a ragged breath, I try to calm myself, but the pain in my head only seems to double with each passing moment.

I don't know how much time passes, but as I spot some other figures in the distance, I'm ready to start this all over again—as many times as it's necessary.

I only know I can't die—won't die. Not now, and not like this.

Wiping the blood off my face again, I stagger to my feet, taking a few steps before realizing it's not the enemy.

"Carlos," I rasp out, putting my hand up.

The sun hits my eyes right at that moment, and the earth seems to shift as I lose my footing, collapsing to the ground.

It's not long before I'm out. For good this time.

"Raf? Can you hear me?"

It's her voice. It's always her voice.

Pain radiates from somewhere in my temples, and as I struggle to open my eyes the light almost blinds me.

"Fuck," I mumble, bringing my hand to shield my eyes.

"He's awake," Noelle declares, and I note she's by my side, her hands wrapped around my wrist.

She has a worried look on her face, her lips trembling as she assesses me.

"Pretty girl, are you ok?"

"Me? You're asking *me* if I'm ok, Raf? You're the one with a massive concussion right now. God, you must have scared ten years off my life when I got the phone call you were at the hospital. What were you thinking..."

She drones on, but I can't focus on her words. Not when my lips tip up as my eyes accommodate to the daylight streaming through the window which bathes her in light, making her look like an ethereal fairy.

So pretty. So fucking beautiful.

"You're beautiful," I simply say.

"Raf," she crosses her arms over her chest, her eyes narrowing at me. "Did the blow to your head addle your brains?"

I try to shake my head, wincing at the sharp pain.

"Nope," I smile through gritted teeth. "Your beautiful face is exactly what I needed to feel better."

"Flatterer," she mumbles, but a smile plays at her lips.

Before I know it, she's on me, her lips on my cheek as she starts peppering small kisses all over my face.

"You don't know how much you scared me," she breathes out. "But you're fine. You're fine and it's all that matters."

I grab her hand, squeezing tightly in a gesture of comfort.

"Where is Carlos? Can you ask him to come in?"

"He's outside. He let me have a moment with you when he saw you were waking up."

"How long..." I frown. "How long was I out?"

"A few hours," she sighs. "But that's already a few hours too many. I'm not letting you take that type of risk again."

"Nothing happened, pretty girl. I'm fine."

She huffs, but continues kissing me. Only after she's thoroughly covered every inch of my face does she draw back, looking pensive.

"Oh well, I suppose I *could* call Carlos back in now," she sighs as if it's the hardest thing she's ever done.

A perpetual smile on my lips, I watch as she opens the door to my salon, asking Carlos to come in before closing it again and resuming her place by my side.

"Glad to see you're back to normal," Carlos adds dryly, surveying me up and down with a sardonic smile.

"Not you, too," I groan. "We need to focus on who was after me. Is it Ortega again? Or..."

"We ID-ed the men, and safe to say they are part of Ortega's network. They all had warrants on their heads for a slew of crimes."

"Damn it," I purse my lips. "I guess Ortega is really taking his mission seriously."

"He's floundering, Raf. Of course he is. He needs support—*financial* support. And you're his ticket to getting Michele's backing."

"Somehow I doubt that," I grumble.

"What do you mean?" Carlos asks.

"If Michele truly wanted me dead, I would be dead," I state confidently. Maybe in the beginning I'd thought his thirst for revenge would compel him to see me to my grave. But after so many failed attempts, after so many times

when he'd had the opportunity to end me, I don't think that's his objective anymore—if it ever was.

He wanted me to suffer, yes. But I don't think he truly wanted me dead.

"So even if he does kill me. Auch," I wince when Noelle pokes me.

"No one is killing you," she gives me a deadly look.

"Right, so even if he *would*," I look at her as she gives me a small nod, as if that sentence construction is rather acceptable. "I don't think he would gain anything from Michele."

"But he doesn't know that. And for as long as he thinks he will secure the cash in exchange for your head, he'll keep coming after you."

"And I'll keep fighting back," I roll my eyes.

"Or we kill him," Noelle suddenly suggests.

Both Carlos and I turn to look at her.

"It's the easiest course of action," she shrugs.

"With the exception that we have no idea *where* he is. He's like a fucking rat, hiding in any sewer he can find," Carlos sighs.

We go over a few strategies before Noelle practically shoos Carlos out of the room, telling him I need to rest.

"It's not that bad," I try to tell her, but she just won't have it.

"It's bad enough that you have to spend the night here for observation. So don't you try to get out of it," she says resolutely while making herself comfortable on the couch on the other side of the room.

Getting myself to a sitting position, I wince a little as I feel the ghost of a pain in my skull.

"Pretty girl," I pause, thinking how to approach this. Given the danger, I don't want her anywhere around me. Especially in a hospital where anyone could attack. But I also know it won't be easy to dissuade her from staying with me. "I don't want you to spend the night here."

Her mouth falls open in shock, and in no time she's off the couch and marching towards me.

"You don't want me here?" She blinks in outrage.

"I didn't mean it like that," I put a hand up. "I don't want you where you could be in danger. And that's here, by my side."

"So I should just let you face the danger all by yourself?" Her arms crossed over her chest, she gives me a look that would kill a weaker man on the spot.

"No," I sigh. "What I'm trying to say is that I would be more at peace

knowing you're at home, where we have guards and state-of-the-art security. Carlos can stay with me in case they think to attack again."

She doesn't seem convinced as she's staring at me, tapping her foot on the floor.

"Please, you know how much it stresses me out if you're in danger. I won't be able to think straight in combat either," I add, semi-guilty into thinking it's going to make me sloppier in battle—which isn't entirely untrue.

A bit more back and forth and it seems my plan to convince her to go home is working, especially as she calls Carlos and makes him promise to stay by my side the entire night.

With that out of the way, it takes one more hour for her to finally unglue herself from my side since she takes one step away from me before coming back for *one more kiss*. I can't say I'm mad at it, though, because it's hard enough for me to be parted from her, too. But in this instance, her safety is all that matters.

Eventually she does leave, taking the guards with her back home. We promise to text throughout the night, but she couldn't leave without threatening Carlos that if something happened to me he'd have to deal with her.

"Your wife is funny," he comments after she leaves.

I shake my head, smiling. She is. For such a tiny thing she surely is determined. But that's just one of the many things I love about her.

Getting myself more comfortable, I grab my tablet and both Carlos and I get to work—or as much as I can do considering I'm still pretty dizzy from the accident.

Noelle and I continue texting well into the night and I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

The morning comes and after a rather lengthy medical exam, the doctor approves my discharge.

Carlos stretches his body, the small couch from my salon clearly not the best for his big frame.

"Shall we?" he asks, stifling a yawn.

"Yeah, just a second. Noelle's not answering my calls," I frown as I dial her number again. It's unlike her to not pick up the phone on the third ring. And she's not answering my texts either.

"Maybe she left her phone in another room. Don't despair."

"People are gunning for me, Carlos. If she's not answering..." I trail off,

panic taking hold of me.

But I can't afford to do that. No, I need to think logically. Maybe Carlos is right.

Though I am reluctant to do this, I dial the security I'd placed around the building, asking some of them to check up on her—just in case.

In the meantime, I put on some clean clothes, ready to leave once everything is sorted with my discharge slip.

Yet the news I receive is anything but reassuring. The guards are scrambling to give me an answer, the excuses flowing out of them.

My wife isn't at home. No sign of struggle in the house.

Our spare car isn't in the parking lot. And they haven't seen her exit the apartment.

There is absolutely no sign of Noelle.

What the fuck?

My hands tighten around my phone, my paranoia increasing by the minute. How could she have simply disappeared into thin air?

"She could be on the way here?" Carlos offers an optimistic alternative.

"Or someone could have taken her," I add between gritted teeth. My pulse is pounding, my temples throbbing both with pain *and* worry.

But how else could there be absolutely *no* trace of her if

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

If anything happens to Noelle because of me I won't ever forgive myself.

"Easy, Raf. The guards said there was no sign of forced entry, nor a struggle."

"Something must have happened," I speak fast, already imagining the worst. "I need to leave. I need to..."

I take a step forward just as the door to my salon opens, the person I'd least expected striding through.

"Michele..."

He's dressed in a pair of black jeans and a black shirt topped with a leather jacket and leather gloves. His dark hair curls to his shoulders, emphasizing his pale features and those otherworldly eyes.

"Well, hullo brother," he smiles, that predatory smile of his telling me something is afoot.

"Where is Noelle?" I immediately demand. If he's here, then he must have had something to do with her disappearance.

"Where is she, indeed?" He muses, amused. "Tell your watch dog to stand down. I'm not here for any nefarious purposes," he motions towards Carlos who'd already drawn up his weapon.

"Get to the point, Michele," I roll my eyes at him.

"Right, about your wife," he chuckles. "I saw her this morning, you know," he suddenly says, though I recognize it as an attempt to rile me.

Taking a deep breath, I calm myself before I speak.

"Where?"

"Easy, easy. I'll tell you *if*," he pauses, looking at me expectantly. No doubt he's enjoying the way I'm barely in control of myself. The thought anything happening to Noelle makes me physically ill, and I'm not about to let that happen.

"If?"

"If you let me tell you a little story."

"Cut the crap, Michele. What do you want?"

"Like I said. Let me tell you a little story and I'll give you all the information you want. Including," he smiles again, "Ortega's location."

My eyes widen and I shoot a look to Carlos, who gives me a brisk nod.

"Fine."

"Wonderful. And to see I'm not too gauche, I even brought a gift," he declares as he opens the door, ushering someone in.

Instinctively, I take a step back.

"What... How... I killed her..." I stammer, the shock of seeing *her* making me reel.

"I just wanted you to *believe* you did," Michele shrugs. "Despite what you may think of me, I don't go around slaughtering innocents. And if there is one innocent in this whole debacle, it's her," he motions to Lucero.

Living and in the flesh.

"That syringe you administered only stopped her heart for a few moments," Michele casually says, revealing the entire debacle at the warehouse as nothing more than a psychological game. He never intended to kill either her, or Noelle, did he?

"Why are you doing this?" I ask, unable to comprehend his angle. All his actions have been contradictory. He either wants to kill me, or he doesn't. He then tries to do it, but he never does. Just what the hell is his deal?

"Because, dear brother, I still care about you. And because of that I want you to know the truth," he shrugs.

"The truth?" What the hell is Michele about? My head might still be pounding, but I doubt this nonsense I'm hearing is a product of my head injury.

I narrow my eyes at him. If he's saying he *cares* about me then something is definitely wrong. Yet if all it takes to find out Ortega's location and what he knows about Noelle's disappearance, then I'm willing to hear him out.

"Spill, what truth?" I demand, rather impatiently, Noelle still foremost in my mind.

"The truth about the monster you're living with," he smirks. "Lucero here will tell you everything that happened at Sergio's *hacienda*. I think it's time you finally found out why your dear wife was called *la diabla*," his tone drips with satisfaction.

Lucero starts speaking.

And I listen.

To my utter surprise, this *little story* changes everything.

TWENTY-NINE

NOELLE

LEAVING RAF ALONE AT THE HOSPITAL MIGHT NOT BE THE MOST IDEAL situation, but it could very well turn into the opportunity I was waiting for.

As instructed, the guards take me home after which they commence their rounds. From what I'd eavesdropped, Raf had told them to cover the entire area of our apartment building, with some guards stationed even in front of our door.

It's a small grace that he didn't allow them to patrol the inside of the apartment, too. But I know my husband and he would never leave me alone in a room with strange men. He'd never risk that.

Which brings me back to my current dilemma.

I'm stuck in the house.

Earlier, when I'd tried to go out, the guards had reiterated that Mr. Guerra had ordered that I was not to leave the premises. Put on the spot, I'd simply pretended it was an absurdity, that I would never leave the house while it was dangerous to do so. Instead, I'd offered them a glass of water and chatted them up a little—enough to find out the formation of the security team and their patrol times.

When the clock chimes at the designated time, I get ready to put my plan in motion.

The idea is rather simple.

I'll go to my brother's home, sneak into his office and hopefully manage to break into his computer. If there's anyone out there who has information on Ortega—and a potential location—it's my brother. That sly bastard has information on absolutely everyone, even though he'd never share it unless it benefits him.

The thought of my brother is enough to sour my mood, but I know I can't afford to be distracted in a time like this.

Putting on a pair of black tights and a tight black shirt, I add a snug exercise belt around my waist in which I deposit my phone, a foldable cap and some cash—I need to keep everything electronic-less so I won't leave a trail behind me. Secrecy is the defining trait of this excursion.

Raf cannot find out—much less anyone else who might tell him.

And so I need to take a more unconventional approach.

I wince just thinking about it.

Alas, what don't we do for love?

Raf is the one person for whom I would venture even in Tartarus if need be. He is, simply put, my weakness—the *only* one.

I place a wireless earbud in my ear, securing it with some tape. When everything is in place, I mentally prepare myself for the hard part of this plan.

Going to the outdoor terrace, I lean over the railing as I do another quick inventory of the distance between each floor. We're on the fourth floor, and that means I'll have my work cut out for me.

With a deep breath, I swing myself over the railing, gripping it tightly with my hands as I move my feet around in an attempt to locate anything I can use for support. I manage to touch a protruding metal bar with the soles of my feet, stabilizing myself for a moment. But *that* is the only surface available.

The outer walls of the building are all smooth concrete, and the lack of edges is going to make it hard for me to scale it down. At most, I'll have to improvise a few things.

And that's exactly what I do I move one hand to grip the metal bar, flinging myself lower and hanging in the air. My body tenses as my entire weight rests on one arm. My muscles are not what they used to be, my strength having decreased considerably after so long without proper exercise. Still, my body remembers everything, and I nimbly grab on to the bar with the other hand, balancing myself in the air.

Knowing each floor will likely put a strain on my body, I have to move fast or I risk losing my strength and falling to my death.

But *that* is simply out of the question.

Taking a deep breath, I turn my head to the side to look at the lower floor.

Each terrace is identical in design. Except for the roof that connects the floors, there is only one small ledge and no windows, giving it a penthouse

feel without paying the steep price for it.

The terrace right under me has some fake grass strewn around, as well as some kids' toys. Immediately, I wince at imagining throwing myself right on top of the toys, the pain already echoing in my bones.

Shaking myself, I simply spot a cleaner part a bit further to the right—at least one that shouldn't hurt as much.

Moving along the metal bar, I reach the designated spot. Tightening my hold over the bar, I start swinging myself back and forth to gain momentum.

This is it. The moment when I'll either succeed or...not.

Considering that the latter option is out of the question, I simply refuse to acknowledge it, focusing all my strength on making the jump.

The wind in my face, my body dangling in the air, I build enough momentum and I jump.

I just jump.

Used to similar situation, I automatically duck and roll as I'm about to meet the ground. And as I brush against the fake grass, rolling a few times without encountering any toys on my way, I exhale sharply in relief. Luckily, there also doesn't seem to be anyone around.

One floor down. Two more to go.

Getting to my feet, I dust myself before stretching my muscles. When I feel confident in myself, I head to the ledge, swinging myself over it and getting ready to repeat the entire ordeal.

I manage to lower myself to the bottom metal bar, gripping it with both hands as I assess the situation on the next floor.

This time, instead of fake grass, pebbles are strewn all over.

Wincing, I close my eyes, pushing against anticipated pain as I only focus on my goal.

Getting rid of the threat to Raf's life.

Nothing else matters. Not the way, nor the casualties. Just the result.

My fingers wrapped around the metal bar, I start a light sway, ready to build momentum before the jump.

But just before I can push myself even further to garner speed, a low melody erupts from my pouch, making me still as well—or as much as I can considering I'm just hanging in the air.

Immediately, I stiffen, knowing there's only one person who could be calling—the only one I could never not answer to.

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. And another. My heart is pounding

in my chest as I flex my arm muscles to hold my weight as I use one hand to click on my earbud, accepting the call before quickly resuming my grip.

His voice immediately comes through.

"I bet you're all bored without me, aren't you?" he asks in a playful tone.

"I should remind you that you're the one who sent me back home. *Alone*," I fire back, doing my best to keep the breathlessness out of my voice.

"You know why," he sighs. "That is not to say that I'm not regretting it. A *tiny* bit," he chuckles.

"You'd better regret it a whole lot more than a tiny bit," I add as I gaze around, scanning the terrace for any sign of occupancy. The last thing I need right now is for someone to catch me like this *while* on the phone with Raf. Well, scratch that. The last thing I need is to *fall* while on the phone with my husband.

I'm sure he wouldn't appreciate that.

"How is it that I've been on my own most of my life but the moment you're not with me for more than an hour I go crazy with missing you?"

"Raf..."

"I needed to hear your voice, ok?" He grumbles. "Texting is not enough."

"You need to rest. You took a pretty bad blow to the head," I say as I spot a flash of movement deep into the terrace. "Oh, the water's boiling in the kettle. I'll talk to you later. Love you," I say and before he can reply, I quickly bring my hand to the ear piece to cut off the call.

At the same time, the noise of a door sliding open demands my focus. Bringing my hand back to the bar, I move to the right as fast as I can so I'm out of direct view.

A man comes out, a cigarette in his hand as he paces back and forth on the terrace, spewing clipped commands into his phone.

His attention seems to be wholly on his phone call and he doesn't notice the dangling legs from the side of the terrace.

Holding on to the bar, I pray he quickly finishes his cigarette and leaves since I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to hang on like this—not when my hands are becoming clammier with sweat.

It feels like forever before he finally flings his cigarette to the ground, heading back into the house and slamming the door behind him with a thud.

Releasing a relieved breath, I move a little more to the side until I'm sure I can land on the terrace without making too much ruckus. Still, there's still the matter of the pebbles on the ground and I gulp down as I try to ignore the

thought of what will happen.

Like before, I swing myself on the bar, yet this time it's more precarious as my hands are already too sweaty to not guarantee that I'll slip if I push myself too hard.

When I consider I've built enough momentum, I let myself go, pushing my hands forward as I fly towards the ground in order to cushion my fall as best as I can.

The pebbles are blunt, but they still dig into my palms and knees, and every bit of flesh that comes into contact with them.

I swallow it all down as I focus solely on the end objective—one more floor.

Taking a few pebbles, I rub them together to create some dust, which I then lather all over my palms to remove some of the residual sweat. Then, I swiftly go back to the railing, repeating the process.

By the time I manage to get down, my muscles are aching, my hands full of tiny abrasions that sting as hell.

Still, I'm not deterred.

There are a couple of people that see me jump down from the last floor, but as I give them a dazzling smile, they just ignore me, going about their day.

Glancing at my watch, I note it's taken me about an hour to scale down the building, and that means the guards will soon do their rounds. To go unrecognizable in case they come by earlier than intended, I pull out the cap from my pouch, placing it over my head. I tip it down to cover my face before heading down the street and losing myself in the crowd.

The moment I reach the main road, I hail a cab, instructing the driver to go to my brother's place and paying in cash once we stop in the back of the house.

Knowing Cisco, security must be even tighter now that Yuyu could be in danger. And that means he must have hired a lot of additional guards to patrol the inside of the house. In addition to that, there's also his security system, which will trigger the alarm at the first sign of an intruder.

For a second, I ponder whether I should actually use the front door and *ask* for the information. But even if Cisco were to give it to me, I wouldn't trust that there isn't something missing, or that he's given me the wrong one. With my brother, both would not only be possible, but to be expected.

Considering the urgency of the situation, I can't afford to waste time, or

make any mistakes. Who knows when Ortega might decide to strike next and catch Raf with his guard down? I won't take any chances with it.

That also means that I need to improvise an entry point.

Instead of going straight for Cisco's house, I go to the neighboring one, going down the steps to the basement. The lock is easy enough to pick and in no time I find myself inside the house.

I don't hear too much noise, so I'll have to hope no one is home at this time.

Stealthily, I go up the stairs to the ground floor, molding myself to every dark corner to not draw any attention if anyone were to suddenly come out.

Yet as I predicted, the house is eerily quiet.

Going to the next floor, I find it equally as empty.

Yet it's the third floor that stumps me, as I come across at least ten men, their snores a clear indication that they're sleeping. But as I quickly peruse them, noting the way they are dressed as well as the weapons stashed around them, I get an idea who they might be.

Damn Cisco. He is too sly, indeed. He must have rented or bought this house for an added security buffer.

I make to move, but the temptation is too strong. On the tips of my toes, I go to the nearest man and I lower my hand to his belt, slowly withdrawing his gun.

He moves a little in his sleep, but I'm successful in taking the gun from him, which I promptly deposit in my little pouch after I make sure the safety is on.

Back to my plan, I head to the roof of the house. And once there, I simply jump the distance between the brownstones until I reach Cisco's roof.

I locate the trap that leads to the inside of the house and then I'm finally in.

I release a sigh when I find myself in the attic—*my* attic. Yet there's always a nagging sensation at the back of my head. It *shouldn't* have been this easy to get in. Not with the supposed security Cisco had hired. After all, it's not like I'm an expert in breaking in, and if I can do it, likely people with more nefarious reasons than me can as well.

But I can't dwell on that.

Not when the mission is to get in and out in the least amount of time possible.

I only take a second to get my bearings and respond to some of Raf's texts

before I'm ready to move forward.

Exiting our makeshift apartment, I'm extremely vigilant as I assess the hallways before I move.

Though I'm small and fast, I won't stand a chance against the likely tens of burly security men my brother hired.

Yet there's no trace of them.

I walk around the hallway, and I don't spot anyone—not even Greta.

Alarm bells sound in my head. First, I assume that Cisco and Yuyu relocated once more, but the presence of the guards in the other building would disprove that. No, there's something else at play here.

And as I move further into the house, I become more and more paranoid.

Everything is so...easy. It's like I'm walking straight into a trap.

That is further confirmed when the door to the study is *not* locked. I easily push it open and find myself alone in my brother's office.

Too. Freaking. Easy.

No, something is definitely afoot. And no matter how much I'd like nothing more than follow the plan and get access to his records, now I'm doubting the information I find there will even be the correct one.

Pursing my lips, I take out the gun from my pouch, letting my hand rest on the handle while I take a seat at his study and turn on the computer.

At the rate things are going, maybe it would have been simpler to just come in through the front door.

Especially when the computer screen blares to life and I notice it's not password protected.

It's. Not. Password. Protected.

That's it. Something is *definitely* wrong.

Hell, my brother probably has his own thoughts encrypted, and he wouldn't have his computer? Bullshit.

Since I'm here, though, I'm not about to leave empty-handed, so I set about searching for everything I can find on Ortega. Sure enough, there are plenty of entries—all right there for me to access.

A smile plays at my lips as I realize what my brother must have planned.

There is, in fact, information on Ortega's location. It's just that there are... several locations. He's giving it to me, but he's definitely not making it *that* easy.

I quickly take my phone out, taking a picture of the list of locations before getting ready to leave. Curiosity gets the better of me, though, and I

can't help myself as I search my own name in his database.

Immediately, an entire list of documents shows up. Medical records, pictures and even videos.

Before I can help myself, I click on some of them, seeing things that I already know, like the state of my health when I'd been rescued from the *hacienda*, or my subsequent medical reports.

What piques my curiosity even more are my psychological reports. Clicking on that folder, I see a series of videos, which from the thumbnail imply they had been taken while I'd been locked up in that mental facility.

Though all my memories before the fire are crystal clear, the time I spent in that institution is muddier. Maybe it's from all the drugs that I was forced to take, but I only remember a fierce desire to forget, and an even stronger one to die. Luckily, I'd chosen the former, or I would not have been here today.

I scroll through a few of them, choosing to play one at random.

Immediately, the video takes up the whole screen, the date on it suggesting it had been taken about a month *after* the fire.

I was skin and bone, my pallor so pale I looked like a ghost. My eyes were sunken in, my cheeks hollow. Overall, I looked dead, yet alive.

"How are you feeling today, Noelle?" A man's voice resounds from behind the camera.

I turn ever so slightly, pinning him with my gaze as I merely raise a brow.

"You tell me, doc. How am I *supposed* to feel?" I ask sarcastically, though my expression is devoid of any feeling.

"I see you're still as belligerent today. I don't think this is going to work," he sighs. "Your brother is coming to see you this weekend and I'll have to update him with my findings."

"Really? And what will you tell him?" I tilt my head to the side. "Let me guess, that I'm a danger to myself and to society and that I should be locked away. *Forever.*"

Slowly, I smile.

"That..." he mumbles, *afraid*.

He isn't visible in the video, the camera filming from his direction. But his vocal cues tell me everything I need to know.

"That is correct," he clears his voice. "I'm going to share the results of your psychological exams and I will give him my professional opinion, which, as you have guessed, is that you *need* to be institutionalized."

My smile is still on my face—unwavering.

"The results of my psychological exams," I chuckle. "Tell me, doc. Exactly, how crazy am I?"

He doesn't answer for a moment, and the camera moves back a little, sign he's also backing away.

"I will be discussing these details only with your brother," the doctor relays just as he moves to leave, taking the camera with him.

There's a loud sound that comes from the video, and not two seconds later the camera drops to the ground. More distressed sounds and what seems to be a scream of pain before the camera recalibrates again.

Like being thrust into the past, I blink and suddenly I'm there, seeing everything with my own eyes.

The doctor is lying at my feet, his mouth opening and closing as he tries to stop the blood spurting from his neck. Dropping the sharp pencil I'd used to stab him to the ground, I grab the camera, turning it towards me.

"Hello, brother," I drawl, watching my reflection on the small screen of the camera. There are streaks of blood all over my face and hospital gown. "I think it's time for a tête-à-tête, don't you think?" I smile at the camera, madness written all over my face.

Slowly, I tilt the camera as I crouch on the floor, thrusting it into the doc's face as he's struggling for his last breath.

"See what you made me do?" I ask as I bring my mouth closer to the camera, imagining I'm whispering this in his ear. "He's one breath away from death. And he won't be the last," I snicker as I wrench the doctor's hand away from his wound, blood immediately pouring out and drenching me in the red liquid. "If you want to stop this—stop *me*—then you know what you have to do."

Kill me!

The video stops, and I'm back to the present.

Kill me!

That echo haunts me, the memories from my time in that institution materializing just like that feeling of hopelessness—of having everything of importance stripped away from me.

But I'm no longer that person for the sole reason that I still have the most important thing in my life. And as long as I have *him*, I'll still be me.

But if something were to happen to Raf... Then I feel sorry for the world.

Melancholy descends upon me as I recall those times and how desperate

I'd been to end my own life and wreck destruction on anyone who dared to stand in my path.

I'd been absolutely inconsolable, and it's a feeling I never want to experience again.

But as I get myself together, I don't know what makes me click on the next folder. The title alone—*autopsy*—should tell me everything I need to know. Yet I can't help myself.

Hovering the cursor over the first picture, I take a deep breath before I double click it, squeezing my eyes shut when it fills the screen.

I count to ten before I'm able to open them again. My heart is in my throat as I take in that familiar cradle—the one I'd built with my own hands. Absent-mindedly, I bring my fingers to the inside of my wrist where lays a tiny scar. One I'd gotten while sculpting the wood for the cradle.

The picture is at an angle, showing the wreckage all around and the damage from the fire. The previously lightly colored wood is now darkened with ash.

I swipe the next picture, and that's where the real hell begins.

Mali. My Mali. My son.

I bring a hand to my mouth to stifle a sob as I take in his small form—or what's left of him. He's in the same position as I left him.

"I'm sorry," I croak, reaching out to trace the incinerated body, remembering the way his small body fit in my arms.

I barely got to hold him—barely got to feel the heat of his skin atop mine.

"I'm so sorry," I continue to whisper, unable to stop the tears that roll down my cheeks.

I failed him. I failed my own child. Regardless of how many times I try to push that knowledge away, simply ground myself in the present and my actual happiness, it's impossible to ignore the fact that I was once a mother. That I...

I loved him.

The next pictures are from the coroner's office, all displaying his little body from various angles. Unable to watch this anymore, I shut everything off, getting up and ready to leave.

Still shaken, though, it takes me a moment to react when I hear movement. Withdrawing my gun, I point it at the door just as it swings open to reveal Yuyu.

She's wearing a pair of dark jeans and a shirt, and I note that she's shed

most of her pregnancy weight. Leaning against the door's frame, she watches me closely—and without a flicker of surprise.

I bring the back of my hand to my eyes as I wipe the tears away, still holding the gun in her direction.

"It was a set-up from the beginning," I state.

She nods, coming closer.

"Don't," I shake my head. "Just...don't," I breathe out harshly.

I'm too rattled by those memories to act properly, or even attempt to.

"I think it's time we had a small talk, Noelle," Yuyu says, and as she takes a step towards me, I brush my finger over the trigger, ready to pull it.

It's not that I want to shoot at her. In spite of the past, I don't wish her ill. I never did. Yet I can't stop myself. My entire body is on auto-pilot as my mind wants to leave me—retreat to a safe place.

I don't get to pull the trigger, though, as her hand shoots out, grabbing the barrel of the gun and disarming me in one smooth movement.

And I let her. I don't put any type of fight as she takes the gun away from me, disassembling it and throwing the pieces to the ground.

Too wrapped out in my own head, I don't put any type of struggle as she comes towards me, ready to receive whatever she has in store for me.

For too long I've tried to push that guilt down. To hide behind a smile and pretend everything was ok even as I knew it wasn't—even as I remembered the past and everything that had happened.

All this time, I've tried to pretend Mali had never existed. Somehow that's an even bigger offense. Because he did exist.

Once upon a time, he'd had my heart.

Until...

THIRTY

NOELLE

A SOB PERMEATES THE AIR, AND I BELATEDLY RECOGNIZE IT'S COMING FROM me. Just as I realize that Yuyu doesn't mean any harm. Not as she wraps her arms around me, holding me tight to her chest.

"It's ok," she whispers. "It's ok to cry, and it's ok to suffer, Noelle. It's ok to let yourself feel."

"He's dead," I break down. "He's dead and it's all my fault, Yuyu. If Raf finds out what I've done..." As that thought arises, I can no longer control myself as I burst into tears, letting everything come to the surface—everything I've tried to keep below the surface.

I don't know how much time passes. Her arms are still wrapped around me as she tries her best to soothe me.

"Why," I lift my head, watching her through damp lashes. "Why are you so nice to me?"

Though we'd been close throughout my childhood, everything had changed once I'd refused to marry Sergio and Cisco and Yuyu had vehemently insisted. From my closest allies, they turned into my sworn enemies. And yet...

"Because I can relate to what you're going through. And because Cisco and I are not blameless in this entire thing, no matter how much we'd like to think so," she adds gently, her hand on my hair as she caresses me lightly.

"Come," she takes my hand, leading me to the couch at the end of the room.

"Why this elaborate scheme to catch me here?" I ask once I get my sobs under control. My breathing is still harsh, my body trembling with residual emotion.

"Because your brother knew you would never listen otherwise."

"But why would he..."

"He's worried about you. Ever since he realized you got your memories back, he's been worried about you. But you don't make it easy, do you?" she gives me a sad smile. "You don't have to be strong all the time, Noelle. It's ok to be vulnerable."

I shake my head.

Those moments of vulnerability are what had killed me on the inside—what had triggered *everything*.

"It's ok to *feel*," she taps my hand lightly, using physical touch as some kind of tether to keep me with her—to keep me *vulnerable*.

Realizing the ploy, I break away, snatching my hand from her.

And as coldness seeps into my eyes, so does the realization of what Cisco had tried to do.

Knowing me as he does, he must have realized I'd need him for information on Ortega but would likely never ask for it. So he'd constructed the perfect bait. All so he could dangle in front of me the only thing that has the power to shake me—the past. He'd intuited that I'd be too curious—too *weak*—not to look at what was right in front of me, thus opening myself up to a world of hurt.

And it was all in an effort to get me to see the error of my ways, I'm sure. He wants me to recognize I need help—that I'm broken. Because Cisco, being Cisco, can't see beyond *his* perception of what is right.

He'd been the same in the past. But back then I'd looked up to him. I'd seen him as my role model and took his advice to heart. I'd worshiped the man until he'd taken from me what I most prized.

Now he wants to prove to me that the past can't stay buried, doesn't he? Well, he's going to have quite the surprise.

Despite his perfectly executed plan and the fact that those images *did* affect me, there was one error in his calculations.

The fact that he no longer knows the me *now*.

He knew me as the odd little girl who needed guidance to face the world. He knew me as the grief-stricken woman who wanted to die with her lover. And then he knew me as the person I wished I were all along, the one I'd constructed when I'd buried my most painful memories—the blameless, innocent one.

But he never knew the person I became *there*. The person capable of

anything to survive.

Cisco only wants this so he can assuage his guilt—well, not even his. My brother would never be capable of such advanced feelings as guilt.

A sardonic smile pulls at my lips as I realize it's not even for himself that he's doing this.

It's for her. For Yuyu.

He's trying to make amends for her.

"No," I tell her firmly, moving backward to put some distance between us. "The past is in the past. I know what you're trying to do and it's not going to work."

"Raf has a right to know..."

"So now you're doing this for him?" I raise a brow.

"You don't understand, Noelle," Yuyu takes a deep breath. "Your brother never wanted things to degenerate this badly. But Sergio had our hands tied."

"My brother? With his hands tied? As if I believe that," I scoff.

"He kidnapped our son," she suddenly confesses. "He kidnapped Val when he was just a few months old because Cisco hadn't married Camilla as he'd promised. And to get Val back..."

I blink, surprised at this new information.

"Sergio made sure the contract was signed in blood. But for a while we didn't think he would ask us to honor the contract. You were so young, and he got married to someone else..." Yuyu takes a deep breath. "When his last wife died, he demanded Cisco honor his deal. You were around fifteen at the time. You'd just had those issues at school and we knew we couldn't do that to you. So Cisco tried to get out of it. He ordered a hit on Sergio. Somehow it failed..." she shakes her head. "That only made matters worse. Sergio was determined to see this through, and he was ready to wage a bloody war if not. He was determined to have you—dead, or alive."

"I see," I nod, pursing my lips.

While the story does at least give my brother *some* motivation for what he did, it doesn't move me as Yuyu undoubtedly thought it would.

"So let me get this straight. My brother only wants what's best of me, he feels bad for the past and now wants to dictate the present and the future so he can absolve himself of his sins? It doesn't work like that Yuyu. And it will certainly not help if he ever dares to tell Rafaelo anything," I tell her, my tone absolutely bleak and not leaving any room for interpretation.

"Noelle..."

"The moment Raf knows, it's game over, Yuyu. For me, for him, for everyone."

"It doesn't have to be like that..."

"No," I interrupt. "That's exactly how it will be. And one thing both you and my brother should know about me is that I don't lose. I *never* intend to lose this game," I add as I stand up, straightening my back and heading for the door.

Yet before I leave, I need to make sure of something.

"Ortega's potential locations," I turn, making eye contact. "Are they real?"

She nods, her face drawn up in worry.

"They are," she confirms, rising to her feet and coming closer to me. "Noelle, I know you don't like me. But know that I do care for you. I see you as my child, my daughter and I love you."

I swallow painfully, her words touching me despite not wanting to be touched. Yet the mention of a mother figure has a way of doing that, especially when mine had been more an enemy than an ally. For all the grudges I've ever held against my brother for what he's done, I must admit that I've also seen Yuyu like that.

Since young I blamed her for my misfortunes, yet I've never been able to hate her.

My body acts before my mind can, and I find myself swiveling towards her and putting one foot in front of the other until I'm in front of her—*hugging* her.

"Thank you," I whisper, my tone echoing the ghost of a farewell. "I care for you, too, Yuyu. But I can't let you, nor Cisco, interfere like that in my life. I'm fine as I am now, and I will continue to be fine."

"You know you'll always have a home with us, don't you?"

A smile pulls at my lips at the double entendre. She's telling me I can return home should Raf ever find out—and shun me forever.

Alas, even *they* don't know half the things that occurred at the *hacienda*.

Raf wouldn't leave me.

He would *kill* me.



"NOTHING IS GOING TO HAPPEN, RAF. LOOK, I'M IN BED AND READY TO GO TO sleep. Which, by the way, it's what *you* should be doing, too, considering you're the one who banged your head," I tell him as I move the phone around to show him I'm already tucked in bed.

He's been blowing my phone incessantly for the last few hours, insisting to see me because he was missing me. As he wouldn't take no for an answer, I'd had to hurry back home one way or another.

Since there was no way I would be able to scale *up* the building, I'd had to quickly improvise and find a way home without alerting the guards to my presence. With the clock ticking—and a few too many missed calls from Raf—I'd bought a new set of clothes, using them to disguise my appearance to get inside the building. It had been slightly more difficult to get *inside* our apartment, but I'd managed to distract the security at the door long enough for me to sneak inside.

As soon as I'd gotten inside, I'd changed into a pair of pajamas and got into bed, ready to pretend *nothing* is wrong—even though *everything* is wrong.

And here I am, forcing a smile at the camera and trying to assure Raf that nothing will happen to me for one night. Yet inside, I'm anything but fine. The discussion with Yuyu is still fresh in my mind, her words echoing in my brain. Despite everything, I can't help but understand where she and Cisco were coming from when they put the safety of their child above everything.

I would have done the same.

And that brings me again to...Mali.

My little boy who never stood a chance because he had the misfortune to be born to a wretched mother.

The sight of his slight body in that cradle still haunts me—though I always do my best to not think about it.

But it's becoming harder and harder to do that, especially knowing I may never be able to have another child...

Am I really this cursed?

"Noelle?" Raf's voice shakes me from my thoughts. "What's wrong, pretty girl. I've been talking to you and you zoned out."

"I'm sleepy," I fake a yawn. "Why don't we talk in the morning? I'll come at the hospital when you get discharged."

"Fine... Just... Don't worry too much, ok? I'm perfectly fine."

"I know that," I smile, letting my eyes roam all over his face and searing

that image in my heart. "Nothing will touch you, Raf," I promise, the words vague to him, but a vow to me.

No one will ever touch him again.

If I have to become wickedness incarnate, I will do it. I will become what I once was—that dreaded being everyone feared.

All for him.

"You know it, pretty girl. I won't let anyone harm us. Sleep now," he murmurs, bringing the phone to his lips to send me a virtual kiss.

Despite my sour mood, I can't help but giggle as I return the kiss.

When I finally get Raf to hang up, I set my alarm for two hours from now and I close my eyes to sleep. I may have a plan to execute, but I've never been one for impulsive displays—at least not when it matters the most.

I need to operate at maximum capacity in order to do what I'd set out to, and that means factoring in at least a few hours of rest as well.

Despite the fact that my heart is clamoring with an urgency for immediate results, my head needs to remain in charge so I can remain as objective as possible. I will, after all, venture into an old chapter of my life that I would have preferred to keep closed forever.

For him, I'm willing to do anything. For *my* Raf.

My everything.

I will protect him to my dying breath.

Before. Now. In the future.

I exist because he does. And so I will continue to exist while he does.

As my alarm inundates my ears, I snap my eyes open, ready for the next step.

While on my little excursion, I'd bought a disposable phone and I'd managed to coax Yuyu into giving me some of her extra potent sleep concoction. I'd only had to act a little distraught and she'd taken pity on me immediately.

Getting out of bed, I head to the kitchen to prepare some coffee—gallons of *decaf* coffee.

Humming a soft melody to myself, I proceed to add all the concoction Yuyu had given me to the coffee before placing it in the few thermoses we have lying around.

When I'm done, I go to the door, opening it and coming face to face with three of the guards.

"You guys must be so tired," I start with fake concern. "Here, I made

coffee for everyone. Make sure the people working the entrance and lower floors get some too," I add with a smile.

"Thank you, ma'am, we'll make sure everyone gets some," one of them replies, taking the bottles from me.

A few more murmured thank yous and I close the door, my eyes on the clock as I wait for the *coffee* to kick in.

In the meantime, I start getting ready for the next phase of the plan.

Taking the disposable cellphone I'd bought, I dial a number from my past.

"Well, hello," I drawl, curious for his reaction.

"Who's this?" A man's voice immediately comes through, eliciting half a smile from me.

"Hello, Vasquez. Don't tell me you don't recognize my voice anymore."

"Noelle?" he asks in disbelief. "It's really you, isn't it?"

"Quite so. Sorry to call you after so long, but it hasn't been safe for me to do so," I lie, not wanting to go into too much detail about what happened.

"But how... I heard what happened at the *hacienda*. I thought you'd died... That everyone died."

"I was the only one to survive. How could you doubt me, you know nothing kills me," I chuckle.

"That is true. Damn, but it's good to hear from you. And I'm happy you're alive..."

"I need a favor," I cut to the chase. "Are you still on the East Coast?"

"Yes," he grunts. "We've relocated to New Jersey. What do you need? I still have a special set I commissioned for you. One I never got the chance to give you," he says in an affectionate tone—a *hopeful* one.

Alas, I can't dash his hope *now*. Not when I need his help.

"I need the regular, but I'm sure the set would suit me too. You know I trust your expertise."

"Good. Let me give you the address," he suggests before dictating it to me.

I nod along, jotting the details down.

"I'll be there in a few hours. Thank you, Alonso," I add on a softer tone.

"Any time, Noelle. Looking forward to seeing you again."

"I'll see you soon."

Hanging up, I purse my lips as I contemplate how to go about this.

Alonso Vázquez had been one of Sergio's business associates who specialized in custom weapons. He would supply Sergio with all types of

ceremonial weapons and other types of heavy artillery, making the *hacienda* as heavily armed as the military—if not more.

Over time, Alonso and I had become friends of a sort, and he'd always supply me with whatever I needed. Of course, from the beginning it had been obvious he wanted more. I'd made it clear from the start, however, that I wasn't interested in anything of that nature and that I wanted to keep things strictly platonic and professional.

He'd taken the rejection in stride, and I'd been surprised he hadn't turned vindictive or bitter over it—as others would have. Instead, he'd pretended nothing happened and had continued to be on good terms. As a result, I'd been truthful with him that I wasn't in the market for a lover, then or *ever*, because my heart and my body already belonged to someone—and would always do so. I'd refrained from telling him who it was, but he'd understood the situation.

But that was *then*, and if I've learned anything in my life is that you should never underestimate a man—especially when he wants to possess a woman. I may need him for a favor this time, but I'm not about to pay that kind of price—or any price. As such, I need to be thoroughly prepared.

Going to my office, I dig through some of my old stuff that I'd recovered from my mother's place. There is one item that will prove most useful in this type of situation. I may be overreacting, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

As I rummage through my old stuff, I find a small pendant, and opening it, I note it still houses some leftover magic dust—but which should be enough to knock an elephant out. Instead of placing it around my neck, I wrap it around my wrist a few times until it sits tightly around my skin—and ready to be used in case of an emergency.

That done, I start to get ready. I put on a pair of jeans and a comfortable shirt, after which I plait my hair in a braid. I top off the look with some make-up, kohling my eyes and adding a dash of red lipstick—resembling at least a little the Noelle from the past. Otherwise, Alonso might not even recognize me.

A smile plays at my lips at the irony.

Back at the *hacienda*, no one would catch me dead without my face full of make-up, my hair perfectly arranged in place or dressed in anything other than a glamorous outfit. Everything had been, after all, to craft the perfect image.

That was how people knew me—or knew *of* me.

One slip and the illusion would shatter.

A while later, I check the peep hole to see the guards out cold. Pleased that it had worked, I grab the car keys and the bag I'd filled with basic necessities and I slowly open the door, being as quiet as I can as I go down the stairs.

I encounter more guards on my way out, all passed out, or on the verge of doing so. Yuyu is famous for her concoction and it really knocks you out, making you lethargic and confused. So even though some are still moving, I walk past them without an issue. Same goes for the guards stationed in the lobby and around the exits.

Heading to the parking lot, I press a button to unlock the car before sliding in the driver's seat, adjusting everything to fit my height. I may not have a driver's license, but that doesn't mean I don't know how to drive, which also brings up another bad memory.

It was no coincidence I'd crashed that car months ago.

Pushing those thoughts out of my mind, I start the engine, pulling out of the parking lot and driving towards the exit.

Now I have someone to live for.

There are a few hours left until dawn, and then some more hours until I'm due at the hospital. If I'm fast, then I might finish everything by noon. The only downside of my plan is that I have to check every potential location, thus wasting a big chunk of time. On the other hand, as I'd researched each of them, I'd noted they were all concentrated in one part of the city.

But I'll worry about that after. First, I need to get my equipment.

My body hums with anticipation as I remember those pieces Alonso would create specifically for me. It's been too long since I've had the pleasure of wearing or using one.

I'm so lost in my mind that I barely see the car heading straight for me. Even as I try to avoid it, the driver pushes it forward, effectively cutting my way as the car stops right in front of me.

Muttering a curse, I take off my seat belt and grab my gun.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I demand as I get out of the car, ready for the worst.

Raf might be right to worry about Ortega coming after me too. But what he doesn't know is that I can more than handle myself.

"And there is my dear sister-in-law," a lazy drawl makes me freeze.

The car's door opens to reveal Michele in all his glory. His hand goes to

his glasses, removing them from his face so he can pin me with those eerie eyes of his.

"Michele," I grit my teeth. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Tracking you if that's not obvious," he chuckles, closing the door and coming towards me.

I hold my ground, tipping my chin up as I meet his stare dead on.

"And why is that? Want to kidnap me again?" I scoff. "Good luck with that."

"You see, dear sis, I don't *need* to kidnap you again," he shrugs.

He's one step away from me, and as he studies me, his lips tug into a hidden smile.

"I don't need to do anything just yet. Everything will align perfectly when the time is right. I just came here to give you a friendly warning. You know, now that your watch dog isn't around anymore," he adds cryptically.

"What are you talking about?" I frown.

"Nothing much," he chuckles. "Just wanted to remind you of our little chat a while back."

My brows knit together in confusion, yet a slow echo resounds in my mind.

At some point, the love will leave their eyes.

"What?"

"Tik-Tok, Noelle. Tik-Tok. The clock is ticking," he winks at me. "I know you remember," he continues, shocking me with his statement. "Just as I know *what* you remember."

I swallow hard, anxiety ripping through me. But I can't let it show.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I school my features.

"Really?" he drawls derisively. "Don't worry. I'll remind you soon enough."

My heart beats loudly in my chest.

What does he know?

Lucero is dead, but she could have told him everything before she died. Still, he wouldn't have *any* type of evidence. Everything disappeared when the *hacienda* burned to the ground. There's absolutely *no one* who could confirm his information. And Raf would believe me. I know he would.

"He'll never believe you," I struggle to keep my mask in place. "Or you've forgotten that I can do no wrong in his eyes?"

"Hmm," he hums, looking at me with amusement in his eyes. "I wonder

about that."

"Go ahead," I dare him. "Do your worst. He'll never believe a word that comes out of your mouth."

"That so? Should we place another bet? What will it be this time? Will you kill yourself if he doesn't believe you?"

"Sure, why not," I say confidently. "Raf would never doubt me."

"Not even when you're out, gallivanting into the night like thief?"

I shrug.

"I'm looking out for him," I smile.

"Riiiiight," he exclaims, rubbing his gloved palms together. "I heard about his latest mishap. Poor Raf," he says with fake concern. "Did he get a boo-boo?" he asks mockingly.

"He's fine," I reply dryly. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

He doesn't respond to my accusation, merely smiling lazily, regarding me as one would a petulant child. He thinks he's holding all the cards, doesn't he?

Well, I might have something on him, too.

"You know what I think?" I ask as I take a step forward.

He doesn't react, so I continue speaking, watching for every little micro-expression.

"You speak of your wonderful revenge plans; of everything you want to do to Raf and how you want him to suffer. But I have to yet see the evidence of that."

He narrows his eyes at me.

"You don't want him hurt, do you? You think I don't know what happened with Armand?" I raise a brow, daring him to lie to me about that.

The moment I'd gotten the full truth about Armand from Raf, years ago, I'd set to find out everything I could about the man. After all, I was, and still am, a woman on a mission. No stone will remain unturned as long as something happens to my beloved. Despite Armand's death, my inquiries had not been in vain—especially as I'd found out the identity of his killer.

"Careful, Noelle. Next you're going to suggest I take shifts at the local dog shelter."

"You might as well," I shrug. "Hasn't Lovely converted you yet?"

He smiles, a sinister smile that's telling me to tread very carefully.

"He has in fact," he smirks. "That also means you're not getting him back. His dog-mind already sees *me* as his master."

I blink, a little taken aback by that. Does he not realize how much that

one line reveals about him?

"Michele," I smile. "You don't fool me. You might have done so before, but not anymore. If you wanted to, you could have killed Raf months ago—the first time he stepped foot in New York City. But you never wanted that—you could never take it that far."

"I'm intrigued by this little scenario of yours. So tell me, then, why do you think that is?" he inquires casually.

"You still care about your brother. You can't bring yourself to harm him."

"He's not my brother," he states in his bored tone, but there's a flicker of something in his eyes.

"If you say so," I play his game.

"Let's say you're right and I don't want to hurt *my brother*," he drawls dangerously. "That would mean I don't want to see him get hurt by others either."

The implication is clear.

"Is that a threat?" I demand sharply.

"You may interpret it as such," he replies, his eyes crinkling with amusement.

He thinks he has me backed into a corner, doesn't he? Too bad I'm not the only one with something to lose. I see exactly what he's gunning for.

This isn't some sort of kindness he's doing to Raf. No, the truth would simply destroy my husband, and Michele knows that.

He may not be able to bring himself to physically harm him, but he is always up for what he does best—psychological warfare. And in this instance, telling Raf the truth about me would be killing him from the inside out.

Michele would never need to worry about Raf again. Nor about me.

"You know, brother-in-law," I start, mimicking him. "You said it yourself. We're not that much different. We love who we love because they embody everything we are not. They remind us of everything we *could* have been."

His entire demeanor suddenly changes as he hears the word love.

"Love?" he spits the word as if it's pure poison. "What bullshit are you spouting now, Noelle?"

"Venezia," I simply state.

His cheek twitches. I don't know if he realizes that the mere mention of her name makes him tense.

"And you think I love her?"

Just like that, his mask is back on. Sporting an amused smile, he leans against the car as he gives me the same lazy do-over as before—as if I'm miles beneath him.

"You mean you don't?"

Two can play the same game, Michele. And I'm not one to back down.

His face erupts into a wide grin.

"Of course not. I may have fucked her once or twice, but nothing that deep," he forces himself to keep the same amused expression, but he doesn't fool me.

"Really? That so?" I flutter my lashes. "I know it was you. The man on the motorcycle. You sure care too much about someone you claim you just fucked once or twice."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he grinds his teeth—the first sign I hit a sore spot.

"So you *really* don't love her?" I inquire again, my mouth curling up.

"I can't stand the bitch," he declares, his voice going up a notch just as he puts some space between us.

He's going on the defensive, and it's all right there for me to see.

"Right," I nod. "Then you'll have nothing against me playing with her. You know I have unfettered access to her, don't you?"

He doesn't answer. His nostrils flare as his eyes glint dangerously.

There it is, that flicker of emotion.

Venezia was wrong—oh, so very wrong. Michele doesn't *not* love her. And it's tearing him on the inside to feel like that.

"What are you trying to say, Noelle?" Each word is measured, his tone even and grave.

"Last we saw each other *you* were the expert in poisons. You tell me," I pause when I realize how rattled he's becoming. "A drop of arsenic. Maybe cyanide. Belladonna," I muse out loud.

But before I can add anything more, my back hits the car door—hard enough to knock the wind out of me. His gloved fingers curl around my neck, holding so tight I can't help but wheeze in an effort to find my breath.

"I may have underestimated you, Noelle. So you'd harm an innocent just to get what you want?"

"Why are you so surprised?" I meet his gaze with mine, showing him he doesn't scare me. "We're the same."

"We're not," his lip twitches. "I don't kill innocents. And neither will you. I find that you've laid one finger—just one—on any part of her body, or that you've tried to do her harm in any way shape or form, and you will rue the day you were born. Both you and my brother. I *will* kill you then. I will rip you apart, limb by limb, and I will give you the slowest death humanly possible. You have my vow on that, Noelle."

In no time he's off me and going back to his car. Bringing my hand to my neck to massage my skin, I watch his retreating figure and the way I know his presence can only lead to disaster.

"Why did you come here, Michele?" I ask one last time.

He stops, offering me only a glimpse of his profile.

"To get an answer."

"And?" I tilt my head, narrowing my eyes at him.

He smiles.

"I got everything I needed."

He doesn't linger, opening the door to his car and swerving out of the parking lot, leaving me behind blinking in confusion.

He never told me what the question was...

THIRTY-ONE

NOELLE

RATTLED BY THE ENCOUNTER WITH MICHELE, I GET BEHIND THE WHEEL, getting out of the parking lot. I drive away from the building before I risk getting caught by the guards.

What the hell is Michele's deal?

In that one short interaction he revealed more than he wanted—probably more than he realized. Though he is actively keeping himself from harming Raf, he unwittingly let me know his boiling point.

Venezia.

She matters.

Regardless of how much he would like to pretend he cares nothing for her, she matters. Enough that he would kill his brother when thousands of other *worse* reasons couldn't convince him otherwise. But that only means he gave me more ammunition to use against him should the opportunity arise.

If he dares pull anything with Raf, I will be waiting, and I *will* act.

I feel sorry for Zia.

It seems that all her life she's been passed from one person to another, never truly getting any type of affection until Michele.

Until he threw her away too.

Though I feel sorry for her, Raf is where I draw the line. Michele does something to him and all bets are off—including Zia.

But the issue at hand isn't whether Michele will harm Raf or not. It's whether he will tell him the truth or not. And on that note, just how much does he know?

Lucero had been aware of almost everything going on in my life.

At that point in time, she'd been the only person I could lean on. As such,

I'd unloaded all my secrets onto her—all the harm that I'd done.

She knew about Raf—she knew all about him. And that information... If she revealed it to Michele then it's game over.

"Fuck!" I curse, hitting the steering wheel just as I stop at the red light.

Adrenaline dances in my blood—the murderous, unleash a river of blood type.

I can't let Michele do that. I simply can't let it happen.

If Raf finds out... If he finds out what I've done.... He'll never look at me the same, much less forgive me.

Because he was right all along.

I *was* the monster at the hacienda. And I was the monster who hurt him...

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to calm my clamoring heart and the fact that I feel so fucking useless. Yet despite everything, I know one thing.

He can't know. Ever.

Digging into a compartment for my phone, I grab it and dial up a number just as I speed down the highway, crossing the state lines.

"Yes," Sisi's voice answers after the first ring.

"Sisi, hey. Sorry to call at this hour," I add some sweetness to my voice.

"I don't know if you've heard but Raf has a small accident," I give her a quick rundown of everything that had happened and the fact that Raf is currently in the hospital under medical observation.

"Good Lord, that's awful. Anything we can do? You know you can always count on us."

"No, don't worry. We have everything under control. Raf is already on it, and our security is top-notch. But since he's going to be in the hospital for a while, I was wondering if Zia would like to come hang out after school. I'm not used to be in the house by myself and it can get quite lonely."

"That's so sweet of you, Noelle. As a matter of fact, Zia's been asking about you and I just know she'd love to meet up. Why don't I talk to her and ask her driver to drop her off later around noon?"

"That's perfect. Does she have a phone? That way we can stay in touch easier."

"Of course! Do you have anything to write the number down on?"

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, I rummage with the other through the compartment for a marker, telling her to dictate it to me while I write it down my arm.

"She'll be so happy about this," Sisi gushes and I assure her there won't be

any security risk.

We talk a little more and I hang up, after which I write one more thing under Venezia's phone number.

Girls' date.

Using my phone, I snap a picture of it and I send it to the number Michele had used to taunt Raf in the past.

I'm not completely sure he will get the text, but if he won't, he'll have other ways to find out about our upcoming meeting.

After the display at the restaurant, I have no doubt he's closely monitoring Venezia, and this should pop on his radar right away.

Maybe now he'll understand I don't play either.

He can behave and *not* say a word to Raf, and I can behave and leave Venezia unharmed.

The way I see it, it's a win-win.

Smiling to myself, I check the GPS, noting I'm only one hour away from my destination. If I spend at most half an hour at Alonso's, then I'll have plenty of time to find Ortega's location and be ready for the afternoon when Raf will likely be discharged.

Suddenly, the day doesn't seem so bad, and my plans might go smoother than expected.

Soon, I arrive at the location Alonso had given me. From the outside, the place looks like a maximum security prison. A large, steel fence surrounds the property, security everywhere. Immediately, a legion of guards take my measure, asking me all sorts of questions before allowing me inside.

After they confirm my identity, the gates open and I'm led towards a parking lot in the back, a few guards waiting for me to get out so they can lead me to the main area. All the while, I'm mentally memorizing all the features should I need to make an emergency exit—including spying on the codes the guards are using to open the gates.

"Mr. Vasquez is waiting for you in the living room with what you've requested," one of the guys tells me as he drops me inside the house, pointing towards the gilded double doors at the end of the hallway.

"Thank you," I nod, heading there and pushing the doors open.

A high ceiling room painted with the loudest colors, the entire place looked like it had been decorated with the most garish and ostentatious items of furniture. In the middle of the room was a man of medium height, olive complexion, black hair and even blacker eyes.

"Noelle," Alonso exclaims when he sees me. "Hijole, que bien te ves," he opens his arms to give me a hug.

I smile pleasantly, accepting the embrace, though keeping myself still and doing my best to limit physical contact.

"It's been too long Alonso," I add softly, drawing back and taking a seat on a nearby couch. My eyes immediately scan the surroundings, zoning in on the few boxes laid around that likely house the items I'd requested. Regardless of the fact that I consider Alonso a *friend* of a sort, I can't dawdle, so I'll have to do this fast—take the items and get out of here so I can prepare for the next phase of the plan.

"Let me look at you," he says, his voice tinged with awe as he leans back, his eyes on me as he peruses me from head to toe. "Beautiful as always."

"Thank you," I smile, batting my lashes. "You don't look half bad yourself."

It takes one encounter with the past to thrust me back into my role, the lies rolling off my tongue with such ease, even I am baffled at myself.

"Don't mention it. Can't you see I've put on some weight," he chuckles, pointing to his midriff.

"Are you fishing for compliments, Alonso," I tease.

"From you? Always," he shakes his head, laughing.

"Am I to understand those are the items?" I point towards the boxes, changing the topic. The last thing I need is for Alonso to get the wrong message.

He might have been understanding in the past, but back then the circumstances had offered me a certain protection should he have become more insistent. Protection I don't have anymore. As such, I do need to tread carefully and keep my eyes open for all potential exits.

"Indeed, they are. But first let's have a chat. We haven't talked in so long, I can't let you leave until you tell me everything. How the hell did you survive?"

Although the encounter started pleasantly enough, I'm observant enough to detect a shift in the atmosphere, especially as I note his eyes glint with hidden interest.

Before I can reply, he barks a few orders, asking one of his men to bring us something to drink. I make to refuse when he brings hard liquor, but that would only delay things since he will no doubt try to coax me until I *will* have a glass with him.

"So, do tell," he invites, bringing his glass to his lips and watching me intently.

"Alonso," I tilt my head as I raise a brow. "Just how do you think I survived?" I give him a sweet smile. "I killed everyone."

"Including Sergio," he blinks, taken aback.

I shrug. Taking a sip of the whiskey, I look him dead in the eye.

"His time was going to come. Eventually," I add cryptically.

"I always knew you were a cold-blooded woman, but I never thought you'd have it in you to kill your own husband," he mentions, his tone appreciative.

I let my lips tip up in a subtle smile.

"Then you never truly knew me, did you?"

"I only knew what you allowed the world to see," he fires back, suddenly getting up and coming to my side, taking a seat next to me.

I don't let my smile waver, though this nearness makes my skin prickle with discomfort.

From the beginning, I've had *a few* principles on which I've built my life, and two have become central to my identity. First, no one who threatens me or mine lives to see another day—as evidenced by my current quest against Ortega. Second, there is only *one* man in the entire universe who may touch me, or invade my personal space—for anyone else, to do so would be inviting death. And I'm nothing if not generous in doling that out.

"Why don't you show me what you prepared for me?" I point at the boxes.

"Come on, Noelle, you can't tell me you're in that much of a hurry."

"As a matter of fact yes. I am. I have a murder appointment," I give him an innocent smile.

He regards me for a moment before throwing his head back and laughing.

"Now that. I truly missed your skewed sense of humor."

"It so happens it isn't a joke," I state seriously. "I have to pay a visit to a certain someone, and those," I nod to the items, "would make it much easier for me."

"Who is it?" He inquires, suddenly interested.

He's also an inch closer to me, having moved as he was laughing.

Does he really think I don't notice?

Still, for old times' sake, I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Momentarily.

"His name is Ortega. Maybe you've heard of him?" I probe.

"Ortega..." he muses.

"He used to be affiliated with Jimenez."

"Oh, that Ortega. I know him. Nasty fellow," he grimaces. "Never liked him."

Hmm, interesting.

"And you wouldn't happen to know his location, would you?"

"How are you going to pay him a visit if you don't know his location?" he asks with a twinkle in his eyes.

He brings his hand up, brushing it over mine.

I fight the urge to pull it back. Instead, I do it slowly so not to startle him and put him on the offensive.

"I have a few options," I shrug.

"Then maybe I can help you. I have some contacts who would know his location for sure. I could get in touch with them for you. For a price, of course."

"Really?" I blink, somehow not surprised. "Are the weapons included in the price, too?"

"Noelle," his lips spread in a wide smile. "I'm a business man. You know the trade. Tit for tat."

"Of course," I murmur, giving him the hint of a smile. "And what price did you have in mind?"

His eyes rove all over my body, the answer clear. Still, I don't let my disgust show. I continue to put on a flirty front.

"You know I've wanted you for a long time," he starts, his voice that of a man starved and taunted for far too long with a scrumptious meal. His eyes are on my chest, slowly lifting them up to meet my gaze "Tit for tat?" He cracks a smile, no doubt thinking he's so suave.

"Tit for tat," I agree with a smile. "*After* you make your inquiries. I want a sure thing."

"Of course," he gets up, pulling his phone and dialing his contact. Taking a few steps to put some distance between us, he starts speaking with whomever has the information. His back is to me, and with nimble fingers, I unscrew the pendant, moving it over his glass and dumping all the magic powder into his drink. I quickly swirl it with my finger before wiping the residue on my jeans.

When he turns, I'm all smiles as I listen to him end his call.

"You're lucky. My man told me he's in an apartment complex in Queens."
If that turns out to be true, won't I be really, really lucky?

"Thank you, Alonso. Why don't we have a toast. For tit or tat," I add suggestively.

"*Carajos*, Noelle, you have no idea how long I've been waiting to hear that," he grunts, throwing his phone on the couch and grabbing his glass.

Before I can take one sip, he downs the entire glass. I could say I am surprised at his urgency, but considering his obsession with me, it seems rather appropriate. Especially as he slams the glass on the table, his hands going to his tie, pulling on it and throwing it to the ground.

Next, his hands move to his shirt.

"Fuck, you can't know how many times I've imagined this," he speaks as he comes closer.

So close, in fact, that I can see the sweat building on his forehead.

Gross.

"Really, Alonso?" I drawl, moving back ever so slightly. "I'm surprised you never made a move on me all those years ago. I would think that for a man like yourself the word no shouldn't have been an impediment."

"Of course it wouldn't have been," he says just as he tears at the buttons of his shirt, seemingly frustrated when he can't undo them properly. "But Sergio would have had my balls if I touched you in any way," he continues, confirming what I should have already know.

After all, don't men want just one thing? To possess and own, but never for the right reasons.

I suddenly stand up, coming towards him as I swallow my disgust.

My hands on the collar of his shirt, I stop his clumsy movements. He's at least a head taller than me, but going by his immediate reaction and the way he swallows hard, I might be more intimidating even with my short stature.

A smile plays at my lips as I regard him overtly.

"Show me the weapons," I whisper before I back away.

So desperate he is to cop a feel that he nearly stumbles in his attempt to get closer. Alas, I don't let him put one finger on me as I move towards the boxes.

"That's the one with your special present," he stammers.

I watch him from the corner of my eye, noting the way he's wiping at the sweat covering his brow, his hand going to his neck as he scratches at his skin. He's having trouble breathing, no doubt.

My magic powder acts fast. It shouldn't be too long now. Minutes? Less? I pretend to be busy as I open the box, seeing two pairs of shoes wrapped in a black cloth.

"And not just one," I raise a brow, surprised.

"It's your initial order and I added another pair with an upgrade," he replies, righting himself as he comes closer.

"What about that box?"

"Guns and knives. A basic pack. You know the type," he adds flippantly, growing increasingly frustrated both at his own reaction and the fact that I'm stalling.

"Alonso," I swivel to face him. "Are you ok? You don't look too well."

"It's this damn itch. Fuck," he bursts out just as he brings his nails down his throat, scraping down the skin, blood immediately reaching the surface. "What the..."

He wipes once more at his forehead, no doubt noting that he's no longer sweating just like a normal person.

"What..." he swallows hard, and his gaze finally connects with mine. "You..."

"Someone should have taught you, Alonso, that you should never try to buy a woman's favors," I take a step forward, my voice back to normal. My cheeks hurt from smiling too much and trying to fake being nice or interested. He notes the obvious change, his eyes going wide in shock.

"Not with money, and not with favors. Not with *anything*," I continue. Whatever he sees in my eyes must frighten him because he backs away just as I advance, heading for the couch. His hand is already stretched out to reach for his phone, but I won't let him do that.

My hand shoots out, and with one light push, he falls to the ground.

The poison is spreading through his system as we speak, making him weak and growing weaker.

"You see, I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt. For old times' sake. But you couldn't help yourself, could you? What would you have done had I said no?"

He doesn't answer, his hand clutching at his throat as it's probably closing up as we speak.

"You wouldn't have taken no for an answer, isn't that right?" I smile, a sinister smile that he'll have no choice but take to his grave.

He shakes his head, but as he opens his mouth to reply, he can only

release a wheeze that slowly dies down just as he asphyxiates and dies.

His head drops to the ground, his eyes still open and full of terror.

Sneaking a look at my watch I note that I'm on schedule, especially since I know with which location to start first. It could end up a bust, but I'd already been prepared to check the additional ones as well and had planned accordingly.

What I hadn't planned for—or at least I hadn't *hoped* for—is dealing with a dead body when I should have just taken the items and gone on my way.

Instead, now I need to improvise a little.

This place is a freaking fortress, so it's unlikely they will let me leave unscathed once they realize I killed their boss.

Quickly thinking of something, I take out his phone, unlocking it with his fingerprint before I go on the web, clicking on a loud amateur porn video. Placing the phone somewhere close to the door, I make sure it's on maximum volume and that it sounds natural enough. Now, this should hold the guards off for a while since I doubt they would like to be reprimanded for disturbing their boss while he's getting laid.

With that done, I return to the couch, where I take Alonso's shirt off as well as his shoes, throwing them around the floor. The harder part is when I have to pull him up on the couch. The man hadn't been kidding when he said he'd gained weight.

Alas, a few minutes later and I manage to move the body. I even arrange him to look like he's sleeping, draping a coverlet around him.

My cover done, I'm finally able to turn my attention to the bounty. My mouth is already salivating at the thought of touching the goodies.

The shoes are first. After all, from the beginning they've been my specialty.

A pair of high heels, they have been custom-built with a retractable blade for a heel, the weapon perfectly seamless and fashionable.

One might even say classy. After all, doesn't every woman deserve a pair of *killer* heels?

Placing the first pair aside, I examine the next one—the upgraded version.

At first glance it looks about the same.

I frown, taking the heel apart and examining the little device.

Luckily I point the tip away from my face because when I touch a spot on the inside of the weapon's body, a small but focused beam erupts from the tip. It hits the curtain, blasting through it just as the smell of burnt material

permeates the air.

"I'll be damned," I mutter to myself, taking my finger off that little spot and examining it closer.

It's a laser. A freaking laser.

There is a mark on the inside of it that indicates it's the trigger—but it's purely touch based.

I spend a few more minutes studying it, unable to believe Alonso had managed to add a freaking laser to the shoes.

Knowing that time is of essence, I decide to study them further later. I put on one pair, packing up the other before I sneak a peek at the box with weapons.

Starter pack, huh?

Five 9mm guns, five military knives, two bulletproof vests, two silencers to go with the pistols and five grenades.

Not bad.

The porno continues to make quite the noise in the background while I pack everything up. Yet before I'm ready to brave the outside, I release my hair from its braid, making it look a little messy just as I rub some of the red lipstick from my lips on my cheeks to give them more flushed appearance.

Done, I simply stop the phone and wait five minutes before I take the box and leave, closing the door behind me.

As expected, there are at least five security guards that greet me as I head to my car, all looking at me suspiciously.

By my calculations, it shouldn't take long before they figure out Alonso did not die of pleasure, but is quite literally dead.

Quickly getting in my car, I push the box on to the passenger seat before I put the car in reverse, driving towards the gate.

One eye ahead and one eye on the mirror, I spot three guards running after me, a few more following behind as they all remove their weapons and start shooting.

Shiiiiit!

Driving at full speed towards the gate, I only stop for a moment when I reach the security stop. The man seems to have been made aware of me, but he doesn't get to do anything before I aim the laser at him, making quite the hole in his skull.

"Nice," I mumble in awe, while also resuming my focus on my escape.

Reaching the end of the gate, I plug in the code I memorized when I first

got here, watching the gate open just as more security hurries after me.

I press hard on the gas pedal, practically flying on to the street and speeding away until I reach the highway—until every last one of Alonso's men is just a dot on the horizon.

THIRTY-TWO

NOELLE

IT'S WELL AFTER DAWN THAT I ENTER THE CITY AGAIN. SNEAKING A GLANCE at my phone, I note that the battery is dead.

Damn it!

Raf will no doubt text me when he wakes up, and he might worry if I don't answer right away. At the same time, it's still very early and he will likely expect me to be sleeping. After all, we're only supposed to meet later in the afternoon when he gets officially discharged.

My thoughts are in disarray as I consider my next steps. If I end up texting Raf, he might want to video call, and that is out of the question at the moment. No matter how much I hate not answering to him, it's better if he believes I'm sleeping in late.

My mind made up, I go to the Queens address on file, stopping a few blocks away from the apartment complex and parking my car. I need to scout the location first and ascertain that Alonso was truthful when he gave me the information.

Walking around the complex, I note that there *are* a few guards stationed around. And a closer look lets me know they are all carrying weapons.

Hmm...

Making myself slightly *less* presentable, I head to the two guys guarding the entrance.

"Excuse me, could you help me? I think I'm lost," I add in a timid voice, my chin pointing downwards as I peer at them through my lashes.

As intended, the effect is immediate. One of them is flustered while the other a bit more daring as he looks me up and down in a lascivious way, his eyes sparkling with a bad, bad idea.

But I can imagine what they see. A tiny, helpless woman who's lost her way—one who's wearing high heels at dawn when that could only mean one thing.

"Stay here, I'll help the lady," the second guy states, giving the other a look that speaks more than a thousand words.

He places his hand on my arm and he more or less drags me towards the darkened alleyway right around the corner, pinning me to the wall next to the trashcan.

I roll my eyes at the clichéd situation.

"You're lost or you..."

He doesn't get to finish his sentence as I bring my knee to his crotch—hard enough to have him doubling over in pain. Planting my heel on his chest, I lean down and cover his mouth so he won't scream in pain. At the same time, I sneak my hand down his back, removing his gun before pointing it back at him.

"You..."

"I think it's better if you *don't* finish the sentence," I tell him with a fake smile. "If you want to get out of here alive," I trail off, noting his smile as he looks at the gun, no doubt thinking the sound would attract everyone's attention.

Shaking my head at him, I remove a silencer from the back of my pants, rolling it around the barrel of the gun just as he visibly blanches.

"I just need some information."

"Wh-what?" He blinks.

"Ortega. I know he's inside," I bluff. "I need his schedule."

"How would I know his schedule?" he raises his voice just as I point the gun to his face.

"I'm only taking valid answers. Anything else and there will be a hole in your brain in... Three. Two..."

He must realize I'm serious because he starts stammering.

"He... He always has some girls over today. Paid girls."

"Do tell more."

He blinks, his body shaking.

"Blondes," he whispers. "He likes to play with blondes on Wednesdays."

"Is that so?" I muse, narrowing my eyes at him. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"I'm not, I swear. The agency he uses sends a few girls every day. Each

day a different type. Today it's blondes," he continues, telling me that Ortega rents the girls for an entire day.

Odd, but to each their own. If he displayed the same type of effort and inclination to getting his business off the ground, maybe he wouldn't need Michele's charity for it.

Luckily for me, it seems the girls always start their day early.

"Thank you for your cooperation," I add sweetly.

But before I release him, I do something a little more controversial. After all, I'm not about to let him go so he could ruin my plans.

Still holding one foot on his chest, I tuck the gun in my pants, moment in which big guys over here tries to move. I give him a quick kick, keeping him down as I snap the heel from my other shoe, bringing the laser to his face.

He frowns, clearly not realizing what I'm holding in my hand, or what I'm trying to do.

"Say aaaaah," I intone as I pry his mouth open, tugging on his tongue at the same time as I touch the little button of the laser, pointing it at the base of his tongue.

His cries are muffled as I cut a clean line through his tongue. The laser is so efficient, the bleeding is kept to a minimum, too.

Smiling down at him, I fling the piece of muscle away.

"See, that wasn't so hard."

He's pale, and though he's on his knees on the ground, he sways from side to side a few times before he drops, his eyes rolling to the back of his head.

I guess that despite the lack of blood, the pain is enough to make someone pass out.

Pleased with myself, I'm about to turn and head to my car so I can go in search of a damn blonde wig—though at this hour I have no clue where I could find one.

Unfortunately, just as I'm about to leave, the flustered guy from before makes an appearance.

"Shift's over, loser, save me some," he calls out, now seemingly *not* as flustered as before.

Aware I only have a small window of time, I take out my gun, aiming it at him before he can do the same with his.

He immediately falls to the ground, blood leaking from his forehead.

Yet now I find myself in a conundrum. Maybe cutting the tongue was a bit excessive? Ok, fine, I admit I may have been a bit too curious to see if the

laser can get that done, and *maybe* I got ahead of myself. But now with a second dead body...

I spend about five seconds debating my options.

Releasing a sigh, I move to the second man, gripping his underarms and dragging him next to the other man. It's not the easiest thing to do, but I'm proud to say I do it without attracting even more attention. The *last* thing I'd need right now would be a third body.

Placing both guys one next to the other, I put a bullet through the first man's skull, ensuring he is equally dead as his companion before I use the trash to hide their bodies—well, as best as I can, considering the circumstances.

Knowing time is of essence, I head back to my car, driving off in search of a blonde wig.

I can't say that expedition is entirely successful, since I'm unable to find any open store. What I do find, however, is a hair product store that also sells wigs. It might not be nice of me, but I manage to get a wig though the store isn't exactly open yet. I'm not all bad, though, and I leave a couple hundred dollar bills as my apology.

With that out of the way, I take a few minutes to get ready, pinning the wig in place and ensuring my outfit is acceptable considering the role I'm supposed to embody, putting on a short skirt and a cropped top. All topped off with the killer heels, since it's unlikely I'll be able to sneak any weapons inside otherwise. Then it's just a matter of waiting and hoping I haven't been lied to.

The odds seem to be in my favor, though, when not even half an hour later a van pulls up by the side of the road. Three blonde girls and a man jump out of it, and it seems he's schooling them on something.

Making my way towards them, I invent an excuse that the patron wanted four girls suddenly, and I was sent from the agency last minute.

The man—the manager, I assume—looks me up and down, pursing his lip.

"I wasn't told," he simply states.

"Sorry, sir," I say in a meek voice. "I do as I'm told."

He huffs, pulling out his cellphone and dialing a number.

Panic creeps inside of me at the thought that my cover will be blown, but it doesn't take long before he gives me a nod.

"You're good to go," he says. "Boss was amazed you got here so fast," he

mentions, and I blink, taken aback by my exceedingly good fortune.

Getting in line with the other girls, we're given the rules again and I do my best not to grimace when I hear what we're supposed to do.

Apparently, nothing is out of bounds for Ortega. And Wednesdays are not only reserved for blondes but also for anal.

I keep a straight face though I can't help the distaste that assails me. I guess the quicker I get this done, the better.

In the same formation, we're taken to the main entrance where we are searched for hidden weapons. When that is done, we're led to the elevator, and the manager clicks on the top floor. Everything is routine for him, and it becomes clear he is the man dealing with Ortega at all times.

The elevator pings when it reaches the top floor, the doors opening to reveal a luxurious playroom. All around, there are devices, toys and all types of items of a sexual nature.

Well, now it makes more sense why Ortega has such particular tastes. The man's entire space is *all* about sex.

Following the man, we go deeper into the room until we reach what I assume are the sleeping quarters.

And right there, on the king sized bed, is Ortega. I'd assume he's in his forties, maybe fifties. Dressed only in a pair of silky bottoms, he has a good physique, indicating that he takes care of his body.

All this sex stuff should burn the calories, after all.

Other than that, the man is rather nondescript aside from his perpetual scowl. Especially as he lays his eyes on us.

"Here you have today's crop," the manager says, using the word crop as if these women are not even human.

"You can leave now," Ortega waves the manager away, who quickly complies.

We're left in a line in front of him, and as he swings his legs off the bed to come towards us, his eyes narrow at me.

Does he recognize me? I should hope not. He certainly knows who Noelle DeVille is, especially since I'm married to Raf. But I did my makeup in a different way than I usually do, leaning on the heavy side and masking all my dead giveaways—like my freckles. That and the blonde wig shouldn't make it too easy for him to recognize me.

He inspects each of us from head to toe and is about to speak when his phone rings.

"Don't you know I'm busy," he barks out before his tone suddenly evens out. "Marchesi, sorry I didn't recognize the number."

My ears prick at the name, our speculations from before ringing in my mind.

Damiano Marchesi? Could it be really him that's in cahoots with Ortega now?

"I told you I'll get it done. I have another squad heading out today to get the job done. You just need to meet your part of the deal."

Another squad? He better not mean he's sending more people after Raf. And right as that thought arises, I simply see red.

While he's busy chatting away with Marchesi, I turn to the girls.

"If you don't want to die today, go to the bathroom and lock yourselves inside."

Their eyes widen, but they don't seem to move.

"I mean it girls. Don't make me kill you because I will. Now shoo," I wave them in the direction of the bathroom.

I don't know if they understood the threat, but at least they take their leave, locking themselves in there just as I head back to the elevator and play a little with the electric panel, ensuring no one will be able to use the elevator to come to this floor. That done, I spot the emergency exit and I barricade that to the best of my ability too.

Ortega is still busy on the phone, his voice growing increasingly louder as he seems to have a disagreement with Marchesi.

As I head back to the bedroom, I take a few seconds to assess the windows, noting a ledge extending from the building—which could very well serve as my escape route.

"No, I need to get this done, do you hear me? You promised, Marchesi," Ortega grits out. "I won't repeat myself. I will do my side of the deal and you do yours. No excuses," he says right before hanging up and throwing the phone on his bed.

Turning, his eyes go wide as he spots me all alone.

I let my lips curl into a smile.

"Where the hell are the others?"

"Gone," I shrug as I take a step forward. "I'm the only one you'll be dealing with today."

His nostrils flare, and taking a step towards me, I can recognize the signs of aggression.

"Who the hell allowed them to leave?"

"You were a bit too busy on your phone to see what was happening," I say, the same fake smile in place.

"Stupid bitches," he spits right as his hand shoots out, his fingers wrapped in my hair. "You're going to pay for them, too, aren't you?" he sneers in a cruel tone.

I flutter my lashes at him, which seems to throw him off—especially as I don't seem scared.

He tightens his hold, his expression growing more aggressive.

"On your knees, whore," he orders, his other hand going to his pants.

Before he can do anything, though, I wrench my head forward, displacing the wig and causing it to slip off my head.

The hair remains in his hold while I duck.

"What the fuck..."

In one fluid movement, I'm on the ground, my hand on my heel as I take out the tiny device, my hand resting over the touch-sensitive button.

Ortega, noticing the ruse, is quick to reach for his gun. But just as he does that, I aim the laser, cutting straight through the barrel of his pistol.

His expression is priceless as he stares at me, then at his pistol, then back at me.

"Who the hell are you?" He blinks, and the first signs of fear appear on his face.

"You don't recognize me?" I smile sweetly as I take off the mesh holding my hair. Releasing it, I also bring the back of my hands to my face, wiping some of the make-up. "Tell me you're not that dumb."

"You're... You're..." he frowns, squinting at me as if I'm familiar but he can't still quite place me.

"Good Lord," I shake my head. "You're trying to kill my husband and you don't know who I am?" I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Yet his stupidity aside, I have a vague impression that Ortega is just the brawn in this whole debacle—a piece of brainless muscle coaxed into this scheme. Not surprising, considering all his attempts on Raf's life have been more or less uncoordinated and straight up idiotic.

But that also means my mission won't end with him.

If he's just a tool to getting to Raf, most likely one to distract us from what's really happening, then someone else is pulling the strings.

Someone like... Marchesi.

"You're..." he struggles again, and I just shake my head and roll my eyes. Really... We've all been worrying about *him*? For God's sake.

That also opens another line of thought. If Ortega has been so elusive that Carlos could not find him, then he must *definitely* have backing.

"You don't have to try that hard," I dismiss him. "Why don't you take a seat and we'll have a nice chat?" I offer from the magnanimity of my heart considering I'm the one wielding the deadly—but fun—laser.

He eyes it suspiciously before he does as told, taking a seat on the bed.

"Since *maybe* you have an idea who I am now, you can tell me what the deal is with wanting Rafaelo dead. And if I were you I'd spare no details," I smile as I cross my arms over my chest, still pointing the laser towards him. "Oh, and by the way, this thing is touch sensitive so my finger could slip at any moment. I'd be careful if I were you."

He stares me down for a second before he sighs.

"I don't know what you want me to say," he shrugs. "I'm just doing my end of a contract."

"And what contract is that?"

"Michele Guerra promised an alliance if I made Fenix disappear," he has the gall to lie to my face.

I narrow my eyes at him. I refrain to add that he's been exclusively after Rafaelo and hasn't even tried to go after the rest of Fenix. Feature in the fact that Michele himself doesn't seem to want his brother dead and I think I have a little liar on my hands.

"Then what's the deal with Marchesi? Where is he figuring out in all of this?"

It's clear that he wants a seat at the table, but there has to be more. Otherwise he wouldn't burst in the city like this, guns blazing and ready to wage war—especially considering he is alone and we have the strength of numbers.

Ortega mumbles something under his breath and it's clear he's stalling. And as I note his fingers searching under the pillow, I realize what he's trying to do.

Shaking my head, I focus the laser beam right at his wrist, lightly touching the button and separating it from his arm.

His reaction is delayed as he raises his arm to see it handless, his mouth opening and closing before he erupts in shrilly screams—even worse than a school girl.

There's minimal bleeding, the laser cauterizing while cutting, which is just as well since a dead man can't answer questions.

Well, neither a hysterical one.

He gets up, flinging his arm up and down as tears stream down his face, his voice caught in his throat as he can't even scream his pain.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, grow some balls," I roll my eyes as I lift my leg, kicking him in the chest and pushing him down. "Listen. I'm on a time constraint here," I tell him, pointing at my wrist watch—which, incidentally, reminds him of his wrist-less hand and prompts another round of cries.

Really? This is the guy who's been trying to kill my Raf? This is the guy everyone was worried about?

I don't know if I'm happy because he's clearly incompetent, or sad because...well, we've been worrying for absolutely no reason.

"Answer my questions and I will refrain from cutting more parts of your body. Don't answer and..." I pause for dramatic effect just as I point the beam towards his crotch.

"I'll answer. I'll answer," he quickly intones, seemingly getting his bearings together.

"Well?" I tap my foot against the floor.

"Damiano married Leticia's daughter and..."

"Leticia's daughter?" I frown.

"Leticia Guerra," he grits his teeth, clutching at what's left of his wrist. "Benedicto's youngest sister. And if Damiano has a son by her, he would have a claim to the Guerra name."

"So he wants Raf out of the way so he can swoop in the Guerra title?"

Ortega nods, his features tense with pain.

"And if he does, he'll let you set your business here, is that so?"

Pursing his lips, he nods again.

Damn, this is a complication we didn't need. I'm not very familiar with Rafaelo's extended family, but from what I know, his aunt lives somewhere in Europe, as far away from the mob business as possible. If that's so, then how could her daughter have gotten involved with Damiano. Unless it was all on purpose and... This is just a tiny snapshot of his motivation.

"What about those weapons? I find it hard to believe *you* would have supplied them."

"Marchesi," he simply states.

"I see."

So it all comes down to Marchesi. And going by the display at the restaurant, he's unlikely to stop any time soon.

And *that* makes him next on my list.

My darling Blue. He never wanted war. Yet war always comes looking for him.

A commotion starts downstairs, the sound travelling up and startling me from my thoughts. My gaze meets Ortega's and I don't know whether it was him that called reinforcements or someone else.

Alas, I can't dwell on that now. I got my answers. I guess it's time to put an end to this.

Crouching in front of him, I note with pleasure the way fear enters his eyes.

"What the hell are you?" he whispers, his features terror stricken.

"The last thing you'll ever see," I smile right as I bring the laser to his throat, cutting a straight line.

Blood slowly pours out before it bursts out like a geyser, hitting me in the face and trickling down my body.

But I don't stop. I continue to use the laser until his entire head is detached from his body. And with a slight poke, it falls to the ground, rolling away and making me chuckle.

The noise outside becomes louder, and since I wasn't able to put on a bulletproof vest, I don't want to stick around for the bullet exchange.

Aiming the laser at the window, I cut a big chunk of it—enough so I can squeeze through.

Right at that moment, the door I'd barricaded starts giving way, someone pushing hard against it.

Climbing up the ledge to get through the hole I'd created, I swing one leg inside, ready to push myself through when the noise intensifies, the door finally giving way.

Taking note of my surroundings and how I can maximize my chances of *not* getting hit, I make to move to the right.

Yet as the door bursts open and people stream inside the room, nothing happens.

No gunshots.

No bullets flying.

Just one voice calling my name.

"Noelle!"

I freeze. Actually, to say I freeze is an understatement. I turn to stone on the spot, hoping the earth would open up and swallow me *now*.

"Noelle!" He shouts again, and I slowly turn my head.

In time for our eyes to connect.

"Raf?" I whisper, the question inane as reality comes crashing down.

In two steps he's by the window, his big hands splayed against my ribcage as he pulls me back. I don't protest. I don't do anything. I simply let him maneuver me around.

Carlos is in the back, a grim expression on his face as he takes in Ortega's body.

"Carlos, can you wait outside?" Raf's voice resounds, harsh and unyielding.

Before he can reply, though, the bathroom door bursts open and the girls run out screaming and pleading not to be killed.

A look passes between the two men and Carlos nods at Raf, ushering the girls outside.

I still don't dare move. Not as my entire mind blanks out on me until there's only one thing that echoes in my head.

It's not real.

It can't be real.

Raf isn't here.

He didn't see me.

He didn't...

"Noelle," he says my name, his tone cold. He places me on the ground, taking a step back from me and taking his body heat with him.

Bereft. I feel so, so bereft.

I raise my eyes to look at him, to search his gaze. Yet I can't see anything.

I've always been able to read him—*always*. Yet now... I don't know what he's thinking, or feeling.

"Raf... I..."

"What are you doing here, Noelle?" he asks in a low voice. "Why are you dressed like that? Why..."

"Nothing happened," I quip. "Nothing happened. You know I'd never cheat on you," I give him a tremulous smile.

"But you'd lie. Isn't that right?"

"I didn't..." I stammer.

"Stop," he shakes his head. "Just...stop."

Closing his eyes, he brings his hand to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"How long?"

"What do you mean?" I ask softly.

"How long have you remembered?"

"A while," I whisper, averting my eyes.

"And you never thought to tell me? Not even when I was talking to you about the past?" He shakes his head, disgust painting his features.

"Raf, I..."

"Why?" he asks sharply. "Why did you hide it? Because of this?" He points to Ortega's dead body.

I shake my head, barely fighting the urge to run away—to hide away.

"Or was it because of something else? Something you didn't want me to find out..." he trails off.

I whip my head up, blinking as I take him in—searching for any clue of what he might mean.

"No, I swear, I just wanted to keep you safe," I say, taking a step forward as I grab his hands, needing the comfort of his touch. "He was a threat to your life and I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't..."

"Keep me safe," he repeats dryly. "Hear that," he laughs.

"Raf, I did it all for you," I whisper, squeezing his hands before bringing them to my face, urging him to touch me and put me out of my misery. "Everything I've ever done has been for you," I continue, imbuing my words with all the emotion I can muster so he can see—so he can realize that he's been my one driving force for the better part of a decade. "I've loved you for so long..."

"Really?" he cuts me off, his eyes a steely blue that cuts me in half. "Did you rape me for me, too?" he suddenly asks and I blanch.

Letting go of his hands, I take a step back.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. You know exactly what I'm talking about," he spits out. His hand shoots out to grab my arm and he pulls me closer—close enough the I can see the deep scorn marring his features.

"My God, how can you be such a hypocrite? I told you about that flashback. I told you I thought a woman had raped me. How the fuck could you look at me straight in the eye and tell me it was all a nightmare, that it wasn't real? How could you look at me and pretend everything was ok when all along it was *you*," he grits out, his voice breaking just as he's breaking my

heart.

"It wasn't like that. Let me explain, please," I beg.

"Explain what? Rape?"

"I know it may seem like that but..."

"But what?" He raises his brows. "You didn't mount me when I was unconscious? You didn't fuck yourself on me when I was so full of drugs I could barely move? When I was a prisoner in my fucking body?"

"Yes, but..." I stumble over my words, panic suffusing my entire being.

This can't be real.

My heart is pounding, my breathing out of control as a dense fog takes over my mind.

This can't be real.

His fingers dig in my arm as he shakes me.

"Yes, but what Noelle?" he snarls at me, holding me so close I can barely think.

All I can see is his rabid expression and the way disappointment ravages his features, his eyes dead as he sets them on me.

Dead.

There's nothing there. No love, no gentleness. Nothing.

And it's just what I deserve. Yet it should have never happened like this.

But because it did happen, *now*, I know there is only one culprit at play. Only one person who could have told him the truth.

Michele.

"How many times? How many times did you take advantage of me when I was at my lowest?" he continues with his barrage of question, his hold bruising.

"It wasn't like that," I shake my head. "Please let me explain, Raf. Hear me out, please," I plead with him, but he's not listening—he's beyond listening.

"It wasn't enough that you raped me, though, was it? You used me for something else. For something..." he chokes on the words, his façade breaking to show me all the hurt within.

Hurt *I* caused.

God, but I feel his pain as my own and it's fucking suffocating me.

Tears gather at the corners of my eyes as I bring a hand up, touching his cheek.

"Please, Raf. Let's calm down and I'll tell you everything, ok?" I suggest

softly.

There's a pause as he looks me in the eye—really looks me in the eye.
But what I see there ends me—it fucking obliterates me.

"More lies, Noelle? Is that what you're going to tell me?" He slaps my hand aside.

"No. I promise I'll give you the truth and only the truth. Just please..."

"*Mali*," he simply states, that one word making me reel.

I'm physically thrust backwards, the enormity of that one word messing with my mind, my soul—everything that I am.

"You had my child. *My* child," he shouts, causing me to shrink back.

I've never seen him so angry, never heard him raise his voice at me before. Never...

"How the hell could you live with me, sleep with me, eat at the same fucking table as me and hide something that monumental from me? What kind of monster are you?"

Tears are coursing down my cheeks, unbidden.

I can barely keep myself upright as his words hit me worse than a bullet—worse than the beam of the laser. They cut a hole in my heart, savagely tearing at me.

Yet it's all I deserve isn't it?

Deep down, didn't I know he would react like this if he knew? Deep, deep down, didn't I know he would shun me?

It's why I never planned on telling him. I would have taken those secrets to my grave if possible—I was well on my way to doing so.

Until now.

Reality hits me like a thousand thunder bolts, all aimed at me.

He knows.

I back away and he advances, his expression growing more hateful by the second. And it's all directed towards *me*—and towards what I've done to him.

What I stole from him.

Because he's right, isn't he?

I did do everything he's accusing me of. And I did much, much worse.

"*Mali*," he utters the name again, his hand raised. My eyes instinctively close.

In another life, I would have cowered. Or maybe, I would have struck back.

But I deserve nothing less.

If he wants to kill me, I'll let him. I've already prepared for it.

I open my eyes, letting him see I am at his mercy—ready for anything he decides for me.

"You named him *Mali*. Like the stone I gave you," he grits out, but instead of hitting me, his hand shoots out to wrench the necklace from me, snapping the string in the process.

"Raf," a heartrending sob escapes me.

Here it is. The moment of the truth.

The moment of damnation.

"What did you do, Noelle? Tell me the truth. I want to hear the truth from your own poisonous lips," he demands, his voice filled with despair. He sets his cold eyes on me, letting me bear the entire weight of his disappointment and disdain. And I feel it. God, but I feel it in my bones, seeping into my very essence.

I stumble back, my mouth opening and closing as I don't know how to answer him. How does one even answer a question like that?

But he's not deterred. Taking a step towards me, he grabs my chin between his fingers, bringing me closer to his face. His nostrils flare, his features tense and angry. But it's the sight of his eyes that has my heart freeze in my chest. The way he's looking at me as he would a stranger.

That cuts me to my core.

"What did you do?" he repeats, the question more pronounced than before as his fingers dig painfully in my flesh.

"I killed him," I whisper, tears gathering at the corners of my eyes. "I killed our son," I confess, but instead of freeing me, those words damn me for all eternity.

THIRTY-THREE

MICHELE

THE CAR DREW TO A HALT AS IT REACHED THE PRIVATE LANDING STRIP WHERE a plane was waiting to depart. Sneaking a glance at his companion, Michele studied her with narrowed eyes, something about the entire situation bothering him.

He didn't know what it was. Technically, everything about her checked out.

Yet something prickled just beneath the surface of his skin.

"The baby," he suddenly spoke. "You didn't mention how he died before."

She froze, slowly turning towards him.

"I didn't get the chance," she answered in a thickly accented voice.

"Did Noelle really have something to do with his death?"

She nodded, and though Michele could not detect any untruths in her expression, something niggled at his conscience.

"She wasn't well," Lucero added. "Mentally. At some point, I think she became too overwhelmed by everything. She also didn't know if her beloved had survived..." she trailed off and Michele could fill in the blanks.

She'd gone over the edge.

Considering the environment she'd been forced to give birth in, he wagered postpartum—hell, even peripartum depression—could have been a serious issue. It wouldn't be the first time a mother killed her own child because her mind was too clouded with negative emotions brought on by a deadly cocktail of hormones.

On the best days, the mind could be a scary place, able to overpower the strongest of people. Michele himself had first-hand experience of it.

That wasn't to say that he excused infanticide. Far from it. Just as he

didn't excuse what he'd done with his own hands—but that was a heartache for another day.

From the moment he'd heard the entire tale, a hole had formed inside his chest. He'd watched his brother slowly pale as Lucero had recounted everything that had occurred at the *hacienda* and Michele had...felt sorry for Rafaelo.

He was intimately acquainted with the death of a child and the ravages that wrecked on a person—on a parent. Yet seeing his brother take in the news that not only had he been a father, but his son had been killed by his own mother—by the woman Rafaelo loved and cherished—was a type of hurt Michele couldn't begin to comprehend.

Over time, he'd studied Noelle and Rafaelo enough to gain an understanding of their relationship and the fact that it thought itself unshakable when it was one step away from being blown by the wind.

His conversation with Noelle, weeks ago, and then Lucero's claims had only served to cement the idea.

Noelle DeVille wasn't who she said she was.

Michele's lips twitched with displeasure and a deeply ingrained disdain towards those of her ilk.

From the beginning, Michele had been of a mind to finish his brother, but death wasn't something he had in mind. No, he needed something more potent that ensured his brother's attention would be fully captured by personal issues to even remember Michele.

As Michele had assured Andreas, Noelle's kidnapping and his subsequent game with Rafaelo had been nothing more than that—a game. But also an opportunity to gain more information.

He'd already suspected there was something odd about Noelle after he'd done his due diligence and researched whatever he could about the *hacienda* and her former husband Sergio.

Michele had managed to track down some of Sergio's former associates who had met Noelle and they all said a similar thing—she was a witch, a she-devil. And no matter how bad Sergio had been, even according to his own *friends*, she'd been worse.

During those inquiries, he'd absentmindedly encountered Lucero's name, but he'd never pursued that lead because there had been no evidence to support her involvement in anything.

But the perfect situation had arisen when Noelle had brought up Lucero,

naming *her* as Rafaelo's true love?

Suddenly all the cards had been laid out on the table for Michele. And as he'd stepped back to look at the bigger picture, he'd realized it was messier than he'd previously thought.

He'd only had to track down Lucero, who currently lived somewhere in Texas with her family, and get the rest of the information from her.

The result had been simply...spectacular.

For Michele.

He doubted his brother would see it as such.

Indeed, if the situation had been different, he wagered he could see Noelle as a worthy opponent, or maybe, a friend.

But as it stood, he knew she would fight tooth and nail for her goals just as Michele did for his.

Her only mistake had been in underestimating how far Michele would go for a certain...someone.

To some extent, that had been *his* as well.

Though he'd never intended to kill his brother, Michele had never wanted to make it easy for him either. But now, faced with the utter mess that was Rafaelo's life, Michele found no interest to continue with his games.

After all, wasn't Noelle herself punishment enough for his baby brother? He wagered Rafaelo had his hands more than full with what was to come.

In a way, Michele found it ironic that his brother of all would fall for someone like Noelle. Someone so like...his own mother.

Cosima's chief quality had been her flawless scheming.

She'd never cared about anyone *but* Rafaelo and she'd done everything in her power to ensure he was always at the top. It didn't matter that she had to step on corpses to do so. It certainly didn't matter that those she perceived as enemies had been children. For her, anyone standing against Rafaelo was to be taken out.

From what Michele had gathered about Noelle, including meeting the lady herself, he wagered she was even worse than Cosima had been.

After all, his step-mother had put her *child* above everything.

Noelle put Rafaelo above even her own child.

It was quite baffling, really, to realize someone who looked so innocent could be so vicious.

For someone who'd seen more than his fair share of cruelty in his lifetime, Michele admitted that Noelle would probably make it in his top

three—and that was nothing to brag about.

Excitement drummed in his veins as he predicted how everything would unfold now.

And it was all because Noelle had dared to mess with his pet. If she'd never mentioned her name—never threatened her—then maybe he wouldn't be in this situation.

Michele's style had always been burn them before they can burn you. As such, he'd attacked Noelle before she could—turning her greatest fear into reality.

If Rafaelo was the only thing she cared about, then she'd have the greatest surprise when his love for her turned into complete...*hate*.

Rafaelo's reaction to Lucero's account had already been more than telling. He'd been shocked, and to an extent, in disbelief. But ultimately he'd been destroyed by the information.

Michele wondered how their confrontation would go, and as a fan of chaos, he regretted he wouldn't be able to witness that first-hand.

But everything meant he was about to close a small chapter of his life. After he double-checked that Lucero had been telling the entire truth, of course.

He wouldn't blindly believe anyone—least of all Lucero. Yes, the circumstantial evidence all pointed to her being right about Noelle's true persona and what she'd done to his brother. Still, that didn't mean that Michele, ever the skeptic, would accept the words that came out of her mouth as the pure truth.

No. Not at all. Her claims were just momentarily useful to punish Noelle for her provocation.

In fact, considering the doubts that he still had—small, but for a man such as himself, consequential enough to niggle at his brain—he wasn't about to allow the woman to leave without having a secondary plan in place.

Andreas, already apprised of Michele's suspicions, was ready to depart at the same time as her.

If there was anything Lucero was hiding from him, Michele would find out. At the same time, she would also learn that he was not a man to cross—regardless of the fact that her information had helped Michele prevail in his plans.

He might be unusually stuck in his ways, but he still had a weakness for *fairness*, or, at least what he considered to be fair since everything he'd done

from the beginning had been in the name of justice.

Maybe it was justice of a personal kind, but he was of the belief that it unfailingly overlapped with *universal* justice.

And so if he had the smallest inclination to believe that something was wrong, he was going to pursue it until the very end.

That was perchance Michele's chief quality. His unwavering and unyielding determination to see things through. It was to the point that it didn't matter if he got hurt in the process.

Only the end result was important.

And though his main plan was still working as intended, and Michele continued to do his due diligence where that was concerned, there was one other thing that had taken over his mind—possessing him to such an extent he felt no longer in control of his own damn self.

But there was a chief difference between those two ruling—*warring*—goals. Deep down he realized that while going against McBride and his clique of corrupted politicians might end in his physical death, going after his other goal would result in his true end.

Watching Lucero remove her bags from the car, Michele leaned against the door, popping a cigarette in his mouth and studying her intently.

Andreas was by his side in a second, leaning in to ask a whispered question.

Michele nodded, giving him the green light to proceed as he saw fit.

"I'll see you soon, Andreas," Michele said as his friend led Lucero to the plane waiting for them.

Andreas would not only accompany Lucero back home, but he was to also spend some time there to make all the proper inquiries and put Michele's mind at ease.

Michele waited until the plane departed before getting back in the car and instructing the driver to take him back home.

As soon as he reached his house, Lovely's bark was the first thing to greet him.

A smile tugged at his lips just as something *else* tugged at his chest.

Being greeted by someone as he arrived home was a foreign notion, and one that had died years ago with his son.

Yet looking into Lovely's eyes, he found a new optimism growing inside of him.

Swooping the dog in his arms, he brought his hand down his head, lightly

petting him and scratching him behind his ears—all things Lovely loved.

Soon, there would be someone else waiting for him at home—greeting him with a sweet smile and even sweeter kisses.

That was the only thing that lightened his mood as he went to his newly renovated bedroom, taking a seat on the bed as he turned the monitors on.

And there she was, with her books in the kitchen.

Her pretty brows were knit together as she followed with her finger a line on the page, her lips working as she tried to read the words.

Now that Michele knew more about her disability and how much work she put in to overcome it, he couldn't help the pride that suffused his chest.

Of course his pet would be up to his standard. Otherwise he wouldn't be so fixated on her. She must have something *worthy* for his attention to be so thoroughly claimed by her.

And though he'd thought her average at some point, now he couldn't even remember why.

He could only see her as she was—special.

Not just in her looks and the way they set his blood afire, but in her will, her determination and her quiet dignity.

He didn't think he'd *ever* met someone more dignified than her.

And though that meant her continuous rebuttal of his attentions, he didn't think he would be in so deep if that weren't the case.

Besides, he was equally, if not *more*, determined.

He would have her. He would melt her fears away and he would bend her will to his. Maybe it would take longer than he'd anticipated, but at the end of the day she *would* belong to him. Then, finally, *she* would be the one greeting him when he arrived home.

Making himself comfortable with Lovely in his lap, Michele proceeded to watch his pet as she went about her day—anxious at seeing her reaction when she'd find the latest thing he'd left for her in her room.

Finishing up the page she was working on, she got up, going to the fridge and pulling some items from it to make herself a sandwich.

Michele watched closely, committing to mind the ingredients she chose to know what her preference was for the future.

Everything she was doing was utterly mundane. But to his eyes, it played like the most scintillating movie he'd ever seen.

She started eating, small bites as she directed her attention to her book, using one hand to eat and the other to write.

She made such an endearing picture. Especially as a strand of hair fell over her face, which she promptly blew away.

It was a couple of hours before she finished up her work and went back to her room.

In that time, Michele never once left his room, drinking in every second of her presence. It didn't matter that he still had things to attend to and business to conduct. He did that curtly over the phone, his sharp mind working perfectly fine in spite of the fact that his eyes were held captive to the monitor.

The moment he noticed her gather her stuff to head to her room, his pulse quickened.

Lovely, sensing his excitement, gave a small yelp as he jumped out of his arms, pouting at Michele for *not* being the sole object of his affection.

"Later, Lovely," Michele told him, expecting the dog to understand and move out of his way as he got closer to the screen.

Lovely pouted for a second before he scrambled off the bed and to his own sleeping place, curling on the soft pillow and curiously watching Michele's rapt expression.

That was it—the moment he'd been waiting for.

His pet opened the door to her room, going straight for her desk to deposit her books. It was then that she did a double-take, noticing the new item that had been beautifully packed with a ribbon on top.

Her brows scrunched in confusion, and grabbing it, she looked around her room—no doubt thinking Michele might still be around.

When she didn't detect anyone inside, she took a solid minute as she simply stared at the package, her lower lip between her teeth as she considered whether to open it or not.

"Open it," Michele said in a low voice, his fists clenched in anticipation.

Until that moment he hadn't entertained the thought that his pet might just...throw it away without even looking at it. And as that thought arose, so did the fear that she might *not* see what he'd gotten her.

It was a gift he'd put a lot of effort in. He'd done countless searches and research before he'd settled on it, thinking it was something his pet would both need and enjoy.

After what seemed like an eternity, his pet finally opened it—slowly, methodically. She didn't tear at the packaging, nor at the ribbon. It was almost as if she wanted to preserve the outside as well.

To Michele's eyes, however, her slowness indicated a lack of excitement, and immediately his spirits plummeted. She didn't care for his gifts, did she?

For weeks now he'd done his best to leave her a little something every other day when he could sneak inside her house. Sometimes that would be while no one was home, but there were also those times when he snuck inside while she slept, and he took his time watching her before leaving, as if he'd never been there.

Aside from the gifts she always found in her room, he wagered his pet had no idea that he was almost always by her side during the night—sometimes going as far as touching her and laying by her side.

When she was almost done peeling the packaging paper away, she frowned as she took in the actual present—a tablet.

But it wasn't just *any* tablet. It was one Michele had had specifically programmed for her and all the features were dyslexia friendly. But more than anything, there was one more gift inside.

And as his pet powered on the device, her eyes widened when she realized what was the *true* present.

Taking his own tablet from his table, he activated the screen mirroring so he could see exactly what she was doing.

Alright, so maybe his gift hadn't been entirely selfless. But Michele couldn't forgo the opportunity to study his pet in detail—and that included her internet browsing habits and the media she consumed.

The moment her tablet was on, a welcome message directed her to one of the apps he'd had installed on the device, followed by additional instructions that were not written, but spoken.

As she clicked on the icon, his voice jumped out of the tablet, startling her and causing her to almost drop the device.

"What..." she whispered, her eyes widening in surprise.

"I hope you like this little present, *Zia*," he'd said, purposefully using her name so she could see he was serious about this—though it was for her benefit only. "I've included a lifetime subscription to an audiobook service, so you don't have to struggle to read anymore." He went on to provide more details about the features of the tablet before the recording ended.

On the other side of the screen, Michele was on pins and needles as he awaited her reaction.

"Audiobooks?" His pet blinked, and after exploring the app a little, she settled on a title, clicking on it. Her mouth opened in awe as she heard the

voice of the narrator, and she quickly started adjusting the speed and playing with the different options on the menu.

A wide grin appeared on her face at the variety of books on the app.

Though she didn't thank him personally, Michele felt her gratitude in the way she threw herself on her bed, plugging in a pair of worn out earbuds into the tablet and choosing a book to play.

He blinked. Of course, earbuds were next.

But there was no denying the way she was enjoying his gift. In turn, his own mood brightened, and as a result, he did not kill one soul that day. Hard to achieve in his line of business, but he found himself extra magnanimous.

And it was all because of her. His pet.

Michele kept track of all her searches, curious to see what she'd want to listen to. At the same time, he queued the same titles so he could try them too.

For most people the day had only twenty-four hours. For Michele, it had twenty-four and *Venezia* hours. It was a wonder he could squeeze everything in his schedule and not make a single mistake. But that was exactly what he did.

He split his time between preparing for the next phase of his plan, and his pet.

It didn't matter that he was only getting only a few hours of sleep per night. On the contrary, his mood vastly improved because he had something to look forward to—*her*.

For someone who'd never been excited about tomorrow, it was the oddest thing to not only anticipate it, but await it breathlessly.

Yet as the day passed, *tomorrow* became the day Michele dreaded the most.

The day even his pet's presence could not brighten.

That night, he went to sleep with a bottle of Bourbon by his side, and he opened another one as soon as he awoke. Andreas and all his employees knew not to bother him during that day because chances were they would meet their end.

He languished the entire morning away, trying to forget all his thoughts and bury all his feelings. And after a bit more liquid courage, he finally jumped in his car and headed to the cemetery.

To Michele's dismay, he was still very much sober by the time he arrived there. But as he found his way to his son's mausoleum, he could barely keep

himself upright due to the pain in his heart. Fumbling with the key to the lock, he finally opened the door, stepping into the darkness of the room.

"Hello, bud," he croaked, his voice breaking with emotion.

In the middle of the mausoleum was Solomon's tomb, and all-around, Michele had laid his favorite toys, seeking to turn the place into something Solomon would have loved, even in his death.

"It's been a while, huh?" he forced a smile on his face.

The mausoleum had been fashioned like a home, and at the back of it was a table with two chairs. On the table, there was a big portrait of Solomon surrounded by a few candles.

Taking a seat on one of the chairs, Michele took out his lighter, lighting the candles and bringing some light into the darkness of the place. He only wished he could do the same with his heart, which was currently breaking as he stared at the picture of his son.

He could still imagine Solomon as he'd been—happy and carefree. The joy and pride of Michele's soul. He might have been his adoptive son, but for Michele he had been *everything*. The proof that family didn't come down to shared blood. It all came down to love.

Yet those years seemed so far away.

It was becoming harder and harder to grasp on to his form, or his voice, even when he tried his hardest.

Once more, guilt hit him straight in the chest.

If only he'd done things differently. If he hadn't been so rash—so out of control with his thirst for vengeance against McBride—Solomon would still be here.

He would still be by Michele's side, and they would be happy.

"I brought you something," he cleared his voice, removing a small toy from his pocket and placing it on the chair opposite him, somehow imagining that his son was there, personally receiving the gift.

Michele only came there one a year. On Solomon's birthday. He couldn't physically bring himself to come any other day. On the anniversary of his death he simply buried himself in work and alcohol in an attempt to numb himself and forget.

But on this day... On this day he forced himself to remember. Because despite the pain, he still needed to honor his son's memory. He needed to face his guilt and renew himself with strength for the journey he'd already committed to.

And that was by remembering.

Only by remembering what he'd loved and lost could he sharpen his resolve and push forward.



"DADDY," SOLOMON'S VOICE CUT THROUGH HIS FOCUS. "WHAT'S WRONG?"

"Nothing's wrong, bud. It's just a small blackout, the power should be back soon," he explained, using his phone to light up the hallway as Solomon carefully made his way towards him.

"I don't like the dark."

"You're not alone in that," Michele chuckled. "I'm not particularly fond of it, either."

It was around eight in the afternoon, and Solomon still had time until his curfew. Without power, though, he quickly grew restless.

"Here's what we're going to do. I'll bring some flashlights and we can play a game of chess. What do you think?"

Solomon debated his options, finally relenting. He wasn't the biggest chess fan, but he did love playing with Michele, especially since lately his father had been busier than before. Any opportunity to play with his dad was a golden one for Solomon.

"You take these to the living room and prepare the game. I'll be with you in a second," he instructed as he placed a few flashlights in his arms.

When Solomon was out of earshot, Michele dialed Andreas.

"There's a blackout at the apartment," he started, his voice grave. "I'm looking out the window right now and none of the other buildings seem to be affected. I need you to investigate it and send a few men here, just in case," he said succinctly.

Michele wasn't one to take chances just as he wasn't one to believe in flukes or coincidences. Already, he had a bad feeling in his gut, but he didn't want to worry Solomon too much.

"Yes, sir. I'll do that. I'm downtown so it won't take me too long to get there, either."

"Good. I'll see you in a bit. In the meanwhile, see if you can access any of the lobby feeds. I want to know if someone messed with the wires or

something."

"On it."

Once that was taken care of, he painted a smile on his face as he went to Solomon's side. Though he hoped the blackout had no outside interference, he couldn't discount that when he'd made a *lot* of enemies in a very short period.

Already, his brain was quick at work in case something was up. He had a built-in steel vault as a mini panic room for Solomon, and at the slightest indication that danger was looming, he'd take the boy and lock him inside. The vault could only be opened from the inside so Michele was sure no one could penetrate it.

When he stepped inside the room, Solomon had already laid out the pieces for the game and he was excitedly waiting for Michele.

"Let's see what we have here, bud," Michele smiled while taking a seat.

His phone by his side, he kept his eye out for Andreas' messages in case he found something.

They started playing. Solomon's attention was momentarily distracted from the blackout while Michele put on a jovial mask while he continued to be on alert.

Nothing on cameras.

The text from Andreas was meant to alleviate some of his worries. Instead, his panic increased even more as he heard a sudden sound.

Not one to risk *anything*, particularly Solomon's safety, he put his hands on top of the boy's.

"Listen. I want you to go into the vault, the one I showed you before. I need to check something and make sure it's safe. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

They'd done simulations in the past and Solomon knew not to question him on such issues.

His big brown eyes regarded Michele warily for a second before he nodded.

"Is everything alright, daddy?"

"It will be," Michele assured him, ready to face the world if he had to in order to keep the boy safe.

Placing the flashlight and one of his spare phones in the boy's hands, he opened the vault and ushered him inside.

"You know the drill. You don't open it until I tell you it's safe, ok?"

Solomon nodded.

"I love you, daddy," he said in a small voice.

Michele hated that he had to worry him so much, but he'd take the chance if it meant keeping him safe.

"I love you, too, bud. Hang tight, ok?"

Closing the door to the vault, he waited until he heard a light snap, sign that the vault was sealed.

His expression changed immediately as determination swept over his features. He wasted no time in gathering a few guns and plenty of ammo as well as a bulletproof vest. After so long with Nicolo, he knew how to take care of himself. And considering the shit he'd gotten himself in, he couldn't discount anyone coming for his neck.

Holding tightly on to his gun, he stepped towards the door, placing his ear on its cold surface as he simply listened.

At first there was silence. To the *untrained* ear it was silence. But as he closed his eyes, zoning in on those pertinent noises, he knew instinctively that someone was moving about the stairwell. Based on the pattern of certain sounds, he was sure it was a rehearsed formation.

Professionals.

He knew instinctively he was the target, and if he managed to hold on until his own men arrived, everything should be fine. More than that, knowing Solomon was safe in the vault gave Michele all the confidence he needed.

He wouldn't let some mercenaries come for his life. Not today, and not if he had something to live for.

Quickly shooting a text to Andreas to let him know the situation, he continued to observe.

Holding his breath, he focused once more on the sounds, detecting an increase in frequency. Almost as if his body knew before his mind, he jumped back just in time to get out of the way as the door was bombed to pieces.

Michele rolled on the floor, assuming his stance and aiming his gun at the men quickly entering the apartment.

He gave them no time to act. Though they were all armed up and armored from head to toe, he had the advantage of his slightly hidden spot as he aimed for the first man's head.

One down.

He did the same with the second. And only when he aimed for the third did they realize where he was hiding, a storm of bullets coming his way.

He dodged, throwing himself on the other side of the sofa while he reloaded his gun.

Damn it, but how many were there?

Raising his head, he saw three more men come inside, and he aimed his gun, pulling the trigger for one of them just as *he* pulled the trigger on Michele.

It happened so fast he didn't get to dodge the bullet, nabbing him in his right side.

He winced in pain but didn't let it stop him.

Throwing his empty pistol to the side, he grabbed two automatic guns, both fingers on the triggers as he unleashed a destructive force on the unwelcome visitors.

He didn't care who they were or who had sent them. They were in *his* home and threatening *his* family. That alone ensured them all a swift visit to the grave.

All fell to the ground as he continued to fire. Despite the adrenaline rush, Michele managed to keep his wits about him and notice the red light moving about the room.

"Fuck," he muttered as he flew in the air, the bullet from the sniper hitting him in the shoulder where his vest didn't cover his body. He didn't get to get up as another bullet hit him in the chest—yet again in an area that wasn't covered by the vest.

His breathing grew harsh as blood oozed from his wounds, his movements sluggish, his entire being filled with pain. He coughed some blood, his throat clogged and barely working.

Just a bit more.

He had to withstand it until the others came. Until...

He dragged himself on the floor towards his phone. His mind was growing foggy, his sight even more so. Immediately he knew they must have nicked an artery, or some major vein and he was bleeding profusely. He didn't have long. Maybe a few minutes, tops.

His bloody fingers reached for the phone right as more steps resounded in the hallway.

Before he could do anything, three more men entered the room. Two were wearing full gear while the other was dressed in civilian clothes.

The man barely spared Michele a glance as he headed straight for the back of the apartment.

Michele's eyes grew wide as sudden realization descended upon him.

They... They weren't there for him?

But that wasn't all, was it? They knew exactly where to go—where the vault was.

He opened his mouth to say something—what, he didn't know. But the man's voice resounded first.

"Solomon? I know you're there. Your daddy is hurt and is asking for you," the man said.

All at once, despite the pain—despite *everything*—Michele knew this wasn't random. This was a localized attack with a clear purpose. They must have been on to him for a long time if they had that much information on him and Solomon.

At that moment, Michele could only pray that Solomon wouldn't open the door—that he'd listen to Michele and not open the door to anyone other than him.

He couldn't hear what Solomon replied—if he did at all. But the man did something else that surprised Michele. He used *his* voice.

"It's okay, bud. You can come out."

His mouth trembled as he dragged himself on the ground. Nothing else mattered but getting to his son and making sure he was ok.

"No, no, no," he mumbled, barely able to get the words out.

He dragged his heavy body to the hallway until he had a full view of the vault.

A click sound, and the door opened.

"Where is my daddy?" Solomon asked, sneaking his head out.

The men were by the door, waiting.

"He's right there, why don't you come see him?"

Something wasn't right...

"No," Michele called out, this time the sound a bit louder.

They weren't attacking him. They were just waiting...

Solomon opened the door wider, coming out of the vault.

His gaze was searching about the apartment, ultimately meeting Michele's on the floor.

He tried to shake his head. He tried to move. But he was in too much pain to be able to do either. Michele could only stare at Solomon, watching his

precious expression turn sad as he saw his father bleeding on the ground.

Yet it was too late.

The red light, the same one that had hit Michele, was now flickering towards Solomon, moving around his body until one dot settled on his forehead.

"No, bud, no," Michele spoke fervently, yet the words were mere whispers. His eyes watered, his mind rebelling at what he was seeing. He felt the helplessness to his core, the way he could only watch his son but unable to warn him—protect him.

He was his father, damn it. And yet, the most he could do was crawl one more inch, bleed one more drop—all in an attempt to save him.

But it wasn't enough.

"Daddy," Solomon called out that sweet word, taking one step forward before the dot became one hole and he fell.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

The sound was wrenched from him, erupting in the air as he witnessed the life go out of Solomon's eyes, his body unmoving on the ground.

It happened in a split of a second.

A second in which his entire world ended.

"Kill him," the man ordered, giving Michele an indifferent look before striding out of the apartment. Yet it was in that moment that his features were forever ingrained in Michele's mind.

There was enemy, and there was foe. There was death and there was inferno. There was a promise, and there was a vow. For Michele, unconsciously, it was all the latter.

One last shot, and Michele's eyes fluttered closed.

The men were out of the building by the time Andreas made it to the apartment, finding a dead Solomon and a Michele that wasn't far behind.

Tears, anguish and a vow of vengeance.

Andreas did everything in his power to ensure that his friend survived.

He didn't.

That night Michele died a second time.

And yet again, he was still alive.

But the world... The world would never be the same.



THE MEMORIES WERE RAW AND PAINFUL. BUT NOW, MORE THAN EVER, HE *needed* that pain more than he needed air to breathe. Deep down he could feel himself at the edge of the precipice, staring into the abyss that was his fate, ready to make the final choice.

Before, he'd had no issue imagining the jump. He'd draped himself in steel so the fall would come quicker—more efficient, lethal. Now, there was a voice in his ear that almost made his head turn. One that whispered and beckoned and made him hesitate as he took the last step towards the unyielding void.

Michele knew what needed to be done and had planned all the steps he was going to take towards his ultimate direction.

Then why was he faltering? Why was he...weakening?

The answer was immediate, as was the uneven beat of his heart.

There was only one person guilty of the confusion in his mind and heart. One person who made him lose every bit of sense he had left.

He *was* weakening.

And that was unacceptable.

"I miss you bud," he whispered, though only the echo of the crypt answered him back.

He was used to it. It had been the same for years now. Yet somehow... Somehow this year was worse.

"I wish you were here. I wish you were still alive. Then..." he choked on his words, his throat clogging with emotion.

A tear made its way down his cheek. The first in too long.

Michele never cried.

Yet this time... This time he'd known it was about to get worse—perhaps the worst it had ever been.

"Then I would be different too. I could..." he trailed off, unable to complete the sentence. To utter it out loud was to turn it into reality. It was admitting to himself that he still had...desires—that he still had dreams. And Michele still lived under the assumption that he was entirely in control—that he was fine as he was, locked away from the world. Living in *spite* of the world.

"I did the unthinkable, bud," Michele whispered, his hand tightening over the bottle of bourbon. Taking another sip of alcohol, he forced himself to speak—to confess his greatest faults. His son deserved to know what a piece of shit his father was.

"I killed my own child," he said the words out loud for the first time. "Or, I should say, I killed *another* child." A wry smile pulled at his lips, though his eyes were unsmiling.

It was a few more copious swigs of alcohol later that he could finally release the words from his mouth—release them from his mind.

"I couldn't let that baby be born, bud," he shook his head. "I couldn't do it," he whispered. "Not when it would mean the end of everything."

Another sip and he relished the burn. After all, pain was what he deserved.

"I killed him and never looked back. And the worst thing? I would do it again."

He didn't share the fact that it killed his own soul to do so. That his pet was not the only one plagued by nightmares. When his pet had told him about her nightmares it had been like stabbing his heart with a poisoned dagger, for it had targeted his insecurities and his pain.

For as long as he lived, he would hold that one regret alive in his memory.

But to imagine otherwise...

To think of her giving birth, of his child out in the world—a *weakness* out in the world? That was out of the question.

Countless times already he'd dreamed about the what-ifs—of that alternate reality in which she did continue with her pregnancy. In which she did give birth to his child. In which they...were a family.

He hurt even more at picturing that for he knew if he opened his heart, he would end up back in the past again—back to bleeding instead of being.

And so he'd closed it.

Maybe his pet was appealing to him, in an odd way that nothing else was. But she'd never claim his feelings. She'd never claim his control and the purpose that ruled his very being.

Yet he also recognized the weakness in him—the fact that she *could* become more if he allowed her. And if there was a child in the equation, it would be even worse—infinately worse.

He saw that alternative, just as he saw the end result.

His enemies would catch up with him—again. And if they ever laid a hand on his family... Michele didn't think he could withstand that type of pain.

His heart had died with his son, though his body had kept on living.

But if he let himself feel... If he let himself create a family with *his Zia*, and that was taken away from him, he knew his body wouldn't survive either.

This time, he would die for good.

And he couldn't allow that. Not while his promise to his son was still foremost in his mind. Not when his guilt was suffocating him more and more.

"I know you must be disappointed in me, bud," he pursed his lips, his eyes fixated on the darkness of the crypt. "But I promised you justice. I *will* give you justice. And this is the only way I can do it."

Popping a cigarette in his mouth, he lit it up, deeply inhaling and enjoying the combo of alcohol and nicotine as it hit his system.

"I can only do it like this," he confirmed.

This meant keeping himself closed—an island among continents. It meant forging his path ahead disregarding any and every potential casualty.

It meant hell. And there was no joy to be had in hell.

He could only fulfill his revenge if he kept his pain onto himself, honing it and turning it into a deadly weapon. He could only go forward *because* he had nothing left to lose.

The moment he did...

The moment he found something more important was the moment he failed.

And he wasn't about to do that.

He'd own his pet and he would take care of her like his most prized possession. He would woo her until he'd gain her love once more—for that was the only resource that could energize him like no other. And he would feed off her adoration, as he'd done from the beginning.

All until he could exorcize her from his body and his mind. Until he numbed himself to her and everything she made him feel.

She would be his. But she would never be *more*.

She would only ever be his *pet*.

And for that, he must steel himself against all further temptation.

THIRTY-FOUR

MICHELE

"I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE CHAIN OF SUPPLY, JIMMY. I TOLD YOU I WANTED IT done by the end of the month."

Michele tapped his foot on the floor, rolling his eyes as the excuses flew from the young man's mouth.

Of course, nothing would ever get done unless he got personally involved.

"I'm so sorry, sir. I'll try to hurry it along. But the shipment is already lost and..."

"Call me when you have actual information, Jimmy. Not excuses," he said as he cut the line.

Michele's plans were scheduled in minute detail, and though he always accounted for unavoidable delays, he couldn't account for human stupidity. And this was exactly what had happened in this case.

From the moment he'd woken up in the hospital as the only survivor, he'd promised to Solomon and to himself that he would make McBride pay.

Yet that was only the beginning.

Michele still had the list of people Solomon had remembered by their given names. And though most were incredibly common ones, Michele was certain that once he got to McBride, he would be able to find the others too. In fact, considering McBride's exalted position and moniker as the *Nation's Hero*, Michele had no doubt that the others involved in the trafficking ring must hold equally important functions.

Alas, first he needed to get to his main target. Slowly, methodically.

For years he'd been doing hostile take-overs of companies of interest, placing a false leadership while he controlled them from the shadows—all in

an effort to gain ground within the impenetrable world of politics and state affairs.

The goal of the entire mission was secrecy. He couldn't afford to make mistakes like he'd done the first time which had resulted in his son's death.

No, this time everything would be so methodically planned, there would be absolutely no room for error.

In the end, the objective was to infiltrate McBride's circle, which had proven quite the Herculean task. No matter how much Michele tried, the circuit seemed to be closed.

They were all a bunch of paranoid old men with a lot to hide.

Michele had nothing but time, and patience.

As he brought a cigarette to his lips, the door to his office opened, Andreas striding in.

It seemed his trip to Texas had ended sooner than expected.

When he stopped by Michele, he handed him a cigarette, his brow going up in question.

"I trust it's done."

Andreas nodded.

"You were right," Andreas nodded, inhaling from his cigarette as he extended a file. "Here's everything you need to know."

Curious, Michele accepted the file, stepping around his desk to peruse its contents.

Inside were a list of relatives as well as pictures.

A lot of pictures.

"It seems we were premature in leaving her alone," Michele narrowed his eyes. "Well done, Andreas. I'll deal with it personally."

"Her husband is an Archibald," Andreas added grimly.

The Archibalds were one of the most influential family on the East Coast. Old money. That meant their network extended to the very top. Michele needed to be slightly more careful about that.

"Doesn't matter," Michele waved his hand. "I'll deal with the blowback later."

"When should I schedule the jet for?"

"End of the week. I have some other things pending until then."

"Understood, sir."

Andreas didn't have to ask Michele what pending things he had for he knew they most likely pertained to Miss Venezia.

Michele may have forgotten but Andreas had access to his accounts and financial statements, and he'd seen the purchases accumulating, day after day.

He'd been quite surprised at some of the items his boss had bought, since Andreas had never pegged him as the more...soft type—except, maybe in the past.

There had been scented candles—*chocolate* scented candles—women's clothes and cosmetics, as well as other health care items that Andreas doubted Michele used for himself.

He supposed Michele should count himself lucky that Kuznetsov and his wife were forever going on their strange expeditions abroad, and more often than not, left Venezia home alone. And while the house might be heavily guarded on a regular basis, Andreas had managed to squeeze in some of his own men, which ensured that Michele could stealthily go in and out.

But that didn't mean it was going to work forever.

And as he regarded his boss, Andreas had to agree he looked better than the last time he'd seen him, especially considering he'd spent Solomon's birthday by himself at the cemetery—as he usually did.

In fact, there was less tension around him—less volatility.

In the weeks since he'd decided he was going to pursue Miss Venezia, Michele had turned into the worst version of himself—quite possibly worse than he'd ever been. He'd become increasingly paranoid about her, to the extent of only getting a few hours of sleep a night so he could watch her more.

More than anything, Andreas could feel that those types of chaotic feelings could only lead to disaster. It didn't matter that he was the biggest proponent of Michele's relationship with Miss Venezia. It wasn't *this* way that he'd envisioned things evolving.

Yet he should have expected that with Michele nothing would ever go smoothly. He was the most unpredictable man Andreas had ever met. For all his cautious planning and meticulous scheming, there was a volatility to him that could turn a regular meeting into a massacre. The prime example had been the disaster at Cooke's house.

Michele had well known that slaughtering so many people could become dangerous and would attract attention. He'd known it and done it anyway.

For her. Miss Venezia. Michele's deepest obsession.

And that was a double edged sword he didn't know how to deal with.

Andreas was certain Miss Venezia was the key to his happiness—that she

alone could get him out of the hole he'd sunk himself in. But he was also aware she was his trigger. One wrong move and she could make him explode unlike ever before.

Michele, to his core, was a calm and collected man who favored well-thought out plans to impulsive displays—and those *only* to send a message. But Miss Venezia instilled too strong feelings in him. So strong, in fact, that he simply lost himself to everything but the sight of her, gaining a tunnel vision that wasn't most lucrative to his plans.

Andreas had seen Michele behave like that once before. It had been right after Nicolò and Cami's deaths when he'd been so blinded by a deadly cocktail of grief and anger that he'd acted without thinking things through—he'd done it just because he could.

In that moment, nothing mattered but the end result—the *end* of Nicolò's killers. And so he'd made mistake after mistake that had resulted in McBride's men coming after him and Solomon.

Andreas knew his boss still blamed himself for everything. But how could he when he'd been just a twenty-something year old overwhelmed by the weight of his feelings?

Yet that was the prime example of how Michele acted when his entire focus became wrapped in one goal—*one person*. He lost sight of everything around, of logic and of common sense, until pure actions remained—often, disastrous actions.

It was one of the reasons why he'd shut down so completely after Solomon's death.

He'd recognized his weakness for what it was and sought to eliminate it—eliminate his feelings.

Yet now that weakness was poking through the surface again. And Andreas didn't like where things were headed.

Michele had suppressed his emotions for far too long, and now that they could prove not only destructive, but debilitating to his plan, he might strike out in an even worse fashion.

Andreas was worried.

Not only for Michele but also for Miss Venezia.

"I'll be out late today. Make sure the dog has all he needs?" Michele suddenly mentioned, closing out all his files.

"Of course, sir," Andreas immediately nodded, watching as Michele shrugged his leather jacket over his broad shoulders.

It was too hot outside for a jacket, but not for Michele.

Always, he was the exception to the rule.

"Good. Talk to you later," Michele said absentmindedly as he pocketed the keys to his car.

Leaving his office, he jumped in his car, driving to the area where his pet's classroom was located. It was a summer tutoring center that taught a slew of disciplines and had a section for learning disabilities too. Covertly, he'd made a small donation to ensure that their conditions were top-notch and that the classes didn't have too many students—something his pet hadn't been too keen on.

As he parked the car across the road, he checked his watch, noting he still had plenty of time before she finished.

A couple of days ago she'd had her doctor check-up. It had come rather late since Michele had kept interfering with the doctors Assisi would choose. When she'd finally found a proper *female* doctor, he'd allowed the appointment to continue.

Michele himself had been rather curious of the results—more than he'd dared admit out loud. Particularly after he'd seen her bleed on video, he'd become increasingly worried that he'd done irreparable damage.

But he'd curbed that excitement, just as he'd curbed everything relating to her lately.

The visit to Solomon's tomb had given him a much needed clarity that he'd been...reckless. Not in the messy sense, and certainly not in his business dealings.

But he'd been messy enough that he *could* have been.

He'd become so wrapped up in her ever since he'd realized there was a chance someone else could come and sweep her from under his nose that he'd spent almost all his time monitoring her.

Day and night.

He went to sleep with her sleeping on the monitor and he woke up with the same image. He even *ate* when she ate.

Certainly his fixation had taken a turn for the worse after he'd hurt her.

Guilt mixed with longing had made him act unlike himself—unlike he'd programmed himself previously.

She'd managed to infiltrate every corner of his mind until he'd felt like going mad if he didn't see her one second.

That behavior had continued well into last week when, upon taking some

time to reflect, he'd realized he was giving her too much importance—too much power.

Yes, he might want her back—mostly in his bed—but that was it. And he *would* get her back eventually. He knew his pet would never be able to resist to him. He just needed to find the right way to melt her defenses.

As such, he didn't need to put in effort that she wouldn't know about anyway. What was the utilitarian purpose of that?

He needed to focus on the showy stuff, not the behind the scenes.

If there was one thing that Michele always prized, it was time.

He *hated* wasting time.

Imagine his surprise when he'd belatedly realized he had been wasting time with her all along. No amount of watch time would get her love back. Certainly, no amount of studying her features, the way she ate or wrote, would get him back into her good graces.

He already had all the information he required on her. As such, more was just...useless.

After he'd come to that realization, he'd minimized his watch time. He only allowed himself to observe her at night, and only for a few hours.

Though he'd been of a mind to bug the doctor's office beforehand, he hadn't gone through it. At the last moment he'd reminded himself of his priorities, and the fact that she was merely a diversion, not a priority. That meant he did not—*could* not—care about her health. Regardless of the perceived damage he might have done her.

Instead, he'd allowed himself to sneak in some listening time when his pet had arrived home after her consultation. Surprisingly intrepid, she'd insisted on going alone to see the doctor, and despite some initial protests, her sister had allowed her to do that.

His pet had given Assisi and Vlad a full account of her exam and the fact that the doctor had diagnosed her as anemic and given her some vitamins. Her blood tests had also come out clear and she was perfectly healthy.

Assisi and Vlad had sighed in relief and after Vlad had carefully retreated from the room, her sister had proceeded to give her a lesson in sexual health.

Michele couldn't help but be curious about that *girls talk* and he'd sneaked in a bit more listening time.

"I know Catalina probably didn't have this conversation with you yet. And maybe it's a little too late," Assisi had pursed her lips. "But I'd rather we

had it anyway."

"Must we?" his pet had asked, peering apprehensively at her sister.

Assisi had nodded.

"You must be responsible about it. I can't tell you who to sleep with, Zia. All I can ask is that you're careful about it. Use protection. Ask them for their tests before you do anything. Just look out for your health, ok? You were lucky nothing happened this time."

"Is that what you did with Vlad? Did you ask him for his test results before?"

Assisi's eyes had widened slightly and she'd stumbled over her words a couple of times before she'd replied.

"Vlad and I were different. He hadn't been with anyone before either. That isn't to say you shouldn't still ask. But I was a little naïve at the time too. I didn't realize that you could get pregnant either..." she'd trailed off, avoiding eye contact. "And you know how that story ended," Assisi had mentioned in a low voice.

His pet had licked her lips, reaching out to brush her hand over Assisi's.

"Don't worry, Sisi. I don't plan on sleeping with anyone any time soon. Maybe ever," she'd grumbled softly.

"Ever?" Assisi had repeated, shocked.

"It wasn't...pleasant," his pet had confessed, and Michele's ears had immediately perked up. "I didn't like it at all," she'd continued. "It was just something I did for him."

"You know, my first time with Vlad wasn't pleasant either. But that's not forever. If the guy knows what he's doing and cares about your pleasure, then it can be wonderful. I get that you don't want to talk about your boyfriend much, but if he never cared about your pleasure, then he's an asshole. And you deserve better."

His pet had smiled furtively.

"I agree. I do deserve better," she'd nodded, to Michele's dismay. "But I'm still not in a hurry. If the situation arises, I promise I will be responsible," she'd assured her sister.

Michele was still reeling from her previous words.

She deserved better?

Better than him?

How was that humanely possible?

Initially, that sentence had been met with rage.

Even now as he recalled that certain discussion, Michele couldn't help but scowl. But as he dwelled on Assisi's advice to his pet, he realized he *had* been awful to her—at least in that department. He'd been selfish, and quite honestly, uncaring.

As long as she'd opened her mouth or legs for him, he hadn't given much thought if it was something that she was into, or deriving any pleasure from.

Retrospectively, he could see the signs of distress every time they were about to get down to business. In the past, he'd mistakenly attributed that to maidenly fear and an intrinsic shame of sex that he'd thought came from her sheltered upbringing.

In his own memory and despite the fact that they'd fucked countless times, he could only think of one time when it had been good—the best it had ever been.

The night after the massacre at Cooke's house.

At least then, he would have assumed she'd enjoyed the act—had even said so herself.

But her confession that it had been bad for her at all times made him reconsider. Especially since the last time they'd been intimate he'd ended up being a brute and hurting her even more.

Maybe that was the key to getting her back? Showing her that it could be good between them. That there was pleasure to be had—and not only on *his* part.

The only issue? He had no fucking clue how to go about that.

He didn't know how to treat women and had no experience to speak of that might guide him other than a basic knowledge of anatomy.

But the moment the idea took root in his mind, he took it as a personal challenge.

He'd seduced her romantically once and as a result she'd been willing to do something she didn't enjoy for him. Now, he just had to go the other way—seduce her sexually and the romantic side would soon follow.

Pleased with himself, he redirected his focus to the building though there was still quite some time until his pet was done with her classes.

Suddenly, however, the door to the brownstone opened, and there she was.

Dressed in a dark baggy dress, she shrugged her backpack over her shoulder as she hurried down the street, a sweet smile on her face.

Michele narrowed his eyes.

What was she up to?

Michele jumped out of his car, following closely behind.

The fact that she was without her guards—without any protection—told Michele that she was likely skipping class.

Immediately he thought of the worst scenario.

Was she... Was she meeting someone?

A red haze descended upon him. His steps became harder as he strode after her, ready to confront whoever she was meeting with.

His pet seemed in her own world, barely acknowledging what was happening around her.

That piqued Michele's curiosity even more.

At the end of the block, she turned to the right, heading for the park. Faithfully behind her, Michele slowed down his steps so he wouldn't startle her. And when she took a seat on a bench, he did the same, finding one that afforded him a good view of her while keeping himself incognito—at least for now.

Watching her closely, he noted her fumble with her backpack, removing the tablet he'd gifted her. All the while she had a wistful smile on her face—one that simply mesmerized Michele.

He slowly shook himself from his reverie to get his own phone, accessing the screen mirroring application so he could see what had her so entranced.

Yet as he traced her actions on the device, he was surprised to see she was accessing the audiobook app, selecting a book she'd already started before.

Since he'd forced himself to limit his watch time, he'd also stopped paying *too* much attention to what she was reading. After all, that knowledge could only take him in one direction—reading the same book and thusly wasting more time.

And Michele had decided he wouldn't waste any more time. It was too uncharacteristic of him. No, instead, he would use all his time *effectively*. As witnessed by the moment at hand, which he rationalized as *very* efficient.

Plugging her earbuds in, she clicked play on the title. Leaning back on the bench, she tucked her legs under her, smoothing her skirt to cover herself up.

Michele's lips tugged up.

His pet's maidenly shyness was quite endearing at times.

Curious to see what she had picked, he put on his own earbuds, choosing the same audiobook.

Kiss an angel.

An interesting title.

Yet as he perused the book's description, he realized it was a romance novel.

Blinking in confusion, he looked from his phone to his pet, shocked to realize her excitement and the smile that painted her lips were all a result of that romance novel.

What could possibly be so good for his pet to be so enthralled by it?

The answer came immediately as the audiobook started playing in his ears. The characters were engaging in a sensual encounter that had his pet blush from head to toe as she brought one hand to her mouth, a slight giggle escaping her.

She looked so young and cheery unlike Michele had ever seen her. And the smile that seemed to grow wider by the moment had *him* enthralled in return.

The book wasn't lewd, and it exemplified the act of lovemaking between a man and a woman in all its glory—all its fun, physical and spiritual glory. Something they'd never had.

Discomfort pricked under his skin the more he listened at the carefree way in which the couple in the book were behaving with each other and he could only see one thing—*her* pain.

He'd hurt her.

Time and time again, he'd hurt her. And the worst thing was that so many times he'd been so caught up in himself he hadn't even noticed—hadn't *wanted* to notice.

He took his time watching her, matching her reactions with the events happening in the book and wondering, not for the first time, what went inside her mind.

Before, he thought he'd known her. He'd thought her simplistic because it had suited him to do so. Armed with some background information that didn't even begin to cover everything that she was, he thought he'd had her all figured out.

The abandoned little girl who craved some attention.

So he'd given it to her. He'd used his charm, making her feel she was the only woman in the world until she'd irrevocably fallen for him.

But only now did he realize his mistake.

She *wasn't* just the pitiful little girl he'd thought her to be. She wasn't

made up of just that. And the realization stumped him. Because she'd been playing a role just as much as he had.

Who was she?

Retrospectively, he could see those tiny instances—those little moments when her act had slipped. Because her calm, good disposition and her easy acquiesce were just that. An act.

The real Venezia was maybe one percent of that.

The rest of her was a chaotic ball of destructive emotions, of dreams and aspirations, of hard work and perseverance. And there was also that part of her he'd never touched—the part she kept tightly to herself.

Her mind.

He had absolutely no idea what she was thinking, or what she was planning to do.

And that was absolutely terrifying.

From the simpleton he'd previously thought her, she'd turned out to be the most complex creature he'd ever met.

And he *needed* to figure her out. It was like an imperative taking shape within the core of his being, a frustration bigger than the question of life itself.

He needed to understand her.

Just like she had invaded every crevice of his mind, he needed to do the same—know every little corner; every like and dislike; every dream and hope.

Michele needed to understand what made her tick.

Only then... Only then could he move on.

Deep in his thoughts, he only realized something was wrong when he heard a small, pained sound permeate the air.

His head turned in her direction, and he noted the tears coursing down her cheeks as she brought her knees to her chest. What started as sniffing soon turned into the most heart-wrenching sobbing he'd ever heard.

And that's when he realized why...

The man in the story told the woman he didn't want any children and demanded an abortion—the events eerily familiar. But in a twist of fate the man recognized his mistake and realized he loved the woman after all—both her *and* her unborn child.

His lips parted in shock as he stared at her, so clearly stricken by the story she seemed inconsolable.

Yet he also saw more similarities in the story in the way his pet had succumbed to apathy after that event, regarding him with such indifference it cut him to the bone.

Why?

Why was she doing this to herself?

Why had she chosen a book that so clearly unsettled her and made her sad?

Instead of seeing himself as the agent that had made her sad, it was easier to blame it all on the damn book.

He couldn't listen for another moment. Not when he knew the end would bring about the much anticipated reconciliation and everything would be forgotten. And that didn't work in real life—not in *his* life.

And though he wanted her love again—her smile and her adoration—he didn't want to admit the biggest issue.

It wasn't *her* who couldn't forgive and forget.

It was him.

He felt frozen in time and place as the words filtered through his ears, the book slowly coming to an end as he'd thought it would, but not in the *way* he'd anticipated.

Michele would *never* demean himself like that for anyone, or anything. He would never beg for anything.

The last time he'd done it—the last time he'd crushed all the shields of his proud soul—had been when his son had been about to step into danger. That moment he'd prayed to all deities he could think of, real or imaginary. He'd begged the fates and he'd begged his own body to move.

But no one had responded.

Only the void.

Only ever the painful void.

As the epilogue finished, his pet was crying harder—was it even possible?

The sound and sight of her tears made Michele uncomfortable in a way he'd not been in the past. Before he could think it through, he was off his bench, his long legs taking him towards her.

As his gaze narrowed on her pitiful form, his entire focus dimmed until there was only her.

Her with the oversize dress that swallowed her whole. Her with the red cheeks stained by salty tears. Her with those fucking alluring eyes that

haunted *and* hunted him until there was nothing else but her.

Venezia. Zia. *His* pet.

This confusing creature whom he'd barely begun to understand.

She whipped her head around, somehow hearing his approach even through the sounds of her labored breathing and ceaseless sobs.

Her eyes grew wide as she noted his taut features—could sense the unyielding intensity emanating from him.

It was like reality shifted in one second as she scrambled to her feet, throwing her tablet and earbuds in her bag before dashing away.

She looked...terrified.

Of him.

His lips flattened into a thin line and as he saw her pick up her pace before breaking into a full on run, he gave chase.

"Stop running," he shouted as he saw her grow increasingly more anxious.

She went down a pebbled path in the middle of the park, looking behind her every now and then to ascertain the distance between them. And when she saw he was gaining ground, she grew more desperate.

So desperate that she didn't even look where she stepped, her foot catching in a big stone right in the middle of the path. Losing her equilibrium, she swayed on her feet for a brief moment—one that had Michele's heart stop in his chest—before she tripped and fell.

The sound of the crash made him physically wince, especially as he finally reached her.

On her knees, she managed to brace herself on her palms. But that didn't take away from the fact that the ground was harsh and abrasive, likely hurting her.

His pulse drumming in his ears, Michele crouched next to her.

It was then that she lifted her face to look at him.

Big, soulful eyes filled with tears. They spoke of pain, heartache and more pain.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said in a soft voice.

She was like a wounded animal caught in a hunter's trap, and he could see her sense of preservation kicking in as she looked wildly around her in an attempt to locate an exit, or someone to help her.

But there was no one around.

Just them.

"Let me help you up," he reached for her.

She was frozen in place, almost as if she didn't realize what had happened.

Taking her backpack first and swinging it over his shoulder, he gently grabbed her by her ribcage, slowly lifting her up. Her hands were still in the air, and he noted the pebbles had imprinted in her skin, a few scrapes already gaining a red hue.

His eyes went lower and he saw the gashes on her knees. One was worse than the other, the skin torn and blood flowing down her leg.

He swore softly under his breath before picking her up and taking her back to the bench. All the while his pet didn't say one word.

She held herself still, her breathing harsh, her eyes wide with fear.

Placing her on the bench, he went on his knees in front of her as he assessed the damage.

It didn't look pretty. And it certainly didn't help that she seemed to be in some type of shock.

"You hurt yourself pretty bad. I need to go get something to treat your scratches. Wait for me here, ok?"

He was worried to leave her for fear she would run again. But she seemed so deeply in her own world that she barely realized as he left her side.

Michele remembered seeing a drugstore around the corner, and hurrying, he got whatever items he could find before coming back—all the while hoping his pet wouldn't leave. He didn't know what he was capable of doing if she ran from him again—if he saw that terrified expression again.

Yet as he got back, it was to find her as he'd left her.

She was staring into empty space, her hands on her thighs, palms up.

He could see that her dress had been slightly torn at the knees too, and he didn't know why the sight of her like that tugged at his heart.

He found it hard to swallow, almost as if his entire throat had closed up.

"I'm back," he added quietly as he crouched in front of her.

Grabbing the hem of her dress, he looked for consent in her gaze before he lifted it, folding it neatly around her thighs.

He shuffled through the items he'd bought from the drugstore, taking out some alcohol wipes.

"This is going to hurt a little. Just bear with me, ok?"

She didn't answer.

At first, he tried to tend to her with his gloves on, but they made it harder

for him to be gentle with her—to feel her skin on his.

With a sigh, he removed his gloves, placing them next to her before he got back to work. But that movement seemed to get her attention. She blinked, slowly looking from the gloves to him and back to the gloves, the unspoken question written all over her face.

He didn't bother to say anything, keeping his focus on her knees.

Bringing the alcohol wipes to the injured area, he noticed her wince. But she didn't whimper, or make any noise. She took it in quietly, letting him do his job.

He cleaned one knee. Then the other.

Applying healing ointment, he finally got some band-aids, carefully placing them over her wounds.

When it was all done, he felt pretty satisfied with himself and even prouder of her for taking it in stride like a champion.

"Can you give me your hands?" He asked as he lowered her dress over her legs, smoothing it out and dusting the dirt off it.

Something flickered in his pet's eyes. She hesitated for a moment before she offered her hands to him.

Just like with her knees, he took his time cleaning each wound, his whole focus on making sure each scrape was perfectly taken care of.

Yet as he gently cupped her hand, bringing the wipe to the bottom of her palm, he felt himself thrust in the past. A long ago memory reached the surface as he saw himself thirteen years back, wiping her hands just as he did now. There was familiarity, but there was also something else...an aching emptiness that he could not explain.

Pushing everything down, he focused on finishing her up, applying some ointment before adding the band-aid.

When he was done, he stood up, assessing her carefully.

"Thank you."

The words were so soft, so quiet he thought he misheard.

But he didn't.

Slowly, she brought her head up, meeting his gaze for the first time.

"Why did you run away from me?" He asked equally as softly.

He recognized the precariousness of the moment and the fact that she was still on edge, her entire body wound tight.

She opened her mouth to answer, but instead she just shook her head, shutting him out again.

"Zia," he took a seat next to her, taking her hand and holding it in his. She made to remove it, one sudden movement that was over before it even began. Somehow, she decided to allow herself that small touch.

She was likely still emotional from the book, Michele told himself. That was why she'd run. He'd caught her in a vulnerable moment and she hadn't wanted him to see her like that.

"Talk to me," he urged softly.

"Why are you here? You've been following me, haven't you?" she asked in a low but even voice.

"You already know the answer."

"Why?"

Slowly, she turned to look at him, giving him the privilege of gazing into those mesmerizing eyes of hers.

"Because everything you do interests me," he replied, almost flippantly.

She flinched, but she quickly masked it.

"I didn't think anything interested you other than your own person," she grumbled under her breath.

He blinked, shocked at her words, before he burst into laughter.

"Well, you can officially add yourself to the list now."

"So you admit you're a self-centered bastard?" She said the words so smoothly and without even blinking that it took Michele wholly by surprise.

"Of course I admit it. I never made a secret of that," he chuckled.

A small smile played at her lips, but she quickly recovered, forcing her mouth in a firm line.

"Why that book?"

"Huh?" Her brows went up in question.

"Why did you skip class to read that book?"

She blinked a couple of times as awareness sunk in. Not only was he aware she'd skipped her class, but he also knew what she'd been listening to.

"Of course you'd send me a Trojan horse," she mumbled.

Michele kept his remark to himself that he was surprised she knew what that was. He was learning to keep a lot of his thoughts to himself because he couldn't have been more wrong about her.

"Tell me about the book, pet," the word slipped from him before he could help himself.

She grimaced at the appellation but she didn't correct him again. She simply stared ahead as she replied to him in the same emotionless tone as

before—one belying the emotive display he'd seen only moments before.

"The heroine was relatable," she shrugged, seemingly not going to elaborate more on the topic.

Michele had only heard the end of the audiobook, and even then he'd mostly spaced out as he'd lost himself in watching her. Nonetheless, he remembered some characteristics of the heroine—one being that everyone underestimated her.

And that made him even more curious about what his pet meant. *How* did she relate to the heroine?

He needed to know it all. So he pushed further.

"In what way?"

Giving him a harsh stare, she asked with unusual aggression.

"What do you want from me, Michele? Just what do you want?"

"A conversation," he smoothly replied. "Just a normal conversation. Is that so hard?"

"I won't make myself look pitiful in your eyes if that's what you're after."

"Why would it be? I'm simply curious about you and why that book affected you so."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I know you," she said quietly. "You're always looking for a weakness to exploit. So why would I share something so private when you'd just take it and turn it against me?"

He was flabbergasted at her accusation for a brief moment before pride suffused his chest. He liked this combative side of her and the way she called him out on his bullshit. But as much as he admired it, he also wanted—no, *needed*—to know her thought process.

"What if I promise to behave myself?" he gave her a sheepish smile. "I'm not looking to start an argument, pet. I'm genuinely curious," he admitted.

She must have sensed the truth in his words because she gave a slight nod.

"Right," she shrugged. "I'm probably getting ahead of myself thinking you'd even remember anything I say. After all, I'm only good for one thing for you," she leveled him with her grave stare before smiling cynically, "and even that not so much, isn't that right?"

"Maybe I'm trying to see if you're good for something else too," he threw the option out there.

"Is this your new attempt to bulldoze your way into my life? Because I

won't..."

"Just answer the damn question, Zia. There's no trap, no hidden motive."

She didn't seem appeased, maybe even more belligerent. But she gave him what he was looking for.

"She proved everyone wrong through hard work and perseverance," she shrugged. "I know I'm not very gifted but I'd like to think that if I do my best and put in the work there will be a happily ever after for me too," the cadence of her voice dipped just as a blush stained her cheeks.

Sneaking a glance at him, she quickly averted her eyes.

"You can laugh now," she whispered.

"Why would I laugh? It's an admirable point of view. You just got one thing wrong."

Frowning, she fully turned towards him.

"There is no such thing as happily ever after," he stated confidently.

"You're just a cynic," she accused with an adorable pout.

"Maybe," he shrugged. "But do tell. Has anything in your life given you an indication that there's something better out there?" He arched a brow as he awaited her answer.

She mulled over the question for a moment.

"No," she started, and his smile widened. "But just because I haven't seen it doesn't mean there isn't. I can't generalize based on my limited knowledge of the world. I'm sure there are people out there who live very happy lives," she nodded, proud of herself and her answer.

"You're too optimistic, pet. See, that's your first mistake. Just because someone else is happy doesn't mean you will be too. Life isn't fair like that."

"If I'm optimistic then you're awfully *pessimistic*," she shot back, a hidden fire in her eyes.

He held his tongue as he was about to sarcastically praise her for her choice of words. But then it suddenly struck him that despite her disability and her age, she was quite well-spoken.

Why hadn't he taken note of that before?

The answer was simple. Because he'd had his preconceived notions about her so he'd shoved her in a box which he'd never bothered to open again.

"And grouchy. And arrogant. And self-important. And just..."

"Do tell. What else am I?" He leaned back, enthralled by her attempts to insult him.

"An unfeeling bastard," she pursed her lips in satisfaction. His widened in

amusement.

"I'm not objecting. You can go on," he motioned, inviting her to shred his character some more. Whereas before people had met their end for suggesting far less than she was, he couldn't find it in him to be mad at the exchange. If anything, he enjoyed the little spar, feeling more relaxed than he'd been in days.

"You remind me a lot of the hero in the book, actually," she suddenly mentioned, and Michele's ears perked up.

"Hear that," he laughed. "Me, a hero."

"Well, he wasn't a hero in the beginning either," she licked her lips, slowly lifting her gaze to his. "But he evolved into one."

Michele's expression turned serious.

"Don't make me into something I'm not, pet," he warned quietly.

A wry smile pulled at her lips.

"Don't worry about that. I'm not about to make the same mistake twice. I may be dumb, but I'm not *that* dumb," she laughed nervously.

"You're not dumb." He didn't know why he felt the need to defend her—though it was from herself—but it didn't sit right with him that anyone should insult her like that.

The words took her by surprise.

"You have a funny way of showing it," she shook her head.

"What do you mean," he frowned.

He might have made fun of her at times, might have even thought of her like that, but he'd never outrightly insulted her to her face.

"This," she waved between the two of them. "This is you thinking I'm more stupid than I actually am," she took a deep breath. "Do you really think that one cozy moment like this is going to erase all the pain you've caused me? That because I'm talking to you right now I'm ready to forgive and forget?"

"Well," he gave her his charming smile. "Yes."

His pet rolled her eyes as if he'd said the most inane thing.

"Then tell me one thing," she turned towards him, grabbing his hands with her own, the touch confusing him and leaving him reeling. "Why did you insist on the abortion? Why were you so against our child?"

She did her best to keep her voice from trembling as she directed her gaze towards him in the most pure, most artless way. Though her tone bore artificial strength, her eyes gave her away—she was giving him the last

chance.

He grit his teeth at the question, knowing she wasn't going to like the answer.

"No child of mine will *ever* be born, pet," he told her squarely. "Never."

"Why?" she kept foolishly probing, a semblance of hope in her voice.

"Because only death awaits that child," he said curtly, removing her touch and looking away, thereby ending the discussion.

He didn't specify what type of death, or who would dole it out.

Venezia didn't ask either.

She looked at him for a few more moments, memorizing his features as he was in that instant—the most real he'd ever been with her. The sun emphasized the paleness of his skin and the way his irises seemed almost translucent. Not unlike the first time he'd set his eyes on her, she got butterflies in her stomach and she couldn't help but recall the good times—those instances in which he'd been the closest thing she'd ever had to a friend. Her gaze traveled lower, to his lips, her own tingling in response as her body remembered his soft, sweet kisses, not the bruising ones. And she preferred it that way. She would remember *only* the good.

She looked her fill and stored that image away because she knew it would be the last time they'd be that cordial.

At some point, Michele was going to find out the truth.

He was going to find out that the doctor he'd forced to perform the abortion had not done so. That Venezia had begged her profusely until she'd relented.

He was going to find out that the child *would* be born—against all odds.

A surge of maternal protectiveness took shape within Venezia.

Michele might try to harm her child—for it was hers and hers alone—but he would never succeed. That was a vow she made to herself—even if her heart bled.

So let the war begin.

THIRTY-FIVE

ANDREAS

ANDREAS REWOUND THE FOOTAGE, THE WORDS SOUNDING OUT LOUD AND clear.

"You're pregnant," Noelle gasped.

"Yes," Venezia confirmed. "And if anyone finds out... I don't want anyone to know Michele is the father, or that he has anything at all to do with this baby..."

Selecting the small clip where Noelle had been in the same room with Venezia discussing her pregnancy, Andreas clicked delete.

One click and everything would be forgotten.

At least for now.

It wasn't the first time he'd done it—altered the footage ever so slightly to remove all traces of Venezia's pregnancy. And with Michele's obsession about watching her every day, it was likely not the last time he would have to either.

He'd been the happiest to find out that Miss Venezia hadn't aborted the baby. But then he'd realized what that could mean for Michele.

It would be either the best news, or the worst.

At that moment, Michele wasn't yet ready to know he was to become a father—would likely not be ready for a long time. But when he would be, Andreas knew he would become the greatest father possible.

It was why he was doing all this—why he was betraying his friend's confidence when he knew how much it meant to him.

Michele wasn't ready yet. But if things went according to plan, he eventually would be.

Until then, Andreas would do his best to keep the secret and help the two

lovers from behind the scenes.

If anyone could bring Michele back from the path of self-destruction he'd embarked on it was Miss Venezia.

Only her.

For that, she had Andreas' full support.

After all, everything he ever did was for Michele's sake.

Only ever for him.

TO BE CONTINUED

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