



The Enforcer

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Category: Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia, Action

Description: A scarred ex-marine vs. a cute blond in need of a husband. Who will win this battle of the wills?

Hector.

In real life, the Beast doesn't end up with Beauty.

So I have to stay away from her.

Even if it will kill me to see her with another man.

Mary.

He thinks I can't handle him.

But I know what I want.

I will wear him down if it's the last thing I do.

Game on...

Total Pages (Source): 100

CHAPTER 1

MARY

The call came in the dead of the night.

Mary's head almost hit the wall when she reached for her phone on the nightstand. Then she remembered that her bedroom no longer had space for a nightstand, since it was so tiny. Three months in her new home, and she still hadn't gotten used to the lack of size of the apartment. After having lived in big mansions all her life, it was quite the adjustment.

She reached for the window sill above her to pick up her phone. Britney was calling. Her friend calling this late was never a good sign.

"Britney. Everything okay?"

"I... I'm so sorry, Mary. I couldn't stop myself." It was all she croaked out, and then she started sobbing.

Oh, no.

"I tried... I really did..."

Mary pushed her legs over the side of the bed and switched on the lights. "Where are you?"

“I can’t do this anymore,” Britney rambled on. “It’s too much. I’m tired. So tired. Zoe deserves a better sister than me. She deserves someone like you. Can she... can she stay with you for another night?”

“Of course she can.” She grabbed her jeans from the dresser and put them on, which was no feat with one hand. “Please tell me you’re home.” And not in some dirty alley.

Another sob. “I’m home.”

Mary had known that the “Kicking your Addiction” program would be hard on Britney. Though, she hadn’t expected her to take to the needle this quickly again.

“Okay, sit tight, I’m coming over. I just need to find someone to watch over Zoe.” Even though her goddaughter liked to think of herself as all grown up—and part-time superhero—she still was a six-year-old.

She ended the call, finished getting dressed, and went to Zoe’s room. The girl was sleeping in a bed that seemed to disappear between stacks of boxes that cramped up the place. Once again, Mary wished that her sister Gina would pick up her stuff that mostly seemed to consist of apparel and shoes. Gina wouldn’t want to be caught dead in Mary’s apartment, but she sure liked to use it as a storage unit.

She was debating on who to call at this hour. Her cousin Jazzy or her friend Tommie would usually be her first choice, but they were at a convention until tomorrow. Jazzy had given her a number for emergencies, though. Not having another option, she called it.

“Yeah.”

Mary froze and dropped back onto the bed. She would recognize that deep, grouchy voice that sent delicious tingles down her spine any time of the day. What was Hector

doing answering Jazzy's emergency number?

"Um... this is Mary. I'm looking for Jazzy."

"This is an emergency number that connects to Diaz Security."

"Oh." She wasn't sure how to continue. She knew Hector provided the security for Jazzy's husband.

"What's the emergency?"

The sarcasm in his voice couldn't be missed. The man really didn't like her and for the love of God, she had no idea why. "I need a sitter."

Silence. Then, "Excuse me?"

That came out wrong, so she tried again. "I just got a call from a friend. She's not doing well, so I have to go over there. Her little sister is staying at my place and I can't take her with me, so I need someone to look after her."

"Call someone else."

She silently prayed for patience. "Don't you think that if that had been an option, I would have done so already?" His attitude was starting to piss her off. He was the only person who could get under her skin so fast.

"Shit. Fine. I'll be there in fifteen."

"In fifteen?" she asked, but he'd already hung up. She didn't know where Hector lived but she didn't think it was in her part of town.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Still, fifteen minutes later, right when she put on her sneakers, the doorbell rang.

Opening the door, she discovered he wasn't alone. Next to him stood another behemoth of a man. With his rippling muscles and shoulder-length hair, he was basically a blond, friendlier-looking version of Hector.

"Hi there, I'm Achilles," the stranger introduced himself.

Hector and Achilles? There must be an interesting story behind that. If only she had the time. "Nice to meet you, Achilles. I'm Mary. Zoe only needs one sitter, really."

"Achilles is here for the kid, I'm going with you. Jazzy would give me shit if I let you go alone at night like this."

Right. Of course he found it necessary to point out that he wasn't here of his own accord.

His lovely words were followed by a frown. "You gonna let us in?"

"Of course." She stepped back, and they followed her into her living room. The small place seemed to shrink as the two large men filled the room.

They were sizing up the stacks of boxes covering half the hallway—Gina's stuff hadn't fit in just the guest room.

"My sister doesn't have her own place yet." She suddenly felt the need to defend herself.

“How the mighty have fallen,” Gina had scoffed when she’d first entered Mary’s apartment. Unlike her sister, Mary was a ‘glass half full’ kind of person. Yes, she no longer lived in the luxury her late grandfather—banker to the mob—had provided her with, but her new life presented new opportunities. It didn’t have the restrictions it had before, and that was incredibly liberating. She could follow her own path instead of the one her grandfather would have chiseled out for her. There was no reason she couldn’t make it on her own. Millions of women did it every day, under far worse circumstances.

Mary grabbed her bag and keys from the coffee table.

“Thank you so much for coming over. Zoe’s asleep, so she shouldn’t be any trouble. Please, make yourself at home.”

Hector grunted and walked outside.

When she started toward her car, he shook his head. “Not happening.”

She had to give it to him; he would barely fit in her tiny Toyota.

To her surprise, he bypassed the van with the Diaz Security logo on it and stepped onto a Harley. Not wanting to get into a discussion about transportation, she just put on the helmet he gave her.

She told him the address and he took off.

The ride over to Britney’s house was nothing if not amazing. It was the first time she got to ride on a bike and she loved every second of it.

Unfortunately, it ended far too quickly. Britney’s place looked even worse from the outside than Mary’s did.

When Hector made an attempt to dismount, she stopped him.

“Britney gets nervous around big men. Could you please wait here while I check up on her?” She didn’t wait for an answer but dismounted, handing him over the helmet.

“You have fifteen.”

What was it with him and fifteen minutes? She hurried up the stairs to Britney’s apartment while contemplating what to do. They had met at a support group at the women’s shelter. It was the place where Mary had found the courage to speak out. There was great power in confronting your traumas and fears. The alternative was going down a rabbit hole of denial that often resulted in alcohol, drugs, a depression, or a combination of those. She considered herself lucky for finding the right people to support her and not going down that dark road. Britney, unfortunately, hadn’t been that lucky.

Using the spare key, she entered the apartment, unsure of what she would find inside. A lot of times, Britney would just be lying on the couch, staring at a wall.

The only sound coming from the living room was some grunting.

She opened the door to the living room and came face to face with a man just stepping off of Britney.

“I’ll be back for the rest tomorrow, cunt,” he sneered, pulling his zipper up.

Lovely. Mary hadn’t seen him here before. Britney didn’t usually invite men over. Especially not the creepy-looking kind with bloodshot eyes and bad teeth.

She looked past his shoulder. Britney was sprawled over the couch, naked from the waist down. Her eyes were closed, and Mary wasn’t sure if she was even conscious.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Ivan. This slut’s boyfriend.”

Her lips thinned. She really doubted that he was Britney’s anything, apart from her drug supplier, maybe.

“Get out.”

She stepped over Chinese take-out boxes that littered the floor, and knelt next to her friend. She grabbed a blanket off the floor and threw it over Britney’s lower body to cover her nakedness. Britney was in really bad shape. Her eyes were sunken into her pale face and she barely had a pulse.

Suddenly an arm wrapped around her chest.

She yelped when Ivan pushed her onto the ratty carpet. She swung her fists, but to no avail. He straddled her body and grabbed her hands in one fist.

“Get off of me!” she started yelling, which only made him laugh.

“I like ‘em feisty.”

Oh God. His breath smelled like a sewer.

Okay, don’t panic. You know what to do.

When his hands went to her breasts and ripped open her top, she made her move.

Her teeth latched onto his scruffy cheek and she bit. Hard. Not letting go until she tasted blood.

Yuck.

“Fucking bitch!”

She poked him in the eye, followed by a move she’d learned from self-defense class, and got away from under Ivan. Those classes Jazzy had dragged her to were finally paying off.

Stepping behind the coffee table, she put more distance between them, and took a defensive stance.

Adrenaline was coursing through her veins, making her blood sing. Knowing that she could take care of herself was incredibly empowering. Unfortunately, she wasn’t sure as what to do next. Her Krav Maga lessons had been about fending off your attacker and then run the hell away. Well, that last part hadn’t been in the instructions, but she’d filled that in herself. Except, she couldn’t just leave Britney with this creep.

Ivan crawled back on his feet, his eyes blazing fire. “I’m gonna cut you open, bitch.”

She sucked in a breath when he pulled out a knife, her flight instinct almost taking over.

Make a stand!

Do I have to?

Yes, you do!

Following the advice of her inner dialog, she was just channeling her inner Amazon, when the door was bashed in. Yep, bashed in, because Hector literally broke the door off its hinges when he stormed inside.

One look at her torn clothes, and his eyes turned into razor sharp shards of green. He didn't speak when he walked up to Ivan. In the blink of an eye, he disarmed him. Then he just grabbed him by the throat and introduced his face to the wall. Repeatedly.

Mary winced when she heard bones break. She could see Death in Hector's eyes. Maybe she should stop him. On the other hand, prison had conjugal visits. It might be her only way in with Hector Diaz.

"You have any idea who you're messing with?" Ivan spewed. "I'm Ivan, and—"

Hector swung him toward the sink. Ivan's head thudded against the sink mirror and bounced back. Hector kicked his knee, then did a spin to his head until Ivan was knocked out cold.

Mary checked on Britney again. Her not waking up, after all the ruckus around her, was a bad sign.

"Overdose," Hector said, while pulling out his phone. His eyes went to the needle on the table.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“Oh no, no, no, no.” What would she tell Zoe?

“Mary?”

She blinked up at Hector. Judging by his frown, it wasn't the first time he called her name.

“Yes?”

“Why don't you get your friend some clothes? And some other stuff she's gonna need.”

Right. She got up and busied herself by stuffing some underwear and clothes into a plastic bag she'd found underneath Britney's bed.

The next few hours passed by in a blur. Britney was loaded into an ambulance and they followed suit. Then there were nurses and doctors to speak to. Nobody could tell her much, except that Britney was in really bad condition. Thankfully, she wasn't alone; Hector didn't leave her side once. He didn't say much—the guy wasn't a talker—but she drew strength from his presence.

Then, around three a.m., the news came: Britney didn't make it. Just as Hector had predicted, it had been an overdose that had ended her life.

Mary felt numb while the doctor told her in a clean and medical way what had happened. All the comforting words in the world couldn't drive away the pain. Britney had only been twenty-five, merely four years older than Mary, and now she

was gone. Her life had hardly begun before it ended.

There were forms to be filled out. So many forms. Again, Hector was her rock. He kept her calm and even took care of funeral arrangements.

By the time they returned to her apartment, Mary was exhausted. All she wanted to do was crawl back into bed and think about tomorrow, well, tomorrow.

They were met with Zoe and Achilles sitting on the couch, watching TV. The big man dwarfed Zoe who was plastered to his side.

The little girl jumped up when she saw her.

“Mary! We are watching Wonder Woman.” Then she came to a halt, peeking past Mary. “You’re the Wolfman,” she whispered, looking up at Hector with eyes like saucers.

“I might have told her a tale or two about real heroes,” Achilles said, getting up. “The PG-rated version, of course.”

“It’s late, cupcake. You really have to get back to bed.” Tomorrow wasn’t a school night, but it was still well past her bedtime.

A pout followed. “But the movie’s not finished yet.”

Achilles tousled Zoe’s hair. “Listen to Mary, oh fierce Amazon.”

This earned him a chuckle. Not that the words had any effect. Zoe was practically bouncing on her feet.

Mary groaned when she spotted the crumbs and brown layer around Zoe’s mouth.

“You gave her chocolate chip cookies.”

Achilles had the decency to look guilty. “Sorry about that. She woke up and looked frightened when she saw me, so I offered her snacks. It immediately broke the ice.”

Of course it had. Zoe was a cookie monster. “Thank you for watching her.”

She turned to Hector, who was still standing in the doorway. “I want to thank you as well, for—”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Let’s go, Achilles.”

And just like that, without him even letting her finish her sentence, Hector left.

Achilles gave her an apologetic smile. “Don’t mind him. Gratitude makes him uncomfortable. If you need a sitter again, give me a call. I was voted coolest uncle last month.” He sounded proud.

Then he was gone as well, leaving her alone with a little girl who, as of tonight, was practically alone in the world.

Mary crashed next to Zoe on the couch and pulled her close. Zoe was used to Britney being ‘sick’ all the time. Her sister had checked out mentally a long time ago. For the past year, Britney’s depression had gotten so bad, she rarely left the house anymore. Mary was the one to take Zoe to school and pick her up on the days Britney couldn’t leave her bed.

As she hugged Zoe closer, her brain hurt from thinking of the consequences of Britney’s death. There was one dark, prospect looming above all. With Britney out of the picture, Zoe had one living remaining family member left; her uncle. She remembered seeing the scars on Britney’s body, the small dots of cigarette burns

covering her arms and chest.

Over her dead body was that monster getting anywhere near Zoe.

CHAPTER 2

HECTOR

Hector's personal Hell on Earth had a name: Mary Rossi. The sweetest woman he had ever smelled, but couldn't have. As he drove over to the club, he swore he could still smell her perfume on him. Having her pressed against him on his bike had been torture. He'd been hard the second he felt her luscious tits against his back.

He cracked open the engine in the hope that the night would make her smell fade away. He wished he could as easily crack open the door to his memory, because every time he thought back on that asshole who put his hands on her, he wanted to commit murder. He should have broken more than his nose and leg. He should have broken everything, and then finished by throwing him out of a window. The fucker hadn't been good enough to lick her little toes, let alone touch her. For a moment there, he had been consumed by rage, just like in the old days. The days that he fought in backend alleys to make a buck. When he let out his beast and pummeled his opponent within an inch of his life. Ending the night with a bunch of women in his bed, all eager to please Hector 'the Beast' Diaz, street-fighter.

He thought he'd sworn off the days when he was controlled by spurts of rage. The military was the world's best anger management program. Except, when he'd seen Mary's torn shirt, he'd lost it.

The first time he saw Mary had been at Gio's wedding, months ago. She'd been glowing in a pink dress, talking to someone over a flute of champagne. It had felt like someone had sucker punched him. Never before had he been overwhelmed by so

much lust. He had just wanted to take her into a room, or against a wall—anywhere—and have his way with her. But classy women like Mary Rossi weren't meant for men like him. He was too rough around the edges; too damaged, too dark, too violent. Too much of a lot of things. So, what did a man do when he got the hots for a woman he couldn't have? He tried to replace her with something that came close.

He took the exit to South Beach and parked in the back of Club Flux. It wasn't his favorite of places to go, since it was co-owned by a man he loathed. It was, however, one of the hottest clubs in San Francisco, and drew a very diverse crowd. And since Diaz Security provided the security for the club, Hector came and went there on occasion.

He took a seat at the bar and gave a heads up to the bartender.

Brent gave him a chin jerk. "Want the usual, Wolf?"

He nodded and got a Corona in no time.

The place was booming, and he told himself that he wasn't going to fuck another blond with long curly hair and baby blues.

"Hi there, big guy. Wanna buy me a drink?"

As far as pickup lines went, that wasn't the worst he'd ever heard. The woman that sat next to him on the bar was a redhead. She had cropped hair, barely touching her shoulders, but most of all, she didn't look anything like Mary.

Perfect.

Her eyes roamed over his face and tats, and she licked her bottom lip.

Women usually had one of two reactions when they saw the red scars covering his cheek; either they got scared and averted their eyes, or they wanted to fuck him. It seemed as if there was no in between.

He tapped on the bar to get Brent's attention. "Give the lady a drink."

That was all it took for her to plaster herself against him, brushing her breasts against his arm. She was hot and eager, but most of all, she was easy. He knew he could have her in the back alley if he wanted to. He decided to take her home, because that was where his stuff was.

The second they left the club, she groped his ass. They rounded the corner toward the empty parking spot.

An image of Mary's lips popped into his head. He loved her lips. They were puffy, the bottom lip slightly bigger than the upper. His dick would look fucking good between them.

Don't go there, Diaz. Not again.

He looked at the redhead. "Get on your knees."

Red did as he asked and pulled out his dick. She gave him a long lick from his balls to the top. Then she started giving him little kisses, playing with him.

He wasn't in the mood for foreplay. His hands pulled her hair tight. "Get to work."

"Yes! Hurt me, daddy."

Ah shit, she was one of those women. One look at his scars and she concocted this silly fantasy of him liking to beat women. He didn't do the 'daddy' shit, and he sure

as hell didn't get off on hurting women.

Suddenly the night was pierced with the sound of an alarm going off. Then a man shouted to his right.

“Hey! What the hell is going on over there?”

Hector turned toward the sound coming from his right. Shit, it was his alarm. He let the redhead go, tucked his dick back in his pants, and rushed over to his bike, only to discover that his tires were slashed. Fucking great. Some asshole had put his hands on his baby.

Brent was standing next to his bike, with a smoke. “Sorry man, the damage was already done by the time I saw him.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“You recognized him?” He’d been feeling eyes on him for a couple of weeks now. He’d attributed it to his PTSD acting up again and didn’t give it another thought. But now he wondered if it wasn’t just his imagination and if there was a connection.

“Nope. He had a hoodie on. Damn kids.”

Since he wasn’t going to find a tow truck this time of night, he called Achilles. He’d forgotten about the redhead until she appeared at his side again.

“Gonna take me home, hotshot?”

“Not tonight. Little busy over here.” He pulled away when she went for his zipper again. “Brent. Why don’t you take...”

“Heidi,” she said.

“Right. Heidi over here back inside. Drinks on me.”

She left him with a pout, an arm around Brent.

It didn’t take long for Achilles to arrive. He somewhat begrudgingly got into his friend’s car. He hated cars, no matter how spacious the interior was. Closed spaces were not his thing.

“I can’t believe some prick slashed my tires, while I was only standing a few feet away.”

“Happens to the best of us, man.”

“Yeah? When was the last time it happened to you?” So, he was a bit sensitive concerning his bike. It was a vintage model and he’d bought it from his first prize money. He had literally bled for his wheels.

“Last week,” Achilles retorted. “Right at the back of the club, just like with you.”

“Tough neighborhood, I guess.”

“I guess. Though, I’m beginning to wonder now if it isn’t something more.” He dropped the subject and went straight to a topic Hector wanted to talk about even less. “So, about tonight. You went to help Mary, huh?”

“Your point?”

“Just that you could’ve sent someone else. One of the guys who were on call.”

Nosy bastard. This was exactly the reason why he had opted to drive over to Mary’s by himself and had asked Achilles to meet him there. If you didn’t share a car, you couldn’t be grilled.

When he didn’t answer, Achilles smiled. “I’m glad you’re finally making a move.”

“There’s no move.”

“It was about time,” Achilles simply continued. “You two have been mooning over each other forever.”

“There’s no mooning. I don’t fucking moon.”

“Sure, sure.”

“Let it go, man. She’s not for me. I don’t want her.” When Achilles gave him a look, he shrugged. “Fine, I want her. But only for one night.” Surely his obsession with her would pass after that. “She isn’t the ‘fuck ‘em and leave ‘em’ kind of girl. Not to mention the fact that Jazzy would have my balls if I hurt her cousin. Mary’s the type that wants hearts and flowers and shit. The kind of guy she can bring home to her mother. I ain’t that man.”

“Her mother is an alcoholic living in France with her third husband.”

Hector hadn’t known that. He tried to steer clear of all and any information regarding Mary Rossi. “Doesn’t matter. And how the hell did you know that? You’ve been checking up on her?”

“Stop the growling. I came across an old file on her. There was one on every Rossi girl. Gio must have compiled them when he married Jazzy. Your friend doesn’t do anything half-assed.”

Hector had almost forgotten about those files. He hadn’t been there when Gio had to pick a bride out of the three Rossi granddaughters. His choice had fallen on the most brazen of the girls: Jocelyn. But then his bride-to-be had literally fled the country to get away from him. Hector had been the one who had dragged her back, kicking and screaming. His friend was ruthless when it came to what he wanted. In the end, it had worked out for Gio, though.

Hector had to admit he wasn’t that much different from Gio. Meeting the Dettas had made him realize that blood didn’t make family. Blood didn’t mean shit when it came to loyalty or love.

It was the Dettas’ grandmother who had taught him that. She had even tried to teach

him a value or two. One of them was to always protect the ones weaker than you. Not hurt them. Him making a ploy for Mary Rossi would definitely hurt her. Because if he ever got her in his bed, he wouldn't be able to let her go.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

And no woman should be forced to live with his baggage.

CHAPTER 3

MARY

The morning after Britney passed away, Mary made Zoe's favorite pancakes. It was a Saturday and Zoe didn't have to go to school. She still hadn't told Zoe that her sister had died, not knowing how to break the news to the little girl.

Sitting at the kitchen table, while drowning her pancakes in maple syrup, Zoe was talking a mile an hour. She was still in her PJs but had put on her red cape. Obviously, she had decided to be a superhero for the weekend again.

She needed to tell Zoe about her sister. Zoe had never known her father, but she had already lost her mother. A woman she didn't even remember. And now her sister. Mary had no idea how to tell her.

Which was why she had sent a message to the help troops an hour ago.

"Can we go to the movies today?" Zoe asked.

"Sure. But, um, we need to talk first."

"About what?"

"Finish your breakfast first."

Avoiding a conversation you dread?

Postponing it. Not avoiding.

How very adult of you.

The pancakes were gone in no time and Zoe expectantly looked up at her.

Mary opened and closed her mouth. She plucked Zoe off the bar stool and went to the couch where Zoe got comfortable on her lap. She was a real snuggle bunny.

“I have to tell you something, cupcake.”

“You don’t want to see a movie?”

“No, no, I do. I just...”

The doorbell rang. It was the most beautiful sound in the world. She nudged Zoe off her lap and went for the door.

“We came as soon as we heard,” Jazzy said, giving her a hug.

Tommie was next. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

She glanced at Zoe who just put on a DVD.

“I haven’t told Zoe yet,” she whispered. “Please come in. You guys being here will hopefully give me the strength to do this.”

“Uncle Tommie!” The second Zoe spotted Tommie, she let out a squeal and headed over to him.

He grabbed her from the floor and threw her in the air. “Who’s my favorite superhero?”

“Me!”

Tommie dropped her on the couch and then plopped next to her. “What are you watching?”

“Thor.” Then she whispered, as if sharing a secret, “Thor was here last night.”

“Oh, my. And you didn’t even call me?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“She means Achilles,” Mary explained, as she sat on Zoe’s other side.

“Then you should’ve definitely called me,” Tommie grumbled.

Jazzy dropped on the recliner next to the TV. “What, no hug for Aunt Jazzy?”

Another squeal and Zoe launched herself at Jazzy. “Do you want to see a movie with us today? We can have ice cream later. Or chocolate chip cookies. Or both.” She sounded hopeful.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Jazzy said, looking at Mary over Zoe’s head.

Mary shut down the TV and took a deep breath. “Zoe, can you please come here? I need to tell you something.”

It was as if the little girl sensed her anxiety, because she frowned and plopped herself down between Mary and Tommie.

So, Mary started talking. She clutched onto Zoe’s hand, happy to see that Tommie had done the same, and broke the news.

The little girl was eerily silent at first. Then the tears started streaming down her cheeks.

“Did Britney go to the angels, like mommy?”

“Yes, baby girl. She went to Heaven to be with the angels.”

Silence. More tears followed until Zoe hiccupped. “Will the angels take me there too?”

“Not until you’re a really old lady,” Tommie chimed in. “You know, when your hair is gray, and you walk with a stick.”

Zoe’s eyes turned back to her. “And you? They can’t have you!” Little arms swung around Mary’s neck.

She slowly stroked Zoe’s back. “No, baby girl. I’m staying right here with you.”

Life had no guarantees, but right now, Zoe needed one.

As Mary comforted Zoe, who was now sobbing against her chest, she thought about Britney.

There had always been this pain surrounding her. This urgency to break free from the demons that haunted her. Britney had often told her that she couldn’t handle living in this world. A world in which her abuser still roamed the streets freely. A world in which she still felt the cigarette burns on her skin when she woke up. Mary hoped that Britney had finally found the peace she had been looking for.

They sat for about an hour when the doorbell rang. Mary looked up, surprised. She handed Zoe over to Tommie and went for the door.

There was a woman standing there, in a stiff, gray suit.

“Mrs. Rossi? Mary Rossi?”

“It’s Ms. Rossi, actually, but yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Clara Wilson from the Department of Social Services. I was told Zoe is staying with you.”

Immediately, a cold lump of ice settled in her stomach. “What’s this about?” Of course, she knew what it was about. She knew all too well. She’d just believed that she would have more time. Time to find a way to keep Zoe with her.

Judging by Mrs. Wilson’s face, her time was up.

“Are you a relative?” she asked.

“I’m her godmother.”

The woman scrambled to look for something on her notebook. “But not a blood relative?”

Mary didn’t like the sound of where this was going. “No. But Zoe doesn’t have any blood relatives. At least none that she has any contact with. I’m the closest she has to family. I’ve been taking care of Zoe for years.”

A look of sympathy crossed the woman’s face. “I understand where you’re coming from and what you are trying to tell me, but I can’t let Zoe stay with you. Our protocol dictates that—”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“Your protocol?” Mary took another breath when she realized that she’d raised her voice. Shutting the door a bit, so Zoe wouldn’t overhear, she said, “I may not have given birth to her, but I love her as my own.”

“I can see that, but you’re not her immediate family. I can’t let her stay with you.”

This could not be happening. “I’m not letting you take her.”

The woman gave her another sympathetic look. Frankly, she was getting sick of them.

“I can assure you that I’m taking her to a safe place. If you don’t cooperate, I will return with the police. I’m sure you don’t want to traumatize Zoe like that.”

I can lock her up in the basement; take Zoe and run.

Or, you could try this the legal, not ending behind bars, way. Orange is not your color.

Option two it is.

“No, I wouldn’t want that,” she said softly.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, could you please ask her to come here?”

Mary knew the woman was only doing her job. There was no malice in her voice, as if she was enjoying tearing them apart. Which was a shame, because it would have

made it easier to hate her.

“I’m coming with. I’d like to see where you’re taking her.” She shushed the protest forming on the woman’s lips. “Don’t tell me no. I’m not letting her go to a strange place without me. Please, she’s been through enough. She has only just learned about her sister’s death an hour ago.”

When Mrs. Wilson nodded, Mary dragged her feet back to the living room. Every step felt as if she was walking to her death.

Zoe looked up when Mary knelt in front of her and took her hand.

“Cupcake, there’s a lady who’s going to take you to a new place. We have to go. But it’s only temporary, okay?”

Tommie frowned, then understanding dawned on his face. Jazzy just cursed. Had Mary’s heart not been in shambles, she would have made Jazzy put a dollar in the swear jar.

Zoe’s tiny hand tightened in hers. “Are you coming with?”

“Yes, baby girl. I’m coming with.”

The look of trust on Zoe’s face was going to haunt her forever. The little girl had no idea that Mary would be forced to leave her behind with the CPS lady.

“Now, go to your room and get dressed.”

“Can I take Spidey with me?”

“Of course you can.” She never slept without her Spiderman stuffed doll.

When Zoe had disappeared into her room, Mary's forced smile cracked.

She was immediately boxed in by her cousin and friend.

"We're going to fix this, Mary." Jazzy had a determined gleam in her eyes.

"We sure are," Tommie chimed in.

"You're not alone in this. That little girl belongs with you. I'm sorry about your friend, but honestly, I think Zoe spent more time with you than with her own sister."

Jazzy wasn't wrong. "I'm not a blood relative."

"So what? Zoe doesn't have any blood relatives, does she now. So, this means—"

"Except, she does," Mary croaked.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Her cousin looked puzzled. “Then why did they allow Zoe to stay with Britney in the first place? No offense, but she was an addict. A recovering one or not, she certainly wasn’t capable of being guardian to a little kid.”

Mary got up, shaking a little. “You know where Britney and I met. Zoe has an uncle who likes to drink.” She didn’t need say more.

Jazzy’s eyes almost turned feral. “That uncle will get Zoe over my dead body.”

She loved her cousin, who was like a sister. No, she was better than her own sister. Because, as usual, when she needed Gina the most, she was nowhere to be found.

Zoe emerged from her room, dressed in jeans and a pink sweater, holding Spidey in her arms. Unlike her own sister, Mary wasn’t going to abandon Zoe to her fate.

She took Zoe’s hand and they went outside, following Mrs. Wilson.

The last few hours had been the worst hours of her life. Zoe had cried, then screamed, and eventually begged Mary to not leave her behind. She hadn’t asked about Britney once, which worried Mary for an entirely different reason than one might think. It was the frown on Mrs. Wilson’s face when she asked Zoe about her sister, and Zoe still kept sobbing for Mary. It was the way Mrs. Wilson’s pencil had started scribbling in her dreaded notebook, as if she was putting another stripe on it, and it wasn’t one in favor of Mary.

Mary was absolutely heartbroken when she returned to her apartment. She was met by Jazzy and Tommie, still sitting in her living room.

“How did it go?” Jazzy asked.

Mary dropped onto the couch, feeling like crying herself. She kept seeing Zoe’s crushed face. The girl didn’t understand what had just happened. One minute, they were having breakfast, and the next, she was left behind with strangers. She just didn’t understand, because she always went back home with Mary. Which wasn’t healthy, perhaps, but it was better than being in a group home. Perhaps it had been wrong to let Zoe get so dependent on her, but she loved that kid. She wasn’t giving her up without a fight.

“I need help, Jaz. You should have seen Zoe’s face. The hurt, the disappointment. She doesn’t understand. A six-year-old doesn’t care about laws and blood relatives. We were going to...” She hiccupped. “Tonight is cupcake night.”

Jazzy handed her a tissue. “I spoke to a lawyer and we have an appointment in an hour. Let’s go.”

“Wait. What? When did you have time to speak to a lawyer?”

Jazzy gave her a look. “Um, you’re forgetting that my brother-in-law is one. Jackson’s area isn’t family law, but I’m sure he can help us out.”

“We will figure this out, Mary,” Tommie assured her. “That little girl still owes me a batch of cookies for losing at Mario Kart.”

If it had been his intention to make her smile, it worked. Those two were always holding some kind of video game tournament which was just another reminder of how much Zoe enriched her life.

“We’ll get you the best lawyer in town,” Jazzy promised.

“I don’t think I can afford the best of anything,” Mary admitted. “How about a ‘good enough’ lawyer?”

“Could you please, for once, leave your pride at the door?” Jazzy sounded exasperated. “You didn’t accept anything from me after Grandfather died and the mansion was sold, and I respected that choice. I even pretend to be okay with you living in the bad part of town. But this is a little kid we’re talking about. Please, let me help you. Isn’t this what family is for?”

Mary didn’t have much to bring against that logic, or anything at all, really, so she gave in.

They went over to Detta Tower to meet with Jazzy’s brother-in-law. Like all the Detta brothers, Jackson sported jet black hair and piercing blue eyes. Mary knew him to be the most analytical-minded brother, a trait she could really use right now.

Jackson ushered them into his office where he stood against the San Francisco skyline that was filled with sky scrapers, dominated by the Transamerica Pyramid building.

He got straight to business, as he was prone to do.

“Ladies, Tommie.” Then he looked straight at her. “I’ve been on the phone with a friend of mine. He’s one of the top family law lawyers of San Fran. Since he won’t be back in town for the next few days, I took the liberty of hiring him for you. I already received a message that he has petitioned for temporary custody. There will be an emergency hearing within a week.”

Mary groaned. “A whole week?”

“Within a week. In judicial time, that usually means about five work days.” His eyes zoomed in on her. “How old are you, Mary?”

“Twenty-one. I know that’s young, but I’ve been taking care of Zoe since she was three. Britney and I met at the shelter three years ago.”

Jackson didn’t make any notes. She remembered he had an eidetic memory. “What about Zoe’s father?”

“There’s no name on the birth certificate. Britney told me once that her mother didn’t have a clue who the guy was.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“I’m going to be honest here. You’re in your early twenties, single, live in a rundown apartment, and make just enough to make ends meet. This is going to be tough.”

“Money won’t be an issue. You know that, Jax,” Jazzy said, before Mary could gather her thoughts.

Jackson smirked. “Yes, I know that you’ve wrapped my brother around your little finger, sis.”

Jazzy fluttered her eyelashes in exaggeration. “As is the duty of any wife.”

He shook his head and focused back on Mary. “Even with the Dettas backing you up financially, you’re still a single, twenty-one-year old. It would be different if you were married and could show a stable family life. Something a couple ready to adopt would be able to do. Do you have a partner, Mary?”

I wish.

Sadly, every potential prince she had kissed so far had turned out to be a frog, the latest being Josh. That had ended six months ago, right after the death and demise of her grandfather. Apparently, Josh had expected to land himself an heir. When that ship had crashed and burned, he’d sailed out of her life.

On the imaginary yacht he bought with your money.

Sometimes she hated her inner snark.

Her shoulders slumped. “No, I don’t.”

Jackson’s eyes spoke volumes of what he thought her chances were in court. “I’ll have my assistant mail you the contact info of your lawyer. You should call him and go over the specifics.”

Who was she kidding? No judge was going to trust a six-year-old that wasn’t of her blood to a single, twenty-one-year-old art teacher.

It was as if the corners of her world got darker and darker until she could hardly see the light anymore.

CHAPTER 4

MARY

She dashed out of Jackson’s office. Yes,dashed. Strode out like a bat out of hell. She needed air. Needed to be alone and gather her thoughts, all while trying not to throw up.

The image of Zoe, clutching Spidey, begging Mary to take them with her, was etched into her mind.

“But why can’t I go with you? I don’t want to stay here.”

“Please. I’ll be good. I will never eat too much cookie dough again.”

“Mary? Mary! Please don’t go. Please.”

On her way to the elevators, she almost bumped into Hector. Great. There he was; the object of her fantasies, in all his bulky, growly glory, and she looked like crap.

One look at her blotched face—she wasn't a pretty crier—and he frowned. "What the fuck happened to you?"

He was always so eloquent. Today she wasn't in the mood to scold him about another f-bomb; she felt like cursing herself. Unfortunately, she couldn't get any words past the enormous lump in her throat.

She shot past him and took the stairs. Jazzy called after her, but she ignored her.

Her cousin caught up with her two floors down. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going downstairs."

"I can see that. But why are you taking the stairs?" Jazzy sounded more curious than annoyed.

"I like taking the steps. It's great cardio." It was also a slower way to get back home to her empty apartment.

"We're on the twenty-sixth floor. That's a lot of steps."

"I just need time to think. I'll take the elevator when I've found a solution to my problem."

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

You're going to end up in the basement.

No, I'm not.

Found a solution yet?

...

She descended another floor, with Jazzy right on her heels. Her cousin was nothing if not tenacious and, honestly, right now, that was the attitude Mary needed to adopt herself. Except, she wasn't anything like Jazzy.

"Would you stop running for a second?" Jazzy practically growled. "I would think that the key to getting Zoe back is pretty obvious."

Mary came to a halt and spun around. "How is that?"

Jazzy started typing on her phone. "All you need is a husband. That, and a house in a good neighborhood, with nice schools. So, here is what we're going to do..."

As her cousin began unfolding a plan, Mary almost kicked herself for not thinking of it herself. It was so obvious.

A flicker of hope started growing in her chest, expanding, until it turned into a blazing sun.

The next morning, after a night filled with nightmares of Britney and Zoe, Mary was summoned to Giovanni Detta's office. Getting a call from his PA couldn't be a good sign. Then she remembered what she'd discussed with Jazzy the previous day, and she relaxed.

The Detta Tower was a short walk from Union Square. She'd taken an Uber, as it was difficult to find a good parking space so close to the city center. The tall buildings on her right cast lonely shadows across the sidewalk that was buzzing with people in business suits.

Gio's assistant let her into his spacious office with a view over the Financial District.

To her surprise, she was welcomed by Gio, who sat at the corner of his desk. Jazzy was nowhere in sight. Her cousin's husband was intimidating enough to deal with when Jazzy was around, but it was even worse when she was alone with him.

Then she spotted a movement in the right corner. Hector leaned against the wall overlooking the San Francisco skyline. He was in his usual black fatigues with large pockets on the side. His Army green t-shirt stretched across his large chest.

She immediately relaxed. Normally, she didn't feel comfortable around big, bulky men, but with Hector, it was different. She felt comfortable around him. Safe.

"Come in, Mary, and take a seat."

"Where's Jazzy?" She perched her butt on the sofa in front of Gio's desk. Her back tingled as Hector's gaze settled on her. As usual, he didn't hide his true feelings around her.

He's annoyed that I've entered his orbit.

At least he's acknowledging your existence.

Yay.

"She told me last night what you two are planning." Gio shook his head, a smile tugging his lips. "She has the craziest ideas sometimes. I suppose I should be thankful she didn't want to flee the country with you and Zoe, becoming a fugitive. I believe she called that 'Plan B.' Either way, I wanted to speak to you before you go on with this crazy idea."

A blush crept up her cheeks. "It's not crazy. It's actually very practical." The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like the perfect solution to her problem.

"Marrying a complete stranger to get guardianship over Zoe is not crazy, you think?"

Hector's head snapped up. "You what?"

She ignored him and gave Gio a pleading look. "Could you please ask him to leave?"

"No. Also, he has killer ears. He'd hear you from anywhere in the building."

Mary rolled her eyes. She knew the stories about Hector "the Wolf" Diaz. They made him sound like some super soldier.

"I don't understand why you care."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“Jazzy considers you like her sister. You spend time together. Which means that any man entering your world will, at some point, be around her as well. I’m just looking out for my wife. I can’t have a Caruso or Bianchi situation again.”

Mary sighed, leaning back into the sofa. Given that her cousin was kidnapped and almost shot, she could understand Gio’s concern.

“Fine. I promise I won’t look for a man that could be of any danger to Jazzy. Can I go now?”

“Mary, are you sure about this? Taking on the care of a six-year-old is a lot of responsibility.”

That had her sit straight up. “I am. Don’t try to dissuade me. It won’t work. I might not be Zoe’s mother, but I love her as my own. She’s my godchild. I’m not abandoning her to the system.”

Gio contemplated that for a second, his fingers tapping the edge of his desk. She really hoped he wasn’t going to go all badass on her. He had the means to sabotage her claim.

“I figured you would say that,” he eventually said. “Which is why I called our contacts and got the name of the judge who will be handling your case. He’s a firm believer of a child being raised in a conventional family. Perhaps Jazzy’s idea isn’t so crazy after all. I just had to make sure you’re sure about this.”

“Thank you for not butting in.” She was about to get up when he gestured for her to

remain seated.

“I’m not finished yet. Marrying a stranger can be dangerous. You’re a beautiful woman; surely you know of someone who could help you out. A former boyfriend, perhaps?”

Lovely. When she woke up this morning, she hadn’t expected to be grilled by Gio about her lack of a love life.

“I broke up with Josh six months ago. He’s of the ‘children should be seen but not heard’ club.” Which had been one of the reasons to end things with him.

Gio stood from his desk. “Tell you what. How about if you pick one of Hector’s men? Obviously, one of the single ones. They’re all ex-military and have had extensive background checks. That way, at least you’ll be sure you’re not marrying a serial killer. And I don’t have to be without my wife for days as she chooses men for you from some dating app. Tommie and her sounded very enthusiastic last night, discussing all the qualities their ‘perfect’ man should possess.”

The immediate protest on her lips died the second she discovered this might actually be a sound plan.

“Any of his men?” she asked, just to be sure. From the corner of her eye, she glanced at Hector, but he stood frozen, as a massive boulder.

“Any of them. I’m sure Hector won’t mind handing you over a copy of their resumes within, let’s say, an hour? After all, we’re on a clock here.” He looked at his friend, who was still in statue mode. “Since there’s no protest from that side, I’m gonna go with it. We’ll speak again, say around eight, so you can give me your first choice. I’ll take over from there, arranging the meet-up, wedding, and everything that comes with it. Jazzy can attest that my assistant throws a killer last-minute wedding. I’m

going to make sure that you will have a husband to present to the judge during Zoe's hearing."

"Oh, that's a great idea."

This could work. This could sowork.

CHAPTER 5

HECTOR

It was the stupidest fucking idea he'd ever heard. What was the damn woman thinking? Marrying a complete stranger. He didn't give a shit what her reason was, noble or not. And what the fuck was with Gio—his so-called best friend—offering to set Mary up with one of Hector's men? Hand over his men's resumes so Mary could pick a husband? He'd rather get shot!

Except, if he refused, Gio would have a field day, claiming Hector wanted Mary for himself. Which he didn't. At all.

He snarled and cursed as he pounded into the punching bag. This here, at the gym in the compound, was his sanctuary. Here it smelled of sweat and leather, instead of Mary.

He filed her delicious smell away, trying to forget about her. Soon, he would have no other option than to completely wipe her from his brain. She would belong to someone else. He'd seen it on her face. She was going to do it. Part of him was furious, though he refused to acknowledge why. The other part was proud of her for sticking up for that little girl.

It didn't take long for Gio to track him down. He walked in, holding a file in his

hand, wearing his usual expensive suit. Still, the guy didn't look out of place. No matter where Giovanni Detta went, the man exuded confidence.

Hector kept pounding as Gio walked around the boxing ring, to his corner.

"Not in the mood, hermano," he snarled.

"Now why do you think that is?"

"Why are you giving into her mad idea?" Gio never did anything without a reason.

His friend pointedly waited until Hector stopped hitting the bag and gave him his full attention. When he removed his boxing gloves, Gio handed him a towel.

"The girl lives in a rundown apartment in a crappy neighborhood. All because she wants to make it on her own and is too proud to accept help. Jazzy's worried about her. I had Mary on my schedule this week, actually."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“What the fuck does that mean?” He didn’t like the thought of Mary on any man’s list, not even his best friend’s.

“I was going to fabricate a will of a sorts, so she would come into money. Her wanting to get married actually solves this problem for me. At a far less cost than I’d anticipated. Though I’m sure Jazzy will insist on an elaborate wedding gift.” He snorted, as if that bothered him, but Hector knew that to not be true. Gio was the most generous man he knew.

“That’s quite a scheme you had planned there.”

Gio shrugged and sat on a bench with weights. “The girl deserves it. Unlike her skank of a sister, who has bailed on her to chase after some British millionaire.”

Gina Rossi. After she’d almost gotten Jazzy killed, she was lucky to be alive. He wasn’t surprised that Gio still kept tabs on her.

“So”—Gio gave him a scrutinizing look—“tell me why you didn’t step up and offer to marry her.”

“You really need to ask?”

“Yes, I do. Because I see the way you look at her when you think she doesn’t notice.”

Bullshit. He didn’t look at her that often.

Probably.

Maybe.

Probably.

Hector sent him a glare. “You know her. Hell, you could have picked her yourself when you had the chance, but you didn’t because she’s too innocent. Parts of me are so dark they are beyond repair. What kind of life would I be able to give her and a kid?” He wasn’t marriage material. Mary was the light to his darkness, the sunshine to his eclipse. She was everything good that he wasn’t.

Gio narrowed his eyes. “First of all, I didn’t pick Mary because once I’d seen Jazzy, there was no going back for me. And secondly, I was thinking what you could give her was security, protection, a family of her own; things Mary craves. But I can see that you’re going to be a stubborn bastard about this.”

Yes, he was.

Gio got up. “I’ve asked your assistant to email Mary a copy of your men’s resumes. I take it you’re okay with that?”

“Sure,” he gritted out.

“Good. See you tonight. At eight.”

The smug bastard didn’t even let Hector have the illusion that he wouldn’t be there when Mary would announce her choice.

Fuck my life.

Now he had hours to look forward to the moment she would show Gio the picture of some good-looking prick. A guy he had handpicked with Achilles, his second-in-

command. Somehow it didn't seem fair. As if the universe was giving him a big fucking middle finger.

"Oh, one more thing," Gio said. "I was informed that Zoe's uncle was called by Child Protective Services today. He's her last living relative. It's the same uncle that—allegedly—hurt Britney as a child. The guy likes his liquor. And his cigs, using kids to put them out on. But I'm sure there's nothing you can do about that."

Gio dropped a file on the corner of the bench and walked away.

Part of Hector knew Gio was baiting him, setting him up. He knew his friend better than anyone. No way in hell would Giovanni Detta allow Zoe to fall in the hands of an asshole who took his rage out on a defenseless kid.

So, Hector didn't need to step up. Not his woman. Not his child. Not his problem. Gio would take care of it. He didn't need to get involved.

He was just going to peek into the file. No harm ever came from peeking.

By the time Hector had put down the damning file on the uncle, dinnertime had passed. The bastard uncle had never been charged because there hadn't been any solid evidence, but everything about him reeked. Britney had never pressed charges. Whether it was out of fear or because she didn't want to open up old wounds, he didn't know. The troubled girl had taken her little sister and moved to another town to get away from her uncle. There was a report about a neighbor calling the authorities, but it had been only rumors, and nothing came of it.

If he'd had any doubts about Mary going through with her 'marry a man in a few days mission' before, he didn't anymore. And honestly, he was proud of her for

stepping up.

He took a shower and changed into his usual gear; cargo pants, a black T-shirt, and biker boots. He was just about to leave when Achilles strolled in. A few men trickled in after him.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Achilles dropped his duffel bag next to Hector's bench. "So, Mary's looking for a husband, huh?"

"Is there anything you don't fucking know?"

"Yeah, the combination to your safe."

"Fuck you."

"So, want me to call you a realtor?"

"What would I need a realtor for?"

His friend gave an exasperated sigh. "To buy a house, of course. You live in a dump." He glanced at the steel stairs that led upstairs, not looking impressed.

"I wouldn't call a state of the art loft a dump."

"It's a big, empty, soulless space. Saying it's 'sparse' is overstating it. All you have in there is a bed and a fridge. Though, I'm not sure why. You're worth billions."

"Not billions. That's Gio." He had given Gio start-up money from the get-go and, in return, he'd received shares in Detta Enterprises. By the time he had finished three tours, his share was worth millions. So that had worked out pretty well. Not that he particularly cared for the money. He was a simple man.

"Whatever. Millions then. Either way, you have more than enough to provide for

your own family. If there's anything I've learned from my sisters, it's that women like a house to nest in. It's like their castle. So, want me to get you a realtor?"

He flipped his friend off on his way out. Damn nosy bastard. With Achilles' laugh still resonating in the back of his mind, he went over to Detta Tower.

He made his way up to the executive floor where he passed Gio's PA. "Hi, Gale."

"Good evening, Hector. Mary should be here any minute."

He scowled when he saw her lips quirk. "I'm just here to return a file to Gio."

"Oh." She extended a hand to him. "You can give it to me, if you want."

"Nah, it's confidential." He ignored her hand and went into Gio's office.

Gio gave him a knowing smirk from behind his desk. Hector kindly gave him the finger.

Mary appeared at eight o'clock sharp, looking as pretty as a button in her denim skirt and green sandals. Her arms were decorated in silver bracelets and her long, curly hair had a few thin braids in it. She'd painted her toes a hot pink. He liked that about her. She was all about color; happy, bouncy, and warm, like the sun.

She dropped onto the couch across from Gio, a determined gleam in her baby blues. "I've made my choice."

He'd bet it was Walker. The fucker was the prettiest of his men. Something the guys always gave him shit over. The ex-black-ops had been on many missions, had broken quite a few bones, but for some reason, his pretty face had been spared. Women always made a fool of themselves over him. Maybe he could send him to Zambia.

Planes went missing in Africa all the time.

Gio nodded. “Enlighten us, Mary.”

She took a breath and then turned to him. “I choose Hector.”

He blinked. Surely, he’d heard that wrong, which was ironic, considering his hearing was something he prided himself on.

“Ah.” Gio, the fucker, didn’t sound surprised at all. “Well, that’s a done deal then.”

Hector scowled. “There’s no fucking deal. Are you crazy? Pick someone else. Anyone else. I’m not the one for you.”

She cocked her head. “Why is that?”

What kind of question was that? Instead of yelling, he tried to be reasonable. Mary was fragile, and he didn’t want to scare her. “For starters, I have PTSD.”

“So? I’m annoyingly chipper in the morning.”

He narrowed his eyes, not sure if she was making fun of him. “I’m an ugly motherfucker,” he stated.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

She gave him a onceover. “I disagree, but if that’s the way you want to play this... I’m pretty. If the Beauty and the Beast could make it, why can’t we?”

“I don’t want a wife.”

“Neither do I,” she said with that musical, and yes, annoyingly chipper voice of her.

“Fuck,” Gio said.

She turned to his friend. “You promised me I could choose any of Hector’s men, but apparently, he doesn’t want to marry me, and I can’t force him. So, Gio, are you going back on your word? I have to know now because I’m running out of time.”

Hector knew Gio considered his word his bond, as any man should. He also knew his friend wouldn’t ask him to honor the promise that he had made. It was just that neither of them had thought of excluding him, since they never expected her to choose him. Clearly, she didn’t know the implications of her choice.

“I’m Hispanic,” he tried once more.

“I can see that. What’s your point?”

“Pretty little, white, rich girls usually don’t go for Hispanic guys covered in tattoos and scars.”

“That’s racist.”

He supposed it was, though he'd never considered it that way.

"Also, I'm not rich. Nor am I little." She seemed insulted by that.

"You are compared to me," he said, just to raise her hackles.

She snorted. It was cute, really. Like a kitten trying to be intimidating, but failing miserably.

"Everyone is, compared to your hulking presence."

Good point. "You didn't comment on me telling you're pretty."

Her cheeks flushed. How was it that she could be all Mama bear when it came to a child, but she turned shy when he complimented her?

"Could we please get back to my initial point."

"Sure. Your initial point of marrying some stranger, so you can become guardian of your godchild."

"Not a 'stranger.' I said I choose you. I'm sure we can come to some kind of an arrangement."

Apparently, in her warped mind, he was Prince fucking Charming. Little did she know that he really was the Big Bad Wolf.

"Not going to happen."

"Why not?" Then, as if something just occurred to her. "Are you... do you have a girlfriend?"

All it took was a nod. Then she would stop pestering him about this ridiculous idea of hers. For some reason, he didn't.

"I don't do girlfriends. I have fuck buddies." And if you weren't off limits, you'd be one of them.

"There's no reason to use such language."

Such language? "Your Ivy League is kicking in again. It doesn't really resonate with my hood, don't you think? Yet another reason why we're a bad fit." When she straightened her spine, he couldn't help but smirk.

To his surprise, she walked up to him. Her chin raised, eyes blazing, as she got in his face.

"Now you listen to me, Hector Diaz," she said, as she poked him in the chest. "Zoe's at protective services right now; scared and alone. That little girl's life has come crashing down around her. Tomorrow will be an even worse day because she has to attend her sister's funeral. Then she'll have to go back with the CPS lady to a house full of strangers, yet again. Leaving her at that place, while she cried after me, nearly wrecked me. I made a promise to Britney that should something happen to her, I'd take care of Zoe. I intend to keep that promise. You think we are a bad fit? Fine. I won't bother you again. Just don't stand in my way." Another poke to his chest. "Since you refuse to help me out, I'll reconsider the other options Gio has so kindly offered to me. Maybe one of your men will like a pretty little white girl, as you've put it."

They were standing nose-to-nose and for the life of him, he couldn't look away.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Gio cleared his throat and the strange hold Mary had on him disappeared. For a minute there, he'd forgotten about Gio's presence.

"I'm a man of my word, Mary." Gio put a hand on her shoulder, and Hector immediately tensed up. He didn't like seeing another man touching her. Fuck, he was in so much trouble. "By the end of the week, you'll be married. Hector might have declined, but that doesn't mean his men will. Any sane man wouldn't," he said pointedly. "Since Hector knows his men the best, I'm sure he'll have no problem helping you pick one." His eyes held a challenge.

Help the woman he'd been lusting after get hitched to another man?

"No problem at all," he snapped.

Sounds like a fucking picnic.

CHAPTER 6

MARY

The next morning, after Britney's funeral, and a detour to Japan Town, Mary strode into Diaz Security headquarters. Hector's private security firm was on the outskirts of town. It basically was a big square building at the end of a dirt road. Behind it, lots and lots of acres of green.

She got a few curious looks when she entered the building, holding up two bags.

“Can I help you?” A cute-looking pixie girl looked at her from behind the reception desk.

“Hi, I’m Mary. I’m here to see Hector.”

The girl’s eye widened. “Ah, so you’re Mary.TheMary? The Mary I sent all those files to yesterday.”

A blush crept up her cheeks. “Yep, that’s me. ‘How to Tinder a ring on my finger in a few days’ Mary.”

A chuckle followed. “I’m Jessica, but everyone calls me Jess. I’m the office manager slash receptionist slash secretary here. If you need anything, just give me a call.”

Mary decided she liked the girl. She held up a bag. “Would you like—”

A gasp. “Is that from Yasukochi’s?”

“Yep.” She’d figured she only got one chance to make a good first impression.

“Please tell me it’s their coffee crunch cake.”

Mary cocked her brow in a ‘what do you think’ gesture.

Jess snatched one of the bags in the blink of an eye. “Oh, and you have bagels in here as well. I think I love you.”

And that’s how you make friends for life.

If only a certain grouchy wolf would be so easy to capture.

“The big boss is in his office, most likely brooding.”

“He does like to brood, doesn’t he?”

“Uh-huh. His office is at the end of the hall. Once you’ve passed the boxing ring and treadmills, it’s on your left.”

Inside, it was a mostly open space, with a gym in the back. On one side, there were desks, lined up with computers. There was a busy, but pleasant vibe in the room that she just wanted to soak up.

Britney’s funeral had been a sad happening. Not only because she had died so young, but also because only a handful of people had attended. One of which, of course, was Zoe with Mrs. Wilson. The second Zoe had spotted her, her tiny legs had taken off to hug her. There was nothing like it; holding a child in your arm, taking in her innocent scent, looking into her trusting eyes. How could she not do everything in her power to keep her safe?

There were men working out everywhere. She was glad to spot a familiar face in the boxing ring; Achilles.

When he saw her, he jumped out of the ring and walked up to her, a smile on his face.

“Hi there, beautiful. What you got there?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“I got you guys bagels and cake.”

“Is that from Yasukochi’s?” He sounded hopeful.

And who wouldn’t be? It was only San Fran’s best baker. “Yes, it is. Here you go.”

It was as if a silent alarm had gone off, because suddenly, she was surrounded by big, brawny men.

“Hola, bonita, I’m Cortez—”

“Afternoon, ma’am, I’m Beau. Can I have—”

Achilles pushed a few of the guys away. “Like bees to honey,” he muttered.

“There’s another one at the reception,” Mary whispered. “I used it to pay my entrance fee.”

Achilles chuckled. He was so much more approachable than Hector. Also, he was hot, in a big, blond, Viking-like way. She could see why Tommie was into him.

She went into Hector’s office, where she came face to face with Mr. Frowny Face.

“Hi. I brought you lunch, but I’m afraid Jess and your men confiscated it.” She plopped down on the seat in front of his desk.

Hector dropped the file he was reading. “They’re like locusts. Never bring food into

the compound, unless you're prepared to give it up."

"Duly noted."

"You seem more... chipper today," he remarked.

"I am." She leaned closer to him. "I learned from the CPS lady that Zoe's uncle has opted out of being her guardian. Last night, while he was working in his garage, an accident happened. Get this. A car dropped on top of him, paralyzing him from the waist down."

"Really?" Hector said, sounding only moderately interested.

"Yup. It's unsure if he's ever going to walk again, though the predictions are bleak."

"I'm glad it worked out that way."

"I know it's not nice to wish bad stuff to happen to people, but I'm kind of glad it happened. Of course, this doesn't mean the judge will automatically appoint me as Zoe's guardian, but knowing that she won't fall in the hands of that monster, I'll sleep better at night."

Also, with him out of the picture, it increases your chances with Zoe.

That's a horrible thing to think!

Doesn't make it any less true.

She internally rolled her eyes at the opportunistic part of her brain.

Even with Zoe's uncle out of the equation, she still had a lot of ground to cover to be

an eligible candidate. She had to look trustworthy and stable. Changing her marital status was an imperative step into the right direction.

It was time for Act Two.

She took out the stack of papers from her bag. “I’ve been going over the files of your men all night. Thanks, by the way, for wanting to help me out with making the right choice.” She pointed at a cute-looking guy. “What about this one? I think he would make beautiful babies.”

Hector stiffened. “Why in the fuck would that matter? You’re only looking for a marriage of convenience, right?”

She shrugged, a finger trailing her bottom lip. “I don’t know. A girl has needs, you know. And he is kind of hot and, well, who knows what might happen if—”

“He hates children.”

“He does? That seems kind of harsh.”

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“Yeah, it’s a tough world filled with assholes.” There was a snarl in his voice now.

“Aha.”

He scowled. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Just, aha, as in I understand.”

“And what is it that you think you understand?”

It was getting increasingly difficult to keep a straight face. “That he can’t be the right guy for me. I need a man who likes children, or, in the least, is comfortable around them.”

“That’s what I thought.” He sounded much calmer this time.

She pointed at another file. “What about him, Beau Walker?”

Hector’s eye twitched. “Walker likes ’em big and beautiful.”

“What?” The way he came up with excuses baffled her.

He drew a silhouette with his hands. “Curvy. He likes his women curvy. Like most men, he likes something to hold on to in bed.”

“I have curves,” she argued. He gave her a look. “Maybe not that big of curves, but I have them.” She was not going down without a fight. So far, he had found a flaw on

every candidate she had proposed. When was he going to give up and just knuckle under?

“You have the figure of Barbie.”

“I do not.”

“Long legs. Curly blond hair. Tiny waist. Big breasts.”

Was it getting hot in here or was she imagining him staring at her chest?

“Fuck.” He cursed a streak and backed away from his desk. “I don’t have time for this shit.”

He was out the door before she could blink.

She knew he wanted her. On some level. He might not particularly like her, but she got the vibe that he at least found her attractive. Hopefully it wasn’t just wishful thinking. If only she knew why he resisted her. Then. Unfortunately, her time for making him give in to her was getting shorter each day.

Which meant that she needed help. One call later, Tommie and Jazzy whizzed inside Hector’s office.

“I come bearing gifts,” Tommie announced, handing her over a cup of coffee and a chocolate muffin.

For the next hour, they went through the documents, one by one.

When Achilles’ picture came up, Tommie hastily put it away. “Not that one,” he said giving her a sheepish look.

“Not that one,” she agreed. Tommie was all brash mouth, packaged in ripped jeans and colorful tees, but when it came to Achilles, he got tongue-tied. It was really adorable.

“Oh, I like this one,” he said. “Just look at those pecs. I could play the bongos on them.”

“What about this one?” Jazzy proposed. “He’s Italian. Those blue eyes are hot. I mean, of course, not as hot as my Gio’s, but he’d be okay. What do you think, Hector?”

Mary turned to the door, where Hector had just come in.

She blushed when she was reminded of how he blew her off. She wasn’t sure what she’d been thinking when she told him she’d picked him. Actually, she did know. It had been a desperate attempt to make him notice her. Perhaps even bind him to her. It wasn’t fair to him, and also, a little sad. What woman in her right mind had to practically trick the man she had been crushing on into marrying her? Still, when the opportunity had presented itself, she couldn’t just let it pass. She’d made herself clear; he was her first choice. The ball was in his court now.

“Yes, do tell, Wolfman.” Tommie held up the picture of Jazzy’s choice. “Do you think this guy would be a good husband to Mary and a good dad to little Zoe?”

Thank God she’d never told them about her stupid proposal to Hector. It would be mortifying if they found out.

“He doesn’t like children,” Hector said.

“Oh.” Jazzy sounded disappointed.

“Maybe we’re going about this the wrong way.” Tommie’s eyes focused on Hector. “If your men are tenderloin, then you’re prime steak. I think you should marry Mary and be done with it.”

“That’s a great idea!” Jazzy looked at her. “Well, why don’t you ask the man, Mary? It makes perfect sense.”

“I... um...”

Understanding dawned in Tommie’s mischievous eyes. “Oh, I’m getting the feeling that she already did. Interesting.”

When Mary looked up to where Hector had been standing, she found him gone.

And now I’m mortified.

Jazzy huffed. “Really? He turned down hipster Barbie?”

“I’m not hipster Barbie.”

Tommie patted her hand. “I so feel you, baby girl. Unrequited lust sucks. But youdoknow he’s a bit, um...”

“Grumpy,” she filled in. “Yes, I’m aware of his level of grumpiness.”

“And you’re so... shiny.”

“Which is why they’re a perfect match,” Jazzy claimed. “Just like Gio and me. He’s broody and I’m, well, me. He’d be lost without hisbella.”

Mary was glad to see Jazzy totally in love with her husband. It was what she wanted for herself. She had been trying to muster up the courage to ask Hector out. But she wasn’t as brazen as her cousin, and now she had Zoe to consider. Still, she wasn’t giving up without a fight.

Tommie made a gagging sound. “Will your honeymoon never end? If I catch you two on the couch one more time, I’m going to have to bleach my eyes.”

Jazzy playfully slapped him on the arm. “Don’t hate me because you’re not getting any.”

“Sadly, that is true.” Tommie pouted. “No one has been drilling me for months.”

Jazzy put her hands to her ears. “TMI!”

Tommie scoffed. “Says the woman using every room in her mansion to have sex in. Your staff drew up a schedule to avoid walking in on that peep show.”

“What?” Jazzy gasped. “They really did that?”

“Any other day, I’d love to discuss your sex shenanigans, but not today, Jaz. Today we’re going to find Mary a man. Though, I already have a sense which one she has set her eyes on.”

Mary sighed. “He doesn’t want me.”

“Oh, he wants, hipster,” Tommie claimed. “That six-five, two hundred and something pounds of muscle wants you bad. He just doesn’t want to admit it. I think it’s time we gave him a nudge, so he comes to his senses.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” Sometimes, when Tommie set out to do stuff, things went a bit awry.

“No worries. Leave it to me. I’m not gonna stand by and watch your mood turn as blue as my mohawk. Besides, even if the thing with Hector doesn’t pan out, you still need to find yourself a man, don’t you?”

Excellent point.

CHAPTER 7

HECTOR

Hector stared at Mary over the brim of his Corona. It was day two of ‘How to find a husband in a few days’ as Mary had dubbed her ‘quest.’

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Tommie had come up with the brilliant idea that Mary should talk with her ‘potentials’ in a more laidback environment. So, he had arranged an impromptu happy hour at the Irish pub across the street. Everyone—that is, the single ones not working a job—had been invited.

They had gone to O’Shea’s, and Hector had followed them. Just to keep an eye on things, of course. Make sure that his men behaved themselves. Though, to be fair, they were behaving just fine. Freaking fantastic fine, mooning over Mary, who was holding court in her corner in the back. With pretty boy Beau Walker plastered to her side. The guy was a chick magnet as he’d ever seen one.

“You okay with this?”

His gaze turned to Achilles, who sat next to him at the bar. “With what?”

“The dates, or interviews, or whatever the fuck you want to call them, she’s been having with the men.”

“Why would I care who she’s going to fuck?”

Achilles raised a brow. “Going to fuck? I thought she was only looking for a fake husband to get the kid.”

As if any man living under the same roof with her wouldn’t fuck her. Apparently, his scowl spoke for itself because Achilles nodded.

“I see.” Achilles cleared his throat. “Funny, by the way, how Zoe’s uncle suddenly

had a car drop on top of him.”

Hector kept his face straight. “Accidents happen.”

“Uh-huh. You got an alibi?”

“You offering one?”

Achilles clinked his bottle against his. “Always.”

“Appreciated.” Not that he believed he needed one. Unless the fucker wanted Hector to finish the job. He hadn’t gone over to the garage to hurt him. All he’d wanted was to have a chat, possibly pay him off. Then the asshole had given him lip. The eager look in his eyes, as he talked about having Zoe with him, was the final straw that snapped Hector’s control.

“So, you really gonna sit here, pretend you don’t give a shit about her?”

Sometimes he hated Achilles’ ‘the glass is always full to the brim’ mentality. He was just about to tell him to shove his glass where the sun don’t shine, when he caught Mary hug Walker goodbye.

Acid filled his stomach.

Apparently, she was a hugger. Of course she was.

“Hector?”

“What?” he growled. Judging by Achilles’ look, it wasn’t the first time he called out his name.

“Yeah, I can see you’re not interested in her at all.”

He forced his gaze away from Mary. “You had your interview with her yet?”

“Nope. She didn’t ask me.” Achilles looked amused. “Not sure if I should be insulted by that or not.”

On second thought, he should’ve known Mary wouldn’t ask Achilles since Tommie had a thing for him. Something Achilles seemed completely oblivious to. She wouldn’t do anything to hurt her friend, because that was the kind of person she was. Thoughtful, always thinking of others. One of the many reasons why the two of them would never work out.

“Not that I would have accepted anyway,” Achilles continued. “No one will, unless you tell them to.”

“Unless I tell them to? Didn’t I already tell them?” He’d explained Mary’s deal to the men who were interested. It had felt like someone was pulling out his nails, but he’d still done it. “Isn’t that the whole fucking reason they’re sitting there with her?”

Having a drink, and a laugh. Having a fucking good time, from what he could see.

“Yeah, about that. There’s a pool going on, for how long it will take until you crack. Hate to say this to you, but the odds are in the girl’s favor.”

“What the fuck?” He slammed his bottle on the bar. “Why would they do that?”

Achilles looked at his fist. “Probably because you’ve been staring daggers at any man she’s been talking to.”

“That’s my default face.”

“Sure, sure.” Achilles took another sip of his drink.

“Fuck you. I don’t need this shit.” He threw some bills on the counter and left, the laugh of his friend following him.

Nobody seemed to fucking understand. He couldn’t walk into her life, unleash himself on her. She was the light. He was darkness. She was small and delicate. He was big and burly.

He stepped into the cool night, looking for his car, when he smelled her delicious scent. Mary.

She stood next to him, looking up at him. “You’re leaving already?”

He saw her eyes flutter before focusing on his lips. Knowing that she was just as aware of him as he was her made everything worse. So much worse. He clenched his hands to prevent them from reaching out to her. He couldn’t just pull her to his chest and have his way with her.

Or could he?

No. Focus, Diaz. Focus!

“You can have anyone. Why me?” Tomorrow, she would pick one of his men. This was his last chance to ask her.

“You’re nice to dogs.”

“What?” Of all the answers he expected, that wasn’t one.

“The first time I saw you was at Jazzy’s wedding. I went onto the deck to get some air, and spotted you with a guard dog, petting him.” She chuckled. “Guess I’m a sucker for people who like dogs. I believe that a man who’s nice to a dog can’t be cruel inside. That’s when I knew that I’d always be safe with you. So, that’s your answer. I chose you because you make me feel safe. Because I know, no matter how big and strong you are, you will never hurt me. And also, because it feels right. Don’t expect me to explain the how or why. Some things can’t be explained. But if you don’t want me, I will pick another. I can’t fail Zoe.”

It took courage to say all of that, so he could do no less than be honest as well.

He sighed, suddenly feeling tired. “I’m thirty-two, you’re twenty-one. You have your whole life ahead of you and I’m not going to screw that up. You have no idea the things I’ve done and witnessed. There’s a beast in me so volatile it would scare you to even scratch the surface. I know why you—”

Her lips thinned. ““You know nothing, Jon Snow.””

“Who?”

She shook her head. “It’s a character from a TV show. Never mind. If you don’t get that reference, nothing I say will make a difference.”

With that, she dismissed him and turned back inside, as if never having heard of this Jon Snow guy was a capital offense.

CHAPTER 8

HECTOR

Today was Doomsday; the day that Mary would choose a husband. It was that disconcerting thought that woke Hector up before the crack of dawn. He'd been punching a bag ever since. Almost an hour in, the sweat was pouring off his body, but he still felt like punching through a wall.

Close to six, the first guys trickled in. Some went straight to their lockers, changing clothes to work out. Others just came in early to coordinate their new assignments.

When he saw Achilles walk in, followed by Walker and Cortez, he couldn't be happier. He left the punching bag and jumped into the boxing ring.

"Who wants to go a round?"

Suddenly, everybody made themselves scarce. Jess shook her head as she walked past him with a huge coffee mug.

"Cortez, wanna go a round?"

The guy shook his head. "Mymamacitalikes my face just the way it is. Smooth and pretty."

"I thought she had dumped your ass?"

"She had. But then I gave her a puppy. Chicks are crazy about puppies. One look at the little ankle biter and she took me back."

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Achilles snorted. “With your track record of fuck-ups, I’m sure she’ll need a kennel soon.”

Cortez clutched a hand to his heart, looking wounded. “Don’t hate me, man. It’s our thing. I fuck up, then give her stuff, and she forgives me. It’s love.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake.

“Walker. What about you?”

Beau looked him up and down. “I don’t think so. My mom likes my face the way it is too; in one piece.”

Achilles dropped his bag on the floor and jumped up into the ring, shaking his head.

“What?” Hector asked.

“You really need to ask? You’ve been out for blood all week. No one in their right mind is going to step in the ring with you.”

Hector jumped up and down, loosening his muscles. “Yet here you are.”

“Never said I was right in the head.”

“Damn hippie.”

Achilles smiled. “And a proud one. Communal living is the best gift my dads and

mom gave me. It was a great practice for the military.”

Hector didn't know anyone like Achilles. From the stories he'd told, he was raised into a polygamous family, in a small town where that was pretty much the standard. Nothing ever fazed the guy.

“Anyway, I just got a call from Mary,” Achilles said. “Apparently, her car broke down and she couldn't reach Jazzy. She needs a ride. I'd love to help her out, but I have to take care of the Hollywood project.”

Walker, who was just passing by, groaned at hearing the new job. Nobody liked being the bodyguard to some spoiled celebrity, but it paid well. His men were the best and highly sought out.

“I'll pick her up,” Hector said. “You take care of Planet Hollywood.”

After he quickly cleaned up, he got into a company car and drove over to the address Achilles gave him. Apparently, Mary was modeling for some art class at the center where she worked. He got the room number from the front desk and that was when he saw her.

Draped over a red couch, without a stitch of clothing covering her body. Her gorgeous, mouthwatering body was on display for every fucker to see and lust after in the classroom.

For a brief second, he stood rooted to the spot.

He wasn't sure what shocked him the most. The fact that she had the courage to pose nude or be confronted with the green-eyed monster tearing up his chest. Without a 'how do you do,' he walked up to her, ignoring the teacher and students behind their easels staring at him.

When Mary saw him, she straightened from the couch. “Hector, what are you—”

“Don’t talk. Not now.” He took off his shirt, removed the excuse for a drape from between her legs, and pulled his shirt over her head. The garment swallowed her up.

“What are you—?”

“I said, not now.” He scooped her up in his arms and walked out, leaving a string of baffled looks behind him. Not that he gave a fuck. That was the last time they got to see his woman naked.

Yeah, his woman. He’d come to a few conclusions concerning Mary. First, Achilles had set him up. The asshole had known exactly what Hector would walk into. And second, he was fucking tired of denying his feelings. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so out of balance. It was driving him loco.

He didn’t let her go until she was safely tucked into the passenger seat. He cranked up the engine and they drove in silence for a while.

“Can I speak now?”

“If you’re going to say that I had no right taking you out of that classroom, save it.” Of course, he didn’t have any right. But that was going to change; she just didn’t know it yet.

Naked. She had been naked.

The image of those long legs and gorgeous breasts was etched into his brain. It was one thing to fantasize about it, jacking off to what she might look like under her clothes, or pretend that a woman he fucked was Mary, but it was a whole different ballgame to see the real thing.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

The reality was so much better. He wanted to devour her. Do filthy things to her. Things she would have no experience with, 'cause he had a feeling she was a virgin. He didn't do virgins. Once again, he went through all the reasons why he shouldn't do what he was about to do, but it all ended the same; his desire for her overrode any rational thought.

“Okay.”

He turned to her. “That’s it? Just, ‘okay’?”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Clearly you’re upset and not in the mood to talk about whatever it was that had you cave-manning me out of that room. I’m sure you will tell me when you’re ready, so we can have a rational talk about it.”

Oh, he loved it when she went all prim and proper on him. She had no idea that it turned him on when she used her teacher voice. In his mind, it was her version of dirty talk. Still, he didn't like that he was the only one burning up with pent-up desire. It was time to even the odds.

When he passed Glen Park, he took an exit onto a dirt road. He parked in a secluded parking spot, in the back, near a wall of trees. Then he plucked her from her seat, draping her over his lap until she straddled him.

“What are you doing?”

She sounded nervous. Finally.

“You want a rational talk? How is this for rational? I took you out of that room because it hit me that I don’t like it when other men see you naked.”

A blush colored her cheeks. “It’s art class. There’s nothing sexual about it, and—”

“I don’t give a fuck.”

“And,” she repeated pointedly, “it’s really none of your business who sees me naked. You’ve been trying to pawn me off to one of your men for days.”

She wasn’t ever going to marry one of his men. In his subconscious, he’d known that. Hell, everyone had known.

“Yeah, about that. Not gonna happen. None of my men will marry you.”

She cast her eyes down. “Please don’t do this. Think about Zoe. She needs me to—”

He lifted her chin. “It won’t happen because they know I will break them if they touch you. So, this is what’s going to happen. You have a choice to make. Either you marry me, or you find someone I don’t know and won’t ever have to see.”

Her eyes widened, but she looked suspicious. “But...?” she asked. “I feel like there’s a catch somewhere. I mean, I already told you that you were my first choice. You declined, profusely. So, what has changed?”

What had changed was that he’d been confronted with what would happen if he didn’t step up. Another man was going to see, taste, and touch all that was Mary. And, yeah, it made him an asshole to consider wrecking up her life just because he wanted to fuck her, but here he was, being an asshole.

“I want you,” he said, and she looked confused. “That can’t surprise you.”

She shrugged. “Half of the time you don’t seem to like me.”

“I’ve never not liked you. I just never wanted you.”

“You’ve lost me.”

Of course he had. He wasn’t making much sense. “I never wanted to be your fucking white knight. Because that’s what you want, what you’re looking for. No, don’t try to deny it. It’s what you deserve, so don’t ever deny or try to downplay it. If I were a good man, I would keep away from you. Like miles away, but I can’t.”

He’d been to Europe for months to track down the fucker who had hurt her, and the distance had hit him hard. He’d come to depend on having her around, even if it was from afar. There was this positive energy around her that he wished he could harness and take into his soul. Keep it in there so maybe, just maybe, it could clean away some of the darkness inside him. He hadn’t taken another assignment that far away again.

“Um... so now what?” She fidgeted on his lap, looking unsure.

He was trying really hard to ignore the fact that underneath his shirt, she was naked. The only thing separating her bare pussy—yeah, he’d peeked—and his cock, was the fabric of his jeans.

“Like I said, now you have a choice to make.” He placed his hands on her thighs, underneath his shirt. “But know this, if you choose me, you will be all mine. There’s no going back. And there will be no marriage of convenience. No sane man would be able to live under one roof with you and not fuck you.” Her face heated up and it probably made him a bastard, but he liked it when she blushed.

“What else? I have a feeling there is more.”

He started drawing circles on her inner thighs. “There is. See, I’m not sure if you know what it’s going to be like between us. I think it’s only fair you get a taste, so you can make the right choice.”

When his finger neared her pussy, her pupils enlarged, but she didn’t pull back. If she had any idea of the things he wanted to do to her, she would probably jump out of the car.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Instead, a determined expression crossed her face. She folded her arms in front of her chest. “So, then give me a taste.”

What she really said was “bring it on.” Little did she know, he loved a challenge. Her being bratty only made him hotter for her.

“I’ve been very laidback and accommodating to you so far,” he said, and ignored her derisive snort. “But that’s over now. You have to know what you’re getting yourself into with me. I’m moody at times. You already know about my PTSD. I have it under control, most of the time, but sometimes I get flashbacks during the night. I swear a lot. I don’t like it when other men touch my woman. And most of all, I control what happens in the bedroom.”

He unbuttoned his shirt until he had bared her breasts. She had small gold hoops through her nipples and he instantly went rock hard. Shit. His woman had a kinky side. How had he not noticed them before? Probably because he’d been too busy covering her up.

“You bad girl...”

Her cheeks flushed. “I got them on a dare with Jazzy.”

“I take it you lost.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Actually, I won.”

He wasn’t even going to ask. His hand went to her nipples, tugging on the piercings

and eliciting a gasp from her.

With his other hand, he covered her pussy, and she gripped his shoulders. Flicking a finger over her clit, he started rubbing her. She was wet, so deliciously wet, that he slowly pushed the tip of a finger inside her.

He didn't have to say a word. She started moving on her own accord. Maybe it was wishful thinking, but it seemed as if she was made for him.

"You get what I'm saying, Mary?"

Her half-closed lids sprung open. "Yes. You just gave me a list of reasons of why not to marry you. I haven't heard the deal-breaker yet."

Then maybe he hadn't been clear enough. He didn't want there to be any surprises. He pushed his finger deeper inside her core, making her eyes go wide. Then he added another digit, much slower this time so she could adjust to his thick fingers. Her look turned strained as he started pumping into her tight hole.

"I like to fuck," he said. "I imagine I'm going to like fucking you, a lot. Once you're in my bed, there will be no barriers between us. Nothing is off the table. I'm not a twenty-four-seven vanilla kind of guy. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Her body moved slower now, still trying to adjust to his fingers. His thumb brushed her little jewel and he could feel her getting more slick. It would make the finger fucking easier for her. He didn't like hurting her. At least, not like this.

"I'm in a parking lot in the middle of nowhere, sitting on top of you in nothing but a shirt, while you have your fingers inside me. I think I got the message," she said dryly. "So, you're not a missionary kind of guy. What else do I need to know?"

“Didn’t say I don’t like missionary. I just like to spruce things up whenever I feel like it.” He was silent for a beat. “Or with whatever I feel like.”

He could see the interest spark in her eyes. Maybe she wasn’t so innocent after all. A part of him wanted to rip out the heart of any other man thinking about touching her, while another part hoped she was more experienced. The reason was just as selfish. If she was used to fucking, he could go hard on her very fast. There would be no need to ease her into things.

“That sounds interesting,” she croaked out.

He had to know. “Are you a virgin?”

She suddenly found the tree next to their car very fascinating. “Why do you ask?”

“Don’t answer my question with a question. Are you?”

“What if I am?” When he scowled, she added, “Yes, I’m a virgin. Why does that matter? It takes me time before I’m comfortable enough with a man to...” She made a gesture with her hands, indicating their position. “With Josh, it was just never... I mean, he tried, but I...”

He let go of her breast and cupped her cheek. “It matters because I don’t want to hurt you. I’m a big guy. If I don’t prepare you right, you’d be walking bowlegged for a week.”

She laughed, and the sudden tension broke up immediately.

“We can’t have that,” she said with a gleam in her eyes. “What would I tell Zoe?”

Of course; Zoe. The reason Mary wanted to marry him. She needed a protector for

the cute, little girl, and he couldn't blame her. For a fleeting second, he didn't like the thought that she was marrying him because of that reason, though he wasn't sure why. After all, his only reason to go along with it was because he wanted her in his bed. He'd do good to remind himself of that. They were both getting what they wanted out of this deal, which was only fair.

“So, what's your answer, hermosa? Be sure. Be, very, very sure.” Because once he had his ring on her finger, he wasn't ever letting her go.

She bent over to him, giving him the softest kiss. “Since you've asked so nicely, yes, Hector Diaz, I'll marry you.”

CHAPTER 9

MARY

It turned out that Hector agreeing to marry her didn't automatically mean everything was settled between them. There was no sunset to drive into together. No sappy Hollywood moment, in which he suddenly discovered that his love for her had been there all along.

Instead, she suspected Hector was avoiding her. At first, she thought he was just busy, but it had been two days since he'd asked her to marry him—kind of—and she hadn't heard from him since. Reason enough for a pit in her stomach to form. If he had changed his mind, she'd rather have him tell her now than being left at the altar. Of course, technically there would be no altar to be left at, but him not showing up at the courthouse would have the same painful result.

She had spoken to Zoe on the phone this morning, had cried a little after that—okay, a lot—then she'd spoken to Mrs. Wilson, casually mentioning that she was getting married to Hector, her long-time boyfriend. At least in her fantasies, she'd pictured him like that. Now, she was back at Diaz Security, on her way to Hector's office.

Everything was happening so fast, yet not fast enough. She still had a million things to take care of, so she could present a unified and stable front to the judge.

She greeted Jess and Beau, who were having a chat at the reception's desk, when Hector rounded the corner.

There was no greeting with words; the man just pulled her against his chest and gave her a kiss that made her toes curl.

“That was not the welcome I was expecting,” she said honestly.

He cocked a brow. “Don’t like it?”

“Love it.” She shrugged. “I guess I’m used to you being more grouchy around me. Oh, and keeping a distance.”

“Yeah, well, you’re mine now. I can touch you whenever I want.”

It was said as a given, and it warmed her belly. Of course, that might also be her raging hormones after that lingering kiss.

Beau gave her a thumbs up from behind Hector’s back and she felt herself flush. He was the prettiest man she had ever seen and, just like the others, had been so understanding when she told him about her predicament. He’d even offered to marry her should things not work out with her grouchy wolf.

Hector grabbed her hand. “Let’s go.”

A little surprised, she followed him outside and into a car. For some reason, she had expected him to blow her off again. After all, wasn’t that why she was here in the first place?

A few minutes after he drove away, she couldn’t hold it in anymore. “Are you sorry?”

“About what?”

“Us.” She looked away. “You’ve been avoiding me ever since we agreed to get married.”

When he didn’t deny it, the hollow feeling in her stomach grew. She didn’t pay any attention to where they were going until he parked in front of a big brownstone with a huge front yard.

Hector finally broke the silence. “Yeah, I’ve been avoiding you.”

But what about that kiss?

Maybe he just likes to liplock.

Remember that guy in college who just loved painting your toes?

“Thank you for being honest with me,” she croaked.

She needed to make some calls. Her head went a million miles an hour, thinking of what was very likely to happen when she showed up before the judge without a husband on her arm. Especially after she’d told Mrs. Wilson that she was engaged. Oh, God, the woman might think that she had lied, or that she was a flighty woman, getting engaged and breaking up in just a few days.

“Don’t thank me yet. You have no clue why I’ve been avoiding you. Come on, let’s go.”

She blinked. “Go where?” Didn’t he just break up with her?

He frowned. “To go see the house, of course. The realtor is already waiting.”

Realtor? It was only now that she saw the “For Sale” sign in the yard.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

The next half an hour—meeting the realtor, going through every room in the house—was a revelation.

The realtor, a petite woman in a suit, concluded the tour, ending in the opulent kitchen. “I understand that you are on a clock and don’t have weeks to wait for furniture. The mansion comes completely furnished, just like you’ve requested,” she said, and stepped out of the room to give them privacy.

“So, what do you think?” Hector’s face was impassive, not showing any signs of whether he liked the place or not.

The house was a mausoleum style; marble statues in the front, an impeccable garden, a steel kitchen that could house a small army.

“I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong idea, but um... I can’t afford this.”

“Didn’t think you could.”

“Then why are we here?”

“Can’t show that CPS woman my bachelor pad. It’s a dump. I’m hardly there, so I never cared what the place looks like. Anyway, figured we should look for a place more... family like.”

“Oh.” That was incredibly generous of him, but she didn’t want him to put himself in debt like that.

Suddenly his scowl returned. “What did you mean by thinking that you gave me the wrong idea?”

“Nothing.”

“In fact, why did you assume I thought you were going to buy this place to begin with?”

This could become really embarrassing, really fast. “I like the hardwood floors.”

He cupped her cheek. “Answer my question.”

Fine. If this was going to work, she should be completely honest anyway. “It’s just that, people seem to think that because of my last name, I’ve inherited a ton of money. When my cousin married a billionaire, it became worse. People think you become rich just by association. Except, there is no Rossi family fortune left. You’ve seen where I live. It’s not temporary. There is no big trust fund that will kick in when I reach a certain age. I have a small trust fund left, which I use to pay rent, since teaching class two days a week doesn’t cover all my expenses.” Maybe she should have made that clear from the get-go. “Maybe we can get a smaller place in—”

He dropped onto a kitchen chair and pulled her in between his legs. “I can afford this place.”

“You can?”

“Yeah.”

“How?” It was probably impolite to ask, but Hector wasn’t exactly Mr. Polite himself, and she was curious. She knew he had his own security firm but surely that didn’t make enough to buy a high-end mansion. Also—and she didn’t want to admit

this aloud—she hoped that he didn't make his money with dubious extracurricular activities. She grew up in the mobster world. A world that had cost her father his life, and had her growing up behind big fences, surrounded by bodyguards. When her grandfather died, she'd hoped to have left all that behind.

"I do odd jobs for the mafia," he whispered. At her panicked look, he grinned. "You should see your face."

This earned him a thump to the shoulder. Which, of course, hurt her more than him, since the man seemed rock-hard all over.

"Not funny. I mean, I know you don't exactly have a safe job, like an accountant, but odd jobs for the mafia, really?"

"My firm does well. In fact, more than well. I also own stock in Detta Enterprises. So, you were hoping for an accountant, huh?"

"I was hoping for you," she said honestly. He wasn't ready yet for her to profess her love—it would probably make him bolt—but reminding him that he was her first choice surely wouldn't do any harm.

His hands went under her top, his fingers brushing under her breasts. Their silent stare-off was interrupted by the realtor who walked back in through the patio door.

She looked at them expectantly. "Have you made a decision?"

Hector pulled his hands back and looked at her questioningly.

"It's a nice place, though a bit big," Mary said.

"I thought you were used to that?"

True. She'd lived in mansions all her life. "You forget where I live now. I've gotten used to my tiny place."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“You’ve lived there for all of three months.”

“I adjust quickly.”

His eyes raked over her body. “God, I hope so.”

The way he looked at her made her heart speed up. “Why do I feel like we’re not talking about living arrangements anymore?”

“Because we’re not.”

When the realtor cleared her throat, Mary sent her an apologetic smile. Hector didn’t seem to care that the poor woman was drowning in their sex talk.

“I’m not really sure about this place,” she said, since Hector seemed to leave the choice up to her.

The realtor showed them two more mansions, neither of which appealed to her. She was afraid Hector’s patience would be running thin by now, but he surprised her. He was as chill as three hours ago. Still, it wasn’t fair to him, or the realtor, to have them running around town like this.

When they left the last monstrous mansion, she stepped up to the woman.

“Do you have smaller places to show? Less, um... flashy? Perhaps closer to where Hector works, but more outdoorsy?”

This stopped both Hector and the realtor in their tracks.

He immediately came to her side. “Baby, we’ve talked about this. I can afford this place.”

“Yes, we did. It’s just that none of the places I’ve seen so far is homey. Yes, they are beautiful, but I was hoping for something less elaborate and more in nature, if possible. I think you’ll be more comfortable there too.”

“I think I might know what you want,” the realtor chimed in.

Their next stop was a beautiful cottage. It was smaller compared to the houses they’d seen before, and had more of a rustic feel to it.

The realtor slid open the patio door and walked them onto the deck. The ocean view that greeted them was breathtaking. The deck went all the way around the house and ended in the master bedroom.

It was love at first sight. “I love it.”

Hector nodded. “We’ll take it.”

“I’ll take care of the paperwork,” the realtor said and left, busy talking on her phone.

“I’m confused,” Mary admitted.

“About what?”

“All of this, actually. I thought you were sorry about agreeing to marry me, and that was why you avoided me.”

“You don’t know this yet, but my word is my bond. Once I give it, I don’t take it back. As for the reason for me avoiding you...” He swooped her off her feet. With a startled cry, she put her arms around his neck. “It’s difficult to keep my hands off of you.”

The most intelligent retort she could come up with was, “Oh.”

“I’m not used to denying myself what I want,” he growled as he walked up the stairs.

“I don’t remember asking you to do that.”

“I wanna do this right. You know, take you on our wedding night. I can wait two more nights.”

She liked the idea of her wedding night being her first time, as old-fashioned as it may seem. “I would like that too. And, um, it’s only for... I mean we are getting married in only a few days, so...” When he grinned, she gave him another thump on his shoulder. It was like hitting a rock.

He dropped her onto the bed and crawled over her. “You shouldn’t have done that. It hurt.”

She scoffed. “As if.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

His eyes narrowed. “Someone’s being particularly bratty today.”

Someone was horny. She wasn’t ashamed to admit that. To herself. Out loud, to him, was a whole different matter. Then again, she didn’t have to tell him anything, she could show him.

She put her arms around his neck. “I’m so sorry for hurting you. Let me kiss it better.” She gave him a slight peck on the cheek, and chuckled when he frowned. “What? A kiss is a kiss.”

“That’s not a kiss. This is.”

She expected him to crush his lips on hers. Instead, he made a trail down her body, pushing up her shirt, kissing her stomach, and going lower. He licked his way to her core, placing a kiss on her panties, taking in her scent. With one pull, he pushed them down and nuzzled the insides of her thighs, basically kissing everywhere but where she wanted.

She tried to guide him to her needy place, but he swatted her hands away. Then he flipped her onto her stomach. Her face hit the pillow with anumpf.

She stiffened from surprise when he gave her cheeks a few swats. Then he pulled her up on all fours.

He pulled off her top and bra, all the while making sure she stayed on her knees, facing the headboard.

Hector pushed her legs wider apart and she could feel his breath between her thighs. “I want to see you play with your breasts. Let me see you love yourself.”

It felt odd at first, playing with herself while he watched her from behind. By the time he finally started licking her pussy, she was sure she was about to combust. It felt as if she had come up with a sudden fever.

She grabbed both of her nipples, turning them, while riding his tongue. Trying to will him to push inside her. When he finally did, her hips bucked, and she let out a cry.

His tongue was followed by a thick finger, roaming inside her body. Then he added another digit, going deep. So deep.

Was that her who mewled like a kitten in distress?

“Shh. We’ll take this slow. I’m gonna stretch you first.”

The stretching of his fingers and tongue started to hurt, but she was beyond caring. She wanted him inside her. Now.

“Hector,” she pleaded, her voice throaty.

When she finally heard him unzip his pants, she let out a sigh of relief.

The head of his cock brushed against her cleft, going up and down, lubricating himself on her juices.

“Dios!”

One push against her back and she went face first into a pillow again. His hands covered hers, holding her down, as his hot rod grinded between her ass cheeks.

When she lifted her butt, silently asking him to enter her—she wasn't going to make it until their wedding night—he bit her shoulder. She winced from the pain but was beyond caring.

His hard thrusts against her ass intensified. He grabbed a handful of her ass and squeezed. Hard. Then he pushed two fingers inside her pussy, making her cry out in a sweet concoction of pain and near ecstasy.

“You don't come until I tell you to,” he growled in her ear as he pulled out his fingers.

Was he kidding her? “Then maybe you should stop with... Oh, God.”

His dick hit her sweet spot. And by ‘hit,’ she meant he was tapping the tip of it against her pussy, taunting her, torturing her. It was becoming increasingly difficult not to come.

Then he let out a big grunt and she felt hot splatters against her ass and back. He placed the gentlest of kisses along her neck, where he'd bit her before.

His open palm swatted her clit. “Let go, Mary. Let go.”

Her ass arched up and she tried to move, but he was still holding her down, forcing her to come, bucking and grinding against the comforter. In a weird way, it was like fucking the bed just to elevate the ache between her thighs. It was the hottest thing she'd ever experienced.

The next second, his weight shifted from her and he sat back on the edge of the bed.

Finally being able to move, she turned her body toward him. Her eyes widened when she saw his cock. It was huge.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

“Don’t look at me like that. If I don’t let you go now, I’m gonna take you right here and now. Two nights,” he muttered. “I can hold on for two more nights.”

She propped herself up and leaned against his big frame. She loved how big he was, how he could easily encompass her with his large bulk. “So, what do you want to do until then?”

His eyes went straight to her breasts, but then he looked away. “I’m taking you out for dinner. I can’t marry a chick I’ve never even been on a date with, right?”

She smiled and kissed his cheek. “Right.”

CHAPTER 10

HECTOR

Hector stared at the guy with his ass perched on his desk, and contemplated his life. How the fuck had he ended up in the position of having to ask Tommie Green for a favor?

Tommie’s fingers drummed against Hector’s desk. “Let me get this straight. You want to go shopping with me? What, just because I’m gay, you assume I have great taste in clothing?”

“No, you little shit. I assume that because every time you have one of your girls’ nights, Jazzy can’t stop gushing about your style. Now, are you gonna help me out or not?” If he hadn’t been determined to not fuck up his first date with Mary, he

would've left, leaving skid marks.

“Ah.” Tommie’s hand raked through his mohawk. “You know, I really wish they’d stop calling it girls’ night, since I’m obviously not a girl. I’m thinking about changing it into ‘getting laid’ night.”

“Thanks for sharing. I really feel like we’ve bonded. Now, can we switch back to what I’ve asked you to come over for?”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Nude pics of Achilles.”

Tommie immediately perked up. “You really have those?”

Dios...

“Of course not. Why the fuck would I have that?”

The scowl returned. “Not cool, Wolfman. Nobody likes a tease.”

Luckily, Hector had a trick up his sleeve. He took out the bag from behind his back. It had taken him a trip across town during rush hour to get it, so it better work.

Tommie gasped and snatched the bag out of his hand. “Gimme!” He drooled when he saw the contents. “Coffee crunch cake from Yasukochi’s. I think I love you.”

“Good. Now that you owe me, let’s get going.” He grabbed the kid by his arm and all but hauled him out of his office.

He didn’t let go of him until they were inside his loft. The Smurf had a habit of

wandering off and causing mischief whenever he stopped by. One time, he'd readjusted the computer screens to the Village People. Another time, it was a Leather Daddy.

Tommie just finished the last of his pastry. "So, this is your place. It's um..."

"Shitty," Hector filled in for him.

"It could use some color," Tommie said as he walked around. "Any color, really. Even beige would be an option. It's a shame to let all this space go to waste. I think it takes up half the block. Do you have any idea what I could do with this place?"

"I didn't call you over to redecorate my pad."

"Well, you should have. Even a prepped-up clown would get depressed in here."

"You can give your home deco tips to Mary for our new place. Now, get over here and make yourself useful."

After a curious look at his bed—which was just a king against a wall—Tommie followed him to his closet.

"How to dress you for your first date with Mary," he murmured. "Good thing you came to me." He looked over Hector's fatigues and boots, and dove into his closet. "So, what do you usually wear on dates?"

"I don't date."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

Tommie spun around. “You don’t date? As in, never have?”

Hector leaned against the wall. He had a feeling this was gonna take a while. “You don’t need to date to get laid.”

“Awww, a dating virgin.”

Hector rolled his eyes. “I’m a lot of things, kid, but no virgin.”

“Well, it does explain the clothes. I mean, seriously, all you’ve got are jeans, cargo pants, tank tops, and flannel shirts. And for some reason, all of it is in either black, white, or Army green. We have to remedy that.” Tommie’s eyes shone bright like a fucking diamond, clearly preparing himself for the makeover of a lifetime.

Hector sighed. “I’m going to regret this, aren’t I?”

“Now what makes you say that?” Tommie smiled. “I’ll have you dressed in no time.”

Tommie’s innocent smile should have made alarm bells go off. Instead, Hector, the simpleton he was, had actually believed they’d be done ‘in no time.’ But as another hour passed by and Tommie dragged him into yet another department store, he got the feeling they weren’t nearly done. It was like standing at the foot of a mountain, looking up and up, as Tommie dismissed another salesperson and stacked piles of clothes into Hector’s arms.

There were so damn many people in the store. They were everywhere. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this trapped.

“Let’s hope these fit,” Tommie mused, as he ushered him into a fitting room. “Never shopped for someone your size before.”

The quiet of the small cubicle was actually a blessing. He tried on two shirts, both too small. Tommie handed him another two from the pile. Two of them actually fit.

Finally.

A saleswoman came over. She scrutinized his chest, her hands going over his shoulders to check the fit. Her fingers brushed over his pecs. “Oh, my. Your chest is so large.”

“Hands off, dudette. He’s taken.”

The woman turned crimson as Tommie gave her the stink eye, then she drooped off.

“I’m done here,” Hector growled.

“But I have all these other—”

“We’re fucking done.” He pushed the ones that had fit into Tommie’s hands.

“Fine. We don’t have much time anyway, since we still have to get you a haircut.”

“Touch my hair and you’ll lose your hand.”

A chuckle followed, and Tommie coughed, eyes all innocent. The little shit was baiting him, and Hector fell right into his trap.

Tommie tapped a finger on his chin. “Now, what to do for shoes?”

Oh, hell.

At o-seven-hundred sharp that evening, Hector stood at Mary's door. He had wanted to do this all proper and shit, picking her up from her home. He wasn't sure why he was nervous when he rang her doorbell. It wasn't like he hadn't prepared for their date night. He knew Mary's background. She was used to pretty, sophisticated things. He was a lot of things, but sophisticated wasn't one of them. Still, he was going to try. He got Gio to make a reservation at a French place you could only get in when you were a member. He'd even borrowed the company car, so she wouldn't have to sit on a bike.

He smoothed back his shoulder-length hair and winced as he tried to break in his new Italian design shoes. He didn't feel comfortable out of his combat boots.

When Mary opened the door, sporting a big smile, he decided his squashed toes were worth it.

Her eyes roamed over his body, looking surprised to see him in a dress jacket. He had ditched his cargo pants and put on a new pair of jeans. Tommie had tried to hoist him in some dress pants, but no store sold them in his size—thank fuck—and it took at least a day to have them custom made.

“You look great,” she said, as she closed the door and took his hand. “I’m glad I dressed up.”

“You look pretty.” She looked fucking magnificent in her khaki mini skirt and white top.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:03 am

They talked about this and that while he drove. Mary was really enthused about their house, and he loved how she talked about ‘them’ sprucing up the place. He didn’t care about decorating, didn’t have her style for sure, but he liked that she asked about his preferences.

Half an hour later, he parked in front of the restaurant in one of San Fran’s high-end neighborhoods.

“The L’Auberge?” Mary seemed surprised at his choice.

“Yeah. Place is supposed to be hot and trending, with a to die for amuse-bouche or something.” Tommie had rattled on about the dish. He hoped they served it in plates, because he was starving.

“Ah yes, their amuse-bouche.” She smiled. “Tommie couldn’t stop raving about it.”

The maître D’ was awaiting them from behind the desk, his nose a mile in the air. Hector didn’t like the way the asshole gave him a curt onceover, and dismissed him. When his eyes landed on Mary, his eyes shone, though.

“Do you have a reservation, sir?”

If his voice became any more haughty, he was going to float up to the ceiling.

“Try Detta,” Hector said, as he looked around.

The place had white walls, glass up to the ceiling, and a chandelier that gave too

much light. In fact, everything was too much. Too fancy, too licked, too... fake. Still, it was the poshest place in town and, according to Tommie, they had great food.

A waiter led them to their table next to the fire place.

“Thank you for this,” Mary said as they sat down. “I mean, I know our engagement isn’t exactly textbook, but I like that you try to make it as normal as it is.”

He decided that she had no idea. She really believed that he was this self-sacrificing hero person that was throwing himself on a blade. Little did she know that the situation with Zoe had been the perfect excuse to snare her. Yes, he had resisted at first, but once he’d decided that she would be his, he was all in. If he had asked her to marry him, she could—would—have refused. But now, he had her without having to have faced rejection. And there would be no take-backsies. He’d told her that up front.

“We area normal couple,” he stipulated. “I don’t care how we came to be. So, we do things a bit backward. You know, having dinner and getting to know each other after getting engaged, but that doesn’t make it any less real.”

“You really mean that.”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I hadn’t meant it.” Growing up, he didn’t have anything else but his word. He could buy her the world now, but he wanted her to know that his word would be enough.

Speaking of buying the world, he pulled out a small box from inside his jacket.

She took the box and opened it. “It’s beautiful,” she said softly.

Remembering how she reacted to the big mansions, he’d opted for a simple wedding

band. It was in white gold and held only one small stone.

Mary leaned over the table and gave him a kiss. Their eyes met, and he got a weird feeling in his stomach. He hoped he wasn't coming down with something.

The waiter took their drinks and handed them their menus. To his dismay, it was solely written in French.

Pretentious fucks.

“Problem?”

“Don't know French,” he admitted.

“How about I order for both of us?” She looked at him hesitantly, and he realized she expected him to throw a fit, or maybe make this a pride issue. Except, he was just proud that she knew French.

“Feed me, baby. I like anything with meat.”

When the waiter returned, she did just that. Hector's gaze once again roamed the fancy restaurant. It reeked of old money and entitled people. The soft piano music did nothing to squelch the feeling that he didn't belong in here.

“You miss this?” he asked.

“Miss what?”

“All of this. The fancy restaurants, the big mansion. Basically, everything you had when your grandfather was still alive. Why did you move to a shitty apartment anyway? You had to know Gio would've set you up wherever you wanted.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“You’re right,” she admitted. “Gio would have done all of that, because he loves Jazzy. Financially, he wouldn’t have even felt it. I mean, my grandfather was rich, but the Dettas are like Richie Richrich. But I had to know I could make it on my own. Also, Gio has already done so much for me. I know he took care of Marco. Jazzy told me.” She looked him straight in the eye. “I know you volunteered to go after him.”

His jaw clenched when he was reminded of her uncle. The sick fucker he had chased until the gates of Hell. Or, in his case, a little town in France.

“You never have to worry about him again.”

“I know. Gio gave me closure, a peace of mind. I couldn’t ask him for more. Also, honestly, I don’t need more. I teach art class two days a week, and with the money I have left from my trust fund, that’s enough to get by. There are so many people who have much less. I get reminded of that every time I volunteer at the shelter. I’ve met people, single moms, who could barely feed their baby. I was blessed.”

“My mother was a single mom.” The words slipped out. He could see the questions in her eyes. Thankfully, the waiter chose that time to arrive with their food.

His plate revealed a piece of beef that might feed a toddler. He was about to order another plate—in fact, they should keep the micro beef coming—when he was met with another unpleasant surprise.

Some guy—slick hair, three-thousand-dollar suit—was standing next to their table, drooling over Mary.

“Mary?”

“Oh, hi, Josh.” She looked at Hector. “Um, this is—”

“Dr. Joshua McGraw, Mary’s ex-boyfriend.”

Hector accepted the extended hand, doing his best not to crush it. Didn’t mean he wouldn’t give a strong hold. He couldn’t hide a smirk when the good doctor winced.

“Hector Diaz. The fiancé.”

Josh blinked, and his eyes went to Mary’s ring finger. He then pointed at a table across the room. “Why don’t you two join me?”

“Oh, no really, we—” Mary started.

“Or, I can join you,” Josh said, his hand already on a chair at a nearby table.

Mary gave Hector an apologetic look. As usual, she was too damn polite. Luckily, he didn’t have that problem.

“How about you fucking don’t?”

This had Mr. Shiny Hair taken aback. “I beg your pardon?”

“You’ll be doing a lot more than begging when I shove my shoe up your ass. They’re new and shiny, just like your hair. I still need to break them in. And if you don’t get the fuck away from this table, I’ll break them in on your face.”

The good doctor turned a shady red, then a pasty pale. But he did leave—practically running—heeding Hector’s warning.

He turned his gaze back to Mary, about to apologize for embarrassing her when he found her chuckling.

“God, his face.”

Totally not what he'd expected. “I thought you'd be embarrassed, with your peers being here and all that crap.”

She rolled her eyes. “You bought shiny shoes for our date?”

“Tommie picked them.” The Smurf was a pain in the ass but did have his uses.

“Oh, I bet he loved that. Tell me you didn't give him free range of your credit card.”

He snorted. “I wish I could tell you that. It was like giving candy to a toddler. The kid does love to spend my money.”

“I'm not surprised.”

“Wish I could say the same. You should've seen the look on Achilles' face when a courier stopped by this afternoon with more boxes from Neimann Marcus. I'm the proud owner now of not one butthreecashmere sweaters, and a dozen silk shirts.”

She laughed, almost in tears now. “I'm so sorry you had to go through that. Honestly, I like you more G.I. Joe style.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“Glad to hear that, ’cause this was a one-time deal only. I can hardly move in this dress jacket. Also, this place isn’t really me. What do you say we get out of this fancy-schmancy place? I like Italian more anyway.”

“You do?”

“I’m marrying you, aren’t I?” He dropped a wad of cash on the table, not wanting to wait for his credit card to be processed.

They ended up having dinner at a little Italian place in Tenderloin, a joint where Gio used to work as a busboy.

Mary chuckled when he told her that as he dropped her off later that night.

“Gio working as a busboy?”

“We all have a past.”

“Aren’t you coming in?” She looked up as he stood frozen in the doorway.

“Can’t. If I go in, I won’t leave until I’ve had you naked.” And fucked your very delicious hole.

“Oh.” She nibbled her bottom lip, looking disappointed.

Just two more nights, he told himself. He could get through two more nights.

After that, all bets were off.

CHAPTER 11

MARY

It was the night before her wedding—which would be a small happening at Casa Detta—and Mary found herself at her impromptu bachelorette party.

Jazzy insisted on throwing her one. Mary was fine with that, as long as it was at Club Flux. Luckily, her cousin hadn't asked why she insisted on this particular place. Perhaps she believed Mary chose it because it was popular and booming, especially on a Friday night.

They were all there—Jazzy, Tommie, and her cousin, Carmen. Jazzy glanced worried looks at her sister, but Carmen's eyes seemed to stare into oblivion. Mary wished she could help her, but what did you tell a woman who had lost her unborn baby at the hands of her own husband? It had only been six months. She needed time to heal.

Sadly, her own sister, Gina, hadn't been able to make it. According to her message, she was whisked away by some Brit to Dubai. Gina had ended her message, that she'd be there at Mary's second, "real" wedding. That remark had hurt. Yes, the reason for her tying the knot was Zoe, but she didn't see this as a temporary thing. Neither did Hector. Maybe it was selfish to hone in on his good nature, it could even be called abusing his protective streak toward women and children, but she wasn't sorry that she'd captured him. Hector didn't know this yet, but no one would love him as much as she did.

"Any particular reason why you chose this place?" Tommie asked.

Jazzy went over to the bar to get them drinks, which probably meant they would have

shots all night long.

“I’m looking for someone in here,” Mary admitted.

Tommie blinked. “You have all that hot, grouchy manliness at the tips of your fingers, and are still looking for a man?”

“Of course not. I’m here to speak to Hector’s brother. According to Gio, he’s here tonight.”

“Didn’t know Hector had a brother.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. Gio said they aren’t exactly on speaking terms.”

“Uh-oh.” Tommie shook his head. “I can see that nosy sparkle in your eyes. You know this is going to piss him off, right?”

“Whatever do you mean?” she asked innocently.

“You’re a fixer, Mary. Thing is, some people don’t want to be fixed.”

So, okay, he might be a tiny, teensy bit right. But Hector was giving her so much. The chance at her own family. She couldn’t do any less for him.

“It’s the only blood relative he has left,” she explained over the dark, piano music. “If I don’t invite his brother, Hector won’t have any family on his own wedding. Whatever happened between them, I’m sure they can figure it out.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Tommie glanced over at the table in the VIP section she was watching. There were three men sitting in a dark booth, against a deep red wall. Her target was the one in the middle, in the black suit. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was flanked by two men with sun-streaked dirty-blond hair.

“He seems familiar somehow,” Tommie mused.

“Wish me luck.”

“Um, I’m not sure if you should—”

She walked over to the table she’d been eying for the past hour. As she neared it, she noticed that the estranged brothers didn’t look anything alike, except for their eyes, which were the oddest shade of green. That was where any similarity ended, though. Unlike Hector, who’s scowl showed a pallet of emotion ranging from being annoyed, angry, or anything else, his brother’s face was blank.

He barely gave her a glance when she stopped in front of his table. The men at both his sides appeared to be identical twins.

One of them had a busty blonde on his lap. “Which one of us do you find more attractive? Me or my brother, Damon?”

His brother just shook his head in exasperation.

Mary literally couldn’t see any difference between the two men. Other than the way they were dressed, that is. Damon was the more casual one, with red cloth high-top

sneakers, whereas the one with the blonde on his lap looked like a model on the cover of GQ.

“You, Angel,” the blonde said with a pout. “I choose you.”

“Wrong answer, love.” He nudged her off his lap. “Off you go. Guess it’s my burden for being the prettier one.” The girl scoffed and walked away, her eyes flashing fire.

In the blink of an eye, Angel stood next to her, openly sizing her up.

She ignored him and focused on Hector’s brother.

“Hi, Kristoff, I’m Mary Rossi, and I would like to talk to you about your brother.” When he didn’t react, she added, “Your brother, Hector.” Maybe she should have had that clarified from the beginning. Just because Hector didn’t have any other siblings, didn’t mean his brother didn’t either.

“And who are you to my brother? My brother, Hector.”

She didn’t appreciate his mocking tone, but kept that to herself. She shouldn’t forget that these brothers hadn’t spoken to each other for years. There was some bad blood between them. Adding in her own anger would only add fuel to the feud.

“I’m his fiancée, and I—”

“Angel,” Kristoff snapped, adding something in Russian.

Holding up his hands, Angel stepped back.

Kristoff looked past her shoulder at their table. Mary followed his gaze. Her friends were staring at her. Jazzy, especially, had the weirdest look on her face.

“You are here with Gio’s woman,” Kristoff spoke.

“You know my cousin’s husband well?”

“We have history.”

“Aha. Anyway, um, our wedding is tomorrow, and it would mean a lot if you would attend it.”

For some reason, Kristoff’s demeanor softened. Maybe it was the fact that he seemed to believe who she was, or maybe because she’d invited him to the wedding.

See? My magic is already working.

Hector is going to kick your ass.

No, he’s not.

“Does my brother know you’re here?”

“Nope. But then again, I don’t need his permission to talk to family, do I?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

The ice in his eyes thawed a little more. “Family?” He made a gesture for her to sit and she scooted in next to him.

“Yes, family. I know you two have been estranged for some time. And since weddings are a great opportunity to get closure, perhaps even mend fences, I hoped—”

“And funerals,” he interrupted her.

“What?”

“You forgot to mention funerals as a way to find closure. It’s at funerals that people show their real faces and feelings. Either that they loved someone or hated him.”

“That’s quite a morbid way of thinking.”

“I’m a morbid man.”

“Clearly,” she muttered. “But since a wedding is the more preferable of the two occasions, I’ve chosen to invite you to Hector’s wedding instead of his funeral, which hopefully will be on a date far, far away. So, can I tell Hector you’ll be attending tomorrow? It will be held at Gio’s place. Since you already know him, it shouldn’t be too hard to find. It will be a small ceremony, with just close friends and family.”

“I wouldn’t want to miss it for the world. But please, let’s keep my attendance to ourselves. I want it to be a surprise.”

“I can live with that. As long as you show up. If you don’t, I will hunt you down,” she joked.

Apparently the man couldn’t smile. “I wouldn’t want that.”

“Good. That’s settled then.”

She didn’t have the money to buy Hector something fancy. Also, she wouldn’t know what to get him. The man didn’t seem to live large, though apparently, he could afford to buy whatever he wanted. The only thing of value he seemed attached to was his Harley. She was hoping that giving him his brother back would be perceived as more valuable than anything she could buy him.

Surely, he was going to love her surprise.

CHAPTER 12

HECTOR

Hector hated surprises. He stared at Tommie standing in the doorway, holding a big bag. It had an Italian name on it. He had a feeling what was in it and dread filled his stomach.

“What’s that?”

Tommie moved past him and put the garment bag on the bed. Jazzy had readied a guest room for him.

“Your tux, of course.”

“No rented tux is going to fit me.” He pointed at the black jeans and dress jacket on

the bed. “I was just going to wear that. You tried, but oh well, too bad.”

Tommie’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah, I can see you’re really heartbroken. I got your measurements from Jess and placed a last-minute order. Paid five times the price to have it done within a day, but it will fit.”

Hector sighed. Up until a minute ago, he didn’t own dress pants. He had hoped to get away with wearing jeans and a dress jacket, instead of a monkey suit.

“You just live to torture me, don’t you?”

“You can thank me later.” Tommie winked and eyed his hair. “Are you sure you don’t want a trim? I could easily—”

“No one is touching my hair, Smurf.”

“Fine, be that way. See you later.”

Muttering and cursing, Hector hoisted himself in the tuxedo. He’d had to admit that the size was perfect, and the trim looked flawless.

Then, the big moment arrived. Standing in front of the minister in Gio’s living room, waiting for Mary to appear. A strange tightness filled his chest, followed by a twist in his guts. Nerves. He was fucking nervous. The little virgin had him twisted in all sorts of knots, and he wasn’t sure if he liked it.

And then she stood before him, dressed in white. He’d never imagined himself getting married. Never believed he deserved, let alone earned, a woman like Mary. He didn’t know what it was about her that made him want to be a better man. What a contradiction that was; wanting to be a better man by possibly dooming her to a life with him. Who was to tell that he would be a better man than the sperm donor, as his

mother used to call his father.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

As he looked into Mary's eyes and repeated after the minister, he swore that he would be a better man than his father. He would honor her, protect her, give her all he had, and never have her want for a thing. And silently he swore to protect little Zoe, and any other kids they may have in the future, as well. All he had to do was keep the crazy and rage inside. Bottle it up where it belonged. Maybe, just maybe, then she could care about him the way she cared about Zoe, her cousins, and even her worthless sister. He wasn't sure why that was important, but it was.

They finished giving their vows, and silently, he added another vow; to never let her go. She was off the market, for good.

He gave her a scorching kiss underneath a shower of applause and catcalls. Yeah, his men were assholes like that. Then the congratulations started.

When it was Walker's turn, he was greeted with a huge grin. "We knew you'd eventually see the light, boss."

"You won the bet, didn't you?"

"I sure did."

Smug motherfucker.

Mary patted him on the chest. "Let's dance."

Dance. Another thing he'd never seen himself do. He was too big and never felt comfortable doing it, let alone while wearing a monkey suit. Thankfully, the DJ put

on a slow track. Mary nestled perfectly against his body.

He cleared his throat. “You look beautiful.”

She gave him a sweet smile. “Thank you. You don’t look too shabby yourself.”

He was in awe of her. Not once had she asked about his scars. Everyone did, sooner or later.

“Not as pretty as you. Obviously.” He’d meant for that to come out as a joke, but she must have heard something in his voice.

She cupped his cheek with the three puckered scars. “Are you referring to these?”

“You never asked how I got them.” He didn’t give a fuck about the scars. Didn’t care what others thought about them either. Thousands of soldiers got hurt during combat, or lost their lives. A few scars were nothing compared to that. Yet somehow, her opinion was important.

Mary placed her hand on his heart. “I didn’t ask because I don’t think of it as something that defines you. To me, it’s just a sign of bravery, of survival. Honestly, I envy it.”

Not what he was expecting to hear. “Envy it?”

She shrugged while he swayed them slowly from the left to the right. “Most people are so focused on what’s on the outside. As if one’s looks tells anything about them at all. I think it’s quite the opposite; it’s the most misleading thing there is. I don’t like it when people underestimate me. One look at me, and they think I don’t have a brain.”

The first time he saw her, he’d been transfixed by her beauty, boobs, butt, and golden

hair too. He had objectified her like any other man. Of course, by now, he knew that there was more to her than just a pretty face.

“I’ll be sure not to make that mistake,” he said smoothly.

Staring deep into her beautiful eyes, he had a feeling everything was going to be all right. That he’d somehow deserved her and wasn’t going to fuck this up.

Then he saw him; an unwelcome face in the small crowd.

Fucking Kristoff Romanov. The one person, apart from the sperm donor, he hadn’t wanted to see today, or any other day.

He turned to Gio, who was dancing next to him with Jazzy in his arms, ready to scold him.

His friend shook his head. “I didn’t invite him.”

“Yeah, then who else would—”

She wouldn’t.

His gaze snapped back at his wife.

“I invited him,” she said softly. “Gio had nothing to do with it. Other than providing me your brother’s whereabouts when I asked him if you had any relatives.”

He tried to rein in the rage. His shirt felt too tight. The whole damn tuxedo felt like it was going to rip off its seams.

“You’re mad.”

He bit the inside of his cheek to keep in a sarcastic retort.

“Not now.” They were still on the dance floor. Surrounded by guests who were dancing, chatting, and having a drink and a laugh. This wasn’t the place for a scene.

That’s why he led her toward the patio. He tried his best to keep a scowl from his face as he passed guests, patting him on the back, trying to make small talk. He gave the appropriate answers, until he had Mary outside on the seemingly abandoned patio.

He let go of her the second the door closed behind them.

“Why the fuck would you invite Kristoff? Explain yourself.”

Her baby blues narrowed, and she folded her arms. “I really don’t like your tone right now.”

What the hell?

“There must be something wrong with my hearing, ’cause I’m damn sure you didn’t just say you don’t like my tone.”

She took a deep breath, as if he was the one trying her patience. Again, what the hell?

“You’re not in the military anymore, Hector. Neither am I. So please don’t bark at me. As for an explanation, I was hoping to start our marriage fresh, since it is a new

beginning for both of us. You said there would be no marriage of convenience, and I'm planning to hold you to that. Well, guess what? This means that you are my family now. One of the few family I have left, and I wanted to do something nice for you.

"I was trying to help you bury the hatchet with your brother. Obviously, you don't want that, and that's okay. I will listen if you think I've crossed a line, but I will not accept being snapped at or being questioned like I'm some child. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to get back inside because... oh, who am I kidding? I'm going back in because I'm angry at you."

With that, she gave him her back and strode back inside, her head held high.

He stared at her retreat, dumbfounded. What the fuck had just happened? He was the one wronged here. She should fucking apologize for sticking her nose in business where she had no business sticking it.

"You're being an asshole," a voice sounded behind him.

He turned to find Achilles against a brick wall, arms folded across his chest.

"How am I the asshole here? She meddled in something she had no business poking around in."

"That's called having a wife. It's what they do. Get used to it. And I think she was trying to help. Family is a big thing to Mary. Her own sister and mother didn't bother to show up to her wedding today. That must have hurt, a lot. In her mind, she was probably sparing you that pain or something."

Fuck. Voiced like that, it made sense. Still. Didn't mean he was going to admit it. Achilles would never let him live it down.

“Since when did you become the chick whisperer?”

“I have mad skills with the ladies.”

“Fuck off.”

A laugh followed. “Just think about it, man. You know what they say: happy wife, happy life.”

He padded back inside and found Mary near the buffet, having a talk with Cortez.

“Boss man, I was just asking your bride to hook me up with one of her friends.”

Mary eyed him warily, but he didn’t give a fuck. He put an arm around her waist and pulled her against him.

“What happened to your girl?”

Cortez’ face fell. “We’re on a break.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that,” Mary said, her eyes full of sympathy.

Apparently, the puppy hadn’t worked out so well after all. He was just about to point that out to Diaz Security’s Casanova, when Kristoff showed his face.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He felt Mary tense. She was probably worried about what he'd do. Judging by Kristoff's non-descript facial expression, he didn't have that problem.

“Congratulations,bratan.”

Don't fucking call me that.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat and instead said, “Yeah, thanks.”

Kristoff took an envelope from his pocket and handed it over to his bride.

“Just a little something for the shelter. I figured you already have everything you need.”

“Oh. Thank you, Kristoff. That's very generous of you.” Mary beamed up at him and gave him a hug.

Hector kept in a growl. Barely.

Kristoff looked surprised by her show of affection as well, and awkwardly patted her on the shoulder. He then excused himself.

Hector took Mary to a more secluded corner in the hallway.

She took a deep breath. “Are you... are you still mad?”

He hated seeing the insecurity in her eyes. Just minutes before, she had been excited,

glowing, happy, and then he stomped on it. Like blowing out a candle. This was exactly what he'd been afraid of. Not married for all of five minutes and he'd already fucked up.

"Nah, we're good."

"I'm sorry," she continued. "I shouldn't have pushed you. I guess, in some way, I imagined this would be a great family reunion. It's just that... I don't like discord in my family. All I remember from my father is him away at work or at home fighting with my mother. Fights between family has a way to fester unlike any physical wound, and I suppose I thought I could heal that for you." She grabbed his arm. "I had no idea that your wound was so deep."

"Guess that explains why you invited the head of the Russian mob to our wedding," he said begrudgingly.

Mary's jaw dropped. "I did what now?"

"Yeah." He couldn't keep the smugness out of his voice. Maybe that'd teach her not to meddle in his things again.

"Oh, my God. He's the head of..." She was speechless for a moment. Her eyes narrowed. "Of course. That's why Jazzy had that smile on her face after I spoke to him. Not that she bothered to enlighten me." Then she looked back at him. "Is that why you two had a falling out?"

He shook his head. He didn't give a fuck about what Kristoff did for a living. Back when he'd seen his brother for the first time, Kristoff hadn't even been this far up in mobster circles. "That's not it. And I'm not gonna tell you what is. Not on our wedding night. I'd rather do something else."

A blush colored her cheeks. She was an enigma. One moment she was defiantly blazing like an angry cat; the next, she was subdued.

“Let’s go.” He was done with the reception, and started pulling her outside.

“We can’t just leave.”

“Says who? It’s our wedding, we can do whatever we want. Also, I’m just following in Gio’s footsteps, keeping up with the tradition.”

That earned him an eyeroll, but she didn’t deny it. Gio had been married for all of an hour when he and his bride suspiciously disappeared.

He swooped her up into his arms and carried her outside, into the limo that was waiting for them. He made a mental note to thank Gio later for providing them with the car. It was something he wouldn’t have thought of himself. Which led to a second mental note; try to think about what his woman needed. Gio liked to micromanage his wife’s life; that is, as much as she let him. He was overprotective to the bone and Hector had never understood that before. But sitting in the back seat of the limo, with Mary draped over his lap, something inside him unlocked. The weight of the responsibility he’d taken on suddenly hit him square in the chest. He had his own woman now. One he had to take care of. He’d never had that before. Hell, he usually didn’t fuck the same woman more than a few times. Maybe he had more of his father in him than he’d believed.

He closed his eyes for a second as his arms tightened around the precious cargo in his lap. He was going to do right by Mary, the way his father had never done for his mother.

They didn’t speak until the car stopped in front of their house. He liked that about her; she wasn’t the type to fill the silence with meaningless chatter.

He didn't let her on her feet until he had crossed the threshold for both their front door and the bedroom.

Mary looked nervous and he suddenly was reminded this was going to be her first time. Something primal bloomed in his chest. Women never forgot their first. It wasn't enough, though. He intended to be her last as well.

CHAPTER 13

MARY

Mary looked around in her new bedroom. It was dominated by a huge king-sized four-poster bed. The charcoal gray comforter and the rose petals sprawled on top of it were a stark contrast to her white dress.

Now she knew why Tommie had asked for her keys. It wasn't to just help her move in her stuff, but to give the room a honeymoon feel. She should thank him later.

Hector put an arm around her and kissed her neck. "You good? Nervous?"

"Just a little."

His hands slowly started unbuttoning her gown. She leaned into his big frame as he continued undressing her. Right up until she was left standing in a white bridal corset. Jazzy's gift.

When she heard his breath hitch, she smiled. Her so-called thong was nothing more than a thin piece of cloth that disappeared between her butt cheeks. She might not have the experience of his usual women, but, by God, she would keep his attention focused on her.

"You're killing me, mi esposa."

She liked him calling her his wife. Slowly, she turned around. "You're still dressed."

He was naked in less than five seconds. She was glad to see his Marine training

hadn't gone to waste.

It was the first time she got an eyeful of all that was Hector Diaz. Tight abs, an eight pack, and layers on top of layers of gorgeous bronze muscled skin. His body was decorated with several tattoos, all of which she wanted to explore.

Then her eyes finally went lower. This time, it was her whose breath hitched. Even in semi-hard state, he was big.

“Keep looking at me like that and I'll lose control.”

They weren't just playful words; it was a fair warning.

“Maybe I want you to lose control.” She wasn't sure she did, but suddenly had the feeling to challenge him.

“Don't challenge the beast, hermosa. You might not like his horns.”

“What if I did?”

Gently, he used his body to push her toward the bed. Step by step, they got closer.

“If you did, this night might go differently. If you did, you'd already have me buried deep inside you. I would just keep your legs spread all night. Filling you to the brim, until I had my fill.” A push to her chest and she fell onto the bed. He dropped on top of her. “There would be no more foreplay.”

“No more?” She chuckled. “When was there any at all?”

“First time was in the car when I took you from posing naked. Second time, in this house when I came on your ass.”

She flushed. "I see what you mean."

He hooked a finger in her thong and ripped it away. He then placed his thumb on her bottom lip. "Open up."

She did as he asked and sucked his finger in. Lubricating him, seeing his eyes go dark.

He took out his finger and after a slight brush over her clit, he went to her other hole.

She jumped when he touched her dark place. Maybe challenging him hadn't been such a good idea.

"Then, when I was done with your pussy, I would take your ass." He slowly nudged his finger tip inside her tight star.

Oh, God. What had she unleashed?

"You would like it," he whispered.

She had slightly mixed feelings about that.

“But, I have more control than that.”

This time, she was keeping her lips zipped, like a good girl. Though, she wouldn't mind opening them up to taste him. His body was big and heavy on top of her, enfolding her, making her feel trapped and cherished at the same time. This was what had been missing with the guys she'd dated. Never once had she felt this overwhelming passion, this sense of wanting to be owned by any of them.

“Scoot up to the headboard and place your legs apart as far as you can.”

The second she complied, he buried his face between her thighs. Sitting half up, a stack of pillows underneath her back, she had a great view of what was happening between her legs.

He suckled on her little bud, lapping up her cream. He didn't let go until her back arched from the bed and she uttered a cry. Spent, feeling a little light in the head, she floated down. Her back relaxed and she reopened her eyes, not remembering closing them.

“Remember that,” he said. “It's how I want to wake up in the mornings.”

She couldn't hold in a laugh. “I'll try.”

His eyes went over her bodice and he frowned. With one move he ripped it open until her breasts spilled out of the cups.

“Much better. I like seeing them.”

He got onto his knees, fisting himself, drawing her attention there.

Oh, God. He was huge.

He's going to tear me apart.

Gee, you think? Look at that monster cock. Think about your tiny hole and do the math.

“Wait. Stop.” He froze. “That's never going to fit.”

She felt him tremble, and it took her a sec to discover he was chuckling. At her expense!

“Don't worry. I'm gonna stretch your pussy so good you'll be fine.” Putting his words into action, his fingers slid inside her and started pumping. “I'm gonna make you feel so good, Mary. So good.”

His voice should be classified as a sin. Just hearing it made her want to do naughty things. Stuff she only fantasized about; steamy scenes she had read about in her novels. Dreams that had featured Hector Diaz since the moment she met him.

That didn't take away her fear from the steel rod pressing against her leg, though.

“Maybe we should talk first?” Yes, that was a great idea. The more she thought about it, the better it sounded.

He started nibbling her earlobe and her body turned into him on his own accord.

“What do you wanna talk about?”

She bowed so he could reach the right spot. Her hips moved to get his fingers deeper inside her. She tried to ignore the incredibly hard and thick dick pressed against her stomach.

“Maybe um, you could tell me about your first time?”

Really, Mary? Really?

Sorry, I panicked!

Another chuckle. Wonderful. The man with the eternal scowl was all cheery, now they were in bed. She supposed she should feel glad that she'd brought a smile to his face, except she felt nervous and a bit panicky, and her wedding night wasn't exactly going the way she had planned. Then again, no romance novel she'd ever read had had a wimpy heroine ready to jump out of the bed because she was afraid her first time was going to be painful.

“I'm sorry I'm such a wimp.”

His answer was biting a nipple.

“Ouch!”

“Don't ever call my wife a wimp. And don't ever apologize for telling me or showing me how you feel. Especially in bed. I won't.” His fingers sped up, spiking up her heat, making her groan. “See how I don't have any trouble pushing into your cunt? I can't wait until I breach your hot hole. But first, I'm gonna eat you out until your pussy is drenched. I dreamed about it for so fucking long.”

“You have?”

“First time I saw you, I wanted to bend you over the nearest flat surface.”

“The first time you saw me, you scowled and then ignored me the rest of the night.”

“And why do you think that was?”

“I figured because of your grumpy personality.”

He pulled his fingers out and jammed them back in.

Oh. Sweet, sweet pain.

“True. But also, because I couldn’t have you. Not even to honor the age-old tradition of the groomsmen fuck, which was my due.”

He pulled out of her and his hands went to her breasts. A reverent look crossed his face when her breasts spilled over his hands.

“Mercy. I love how big they are. Probably can’t get it all in my mouth but I’m gonna die trying.”

He winked, and all the pent-up tension left her body. She pulled him closer. “I’m ready.”

His forehead pressed to hers. “Thank fuck.”

With one swift thrust, he entered her body.

She screamed.

Her romance novels had lied to her! There was no “small discomfort, immediately followed by waves of ecstasy.” Losing her virginity hurt. A lot.

Hector didn’t move an inch. He lay still, frozen on top of her.

“You okay?” This time, when he asked the question, it came out as a growl.

Sweat had formed on his forehead and she realized he was holding himself back for her.

“I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me. I hurt you. Wish it could have been different, but there was no other way. We’re gonna take this slow.”

Apparently ‘slow’ in his vocabulary meant no movement at all.

It took her a full minute—with his heat pulsing inside her—to realize he was giving her time to recuperate. To catch her breath. For the pain to dull. She didn’t think it was possible to love him more.

It took a while for her muscles to relax. Then she started moving. First, she started kissing him. Their tongues met in a heated duel. Kissing, sucking, bringing them closer. Her legs, which had tensed up, fell apart. She thrust up against him, slowly moving, seeking for friction.

“Don’t make me beg. I want you to take me. I want everything you can give me. I

want... you.”

That was all it took.

Hector rolled her knees up to her chest, pinning her folded legs against her breasts. With her practically bent in half, he started drilling into her. She moaned with each brutal slam of his hips. And just like he’d promised, he didn’t let go until they were both completely satisfied.

CHAPTER 14

MARY

Mary woke up and blinked slowly as the sun poured through the blinds. She looked down to see Hector’s arm thrown across her stomach. Last night had been amazing. Yes, she was sore in weird places, but in a good way.

Her fingers trailed over the tattoo on his chest. It was a bald eagle clutching the world in his talons, surrounded by tribal art and “USMC.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

She hadn't gotten the chance yet to explore him the way she wanted. To explore every dent, every scar on his body.

Luckily, she had the rest of her life to do just that. She was actually married to Hector Diaz, the sexiest man alive. How had she gotten this lucky? For years, she had seemed cold toward men. Afraid of intimacy. As a child, her mind had shut down at what had almost happened the night her uncle had sneaked into her room. Over the years, she hadn't wanted to deal with it. There was no place for shame like that in her grandfather's house. One did not speak about vile things that could damage the family name. So, she had kept it inside. But bad memories had a way of dripping into a bucket until one day, that famous last drop fell.

Eventually, she had sought help. It had taking extensive therapy, but she'd given the horror of what had happened a place, and had moved on. Right now, she felt at total peace with herself. She was right where she wanted to be.

Her finger trailed over his pecs, outlining the tattoo that was a reminder of his time as a Marine. Hector was a loyal, honorable man. He deserved to be happy. Whatever it was that had him and his brother—crime lord or not—drift apart, she hoped they could work it out. She didn't want it to come bite him in the ass one day. She was going to keep him safe and sound, both physically and mentally.

Her hand trailed up to his navel and her eyes widened when she saw his morning wood, growing by the second.

"Morning," she said softly.

He tugged at the sheet covering her breasts. “Don’t hide your breasts from me. I love them.”

“I’ve noticed.” He really was a breast man. He’d woken her during the night just to nibble on her breasts until he’d finger fucked her again.

Something in his tattoo caught her eye. In the intricately woven design, she discovered a date and the text RIP. It was from almost a year ago. She wondered who he had honored on his chest.

Hector placed his hand on hers, his eyes narrowing at the question in her eyes.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” she told him. She could see how the memory hurt him. The last thing she wanted was to add to his pain.

He took a deep breath. “It’s the date a guy from my unit, John Decker, died. We didn’t get to take his body home. He died in action, the way he always said he wanted to go out, but it doesn’t make it any easier. He didn’t have any family, except for a brother in the Army he always talked about.” He shrugged. “I couldn’t just let him fade away, you know? Figured he had to be remembered by more than one person.”

In her eyes, he was a hero, always would be. The military had been a big part of his life and even though she had an inkling of what he must’ve been through, in reality, she’d probably barely scratched the surface.

So, she offered him solace the only way she knew how; by kissing him, determined to cast away the sorrow in his eyes.

He pulled her over him until her breasts swayed above his mouth.

“Put your hands on the headboard.”

The second she'd steadied herself, he palmed her breasts, pressed them together, and brought them to his mouth.

“Mercy.”

His reverent whisper opened up her chest and set loose a jar of butterflies to her stomach.

He molded his hands around a globe and tried to put as much of it in his mouth as he could. When he released one wet breast from his mouth, his teeth latched on to a piercing. He tugged on them, right before he bit the hard peak, eliciting a moan from her.

She closed her eyes as she found a nice spot for her ass, right on his dick. It poked her butt, asking for attention, so she grinded against him. Her grinding became more frantic as she felt herself getting more wet.

“One day, I’m gonna fuck you between your tits.”

Her clit was throbbing, demanding attention. This was torture. Nothing but sweet torture.

But two could play that game. She may not have his experience, but she did have his passion and want. Oh, she had want. While he devoured her breast, sucking, and nibbling the sensitive flesh, she put a hand on his shaft. Stroking him.

Finally, after what had felt for an eternity of exquisite torture, he let go of her breast with a pop. “You still sore?”

“A little.”

He hauled her up. “Straddle my face. I’m gonna eat you.”

She held on to his shoulders, while she hovered above him.

He sat up against the headboard, hands on her ass, pulling her on to his mouth and started licking. All too soon, his tongue started over her pussy, trailing a path from her core, dipping into her navel, and back. Then he speared his tongue inside her and started sucking.

Mary couldn’t hold her moan in any longer. He started to push her lower body on his mouth. Only when she couldn’t hold her own weight any longer and came, did he let her go.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

She collapsed on top of him and he tucked her to his side.

“Good morning, chica.”

“Morning,” she murmured back as she wrapped her hand around his thickness.

He hissed. “Not a good idea right now with you being sore. Don’t start something I can’t finish.”

Perhaps she should heed his warning. Yep, that would be the sensible thing to do. Except, he made her feel empowered, as if she could do anything.

“I want to do for you what you did to me,” she confessed.

He played with a nipple, while she slowly jacked him off. “You ever done that before?”

“No, and um... I’m afraid that, well you know.”

“You’re afraid that you’ll suck at sucking me off?”

She retaliated by strengthening her hold on him. “Any more smart comments?”

He winced. “Maybe not while you’re holding my dick.”

“I didn’t think so.”

He put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. “Since you’re determined to learn why don’t you get to work? I’ll tell you if you’re any good.”

Challenge accepted. She scooted down until her face was next to his dick, her hand not leaving him. It was odd feeling his hardness in her hand. Odd and exhilarating. Because, for all his laidback and relaxed attitude, she could see sweat form on Hector’s brow. It gave her a sense of power she’d never had in his presence before.

Her first tentative lick over the head of his cock made him jump. His nostrils flared, and his muscles tensed. Then she gave another lick and another, while holding on to his root.

“Suck on the head,” he ordered.

That was the beginning of more directions. She followed every one of them to a T, enjoying every second. She couldn’t get all of him inside her mouth without gagging, but she enjoyed giving it a try.

Right when she was debating letting him come inside her—soreness be damned—their doorbell rang.

“What the fuck.” Hector growled.

After a few seconds, it rang again. Who would be visiting them, the morning after their wedding?

“I’ll go check who it is,” she said, giving a pointed look at his hardness. “I don’t think you should go downstairs like that.”

She got out of bed and put on a silk nightgown, when Hector growled.

“You’re not going down like that. Put on some clothes.”

Ah yes, the thing about other men not seeing her naked. She quickly grabbed some underwear from the drawer and hoisted herself in a pair of jeans and a tee while he went into the bathroom.

Mary hopped downstairs right when the doorbell rang for the third time. She couldn’t help but look a bit grumpy when she opened the door.

Until she saw two police uniforms. All the happiness she’d felt washed away and got replaced by fear.

Ice. Cold. Fear.

CHAPTER 15

HECTOR

What did a man have to do around here to enjoy fucking his bride after his wedding day? Apparently, take her to an unknown location or remove the doorbell. What he’d planned out as a lazy morning in bed, getting his first blowjob from her, had turned into him plotting the demise of whoever was at their door. To make matters worse, his hard-on refused to go away.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He closed his eyes and jacked himself off in the cold shower. She'd been so brave to ask for what she wanted. She was new to the love-making, but he liked that she felt comfortable enough with him.

He was out of the shower within minutes, not liking the thought of Mary having to face whoever it was at their door by herself. He put on some sweats and a shirt before he went downstairs. When he heard Mary's rising voice, he hastened his pace. The second she saw him, she flung herself into his arms.

"Zoe's gone!"

It was all he could make out from her muffled voice before she broke into tears.

There were two detectives sitting in the living room. They got off the couch when they saw him. They explained that someone had snatched Zoe from the school yard. The more they explained, the angrier Hector got.

One of the detectives cleared his throat. "Mr. Diaz, I'm Detective Sanders. We have asked your wife, but maybe you could help us out. Can you think of anyone who might have a reason to abduct Zoe?"

"When did this happen?"

"This morning, at the school yard. We were hoping that you could give us any information."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you. I have no idea why someone would do that."

The detective didn't seem surprised by his answer and Hector assumed that Mary had told him about his practically nonexistent relationship to Zoe.

He took a card from Detective Sanders, just to get rid of the man. Sanders must have seen something in his face because his eyes narrowed.

"We know who you are, Mr. Diaz. Leave this matter to the SFPD. This town has no place for vigilante justice."

"I wouldn't think of it," Hector said smoothly. "I will stay right here and wait by the phone."

Sanders gave him an apprehensive look before he and his partner left.

The second they were alone, Hector cupped Mary's cheek. "I'm going to find her."

"I know you will." There was no hesitation in her voice. Not even a speck of doubt. "I'm coming with."

Yeah, no... "I don't think so."

"But—"

"You'll only slow me down. I can't concentrate on Zoe if I have to look out for you as well."

She nodded reluctantly.

He took out his phone and called Achilles. "Pick me up ASAP. We're going on a hunt."

It was time to exact some “vigilante justice.”

He didn’t stay long after the detectives had left. He’d called over Jazzy to stay with Mary; he didn’t want her to be alone. An Amber alert had been sent out, but that was hours ago, and so far, they didn’t have any clues.

Mary couldn’t answer the question as to who Zoe’s father was. There was no name on the birth certificate and Britney had once entrusted her that Zoe had been the result of a one-night stand. It was unlikely that a father who had never been in the picture would have kidnapped her.

“What a fucked-up world,” Achilles said from the seat next to him after ending another phone call.

Kids being snatched up from school was the definition of fucked up. A call came in and Hector put Jazzy on speaker. Jazzy’s company developed facial recognition software specifically for children. Her help would be most welcome.

“Talk to me, Jaz.”

“Hey, Hector. So, I have some news. I tracked Zoe down, the last sighting she was taken out of a black van in Fillmore. This was just two hours ago. From there, I lost her trail. I was able to get a partial plate number and gave that info to the police. They said they’re looking into the matter, but so far, nothing. There wasn’t much to go on, I’m afraid. So, I’ve called in some help from my friend, Tess. She’ll be giving you a call. Don’t um... don’t ask how Tess knows things. Just go with it.”

Now that sounded as cryptic as they came, but he’d take it. “Thanks, Jaz. How’s Mary holding up?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“She’s being a trooper. She called her lawyer to see if they can speed up the date of the hearing. Suffice to say, her trust in CPS has taken a dent. Just get her back, Hector.”

“I’m not coming back without Zoe.” He ended the call.

They were almost at the compound when another call came in. It was from an unknown caller.

“Diaz.”

“Well, hello there, Wolfman,” a cheery female voice boomed in the car. “I come bearing gifts.”

“Tess?” he guessed.

“The one and only. Now, before I give you info on the gorilla who kidnapped the princess, do you solemnly swear that you will not ask me any questions I don’t want to answer and won’t mention my name to anyone relating my services?”

Achilles shrugged when Hector gave him a look.

“Clock’s ticking, guys,” she said. “I get that you have a missing child to find, but I have a family of my own to protect and can’t take any risks.”

“And you’d take my word for it?”

“You’re a Marine! Of course I’ll take your word for it. Also, Mary wouldn’t marry a lying scumbag.”

He’d heard worse deductions. “I promise.”

“What about you, Achilles?”

“Same from me.”

“Does the name Ivan Yankovic ring a bell? He’s a low-life drug dealer slash junkie slash pimp.”

Who in the hell was—then it dawned on him. “Shit.”

“I take that as a yes,” Tess said. “It took some digging and following a lot of traffic cams before I found him, but that’s the guy you should be looking for.” She gave them the address and Hector made a sharp turn, ignoring the honks after them.

“Shit, slow down,” Achilles muttered. “And watch that red light. You’re gonna get us pulled over.”

“No, he won’t,” Tess reassured them. “There’s a protest thing at Union Square and most of the police are over there. There are only two units in your area, none of which close to you. I took care of the traffic lights. They should blink in your favor.”

“Who again did you say you were?” Hector asked.

“No, no. You just made a promise not to ask any questions I don’t want to answer. Now, when it comes to this Ivan dude, I think he took Zoe out of desperation. His bank account is empty, and he was admitted to the hospital twice in the last month with multiple fractures. Doesn’t take a genius to figure out that he probably owes

some money to some bad guys.”

“Actually, I was one of those people who hospitalized him,” Hector admitted.

“Ah.” Tess didn’t sound fazed in the least bit. “Anyways, I did some more digging, because with slimy people there’s always more. Ivan was once arrested for human trafficking, but they couldn’t pin anything on him. And when I say human trafficking, I don’t mean the rounding up of girls to sell them to a brothel kind, which is sick in itself, but I mean the harvesting little humans for their organs kind. Good luck.” Then she was gone.

“Shit. Shit. Shit!”

“Cool it, man.” Achilles glanced his way, looking just as pissed. “We’re going to find the kid.”

“I should’ve ended the son of a bitch when I had the chance. Gio is right, the second you see a threat to your family, you should eradicate it, root and all. Hell, we didn’t even get the chance to plead our case with the judge. I haven’t been married for all of a day, and I’ve already failed her. If anything happens to Zoe, it will devastate Mary.”

“Not going to happen. We are going to find her. Ivan took her because he needs money. He’s going to sell her. It takes time to find a buyer. We should have a window of at least twenty-four hours.”

Which was basically no window at all. Once the kid left the state, she would disappear. It happened all the time. Men like Ivan targeted street kids, or kids like Zoe, they believed no one would go looking for. Well, the fucker had chosen the wrong mark.

He hit the gas until they parked in the alley Tess had mentioned. It was in a drug-

infested neighborhood, filled with houses that looked ready to be torn down.

“Jesus, what a shithole. So, we got a plan?” Achilles checked his gun.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Hector readied his own piece. “We go in, find Zoe, beat the shit out of Ivan. Then we take her home.”

“Sounds good to me.”

They entered the building from the back. It took a while—and some cash into the hands of the right junkies littering the floor—before he found his mark.

Ivan lay on a dirty mattress in a room that smelled like a toilet had overflowed. Beer bottles and needles scattered the floor.

Hector gave Ivan a nudge with his boot. “Wake up.” When that didn’t work, he kneeled next to him and smacked him in the face.

The fucker hardly seemed to feel it. Ivan was wasted, either on drugs or alcohol; probably both.

It hadn’t escaped his notice that Zoe was nowhere in the room. They navigated down the corridor, opening and closing doors, calling out her name.

She wasn’t there.

Shit.

He stomped back to Ivan, who still lay in his own filth.

Achilles pulled a face. “Damn, he smells.”

“Stop complaining. You’ve smelled worse.”

“Give me a warzone any time a day over this shitty room.”

“We need to sober him up.” He looked around, but Achilles beat him to the punch when he emerged from an adjoining room, a bucket in his hand.

“Ask and you shall receive.”

“You found water here?”

“Toilet water,” Achilles explained. “Should be an upgrade for him.”

“That was very nice of you,” Hector complimented him.

“Well, thank you. I’m a nice guy.” He emptied the bucket over Ivan.

Ivan’s eyes shot open. “What the—”

“Ivan. We meet again.” Hector grabbed him by his throat and punched him in the nose.

A scream, and then blood splattered on the dirty linoleum floor.

“Fuck! You broke my nose again!”

“That’s only the beginning, you sack of horseshit. The girl, where is she?”

“I don’t know what—”

Hector squeezed off his breath. “Don’t. Nowhere in the history of mankind has

anyone believed anyone when they said, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’”

The fucker licked his dry lips. “I can’t tell you. You don’t know who you’re dealing with. He’ll kill me.”

“And what exactly did you think I was going to do to you? Braid your fucking hair?”

Hector took out his knife, pushed Ivan’s left hand onto the ground, and cut off his pinkie.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Ivan’s eyes went crazy. “Stop it! Shit, shit, shit.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“Every time I ask you something and I’m not happy with your answer, a piece of you will go missing. Now, let’s try this again. Where is Zoe?”

In the end, he had to cut off another finger—he opted for the thumb—before Ivan gave him a name.

“Pachenkov! I sold her to Yuri Pachenkov! One of Kristoff’s men.”

It was like a sucker punch to his sternum. “You sure about that? If you’re lying again this time, I’m going for your nuts.”

“I swear! I owed him. A lot. You don’t want to owe Pachenkov or Kristoff. I was doing fine paying him every week, but then that Britney bitch died, and I didn’t have a cunt to sell anymore. I figured her sister owed me, you know.”

Kristoff.

A man he had compartmentalized in his brain up until today. Separating the brother he loathed from the crime boss. A man he had believed didn’t trade in women and children. Guess he’d been wrong.

Ivan was sniffing, clutching his mutilated hand. “I told you everything I know. Pachenkov is untouchable. A hit on him is a hit on the Bratva. Kristoff owns this city. He will bury you and anyone you care about.” His eyes darted around the room, as if someone might over hear him. “You’re gonna get me killed. If Pachenkov finds out I ratted him out, he’ll tell Kristoff, and that Siberian will give me to his enforcers. Those crazy twins will feed me to snakes. Fucking snakes!”

Hector sighed. The stories about the twins got worse every time. Rumor had it they fed people to a pit of anacondas, fed them to an alligator. Maybe even to a gorilla. One would almost think Kristoff was running a fucking zoo.

It didn't matter, though. It didn't matter who he had to get through to get Zoe back. Fate had these weird twists sometimes.

Maybe this day of reckoning had long been coming. 'Cause brother or not, if Kristoff had anything to do with Zoe's kidnapping, Hector would take him out.

CHAPTER 16

HECTOR

Their next stop was Kristoff's lavish mansion. The uncrowned king of San Francisco lived at the edge of North Bay, without any close neighbors in sight. Not that any sane person would want to live next door to a kingpin.

When Hector stopped in front of the iron gates, he could no longer ignore Achilles' sideways glances.

"What?"

"You sure you want to do this?"

"Do what?"

"Don't pretend like you don't know what I mean. You're going up against fucking Kristoff Romanov. Yeah, the man showed up to your wedding, but that doesn't mean shit. Especially not since you don't acknowledge him as your brother. Don't you think it's smarter to call Gio? He knows the guy; they play poker together, for fuck's

sake. He can parley with Kristoff without this turning into a bloodbath.”

Hector lowered his window and pressed the intercom button. “I’m not waiting until Gio’s here. Zoe could be gone by that time. Also, this is my family. My business. You can leave if you want.”

Achilles snorted. “You know I’m not gonna let you go in there alone. Just saying, for the record, there’s a smarter way to do this.”

Smarter, perhaps. But the swirling rage inside him didn’t want smart. It wanted blood. It wanted someone to pay for the grief on Mary’s face.

“Duly noted.”

“If we get killed, I’m gonna say I told you so.”

“Of course you are.”

A lone figure walked up to them. Hector recognized him as Angel, Kristoff’s right-hand man. One of the crazy twins. According to rumor, when Angel’s twin Damon got a scar on his left shoulder, Angel had cut himself on the exact same spot.

“I’m here to see Kristoff.”

“Are you now,” Angel said, peeking through the window. “See, it’s a Monday afternoon, and this is Kristoff’s friends and family time. Which exactly are you?”

Hector hated the smug motherfucker. Kristoff’s honorary brother; one of the men Kristoff had preferred over his own blood.

The asshole tried to get a rise out of him and any other day, he’d have gladly gone a

round with him, but not today. Time was of the essence and if that meant having to swallow his pride, he'd do it.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“Tell him it’s his brother. I need to see him, now.”

Angel cocked a brow, obviously surprised that Hector—for the first time ever—acknowledged his relationship to Kristoff. He said something in his earpiece and the gate opened.

Hector parked close to the veranda. He spotted several men in and around the perimeter.

“Three on your six,” Achilles said.

“At least a dozen around the house.”

Oddly, they weren’t approached by any of them. There was one guy waiting for them on the front porch. Track pants, red sneakers, black wife beater, and a face similar to Angel.

Damon held out his hand. “Your piece.”

“I don’t think so.” A Marine, former or not, never voluntarily gave up his gun.

Within a heartbeat, they were surrounded by six men, holding them at gunpoint.

“Now, let’s talk about this,” Achilles said.

“You have me confused with my brother,” Damon said, his eyes narrowed on Hector.

“I’m not much of a talker.”

“Let him keep his piece,” Angel said, who had caught up to them. “Let’s see if he can restrain himself in front of Kristoff.”

“Could be interesting,” Damon eventually conceded. The pointed guns around them disappeared.

“I put ten on the boss.”

“You still owe me for guessing that stripper was a natural blonde.”

Angel scowled. “You cheated. You hadn’t told me you’d already seen her pussy.”

“You didn’t ask.”

Hector sighed. “Jesus.”

Damon shook his head. “Follow me.” He led them into what appeared to be a state of the art gym. Kristoff was punching a bag in a corner.

Achilles gave him a pointed look.

So, they both liked to punch stuff. That didn’t mean shit.

When Kristoff heard them arrive, he turned around.

“Bratan,” he greeted him.

“Don’t call me that,” Hector snarled. “You don’t get to call me brother. Ever.” He had to remind himself that he didn’t come here for himself. His issues could wait, stay buried where they belonged.

Kristoff's eyes narrowed. "Let me guess, my sister-in-law asked you to come over and you caved?"

Hector walked over to him, very aware of the twins following him, ready to pounce on him the second he became a threat.

Damon helped Kristoff take off his gloves.

"I'm here for your guy Pachenkov. I need you to tell me where he is. He's got something that belongs to me."

"First, that's not "my guy." Never has been. In fact, I believe he's plotting to take me out to prove the world that he's his own guy. Second, what could he possibly have that's yours? I didn't take you for someone that walks in the same circles as that human garbage can." He sounded utterly bored.

Figures. The last time Hector had asked Kristoff for help, he hadn't given a damn either. But this time, Hector wasn't a teenager anymore. He wouldn't back down.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“That cockroach kidnapped my kid. In your name, I might add. After I get her back, I’m gonna pull out his testicles through his nose, and you’re not gonna stand in my way.”

Kristoff’s head snapped up. “We don’t kidnap children.”

“That’s not the word on the streets.” He relayed what had happened and finally saw a spark of fire in Kristoff’s eyes.

His brother turned to Damon. “Find him.”

“Sounds like Pachenkov is a thorn to your side. Why did you let him get this far?”

Kristoff took a towel to wipe his face. “Even thorns have their use. Especially when you have another one. In this case, Pachenkov’s rival, Irish Brian. As long as two dogs fight over a bone, they keep busy. Checks and balances, bratan. It’s all about checks and balances.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“And what will you do if I keep doing it? Shoot me?”

“I just might,” he grumbled, his hand itching.

“Then don’t let me stop you.” Kristoff chin-jerked to the boxing ring. “Or why don’t we go a round in there?”

That's when Achilles stepped in. Literally, by pushing his large frame between them. "How about you two save this for another date? You know, after we find the girl."

"Why?" Angel asked. "I'd pay money to see that. Fifty says Kristoff will wipe the floor with Army Boy."

Achilles shot him a glare. "First of all, he's not 'Army Boy' but a former Marine. Totally different branch of the military, look it up. And I don't give a shit if your boss is head of the Bratva or not. There's no way Kristoff—biggest, baddest, and meanest fucker or not—can beat a former Marine in Hector's class."

"Biggest, baddest, and meanest fucker," Kristoff repeated. "I like that. Note it down for on my grave, Angel."

He didn't sound as if he was joking, and Hector wondered how cracked in the head his brother really was.

Damon walked back in. "Found him. He's holed up in a warehouse at the docks. Lots of security around to just be guarding fish."

"Give me the address." Hector took out his phone. It looked like he was going to need backup. "We can take it from here."

He'd barely spoken the words when a small army joined the gym. Most of them were carrying guns, varying from Glocks to semi-automatics. He'd seen small countries get overthrown with less firepower.

"Oh, fuck no." Achilles raked his hand through his hair.

Kristoff's lips turned up in a feral smile. "You didn't think I was going to let you go alone, did you?"

“You may be called a wolf,” Angel said, strapping on a gun to his ankle. “But Kristoff is a lion. Of course we’ll go with.”

Achilles snorted. “About that, wolves might not be the strongest of wild animals, but unlike a lion, you’ll never see a wolf play in the circus.”

Kristoff frowned. “The blond Rock is right. Don’t compare me to a lion again.”

“A dragon then?” Angel suggested. “You don’t see one of those in a circus.”

Were they for real? Hector barely contained a growl. “Can we fucking focus?”

Kristoff threw him a Glock and he grabbed it in the air.

“Let’s go hunt my thorn.”

The warehouse was at the mostly abandoned end of the docks. They arrived at twilight with three vans filled with over two dozen men.

To Hector’s surprise, Kristoff really had come along. Apparently, the rumors about him were true; he did join his men in big operations, instead of just sending his enforcers.

Damon made some gestures and Kristoff’s men spread out, seamlessly disappearing into the dark.

Then, all hell broke loose.

In the end, it could barely be called a fight. It was more a massacre. They descended on the warehouse like a plague, scorching the earth with blood, leaving a trail of destruction behind.

It didn't take long for them to burst inside the warehouse. Hector was immediately hit with the smell of fish. There were rows and rows of fish containers that led to a path inside.

The heavy odor intensified as they neared the hall and came across three men standing in the middle of it.

He didn't bother to tell them to drop their weapons. Their eyes were fixed on the firepower behind him. He wasn't sure which of the three was Pachenkov. It could be any of the three slick motherfuckers, but his bet was on the one with the pooch and balding hair.

"What? Fish got your tongue?" Kristoff asked.

"Kristoff, you son of a bitch," Pachenkov spat.

It was the one with the beer belly.

"Actually it's 'son of a whore.' Mymatushkawas a hard-working lady of the night, not a bitch. I should cut out your tongue for that insult."

“Sorry, shit, I mean... I meant no disrespect, Kristoff. So, what brings you here?”
Pachenkov asked, an uneasy smile on his face.

Hector shook his head. The dumb fuck actually thought he could talk his way out of this.

“I’ve come to buy fish. I heard you have the best in town.”

“What kind of fish?” Pachenkov stammered.

“Take an educated guess. Hint; it’s not canned tuna.”

“Not a shark either,” Damon said darkly. “We already have one of those.”

“We’re looking for a little mermaid,” Angel chimed in.

Sick and tired of their fish talk, Hector grabbed Pachenkov by the throat.

“Where’s Zoe?” He pulled out his knife and held it to the sweating man’s eye. “I’m gonna scoop your eyeballs out, if you don’t start talking right the fuck now.”

Pachenkov gulped and pointed at a door partly hidden behind a few barrels.

He let the man go and together with Damon, they moved the barrels. He opened the door and found the room shrouded in darkness.

His hand went to the wall, trying to find the light switch.

“Zoe?” He wasn’t sure what he would find inside. He prayed it wouldn’t be the little girl’s body. “Zoe, it’s Hector.”

He heard a sniff, then a small voice. “Wolfman?”

He finally found the light switch. Huddled up in a corner were four children, ages ranging from six—Zoe’s age—to maybe twelve.

When Zoe saw him, she got up on her tiny legs and launched herself at him. He dropped to his knees just in time to take her in his arms.

Her shoulders shook as she cried into his shirt. He looked at the other kids. The fear in their eyes made him want to skin Pachenkov alive.

“We’re gonna get you out of here,” he tried to reassure them.

Zoe looked up from under teared eyelashes. “Are you taking me home?”

“Yes, baby girl, I’m taking you home.”

“I want Mary,” she sobbed.

He placed a kiss on top of her head.

So do I, little one, so do I.

CHAPTER 17

MARY

Waiting for Hector to show up with Zoe was torture. Mary paced a hole in the carpet, her eyes focused on the front door, trying to will Zoe and Hector to appear through it.

“Can I get you anything?” Jazzy asked.

She shook her head. No, she didn’t want anything. Anything she’d eat would taste like ash anyway. Hector would find Zoe, she had total faith in him. It was the aftermath that worried her. Zoe had been gone for less than twenty-four hours, but damage didn’t need hours for it to happen. It could happen in the blink of an eye. One wrong touch, one wrong look, and she could be scarred for life.

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

When Tess had told them who’d abducted Zoe, it had taken her a second to recall who Ivan was. Then she remembered, and her fear for Zoe increased tenfold.

“They are going to find her, and then that beautiful little girl is going to find a home with you. I know it. Gio and Jackson are working on that part, you have to keep faith.”

Tired of pacing, Mary plopped onto the couch. “I feel so useless.”

“I know. But there’s really not much else we can do. So just try to concentrate on the stuff you have to get done once Zoe’s back. You know, like readying her room. Positive thoughts.”

“Right. Positive thoughts.” She had a million things to get ready. They had just moved in here yesterday. The house was delivered totally furnished, but there hadn’t been any time to do any decorating or get Zoe’s room ready. She tried to make a list in her head of all the things she had to get, but it wasn’t working. What if they couldn’t find Zoe? What if they found her body?

“My mind keeps going to what could happen to her,” she admitted. “What if—”

“Stop it. It’s no use torturing yourself with what-ifs. Whatever happened, you will get through it, together.”

Then she heard the front door open. She jumped up and ran into the hallway.

“Zoe!”

The little girl was plastered against Hector’s massive chest, making her look even smaller than she already was.

“She’s okay,” Hector said gruffly.

Mary slowly walked up to the girl, not wanting to spook her. Zoe turned toward her, her eyes peeking through a curtain of blond curls. When their eyes locked, the little girl launched herself into Mary’s arms.

“It’s okay, baby girl,” Mary said soothingly while taking her over from Hector. “It’s

all going to be okay.”

“I called a doctor,” Hector said. “He’s on his way over.”

Mary carried Zoe to the couch, settling down with her on her lap. She couldn’t stop shaking.

Zoe was covered in a big jacket, and they sat in silence for a while as Mary stroked her hair. Her breathing eventually slowed, and the shaking stopped. It took a few minutes before Mary realized Zoe was sleeping. She held out her hand to Hector, urging him to come sit next to her. Jazzy scooted over.

“So, what happened?” her cousin asked.

As Hector began to unfold the horrors of the night, probably heavily censored, Mary shivered. Hector put an arm around her and she leaned in to him.

“So, how did you find this Pachenkov guy?” Jazzy asked. “Tess told us about Ivan, but other than that, she didn’t have a clue where to find Zoe.”

“We’ve had some help.”

Jazzy groaned. “Please don’t tell me Gio knows that man. I don’t want to think about my guy knowing monsters like that.”

“Actually, it was Kristoff who found Pachenkov and helped us get to Zoe and the other kids.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Mary's head snapped up. "There were more kids? What happened to them?"

"Achilles took them to the hospital to get checked out. He'll handle stuff from there with the cops."

Jazzy hummed. "I'm guessing the apprehending of this Pachenkov guy didn't go by the book?"

"No," Hector admitted. "It's not like we could call the SFPD and ask if they minded coordinating with the Bratva to get Zoe. It was a warzone over there when I left. I'm guessing San Fran's finest didn't get a call before the clean-up crew arrived. The official story is an anonymous tip."

It was in another hour that the doctor came and checked up on Zoe. Luckily the little girl was fine; that is, physically. They would have to wait and see how she processed what happened. After the doctor left, she took Zoe to bed.

She found Hector in their bedroom, looking exhausted, and dropped next to him on the bed.

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

He took her in his arms. "No need to thank me. I did what any man would do when his family is threatened."

She wanted to tell him that she loved him. That she valued him beyond any other man. It was like a dam inside her, building up for a long time now, but she couldn't

voice it. Not now. Not when he would think that she'd only said it because of gratitude.

Instead of telling him, she was going to show him. Every day.

CHAPTER 18

HECTOR

Hector didn't wake up until dawn, which was unusual for him. Being in the Marine Corps had left him with an internal clock that rose with the sun. Then he remembered why he was so knackered.

The night before.

Zoe.

Kristoff.

A look to his side showed him that the bed was empty. He took a shower, put on some clothes, and went downstairs where he was greeted by the smell of bacon.

Mary stood behind the counter in the kitchen island, making batter. Zoe sat on the carpet near the television, drawing in a book. The second the little girl spotted him, she jumped up.

"Hector!"

He gathered her up to his shoulders. "You okay, little one?"

"Yes. Mary is making me blueberry pancakes, and then we are going to find me a

room.”

“Get you stuff for your room,” Mary corrected her with a smile.

“Will you come with us?”

“Sure.” It was a weekday and he should get back to work, but Achilles could hold down the fort.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” Mary said, as she put some eggs in a skillet.

He dropped Zoe back on her feet and sat at the table.

“Zoe, why don’t you go wash your hands?” Mary asked. The little girl skipped away and ran back upstairs.

When she was out of earshot, Hector asked, “She okay?”

“She seems okay, but I’m not sure. I tried to ask about last night, but she closes up whenever I try to, and I don’t want to push. The doctor said children bounce back quickly. It might be a defense mechanism that she doesn’t want to talk about what happened. All we can do is make her feel safe.” She put the bacon and eggs on a plate and then on the table, followed by pouring him a cup of coffee.

“My woman can cook.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“It’s just some bacon and eggs.”

It was more than that. He remembered having breakfast when his mother was still alive. They didn’t have much, but whatever they had, they ate together. Sharing a table, sharing your food, was what being a family was about. He’d never understood that until his mother died. Mary didn’t, couldn’t, know what this meant to him. He wanted to haul her over the table and pull her on his lap, but the pitter-patter of tiny feet stopped him.

Zoe ran back into the kitchen. He liked seeing that after the subdued way she’d been in the warehouse.

They had breakfast together, talking about nothing much. Zoe talked a mile an hour. When she was finished, she suddenly stared down at her plate.

“Do I have to go back?”

God, the sound of her voice. It seemed as if the kid was readying herself for bad news.

“Zoe. Look at me.”

She looked up, her big hazel eyes watery. He held out his hands and she hopped off her stool and crawled into his lap. Then she started crying. Big, fat tears pooled on her face and wet his shirt.

“I don’t want to go back with Mrs. Wilson to that place. Nobody makes cupcake

there or wants to braid my hair. And I missed Mary.”

As much as he wanted to reassure her, he wasn’t ever going to make a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep. Nothing was worse than relying on someone, thinking they would help you, and then be disappointed.

“We’re going to do everything we can to keep you with us. Everything. Now, we need to talk to some people first, so we can keep you with us, okay?”

“What kind of people?” She sniffed.

“Mrs. Wilson and a judge. They’re going to look to see if this house is a good place for you. And when they do, you can stay here.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart. Now go get ready, so we can get you a new room.”

Mary took Zoe out of his arms and gave him another kiss. Then they went upstairs.

As soon as he was alone, he called Jackson. “Talk to me about the guardianship thing. Tell me we got a shot at this.”

“Actually, I’ve been on the phone with Mary’s lawyer and there will be a hearing tomorrow morning. CPS plans on visiting you this evening. They wanted to give you some time after the happenings of last night.”

“And Pachenkov? Any word on him?”

“Guess you haven’t seen the news yet. Pachenkov was found in a ditch on the outskirts of town, with all of his organs removed. SFPD isn’t exactly in a rush to

solve that particular crime. They think it was a cleanup job, and the world is a better place without him roaming the streets. Your buddy Ivan didn't fare much better. They found him in an alley with his hands chopped off."

He had to give it to Kristoff; he really did have a poetic way of dealing with scum.

They spent the afternoon in a bunch of home decor stores. His two girls had the time of their lives picking out a bed, wallpaper, a new closet, and every other accessory a six-year-old couldn't live without, according to Mary. Zoe stayed close by. He noticed that every now and then, she would disappear, and a few minutes later, she came back, reaching for his hand. Part of her needed the reassurance that he was still there. It amazed and humbled him at the same time, that this little human saw him as her protector. It also made him all the more determined to keep her in their lives. And to keep his crazy at bay.

Of course, that's when it happened.

In the sea of swarming bodies, he saw Decker. His dead friend's face so close by and yet so far away. It was like taking a slug to the chest.

Dios, protégeme.

He was beginning to see dead people.

During daylight.

CHAPTER 19

MARY

There were two moments in her life Mary would remember forever; marrying Hector

and becoming Zoe's legal guardian. Last night, Mrs. Wilson had come for an inspection, after which she'd given them her blessing. And this afternoon, the judge had made it official. She was on cloud nine, practically dancing in the kitchen.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

She'd tucked Zoe into bed an hour ago. Hector hadn't been able to make it to dinner tonight, but he was on his way. All she had to do was prepare her class for tomorrow, then she would make her husband the Italian dinner of his life.

Last night, he had seemed a bit off. After Mrs. Wilson had left, he went back to work, not returning until the early morning. Though she was disappointed by his absence, she kept that to herself. He was a busy man after all, running his own company.

Making Hector happy was one of her missions in life. She didn't ever want him to regret marrying her. So tonight, she was making his favorite dinner, and then she hoped he would make her his dinner.

She was looking up an old recipe, when the doorbell rang and then her sister waltzed inside.

Gina looked as beautiful as ever in a pink designer dress. It was the first time since before her wedding she'd seen her sister. The last time they had talked was when she'd invited Gina to the wedding. Frankly, she was still hurt that her own sister hadn't bothered to come.

"I like your house, though it's a bit small. I would have thought Hector could afford something bigger."

"Nice to see you too, sis," she said dryly.

Gina dropped onto the couch. "It's good to be back on U.S. soil. You have no idea how stuck up Andrew's family was."

Mary sat on the recliner across her sister. “Andrew?” She couldn’t keep up with the men Gina was dating.

“He’s British. Comes from old money and a line of blue blood. He thinks dating a mob princess, as he’s dubbed me, is incredibly naughty.” She snorted. “He also believes that he’s saving me from this life. All I have to do is keep up appearances until he pops the question.”

It seemed a tedious job; pretending to be something you’re not. “I’m glad you’re home. We haven’t readied a guest room yet, but I’ve put your stuff in the attic, so you can—”

“I’m not here to stay. I just need...” A blush spread over Gina’s high cheekbones. “Andrew is taking me to a fundraiser tomorrow night. It will be filled with snooty British people and the creme de la creme of San Fran’s high society. I can’t show up in an old dress, and I can’t ask Andrew to buy me one. He will think that I’m after his money.”

Mary swallowed a hateful remark. She wished she could make her sister see that she didn’t need a man to make a living.

“You need money.”

“Yes. For the dress, and uh... I owe some to certain people.”

“What kind of people?”

“No one of any importance. Once I have Andrew’s ring on my finger, it will all resolve itself. Now, can you help me out or not?”

“Of course I’ll help you out, you’re my sister. I don’t have much on me right now,

but—”

Gina let out a harsh laugh. “You’re kidding, right? Look at where you live.”

Yes, she lived in a big house, but it was Hector’s. “You know this isn’t my house. You know that me living here doesn’t automatically mean that I’m rich. Of all people, you should know that.”

A shrewd look entered Gina’s eyes. “If you play your cards right, you could be rich.”

She didn’t like the sound of where this was going. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Did you sign a pre-nup?”

“Um, no.” It had never even crossed her mind. She didn’t have any assets—other than a shrinking trust fund—and she’d just assumed Hector was doing well with his company. She hadn’t known about him owning shares in the multi-billion-dollar Detta corporation.

“Good. This gives you all the power and a lot of options. You don’t have to stay with him, you know. You could just leave him and take everything with you.”

Mary started feeling really uncomfortable. “I would never do that. And I’m done talking about this with you.”

“Don’t be naive, Mary. Men cheat. They get bored. Especially rich men. Sooner or later, Hector will go looking for another. You should be prepared for that. It can’t hurt to talk to a lawyer. Hector might not share the same last name as the Dettas, but he is one nonetheless. When the inevitable happens, he will try to intimidate you into signing—”

“Stop.” She took a deep breath. “I understand that you’re going through a difficult time. Especially after what happened with Jazzy. I know Gio had a talk with you.” Which was probably an understatement. Gina had been chalk-white after whatever Gio had threatened her with. Unlike what her sister believed, Mary wasn’t naive. Gina had played a role in Jazzy’s kidnapping, even if it were by accident. Men like Giovanni Detta didn’t normally let that slide. Her sister was lucky to be alive. “But I can’t let you slander Hector in his own home. That man has been nothing but good to me and Zoe. I don’t believe he will try any intimidation tactics, should it come to a divorce.” She ignored Gina’s snort. “Besides, he wouldn’t have to. I would gladly sign any document. I’d even do it now if he asked me.”

“You’re a fool,” Gina spat, jumping off the couch.

Mary expected her sister to make a dramatic exit, as she was prone to do, but she was still standing. Right, the money.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

She took out a few hundred-dollar bills from her purse and gave it to her. “That’s all I have on me right now.”

Gina took the money and spun around, then froze. Mary followed her gaze. Hector was standing in the doorway.

Her sister mumbled a greeting and made herself scarce.

When the door closed behind Gina, Mary walked up to her husband. She blushed, unsure of how much he’d overheard of her conversation with Gina.

Hector pulled her close and gave her a long and lingering kiss. She melted against him and felt the tension drain out of her.

“You’re wrong, by the way, hermosa.”

She gave him a confused look. “About?”

“This house. It is yours. You are what makes it a home.”

It was probably the most beautiful thing anyone had ever said to her. The only thing she regretted were the circumstances in which he said those words.

“I’m sorry about what Gina said. She’s—”

“Don’t. Don’t ever apologize for another.”

“My sister, she’s...”

Weak.

It was the right word, but saying that out loud somehow felt like a betrayal. Still, she wanted him to understand.

“Gina has always been sheltered, even more so than me. She’s not a bad person, she’s just...”

“Spoiled?”

“That too, but it’s because she doesn’t know any better. We grew up in a golden cage. And then, from one day to the other, our grandfather died. His assets were seized, and everything disappeared. The mansion, the expensive cars, the bodyguards. Gina’s like a fish on dry land. She’s trying to survive by reaching for a faraway ocean instead of hopping into the nearest pond. Because that’s the world she’s used to. She has never known anything else but to have the best of the best.”

“You grew up the same way.”

True point. “You know the nature versus nurture discussion. I was told that one traumatic event, especially as a child, has the power to change one’s personality. Maybe I would have turned out just like my sister if the thing with Marco hadn’t happened.” She held up the palm of her hand, showing him the self-inflicted scar tissue. It was a single white scar. “You’re not the only one with scars, you know. Unlike yours, mine didn’t happen in the line of duty, though.”

It was difficult to talk about it, but she felt like she should. He’d told her about his scars, how it was the result of flying shrapnel after an ambush. An ambush that had cost him a friend from his unit.

He entwined their fingers. "Tell me what happened."

"The night of Marco's attack, Jazzy cut herself while trying to save me. The worst thing was that she cut herself on my scissors. Due to some nerve damage, she almost lost the use of her arm. I wanted to talk about it. Wanted to apologize. Thank her. Do something. I was seven, and I didn't fully comprehend what happened, but I knew Marco was wrong. He made my skin crawl, but I couldn't tell anyone before his drunk midnight stroll into my room, let alone after it. Things like that weren't discussed in our home. My grandfather just banished Marco and his name was never mentioned again. We all pretended as if Jazzy just had an accident. I..." She sighed. "I felt guilty and wanted to feel a fraction of what Jazzy felt when the scissors cut into her. It seemed unfair that Jazzy got hurt while saving me, and I was peachy keen."

"You weren't peachy keen. And don't ever compare yourself to your sister again. I don't give a shit about the nature and nurture thing. No matter what did or didn't happen to you, unlike your sister, you don't have it in you to hurt people. It's not in your DNA." He took her in his arms and carried her to their bedroom.

He put her on the edge of their bed and undressed her. When she was naked, she turned on her belly. She knew what her man wanted.

There was no foreplay, or even a slight peck on her ass, he just rammed into her and had his way with her. Mary enjoyed every second. When they both were spent, she watched him go into the bathroom. He came back with a wet towel, and cleaned her between her legs.

She sighed into the comforter. Life had never been so good. All she wanted to do right now was snuggle up to Hector, bask in his heat.

Then he took his pillow from the bed.

“What are you doing?”

He looked caught. “I uh... I didn’t get much sleep last night, so I’m gonna sleep in the room next door.” The closing of the door sounded like a hammer to the head.

She blinked.

Page 57

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He left their room to sleep in another bed? After she had poured her soul out to him? Right after they had made love? A knife to the chest would have hurt less.

The man has a right to a good night's sleep.

Since when did you become so reasonable?

He's probably just tired.

Or maybe it was the beginning of the end of her marriage. She was going to end up like her mother. Sleeping in separate beds, stocking up on booze, and ending up hating her husband.

A good wife would be considerate of her husband's needs. In fact, a really good wife would make him a hearty breakfast the next morning.

She jumped off the bed and opened the door to where Hector was sleeping. Though 'threw open' would be more truthful.

He jack-knifed up in the bed. "Mary? Everything okay? Is Zoe—?"

"No, Hector. No, I'm not okay!" See? She sounded perfectly calm. "I'm hurt because you left our bed with some lame ass excuse."

He cocked an eyebrow and opened his mouth.

"If you're going to comment on me cursing, I swear to God, I will hurt you!"

His mouth closed.

“I want you to tell me the truth. Why don’t you want to sleep with me? Is it because of what I told you?”

“Look, you need to calm down—”

“I’m perfectly calm!” Okay, this time she could hear herself shriek. Thank God Zoe slept like the dead. “I’m not my mother!”

His eyes widened, then narrowed to slits. A slow burn was starting to shimmer in his gorgeous eyes, that promised her retribution.

She suddenly realized that she might have let out another curse. Or two. Or three. Who was keeping count anyway? She wasn’t. Not with the prospect of ending up like her mom.

“In my family, difficult subjects were never discussed. They were shoved under the carpet. We all lived by my grandfather’s rules. Even my father, no, especially my father. I think part of him hated being an in-law to a powerful man. He didn’t have much say over his own family. See, he wanted a homebody housewife, but my mother liked to go out with friends and leave us to the nannies. When my father died, she just left, to ‘live her life in freedom,’ as she told me directly to my face. My grandfather knew she wasn’t mother material and didn’t try to stop her. He just changed our last name to his, because he wanted us to feel like family, and also because he had zero respect for my father. I see my mom once a year, during Christmas. There are a million things I want to talk to her about, but I know she’ll never let me. She doesn’t talk about things that make her feel uncomfortable, and I have to abide by her rules, because she’s my mother. In a way, we will never be equals. But I will be damned if I will live like that with you! I deserve better. I deserve more than a fuck after I tell you about something that shaped me irrevocably.

I at least deserve to be cuddled, dammit!”

“Has it occurred to you that maybe I wanted to sleep apart to protect you?”

His voice was more of a growl, and she could see his hands clench, as if he was barely hanging on. Well, tough.

She laughed, though it wasn't a happy sound. “You want to protect my fragile little body? Or do you want to protect your own? I think it's the latter. Let me tell you that I've never been so disappointed in my life. I must have married an old man for you to need a break after just one good fuck.” For good measure, she added a few choice words.

When he jumped off the bed, she slapped her hands over her mouth.

“Too late, chica.” He stalked over to her, like a wolf closing in on his prey.

Just in case, she took a step back.

Maybe two steps.

Was that the wall hitting her butt?

“You know, my Italian's a bit rusty, but not that rusty,” Hector growled. “Maybe you forgot I was practically raised with Italians. I'm pretty sure you just called me an old bull ready to be taken to the pasture. I'm also damn sure that was an insult to my”—his eyes roamed her body—“manliness.”

“Um, maybe we should further discuss this in the morning.” She tried to circumvent him, but he planted his hands on the wall on either side of her head, boxing her in.

“No. Let’s talk about this now. See, I have this sudden itchy feeling in my hands, and I don’t think I can just get back to sleep.”

She swallowed. “Because of your itchy fingers?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He played with a curl of her hair, pretending to be relaxed. Meanwhile, she was trying really hard to ignore the hard-on that pressed against her soft belly.

“Because of the fantasies in my head about the things I want to do to you. Correction, the things I’m going to do to you. I’ve got a new plug and nipple clamps to break in.”

It was hard not to feel terrified and excited at the same time.

“Oh.”

A Master’s degree and that’s your best comeback?

It’s my mouth that got me in trouble in the first place!

You are an embarrassment to your gender.

Hector lifted her butt and pressed his knee against her core. Any thoughts of giving him lip fled her mind. Grinding his knee against her, he made it impossible for her to use more than a few brain cells.

“But first, let’s get our misunderstanding out of the way.”

“Yes, let’s,” she sighed.

“You want the truth? I’ll give you the truth. Yesterday, at the store, I had an... episode. It was just a flashback. Thing is, I never had that before during the day. Ever. Whenever I see Decker’s dead eyes stare up at me, it’s during a nightmare. I’ve

thought about it all day. He'll probably haunt me again tonight. I didn't want you to have to deal with that."

Her heart went out to him and she placed an apologetic kiss on his lips. "I'm sorry you went through that. But that's still no excuse to leave our bed. The good and the bad times, remember? You can't just shut me out like that. That's not okay."

"I hear you."

She let out a relieved breath. "I'm glad we talked it out." She rewarded him with a sweet smile that told him there were no hard feelings.

He stepped away and motioned for her to go back into their bedroom.

"You still sore? Not that it really matters."

This stopped her in her tracks. "It doesn't?"

"No, baby, it doesn't."

She watched, fascinated—and slightly horrified—as he pulled a paddle out of a cabinet.

He gave a good swat to his open palm. "See, I can't let you calling me names go unanswered. Cursing, as you've told me numerous times, is a bad habit."

"I'll put a dollar in the swear jar," she said hastily, while trailing backwards into their bedroom.

He followed her slowly, the paddle hitting his hand.

Slap.

Slap.

“I don’t think that’s going to cut it,” he claimed. “See, you didn’t only say bad words, but you hurt my pride. My male pride.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Yes, you really seem like a broken man, stripped of all his confidence.”

“I wanted to ease you into things, but I’ve changed my mind.”

Easing into things sounded pretty good right now.

“Here’s what’s going to happen. First, I’m going to redden your ass, taking the paddle to it thirteen times.”

“Why thirteen?” It sounded like a bad omen.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“That’s the number of curses you spat out. You should’ve stopped after calling me a stubborn donkey. But then you had to go and compare me to an old ox, insinuating that I couldn’t get my dick up. Do you want me to repeat all the words? Iama fair man, after all.”

She winced. “No, no. I believe you. It’s going to hurt, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Mary, your pretty, perky ass is going to hurt once I’m finished with it. But you won’t have too much time to think about it, because once the paddling is finished, you’ll be too busy taking my cock down your throat.”

Heat washed over her. One more step and the back of her knees hit the bed.

Hector put the paddle next to her on the bed and went to his drawer. He pulled out two objects that looked like... oh no—

“Let me introduce you to your new friends,” he said. “Nipple clamps.”

That’s when the heat between her thighs turned into a pool.

“Now, get on your stomach and lift up your ass. It’s best to get this over with, so we can get to the good stuff.”

“Good stuff?”

Please let it be multiple orgasms.

Possibly with whipped cream.

Or anything chocolatey.

He gave her a wicked grin. “Yes, baby. The part where I fuck you six ways till Sunday, until your pussy has come so many times, you’ll need to put ice on it just to handle the fire.”

Hector turned out to be a man of his word. Not that she had expected any differently. He did just as he said. Making her burn. Hurt. Squirm. And feel good. Oh, so good.

By the end of the night, she was a pile of melted bones.

“Mary?”

She snuggled up closer to him. “Yes?”

“I didn’t like sleeping without you either.”

And just like that, she melted all over again.

CHAPTER 20

HECTOR

His wife was up to something. He wasn’t sure what but every now and then, she gave him this look from her side of the kitchen island. After their first fight, after which he’d fucked the insolence right out of her, things had gotten back on track. A month into his marriage and things had never been better.

She’d made him his favorite breakfast, which wasn’t too strange since she seemed to

like to cook. Still, something was up. Maybe it was because tomorrow, they would have their first guests over. Mary was big on family gatherings, he'd discovered. She had wanted to throw a housewarming barbecue and officially welcome Zoe into their midst.

Right now, she was prepping salads.

"Need any help with that?" he asked.

"Nope." She cleared her throat. "So, um, is there maybe anyone else you want to invite? Perhaps, someone you forgot?"

"Nah, I'm good. You know everyone I know. The guys, the Dettas, who else is there?"

"Hmm." She kept on cutting tomatoes.

"Mary. Who else did you invite?"

"I invited Katya," she said against a bowl. "We met at girls' night. She's Kristoff's protégé and so much fun. Sadly, she can't make it tomorrow, but when I had her on the phone, I also talked to Kristoff. I wanted to thank him for helping find Zoe. Then I invited him to the barbecue. It seemed rude to invite Katya but not him."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He took a deep breath. “You did what?”

“I invited Kristoff to the family barbecue,” she repeated. “He is my brother-in-law, after all, and that makes him family.”

The woman was determined to drive him mad. At this rate, the swear jar was going to burst from money. His fucking money. It took some effort, fucking Herculean effort, but he managed to rein in his temper.

“He won’t come.”

Did it make him a bastard to complete that remark with a smirk? Probably. But Mrs. Sweet Smile and Angelic Hair was going to find out that having those attributes didn’t immediately mean everyone was going to do her bidding.

“That’s what I told him you’d say.” She returned his smirk. “Guess what? Apparently, the leader of the Russian mob doesn’t like to be predictable. I believe he used a few colorful expletives about his ornery brother. Your eyes aren’t the only thing you two have in common, you know. Kristoff does love to swear.” She pulled a face.

He pushed back from the table. “Then you better get another swear jar, because if he does come to the barbecue, it’s going to be one fucking swear fest.” With that, he left the room, cursing to himself.

“That’s another dollar!” she hollered after him.

When Hector returned home later that night, he'd come to a few conclusions.

Mary was reading on the couch, and Zoe was playing with dolls at her feet. His wife was pointedly ignoring him, thinking that with Zoe there, she would be safe. He couldn't stop a crooked grin when he grabbed Zoe from the floor.

She squealed as he twirled her around, playing plane. He dropped on the sofa with her on his lap. Zoe reached for her Wonder Woman doll and a tiny brush.

"Diana wants a braid, like me," she said, twirling her perfect pigtails.

He glanced at Mary, in the hopes of getting help, but she seemed engrossed in her e-reader. Though her shoulders shook suspiciously.

His big fingers weren't meant for this shit, but Zoe gave him such a hopeful look that he tried anyway. He ended up having to do it over three times until it looked somewhat decent.

"There you go. All done." He really hoped she wasn't going to come with the rest of her collection.

"We made cupcakes today."

"Is that so?" One question was all it took for Zoe to go on a one-sided monologue about everything that had gone down that day.

"Why don't we go brush your teeth and put on your PJs," he interrupted her. "I'll tuck you in."

“Are you going to read me a story?” Zoe never went to bed without negotiating a story out of him.

“Sure.”

“Four stories?”

“How about two?”

“Hmm... okay.”

Storytelling took longer than he'd expected. The little munchkin had chosen a Grimms' Fairytale. Who knew those stories had that many pages? Apparently, she did, because he didn't believe for a second that she hadn't tricked him. Beaten by a six-year-old, what was the world coming to?

As he headed downstairs, he shook his head. Hector “the Wolf” Diaz, domesticated. If the guys in his old unit could see him now, they would laugh their asses off. Thing was, he didn't give a fuck. Never in his life had he been more centered as since he'd tied the knot. Coming home to Mary and Zoe was the highlight of his day. He'd always considered the Dettas as his true family, and they still were. But he had another one now, one of his own. This was why Mary couldn't let go of trying to fix things between him and Kristoff. She genuinely believed that he would be happier with his brother in his life.

She was in the kitchen, putting on a kettle. It was the center of the house and where she spent a lot of time, reading at the kitchen island or having a cup of tea. He could see her pulse jump up when he took the seat across her.

“I've come to a few conclusions today, hermosa. I'm going to tell you about Kristoff. So you'll understand why I can't stand the guy, and why it won't change anything,

whether you invite him over or not. And when I'm done talking, you're going to go upstairs, put on that red lace teddy, and come back. After that, I'm going to fuck you and I'm going to fuck you real hard."

She put her mug down, eyes big.

"And don't give me that look. That's not gonna save you. See, I'm tired of being the only one frustrated when it comes to my brother. So, I've decided to... spread my frustration. Every time I have to spend time in his presence, I'm going to share my feelings with you, deep inside of you. And you might want to wipe that smile off your face because I haven't decided yet if I'm gonna let you come."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

She pouted and folded her arms. “Fine. Now, tell me what happened between you two.”

Ah, she’d put on her teacher’s voice again. If she had any idea what it made him want to do to her beautiful ass, she wouldn’t have.

“You seem to be under the impression that I know Kristoff. That we were somehow separated later on in life. That’s not the case. See, we don’t share a mother, but a father. An asshole of a top shelf father, who likes his women exotic, judging by my Mexican and Kristoff’s Russian mother. Our All-American pie father liked to fuck his nannies. When my mother told him she was pregnant, he kicked her out. Gave her some pocket change as a bribe. I didn’t even know I had a brother until my mother told me on her deathbed. I guess she didn’t want me to be alone. She must have known that her mother, a grandmother I had never met, wouldn’t take me in. I was fourteen when my mother died.

“When child services came to pick me up, I fled to my father. Maybe my mother had been wrong about him. Maybe he’d changed. I had no idea where he lived, so I went to his office; after all, he was the mayor. The second he spotted me, he recognized me and ushered me into a room. He’s big and bulky like me, and has the exact same eyes. The asshole threatened to make my life a living hell if I ever came back. You can’t imagine the rage I felt when he called my mother a puta. I was so close to killing him and destroying my life. My mother must have been watching over me from above because I walked away. I walked away, never to return.”

Her eyes turned soft. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago. I don’t give a shit about that man.” And that he didn’t want me. Nobody had wanted him after his mother died. Not his asshole father, and not his grandmother, who stated that the bastard had brought shame upon her family.

“Then what happened? I recall Jazzy telling me that you grew up with the Dettas and their grandmother.”

Bless Caitlin O’Brian. She’d been the poster granny of Irish hospitality.

“I met Gio at the group home. When a few kids jumped him, I helped him out. We became inseparable ever since. Then one day, Grams came to pick up her grandsons.” He remembered that day as if it happened yesterday. He had felt sick to his stomach. Any minute, Gio was going to leave him behind and he would be alone again. “Gio begged her to take me with them.” All it took was a look at his crestfallen face and Grams decided to take him in too. It had been him and the Dettas ever since. He had been Gio’s enforcer. When starting a new business, not everyone took you seriously at first. Some even believed they didn’t have to pay you. That’s where Hector came in.

“And where does Kristoff fit in this story?”

Ah yes, his ‘long-lost’ big brother. “My father’s name wasn’t the only one my mother told me on her deathbed. Kristoff’s mom and she had worked at the mayor’s mansion at the same time. The bastard impregnated both of them. Kristoff’s three years older than me. Finding Kristoff was more difficult. He lived in Tenderloin, like the Dettas and me, but my older brother was already doing odd jobs. Still, one day, I found him. I told him we were brothers and, stupid me, I expected a Hollywood moment or something.”

“I take it, it didn’t go down like that?”

“Fuck no. He told me that he didn’t play with kids. Then he said to never call him brother again.” It had been like a punch in the gut.

“And you never spoke to him over the years? I mean, he knows Gio, and even shares a club with him.”

That might seem weird to an outsider, but Kristoff and his crew had shared the same streets with the Dettas, and by extension, with him. They had both managed to crawl out of the slums. The only difference being that Gio had chosen to go legit instead of following in his father’s footsteps, working for the mob. Kristoff had chosen the opposite. Over the years, a friendship formed between the two powerful men. A friendship that Hector would never share with his brother, because one rejection would last him a lifetime.

He told Mary all of this and she kissed his shoulder, snuggling up to him.

“When I turned twenty, I enlisted. I needed to forge my own path and figured it would be one less mouth to feed for Grams.”

“Kristoff showed up at your wedding and accepted the invite for the barbecue. Maybe he wants to reconnect.”

He shook his head. “Don’t go there. I don’t know what game Kristoff’s playing, but he’s after something. Up until our wedding, the man has never acknowledged me as his brother. Apart from the Dettas and Achilles, no one even knows. It’s not a secret, but not common knowledge either.”

Mary burrowed into his side. “I’m sorry that I butted into your relationship.”

“Apology accepted.”

It wasn't going to save her butt, though.

CHAPTER 21

HECTOR

The woman who walked into the living room was a vision in red lace. Hector gave his wife a quick onceover and tried his damn hardest to turn his gaze back to the TV.

He grabbed a cushion from the couch and threw it on the floor.

"You're going to watch basketball?" She looked surprised and a little indignant.

Oh, mi corazon, this is only the start of your lesson.

He pointed at his feet. "Get over here. You know what I want."

Her eyes narrowed, but she did as he asked. In a beautiful, graceful manner, she dropped before him, her ass perched on the cushion, her hands going to his belt. It wasn't long before she took him out of his briefs and started to suck him.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He leaned back against the couch, trying to appear relaxed as Mary started to make slurping sounds. She was really getting the hang of it. Her head bobbed up and down his shaft.

He loved her brazen nature when it came to sex. His woman looked all angelic, but when they were alone, a sassy little devil inhabited her body. All he wanted was to give her pleasure. But, he couldn't let her meddling in his affairs go unanswered.

He pulled her off his dick.

“You wet yet?” When she opened her mouth, he put a finger on her lips. “No talking. Just show me your juices.”

She tried to get up, but he pushed her shoulders down.

“No. You're a smart girl. Figure out a way to show me without getting up.”

It took her a second to catch on, but then her hand went to her stomach. From there, slowly—oh so slowly—her hand descended until she pushed two fingers into her heat.

“That's it,” he rasped. “Pleasure yourself for me.”

He still hadn't decided if he was going to let her come, but he liked their play.

Mary closed her eyes and really got into it. It was probably an obscene sight. Him with his dick straining up to his stomach. Her face close to his dick, fingers inside

herself.

When he heard her breath hitch and the pace of her fingers sped up, he pulled her hand away.

She mewled and gave him a hurt look. He wanted to bite her full bottom lip and fuck her into oblivion. Unfortunately, he couldn't. He was trying to make a point here.

“Feeling frustrated yet?” he asked.

She blinked. Her eyes narrowed as she was reminded why she was in this predicament in the first place.

Meanwhile, on the screen, his team scored. It didn't get much better than this: his woman giving him head and his team on the win.

Actually, it could get better.

He put a hand on her head, pushing her back down on his cock until he made her gag. With deep rhythmic strokes, he started to fuck her face. She groaned when he went particularly deep until he hit the back of her throat. He held her there for a few seconds, expecting her to protest. Instead, he was confronted with her gorgeous eyes looking up at him, full of trust. Shit. That made him even harder.

Slowly he pulled out of her mouth and tucked her head between his legs, giving her reprieve. She nuzzled against him and gave a contented sigh. It was as if something broke free inside him, wanting to rejoice.

How had he ever gotten so lucky? The most beautiful woman in the world lay at his feet and enjoyed pleasuring him.

Mary lifted her head up and looked at him questioningly. Looking for instructions.

“Get up.”

When she complied, he made a twirling gesture with his finger, so she turned her back to him. He was greeted by pale globes that were supposedly covered with a thong. The strap of red fabric, of course, didn't cover a thing. It only highlighted her pussy, the way it went snug around her lips. He pushed away the soft fabric and dipped a finger into her hot cunt.

She nearly burned his fingers. He set a fast pace, fingering her, all the while making sure not to touch her clit. One accidental brush against the puffy bud, and she would go over the edge.

He pulled his finger out when his hand was practically drenched.

“Get up and sit on my dick, facing the screen.”

He hadn't done the reverse cowgirl with her yet, and it was perfect for what he had in mind.

She settled onto his lap, back to his chest, and slowly descended on his dick. When he was balls deep in her, she let out a satisfied sigh.

Little did she know...

He brought his hands down to Mary's thighs and pulled them up, so her feet were flat on the couch on either side of her.

Her hand went back to her clit, playing with it. He let her touch herself one, twice, just to get herself worked up, then he pulled her hand away.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“You don’t get to make yourself come tonight. Now, get moving.”

Mary dug her heels into the couch and started to bounce her hips up and down.

He pushed two fingers into her anus, slowly loosening up her butt hole.

Mary stiffened, and he gave her ass a swat.

“Did I say you could stop moving? Ride that dick.”

“Are you going to—”

“Shh. Only time you’re allowed to speak is when you want me to stop.”

“Like a safe word?”

His heart made a double thud. “What do you know about safe words?”

She scoffed. “Idoread, you know.”

“You’ve been reading up on kink?”

“Maybe.”

Dios. She’s going to be the death of me.

“You won’t need a safe word. Stop is enough.”

When she continued riding him, he kept probing his finger into her back hole. She was so damn tight. When he felt her loosen up, he pulled out of her pussy.

He guided his cock to her tight star that quivered when it felt getting breached for the very first time.

Ideally, he would have used lube, but he didn't have any with him and there was no way he was letting her go to get some. They would have to make do.

The second he pushed inside her, she moaned.

“That’s it, baby. Just take the tip. That’s enough for now.”

“It burns.”

“Then I’m doing it right.” He let go of her ass cheeks, so she had to use her own strength to hold herself up. She used her leg muscles to prevent from sliding down, taking more of his cock up her ass.

His hands went to massaging her breasts.

“I love how flexible you are, gorgeous. Never, ever stop doing yoga.” He hissed when he passed the first ring of muscle in her ass.

He couldn't see her bare pussy because he was fucking her from behind, but wondering what they must look like turned him on even more. He snaked his arm around her and gave her pussy a slap with the flat of his hand. Then another one. And another one.

“Hector...” She was panting now, sounding in distress.

“Tell me about the sex books you’ve been reading.”

“They’re not sex books.” She sounded offended. “I read romance.”

This time, he slapped her clit. Hard.

“Oh, God.”

“Tell me about your romance novels,” he conceded. “What do you like about them?” He wasn’t much of a reader, but had seen her many times with her e-reader. If she was reading up on sexy times, he wanted to know.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“I like guaranteed happily-ever-afters. I like knowing that two people who sometimes start off on the wrong foot or have barriers between them, in the end, find a way to overcome it all. Sounds sappy perhaps, but I really do believe love conquers all.”

He slowly rubbed her slick nub while overthinking her answer.

“I’m not sure I believe in love,” he said honestly. He pressed a kiss on her shoulder as if in an apology, though he wasn’t sure why he was apologizing.

They had both went into this marriage with open eyes. He hadn’t lied to her or pretended he had feelings for her other than pure lust. Still, every day it was becoming more difficult to keep a wall between his feelings and his wife. The hold this five-foot-nothing of a woman had on him sometimes scared the shit out of him. She might be the one impaled on his cock right now, but he was the one dodging arrows to his heart. He could never let it happen, though. Loving someone gave them power over you. It made you vulnerable, and when they died on you, it made you mad with grief.

“Well, I do,” she said.

Brave. She was so fucking brave. Never one to mince words or not vocalize what she believed in.

She rose up on her tiptoes, probably to catch her breath.

“Get back here.” He slammed her back down while thrusting his cock up her ass.

Mary yelled, then bucked. He put his fingers on her clit, drawing lazy circles around it.

“I love how you make me feel.” Her voice was throaty and so sexy.

“Shh. And no more moving.” He nipped at her earlobe. “I’m watching the game.”

She turned her head and gave him an incredulous look. “Are you really going to have me sit here until the break?”

Ah, she was so innocent. “Until the end. Not until the break.”

“Oh God.”

“No, it’s, ‘oh Hector.’”

“You’re a sadist.”

“I don’t really get off on pain, baby, but I can try.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she said hastily. “I’ll be good.” She immediately contradicted those words by clenching her cunt.

Determined to take her mind off her devious plan, he grabbed her nipples, giving the little hoops a tug.

“Ouch!”

“Maybe I am a sadist. How about this? Every time you ripple your cunt like that, I’m gonna tug on these beauties.”

“I’ll sit still.”

Always a man of his word, he kept her sitting like that for the entire game. Every now and then, he shallowly thrust into her ass. Having her heat sit on his dick for almost an hour was pure agony. But he had a point to make.

By the end of the game, her head lulled on his shoulder, and she was panting. His pretty wife was spent.

She nuzzled against his neck. “Please, Hector, no more of this slow burn. I’ll be good.”

He wasn’t sure if she meant good to him or that she wouldn’t meddle anymore. Not that he cared. He had punished her enough for one night. She had learned her lesson.

He pulled her off him and carried her upstairs. There, he dropped her on their bed. He spread her legs and slammed into her. This time, it was him doing the riding. He was even kind enough to make her come before himself.

Afterwards, when they lay under the covers, she snuggled up against him.

“Hector?”

“Yeah, baby?” He could hear the smile in her voice.

“I think I’m going to invite your brother over for the holidays as well.”

Ah, hell.

CHAPTER 22

MARY

Her husband was up to something. Mary brushed her hair in front of the bathroom mirror as she pondered what it could be. He’d been giving her this look all morning. Every now and then, his lip curled up and he got this... satisfied look in his eyes.

You woke him up by giving him head.

He’s just very happy with you.

He’d better be, I almost unlocked my jaw taking him in.

Today was their first house party, or ‘barbecue day’ as Zoe had dubbed it, and she pondered about what to wear.

When she came out of the shower, she found Hector sitting on the edge of the bed. There was a black box in his hand.

“I got you something.”

A gift!

She preened as she walked up to him. Their guests would be trickling in within an hour, so she should get dressed, but maybe they could squeeze in another round.

He pulled out a black thong with a string of pearls at the crotch. This was so... hot.

“I love it.”

“Glad to hear that. Now, put it on.”

Wait, what? “Now? You want me to put it on, now?”

“Yes. Now.”

“But, but...”

He grabbed her leg and pulled her close. “Today is going to be a tough day,” he said, his voice gruff. “Knowing you’re walking around wearing this will help me get my mind off that.”

Oh, no.

“Tell me what’s going on. I’m here for you.”

He nodded, looking dead serious.

Her heart leaped, and warmth settled in her stomach. This was it, the moment she’d been looking forward to. The little things they would share. Showing trust, building a foundation to become closer, and one day, that would turn into love and—

“Kristoff’s coming. Makes me feel frustrated. Knowing you’ll have pearls running up your pussy all day long, keeping you wet, helps.”

—and... her husband was an ass.

He gave her a pat on the back and walked away, practically whistling.

She debated throwing something at his head. The marble vase on her vanity would do nicely.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” he called over his shoulder. “Not unless you want me to decorate your nipples as well.”

An hour into the housewarming, Mary concluded it was a success. The grill was manned by Hector, who apparently loved to cook when danger was involved. Everyone was enjoying themselves.

Page 66

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Everyone but me.

The day would have been perfect if she wouldn't have pearls rubbing against her bud at every move. Her pussy was burning, and she felt on edge. She'd thrown dirty looks in Hector's direction every chance she got, but he just smiled. For a grumpy guy, he sure loved to smile these days.

Staring into the fridge, she pondered her options. She needed to grab some ice. Unfortunately, the ice was on the lowest shelf of the freezer.

Do not bend over!

A soda tastes better when it's warm anyway.

When the doorbell rang, she left the ice where it was.

Kristoff stood at the door. She almost didn't recognize him in casual black jeans and a black button-down.

His presence was followed by a huge truck stopping on their front lawn. Mary's jaw dropped when she saw two men wheeling out a big statue from the truck.

"What the hell is that?" Hector had joined them and scowled at the monstrosity that took up a good portion of their lawn.

Kristoff was overseeing the placement of the statue with great pride. "That, bratan, is a dragon, chiseled after the big fucker from Game of Thrones."

Zoe gasped. “Bad word.”

He patted her on the head and looked Hector straight in the eye. “I wanted to introduce you to the show. It’s a gift from Katya and me.”

“You watch a TV show with dragons in it?”

“It’s educational,” Kristoff claimed. “There are seven families who fight over the throne. It’s basically the Bratva with dragons in it.”

“I don’t give a shit. Get that ugly thing off my lawn.”

Another gasp from Zoe and the little girl took off. Mary had an inkling of where she was headed.

Kristoff ignored him and trailed into the living room. “You remove it if you can. It’s solid marble, so watch your back.”

When Hector wanted to stomp after his brother, she pulled him into the nearest room.

“Please don’t.” Her brother-in-law just had a weird sense of humor. “If I can live with... that thing you made me wear, you can suffer through Kristoff for an afternoon.”

He scowled. “You forget that you get to wear... that thing in the first place because you invited him over.”

“Really, Hector?”

She didn’t care that he was right. Everyone but her was having a great time. Oh, she was smiling and refreshing the food and the drinks, but there was nothing she could

do to stop the pool between her legs. Damn him for making her go through this.

“Is my wife feeling frustrated?”

She couldn't help herself; she bit his chin.

Hector retaliated by pushing her up against the wall. His hands went under her dress, the heat of his skin burning her. Finally. She was ready to be scorched by him. Luckily, that's exactly what he did.

Ten minutes of hot monkey sex later, she pulled her dress right. After peeking into the corridor, and making sure nobody saw them sneak out—her with mussed up hair and Hector with an insufferable grin—she got out.

“You will be polite to all of our guests,” she snapped. “And that's the end of it.”

She hurried up to her bedroom, put on a new pair of panties—sans any pearls—and went looking for their latest guest.

She found Kristoff sitting in the backyard, his back to a wall, ending a phone call. Zoe joined her, skipping along, holding precious cargo in her hands.

“Kristoff, meet Zoe, your niece,” she officially introduced the two. Zoe's eye widened at suddenly discovering that she had an uncle.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Kristoff looked down at the little girl, his brows furrowed. “Why do you walk around with a tin can? Don’t they give you proper toys?”

Mary rolled her eyes. “That’s the swear jar.”

“That’s not a jar.”

“I can’t have her running around with glass all day,” Mary muttered.

“Ah, mybratandoes like to swear, doesn’t he?”

Zoe held the jar under his nose. “That will be one dollar, please.”

Kristoff took out a stack of bills and riffled through them. “I don’t have a one-dollar bill.”

Zoe peeked at his hand. “But you have money?” She looked disappointed, clearly not happy with a grown-up not abiding by grown-up rules.

“Those are hundred-dollar bills, cupcake,” Mary explained.

“I can wait so you can change,” Zoe offered, not ready to let her uncle off the hook.

There was a stare-off between the two. Then Kristoff cocked a brow and put a hundred-dollar bill in the jar.

Zoe beamed. “Thank you, Uncle Kris.” She turned to Mary. “Will you count how

much I have now? Do you think it's enough for a Wii?" She sounded so hopeful.

"I'm sensing a scam here," Kristoff said dryly.

"No scam," Mary assured him. "Why don't you take the jar to Hector, cupcake, so he can count for you? I have something to discuss with your uncle."

Zoe left with the swear jar safely tucked in her hands.

"Discuss with me? Sounds ominous."

"Not at all." Her gaze followed Zoe who had reached Hector. He was patiently listening to her as she bounced around him. "You should talk to him, you know. Explain."

"Explain what?"

"Why you sent him away."

"He has told you." He sounded surprised.

"Yes. After, um, much debate." And an intro of a night she would forever remember.

"There is nothing to tell that would make a difference. We are what we are."

"I don't believe that. See, if you didn't care about him, you wouldn't have kept yourself in his life." When he cocked an eyebrow, she continued, "Hector seems to think that you decided to become friends with Gio because you two are made out of the same cloth. And while that may be true, it's still strange. Why would a man who wants nothing to do with his brother become friends with his brother's best friend? It doesn't make sense. It would have been more logical if you would have stayed away

from the Dettas, and thus away from Hector. But you didn't. In fact, I'd bet you proposed to co-own a club with Gio to stay entangled in Hector's life."

He took another swig from his drink. "It appears my brother has married you not only for your beauty, but your brains as well."

"Hector doesn't see it, because his emotions cloud his judgment, but I do. And I don't like seeing him unhappy. He might not show it, but I think you hurt him really bad all those years ago, and that wound hasn't healed."

Kristoff looked at Hector, who was putting patties on the grill while trying to keep Zoe away from the fire.

"What if some wounds never heal?"

"I don't believe that to be true. Being too afraid or too proud to right a wrong is a weakness. I would think that a man like you wouldn't want to live with such a flaw."

"A man like me?"

She nodded. "Strong, independent, king of his world. Surely you aren't afraid to tell Hector the real reason why you sent him away?"

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“Smart, beautiful, and manipulative. You should come work for me.”

“Not manipulative,” she corrected him, though she totally was. “I just want Hector to be happy. And I think you giving him closure will help with that.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“That’s all I’m asking. Now, do you want some steak with your drink?”

CHAPTER 23

HECTOR

Hector opened his front door and almost tripped over Zoe’s suitcase. Then he remembered today was Zoe’s sleepover. He hadn’t been able to make it to dinner tonight, but was just in time to see his girls getting ready.

Zoe looked excited when she saw him. She was adorable in her jeans and pink sweater, holding her superhero backpack.

Mary greeted him with a chaste kiss. She was nothing but proper around Zoe, considering even a little tongue risqué.

She grabbed her keys. “Let’s go, cupcake.”

“Can Hector bring me?”

“You don’t want me to take you? Are we already at the embarrassing mom stage?” Mary mock-whispered.

Zoe rolled her eyes. “No, silly. But I told Kim and Jodi about Hector. That he’s as big and strong as Wolverine. They didn’t believe me.”

She wanted to show him off. No one had ever wanted to do that before. It was... humbling. “Sure. I’ll take you.”

“Yay! They didn’t believe me when I said Mary looked like a doll before either,” she huffed. “Except Jodi’s father, Mr. Storm. He said Mary is beautiful.”

Hector’s eyes narrowed. “Did he now?”

“Don’t give me that look,” Mary said, while she put her keys back in the bowl. “Storm lost his wife a year ago and is still mourning her.”

“Guess that’s what I get for marrying a hot piece of—”

“Little ears!” Mary hissed.

“I forgot Spidey!” Zoe ran back up the stairs.

He pulled Mary to his side and whispered, “A hot piece of ass like you. You know what I’m gonna do to that ass tonight?”

“That’s going to have to wait because tonight is girls’ night.”

“Are you going to wear your fuck-me pumps?” Just thinking about the first time he’d seen her in those spiked heels got him hard. Of course, back then, he couldn’t touch her. How things had changed.

“I am.”

“Jesus, fuck.”

“That’s another dollar, Mr. Diaz. Keep it up, and you’re going to make me rich.”

“You can have all I have, baby. And tonight, when you get back, I’m going to give you all I have while you’re wearing those pumps.”

Her clattering smile elevated his spirit. He found himself... happy, dammit, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about that. On one hand, it felt great. Coming home to his girls every night was worth more than any pile of money. On the other hand, for the first time in his life, he had something to lose. If anything happened to them, it would cripple him.

He took Zoe’s suitcase and opened the door. A delivery guy with a large box looked up at him from his porch.

“Zoe Diaz?” he asked.

Page 69

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Hector liked that name. They should look into changing Zoe's last name.

"Yeah. That's my kid." He bellowed Zoe's name up the stairs.

"I'm here!" Zoe announced dramatically as she jumped off the last few steps of the stairs.

He caught her mid-air and she clasped her arms and legs around him. The kid was quite the monkey.

"Who's it from?"

The guy looked on his clipboard. "Some Kristoff, no last name."

"Uncle Kris sent me a present!"

He winced when Zoe nearly blew up his ear. He signed the paper that was shoved under his nose, and the courier left the package in the corridor.

As soon as Hector closed the door behind him, Zoe climbed off him and attacked the box. The piece of carton didn't stand a chance against a six-year-old.

"Uncle Kris got me a Wii!"

"That's very nice of him," Mary said.

Hector cocked a brow. "How come he gets to buy her stuff and when I want to, you

tell me no?”

“I want her to learn the value of money,” Mary explained.

“Clearly, Kristoff didn’t get that memo.”

“Clearly.”

“I have to thank Uncle Kris,” Zoe decided.

“Why don’t you let me do that?” Mary said, as she took out her phone. “You’re going to be late for your friend’s party.”

Hector grinned. “Don’t forget to give him hell for spoiling her.”

“Of course,” she hastily agreed.

He pulled her close and whispered, “You’re so full of shit.”

“I’m totally going to scold him!” she shouted after him.

She so wasn’t.

After taking Zoe to her friend Kim’s house, he returned home. He wanted to see Mary before she left for her night out.

She was standing in front of the hallway mirror, putting on her shoes. Fuck, she was beautiful. A sight for sore eyes in her deep purple skirt that ended just above her knees, her silver pumps that made her long legs go on for miles, and her top that...

“Where’s the rest of your shirt?”

She spun around, an arm cocked on her hip. “Do you like it? It was Jazzy’s turn to pick the theme this month.”

No, he didn’t fucking like it.

“Theme?” he forced himself to ask.

“Every month, one of us gets to pick a dress code. Jazzy went for backless.” She gave a wicked smile. “Next month, it’s my turn. I was thinking of boho chic with animal print. I can’t wait to see what Tommie will come up with. He always has this crazy apparel. No idea where he finds the stuff.”

“Hold on. I’m coming with.” He put his boots back on.

“To girls’ night?”

“I have some business at the club anyway,” he lied.

“You do?”

“Yeah. I’m going to have a talk with Kristoff. He’s usually at Flux on a Friday night. Was thinking that maybe you’re right, and I should try to get to know him. Make an effort.” He almost choked on the last words.

Her eyes softened. “You’re finally going to talk to your brother.”

“Now don’t get ahead of yourself. And no more meddling. I’m just going over to say hi.” And he meant that in the most literal sense of the word. Greeting the bastard and then ignoring him technically was talking.

She gave him a soft kiss. “Thank you.”

He pressed her body against him, his hand grazing her back. Her naked back. The reason he had to keep an eye on her in the first place.

“I’ll drive you.”

On the way over to Flux, they discussed Zoe. He was glad to hear the progress the little one was making. She’d gone through a lot, and it seemed like she was settling in nicely at her new school.

At the club, they were greeted with dark piano music and complimentary drinks. He took Mary to a table in the VIP section. Tommie and Jazzy were already there. Their quartet was finished with Katya, Kristoff's protégé. The girl had long pink hair that made her baby blues stand out, even in the shaded nightclub.

He kissed his woman, tongue and all, for everyone to see, and went to the office upstairs.

As he'd dreaded, he was greeted by Angel, who managed the club. He was doing paperwork behind his laptop.

"Well, well, what brings you here?" he asked.

While Diaz Security did provide the security for this place, it was usually one of his men who coordinated the security.

"Just thought I'd join my wife for the evening."

"Ah, the infamous girls' night."

"You've heard about it."

"They're great for business. Every time they come in, social media posts about the club increase. Especially when Tommie enters the building."

Hector looked down through the see-through mirror onto the dance floor. The area around his woman was getting crowded with rowdy dancers. A few men, some already drunk, were getting closer than he liked. He called his security guy.

"I need a parameter around table three in the VIP section."

“You sure you don’t want them to build a wall?” a voice sounded from behind him.

Kristoff stood in the doorway. Great.

“What are you doing here?” He usually stayed at his own private booth.

“I’m part owner of this place. I can come and go as I please.” Kristoff came to stand next to him, looking through the glass. “I dropped Katya off. As you know, she was invited as well.” He sounded particularly pleased by that.

“And you let her leave like that?”

“Leave like what?” Kristoff peeked downstairs and cursed. “She was wearing a jacket while in the car. Sneaky girl. What is she doing going dressed like that? She’s just a kid.”

Actually, she wasn’t. Hector knew that because when the girl had turned twenty-one, a few months back, she’d had her first girls’ night with Jazzy’s crew. It was good to know someone could pull one over Kristoff, though. He grinned. Maybe this night was going to be fun after all.

Then someone put his hand on Katya’s bare back. Kristoff’s eyes flamed up like the end of a match.

“Suka,” he hissed. “Getting his filthy germs all over her.”

Page 71

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

His germs? It was a weird thing to focus on, but Hector was beginning to learn that his brother was nothing if not a bit... peculiar.

“You can’t kill him.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. Too many witnesses. If they find his body, first place the cops will come looking is here.”

“You’re assuming there will be a body to be found.”

Hector shook his head. “Same result.”

“Boys, boys, boys,” Angel said from behind his desk, making both of them turn to him with a scowl. “Already taken care of.” He waved his phone.

Hector looked back to the dance floor and saw the guy who had been harassing Katya discreetly being handled.

Shit. This was not going to end well.

Kristoff exchanged a look with Angel. “Let’s go.”

“I said, no killing.”

“He touched what wasn’t his to touch,” Kristoff said. “If a man dares to touch what is

yours today, who's to say that he won't take all of it tomorrow?"

Angel nodded. "Knife, hammer, or chainsaw?"

Fucking fuck.

Hector followed behind the two crazies. He couldn't let them kill the guy. Not without it raising any suspicions toward Flux, and Gio in general.

Sometimes he hated his job.

CHAPTER 24

MARY

Mary leaned back in her comfortable booth. It had been a while that she had gone out like this. It was nice to put on a skirt sometimes and make an effort. She didn't get to do that a lot anymore. Not with having a part-time job and a six-year-old to take care of.

She toasted with the girls and Tommie for another round of shots and looked around, trying to spot her husband. Hector had been so cute trying to hide his jealousy. He even made up a story about accompanying her, so he could talk to his brother. She knew he'd rather have his teeth pulled.

"So, how's married life treating you, cuz?" Jazzy winked.

"Actually, pretty good," she confessed. Part of her hadn't expected things to work out this well, afraid that the domestic life would be too boring for a man like Hector. After all, the man had been a bachelor one day and got a wife and a child the next. He didn't seem to mind, though. If ever a role would be assigned to people, Hector's

would be just that; husband, father, protector.

“Tell me he’s great in the sack,” Tommie chimed in. “Tell me it’s not all looks but a snooze fest between the sheets.”

“I don’t kiss and tell.”

He huffed. “You have to share. Let me live vicariously through you guys. It’s been ages since I’ve gotten laid.”

Jazzy cocked a brow. “Ages? Didn’t you hook up with this guy just two weeks ago?”

“You mean parrot man?” Tommie fake shuddered.

“Parrot man?” Katya asked. She was the newbie between them. Mary liked the girl. There was this permanent smile etched on her heart-shaped face.

“Yeah, he does this thing with his dick—”

“Tommie!” Jazzy sent him a look.

“What?”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” Katya said, after she slurped the rest of her margarita. “I wished I had a sex life. I’m not exactly a virgin by choice.”

Tommie turned to the girl. “How is it that a beauty like you doesn’t have a man? Or are you into women? Maybe both? We could get you one of each.” He rose a bit from his chair, scanning the crowd. “Let me get you a hottie tonight. Maybe more than one. ’Cause why not? I love me some reverse harem.”

Katya chuckled. “Actually, I’m into men—”

“Ain’t we all,” Tommie muttered.

“—and I didn’t go out much before because of all the hospital visits. Cancer,” she said, when they looked at her questioningly. A determined look crossed Katya’s face. “But that’s over now. It’s time for things to change. It’s time for some color in my life.” She patted Tommie’s arm. “Thank you for the pink extensions, by the way. I love them.”

“You’re welcome, sugar-plum. Next month, we’ll go for rainbow hair.”

Jazzy’s hand went to Katya’s in a silent support. Mary knew her cousin was thinking of her friend whom she’d lost to cancer. Katya smiled at her, her eyes shining.

And just like that, Mary knew Katya had become a permanent part of their group.

Speaking of their group, a long-lost member just emerged out of thin air, snaking through the crowd. Gina was coming over. She wore an amazing-looking white dress with cap sleeves. The piece was complemented with gold hoop earrings.

She was surprised to see Gina because ever since the incident with Jazzy, she avoided their cousin. Even now, she could hardly look Jazzy in the eyes.

“I need to speak with you,” her sister said.

It irked her that Gina ignored the rest of her company. “Sure. But first, let me order you a drink.” Maybe if she could get her to talk to Jazzy again—

“No, I need to speak to you, now. In private. I knew you’d be here tonight. I need... can we please—”

Mary got up from her seat.

“Do you want us to go with?” Jazzy asked, her eyes narrowed on Gina.

“What? No.” Did she really think her own sister would be a danger to her? “I’ll be right back. Order me another round. Make it something fruity.”

She followed Gina through the busy crowd. Gina didn’t stop until they were behind the club, in the parking lot.

Standing underneath a lamp post, Mary saw the fear in her sister’s eyes.

“Are you okay?”

“I need a place to stay tonight.”

“You’re welcome to stay with us.” She wasn’t sure how Hector would feel about that, but Gina was her sister. He’d have to deal.

Gina rubbed her arms as if she was cold. The night was a bit nippy, but Mary had a feeling it was more than that.

“You look tired,” she said carefully. Gina didn’t do well with anyone making remarks on her looks.

“I am tired,” Gina admitted, to her surprise. She leaned back against a Suburban and let out a deep sigh. Her Jimmy Choo clad foot was jittery. “I can’t believe my life has turned into this nightmare.”

“Nightmare?” Her sister had a flair for drama when things didn’t go her way. A nightmare in her world could also mean that she didn’t get to purchase a handbag that was ‘todiefor.’

“I’m broke, Mary. I have nothing. Every last dime I had, I’ve spent on chasing a duke.”

“Chasing a duke?” It sounded like the title of a Regency novel.

“Andrew. I told you about him.” Her sister sounded miffed.

“The British guy.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“British royalty,” Gina clarified. “He’s thirty-fourth in line for the British throne. I’ve spent the last of my trust fund on looking like everything he wanted in a wife. Then what happens? His mother finds him a nice British wife with blue blood.”

Now, this does sound like the plot of a Regency novel.

You better keep that tidbit to yourself.

Agreed.

What do you know? Her inner snark actually agreed with her. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I need more money.”

Of course she did. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“You don’t understand. I need it now. Today. Like, yesterday.” There was a strain in her voice.

“Gina, what’s going on?”

“Don’t give me that look. You have no idea what I’ve been through. I wasn’t as lucky as you to land myself a millionaire.”

She wasn’t even going to go into that. “How much do you need?”

“A hundred thousand.”

“What?!” She didn’t know what amazed her more; the casual way Gina summed the amount or, well, the amount itself.

“Don’t pretend like that’s a lot. It’s pocket change to a man like Hector.”

“Yeah, to him, maybe, but you’re my sister. I’m not going to ask him for a hundred thousand dollars, so you can buy a new wardrobe.” Sometimes her sister even baffled her.

“He’ll give it to you. You will make him give it to you, right? Please?”

There it was again, that desperate look in her sister’s eyes. A look that made her stomach ache. “Gina. Tell me you just want to buy new clothes, and it’s not for something else.”

“Of course it’s for clothes, what else?” Gina sneered, her eyes darting into the dark night. “And maybe for a few hotel arrangements here and there. It’s just that I needed some money, stat, and after the last time, when you couldn’t give it to me fast enough, I had to borrow from some people.”

An icy feeling seeped into her stomach. “What kind of people?”

“It doesn’t matter. Just get me the money.”

“What kind of people, Gina?”

When a man emerged from the shadows, her question was answered.

“Gina Rossi.” The guy spat out her name, rounding up on her. Underneath the

fluorescent light bulb, his bald head almost glowed. “You gonna pay me now, pretty butterfly?”

Her sister stared at him, looking frozen. “I... I don’t have the money.” Her eyes went to Mary. “But her husband does.”

Mary’s jaw dropped. She couldn’t believe Gina threw Hector under the bus like that.

“That true, dollface?” The guy came up to her, his cigarette scent wafting over her. “You got a man who can pay for you?”

“I...”

She tried to step back and bumped into a chest.

“Doesn’t matter,” the second guy from behind her said. “You’re gonna pay in flesh or blood, sweetheart. Either way, you’re going to pay.”

“Hector Diaz.” Gina practically shouted the name. “He’s my brother-in-law. He has his own security firm. Just call him, and he will pay you. Please, just don’t hurt us. If you touch his wife, he isn’t going to be happy.”

Page 74

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

The thug looked at Mary. “Hector fucking ‘The Beast’ Diaz? You’re married to him?”

The guy behind her chuckled and pointed a gun at her. “Things just got more interesting. Call him. Now.”

When she didn’t move fast enough, he slapped her across the face.

“No!” Gina screamed, looking frantic.

“You make another sound and I’m gonna break your neck.”

Mary’s cheek burned, and she tasted blood. Not wanting the asshole to hurt her sister, she did as he asked.

Hector sounded worried when he answered. “Where are you, Mary? I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“Hector, I—” Before she could say another word, the phone was snatched from her hand.

“Hello, Mr. Diaz. It seems as if I have something that belongs to you. Now, this is what’s going to happen.”

CHAPTER 25

HECTOR

Hector stared at his phone, his vision going red for a sec.

They had his wife. Some motherfucker had put his hands on Mary, and was now demanding money. While he was preventing Kristoff from committing murder, some sick—soon to be dead—fuck had taken Mary.

He had an hour to find a hundred thousand dollars. On a Friday night, when banks were closed.

“Fucking shit!” He kicked a chair, breaking it.

Kristoff looked up and put his hammer down. A hammer that had just smashed every bone in the hand of the guy who had touched Katya. Hector felt like jamming the hammer in his own head. He should have never left Mary out of his sight.

He had to get out of here. He had to get to her.

“Who was that on the phone?” Kristoff asked.

Hector rounded on him. “A motherfucker with a death wish. Someone snatched my wife while I was stuck here with you.”

“Someone took Mary?”

He closed his eyes for a second and took a deep breath. He needed to think. He couldn't let emotion cloud his judgment. A mission. Yeah, he was going to treat this like a mission. First; recon. He needed to know who he was up against.

“Tell me who has her.”

Kristoff again.

Hector wanted to tell him to fuck off, that he'd done enough, when he realized his anger was aimed at the wrong person.

"I don't know. He didn't give me his name. Just told me to get him a hundred grand within an hour if I want to see her again." He didn't want to think about the threat the fucker had made about carving up her face.

Focus, Diaz, focus.

Kristoff barked something, and Angel left the room.

"It seems like an odd number," he said. "You're worth far more than a hundred grand."

He was right, of course. If someone would take his wife for ransom, they would ask a lot more.

The next moment, Tommie was ushered into the room, Angel following him on his six.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

The kid looked extremely relieved when he spotted Hector. “You know, you could have just texted me, instead of sending this guy.” He pointedly looked at Angel. “For a second, I had this Goodfellasmoment, picturing myself getting beaten up in a back room by mobsters.”

Any other time, Hector would have appreciated his brazen talk, but not now. “Someone has Mary. I need you to tell me if anyone has approached her at your table.”

“Mary’s gone? When did that happen? She just left a few minutes ago with Gina.”

Fucking Gina Rossi. He should’ve known she had something to do with this. Bad luck followed her around like a dark cloud.

“I watched the footage from the parking lot,” Angel said, looking up from behind his laptop. “It shows Mary and another woman getting pushed into a van by two men. One of them is Micky, from Brian’s crew.”

Kristoff pulled out his phone and walked away.

“Who is this Brian?” Hector wanted to know.

“Irish Brian. He’s into gambling and underground fights. He usually doesn’t get in Kristoff’s way. He is said to be fair but out for blood when someone crosses him. Very Old Testament kind of guy. You take money from him and don’t pay him back in time, he’s not gonna charge you an interest rate. He takes the interest back in blood or sweat. It’s his trademark.”

Hector didn't like the sound of that. "Meaning?"

"Meaning men usually pay him back by fighting in a cage; women, by working on their back."

If this Brian character landed one hand on his woman, Hector would paint the streets with his blood.

Kristoff returned, an annoyed look on his face. "I've spoken to Brian. It seems that your sister-in-law has said that you would pay her debt. Mary was just taken with, since she refused to leave her sister. You have to control your woman. She can't willingly let herself get kidnapped. It's bad for my reputation."

"They better not have touched her."

A chill crept into Kristoff's eyes. "Mary has declared herself my sister-in-law. I told Brian who she is. No one touches my family."

Hector bit back a crude remark.

Not the time, Diaz. So not the time.

Walking into Irish Brian's place of business was like strolling back down memory lane. It had been over a decade since he'd had his last underground fight. Back then, fights were arranged close to abandoned subways and in back alleys. Nowadays, apparently, bare-knuckle fights had moved to a silo at the docks. It was one of the last buildings, more secluded, so the row of cars didn't draw much attention.

Kristoff had insisted on going with, and Hector didn't object, as he could be useful in

the parley. Also, Kristoff had provided him with a suitcase filled with cash. Guess being a crime boss had its perks, such as having a hundred thousand dollars laying around.

The twins were another matter. Then again, he knew they wouldn't let Kristoff walk into the den of this Brian guy by himself. Or maybe they just came along to watch the fights; who knew why those crazy fuckers did anything.

Brian's place was packed. There was a big, octagon cage in the middle of the room, placed MMA-style.

As they walked past the rows of cheering and screaming people, some waving with pieces of paper in their hands, he remembered the old days.

There was a certain appeal to people chanting your name. It had made him feel invincible, but more so, it had felt as if he mattered. He knew though, that the same people who cheered him on while he was a champion, would turn their backs on him the second he lost. Street fighting had been more of a way to let off steam, a way to control his rage since he'd been so angry all the time.

He tried to put all that behind him as they walked toward a door in the back. Two men were guarding it. Hired muscle, hands crossed before them, close to their piece.

When they saw Kristoff, one of them opened the door and went inside. The other one remained standing, looking nervous.

"Mr. Romanov," he greeted him.

Angeltsked. "Now you've done it. Kristoff hates to be called that." He looked at the hater in question. "Can I introduce him to Ally?"

The guy's hand went to his gun. "Ally?"

Hector could see the sweat form on his brow.

"My alligator."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“Ouralligator,” Damon corrected him. “I hate how you always introduce him as yours.”

“I’m sorry, bro, did I step on your sensitive toes? Did our mother not give you enough love, so you feel lost when I leave you out of our pet’s life?”

“Jesus, fuck.” Hector shook his head. How the hell had his evening go down the crapper like this?

“Boys.” Kristoff’s order couldn’t be missed.

Angel and Damon immediately looked contrite, though Hector didn’t miss the spark in their eyes.

All of it is just a damn joke to them.

He was tempted to bash in their skulls with the suitcase when the door opened.

“Brian can see you now.”

Hector surged passed the guard. He came to a halt when he saw his wife in the corner.

“Hector!” Mary jumped up from her seat and ran up to him.

His arms opened of their own accord. Only when she was in his embrace could he breathe again. He cupped her cheek and noticed the trail of blood on the corner of her

lip. It was like hellhounds ripped open his chest.

He tucked her behind him and looked at the men sitting at a table in the corner. He didn't have to ask which one was Brian; the guy wasn't the biggest of the trio, but he did have the most calculating eyes. Two men sat next to him; one ripped, bald guy wearing a tracksuit, the other, a short version of Baldy.

Gina was huddled against the radiator, looking scared out of her mind. He dismissed her pleading look.

“Who hit my woman?”

When Shorty's eyes darted to the bald guy, Hector had his answer. He was getting his wife out of here and then he was going to destroy that bald motherfucker. No man got to hurt her and live.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kristoff and the twins spread out behind him, almost as if they were having his back.

“You touched her, Irish.” Kristoff's voice was arctic.

Brian shrugged. “Actually, it was Mick. And that happened before we spoke and I found out who she was. I held up my part of the deal. Where's my cash?”

That was Hector's cue to move. He walked up to Brian and handed him the suitcase.

The guy put it on the table and opened it. He didn't count it, probably assuming coming from Kristoff, that would be proof enough that it was all there.

Gina crawled up from her position on the floor, looking immensely relieved.

Brian snapped his fingers at her. “Where do you think you’re going? You haven’t paid my interest yet.”

Ah, shit. Hector was really hoping it wouldn’t come to this. “I’ll pay the interest,” he offered. He had an inkling Mary would object to him leaving her sister’s sorry ass behind.

“That’s not how this works, Hector ‘The Beast,’” Brian said.

His muscles pulled taut when he was reminded of his old street fighter name. “Then fucking enlighten me how it works.”

“You got your woman. She owes me nothing. Take her and leave. The little bitch that owes me interest is another matter. If I let her go, the next bitch who owes me will think she doesn’t have to pay me on time either.”

“She’s a pain in my ass, but I can’t leave without her,” Hector growled. “In-laws, what can you do? Give me a number.”

Brian went to stand right in front of Hector. “Blood or sweat. That’s the way people pay me if they are too late. But since you’ve asked a number, how about one?”

“One?” Like one million? That was a lot of money, but it would hardly make a dent in his savings.

There was a cheer outside, announcing the end of a fight. Brian cocked an eyebrow and Hector just knew. He knew it before Brian spoke the words.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“One fight. In the cage. Last man standing wins.”

Mary sucked in a breath. “What? No—”

“Take her out of here.” He didn’t have to repeat his words. Angel pulled a sputtering Mary out of the room.

He didn’t look back. He wouldn’t be able to focus if the last thing he saw before he went into that cage was her beautiful eyes.

He chin-jerked to Baldy. “I want him.” He’d been planning to get back to Baldy after he had Mary safely tucked away, but this would do. In fact, it was the perfect opportunity.

“Any time, Diaz,” Baldy spit out. “Maybe a few people still remember your name, but you’re nothing now. I’ll hand you over your balls.”

Brian shook his head. “I choose who you fight.” Clearly, he had less faith in his enforcer.

“I don’t give a fuck who I have to fight as long as I get a piece of him.”

“Fine with me. This just means there’ll be two fights. First Mick, then my champion.”

“Fine with me,” he repeated after the Irish.

“This isn’t going to end well,” Kristoff remarked.

Brian's eyes narrowed. "Whatever happens in the cage stays in the cage. Even when the fighter is a brother you suddenly have."

Meaning Kristoff couldn't go to war should Hector die in the cage. Brian was giving Hector too much importance in Kristoff's life.

"Damon, put a hundred on my brother."

The opportunistic asshole.

"You're going to make money off of me now?"

"Of course. I never let a good wager go to waste."

All he had wanted for tonight was to fuck Mary while she was wearing her pumps. Instead, he was stuck in a fight he didn't want to be in, surrounded by people he didn't want to be with. And it was all Mary's fault. She wasn't allowed to get hurt or kidnapped.

He was beginning to understand what had driven Gio to lock up his wife that one time. It wasn't him being an overprotective bastard. No, it was pure genius.

CHAPTER 26

MARY

"Ladies and gentlemen! Do we have a special treat for you tonight! He is feared for his flying knee, famous for his first-round knock-outs, and a legend for never having lost a fight. A decade after having left the ring, he returns for one night only. I present to you Hectooooooooor 'The Beast' Diaz!"

Mary found herself in a front-row seat at an MMA fight. Kristoff sat next to her, the twins in the row behind them.

Fear for Hector coursed through her body, making her heart rate spike. She couldn't believe that her ladies' night had turned from margaritas into mayhem.

The crowd in the warehouse was loud and cheery. Hector's opponent, Mick, the man who had slapped her, was already in the ring, waiting, bouncing on his feet, ghost boxing.

As a new song, Eminem's "Lose yourself," blasted through the speakers, the crowd went wild again. Her breath hitched when Hector entered the ring, introduced by what was apparently his walk-on song. His hands were taped, and he was wearing red shorts, his bare chest on full display.

The referee exchanged some words between the fighters and then got the hell out of their way. A bell sounded and then it was on.

Before Mary could blink, Hector landed an uppercut and the crowd started screaming.

"Beast! Beast! Beast!"

Judging by their chant, Hector's reputation wasn't exactly buried in the past.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Then the running commentary started.

“Oh! Beautiful little bow.”

No, it wasn't. There was nothing beautiful about that man's elbow getting a jab at Hector's head.

“Great Muay Thai move by The Beast.”

Mary was really beginning to loathe the microphone voice. When Mick kicked Hector in the stomach, her nails latched onto Kristoff's skin. He didn't even flinch.

“How can you stay so calm?” she snapped.

“Hector's got this.”

That was his big consolation?

“What if he doesn't?” She knew she should have more faith in him, and she did, but there was this swirling vortex in her stomach that sucked in every positive thought.

“If he doesn't, I'll wipe that Irish fucker from the face of the earth,” Kristoff said, as if that were a given.

“Don't worry, doll,” Angel said from behind her shoulder. “If shit hits the fan, I'll protect you. We have the place surrounded.”

“But what about all these people?” There were over a hundred people in here who would get hurt in a crossfire.

“What about them?” Kristoff remarked.

She was learning that his mind was very singular. The world seemed divided, into people he cared about—a very select few—and, well, the rest of the world. And he couldn’t care less about the latter group. She didn’t have the illusion that she could change his mind. She could never be like that, and now had another reason to hope Hector would come victorious out of that cage.

“And the Beast takes another kick in the stomach.”

“He’s bleeding. Why isn’t he fighting back more?”

“It’s the calm before the storm. You haven’t seen him fight like I have.”

“When have you ever seen him fight?” When his lips thinned, she understood. “You watched him from afar when he was street fighting.” He didn’t say anything, and he didn’t have to. Yet another clue that Kristoff had never really been out of Hector’s life. Not that her stubborn husband would believe her if she told him.

“You should think less about me and more about your own hide, dearnevestka.”

“What does that mean?”

“Nevestkameans sister-in-law.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not that. The other part.”

“You put yourself in danger tonight. Scared the shit out of him. A man like Hector

doesn't deal well with fear. It makes him angry. It makes him draw out a fight, so he can get rid of his pent-up rage." He looked back at the cage pointedly.

"Are you telling me that he's letting that guy hit him, so he won't be so mad at me anymore?"

"Da."

"You're wrong. Hector's not mad at me. Surely he understands why I couldn't just leave my sister with those men."

A part-cheer, part-groan went through the crowd and Mary's eyes shot back to the cage.

"Flying knee! Wow... There we go. Here we go, peeps. This is the savage Beast of old."

"Perhaps," Kristoff conceded, though his tone suggested she was wrong. "Then again, you could have let them take her, and called Hector. He'd have come for her without you getting in harm's way. If you were my woman, I'd make sure you wouldn't be able to sit for a week."

"Well, luckily for me, Hector is far more civilized than that."

“Beast! Beast! Beast!”

“And that’s what I call a perfect knock-out!”

Mary’s jaw dropped.

Mick lay sprawled on the mat, beaten to a bloody pulp, his legs at a weird angle. Her perfectly civilized husband had snapped a man’s leg in two, like a twig.

Hector loomed over the guy, like an avenging angel. Of course, angels also protected people. She was going to hold onto that thought.

The referee made the universal motion of declaring Mick knocked out. Hector spun around, his eyes scanning the crowd until he found her.

She offered him a weak smile when he stared at her. Never before had he looked so... distant and cold.

This doesnotbode well for you.

Ya think?

The crowd chanted his name, crowning him king of the cage, but she knew that Hector had found no glory in the fight. Took no satisfaction from it.

Then a new song started, and his second opponent appeared. What walked into the cage could only be described as a human mountain. The guy was huge. Sure, Hector

was big—by far the biggest man she knew—but the reigning champion had an inch and at least thirty pounds on Hector. One side of his face was painted as a skull and he slapped his own chest, shouting at Hector.

Damon put his head closer to his boss. “There’s a lot of cash going around here. Perhaps more than we knew. I just put down a hundred k on Hector, and nobody batted an eyelash. Which means Friar Tuck must have loads of cash somewhere in this joint.”

“He does seem to draw in a nice crowd,” Kristoff conceded.

“I take it if that pile of meat manages to kill your brother, we’re going to war?”

“Nobody’s killing Hector,” Mary said, alarmed. “It’s just a fight.

“An MMA fight without any rules,” Angel explained as if he was speaking to a toddler. “A regular one doesn’t have many rules, let alone an underground fight with amateurs who fight out of desperation. Basically, everything is allowed, except for hitting below the belt.”

That wasn’t what she wanted to hear. “There’s a referee. Look. He even has a whistle.”

“Don’t worry, doll,” Angel said. “If Hector gets crushed by that mountain, we’ll let you have a piece of Brian.” He sounded as if he were making a grand gesture.

She grinded her teeth to keep in a hateful retort and concentrated on the fight.

The mic guy announced the ruling champion as “Satan,” which wasn’t reassuring at all. Trembling from the inside, she braced herself for another round, all the while praying.

And then it happened.

It was a move she would never, ever forget in her life. Hector jumped up, one knee in the air, as if aiming for Satan's stomach. When Satan put his hands up in a defensive move, Hector struck.

His knee changed direction and only grazed Satan's side. But his elbow landed to Satan's temple and knocked him out cold. The pile of meat, as Damon had dubbed him, crumbled like a building under demolition, falling face flat on the floor.

For a millisecond, there was a shocked silence, then the mic guy announced Hector the winner. The crowd cheered, yelled, and screamed obscenities.

"Bratan. How very evil of you."

That's when she noticed the angry, disappointed shouts of the visitors. Of course. Nothing was more disappointing than having placed a fight, and it ending in less than five seconds. The crowd felt cheated. Which left Brian with an angry mob.

She looked up at the mobster in question. "He doesn't seem too upset at his champion losing."

"Why should he be? I'm sure he bet on Hector. It's what I would've done in his place. A man fighting for his woman against asukaon steroids. Not a difficult choice."

Speaking of choices. Up until now, she had always backed Gina up, finding excuses for her behavior. As she watched Hector leave the cage, covered in sweat, bleeding from an eyebrow, she swore never again. Never again would she be the reason for him getting hurt.

He sent her home with Achilles.

All she wanted was to wrap her arms around her husband, make sure he was okay, but he didn't even talk to her after the fight.

After she installed her sister in the guest room—Gina was in no shape to be yelled at, though she really wanted to—the waiting started.

It was past midnight. As she lay in bed, waiting for Hector, she thought about going to the compound. She had a feeling he was there, pounding a punching bag. She decided against it, to give him time to cool off.

Another hour had passed when she finally heard Hector come home. It took another hour to realize he wasn't coming upstairs. She got out of bed and went looking for him.

She noticed that not a single light was on downstairs. Pulling the cord around her nightgown tighter, she walked down the hallway and into the living room. A dark figure was standing in front of the window near the deck. Hector had one arm braced against the top of the windowsill. Even though he must have heard her approach, he didn't move.

“Hector,” she said softly.

He turned around slowly and faced her.

“What did I tell you about sleeping apart?” she said.

He chuckled, a bitter sound. “Don’t. Not tonight.”

The rage emanating from him was like a wall. A wall she was determined to penetrate. There was only one reason for him to be this upset. She just wanted him to admit it. If it wasn’t to her, then at least to himself.

She looked up into his storming eyes. “Please talk to me.”

A pulse jumped in his jaw. “If you knew about the things I want to do to you... Run, gorgeous. Run, before I hurt you.”

“You could never hurt me.”

“Did you not see me tonight? Did you not hear what they called me?”

“I saw you, and I heard them. And I don’t care.” Her husband was no beast, no matter his nickname.

He grabbed her hair, pulling her close. “You should,” he snarled. “I want to hurt you. I want to turn you over my lap and blister your ass so bad, it will have a permanent mark of my hand. I want to beat you, so you will never, ever do something this stupid again. And don’t fucking tell me you couldn’t leave your sister behind. See, that’s what I don’t fucking care about.” His grip tightened.

She refused to cower. It felt as if this moment, right here, would be their breaking or making point.

“You won’t hurt me.”

“Are you sure?” His grip tightened, almost to the point of pain. “Because I really want to. I want to unleash myself on you. You’re not allowed to get yourself hurt.

You are not allowed to fucking... scare me like that.”

He roared that last part. She wondered if he knew he was yelling at her. She didn’t believe he did, but was smart enough to keep her mouth shut.

His grip loosened, but he didn’t let her go. Instead, he yanked her close to him. She could see the golden swirl at the edge of his pupils. They were like orbs of green fire.

“What would Zoe do without you?” His roar had changed into a soft tone.

“I’m sorry.”

“You are her whole life. Her whole fucking life!”

And... the roar was back.

“I’m sorry,” she repeated, unsure of what else to say. She had never seen him this unhinged before.

“I never wanted you to see me like that,” he admitted, looking away. “There’s this thing a cage does to you. Even when you get out as a victor instead of being dragged out, it’s difficult to shuck the feeling.”

“I know you didn’t like to fight in there.”

He let out a harsh laugh. “Oh, I went in voluntarily.” He finally let go of her hair. “Nobody gets to hurt what’s mine and walk away. Brian knew exactly what he’d get when he got me in that cage. They nicknamed me The Beast because I was one once I got in a fight. Sometimes I didn’t even go looking for one; it found me just because I was big for my age. Like in the old days, in the Wild West, when you carried a gun and people challenged you because you were expected to know how to use it. Thing

is, you can take a gun off, but I couldn't hide my large frame.”

Page 81

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“I’m sorry you had to go through that again, because of me. It’s still no reason to stay down here, though.”

She pushed the straps from her shoulders and exposed her breasts to the chill air. Her nipples immediately hardened.

He couldn’t look away and she knew she had him.

“You have no idea what you’re in for.”

“I trust you.”

He tugged her nipple piercing. “Be careful what you ask for, beautiful. The state I’m in right now, I want to fucking pound you into the mattress. I want to gag you with my cock until tears are streaming down your face.”

“I trust you.”

“This isn’t going to be gentle. It’s going to be a long, rough, and hard fuck. I’ll use your body any way I want.”

She placed a kiss on his knuckle. “I trust you.”

CHAPTER 27

HECTOR

Hector passed the newly-formed ‘family wall of fame’ in the corridor as he made his way into the living room. It held their wedding picture, one of them with Zoe at the zoo, various ones with the Dettas, and Mary with her cousins.

He’d waited until Mary had left to take Zoe to school, so he would be alone with Gina.

It was the second day after his cage fight and time for his long overdue talk with his sister-in-law. She’d been hiding, huddled up in their guest room. This morning, Mary had mentioned Gina would be leaving today, destination unknown. Hector didn’t give a fuck what rock she would crawl back under. He was, however, first gonna set her straight.

It didn’t take long for Gina to show her face and find her way to the coffee machine.

“Glad you’re up.”

She jumped up when she heard him. “Oh, Hector. Um, you’re still here.”

“Yeah, ain’t that a bitch?” He walked over to the kitchen island, taking a position across the table from her.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Cut the crap. We both know that you’ve been avoiding me. Only reason you got off your butt this morning is because you thought you had the house for yourself. Now Mary, bless her heart, believes your ‘I’m traumatized’ bullshit. I don’t. Not only because I know it’s bullshit, but mostly because I couldn’t care less about your whiny, selfish ass.”

Her knuckles holding the cup turned white. “If you’re trying to tell me you want me

to leave, then rest assured—”

“I never try anything, I just do. See, the first time you slithered into our home, it was to warn Mary off me. Feeding her bullshit about her divorcing my ass and taking me for all I have.” That memory still pissed him off. Had she been a man trying to get between him and his wife, he would have knocked out his teeth.

Gina paled. “I—”

“I’m not finished. Don’t fucking interrupt me again. I let that insult slide, thinking that perhaps you were just looking out for your sister. After all, you didn’t know me; neither did Mary much at the time.” How things had changed. He couldn’t remember his life before Mary, nor did he want to. “But this time, you really fucked up. You put Mary in danger and that’s where I come in.”

Her eyes darted at his scars, looking afraid. The two sisters couldn’t be more different. Mary didn’t focus on what others deemed as imperfection. Gina was all about looks.

“If you ever put Mary in danger again, I will dig a nice hole in the desert for you. No one will ever find your body.”

Her eyes widened. “You wouldn’t.”

“Have you not listened to a word that I’ve just said? I’ll do it, and won’t lose any sleep over it. See, I’ve got a woman and kid to think about. I’m the fucking wall between them and nasty bitches like you. Get your act together, or I will fucking make you.”

He was about to really reel into her when suddenly, he noticed a movement in the window behind her. For a second there, he saw a ghost from his past.

Decker.

Page 82

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He threw open the door to the patio and ran outside. There was nobody there. Just a mostly empty street, and a neighbor walking his dog.

Not again.

Fuck. Fucking fuck. He was losing it. Must be the stress.

It makes you start seeing shit.

He had to get out of here. To the one person who could center him. To the most real thing in his life.

The yoga studio Mary frequented was two blocks from the center she worked at. A little over a dozen people with rolled-up yoga mats were standing outside. Some were chatting, others were on the phone, or getting to their car.

He was there just in time to see Mary leave the building. Her hair in a messy bun on top of her head, a radiant smile on her face. He'd liked to think he was the one who put that smile on her face. Maybe she was thinking of last night too. Fuck, for a moment there, he felt like some kid in high school asking himself if his crush was into him.

He parked his bike, toed the kickstand down, and walked over to her. There stood a guy next to her. Seeing the man watch Mary with scarcely veiled hunger made him want to plant his fist on his face, but he restrained himself. He'd be the first to admit that he was perhaps a tiny bit territorial when it came to Mary.

“Oh, hi.” She looked surprised at seeing him. The immediate smile that spread across her face reassured him that she liked having him there.

“Hey, gorgeous.” He nudged himself between her and the asshole and pulled her close.

“I didn’t know you were going to pick me up.”

“I wanted to take my wife out for lunch.”

“Lunch sounds great. I could use pancakes. Lots and lots of pancakes.” She leaned against him. “Storm, this is my husband, Hector.”

Storm? Yeah, Hector could see one forming on the fucker’s face. This must be Jodi’s father, the widow.

“Really?” Storm looked surprised. His expression said, “What is a nice girl like Mary doing with a scarred grunt like you?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Nice to meet you.” Hector had never heard a more blatant lie.

“It sure is.”

Not wanting to spend another second in Storm’s presence, he took Mary to his bike.

He saw the man’s envy at both his woman and his Harley. The douche could look all he wanted, but he couldn’t touch. The second he did, Hector would finish him.

He took her to a diner down the street. A graying waitress with big glasses guided

them to a booth and took their orders. Their pancakes with hash browns on the side arrived in no time.

“I’m so ravenous,” Mary said, squirting a generous amount of maple syrup on top of her pile.

The waitress smiled. “Oh girl, I was just like that when I was pregnant with my first one. How far along are you?”

Mary froze. “I... um... I’m not pregnant.”

“Aha.” The waitress put the check on the table and left, not wanting to put her foot in her mouth any further.

His wife blinked. “Surely I’m not... you know.”

“Do you want to have kids?” He’d taken that as a given, and he was surprised by the slight panic on her face.

“I do.” She paused for a second. “Um... what about you? I mean, we never discussed it and I know it’s probably too soon, and...”

Ah. It was his reaction that worried her, not the idea of having his kid. He relaxed.

He shrugged, trying to appear casual. “I like kids.” Honestly, he couldn’t wait until he got her pregnant. Another child would strengthen their bond and would make it harder for her to leave him.

“That’s a relief to hear.”

“Don’t sweat it. Eat your lunch. If you’re knocked up, you’re knocked up, and we’ll deal.” He grinned at her blush.

“Okay.”

“So, this Storm guy,” he started. “What kind of name is that anyway?”

“It’s just a name, I suppose. Why do you ask?”

“Just don’t like pretentious dicks that call themselves Storm.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You’ve spoken to him all of five words. You can’t know if he’s a dick.”

Except he did. He knew even before they exchanged a single word. The man’s envious look said it all. “He’s a dick.”

“Storm’s not a dick. He has lost his wife and comes to yoga class because he wants to get more in touch with his feelings. He used to be a workaholic and to this day, he regrets not spending more time with his wife. He deserves our sympathy.”

So, the man pretended to be a bleeding heart to get Mary’s attention. Smooth. Real fucking smooth.

“As long as he doesn’t want to get more in touch with you, I’m fine with it.”

She waved her fork at him. “Are you jealous, Mr. Diaz?”

“Of course not. I just don’t like it when another man ogles my wife.” Also, yeah, I’m jealous as fuck, but no way am I admitting that.

“Uh-huh.”

“Keep up the sass, baby. See what it gets you.”

Her lashes fluttered in exaggeration as she swallowed down her food in record time.

“Please, do tell. What will it get me?”

There was a sparkle in her eyes, her pupils had dilated, and a light flush had pinkened her cheeks. Damn, she was perfection.

He leaned back. “Four words. Spread eagle with toys.”

She blinked.

If she hadn’t been sassing him, he might have felt sorry for her. Mary was a novice when it came to sex. All he had to do was name a few kinky words to hush her up. Any second now, she was going to cast down her eyes, softly scold him for suggesting the way he wanted to fuck her in a crowded place where anyone could overhear them and—

“Only if I can return the favor.”

He almost choked on his drink.

Hell. He had unleashed a sex demon.

CHAPTER 28

HECTOR

A week before Halloween, Mary gave him an important mission; to pick up Zoe's costume. Unfortunately, his mission had run into an unexpected snag.

“What do you mean, you don't have a Wonder Woman costume left?” Hector looked on his phone once again. Yep, this was the place Mary said she'd reserved Zoe's outfit.

The guy behind the counter, a teenager with bad skin, clucked his tongue. “I'm sorry, sir, but there's been some kind of a mix-up. Your costume was given to someone else. I apologize and offer you this coupon. Please pick another costume. There's plenty to choose from.”

“What about that one? It looks like Wonder Woman to me.” He pointed at the costume behind the counter.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“That one’s reserved for someone else. I already checked the name tag.”

Hector looked around the overly crowded store. Zoe was running around with a plastic sword, doing battle moves in front of a mirror. They still had a week till Halloween. He could go to another store, but he didn’t feel like traipsing around town while there was a perfectly good collection of costumes to choose from right here.

He passed two Spidermans, one Captain America, and a ghost before he found Zoe.

“Zoe, they’re all out of Wonder Woman costumes. Let’s find you another costume, okay?”

She shook her head, her blonde curls swaying from the left to the right. “Nope.”

He stood there waiting, thinking of what to do, when he found her doing the exact same thing.

A woman with a pile of costumes draped over her arm looked at him indulgently. “My boy insisted on becoming Black Panther,” she told him. “I’ve been racing across town all day. This is the third shop we’ve visited. I’m so glad we found this place.”

Zoe gave him a hopeful look. He knew what it meant.

“Fine. Let’s go.” He scooped her up and took her outside.

“I’m going to be Wonder Woman!” she squealed in his ear.

He really hoped she was. He dropped her in the side car and made sure he tucked her in nice and safe.

He sent Mary a message that they were gonna be a bit late, explaining what happened. She wished him luck and sent him a wink emoji. He rolled his eyes. How difficult could it be to find one Halloween costume for a tiny human?

The answer was: fucking difficult, near impossible.

Who knew it would be this difficult to negotiate with a six-year-old? By the time they had left the third store, Hector had promised Zoe all kinds of stuff if she would just pick out another costume. He'd even upped the ante by offering her chocolate caramel cake before dinner, for a whole week. Mary never had to know. It would be their little secret. The munchkin just shook her head and said, "Nope."

They were in the fourth store and still no Wonder Woman costume in sight. By now, he was ready to sacrifice a goat to any deity, just to get that costume.

He nudged Zoe toward a rack of pink princess dresses, hoping she'd fall in love with one of them. Instead, she ran off to a section with pirate costumes.

His shoulders slumped. Honestly, he'd reached the point that he didn't care if she wanted to walk around like a cucumber.

This shop was the largest one so far, but it still felt small and suffocating to him. It was filled with people doing their holiday shopping and he was starting to feel antsy. Waves of heat rolled over his body, and he had to watch his every step. One wrong move and he would step on a kid. He'd almost accidentally bumped into a tiny Hulk just minutes ago. The kid had growled at him and told him he "made Hulk mad."

Finally, he found a free sales clerk.

“Look, um, Cathy,” he said, after a look at the woman’s nametag. “I really need a Wonder Woman costume for my kid. So, what can you do for me?” He smiled and tried to look non-threatening.

Her eyes went to his scars and then trailed to his tattoos. She practically licked her lips and bent over the counter, showing him cleavage.

“You know, I think I can help you out,” she all but purred.

He leaned over to her. “Do tell.”

She glanced over at Zoe, who was having a sword fight with Aquaman.

“I don’t have a Wonder Woman costume and you won’t find any if you haven’t reserved one. It’s an extremely popular outfit, with the movie out and all. But what if I can convince that little girl to wear a different costume?”

Oh, he liked the sound of that.

“You do that, and I’ll owe you.”

“Oh, I like you owing me,” Cathy said, followed by a wink. “What will you do for me if I get it done?”

“The best date of your life,” he promised, not feeling sorry for misleading her. He could pawn her off to Achilles or Walker. Maybe even Cortez, if his girl had dumped him again.

“Deal.” She sauntered over to Zoe, who was standing next to a pile of tridents.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He caught Zoe from falling on her butt when she tried to pull out a trident that was twice her height. He placed the weapon in her hands and then pointed at Cathy.

“Zoe, this lady wants to talk to you.” Or wait. He eyed the trident. Maybe the solution to his problem was right in front of him. “Do you want to become Aquaman?”

Zoe rolled her eyes at him. “Aquaman is aman, silly.”

Of course it wouldn't be that easy.

Cathy hunched down next to Zoe. “Hi, little girl, I'm Cathy and I'm here to help you with your Halloween costume.”

For some reason, the attention of the sales clerk made Zoe shy. She put an arm around his leg and leaned against him.

“I want to be Wonder Woman. She's a hero.”

“I'm sorry, but we don't have that costume anymore. So, what do you think about Catwoman? She's a hero too.”

“Nope.”

“What about Elsa from Frozen?”

Zoe folded her tiny arms in front of her chest. It took him a sec to realize that she'd taken over his stance.

“Nope,” she repeated. “I can’t fight in a dress.” She gave Cathy a dubious look as if she was debating her mental health.

Cathy came up with a dozen more suggestions, all of which Zoe shut down. The eyes of the clerk got strained and her smile wavered.

Hector knew how she felt.

“Well, it seems like we’re not getting any further here,” Cathy eventually said, admitting defeat.

“Too bad.”

Cathy got up and stepped closer to him. “This doesn’t mean we still can’t go out. How about I give you my number?”

“How about you don’t?”

She blinked, obviously surprised that he was gonna hold them to their deal. He didn’t feel too bad for shutting her down. After all, she’d looked at his ring finger, but dismissed it.

So yeah, he didn’t feel bad at all when he scooped Zoe up and went outside. Sitting back on his bike, Zoe on his lap, he wracked his brain about what else he could do. He came up with nothing.

“Zoe, I’m sorry, but I don’t think we can find your costume.”

Her bottom lip quivered, and he felt a pang in his heart. Ah, hell, not the pout.

“But I have to be Wonder Woman. She’s a hero like you!”

What?

“Zoe, why do you have to be her and not someone else? There are other superheroes.”

“But they don’t have her dark hair.”

“You like dark hair?” He got the feeling she was trying to tell him something, but he was clueless.

Zoe nodded and pointed at his head. “Wonder Woman is a warrior like you. She has dark brown hair like you. I want to look like you, so everybody will know.”

“Will know what, puppet?”

“That I’m your kid,” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Ah. “Baby girl, with or without the same color hair, you will still be my kid.”

She looked puzzled. “But Mr. Storm said I couldn’t be your kid because your skin is darker and your hair too. He said you didn’t look like me because you are spanic.”

Hispanic.

Fucking Storm. Hector took a deep breath, trying to calm down.

He had to tread carefully. She was just trying to find her place in his world. He could understand her need for wanting to feel secure, to be a part of a family. He’d gone through the exact same shit.

“Remember how in X-Men, the mutants were being made fun of because they were different?”

She nodded in earnest. “Professor X helped them.”

“Exactly. He opened a school so the kids with special powers could go there. None of them looked alike, but together, they still became a family.”

“So... it doesn’t matter what color my hair is?”

Finally, having to watch all those superhero movies was paying off. “That’s right. Even if you were purple with yellow dots, you’re still stuck with me.”

She giggled and gave him a hug. It was amazing what power she packed inside that

tiny frame of hers.

Zoe looked back into the shop they had just left.

“I can wear something else.” She didn’t sound too happy with that prospect, but she was being a champ. For him. “But not a dress. I can’t save the world in a dress.”

He plucked her off his lap and put her in the side car. “We got one more stop first.”

He went back to the first store. The place that had fucked up their order. The same pimply teenager stood behind the counter. One look behind the kid and he saw that his coveted costume was still there.

Hector pointed at the costume. “I’ll be taking that one.”

“I’m sorry, but—”

He pulled out five hundred-dollar bills and shoved them over the counter. “Like I said, I’ll be taking that one.”

Money had a way of shutting people up. That’s exactly what happened. The costume was wrapped up and handed over to him in no time.

Zoe jumped up, barely able to hold her excitement.

So, yeah, another kid would cry over not becoming Wonder Woman, which probably made him a bastard. But, at least, it wouldn’t be his kid.

CHAPTER 29

HECTOR

The next morning, when Jess led two suits into his office, Hector's first thought was Storm. More accurately, of his late-night visit to the fucker. The asshole must have gone to the police, after all.

"What can I do for you, gentlemen?" He didn't bother to get up from his seat, just gestured to the sofas in front of his desk.

"Special Agent Husk," the one with the gray tie said, pulling out a badge. "And this is my partner, Special Agent Gonzales."

Hector relaxed. This wasn't about an—alleged—assault slash attempt to murder charge.

"Can we speak in private?" Husk asked, with a glance at Jess.

"We'd like to talk to Mr. Smith as well," Gonzales added.

"Jess, get Achilles in here."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

It wasn't long before his friend showed himself in. After another round of introductions, Hector's patience was over.

"Tell me what this is about."

"What can you tell us about John Decker?" Husk asked.

It felt as if the air was sucked from the room. All Hector could see were John's dead eyes staring up at the sky.

"This isn't Twenty Questions," he growled. "You came here to tell us something. I'm not answering shit before you tell me what it is that has the Bureau sending two of its finest to my humble abode."

Husk turned to Achilles, but his friend shook his head.

"What he said. Don't make this a guessing game. Everything about what happened overseas has records. We can't tell you anything more than you already know. Our unit came under fire, John Decker got killed, and we had to leave him behind. We didn't want to, but those were our orders. We had to leave his body behind."

"What do you know about his family?" Gonzales asked.

"Decker didn't have any family, aside from a younger brother." Hector had tried to reach out to him, to pay his respects, but the kid had been deployed at the time.

"He has a brother, a few years younger. Has served one tour. Got out when he heard

about what happened to his brother. No one has seen him since.”

“No one but Decker’s former unit mates,” Gonzales said pointedly. “There were six of you that day, weren’t there?”

Something in his voice made Hector’s head snap up. “Tell me why you’re here.”

Gonzales cleared his throat. “Three of your former unit mates are dead. A fourth barely survived and is currently in the burn unit. Up until him, the deaths of the other three were considered to be accidents. They died within a few months of each other, and no one saw a connection with Decker’s brother. Not until he tried to kill Seth Hawk.”

“He got to Hawk?” Fuck. It was nearly impossible to sneak up on him.

“Decker didn’t hide from him. Apparently, he wanted Hawk to know who it was that was going to kill him. According to what we’ve heard from Hawk, Decker is unhinged. He believes that his brother was murdered by his unit. He thinks it’s one big cover-up. We believe he has mental issues.”

When Gonzales took out a picture, Hector took a sharp breath. He knew that face. Private Decker looked a lot like John. From a distance, it was easy to confuse Decker with his brother. The visions during daylight, when he thought he saw John, started to make sense now. It explained the eyes he had been feeling on him for the past few months. The slashed tires.

I’m not crazy.

I’m not losing my mind.

“You think he’s after us.”

“Yes.”

“Why now?” Achilles asked. “It’s been over a year since John died. Why wait all this time?”

“Because Decker had to finish his tour first. When he got out, the killing started. We believe he first learns everything there is to find about his target, then he swoops in. I believe he chooses his target by level of ... domesticity, as odd as that may sound.”

A chill went up Hector’s spine. “Meaning?”

“He chooses them by level of... happiness. He waits until they are with their loved ones. Hawk would have been his easiest target, living the nearest by, but he didn’t go after him first. He took out Sweeney first.”

“Shit. Sweeney. The guy has four kids.”

“Exactly.” Gonzales gave him a look of pity. “I think the reason he hasn’t targeted you two before is because you didn’t have your own family. Smith still doesn’t, but you do.”

For a moment, his limbs became paralyzed, and his tongue turned into stone, too heavy to lift and turn sounds into words. All he could see were Mary and Zoe. Decker had waited in the shadows, biding his time, until he could destroy him when he was finally fucking happy. In a sick, twisted way, it made all the sense in the world.

“What’s his M.O.?” Achilles asked. “What exactly are we up here against?”

“He’s a demolition expert,” Gonzales said.

Fucking great. They were being hunted by a grunt who liked to blow things up. When

did his life turn into a bad action flick?

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“I need intel on him, now.” Finally, he’d found his voice.

Husk gave him a stern look. “The FBI handles this case. And we advise you not to get any other party involved, such as your recent connections to the Bratva.”

Like he would ever ask Kristoff for help.

“You expect me to sit back and twiddle my thumbs, while this fucker goes after my family?”

“That’s exactly what we expect,” Husk said. “Decker is somewhere in this city, and we will catch him this time. Do not get in my way, or I will have you arrested before you can say ‘Semper Fi.’”

Oh, he was going to Semper Fi this asshole right fucking now. “I’d love to see you fucking try.”

Achilles stepped in between them. “Look, we both want the same thing; to catch Decker. Now, why don’t you tell us, Special Agent Husk, how we can help? I’m sure you didn’t come all the way here just to warn us.”

Husk backed off. “If we don’t catch him this time, he will go underground, and it may take another month, even years, before we hear from him again.”

“We need your cooperation,” Gonzales said.

“That’s why you’re here. I’m the bait.”

“You are the bait,” he acknowledged.

“The FBI will protect you and your family,” Husk added.

“Protect me and my family? This fuckwad took out four Marines before you even knew what was going on. Now you think you can just come in here and tell me what to do?” Everything dark inside him was fighting to reach for the surface.

Achilles cleared his throat. “At least we know he doesn’t target someone’s family. That’s something, right?”

It wasn’t really a question, but Hector didn’t miss Gonzales’ eye twitch.

“Tell me,” he snapped.

Gonzales sighed. “We don’t believe he targets women or children. However, when he blew up Hawk’s garage, his wife happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. She... didn’t make it.”

Hector realized that, up until this moment, he had never truly experienced fear. Gut-wrenching, bone-crushing fear.

He didn’t leave his office for the rest of the day. Not until it grew dark outside. He had a decision to make. One that might rip out his soul.

His phone rang, and he picked up without looking on the screen. For a few seconds, there was nothing but white noise in the background.

Then a voice said, “I know they visited you. So you know I’m going to end you,

Diaz. Did you really think you'd get to fucking live happily after? After what you did to my brother?"

Every part of him went on alert. "Decker?"

"You don't get to live, Diaz. You don't get to have a family to live for. Just like I don't have a family anymore."

"Decker. This isn't what your brother would have wanted. Turn yourself in."

More static, then a voice, devoid of any emotion. "You don't get to fucking be happy. You should say your goodbyes."

Click.

"Dammit!"

Decker wouldn't stop coming after him. He was never going to stop until one of them was dead. It could take weeks, months, to hunt him down, especially now he knew about the feds.

He dropped back into his seat. He should've never married Mary. By marrying her, he'd put her on Decker's radar. He'd vowed to protect and honor her. Not to lure the danger into their lives.

Damn you, Decker.

Part of him had always known this domestic bliss was too good to be true. A man like him didn't get to have it all. The sins of his past had come back to snatch away the glory of his present.

There was only one thing left for him to do.

CHAPTER 30

MARY

Mary grabbed the leather cushion of the bar stool—she needed something to hold on to—and shook her head at the love of her life.

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“I said 'no.' I decline your proposal.”

“It wasn't a proposal. I said I want to get separated.”

The words almost shattered her. Again. How could he speak those words so casually while every syllable tore her apart? Something fishy was going on here. There was no way that the man who had made such passionate love to her just last night would change like this overnight.

“Tell me the real reason why you’re doing this.”

Please let there be a reason.

Please don’t say you got fed up with me. That you want your freedom back. That you regret our marriage.

Hector let out a frustrated sigh. “Truth is, I’m done playing house. It was good while it lasted but now I’m... bored. It’s suffocating. This isn’t the life I want. I like my freedom. You got the kid, so I held up my end of the deal. It’s time to part our ways.”

Heart. Officially. Shattered.

“I... I don’t know what to say. Or where we go from here.”

Never in a million years had she expected this to happen. She could’ve sworn that he cared about her. She had been ready to tell him she loved him. She was going to be brave, take the plunge, and just tell him. Now everything was tainted. He wouldn’t believe her, even if she did tell him. He would think of it as a ploy to get him to stay. Just as he would if she were to tell him about their baby.

Her hand instinctively went to her abdomen.

Oh, God, she was going to be a single mom. She was going to be a pregnant, twenty-one-year-old divorcee with a six-year-old.

She forced herself to stay upright. Her heart might be a mangled, bloody mess, but she would keep her spine straight. She had to stay strong. Hector might not feel that way, but she had a family to protect. At least she still had a house.

“So, now what?” she asked. “Are you just going to leave? Or do we get separate

bedrooms or—”

“You can’t stay here.”

She sucked in a breath. This was actually happening. He was kicking her out of her own home.

“I guess I should start packing then,” she croaked. Zoe would be in school for a few more hours. This gave her at least some time.

“I’ll have your stuff delivered wherever you want,” Hector said. “I’m sure Jazzy will have you before you find a new place. I... I called the realtor. You can pick any place you like. Anything you want, Mary, just ask and it’s yours.”

Anything she liked? Was he kidding? He thought he could buy her off with an expensive house?

She stepped back from the kitchen table and the block of knives, afraid of what she might do. She would either stab him or beg him not to cast her out. This was her own fault; she had practically forced him to marry her. Had she really expected it to last?

Actually, yes, she had.

“You said that once I was yours, there was no going back.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

He flinched, and a darkness settled in his eyes. She wasn't sure who it was meant for; her for calling him out on his lie or himself for not being able to commit?

Screw this.

She walked up to him. "You said I was yours. How did that change overnight? Tell me."

When he tried to leave, she grabbed his arm. Heavy muscles were spasming under a layer of flannel.

"No. You don't just get to leave like that. Look me in the eye!"

He looked up, his eyes burning a green fire. For half a second, it was all there for her to see. A million battling emotions swirling inside them, with a hint of despair. Then he shut it off. If it hadn't been for that window into his soul, she would have missed it. Whatever it was that had Hector kick her out, it wasn't his lack of feelings toward her.

She let go of his arm. Tears fell from the corners of her eyes, but she didn't wipe them away. She let them fall freely, and with the tears her soul cleansed in a sense. For she knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that this man loved her. For a moment, it had been there for the world to see, in the depths of his eyes, in all its naked glory.

Hector went for the door. "Achilles will take you to Jazzy's. I'll have your stuff sent after you."

“What about Zoe?” There it was again, the slight hunch of his shoulders, as if the name of their girl was physically hurting him. “Are you just going to abandon her as well?”

“I’ll talk to her and explain. You need to leave, now.” With those parting words, he left.

Sometimes the depths of male stupidity baffled her. He really believed he could just stash her away at Jazzy’s and be done with it. Little did he know, she intended to keep him. She had fought to become a permanent fixture in his life, and that was exactly what she planned to stay. There was no way she was playing into his hand by hiding behind the walls of the Detta mansion. She had a feeling, the second she did, that would be the last she would see of him for a long time. No, she had to make a different move. A bold move. Something that would bring Hector Diaz to his heels. A move that would make him think twice before he ever tried to rip her heart out again.

The next morning, Mary suppressed a sigh as she watched her brother-in-law scrutinize her from across the dining room table. Like, from the complete opposite end of the table.

So, maybe her entrance last night had been a bit dramatic. Instead of greeting Kristoff with a proper “hello,” she’d sobbed that Hector was divorcing her and had ended up crying all over him. Still, she was proud of herself for keeping the tears at bay until she had put Zoe to sleep. The little girl had no idea what was going on, and Mary had sold their homelessness as a sleepover. The girl was ecstatic.

“You don’t have to keep a distance like I have the plague,” she grumbled. “I’m not going to cry again.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not certain of anything anymore, so I’m going to go with, I’m pretty certain.”

Judging by Kristoff’s scowl, he didn’t seem too happy with that answer. Apparently, the man who had no problem with massacring a crowd couldn’t handle a woman in tears. She filed that info away for later use.

“Does he know about the bun in your oven?”

She almost choked on her tea. “You know?”

“My housekeeper heard you puking your guts out this morning.”

“There’s no privacy in this place,” she muttered. They had only been here for one night and her ‘big secret’ was already out. She was glad Zoe was off to school. At least that way, she didn’t run the risk of her telling Hector.

“Answer my question.”

“No, I’m not going to tell him. And neither are you,” she hastily added.

His gaze told her that was up for debate. “One of the things I deal in is information. I use it whenever I deem fit.”

“Please don’t,” she whispered.

“And why is that?”

Now she had to tell him of her shame. She hoped he wouldn’t hold it against her.

“I can’t tell him because then he will come back to me, and I don’t want me being pregnant to be the reason. I can’t... trap him like that again.”

“Again?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

She sighed. “He kind of married me because I forced him to.”

“You, a five-foot-something, hundred pounds of nothing, forced a Marine that’s twice your size to marry you?”

She nodded. “I can’t do it again. It wouldn’t be fair to him or me.”

No, this time, he had to be the one to come for her.

CHAPTER 31

HECTOR

So, this was what misery felt like; a constant ache in his chest, magnified by the pain in his back for falling asleep on the couch.

When morning came, he pulled out his phone to call Achilles. By now, his girls should be safely tucked away behind the high gates of the Detta mansion. It had been hours since Mary and Zoe had left. He’d been up all night, scouring the town for clues of Decker’s whereabouts, coming up with nothing. Then the waiting had started.

His house didn’t feel like a home anymore: it was just an empty shell. The walls were mocking him. The absence of the sounds of pots and pans was like a blade through his chest. He’d gotten used to getting home and smelling fresh herbs, Mary cooking dinner while Zoe talked a mile an hour.

But that had been in the pre-Decker era. Fuck, had it only been one night? It felt like an eternity since he'd been alone in an empty house.

Achilles picked up at the second ring.

“You got eyes on my girls?”

“Me and two dozen other men.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Oh, didn't I tell you? Mary's visiting your brother. Though, I'm not entirely sure on the visiting part. When my sister Joanne came for a visit, suitcase in her hand, she stayed for three months. Right up until the moment her husband showed up to grovel at her feet. How are you on the groveling part, my friend?”

“She wouldn't.” The only way Mary would leave him to live with Kristoff would be in an alternate universe.

“I kind of think she already did. Zoe even brought her stuffed doll. You know the little one never goes anywhere without it.”

Not Spidey!

Welcome to the Twilight Zone.

Another twenty-four hours passed and still no word on Decker. They were scouring the city, both his men and the FBI, but the asshole had disappeared off the face of the earth.

Which was why he was in the gym, trying to punch a hole in the punching bag. He grunted and threw a six-piece combination at the bag, then stepped back. He ducked, did a left and a right, threw another set, snapping his fists back after each hit.

“Where’s the fun in that, Marine? Hitting a bag that doesn’t hit back.”

Hector looked up. Kristoff had just sauntered inside, Damon at his side.

“Go away.”

Kristoff jumped up onto the boxing ring and climbed inside. “Come on,bratan,” he yelled for everyone to hear. “Let’s go a round.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“Yeah, you did. Unfortunately, your wife hasn’t gotten that memo. Or else she wouldn’t have moved in with herbratan-in-law.”

Mentioning Mary to him right now was not a good idea. After learning where she was staying, his anger had reached a new peak. Though, in hindsight, Mary staying at Kristoff’s was the best move she could’ve made. Only a crazy guy would try to get into a kingpin’s house.

This time, when he went back to pummeling the punching bag, he pretended it was Kristoff.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“You gonna tell me why you kicked Mary out? Was it a marital spat? A brain melt?”

“I’m handling it.”

“The way you handled Storm?”

Hector’s head snapped up. “What do you know about Storm?”

“Thesukatried to file a complaint about a certain Mexican that threw him out of a window, holding him by his ankles.” Kristoff gave him a speculative look. “What did you threaten him with? According to my guy at the station, he was equally pissed off as afraid.”

“I told him to make it his last yoga class with Mary or I would bend him into a downward dog position he’d never recover from.”

Kristoff looked down on him from the ring. “Showing him mercy instead of finishing him off was a mistake. It makes people take advantage of your good nature and go to the police.”

Hector sighed. “What did you do?”

“I just banished him. He should consider himself lucky. Damon wanted to feed him to Capone.”

“Capone?”

“His pet shark.”

He wasn't even going to ask. “What do you want, Kristoff?”

“I want your wife and kid out of my house.”

That made two of them. “Then kick them out.”

“If it were that simple, I wouldn't be here. Your woman insisted we'd celebrate Halloween. She batted her eyelashes at me and reminded me that it is my duty—she dared call it that—as an uncle and brother-in-law to honor this family tradition. I told her that since you were going to divorce her, she would technically no longer be my family. That was when she gave me that ‘kicked puppy’ look, and I ended up giving her free rein over redecorating the place. My house looks like a haunted castle now. Note to self, and you; never, ever give a woman free rein over anything. She will multiply and before you know it, they will take over the place.” His eyes narrowed. “Fix this.”

“My heart bleeds for your pain.”

“Word on the street is you don't have one. I got a call from a certain Tess last night, insisting I get the fuck over to you. She seems to think that by making herself my problem, I'd be more inclined to ‘help you snap out of it.’ This Tess woman threatened to empty my bank accounts.”

“Can she do that?”

“Since she once put Gio on the no-fly list, I'd rather not find out.”

Hector didn't like the look on Kristoff's face. “What did you do? You'd better not have threatened her. Tess is harmless.”

“I tried to hire her, of course. She refused. Something about, even though she had a thing for Darth Vader, she wouldn’t succumb to the Dark Side by working for the Empire.”

“You don’t seem too disappointed by that.”

“She compared me to Vader. It’s an honor.”

No, it really wasn’t. “I can’t believe we’re talking fucking Star Wars.”

“I have a swear jar in my house now. I’m losing money every time I open my mouth.”

“Don’t you have a mute button?” He was done with this shit. He wrapped a towel around his neck and started toward the showers.

“Your wife makes a killer lasagna,” Kristoff called after him. “The beef just melts in your mouth. Why would you dump a woman who can cook like that?”

Hector stopped in his tracks. She’d made Kristoff his favorite meal?

“It was delicious,” Kristoff continued. “She topped it off with panna cotta.”

No. No this dessert. Surely, she didn’t make the one with—

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“It had fresh raspberries with coconut.”

That’s it. The fucker was going down!

He climbed inside the ring, noticing that a few of the guys had paused their workouts and made their way closer.

Part of him had waited a long time for this day of reckoning. Finally, the moment had come that he got to crush his big brother. They were of the same height, and although Kristoff was definitely in shape, Hector was more ripped. He had a solid thirty pounds on Kristoff.

“Fine. You get your wish; let’s go a round. Go change, I’ll be waiting to kick your ass.”

Kristoff shook his head. “No need to change. I’m good.”

“You want to fight wearing a suit?”

“I like my suit.”

Whatever. He’d given him a fair warning. “It’s your funeral.”

Kristoff slowly pulled up his sleeves.

Hector smirked. Yeah, like that was gonna help him.

“By the way, I have a newsflash for you,” Kristoff said, matter-of-factly.

“What?”

“Mary’s pregnant.”

The words nearly knocked him off his feet. They were going to have a baby? Before he could process that, stars exploded. He went down. Hard.

Hector sat back on his haunches, trying to process not only that his brother had a mean upper-cut, but also what he’d said.

“I’m gonna have another kid.”

“Da. It was meant to light a fire under your ass. Now get up and go get your woman.”

Hector couldn’t find the words. The joy of becoming a father again was quickly overshadowed by the thought that now he had another person to protect from Decker.

When he didn’t move, Kristoff frowned. “Youwanther to stay with me,” he guessed. “Even when you can’t stand me. What is going on? Who’s after you?”

Hector jumped back on his feet and wiped the blood from his mouth. “What makes you think someone’s after me?”

“Why else would you want your woman and kid to stay with me?”

He didn’t want to tell Kristoff shit. This wasn’t his problem. Not his family.

“Don’t let your pride get in the way of your family,” Kristoff warned.

He snapped his mouth shut. Maybe Kristoff had a point. Besides, what did he have to lose? Both his men and the FBI were looking for a lunatic in a city of millions, coming up with nothing. Kristoff might have other resources. Maybe, for once, he could be useful.

So, he told him about Decker. Every little detail he could think of.

“I expected her to go to Jazzy,” he admitted. “She probably went to you to piss me off and because, God knows why, she seems to like you. And I’m okay with that because your house is a freakin’ fortress. But you can’t tell her. She’ll insist on returning home.”

“You sent her away, so she won’t get hurt. So your life doesn’t touch and sully her. I understand.”

There was an odd tone in his brother’s voice, and Hector frowned. Was he trying to say—?

“Don’t you fucking go there.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“You are my only blood in this world. I couldn’t let you live on the streets with me.”

“So you left me to fend for myself? Do you have any idea how many homes I was placed in? How many times my ‘new dad’ thought to pick on me just because I was bigger than him? I don’t know what was worse. The racist assholes or the ones that brought out their belt to ‘teach’ me stuff.”

“You mean Peter Willis, Donald White, and James Pratt?”

That stopped his rant. “How do you know about them?” He didn’t even remember their first names, only their last, because he was always told to call them “Mr.”

“You didn’t think I’d let anyone who tortured my brother live, did you?”

“Fuck.”

I can’t deal with this right now.

Kristoff straightened his jacket and jumped out of the ring. “I’ll make sure Mary has eyes on her all times. Let’s go, Damon.”

“Pay up.” Damon held up his hand to Achilles.

His friend gave Hector a disgusted look. “I can’t believe you lost.”

He would gladly lose a thousand times if it meant he would get the same great news. Mary’s pregnancy gave him a new burst of energy.

“Call off every man you have on me. Decker will know when I’m no longer trailed. And find a way to distract the men the feds have put on me. Decker will come out of hiding when he thinks I’m alone.” From what Gonzales had told him, Decker wanted to look him in the eye before he killed him.

“I don’t think—”

“Don’t care. Just do as I say.” He would be the perfect bait. Walk around town, showing Decker his unprotected belly, so he would finally make a move.

No way was he letting Mary go through her pregnancy alone.

This ended tonight.

CHAPTER 32

MARY

The last thing on Mary’s mind was to go clubbing. She’d been perfectly fine with her butt planted on the couch, accompanied by chocolate and her e-reader. That is, after she’d had a group call with her cousin and Tess, bawling her eyes out like a little girl.

That was sad, really.

I know.

You have to stop sponsoring Kleenex.

If it hadn’t been for Tommie insisting that he needed a “wing woman,” she would’ve stayed home instead of hoisting herself into a dress and driving him over to Flux. She couldn’t even use Zoe as an excuse. The little girl was treated like a princess at Casa

Kristoff, with the staff dotting on her.

“Are you going to be a sour puss all night?” Tommie asked.

“Maybe.”

“See, this is why I had to get you out of that house. You were becoming a hermit.”

Tommie had turned exaggeration into an art form.

“I’ve only been at Kristoff’s for three days. During which time, yes, I didn’t leave the house, but I would hardly call that becoming a hermit.”

“Do I have to remind you that I literally gave you a nudge and pushed you out of the door?”

“I was mourning.” She took a sip of her strawberry virgin cocktail.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

“Really, who died?” Tommie’s snark was sometimes worse than her inner voice.

She sighed. “My marriage. At least, that’s what it feels like.”

Tommie wrapped an arm around her. She loved his comfort. At the same time, it reminded her of how Hector had always touched her. Anytime they were in the same room, he was close to her. Funny how she’d never realized that before. For a grumpy guy, he was awfully touch-feely around her.

“Your marriage isn’t dead, baby girl. It’s more... in hibernation for reasons yet unknown. Whatever Hector’s deal is for pulling a stunt like this, I’m sure he has a reason. That man loves you.”

She had believed so as well. He’d never said the words, but she had felt loved by him. That had to count for something, right? If she could only figure out what had changed.

“I was expecting him to come to his senses by now,” she admitted. In her mind, he came running back to her with a perfectly good explanation on why he’d asked for a separation. Then, of course, she would make him squirm a bit—what woman wouldn’t—and eventually forgive him. All of which was followed by a sappy Hollywood-style happily-ever-after. Reese Witherspoon could star in their movie. Of course, Joe Manganiello would play Hector.

“And I’m sure he will.”

She chugged the rest of her drink down. “Okay, enough about my pity party. We

came here to hook you up. But first, I need another drink.”

She hopped off the chair and walked toward the bar. That’s when she saw them.

Her husband. Standing at the bar. With some redhead drooling over him.

Anger churned in her belly. Suddenly, his breaking things off wasn’t a mystery at all. The only mystery was how in God’s name she could have been so naive, making up excuses for him.

He must have a reason?

Really, Mary? Really?

Ha!

Sappy Hollywood happily-ever-after? Their story was going to be shown during Horror Nights!

“Oh, crap.”

She ignored Tommie and strode over to Hector.

“Mmm.” The redhead crooned, her breasts practically falling out of a tight top. “Let me have another taste of that monster cock.”

Pain lodged in her throat. Then, fury took over.

Hector blinked when he saw her. “Mary?” He sounded alarmed. “Shit. You shouldn’t be here.”

She debated between throwing a drink in his face or slapping him. Both excellent classics to cause a scene. In the end, she went with her first instinct: she kneed him in the balls.

He doubled over and grabbed on to the edge of the bar. When his head snapped up, she decided to go a second round, smacking him in the face.

“I don’t know how long this has been going on, but at least tonight, you won’t be fucking her.” She spun around, heading for the door, keeping her head high and her back ramrod straight.

“Mary!”

She ignored the yell and put a hand on her belly. “Sorry, peanut. Your dad is an a-s-s and doesn’t deserve either of us.”

Going into the underground parking lot, she was suddenly reminded that she’d left Tommie inside. She gave him a call, but he didn’t answer.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a man following her. Kristoff had given her a bodyguard, without asking her. Honestly, she didn’t feel like she needed one and she’d protested, but he gave her a firm ‘nyet.’ Apparently, that hadn’t been up for debate. She waved at the bodyguard, silently telling him she was sorry that he had to trail after her all day.

Her heels clicked on the black pavement, echoing in the dimly-lit space. They should really do something about the lighting. Her heart constricted when she passed Hector’s Harley. It was parked in the opposite row as her car.

“Mary! Wait!”

She ignored Hector yelling after her. Ignored his tall, bulky frame following her into the parking lot.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:04 am

Wiping away a tear, she frantically searched in her bag for her keys. She'd be long gone before he reached her.

Then, the world exploded.

CHAPTER 33

MARY

Mary was lifted from the floor as she got caught by the backlash of an explosion. Her back slammed against a car, knocking the wind out of her.

Coughing and wincing, she tried to get back on her feet. There was fire and flying pieces of debris everywhere. She scooted backwards and leaned against her car, trying to catch her breath. Cars were burning all around her. She had to get out of there. Two cars had crashed in the wall opposite her. Flames were coming out of them, reaching the low ceiling. It was a roadblock of fire and steel. A wall she had to somehow get over.

There was something she needed to remember. Something important.

Oh, God, Hector. Was he okay?

Crawling back to her feet, she winced when her ankle gave away. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to take a step. Then another one. Her bag lay three feet away, underneath a Hummer. She decided to leave it instead of going for her phone. Surely someone had heard the blast and had called the cops, an ambulance. Maybe even the

National Guard. Was it a terrorist attack? A gas leak?

She looked for a way out, not seeing one. The feeling of being trapped intensified by a million. Her vision turned blurry because of the smoke biting into her eyes. She had to get on the other side of the wall. That was where the exit was.

Finally, she found a small space between two crushed cars; a dent in the steel wall.

Pushing and prodding, she inched through the gap. Something sharp caught her dress and pierced her thigh. Hissing in pain, she continued until she pulled through. A bout of fresh oxygen hit her when she got closer to the exit, almost making her high.

“Hector? Hector?!”

The other side of the ‘wall’ was one big chaotic mess. This must have been where the origin of the blast had happened.

There was a door to her right. It didn’t have a handle though. She figured it was an exit door from the club that could only be opened from the inside. She banged on it and yelled, but the door remained shut.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted a movement. It was her bodyguard, plastered against a van, blood covering his stomach from a shard lodged into it.

She dropped at his side and pressed her hands on his wound. “It’s going to be okay. I’m going to get you out of here.”

His pupils were dilated, then his eyes widened, looking frantic. A hand went to his stomach.

“It’s going to be okay.” His fingers kept moving beneath him, as if he were looking

for something.

A loud pop startled her. Her head shot back to the bodyguard and she nearly threw up. Half his face was gone.

Oh, God. Oh, God. It was no gas leak.

Told you so.

She quickly spun around. Before her, stood a man in Army fatigues and a buzz cut. In his hand, a large gun. She suddenly realized that Kristoff's guy had been searching for his handgun.

"Get up," the guy said. "I have no beef with you. I just want Diaz."

That had to mean Hector was alive. Even though fear nearly paralyzed her, she held onto that thought. If Army Guy was looking for Hector, he probably wasn't underneath the debris.

Letting go of the bodyguard, she rose to her feet. "What do you want with him?"

It was a no-brainer, but she had to keep him talking, buy herself time. That's how it happened in the movies. Then the hero swept in at the last second and saved the girl. Except, she didn't want Hector to sweep in; she wanted him to stay far away from this Rambo reject. Yes, she was furious with him. But if anyone was going to kill him, it would be her.

"Diaz murdered my brother."

The words sounded cold. There was no passionate rage behind them. And that scared her more than anything.

“Your brother?” Hector was not a cold-blooded killer. Nothing he would say would make her believe that.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:05 am

“John Michael Decker. My only kin.”

Where had she heard that name before? Oh. Her eyes widened. Hector’s tattoo. His fallen brother he had honored on his chest.

“That can’t be right. I know Hector, he wouldn’t—”

“You don’t know shit,” he spat. “Did you know they left him in the desert? They left him there to rot. All of them! His brothers-in-arms left him there to turn into a carcass to be picked clean. But I showed them, every one of them, what it feels like to die from the inside. To die at the top of their happiness, when they believed everything was right in their world. Just like I did.”

“I... I’m really sorry about your brother.” Part of her felt sad for this man. Something inside of him was broken, and he was trying to mend back the pieces. Maybe, just maybe, she could break through to him. “But I’m sure he wouldn’t want this for you.”

“Shut up! Shut your damn mouth. You don’t know anything about him. I don’t want to hurt you, but if you keep talking, I will.”

Staring down the barrel of a gun, she believed him. There was this deranged look in his eyes.

He waved his gun at her to move toward him. An arm constricted around her upper body, keeping her close to him.

“Diaz!” He scanned the parking lot. “I have your woman. It’s time to say goodbye.

Show yourself!”

CHAPTER 34

HECTOR

It was a sight he would never forget; his worst nightmare. Before him stood the love of his life with a gun pressed against her temple. Hector’s mind exploded at the thought of living in a world without Mary. Every muscle in his body tensed and his hands tightened around his gun.

Decker stood behind Mary, sizing him up. Hector knew what the man was doing. He was taking in his minor injuries; the blood trickling from his arm. He’d been lucky, though, just passing a big van when the explosion happened. The vehicle took the brunt of the bang.

“I’m here. Let her go, Decker. This is between you and me.”

“Drop your weapon. Now. Or I will splatter her brains all over the wall.”

Hector knew it was no use trying to talk Decker down. He’d already killed three people, put one in the hospital, and blew up a parking lot just to get to him.

All Hector wanted was to get Mary out of the equation. To get her as far away from here as possible.

“No!” Mary yelled, shaking her head. “Please don’t.”

Decker tightened his chokehold on Mary until his woman was fighting to breathe.

“Shut up,” he hissed.

Hector dropped his weapon. “Please. Don’t hurt her. Let her go. She’s pregnant.” This seemed to have Decker taken aback and Hector immediately honed in on that. “I’ll do whatever you want. Just, let her go. You don’t want the death of an unborn child on your conscience. You used to protect and serve, soldier.”

Decker let go of the hold he had on Mary and pushed her away from him.

Unable to stand on her feet, Mary fell to her knees. She grabbed her ankle and winced.

Seeing her in pain killed him. He wished he could just scoop her up and get her out of this place. Wished he could protect her from what was about to happen.

“On your knees, Marine!” Decker snarled. His voice echoed in the partially-collapsed garage.

Hector did as Decker asked, his eyes on Mary. She was staring at him through tears. Her nose was blotchy from crying and her eyes red-rimmed from the smoke and tears.

“There it is,” Decker said. “The look I’ve been waiting for. It was there on every one of you fuckers’ faces. You should have seen Hawk when he knew it was the last time he would see his wife.”

“It wasn’t Hawk who died though, was it?” Hector said.

A pulse jumped in Decker’s jaw. “That was an accident. Either way, the fucker deserves the agony. I’ll finish him once I’m done with you. This is the last time you’ll see your wife, Diaz. Make peace with it.”

“Hector...”

Page 98

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:05 am

“No,” Decker snapped at Mary who was kneeled before him. “You don’t get to say anything. He doesn’t get to hear your last words to him before he dies. Just like I didn’t get to say them to my brother.”

She didn’t have to say the words. Mary’s face had always been an open book. He’d known for some time now. Had hoped for it. To receive the greatest treasure in the world; Mary’s heart. It was a special kind of cruelty for Decker to deny him hearing those words from her lips. But it didn’t matter. Not when he could see her love for him.

Decker aimed his gun and cocked the hammer back. Hector knew his time was up.

“Tell Zoe and our baby that they are loved. That I had wanted to be there for them.”

If it wasn’t for Decker’s bullet, the pain in Mary’s eyes would probably have killed him.

His wife mouthed “I love you” to him and then made her move. She threw herself at Decker, nearly giving Hector a heart attack.

Just like everyone else, Decker had dismissed Mary after a first glance, deeming her harmless.

Big fucking mistake.

In the split second that his wife struggled for Decker’s gun, Hector launched himself at him. But not before Decker slapped Mary with the gun, dropping her onto the

floor.

Hector roared and knocked Decker down. His gun slid across the ground, disappearing underneath a car.

What followed was a downright brawl. Hector had never fought so hard in his life before. Not on the streets, not in a war zone, and not in a cage. It was full throttle on when he pummeled Decker into the ground.

He grunted when Decker got a hit to his busted leg, but immediately retaliated with a hold on his arms, breaking both of them. Decker dropped to the floor, on his knees.

Hector did a kick back to his knees, splintering the bone. Decker face-planted, groaning in agony. He wasn't going anywhere.

The second he'd eliminated the threat, Hector limped toward his wife. She lay on the ground, motionless. Fear lodged in his throat.

"No, no, no. Don't do this to me." He dropped next to her and cradled her head in his lap. She was as pale as a ghost. Her temple, where Decker had slammed his gun, was already turning purple.

Decker started laughing. It was a dark, eerie laugh. The guy was half-dead, and could barely move, but he laughed like there was no tomorrow.

"Feel"—he coughed—"my pain."

"You sack of shit," Hector snarled, as tears pricked his eyes. "You're not worthy enough to breathe the same air as she does, let alone touch her. If your brother were alive, he'd be fucking ashamed of you." He focused back on his wife. "Mary? Baby, please wake up. Open your pretty eyes."

Suddenly, a door to his right creaked open, sounding like it hadn't been opened in a long time.

Damon's head peeked through the opening. "Shit." He stepped past Decker, barely giving him a glance, and looked down at Mary.

"Where are the damn EMTs?" Hector growled.

"Ambulance is at the front. The entrance of the lot is wrecked, so it takes some time to get through that. They should be here any minute." His head turned back to Decker, who was still laughing. "You know what's going to happen when the cops get here. Want me to take him out?"

Hector knew what he was asking. Decker wouldn't be tried. He was off his rocker, completely loco. He'd most likely end up in some mental ward for the rest of his days. Or until he got out. A man with his skills would eventually get out. After all, in his warped mind, he hadn't finished his mission.

He wanted to snap Decker's neck, finish the job. But, for the life of him, he couldn't let Mary go. She was unconscious, covered in scraps, and blood coated her leg. He feared that the second he stopped touching her, she would slip away, never to wake up.

"Take him away, but don't kill him." At Damon's frown, he snarled, "If Mary doesn't make it, he doesn't get to die. I'll make him die every day for as long as I have to live without her."

He hadn't even told Mary how much he loved her yet. And now, thanks to this piece of shit, he might never get the chance. He'd been pretending to drink all night, trying to appear a bit drunk, sluggish even. He was convinced Decker had eyes on him. No way the fucker wasn't tracking him down somehow. He had the unfortunate luck of

running into Heidi that night. Then Mary happened. God, the hurt in her eyes. Her last memory of him would be with another woman.

“You can’t die on me,” he whispered, holding her tight. “You’ve broken into my heart, smashed all my walls. I’m not letting you go. You don’t just get to leave me. I won’t let you.”

After spending six hours in the hospital, Hector was ready to climb the walls.

“Why isn’t she waking up?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:05 am

Jazzy grabbed his hand. “The doctor said it could take twenty-four to forty-eight hours.”

He didn’t want to think of what else the doctor had said. Of how, after the first forty-eight hours, the chances of Mary waking up would become slimmer with each passing day.

They had been in the hospital all night—Jazzy, Gio, and Tommie—sitting in Mary’s room. He’d sent Tommie home with Zoe a few hours ago. His little girl was a mess. She’d even left Spidey with Mary, so he could protect her.

“Could you give us a minute?” He needed to be alone with her. When they left the room, he scooted closer to Mary and grabbed her hand. He closed his eyes and relived the past few hours.

Damon had knocked Decker out cold and carried him away before the authorities had arrived. His parting words to Hector were that he’d have the knife, hammer, and chainsaw ready. If Mary didn’t wake up soon, Hector was going to take him up on his offer. Over and over again, for every day his wife lay in a hospital bed, fighting for her and their baby’s life.

“Please wake up. I’m lost without you. Our house is empty, just like my heart. Let me come home to you again. Please, come home again.”

There were a million things he wanted to tell her. He wasn’t good with words. He wasn’t a flowery guy who knew what to say to make her believe he loved her. But he vowed to himself, if she made it, he was going to spend the rest of his lifeshowingit

to her.

That became his new mantra in the hours that passed. When the sun came up, introducing a new day, he was startled by a voice.

“Hector?”

Mary looked at him through half-mast lids, sounding groggy.

“I’m here, mi vida.” He kissed her hands, biting back the tears.

“You called me your life.”

“I did.”

“About time,” she grumbled.

He chuckled; he couldn’t help himself. She was going to be okay. Everything was going to be okay.

A nurse showed up, then another one. Then a doctor was called in, and Mary got picked and prodded.

Hector stood back, peace settling over him, and called Kristoff. “Finish it, brother.” He didn’t ever want to hear or see Decker again.

His life as he knew it, of darkness and rage, dealing with blood and gore, was over.

EPILOGUE

About six months later

Mary had always imagined giving birth as a beautiful and miraculous happening. She would be home when she had her first contractions. Hector would slowly drive over to the hospital. He would be by her side every second, telling her she was being so strong, that he was proud of her. A few hours later, she would give birth to a perfect little girl. Unlike the screaming woman she had seen in a video, Mary would give birth with dignity.

In reality, it happened while cooking for Kristoff, with Hector out of town. Her water broke in the middle of her kitchen, right on top of the shoes of a Russian crime boss.

She stroked her belly.

And that, peanut, is the story of how I ended up in the hospital with your Uncle Kristoff.

Your uncle looks like he needs a drink. Badly.

“I bet you regret coming over for my panna cotta now.”

It was their little secret. Hector could never know. Despite him tolerating Kristoff in their life, he was adamantly against his brother eating even a morsel of her prized dessert. She had no idea why. He was fine with her serving Kristoff anything else.

“Regret doesn’t begin to cover it.”

She glared at him. “I’m the one being tortured by contractions and you dare speak of regrets?”

“I’ve been tortured before. It was no big deal.” Unlike being here with you, his eyes seemed to say.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 4:05 am

When he glanced at the door, as if he wanted to make a break for it, she clutched onto his hand.

“Don’t you dare leave me,” she ordered, and then chuckled.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Your face... you look so squeamish.”

“No, I don’t. I look annoyed that I’m stuck in a delivery room while my brother gets to do fun stuff like catching bullets and ward off stalkers, possibly maiming them.”

Obviously providing comfort to a woman in labor wasn’t his forte. “That’s the worst kind of motivational speech.”

“I agree. Let me get you someone else. Like Jazzy, or that blue guy, or anyone else that isn’t me.”

“Jazzy’s out of town and Tommie already has Zoe to take care of. So, it’s just you and me.” She chuckled. “You’re going to be a godfather. Don’t you think that’s funny? A real-life Russian godfather to become my daughter’s godfather.”

“You’re hysterical and don’t know what you’re saying.”

Maybe she was. But who cares? She was exactly where she wanted to be. Okay, maybe not exactly. She could do without the pain wracking from her spine to her lower body.

All was well in her world, though. After the ordeal with Decker, things had gotten back to normal. No, better than back to normal. Hector had explained everything, and she had graciously accepted his apology.

Another contraction followed, a fierce one, as if calling her out on her lie. So, maybe she hadn't been too gracious about it. There was still the part regarding the boobylicious redhead she'd caught him with, after all. There had been some yelling on her part.

Then, the next morning, he showed up with a puppy. Mary knew exactly what Hector was trying to pull. And it totally worked. All was forgiven. They were in love, they had officially adopted Zoe, and were ready to welcome the next installment to their expanding family. She was blessed.

So, right now, she didn't mind being called hysterical. Apparently, she was also delusional, because she imagined Hector rushing into the room.

"Mary!"

Nope, all her marbles were intact. It was really him. He was out of breath, looking a bit panicked. He was perfect.

"Bratan. Finally." Kristoff slowly pried her fingers off his wrist. "She's all yours." He gave her a pat on the shoulder and fled the room.

Exactly two hours later—two torturous hours, in which Mary screamed her lungs out—Christina Jocelyn Diaz came into the world.

Just like her mom, for the first few hours of her life, she screamed her lungs out.

Welcome into our world, peanut. You are loved.
