



Vicious Savage

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: I ran from a monster... only to be claimed by another.

For three years, Luna has been running. Hiding from the man who gave her life—only to steal her mother's. Her father, a ruthless cartel king, is determined to sell her to the highest bidder. And now, there's nowhere left to run.

Until two strangers find her first.

Attila has spent years hunting the man who destroyed his world. The cartel king who took everything from him. Vengeance is all that drives him. And Luna? She's the key to his revenge. His enemy's greatest weakness. The perfect pawn.

But the moment she falls into his hands, he realizes something dangerous.

Luna isn't just a weapon to be used. She's a prize to be claimed.

Now, trapped between a past that won't let her go and a man who won't let her escape, Luna faces an impossible choice: fight for her freedom... or surrender to the devil who might just set her free.

Blood will spill. Vengeance will reign. And in a world where loyalty is paid in blood, love may be the deadliest weapon of all.

Vicious Savage is the explosive, final installment in the Sinners of Seattle series—an untamed, enemies-to-lovers mafia romance filled with betrayal, obsession, and a love that was never meant to survive. Check content warnings before diving in.

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ATTILA

I have a moral compass. I do.

No women, no children. I won't touch the elderly, and I won't even look at someone with a disability. But stupidity does not count as a disability, no matter what anyone tells you.

I'm a killer. I was born to kill. But I have values, you see.

I watch Caleph and Ariadne disappear into the distance as my chopper flies away. I miss them already. Caleph is the brother I grew up with. Ariadne is the sister that came into my life at a time when I was standing on the tight precipice between humanity and monstrosity. She showed me that I could be both. For those close to me, I could be human. For all others, they got the monster in me. Because that's all most people deserve. But Ariadne is different; she is good for us all. And she came at a pivotal point in our lives.

I know that Caleph's hands are itching to get on the chopper with us. He wants nothing more than to do that, but now there is too much at stake for him. His thirst for vengeance is great, but his love for Ariadne is greater. So he watches us climb the aircraft and waves us away with a promise to keep him updated. When the time comes, he will be on the first plane out to meet us no matter where we are, but for now, he understands that the situation is in capable hands.

He's offered us his immense cache of resources, including the numerous bodyguards and strong arms he has scattered all along the coast. All at our disposal any time we need them. Combined with our own resources, we literally have a small army to deal with Coyin Castillo and what's left of his family.

The plan is to use his daughter to lure him out of hiding. Not to hurt her, because again, I am a man with standards and values. I don't hurt women, and I know The Jekyll feels the same. But I wouldn't hesitate to use her as a tool to flush her father out of the woodwork.

Travelling with The Jekyll has been an exercise in patience. I've had to adapt to his grunting and head nodding to gauge his thoughts. He doesn't talk much, and now I know he doesn't really appreciate my jokes. But we're quickly becoming friends. If there's a need to say something, he'll say it. Everything else is off limits. He doesn't believe in speaking if there's nothing relevant to say. So I'm surprised when he actually opens his mouth of his own accord and starts to speak.

"We're in agreement," he reiterates, although it's like he's looking for confirmation, "That the girl doesn't get hurt."

My eyes observe him with a flicker of suspicion. Does he not trust me? Does he actually think I would hurt a woman?

"I told you, I don't do women and children."

"Just wanted to make sure we're on the same page."

"That's rich coming from a man who dragged a woman across the road and kidnapped her."

I remind him of what he did to Ariadne when he kidnapped her months ago. My

anger simmers beneath the surface, threatening to erupt. I could live with many things, could even forgive much. But not violence against my sister.

“You know why I did that.”

“I do. That doesn’t make it right.”

“Will you ever get over that?” he asks me.

“Doubtful. I’m surprised she’s forgiven you. I expected her to gouge your eyes out when she saw you on that boat.”

“But she didn’t. Which means she’s past it and now you need to move on, too.”

I scoff when I look at him, my sarcasm apparent. “Dude, I think she’s biding her time until she finds the opportunity to drive a knife through your heart.”

* * *

“Are you sure that’s her?” I ask, looking from my phone to the girl sitting across the road in the cafe.

I look over at The Jekyll for confirmation. He sits looking into the cafe, as though afraid if he blinks, he’ll lose her.

“That’s her.” He’s emphatic when he speaks, and for now, that’s enough for me.

“Looks like she hasn’t inherited anything from her father,” I snicker, looking at the long dark blonde hair that falls in a blanket across one side of her face.

I watch the girl as she lowers her eyes to the table, doing something with her hands,

then as she lifts her head and folds her waves back over her shoulder. Her hair is so long, I think it must reach her waist. We can't see anything past her shoulders and head as she sits in the booth she's occupied for the past two hours. The muscles in my long legs are wound tight from sitting in the same position for that long.

"We have to make sure we have the right girl," I tell him. "We only get one shot at this; if we stuff up, Coyin will see us coming from a mile away."

"I'm sure it's her."

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“You seem very sure of yourself.”

“That’s because I am.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I’ve met her before.”

I swing my head in his direction and stare at his side profile. This is news to me. Unwelcome news. I lower the toothpick I’ve been flicking from one side of my mouth to the other and guide his attention toward me with a grunt, taking a leaf out of his book.

“Where would you have met her, and why am I only finding out about this now?” I ask him.

“Why is it important?”

“She’s the subject of our surveillance, and you’ve met her. Which means she’s seen you. Isn’t the whole point of this exercise that we don’t draw suspicion to ourselves?”

“It was brief. In the supermarket. I helped her reach a product on the top shelf.”

“And this is how you’ve identified her?” I screech, in disbelief.

He shakes his head like I’ve grown two heads and tells me he followed her from her

art class, where he confirmed her identity, to the supermarket.

“Plus, did you forget that I’ve seen a picture of her?” He whips out a picture from his wallet and pushes it my way. It’s a little eerie that he carries her picture in his wallet like a hidden talisman.

I’m still in disbelief as I turn my gaze back to the cafe to compare the photo to the girl. I’ll have to watch him carefully so he doesn’t stuff this up. When I don’t see the girl in the window, my eyes scan the length of the cafe, but she’s nowhere in sight.

“Where is she?”

“Damn it!” he mutters, turning the ignition on.

“What are you doing?”

“She’s gone.”

The Jekyll tells me that the girl has done this before; that she’s quite fond of disappearing into thin air. He informs me that she’s quite masterful at being a ghost, just like her father.

2

THE JEKYLL

I thought nothing could ever hurt me as much as losing Sisely. Thought that was the worst possible thing that could ever happen to me. I was wrong. The worst thing that could ever happen to me was that vengeance would elude me. Because the scent of it resides in my blood. It flows through my veins, tracking through my body like a bitter poison. I’m thirsty, and I’ll do anything to achieve it.

But I've been going at it so long, sometimes I forget why I'm here. I lose sight of the bigger picture. It's been so long, most people don't even remember my real name anymore.

I'm no longer Cesar Cavalho, the successful builder with a bright future. I'm no longer the man they all knew. They know me now as The Jekyll. The dark side of a good man who went horribly wrong somewhere.

And those that know of The Jekyll fear even my shadow. For I lurk in the darkness, in the valley of death. Fire and destruction. And come out into the light only when I need to.

That thing with Ariadne Moore was a mistake. Well, no, it wasn't. Because in taking her, I foiled the cartel's plan to kill Caleph Rojas and collect a bounty on Ariadne Moore before she was killed or sold into a sex trafficking ring. That's literally the only reason that Rojas let me live... because I had stepped on a landmine which detonated under the Mexicans rather than his life.

I wonder if all that's behind us now. He was lukewarm when I landed on his boat. But he didn't kill me, so there's that. Even though his eyes maybe said he wanted to. I saw the way he was looking at his wife. Sort of the same way I had looked at Sisely when she was alive. She's dead and gone, but she's still anchored to my heart in a way I can't explain. Yeah, I don't blame Rojas for going all psycho and shit on me for touching his wife; I probably would've done the same thing.

I am doing the same thing. I'm trying to track down Sisely's murderer. All I know is it was the Castillo cartel, and they've been slippery as fuck to catch. By some stroke of fate, it turned out that Caleph Rojas and I had a common enemy. Which is what brought us into each other's world in the first place. Because I was tracking the cartel responsible for Sisely's death; the same cartel that had been planning to steal Ariadne away from him and hand her over to the politicians who wanted her to burn at the

stake. Their leader, Coyin Castillo, was also the man responsible for the death of Caleph's parents. So now, he has more invested in the Mexicans than ever.

I've done my homework. I've been to Mexico, to Arizona and to California. Looking in every corner and under every rock until I was able to piece together the main players of the cartel. Coyin may be the leader who lurked in the dark and never showed himself due to how popular he was with every law enforcement agency in the world, but he also had a brother — Miguel — who worked alongside him and had been identified as the trigger man in Sisely's death. They are two brothers with a similar thirst for evil. And the world would be better off without them.

It's taken me five long years to track the Castillo brothers, or to track a thread to their whereabouts. Five long years of wreaking havoc on their infrastructure from the shadows as I tear them down bit by bit. Physically, I've been able to quietly and quickly make a few of their men disappear — putting the fear of the unknown in them. Grown men don't simply disappear; they know there's an unseen, unheard beast lurking on the fringes cutting them down one by one. The fear alone has them pissing their pants. Financially, I've annihilated them. As seen in the case of Ariadne Moore, I've foiled several attempts where they've tried to make some quick money to keep them afloat in their crumbling empire. I've stolen one of their shipments, then burnt it to the ground. Another time I set the feds onto them and that shipment, along with three men, was confiscated. And who knew all I had to do was lurk in the shadows and listen to chatter?

I run a hand over my bald head and let it rest at the base of my neck. There's a reason I keep my head bald. And I've sworn not to grow my hair back until I've avenged Sisely's death. A death that was in vain. No, not targeted. Wrong place, wrong time. My mind flits back to the day five years ago that I lost her. To the footage of what happened. I don't know what was worse — losing her or watching it happen on the camera feed... feeling like if I could just press pause of the reel and rewind the tape, I could simply undo everything. The senselessness. The why. The utter stupidity of a

gangster shooting an innocent bystander because she could identify him when the cameras could do just as good a job.

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Sisely folded the money and tucked it into her purse, before turning to her left to make her way to her parked car. She'd barely taken two steps when four masked men burst through the doors of the bank and onto the pavement, waving about shotguns. Bystanders scattered like dust, screaming as they ran in opposite directions and across the road when they realized the drama unfolding before their eyes wasn't part of a movie shoot.

But Sisely stopped short, a hand going to her chest in surprise and horror. She was absolutely still, frozen on the screen. One of the men who limped out of the bank removed his mask, and as he did, he spotted Sisely standing watching him. They made eye contact; something flickered in his eyes, but it was minute, before he lifted his shotgun, aimed it at her chest, and sent a shot blasting through her with such fury that she flew back like a stretched rubber band and landed on her back. The man was dragged away by the arm by another, and they climbed into a waiting blue van and sped off with a screech.

Sisely lay perfectly still on the pavement. Not even a twitch. The one concession to come out of that horrendous ordeal was that she died quickly.

3

LUNA

I know I'm being followed. It's too much of a coincidence otherwise. The same man that was acting all weird on me in the supermarket a couple of months ago is sitting with another man in a car outside the cafe, trying to look inconspicuous. But I can see the underhanded glances they keep throwing my way. They may not know it, but I

have eyes everywhere. Even when it seems I'm not looking your way, my side eye is working its magic. What not many people notice about me is the way my eyes slant slightly, which gives me a 360 degree view of all that's around me. So I could be looking straight ahead, but you'd better believe I can see you from the corner of my eye without much effort.

It was the same way I caught him the night he followed me into the supermarket. He tried his hardest to appear like he was just some random guy off the street, but he failed terribly. Firstly, because I shopped at that supermarket at a particular time on a specific day of the week, which means I literally saw the same people over and over again. Which was only a handful — not many people choose to shop at their local supermarket at eleven pm on a Friday night. But I do. That was the first red flag. The second red flag was the way he kept throwing surreptitious glances my way when he thought I wasn't looking. Again — side eye.

I didn't know who he was. Police? Cartel? Axe murderer? I'd had my share of stalkers over the years, but this one gave me an odd vibe. So I approached him. I. Approached. Him. I'm nothing if not courageous. Some would say stupidly so.

I'd pretended I couldn't reach something on the top shelf and required assistance, since he was big, built like a beast. He graciously helped and I struck up a conversation with him. The look of surprise on his face told me it was the last thing he expected of me, but that's what I did. I took control of the situation before he could. And I steered the conversation the way I wanted, so I would only give him what I wanted him to have.

My engineering the whole encounter worked in my favor in many ways. The first being, I noticed the bulge in the back of his waistband when he reached for the jar I was after. A gun. A man with a gun. That was never a good thing in my case. Hot, maybe, but still never good.

And then as he stood in the checkout behind me and we made small talk, I passed through the cashier and walked rapidly toward the exit with a wave of my hand, making a quick get away before he could catch up with me. That was the last time I saw him. Until today. Sitting in that car across the road watching me through the glass window of the cafe. I'd made a quick exit through the kitchen when they weren't looking. What these men don't know won't hurt them; I never go anywhere without an exit plan.

The taxi driver looks at me in the rear view mirror, smarting because we haven't moved in fifteen minutes. Like he has anywhere else to be.

"Lady, we going to sit here all day?" he asks, throwing up his hands like a child having a tantrum. Any louder and he'll attract the wrong kind of attention towards us, so I give him a furious look and put my phone down.

"The meter's running, isn't it? You could sit here all day and you'd still get paid, so why are you complaining?"

It seems to be the reminder he needs, because he sighs quietly and settles back into his seat. I look back toward the cafe as the two men emerge, and I can almost see fire coming out of their nostrils. The one who tailed me previously has donned a neutral expression, but the handsome newcomer with the scruff of light hair lining his strong jaw is fuming. He doesn't need to say anything or act in any particular way to show his anger; the hard set of his eyes says it all. He mutters something to his companion as they near the car, who just smirks and gets behind the steering wheel.

"There," I say, catching the driver's eye in the rear view mirror. "Follow that car, but at a distance."

The driver emerges from four cars behind the men's parked car and leaves a healthy distance between us as we follow them down the road then hit the freeway. It looks

like he's done this before, because he weaves expertly through the traffic and hits the road with a few cars between us. I'm like a proud mother hen at his expert handling of the car as the assailed becomes the assailant.

We follow the car across the city, a leisurely pace behind them, and they seem none the wiser as we cross into the other side of town and they pull into a motel carpark.

"What now?" The driver asks me as we glide to a stop outside the motel.

From my vantage point, I watch the two men walk up to a first floor room they enter with a key. It looks like they're familiar with the place and they know their way around, so I assume this is where they're staying.

"Now, you wait; I won't be long."

"You sure you know what you're doing, lady?"

I have one hand on the door handle and my eyes focused on the driver in the rear view mirror. I shoot him a cocky smile. He's not going anywhere if I don't pay him; he'll wait.

"As long as you wait, I'm good."

He gives me a short nod and looks like he's about to settle in for a nap as I open the door and make my way into the motel.

4

ATTILA

There's a reason why they call me Attila the Hunter.

I have a sixth sense that could inspire bloodhounds. And if I fixate on something, I don't stop until I achieve the outcome I'm after.

That's why Caleph Rojas, my best friend since we fell into our teens, made me his right hand man. And put me in charge of hunting down Coyin Castillo, a task he couldn't entrust to anyone else. Having said that, I still don't have a handle on the ruthless cartel leader.

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Castillo has been my biggest failure; a slight I take personally because I don't fail at anything. He's eluded me for the better part of a decade, so I've made it my life's mission to bring him to justice. It's personal now. And I have much to prove.

So when my associate Marden tells me over drinks about The Jekyll and his five year quest to bring down the Castillo cartel after they killed his wife, it's like the skies opened up and gifted me with the impossible. The beastly Jekyll and I had something in common, and that something meant I would finally right my one failure if we could just work hand in hand to bring our common enemy down.

It had seemed like a good idea. The Jekyll was thirsty for Castillo blood. And so was I. But I wasn't entirely sure that I could trust the man. Even though Marden himself had vouched for his former brother-in-law, and The Jekyll had saved Caleph's life more than once, I still didn't know enough about the man to be able to say without a doubt that I trusted him with everything in me.

And now we'd lost the girl. Which, apparently, was prone to happening because The Jekyll had previously stalked her and knew just about everything there was to know about her. A thought that doesn't sit too well with me, considering he hadn't thought to share this fact with me before we embarked on this journey.

My patience with him is wearing extremely thin as we enter the motel room and I drop the keys on the hall table in disgust. The sigh that escapes my lips is one that could very well burn a hole in his back.

"Will you get over your little tantrum, already?" The Jekyll shoots off. "It's not like we were going to grab her off the side of the street in broad daylight."

“I don’t want to be in Arizona any longer than necessary.”

I rub the back of my neck like I can undo the past hour with just this one movement.

“What, you’re not fond of the heat?”

When there’s a knock, we look at each other before turning toward the door in surprise.

“You expecting someone?” I ask him, suddenly suspicious. No one knows we’re here — as far as I know.

The Jekyll shakes his head and puts a hand to the back of his waistband where he keeps his gun. No one knows we’re here, but we can never be too careful in our business. I cock my head in the direction of the door indicating that he should see who it is. He’s not even halfway there when there’s another knock, this time louder, more persistent.

I watch as he cocks his gun then guides his attention to the peephole, frowning in my direction when he looks back.

The Jekyll mouths something I can’t make out, then beckons me forward as another knock sounds on the door. This time, it’s so loud, the frame shakes under the weight. I look through the peephole. No wonder he looks confused; I would be too. The girl we lost not an hour ago is standing at the door, her expression thick with malice.

“What the...?”

I don’t finish my sentence. Instead, I swing the door open and lean a hand against the frame casually, blocking the doorway.

“Sorry, boys, if I’ve interrupted your private afternoon tryst,” she looks past me into the room, “but I thought I’d stop by since you did such a great job of losing me earlier.”

I glance back at The Jekyll, see the knowing smirk on his face. Can you believe this girl? I don’t know whether to be offended or furious at her attitude.

She folds her arms across her chest and leans her back against the railing, relaxed and comfortable. There’s not a shred of fear in her. She’s wearing dark jeans that hug her like a second skin and an eggshell colored t-shirt that doesn’t do anything to hide her well-defined bosom.

“You must have the wrong number,” I tell her, pointing towards the Reception desk.

She pushes off the railing and comes toward me. She’s not as young as I initially thought she was. Maybe early to mid-twenties at best. Her dark blonde hair borders on the lightest shade of brown, its gold highlights accentuating her stunning amber eyes.

She points a finger into my chest.

“I don’t know who you are, or what you want,” she starts. “But I can find you just as easily as I can lose you.” I open my mouth to say something, then proceed to snap it shut when she lifts a finger to stop me. She presses it against her lips, commanding me to be quiet, and I flinch. She’s a woman, so she’s untouchable. But she’s not above loathing.

She’s got balls coming here, I can admit that. And she’s not afraid, that much is obvious.

“Again, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t test me. Go back wherever you came from and don’t let me see your face again.”

The fact that she knows we’re not from around here tells me we’re not dealing with a dummy and we have our work cut out for us. She doesn’t wait for me to reply. Instead, she leaves me with a final glance that dares me to challenge her, then turns and starts to walk away. I step out of the room and watch her with some interest. Instead of walking down the stairs to the ground level like normal people do, she heaves herself over the railing and jumps.

“What the fuck,” I whisper, moving to the railing. She lands on all fours, pretty much just like a feline would, and now lifts to her full height. She turns back to give me a shit-eating grin before she runs across the carpark and gets into a waiting taxi. “How the fuck could Castillo have spawned that?”

5

THE JEKYLL

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It was always going to come to this.

We have the girl in our sights, which means we have Castillo right where we want him. Or do we? What do we do with a girl we know we won't hurt?

"Remind me again why we're going for the daughter, not one of his sons," Attila shoots. He's been irritated as all fuck since we got to Arizona, even though we've been getting along fine. He must really hate this place.

I sigh in exasperation. Attila has never had to go smoking anyone out, so I grant him that this is new to him. But he really needs to understand how this cartel works. And he needs patience, something I now know he has very little of.

"They're not exactly hiding in plain sight," I tell him.

"Oh, but the daughter is? You don't find that just a little bit odd?"

"Not necessarily. The cartels are notorious for treating women as expendables. I doubt they're keeping tabs on her."

"Probably think she's safer here, away from them," he comments.

"Not a bad idea, hiding her out in plain sight. Who would ever suspect?"

"So you think she's going to turn up here tonight?"

"She works here," I tell him. "No reason for her not to turn up."

“We’re going to spook her.”

“She look spooked to you when she turned up on our doorstep?”

Attila quirks an eyebrow at this then exits the car and stretches. I follow and go to stand beside him in the parking lot and look at the bar we’ve come to.

“I wonder what the hell Coyin Castillo’s daughter is doing working in a place like this,” he mutters, as he starts to walk toward the entry.

The sun dips below the horizon, casting a vibrant orange glow in the distance as we approach the bar. We step into the dimly lit entrance, the promise of intrigue and excitement lingering in the air. Located on the outskirts of the city, the venue is surprisingly alive with the swell of patrons seeking refuge from the rush of the city.

The heavy wooden door creaks open, and a rush of warm air infuses with the scent of aged whiskey and laughter. The sounds of lively chatter and clinking glasses envelope me, carrying against a backdrop of smooth jazz melodies that swirl through the room. A sultry saxophone weaves a seductive melody, while the rhythmic beat of drums sets the pace for the evening.

The bar itself is a masterpiece of craftsmanship, its polished mahogany surface reflecting the soft glow of neon signs that adorn the walls. The exterior of the building doesn’t give any indication of the caliber of the interior, the difference between the two a stark revelation in chaos. The only casual thing about the bar is the bartenders dressed in white t-shirts and black pants, moving with practiced precision as they expertly mix cocktails. The clinking of ice cubes against glass sounds like the tinkling of bells as we move further through the dense cacophony of human bodies towards the bar.

My eyes adjust to the low lighting, the room coming into focus. The crowd is a

vibrant tapestry of diverse characters, each with their own story to tell. A group of friends huddle around a high table, their laughter infectious and carefree. A couple, lost in each other's gaze, share a private moment at a cozy corner booth.

The patrons themselves are a kaleidoscope of personalities. The weary businessman, seeking solace from the pressures of the day, sips his martini with a sense of quiet contemplation. A vivacious artist, adorned in colorful attire, dances to the rhythm of her own inner muse. A mysterious stranger, clad in a leather jacket, observes the room with an air of intrigue.

The energy in the bar is intense, a bright spark as the night unfolds. Laughter echoes off the walls as conversations grow louder, animated gestures punctuating the air. The vibrant atmosphere creates a sanctuary where time seems to stand still, as the music swells and the spirit of the bar thrives.

At the far end of the bar, a lone figure perches on a barstool, engrossed in conversation with the bartender we've come for. Coyin's daughter moves with a lethal grace as she throws orders at the other bartenders and fluidly sets down drinks at the same time. We watch from across the room as she gets back to her conversation with the woman at the end of the bar, then leaves again to serve another customer. It's obvious she's the head bartender, and she does it so well, her team moving together like a well oiled machine.

I look at Attila, whose eyes are fixed on the girl. He's watching her intently, as though afraid that if he blinks, she'll disappear again. I know this time he's going to do everything he possibly can not to lose sight of her.

"Let's sit here," I suggest, parking myself in a nearby table. It's close enough that we can see the bar but far enough that the girl probably won't even notice us. We order our drinks with a passing waitress then settle in and look around the bustling bar. From the outside, I wouldn't have picked that it would be humming with so much

energy.

“Careful,” Attila warns, as our drinks arrive and I chug back my tequila. “I don’t want to have to babysit your drunk ass tonight.”

I shrug and shoot him a smirk. “I only ever indulge myself with one drink,” I tell him. I stopped the hardcore drinking after I realized Sisely wasn’t coming back and I wasn’t doing myself any favors drinking myself into an early grave. Even though I wanted nothing more than to join my dead wife.

“What time does her shift finish?” he asks me.

“Midnight. Dumbest thing ever, but she’s a creature of habit.”

“I still don’t understand what she’s doing in this dive.”

“Well, you can ask her yourself when you finally get a formal introduction.”

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The waitress returns with two more of what we're having and sets them on the table in front of us. A quick glance passes between us before Attila casts his eyes toward the bar.

The girl is standing smirking in our direction, holding her own glass aloft as though saluting us. I didn't think she'd seen us come in, but I should have known better.

"Compliments of the bartender," the waitress announces, before she turns and walks away.

6

LUNA

I saw them come in. Of course I did. How could I not? It's part of my job description to notice everything that goes on in my bar, down to the color of the fly on the wall. But more than that... much more than that... was the buzz that radiated through the room as soon as they walked in. Of course, they were oblivious to it, but I watched as they walked through the crowds, easing their way toward the bar. I saw the way others looked at them, saw the way the girls nearly lost their drenched panties and rolled my eyes at the predictability of it all.

"Mama mia," Nadia said, twirling in her stool then coming back full circle until she faced me. "Hottie and McHottie just walked in. Pinch me and prove I've died and gone to Heaven."

"Whatever you do, don't look again. Don't make it obvious we've seen them."

I busy myself with someone's drink, then another and a third, sliding them against the highly polished aged wood to their owners.

"Why would I do that?" Nadia hisses, leaning forward in her seat.

"Not even two seconds ago, you were reminding me that you're in a relationship. What happened to that, huh?"

"And you were reminding me that my boyfriend is a dud while suggesting I should leave him.

"As you should," I reiterate. "But don't look at them."

I knew she wouldn't be able to help herself. She chances a glance in their direction as they take their seat at a table in the middle of the floor. They've picked the exact spot to blend seamlessly and not get noticed...except, with their looks there's no hiding, no matter where they sit.

"I'd so tap that," she mumbles, turning back to me in resignation. I don't know which one she means, but I toss her an irritated glare then swipe a cloth across the bar.

"You'd tap anything that has two legs and breathes."

"That was before Dwayne," she huffs.

"Yes. Dwayne with the bad habits and lazy lifestyle," I say, distaste curling around my words like a glove.

"You really need to get to know him better."

I drop the cloth in a nearby tub and fix my best friend with a glacial stare. Sometimes

she could be the daftest person this side of the aisle. There was something rotten about Dwayne and I wasn't entirely sure why she couldn't see that.

I've known Nadia since I moved to Phoenix eight months ago. We met through work at this very bar. And even though she'd moved on, finally putting her vocation to work and becoming a kindergarten teacher, we were still close and made an effort to see one another a few times a week.

I can't say I'm impressed with her choice of men — she is a sucker for bad boys — but this latest find was definitely no catch. He sat around all day doing nothing and mooching off Nadia. “Until I get on my feet”, he'd explained. And four months into their relationship, he'd moved in with her and still hadn't found a job.

“You really need to dump his ass,” I tell her. “You deserve so much better than that.”

* * *

I send them a round of drinks. If for no other reason but to let them know that I've noticed them. No point pretending when it's hard not to notice them. I toast them then throw back my shot — which is actually water, but they don't need to know that. I don't need to fall on my drunk ass trying to save myself from them if I need to. But I decide to turn the tables on them and play their game; maybe then I'll find out who they are and what they want.

They haven't made a move toward me on the three separate occasions I've seen them, which sends my curiosity shooting through the roof. And I know if I ask them why they're following me, they'll probably deny it. They'd be hiding, right, if they were following me? Would anyone really make bad intentions that obvious?

When I turn back to Nadia, a man is sitting on the stool beside her. He has his hand on her knee. Nadia shifts away and turns in her stool to look in the opposite direction.

The man doesn't get the point though, and continues to harass her.

Nadia's beautiful in an Elizabeth Taylor sort of way. With her jet black hair that falls in loose waves against her shoulders and violet slits that sit against creamy skin, she possesses an other-worldly presence that never fails to enchant wherever she goes.

She's older than I, but I love and take care of her as though I am the older one between us. She's the most remarkable woman with the best heart, but she's flawed. Yes, definitely flawed. She doesn't know how to say no, even when faced with situations she doesn't want to be in. She avoids. Hoping that problems will disappear or fade away. I've tried my hardest to break her out of that trait and mold her into being a stronger woman, but she's just not built that way.

I stand a few feet away, crossing my arms over my chest as I watch her turn her back to the man. I just want to see how she's going to get out of this one. I've rescued her too many times to count, but sometimes I wonder — what if one day I'm the one that needs rescuing?

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“Would you not!” Nadia snaps, slapping the man’s hand away when it rests on her shoulder.

“Come on babe... you’re on your own. I’m on my own... doesn’t have to be that way...”

He lets his words hang suspended between them, even though she still has her back to him as she tries to ignore him away. He’s good looking in a college frat boy kind of way, if a little inexperienced. Because no man worth his weight would harangue and badger the way he is when Nadia’s answer is a clear and resounding no.

“Ok, Casanova... time to move along,” I tell him, moving toward the bar. He swivels his head toward me, gives me a lascivious glance, then concentrates his efforts on me.

7

ATTILA

The night is proving more entertaining than I thought it would be. From toasting us to going back to ignoring us, the bartender is now in the midst of a furious showdown with a handsy patron who won’t leave her friend alone.

I see the precise moment that the friend’s eyes scan the room and land on the face of a man with an arrogant smirk who’s been making advances towards women all night, ignoring their polite rejections and invading their personal space. No sooner has she turned her gaze away than the man swaggers towards her, his eyes filled with malicious intentions. Frustration and discomfort etch across her face as he sidles up

and takes the stool beside her.

Our friend the bartender watches on as the man leans in closer to her friend, his unwanted advances becoming more aggressive. The friend's distress grows until the bartender steps in and tries to talk some sense into him. She's obviously seen enough of his type to know how to handle his behavior.

She's calm yet commanding as she approaches him, an impenetrable barrier between the man and her friend. But he just snickers and sets his eyes on the bartender, fixing bedroom eyes on her. She lifts her eyebrows in a mix of disbelief and disgust, no trace of fear in her.

When he scoffs at something she says, a mischievous smile crosses her face. The other bartenders have crowded around her, rallying their support. She holds her hand up until they fall back and watch as she moves a hand under the counter, releasing the bar top to let her out to the other side. She stands facing him now, her hands on her hips as she nods towards the door, telling him wordlessly to leave.

The man makes no move to rise, instead turning back to the friend and putting a hand around her shoulder. The friend shrugs him off and shrieks before shrinking back in horror. She scrambles off her stool to get as far away from him as she possibly can.

My eyes fly back to the bartender as I sense movement from her angle. There's a look of fury on her face, and if I thought her incapable before, I don't now, because her look is murderous.

With lightning speed, the bartender's hand moves like a blur, delivering a series of expertly timed punches. The man is caught off guard, but he recovers quickly, shooting his hand out in an attempt to strike back.

But he's no match for her superior martial arts skills. I don't know where she picked

them up, but she's an absolute machine. She strikes a blow to his shoulder blades with the base of her hands, and he almost stumbles. She uppercuts him, her wrath sending his face lurching backward. Before he even has the chance to bring his face back, she's dealt him a back hander across the other cheek, sending his head flying at an odd angle.

The bartender's gaze is unwavering as the man stumbles backwards, his face swelling under the threat of a bruise. The bar falls into a cohesive silence, its patrons whispering in hushed tones as they look from the bartender to the man as he shuffles towards the door.

And just as soon as it started, it's over. The man is gone and the bartender is back behind the bar, talking animatedly with the patrons, setting a drink down in front of her friend. She reaches up a hand and places it on her arm, giving her a comforting squeeze.

"You must be drunker than I thought."

The Jekyll's voice cuts into my thoughts. I glance his way; he's looking at me with some amusement.

"Did I just dream that whole thing up?"

He gives a hearty chuckle and shakes his head, tells me my eyes aren't playing tricks on me.

"I think we're going to have a hard time bagging this one," The Jekyll says.

"No shit, Einstein."

We knew this wasn't going to be easy from the get go. But even then, we had no idea.

It was going to be near impossible to take her; she would definitely put up a fight.

“How do you feel about drugs?” He asks, confusing me further. “I mean, what if we drugged her? She’s going to put up a fight, otherwise.”

“You scared of a little girl, Jek?”

He shakes his head.

“Not scared of her. Scared what will happen to her if we have to fight back.”

* * *

“It’s not an option,” I say, as we walk across the parking lot.

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It's way past midnight and the creature of comfort is still holed up in the bar. My guess — she wasn't willing to leave before us. So she stayed on, continuing to serve drinks and holler orders well into the night. It looked like she was needed, at any rate; for some reason, the crowd was only getting thicker, not thinning as the hours wore on. It seemed like the altercation earlier had only served to heighten everyone's adrenaline.

We sit in the car, our eyes planted firmly on the door, waiting. Patrons fall from the doors at random intervals, making their way to their parked cars and leaving.

“Find out everything you can about the friend,” I tell him, as she stumbles out of the bar and makes her way to a red Mustang. I don't know how much she's had to drink, but the sheer number of people leaving the bar and heading to their cars beggars belief.

The cars have dwindled to a dozen or so when something catches our eye. The man from the bar — the one who'd gotten his ass kicked by a woman half his size — slinks from the shadows, flicking a cigarette to the ground. The light flickers against the damage to his face, the broken skin begging to heal itself. He looks towards the door of the bar, then steps back into the shadows as more patrons exit and walk to their cars.

The Jekyll moves to open his door, readying himself to go out and flatten the coward on the kerbside. I stop him with a hand to his arm.

“Let it be. We step in only if the asset is compromised.”

LUNA

The hair stands on the back of my neck as I step out into the night air. Nadia is long gone to the comfort of her own home, and I'm just at my truck when a shadow steps out of the night. I would've expected the twin flames that have been scorching the earth as they track me, but instead it's the man from earlier in the bar. He steps out in front of me, blocking my movement and preventing me from reaching for the driver's side door.

He looks like a mess. And he's mad as hell as he locks his jaw and snickers in my direction. I don't know how he thinks he stands a chance after the night he's had and the proof that I can put him down now as easily as I did in front of an audience earlier. If nothing else, I have the undisputed upper hand because I haven't consumed a lick of alcohol tonight like he has. I heave a bored sigh then roll my wrist for him to move out of my way.

"Huh," he says, testy.

"What do you want?" I ask him, my hackles rising.

"To finish what I started."

"I already did that for you," I hiss, trying to push past him.

He reaches into his coat and produces a pistol. He fumbles with it clumsily, and I wonder if it's even loaded, but I can't take that risk. The man is drunk and angry and he did not come back here to make up and get silly.

I keep my expression calm, casual, as I try to think of an exit plan. The bar is

deserted, the parking lot nearly vacant save for those intelligent people that decided to get an Uber home and left their cars behind.

“Little boy has a big toy,” I sigh. “You sure you know how to use that?”

A tic develops in his right temple as he immerses himself in his fury. I see the shake of his hand as he struggles to keep the gun raised; what people who haven’t handled a gun don’t know is it’s a pretty damn heavy load to carry in one hand. The more I stand with him in all his clumsiness, the more I realize his wavering hand could very well be the thing that kills me. And I really don’t have any desire to end my life without much fanfare.

Without warning, I fold my body into a squat, shoot out a leg, and swipe it past his until he’s falling onto his back. But not before he fires off a shot, one I’m noting as ‘accidental’, which goes flying through the air, whizzing past me, to land with a metallic clink in a nearby car. I straddle him, an arm at his throat as I wrangle the gun out of his hand and tuck it into the back of my pants.

“This is the last time I see you here,” I tell him. “Or by God, you will leave here in a bodybag.”

“Bitch!” He hisses. “You haven’t seen the last of me.”

I tighten my arm at his neck, momentarily cutting off his oxygen, until his eyes bulge and true fear appears on his face. I ease off — I don’t relish killing him tonight, then get up and tell him to leave.

He scrambles to his feet but doesn’t make a move to leave. I fill my lungs with night air, preparing to give him another dressing down, before we’re interrupted by the squeal of tires. I turn, my hand on the gun in my waistband, to see an SUV come hurtling around the corner, impatient in its movements, the lights infiltrating the

night. I look back at the man, but he seems just as surprised as I am by the interlopers, his expression that of a deer caught in headlights.

The SUV is dangerously close to tipping over as it rolls on two wheels in its haste, before it comes to a sudden stop about forty feet away, its glaring headlights blinding me. The doors swing open, and heavy boots thunder to the ground as three men come towards us; a fourth man must be in the vehicle because the beams are suddenly switched off and we resort to the bar's security lights for sight.

“Well, well, well...”

The three men stop walking. One claps slowly. My eyes swing to the vehicle, to the man sitting in the passenger seat, resting there as an unsettling fear envelopes me.

“Oh, fuck.” I mutter.

“Got yourself into more trouble, bitch?”

My adversary from tonight's adventure finally has an ally in his corner. But his happiness is short lived, because one of the men lifts a gun, aims it with steady hands, and plants a bullet in the middle of the man's forehead. It is so callous, so calculated and unnecessary that I feel like I want to hurl back the evil that has stampeded this night. But I right myself and push my shoulders back, a soldier to the end. No matter that he was an asshole tonight, no one deserves a death like that.

The men start to move forward toward me. They're drawing out the showdown as much as they can, most likely thriving on the fear they probably see in my eyes. But this is what no one tells you. There's fear, and then there's its wealthy relation — adrenaline. It bursts through my seams, assaulting my veins, challenging me in ways that are not necessarily good for my health.

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“Do you know how long we’ve been looking for you, sweetheart?”

I don’t reply. Instead, I calculate the steps I need to take to turn, unlock my truck, put the key in the ignition and fire up my baby before I kick up dirt and leave this shanty town. Too many steps, and I don’t even include producing my car key. So I do the only thing I know to do and I start to run.

9

ATTILA

It was all I could do to hold The Jekyll back from involving himself in this littletête-à-tête. But the minute that bullet hit the man’s temple, I knew we were in trouble. I don’t know what kind of trouble the bartender is in, but it couldn’t be good if she had that many grown men after her.

I watch as she starts to run; she does a good job of outrunning them, but there’s only so far she’ll get on foot. The men turn back to their SUV and climb in just as the bartender rounds the corner of the bar. I turn our headlights on and pull forward to charge at the SUV before they can move, swiping the side of the car, catching them off guard. I reverse then head to the back of the bar, easily catching up to the girl in my now battered up car.

She looks back only once as our lights fall across the ground in front of her, then continues to run before I pull up alongside her and demand that she gets into the car. She doesn’t stop. I roll along with her, trying to talk sense into her.

“There’s four of them,” I remind her. “And only one of you. Get in before they put a bullet in your head, too.”

A look of confusion crosses her face, only fleeting, but it’s there nonetheless. She starts to slow, her muscles obviously aching from her impromptu exercise regimen. She seems to think for a moment, considering the possibilities, before she curses and climbs into the car behind The Jekyll and we drive away into the night.

* * *

“They’re not dead, are they?” she asks, after we tell her how we held off her would be attackers.

“No. Just out of commission for a little while,” The Jekyll tells her. “Looks like they meant business, though.”

Her sigh is painful. She sits back into her seat and settles a hand to her forehead, as though trying to catch her breath and think at the same time. There is a slight tremor in her hand. I turn away when her eyes meet mine in the rear view mirror.

“Who were those men and what are we facing here?” The Jekyll asks.

The bartender is quiet, but the edge of her lip is caught between her teeth. Something has spooked her. And I don’t know whether she’s more afraid of us or the men in the SUV bound to catch up to us momentarily.

“You’re not facing anything,” she says. “This is my problem and I’ll take care of it.”

“You sure about that, Wonderwoman?” He scoffs. “Because the way it looked to me back there, you were about to get mauled. You may have some moves on you, but I’m in no way deluded enough to think you can dodge a bullet.”

* * *

Coyin Castillo's daughter falls into our laps like a gift from the skies. We don't even have to work for it. We drive on for a while, no one speaking, with no direction in mind. We'd thought out our carefully laid plan down to the letter, but now that we had her, our plans seemed a little outdated. So we drove aimlessly through the night until we reached the motel. This would have to do for a while as we regrouped and found our feet.

"What are we doing here?" She asks, her hands crossing against her chest defensively. The bartender has a vulnerable side, even though she hates to show it.

"Collecting our things before we clear out of here," I tell her, turning in my seat to face her after we come to a stop. "I have no desire to stick around waiting for your posse to come looking for us."

"No. I wouldn't wait around either."

She speaks softly, a far away look in her eyes. Whatever those men wanted from her, it was enough to have her all sorts of riled. She still doesn't know that she is effectively our prisoner; she's traded one monster for another, but I'm interested to see how this plays out and what conclusion she draws. Thankfully, The Jekyll has caught on and he decides to contribute to the conversation.

"You leaving?" he asks, and she shrugs.

"Where will you go?" I'm curious to know where her next stop will be.

"I'll get on a bus and just keep going until I find someplace safe."

She catches herself immediately, recognizing that she's already said too much.

“Safe,” I whisper. She has secrets. Secrets she means to keep. If only I could crack her open just a little bit.

“What are you running from?” The Jekyll asks.

“You know, for two guys who have been following me around like lost puppies for the past few days, you sure do have a lot of questions. Who are you, anyway?”

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The Jekyll and I turn back in our seats, facing forward. This whole thing has not gone in the direction we had planned. At all. And we aren't dealing with a dummy here. She may be in a world of trouble, but I can't say her intelligence isn't impressive.

She's bunched her dark blonde hair into a messy bun at the nape of her neck, the black leather of her jacket a stark contrast against the milky white of her skin. Her face is devoid of any makeup, like it's been freshly scrubbed of the harsh chemicals that one might find on a woman's face during a night out. She's beautiful in that earthy, girl next door type of way, her nose slightly upturned above her bow tie lips. Her beauty lies in the undeniable power she knows she wields with her confidence. This is a woman who can turn heads with the cool fixture of her eyes upon you, and can just as easily corrupt you with her innocence and vulnerability. She is lethal — of the dark and dangerous sort.

“So where are you headed?” she asks.

10

LUNA

Idon't know how they found me. But they did. They came out of nowhere and unwittingly saved me while someone else was trying to kill me. Then the two men that had been following me around for days saved me fromthemwhen they tried to take me. My list of enemies is growing exponentially.

So I hitch a ride with the two men. The lesser of two evils, I believe. Safety in numbers and all that. I still don't know who they are or what they want from little old

me, but I have to take a risk and this is where I choose to lay my chips. They seem mighty curious though, asking a whole bunch of questions that I really don't want to answer.

"You sure you don't want to pick up any of your belongings?" One of the men asks me, as they fling their own duffels into the boot of their car. I shake my head quickly and open the door to get into the car; I just want to be out of this town.

Eight months. Eight months of living in near obscurity here in Arizona. I had just settled in, thinking I was home safe and there was no way they'd ever find me here. And I'm not exactly sure how they did, but for them to have come knocking on my door here meant they'd damn near find me anywhere, no matter where I went. That was now a given. And the only way I'd be safe from them was to find someone bigger to hide behind.

"You going to tell us who those men were that were after you?"

"You going to tell me who you are? Your names, perhaps?"

Mr Handsome raises his eyebrows at me. Obviously, he's not used to people challenging him. The muscles roping his thick arms tell me he's a man used to getting what he wants without anyone second guessing him. Especially not a woman. His ice blue eyes seem a beautiful contradiction against his brown hair and heavily stubbled face. They pierce through me, daring me to ask more questions.

"We have a long drive ahead of us," he says, as his friend falls in behind the steering wheel. "Please tell me you're not going to spend the entire time boring me with your incessant questions."

"Rude, much? Where are we going?"

“We are not going anywhere if you keep talking.”

“Well, at least a name,” I plead. “I can’t keep referring to you as Asshole number 1 and Asshole number 2 in my head.”

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. His friend seems to take delight in the fact that I’ve pissed him off and he chuckles.

“I’m Attila...” he starts, then turns to his friend and frowns. “And this is TJ.”

‘TJ’, now the designated driver, looks up in surprise, and I know this can’t be his name. But whatever. I look at Attila. He didn’t pause when he told me his name, so he’s definitely Attila.

“Attila... as in Attila the Hun?” I ask. He rolls his eyes like he gets this question a lot.

He fixes me with a look that could melt the panties off another woman but does something entirely different to me. It stokes the fire deep within me that I’ve been putting out for a while now.

“No. As in Attila the Hunter.”

* * *

We pull out of the parking lot where we’ve changed cars and hit the freeway in an inconspicuous Ford Ranger that blends seamlessly with every other car on the road. These men must be well connected if they can place a call then head to a location where a car is just sitting there waiting for them.

A little after daybreak, we pull into a motel and TJ parks in the back where there’s no main road exposure. We haul our asses to the Reception and check in to two

adjoining rooms, something Attila insists on, because apparently I'm now Public Enemy Number One and I need saving even from myself.

"Well, I'm Luna, if anyone is interested in my name," I shrug, as we walk toward our rooms.

I don't miss the look that passes between the men as they continue to walk. Why am I not surprised that they probably already know my name?

"You from around these areas?" TJ asks. He's a less intimidating version of Vin Diesel, handsome and sexy in the way that only South American men can be.

"No."

It's a simple answer, and it's the truth. But somehow, it doesn't satisfy them.

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“So you’re not from these areas, and you refused to go back for any of your possessions. I don’t know what you’ve done to piss off those men back in Phoenix, but you must have done a number on them for you to be too afraid to go back there.”

“They’re the ones doing the number here. I merely value my life more than I do any worldly possession.”

“Ahhh...” Attila sighs. “Yes. But if they wanted you dead, they would have killed you, not handsy with the sweaty palms who insisted on being a dick.”

“True that,” I say, looking at Attila. He’s not only a looker, he’s also astute. Something you don’t see much of anymore.

“So tell me... what could make grown men accost a lady on her own in a vacant lot in the middle of the night?” he asks me.

I regard him carefully. They’re not going to stop until they get answers. And I’m not going to explain anything until I have the answers I need from them.

“Will you tell me why you’re following me?”

He gives a short nod, as if to say yes. I have to believe that his nod is as good as his word. Have to believe that if either of them wanted to hurt me, they would’ve done so already. But they haven’t. They hadn’t done anything but save me and protect me at a time when I needed it. They then sheltered me when things could have gone so very differently. And finally, they agreed to let me ride with them out of the town where I no longer belonged.

“Those men work for my father,” I tell him, waiting for his reaction as pain starts to ebb and flow right through me. The loss of my family is something I still have not accepted. The loss of my family turned me into a dead woman walking... alive but dying inside.

11

THE JEKYLL

I quickly get over my anger at Attila for reverting my name to that of a pretty boy. TJ. Huh. I guess he didn't want to scare the girl off by telling her they call me The Jekyll. Not that he knows my real name, anyway. Attila didn't know me when I was Cesar Cavalho. But I think if he had known me, we could've been friends. We're a lot alike, he and I. Even more than he likes to think. And heck, maybe I even like him a little.

Not many people remember me the way I was back then. Before Sisely. Before the light in my eyes was extinguished. I became a different person after she died. A whisper of the man that I had once been. But I have never ever crossed the line with an innocent the way the Castillo cartel did with my Sisely. Listening to the girl speak now, it would be so easy to cross over and become the monster I need to be to get my vengeance for my wife. It would be so easy to grab her and snap her neck and then go on with my life. Would it bring Sisely back? No. Would it give me any satisfaction? Most likely not. Would it give me some more heavy baggage to carry for what was left of my life? Definitely.

So I stay quiet, moving as far away from the girl as I possibly can as we walk to our rooms. The temptation is too great, and I don't want to have a sudden moment of regress where I lunge and destroy her.

When she tells us the men we helped her escape from work for her father, we both stop walking and Attila fixes me with a stony glare before he casts his eyes her way

again. Her words have piqued his interest.

Attila and I both want the same thing, but now there's a complication. And that complication happens to be an innocent girl who, for some unknown reason, is running from our mutual enemy. The odds couldn't be more stacked against us than they are right now.

Attila swipes the keycard against the reader of the first room and ushers us in quickly. He opens the interconnecting door to Luna's room, glides his eyes over its contents, then closes the door and turns to us.

"Explain to me why you were running from those men," he asks. I can't even explain how furious he is. And suddenly, I understand why. She was to be our bargaining chip. The secrets she's hiding could very well be the thing that brings our plan toppling down around us.

"It's a long story," she says, taking her leather jacket off and flinging it against one of the two chairs in the room. She paces in what little floor space there is, back and forth like a caged animal.

Attila spreads his arms like an eagle and reminds her that we have all day and no place else to be. He's fuming. She looks up at him in surprise and registers his anger. She frowns, at a loss to explain his mood, then resumes her pacing again.

"How long have you been running?" Attila asks, moving closer to her in a bid to make her stand still. Her movements are giving me whiplash. When she pushes past him, grazing his arm, he whirls around and grabs her, pulling her arm back with such ferocity that he almost pulls it out of its socket.

"How. Long. Have you been running?" he snaps. He takes hold of both arms in his hands, squeezing the life out of her as murderous rage envelopes him. The girl is a

head shorter than him and has to look up at his face; a flicker of fear crosses her eyes before she rights herself, stretches and tries to break free of his hold.

I've seen what this girl can do, and the fact that she can't move out of his grasp means he's holding her too tight. I move toward them, tap Attila's shoulder and tell him to let her go. I know if he doesn't, he'll probably do something he'll regret. I've heard the stories about him.

"Come on man, back off," I tell him.

He shakes me off with a furious shrug then sets brooding eyes onto me before he stalks to the door and leaves, slamming it behind him.

"What's his problem?" she asks, just as furious. No woman likes to be man handled.

"He needs a few minutes to calm down. You going to be okay here on your own if I step out?" I ask her.

She nods and stubs the toe of her boot at the carpet before she tells me she'll be in her room resting. I watch her enter through the adjoining door then heave a tired sigh before I leave to find Attila.

I don't have far to go. He's leaning against the railing looking down at the empty pool below, his hands clasped in front of him. He has one foot resting on the ledge casually, as though out for a breath of fresh air.

"Where's the girl?" he asks, before I even reach him.

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“Inside resting. Don’t worry, she can’t go anywhere without getting past us. And somehow, I don’t think she’s in a hurry to ditch the safety of our company.”

“You know what this means, right?” he asks, turning to give me a questioning look.

“The fact that she’s running away from her father could mean anything, Attila. Let’s not jump to conclusions just yet. We can still use her to our advantage.”

He snorts like he believes that will never happen and tells me we’re carrying around dead weight by saddling her to us.

“Do you have a better idea?” I ask him.

He’s silent as he looks back down at the pool, then clenches his hands against the railing until his knuckles turn white.

“Just get me out of this hellhole before I decide to kill someone.”

12

LUNA

I have no intention of ditching my saviors. I may be many things, but suicidal is not one of them. They want me alive and safe, which means they’ll do anything to protect me, even if that means from my own family. Sure, they may want something from me, but until I know what that is, I’m sure it’s safer to stay with them than to go off on my own.

I still don't know how my father found me, but now that I've ditched my phone and left everything behind, I'm sure I'll remain one step ahead of them as long as I keep moving. I lay down on the bed. I don't even remove the bedspread. I'm looking up at the ceiling when a stabbing pain clutches at my heart.

Nadia. She's all I can think about as I hatch my escape plan.

She's the first and only friend I've made in the three years since I left home and vowed to never go back. She may not know about my background, about my past. But she knows I'm running from something. I told her if ever I took off suddenly not to be concerned, and she made me promise to at least call her and let her know I'm okay. There's a slight twinge of guilt eating at me at the thought of breaking my promise to her. In my eight months of knowing her, she's showered me with a lifetime's worth of sisterly affection, and it's painful to think that I may never see her again.

"You hungry?"

TJ is in the doorway, a box of pizza in his hand. I don't think it's even 10am yet and already the big boys are going for the carbs. I shake my head and tell him I'll take coffee and follow him into his room. Attila is sitting at the small round dining table that looks like it was built for a child, looking out the window. The chair he's sitting on threatens to collapse beneath his weight. He shifts his gaze toward me as I walk into the room and sit on the edge of the bed, my hands folded between my knees, then looks away just as quickly, disregarding me.

I've literally been on my own for three years, never letting anyone in. Holding the wolves at bay. Nadia is the only person I ever let into my circle. And now I find myself in a motel room with two complete strangers, perhaps not by choice, but here I am. For some reason, it hurts that Attila turns away from me. Like I'm a bug he can't wait to get rid of. I wonder if this is what I can look forward to from all men for

the rest of my life.

TJ makes me a coffee at the makeshift kitchenette and hands it to me. It's the worst coffee I've ever had, but it soothes me in a way that I know nothing else can at the moment.

"I'll tell you what you want to know," I whisper, as I set the cup down on a side table. TJ pauses as a slice of pizza makes its way toward his mouth. Attila looks back from the window and watches me, no doubt surprised. I've probably knocked the wind out of him.

"Anything?" he asks. He's like a little boy about to receive his Christmas gift. Honestly.

I nod my head. I'll tell them anything they want to know. But I won't go back home, not in a million years. And I have nothing to lose by telling them what they want to know. Nothing to lose, but possibly something to gain. This is the closest my father has ever come to finding me — the thought both terrifies and invigorates me. If I'm to have any chance of surviving this, I have to place my trust in someone.

"What do you want to know?"

* * *

I start at the beginning. And it's painful. I have a brutal story to tell them, and even though I know they're just as much thugs as the members of my family are, somehow I don't think they're going to like what they hear.

So I tell them my story. How being the only daughter to a ruthless cartel leader made me an unwilling pawn in my father's game. How at 22 years, he promised my hand in marriage to Nestor Gamboa, a wealthy businessman who was more than ten years my

senior. An older man who had a penchant for doing things that were downright unlawful and disgusting. Obviously a marriage of convenience, but my father would do anything, even sell his one and only daughter, to prop up his crumbling empire.

“I’m confused,” Attila says, frowning. “What about your brothers?”

“What about them?”

“They agreed to this? You marrying someone you didn’t want to?”

“They didn’t agree,” I sigh. “But they didn’t protest loud enough, either. My father’s not the sort of man you argue with.”

“Damn...” TJ gives a low whistle and throws his pizza down, suddenly losing his appetite.

“How long have you been running?”

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“Three years, since the night of my engagement when I turned 22,” I tell him. “So it’s not just my father I’m running from — it’s also Nestor.”

“You actually got engaged?”

“Again, not by choice. We were attending a dinner at one of my father’s colleague’s homes. It turned out to be my engagement party — he didn’t see the need to warn me.”

I shrug. Attila is shocked into silence. TJ whistles again and now he closes the pizza box and pushes it away, his stomach turning, I’m sure.

“What does your father hope to gain by bringing you back home?”

“You’ve obviously not grown up around girls, especially ones who belong to this life,” I answer TJ. “Cartel princesses don’t run away. In my father’s eyes, I’ve committed the ultimate sin. Yet, he won’t kill me for my indiscretion, no. He’ll use me to his advantage, sell his asset to the highest bidder. If not Nestor, he can marry me off to some other hapless fool who can benefit him.”

13

ATTILA

I have heard stories of marriages of convenience amongst our kind. Cartels, mafia, syndicates; we’re not all that different, after all. But I had thought that such practice had been discarded, a thing of the past. That it was still happening today that a

woman or a man would have to marry at the whim of their parents was unbelievable.

Not that I didn't believe her. The sincerity in her words and the consistency of her story told me she was telling the truth. About everything. I can't say my heart broke for her, because I don't feel anything. For anybody. But it did piss me off that her father was trying to palm her off against her will. She should have a choice.

Her story does, however, raise a problem for us. There is no way we can use her to lure out Castillo. We'd be doing the same exact thing he was doing to her by selling her off to the highest bidder. We'd be using her as bait, and we'd have to sacrifice her for that, which wasn't an altogether appealing idea after everything she'd told us. She really was of no use to us now. Which is what The Jekyll and I argue about after she stands, stretches her legs, and tells us she's going to shower.

"You can't just dispose of her like that," he hisses, when he hears the water running.

"She's a liability to us now."

"They will kill her," he reminds me. "She will keep defying them until they kill her. Or worse yet, she'll end up married to that sadistic Gamboa and he'll end up torturing her to death."

The thought irks me. I don't care — I never have. About anyone. Except maybe Caleph, the only one that ever understood me and accepted me with all my flaws. And I can't start caring now; it's not who I am. It's not the way I'm built. I'm just not made to care.

"The girl can do whatever she wants and go wherever she wants; I'm not saddling myself with this problem."

The Jekyll has steam coming out of his head as he watches me, his face red and

splotchy with the makings of an impending explosion.

“We can’t lose sight of our initial target,” I remind him.

“This is unethical,” he snaps back at me. “You can’t be that much of a monster that you would send her back to her destruction.”

“Cut her loose, TJ.”

* * *

After her shower, Luna doesn’t come out of her room. The door remains closed and I don’t hear any movement from within. The Jekyll has gone out to get some clothes for her, something we hadn’t considered in our haste to leave Phoenix.

I knock on the door softly, then again, until the door swings open and she is standing there in the doorway, her eyes swollen as though she’s been crying. I notice it, but it doesn’t affect me in the way that I think it should.

“What’s wrong?”

She shakes her head and steps away from the door. She’s wearing the white cotton robe supplied by the motel, and I doubt anything else underneath because she came with only the clothes on her back. The robe reaches to her knees, giving me a flash of long legs that seem to go on forever until they end at her small bare feet.

“Why are you crying?” I ask, coming into the room. I’m not built to care, but I’m curious. I can’t always read human emotions the way others do, and I don’t always care what one is thinking or feeling, but now I find myself interested to know. Luna Castillo has become a fascination for me.

“Why do you care?” she snaps back.

“Who says I do? I’m just asking because I’m curious.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?”

She steps closer and pushes a long finger into the middle of my chest, pushing me away. She does it with such force that I almost lose my balance, and I look at her in surprise, wondering what’s gotten her so angry.

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“I’ve been called many things,” I tell her. “Asshole is right up there at the top of the list, so yes, I’m well aware that I am one.”

Her eyes blaze, anger simmering beneath the surface. I’m not doing myself any favors here.

“You think you did your good deed for the day and rescued me from those men and now you want to throw me to the wolves?”

She heard us. Must’ve heard every word. Put the water on in the shower and pretended to be in there but instead listened to our conversation until her brain caught up to my plans for her. An unfortunate turn of events, but she should ditch the eavesdropping.

“You heard us, huh?”

“Yes, I did, asshole. What sort of a man are you?!?”

“The sort of man that makes decisions based on logic and method. You do not fit into that equation.”

I’m honest with her. I don’t see her fitting into our plans or how we need to execute them. She will just drag us down and hold us back.

“You bastard!”

She screams then rears her hand back and brings her palm down to my cheek. She

even hits with the force of a man; my face goes flying to the side. There is so much anger and hurt and betrayal in that one connection between her palm and my cheek.

My skin scorches with the sting, but it misses her heat already. No woman has ever slapped me before. I turn my face back to her slowly, my eyes hard as I watch her standing there, shocked at what she's just done while contemplating my next move.

She answers her own question by flinging herself at me. Without warning, her body is pressed up against mine and her lips are sealed to mine. She digs between my lips, as though searching for treasure, forcing her tongue into my mouth until I'm reciprocating, my hand going to her back and pushing her into me.

She tastes of mint and strawberries and sugar. She's soft and gentle and languid. Her tongue probes against mine, until we're engaged in a happy dance together, our bodies moving against each other feverishly.

I don't know what's happening, but I'm not in a position to stop it. I'm logical and methodical, and everything happens for a reason. Just so. But there's no reason for this to be happening. It's not part of my plan. There's no method, no rhyme or reason. No control. But it's happening. And I don't want it to stop.

14

LUNA

I undo the sash of my robe until it falls open.

I don't know what I'm doing, but all I know is I want this man, here in this moment, right now. I want him and I need him. And I can't stop.

But something in him is holding back. He's with me, but there's a little devil on his

shoulder telling him he has to stop. I can feel it in the way he tries to pull away before I press myself further into him. I grab his hand and guide it under the robe until it's resting on my chest. There's no way he's going to be able to draw away once he has a taste of what I've got hiding here. He moves his hand up and down my chest, down the side until he reaches my hip, where he grabs me and pushes me into him until I can feel the ridge of his cock pressing into my body. He's hard and he's ready and he's one step away from consuming me.

"You don't know what you're doing," he growls, pulling away and looking into my face.

His eyes are like fire and ice, mesmerizing in their blue tranquility, and I feel as though I'm swimming in the sea as I look into them. I stretch a hand to his cheek, trace the curve of his stubble as it winds down his cheek. I have never wanted any man more than I want him in this moment. And it could be that I'm using him. It could very well be — I have something I can give him in the form of my body. And he has something he can give me — protection. I desperately need protection from my father and the evil that follows him. I don't know if he can even offer me that, but I'm out of options. So I take the only one open to me and I hit the floor running.

"I know what I want." I nip at his lip, eliciting another growl, until he lifts me off the floor and carries me back until I'm laying on the edge of the bed, my feet still touching the ground. The robe falls open, its sash discarded. He lines himself up between my legs, pushing them open, staring down at my body which is now on full display. He undoes his leather belt, slides it out of the loops, unbuttons his pants, then leans over to splay a huge hand on my stomach. It's not a sensual move, but the move is filled with promise, a warning. Preparing me for what's to come. Once this happens, there's no turning back, no second chances.

He removes his clothes, and it's when he removes his t-shirt that I slowly start to combust. Ropes of muscle snake down his chest to end in a v at his torso. His arms

are thick with veins that tell me this man does some serious training. I reach my arms out, and he hovers over me, his eyes hooded, until I'm touching his chest, rock hard beneath my fingers.

I've all but ignored the rest of him, but now I look up into his face as he leans into me without actually touching me, searching his eyes. They're heavy with lust, much in the same way I imagine my own to be, as he watches my exploration of his body.

"Last chance," he says, swaying back and forth as though pushing and pulling. He wants to do this but he doesn't. Does he have morals? Ethics? I don't even know what sort of a man he is. In answer, I reach out and pull his mouth to mine, until he's falling into me, his naked body pressed against mine.

Attila reaches for his jeans, pulls out his wallet and produces a condom, holds it up for me to see then grins. "It's my only one so don't waste it," he says, making me chuckle. He rolls it down his thick manhood, then settles himself between my legs until he's at my opening. He pauses, his eyes a daring challenge for me to stop him now, but I just lift myself off the bed to meet him, nudging his cock in invite. He hisses at the contact, then leans in to kiss me again, pushing himself slowly into me. He takes his time, pushing in and out slowly, gently, making my eyes roll in the back of my head with the effort it takes to remain patient. And then finally, one massive thrust until he's seated all the way inside me, his body covering mine like a blanket as he rocks back and forth steadily.

My body hums against his, tension coiled deep in my depths as I wind my legs against his back and push him in further. It's not possible; he's in the deepest he can possibly go, but I want him deeper. I want him in me, on me, with me. I want him to fill every inch of space in and around me. We fit together in perfect symmetry, gliding against one another until the air is filled with our moans and our bodies coated in sweat. And it's only moments of building, thrust after thrust, before I find myself tumbling off the mountain with him.

When he pulls away, he remains sheathed inside me as he holds himself on his arms and looks at me, searching my eyes for something. I don't know what either of us expects; if we even expect anything, but there's a question I can't quite decipher lingering between us. A slap led to this. My hand connecting with his face resulted in us sharing a bed. It's not how I would usually do things, but the moment called for this. It ached for it.

Attila moves in and nips at my mouth, then pushes my lips open, curling his tongue against mine. Like he could go again. He wants to go again. And I know deep within me that if we do, he could easily become my addiction.

ATTILA

I'm not one to lie to myself. There are certain things that I recognize about myself that are indisputable. Certain things I can control, and those I can't. Things that maybe I myself don't understand but would like to.

When Luna approaches me, I know this is the worst thing that could happen. I can't let it happen. But I do. And it shoots all my plans in the foot, because pulling away from her is taking every last ounce of strength I have.

I'm not one for ribbons and rainbows or fancy fanfare, but I knew in that moment, no matter how much I warred with myself, that I had to have her. I'd like to say I regret it, but I don't. Another thing I won't be apologetic for. I fucked Luna Castillo and I loved it. I fucked Luna Castillo and now I'm fucked.

The Jekyll knows there's something wrong. How could he not, with all the pent up tension pervading the air? He looks from me to Luna, back in her tightly wound robe again, then back at me once again, raising an eyebrow in a silent question. He sniffs the air, as though that will help him determine what is going on. And maybe it will, because the scent of sex wafts heavily through the room like a sordid perfume.

He puts the bag down in Luna's room and tells her there's clothes and toiletries. She gives a happy yelp and goes flying through the door, shutting it firmly behind her. Girls and their creature comforts...

"What's going on?" he asks, his hands on his hips as he gives me a curious glance.

I don't make a habit of lying, but no one said anything about omitting. I will deny, deny, deny all the way to my grave if that's what it takes.

"We need to leave here," I tell him. "The whole point was to be in and out."

"Arizona making you nervous?" He quirks a brow.

"You know I don't like it here," I remind him. For someone that used to only communicate in grunts, The Jekyll has become mighty vocal lately.

Luna joins us, and I don't know how he did it, but the Jekyll managed to get her clothes that look like they were tailor made for her. For a moment, the evidence of his attention to her body measurements stabs at something deep inside me. I know it shouldn't — the man is still mourning the wife he lost five years ago, but it does.

She's in dark denim jeans and a tight black t-shirt that doesn't let me forget what's underneath. I don't even want to think about my partner in crime picking out underwear for her. She clips her hair high above her head as she comes to a stop between us, looking from me to TJ before she grins.

"Thanks for the clothes," she says, looking down at herself. She's fully clothed but she might as well still be naked with the way my eyes sear through her.

"We'll be moving out soon," he tells her. Thank God he's listening to reason.

"Where to?"

"Not sure yet. But we need to keep moving."

The revelation lingers between us like a bad omen. She knows we have no intention of taking her with us. But she says nothing in that regard, instead telling us that she

needs to make a phone call.

“To who?” I ask, maybe a little too eagerly, because it causes TJ’s head to snap my way in surprise.

“A friend. My friend Nadia.” She hurries to explain. “I promised her if I ever left suddenly, I’d call to let her know I was okay.”

* * *

I have a bad feeling about this whole thing. And my feelings aren’t misplaced when Luna takes the disposable cell phone in her tiny hands and starts punching in numbers.

It’s been decided that we’re leaving. We can’t stay here another minute. Luna graciously steps up and announces that she’ll make her own way to a friend’s place in Utah if we just drop her off at the nearest train station. Her decision to leave us scrapes at something indefinable inside me, even though I am the one who didn’t want her along for the ride in the first place.

I hear the call as it clicks over, the raspy hello from the other end of the line as her friend answers. We’ve insisted on having her on speaker for the sake of transparency. Luna doesn’t seem to mind.

“Nadia, it’s me.”

There’s a beat of silence, before there’s a flurry of activity on the other end and Nadia starts to scream before her voice becomes garbled.

“Luna, run! Don’t come... Don’t...”

A hearty chuckle floats through the phone, then a male voice speaks. A voice derelict of any emotion. One that makes my skin turn over. Instinctively, I know who it is.

“Daughter, dearest, won’t you come home now?”

Coyin Castillo. It can only be him, because only he would be able to make the color drain from Luna’s face, making her look like an apparition. She skates fearful eyes towards us, shaking her head in disbelief.

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“Don’t you dare touch her.” It sounds more like a plea than a command, and her father chuckles again. He obviously knows how much her friend means to her and that he has the upper hand.

“I don’t believe I have much choice, Luna. To touch — or not to touch. That is the question.”

“You bastard.”

She’s gutsy, I give her that.

“She’s beautiful, too,” Coyin purrs. “She’ll fetch a pretty penny after I’m done with her.”

We hear the sound of a vicious slap, then Nadia screams, and the sound of something heavy thumps to the ground. Nadia sobs in the background.

I’d like to rip the phone from Luna’s hand and rip Coyin a new one, but I can’t show my hand. Not yet.

“What do you want?” There’s a tremor in her hands as she asks.

“It’s very simple. You come home and fulfil the contract I agreed to, and I’ll think about letting little Nads here go. Not saying I will, but it’s a strong possibility.”

LUNA

I'd been dying for Attila and TJ to take me with them. Now I'm dying just as hard for them to let me go so I can help Nadia out of the situation she's in because of me. They don't know what my father's capable of. Only I know. I know because I've seen it with my very eyes. I don't know if he knows that I know, but I do. I remember every single tawdry thing he ever did to my mother, and then I watched as he extinguished the light from her eyes. The bastard. He's a wicked, despicable man, and he will stop at nothing to get what he wants.

"You can't go back there," TJ warns me. "Once he has you back, you know there'll be no getting away from him. He's going to do to you exactly what he promised he would."

He's right. I know he's right. But what I've told them is just the cusp of what my father is capable of. He's going to do so much more than annihilate me. The scandal alone of a runaway daughter and a broken contract is enough to have him fuming. I think he'd like to have me back just to make an example of me. To string me up before his friends and punish me — or even let them punish me — just so he can prove his word is gospel. To show everyone that he's still the boss and he owns me.

"I can't live with myself knowing what he'll do to Nadia," I say, stuffing the clothes that TJ bought me into a bag. I have very little on me — every last cent I'd been able to scrimp and save had been left behind in my apartment when I didn't have a chance to retrieve it after fleeing the bar. If I know anything about my father, he would've turned that place upside down and set it on fire so I would be left with nothing.

"He'll probably kill you," Attila says, flicking his nails against each other as he watches me.

I'm quiet as I look at him, hold a shirt in my hands as I pause to reflect on his words,

then stuff it quickly into the bag. I don't miss the look that TJ passes him. I wonder if he suspects? The room reeks of sex and our attitudes toward one another have calmed down somewhat. I'm sure he's wondering what happened in his absence, although I don't think he's the type to just come right out and ask. He's the silent, thoughtful type.

"He's capable of so much more than killing me," I whisper, though I feel like I'm reminding myself more than I am trying to put that out there.

"You can't go back there," Attila says, coming to stand in front of me. He takes the bag from my hand and sets it down on the bed. His eyes cut a line through me as they blaze across my face, seeking purchase. "He will kill you."

He knows this without a doubt. As surely as I do. I know that I will probably die trying to save Nadia. I know we'll probably both lose our lives. But Nadia will die regardless if I don't turn up. This way, she at least has a fighting chance. I look at him with sullen eyes.

"You're asking me to turn my back on the one person who's been more like family to me in the past few months than my own blood have been in my entire life. You're literally asking me to take a knife and gut myself."

"He'll kill you both," TJ says.

"Then so be it. I will die if I need to, but I will not turn my back on her."

* * *

I consider sneaking out of the motel room to return home. If only to avoid Attila and TJ getting hurt — I don't need more blood on my hands. These two are not made for the world I come from, and even though I still don't know who they are and what

brought them into my life, I'm not heartless enough to let them walk into an ambush.

But I find I'm a coward when it comes to walking out that door and walking away from the two men who saved my life. I'm grateful for everything they've done for me, and they've become a mainstay in my life in the little time I've known them.

And Attila... ahhh, Attila. When I think of the way his hands glided up and down my body, I have to take a deep breath to stem the fire that starts at my toes and makes its unbidden way up my body. I'm not going to lie and say it meant nothing. Because it meant everything, and I'm not courageous enough to walk away from what could be.

It helps that I feel safe with them. But there's no talking them out of taking me back to where they picked me up from. They won't let me go on my own, and they decide we'll all travel back together and formulate a plan as we go. Truth be told, although I know what to expect, knowing what my father is like — there's no telling what we'll be walking in to. How many men he'll have with him. Or how I'll approach the situation. I have no fucking idea how I'll be able to get Nadia away from him.

"You really want to do this?" Attila asks, throwing a concerned look my way.

I give him a short nod and fold my arms defensively across my chest. I won't be talked out of saving my best friend. My sister. She doesn't deserve to suffer in my place. And if it means I have to sell my soul to the devil to ensure her safety, then that's what I will do. Even if it means I'll end up married to a man not of my choosing.

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“Even knowing that your fate will probably end up nothing like what you’ve imagined for yourself?”

“You know what, Attila? I think my fate was sealed the moment I was born.”

17

ATTILA

Caleph would probably have my head if he knew what I was doing. But the man is on his honeymoon, cruising on a ship in the Gulf of California, and I don’t want to disturb him. I’m his fixer and I always have been, and no amount of distance between us could change that fact. Although best friends, I’ve always been his enforcer.

I realize he’s far enough away to stay out of danger but close enough that he could easily come back and skin me alive for my actions. And he probably will once he finds out. I don’t even believe I’m doing this myself, but when TJ takes me aside, he reminds me that our whole objective had been to bring Coyin Castillo down. And now that the opportunity has presented itself, we have to take it. Regardless of the danger to ourselves.

“We’ll never get an opportunity as good as this one,” TJ says, after we enter the privacy of our own room. Luna still doesn’t know why we came looking for her; briefly, I wonder how she’d feel if she knew the real story. I dismiss my curiosity and look at TJ, knowing with everything in me that he’s right. But the thought of Luna being in danger causes a lump to form in my throat that I can’t swallow past. The thought of her sacrificing herself to a nightmare to save her friend; it doesn’t seem

right.

I lift a hand to my chest and scratch at the place above my heart. TJ follows my movements with his eyes then raises inquisitive eyebrows.

“It’s wrong, what we’re doing,” I tell him. “Using her as bait to get to her father.”

“We’re not using her as bait — she’s going there anyway. And since when did you develop a conscience?” TJ looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, then shakes his head in disbelief.

“You growing soft on me, Hunter?”

“You wouldn’t know soft if it slapped you in the face,” I bite back, falling onto one of the beds and stretching my body out. “I’ll be ready to roll in thirty minutes.”

* * *

We drive through the streets, edging toward our destination, TJ riding shotgun. Luna sits in the back looking quietly out the window. No one is in the mood for small talk. When I ask, she shoots off her friend Nadia’s address and I stop the car in an alley four blocks from her home. I have no doubt that Castillo is still there waiting for his daughter to show up.

I hop out of the car and pop the boot, reaching in for the duffel bags. TJ joins me, until we’re standing side by side looking down at the array of weapons. Luna stands beyond us, watching on with interest as we tuck guns into our waistbands and load up our rifles. When I look at her, an unexpected question passes silently between us. She’s very curious as to who we are and why we’ve come loaded like an armory. This, she did not see coming.

“Do I want to know?” she asks.

“No, probably not.”

It’s answer enough for her, because she purses her lips and says nothing before she turns away and starts walking back to the car. I stop her with one word when I call her name. She turns and faces me, her expression indecipherable.

“You know this will come down to kill or be killed,” I tell her. “How comfortable are you with that?”

“Very.”

* * *

The SUV rolls to a stop a few hundred feet away and Luna points toward her friend Nadia’s house. It’s a single storey bungalow with a slanted ceiling and a wraparound porch. It’s small, efficient, and the only way to describe it is ‘cute’. There are two SUVs in the vicinity — one in the driveway and one on the road. Luna tells us that Nadia doesn’t have a car.

“Assume ten men,” TJ says, checking the rounds in his gun again. I know he feels like he doesn’t have much to live for since his wife died and he embarked on this journey of vengeance, but I doubt he’d be willing to just lay down and lie at the feet of ten men. I wonder if he has a death wish.

“Ten of them to two of us,” I mutter, bitterly. We shouldn’t have come without back up. I could have so easily called in some of our own men. Instead, we’re parked out here like sitting ducks.

We sit contemplating our entry into the house when two men walk out of the front

and stand on the porch. They're laughing and mimicking vulgar sexual actions with their hands, which tells me something must be going on inside. I hate to think what condition Nadia is in. I hear Luna shift uncomfortably in her seat, and instinctively, I know that she's thinking the same thing.

The men light up cigarettes and inhale, and I see our opening. Luna already has one hand on the door and she's about to lurch out of the car and cross to Nadia's house.

"Stay still, Luna. Once they go back inside, we'll cross the road and make our way toward the house. You'll knock; we'll take either side of the house and start capping."

She throws me an unsure look, then nods. She's on board and I release the breath I'd been holding. "One last thing," I tell her. "The objective here is to get both you and Nadia out, okay?"

She's stoic as she nods in my direction, then turns to watch the men go back into the house. Luna gets out of the car and walks toward the house. We run ahead and take our places on either side of the house, and I place myself under the first window I come to. The first chance one of us gets, we put a bullet in Castillo. We've also agreed that we won't leave either of the girls behind. It's a morals game now; we can't be just as bad as he is. So it's kill him, rescue the girls, and leave this Godforsaken town. Although I know things probably won't go as smoothly as they have in my mind. Somebody's bound to get hurt. Someone will definitely get killed. And there's going to be a whole lot of damage once we're through with the Castillo cartel.

THE JEKYLL

I'm under an open window. And I don't like what I hear. The low moans of a woman in pain, obviously delirious. The heavy grunting of men. One, then the other. So rapidly, right after each other. I close my eyes and swallow back the bile I feel rising up my throat. A hazy red cloud covers my eyes, and it's like I'm out of my body looking down at what's happening around me.

The gauzy curtain flies back and forth in the wind, scraping against the window frame. I feel nauseous listening to the woman's painful groans and I don't know how much longer I can tamp down this anger before I unleash it on the Castillo gang. Which may not be such a bad thing — my anger might just be the rage we need to get us through this.

There's a knock on the door, loud enough for me to hear and loud enough for the grunting to stop. Low voices speak, before the stomping of boots go toward the door.

"The prodigal daughter has returned!" One of the men bellows. He sounds too young, too brash to be Castillo. "Come in, baby. Wanna join the fun?"

I listen carefully. Luna is quiet, before I imagine her eyes falling on her friend, because her feet patter hurriedly across the floor and she screams at the men asking them what they did to her.

"Are you fucking crazy!" she screams. "There's six of you against one defenseless woman? You're disgusting! Where's my father?"

Luna is telling us how many men she can see.

“You’re just in time to join the party, Lulu,” one of the men laughs.

“Where’s my father?”

Her father must have been elsewhere in the house, because I hear him as he comes into the room, clapping his hands together slowly.

“Welcome back, mi hija.”

His words are forceful, angry. And I know his retribution will be lethal.

“How could you do this?” she spits, her words venomous.

“Do what, Luna? I haven’t even started.”

“Why am I not surprised?” she spits. She’s mighty brave to go up against the likes of her father.

I hear a sharp pop and I know that’s the signal I’m waiting on from Attila. I rise and look through the window. One of the men is down and the room breaks out into chaos. I aim and shoot at two of the men, capping them in the knees. Luna throws herself onto her friend, covering her body to prevent any stray bullets from hitting her.

The men shout at each other, their guns raised and aimed at the windows, chaotic voices rising above the noise of gunfire. I duck beneath the window, taking cover as a stream of bullets comes flying at the window. I hear the same across the other side of the house and hope that Attila has the foresight to move out of the way. There is more gunfire and screaming, smoke rising from within the house. I chance a glance through

the window, but can't see through the fog descending on the room, then narrowly miss a flying bullet as it comes my way.

In the distance, I'm aware of the faint sound of a car motor turning over as doors slam shut and tires squeal down the road. And just as soon as it started, the din dies down until I can hear nothing but the quiet hum of the neighbor's air conditioning unit a few feet away.

I rise again, look through the window, and I can vaguely make out the bodies laying strewn against the floor. It looks like we hit the majority of them. I make my way around the back of the house until I find Attila, his shoulder grazed, pulling himself from the ground. The front of his T-shirt is soaked with blood where the bullet has nicked him.

At the front of the house, we reload our guns before kicking the door open and entering the house. Four men lay dead on the ground. Nadia barely gasps for breath as she holds on to the last thread of life, her naked almost lifeless body trembling with fear. It's a sight I know is going to take me a long time to forget. I find a throw on a nearby sofa and grab it, covering her body until she's decent. Her flat eyes look up at me, her crystal orbs vacant of life, as tears stream down the side of her face. In the midst of her horror, this one little act is the only kind of mercy she is afforded.

"Castillo is gone," Attila seethes. "He's taken Luna."

I bend over Nadia, wrap the throw around her properly, then lift her into my arms.

"We've lost one," I tell him. "We're not going to lose the other."

"There'll be questions at the hospital," he reminds me. Arizona is not our usual stomping grounds. We may have reach in many places, but this is unfamiliar territory to us. He's right; I know he is. But I won't leave the woman here to die. Her face has

been beaten, swollen maliciously, cuts and bruises already forming at her temple. I won't subject her to any more torture.

"I won't leave her here," I tell him. "You can go your own way if you want, but I won't leave her."

I couldn't save Sisely, but I sure as hell won't let another woman die on my watch. Not if I can help it. I cradle her in my arms as I walk toward our SUV and slide her in to the back seat. Attila relents and tells me he knows someone who may be able to help. He calls his friend Dante Accardi, a man I've heard plenty about but never had occasion to meet, then directs me where to drive.

It's just over an hour before we get to a clinic, where we're met at the door by a doctor in a coat and a nurse with a wheel chair. I kick the chair away and carry Nadia into the clinic, setting her down on the operating table as the doctor indicates.

"Will she be okay?" I ask, as the doctor frowns down at her.

He gives me a long look. He wants to ask what happened, but he knows he shouldn't. He won't get answers. They never do. And those that do soon realize they were better off not knowing.

ATTILA

The Jekyll and I wait outside Nadia's room waiting for some news. It may be selfish but all I can think about is that the more time that passes, the further away Luna gets. I didn't even contemplate that we might lose her. That just wasn't in the cards. But now that it's happened, a deep, dark anxiety rears its head, threatening to bulldoze everything in its path.

"I know what you're thinking," he says, looking up at me from his chair as I continue to pace up and down the hospital corridor. I stop, turn to face him, and wait for him to continue.

"You're thinking that we've lost her."

How the fuck could he possibly know that?

"Well, she's gone, isn't she?"

I'm angry and I'm spiteful. Things haven't exactly gone the way I planned, and shit's probably going to hit the fan once Caleph finds out everything that's happened. I know I dropped the ball on this one, but I can't get stuck in what's happened. I need to figure out how to get past this and find our footing again.

The Jekyll stands and faces me. He tucks his hands in his pockets and lifts his shoulders in a shrug, which he holds then exhales as he fixes me with curious eyes.

“You know, you never really told me what happened between you two.”

I don't say anything. I won't insult him by lying, yet my silence pretty much answers his question. He stares at me quietly for the longest time before I turn away, unable to hold his gaze.

“At any rate,” he starts. “I know exactly where Luna is.”

* * *

The Jekyll tells me that he knew something like this might happen and had accounted for every eventuality, especially knowing the sort of man that Coyin Castillo is. There are things about the man that I apparently am not aware of. Yet some things still that neither of us could possibly know — Luna lived with the man, so she'd be the best judge of the sort of man he is, but she didn't seem to be a fan. Even if he is her father.

“When you left us to settle the motel bill,” The Jekyll starts, bringing me back to the conversation. “I spoke with Luna. She wouldn't let you see it, but she was terrified of going back to her father. I gave her a tracker and showed her how to use it.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because I promised we'd come looking for her if it came to that.”

“She's not our responsibility,” I remind him, a false sense of bravado in my voice. Even I can admit to myself the shallowness of my words. She may not be our responsibility, but even criminals live by a code of morals.

“She became our responsibility the minute she got into that car after the bar. We picked her up from there to protect her. And when she was taken at Nadia's house, we failed to protect her.”

He's not trying to sell me anything. He's saying it like it is, and I know that every word he says is right, because they reach into the deepest recesses of my brain and tell me so. It's morally wrong to throw her to the wolves then wash our hands of her. That's on a normal day. But the fact that I already feel the loss of her tells me I'm not willing to let this go as easily as getting on a plane and going back to France. Or heading back to Seattle. Or any one of the many other places where I often lay my head. I've been a nomad all my life, hopping from one country to another, from one problem to the next, cleansing the earth of the scum invading it. But for the first time, I have the overwhelming urge to stand still. To stop running and just be. Just stay. Without having to think about where my next landing will be.

"The tracker on now?"

"It's on. The receiver is in the car."

"What if they find it?" I ask.

This is the next complication that we have to think about. We have to consider that they may find the tracker and switch it off. We could lose Luna, with no-way of ever finding her. It has taken years between us to even get a whiff of Castillo — there's no way we can find him if he disappeared on us now.

"They won't," he assures me. "I sewed it into her clothes. She knows not to wash that shirt and to keep it with her at all times."

I nod, somewhat reassured. For some reason, the thought of not knowing where she is at any given time doesn't sit well with me. I step away and place my hands at the back of my head like a cushion, wondering how we came to be standing here in this hospital. How we even came to be in this predicament.

"I have to call Caleph," I tell him. He gives me a short nod and watches as I walk

away to speak with my best friend.

“I really didn’t want to bother you with this,” I say, after I’ve laid out all the details for him. How we came to be at the same bar with Luna and her friend. How she was accosted outside the bar and her harasser shot. Her getting in the car with us to get away from her father’s men. And then the phone call that ended it all and everything that came afterward.

“So you have no idea where Castillo has gone?” he asks. When what he really wants to know is how we could’ve been so close yet let him get away.

“We don’t know where he is, but we can know.”

“How?”

“The girl. We put a tracker on her.”

“Probably signing her death warrant,” Caleph mutters. He’s not impressed. He doesn’t know the girl, wants Coyin Castillo’s head on a stake, but he would never take his anger out on the female offspring of his enemy. He may be many things, but Caleph Rojas would never cross that line. Ever.

20

LUNA

“Put a,” my father spits. He sits on the other end of the backseat, but he might as well be sitting right by my side for all the fire flaring from him and burning into my soul. He always was a callous man. “Who were those men, hmmm?” He hums. “You have an army now, perra?” His evil eyes slice right through me, as though they alone could bury me with their power.

An arm shoots out until he has his hand buried in my hair, the strands fisted in his fingers as he yanks. My head snaps to the side awkwardly, a sharp pain radiating down the column of my neck. I slant my eyes at him defiantly, which only makes him pull harder. All I see is a monster. Nothing he does to me now could be any worse than what he’s already done. Things so despicable, I would only gladly be the one to put that bullet in his head.

“Answer me!” he roars.

What can I tell him when I don't even know who those men were? Sure, they gave their names, but how do I even know they were telling the truth? And even so, why would I ever tell him what he wanted to know? I definitely wasn't in the habit of helping him in any way. I wouldn't start now.

Instead of answering him, I spit in his face, which causes him to rear back and slap me. But it's not enough, because my father's arm stretches out again until he has his hand wound around my throat and he's squeezing the life out of me. I feel my eyes bulge as he squeezes and I struggle to breathe. He can't have come all the way out to get me himself just to strangle me.

The driver, his eyes obviously on our unfolding battle, swerves across the road, then screeches to a stop, sending us back and forth on the backset. My father's fingers unfurl from around my neck, his angry face all I can see. I try my hardest to avoid touching him as I take in deep breaths. I bury myself in the door as he curses the driver and gets his gun out. My breath catches in surprise as I watch the driver's eyes in the rearview mirror. There is only hardness there as my father points the gun into the back of his head.

I press my eyes shut as memories come flooding back and I resort to my self-preservation, shutting everything out. The gun clicks, echoing a calamity in the chamber as silence follows before I squeeze my eyes harder, forcing them to stay closed. I can't hear myself above the roar of my own voice as I scream. I let out a howl so loud and so savage that the SUV shakes with the strength of my pain. I'm near hysterical with all my screaming as I bend my head to my knees and cover myself with my hands, drowning out the world. I don't ever want to open my eyes again. I want to stay this way forever, trapped in my cocoon, from which there's no escape.

I curl up in a ball against the door, my head safely held between my arms, as the car starts to move again. I try to breathe, small shallow breaths to keep going. This is all I

can manage until we get to where we're going. Knowing that my father is a monster. He's a tyrant I won't ever be able to escape. And he probably already has a bullet with my name inscribed on it.

* * *

When we arrive at the tarmac, I see that the driver is still alive and kicking. My father's gun must have been empty. Either that or he was playing Russian Roulette again. All the times I'd wished that the gun in his hand would go off and he'd shoot himself never came to fruition. It was too great an ask. Because he is still here, and he is still making everyone around him miserable.

"Out!" he hisses, as the car comes to a stop where the plane waits.

We're probably headed back to Mexico. Not that I expected him to confirm that one way or the other. There's no way my father would ever tell me where we're going. He'd never make anything easy for me. And he sure as hell would never do anything that wasn't in his own best interest. Selfish bastard.

My mind wanders back to Nadia. A deep, raging red fury coats my eyes as her image floats before my eyes. The disgusting things they did to her. The torture they subjected her to. I hated leaving her there in the condition she was in, not being able to do anything for her and not knowing whether or not she would make it. I only hope that Attila and TJ are okay and that their humanity stretched to my friend and helping her get the medical attention she needed. Maybe not; their humanity may only extend so far, but I could hope. Especially after everything they did for me.

I stand looking up at the plane. This is the last barrier between me and freedom. Once I get on it, there'll be no coming back for me. My fate will lie in the hands of another, and surely I'll be destined for a life of horror. If I even make it out alive.

I can't believe that he's still been looking for me all this time. I've been gone three years, and yet he was still searching for me. To what end? It can't be anything good. Nestor may not have waited around for me like he and my father had agreed, but I'm sure my father hasn't wasted any time in finding another use for me. Things could've gotten much, much worse in the time I'd been away; I just didn't know how much worse they could have possibly gotten. And I'm not one to delude myself into believing that he's missed me. His only daughter. I know I always reminded him of her. And I know all he ever wanted to do was forget.

"Move," my father orders, pushing me toward the plane. His fingers are short and stubby, but they may as well be sharp points as they dig into my flesh, prodding me along. I've hated him for the longest time. And now I just loathe him. Even that emotion, I realize, is too much for him. It expends too much energy for me to feel anything for him.

21

THE JEKYLL

Nadia falls into a coma. It's probably a good thing; the trauma she's suffered at the hands of Coyin Castillo and his men is the type of trauma that not many people can recover from. Her only hope for survival is her willpower and the coma that will keep her brain intact as it heals itself.

"I can't fucking believe this!" I mutter, as we leave the clinic. She'll be out for hours, perhaps days, and there's nothing more we can do but wait. And I refuse to stand idly by while Coyin Castillo gets further and further away. There's nothing more we can do for Nadia, but there's a whole lot that needs to be done for us to find Luna and take out Castillo. For once and for all.

We head to a local motel and check in, then take turns to shower, change, and finally

regroup.

“Dante Accardi is sending soldiers,” Attila says a short while later, looking up from his phone. “We need to meet them at a private airstrip in a couple of hours.”

“Can they be trusted?” I ask him.

He looks up at me like I’ve grown two heads and reminds me that no one questions Dante Accardi’s resources. Dante Accardi, I’m told, is one of those rare species that has everything. He’s that man that didn’t ask for anything but got it all. And he took that and turned it into an empire. Then he married another empire, and now he lives in a kingdom. Literally.

The only remaining son of Don Durian Accardi, he ascended his throne after the death of his older brother and his father’s ailing health. Apparently, dragged away from the priesthood. The saint became a sinner, and the moniker always stuck. Somewhere in the midst of his taking over Seattle, he met and married the only heir to the Murray dynasty, which made the Accardis unstoppable. If they had been a force to be reckoned with before, now they were a powerful, untouchable powerhouse.

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He rules Seattle with a fair but iron fist, and he's taken his business to such heights that he has every organization worth its weight under his thumb. By the time Attila stops talking, I'm in awe of the enigmatic man who seems more legend than human.

And this is entirely why I am floored when the plane touches down and the man himself walks off the plane. I know without being told that it's him by the way he carries himself and the way the air shifts around him. Almost like it's parting to make way for him. It's easy to understand why so many have joined the Dante Accardi fan club. The man breathes power. Then he exhales it like a dragon does fire. He's larger than life as he steps off the plane and walks easily down the stairs, his suit jacket flapping in the breeze. He's flanked by several men, who stay an arm's length distance away from him. There's a casual yet reserved air about him as he walks toward us and shakes Attila's hand then takes mine as we are introduced.

"You're the man who saved my brother's life," he says, smiling, but his smile doesn't reach his eyes. I hear that's reserved only for his significant other.

"By default," I correct.

"Yes, I heard that, too. But you saved his life nonetheless, and I'm grateful."

Dante and Caleph grew up together. And when Caleph's parents were murdered, by Castillo, no less, Durian Accardi took Caleph under his wing and made him the best version of himself before he allowed him to go out into the big wide world on his own. This is how Dante and Caleph came to refer to each other as brothers.

I nod in acknowledgement, but I'm humbled. That a great man such as himself should

be thanking me. A former construction manager who found himself on the wrong side of the law after his wife was murdered.

It's Attila who breaks the moment, stepping forward as he directs his words toward Dante.

"I wasn't expecting you," he says, and he's almost defensive about Dante's presence. Almost as though he feels like Dante was sent to babysit him so he doesn't get into any more trouble.

"Whatever it is you're thinking, don't," Dante warns. "Caleph doesn't know I'm here, and you know I'd rather not leave Kingsley's side. But it would break Caleph if anything happened to you. That's why I'm here."

Attila relents, sighing slowly then looking up at the sky as dark clouds start rolling in.

"We'd better go if we're to make any headway," Dante says, turning back toward the plane. "Come on, I'll introduce you to everyone."

* * *

Dante owns an army. And I mean that in every sense of the word. Every man on that plane has been meticulously selected and looks like he belongs with the Navy Seals or the military. They are all built like tanks, their hair shaved low and their bodies tense yet ready for attack.

When he takes off his jacket and drapes it over the back of his seat, I see the holster he's strapped over his shirt. It's a double holster that criss crosses his chest and then against his back, allowing him four handguns at any given time; two across his chest and one on either hip. The back of his pants bulges at the waistband and I know he's got a fifth gun there. I won't even hazard a guess as to how many he has tucked

against his legs. As I hear it, he's been shot several times, but he's like a cat with nine lives. Every time he gets slayed, he gets right back up again. I don't doubt that the amount of lead he's carrying around has saved him on more than one occasion. The man grins when he sees me looking at his armor.

"Gifts from my wife," he explains. "Because she's threatened if I get myself killed, she'll drag me out of hell to kill me again."

22

ATTILA

Caleph and I became friends when we were fourteen. We'd gone to the same school since kindergarten, but our paths had never had occasion to cross. It was only as I was standing at my parent's gravesite, and he was standing at his, that we both looked up and watched each other across the graveyard. I stood by the grave on my own; he was surrounded by a few men in suits.

We lost our parents on the same day. Mine had died in a car accident. His parents had been brutally murdered, and there were whispers that they'd been embroiled in a mafia turf war. I didn't care either way. All I knew was that my parents were now gone and I was on my own. Completely alone. Whilst Caleph, although the last remaining member of his family and also alone, was safe under the wings of his father's old friend, Durian Accardi, who insisted he go and stay with him.

I was introduced to the Accardis by extension of Caleph's relationship with Dante Accardi, who had become like a brother to him. And the three of us were always up to some sort of mischief or other, forming an unbreakable bond that we still shared to this day. When Caleph opened his first munitions factory, I was right there beside him serving as his right hand. And during the expansion, I was still there; I'd always been there in some capacity of another. Even now, I was somehow intrinsically

entwined in all of Caleph's assets, after investing the bulk of my small inheritance in his ventures. Some were more mine than his, but munitions would always be his baby.

"So bring me up to speed on the situation," Dante says, as he sits in the chair opposite me. I rattle off all the facts to date, noting the way his brows rise in surprise when we tell him about the tracker.

"You don't want her family to find that tracker," he says, and it's also the one fear I've had throughout this entire ordeal.

"They won't," The Jekyll pipes up.

"How can you know that?"

"The girl is smart. We spoke about what she should do if there was even the remotest possibility that the tracker could be found."

"Which is?"

I turn to The Jekyll, fix him with a curious look. And for some reason, I'm fuming. When did he even get the time to have a whole conversation with her? I'm suddenly jealous of this time he had with her.

Luna's face flashes before me. Her dark blond hair with its sun kissed highlights and almond eyes as she set her assessing gaze on me, lighting me up from the inside out. That brief interlude when she scorched my skin with her fingers; the one time in my life when I aimed for casual yet now gulped back my regret.

"When the fuck did you have the time to discuss all this with her?" I ask angrily. Just knowing that he had a private conversation with her is making my blood thicken with

anger. Dante clicks his tongue and his eyebrows rise in surprise at my sudden outburst.

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“What’s gotten into you?” The Jekyll asks. “You couldn’t wait to ditch her, now you’re getting all defensive on me because we had a damn conversation?”

I turn away in disgust, although I don’t know if it’s out of anger at him or myself that I’m affected by them having their own little moment. I know what happened between Luna and me, but I never stopped to consider if anything happened between them. I rack my brain for any memory I have of leaving them alone together long enough for something to happen.

But no. There was never a time that I left them for more than ten or fifteen minutes. But then, a lot could happen in ten minutes.

“What really happened between you two?” I ask. I’m genuinely curious to know, but I wonder what it will do to me if he actually tells me that something did happen. My heart beats out of my chest as I watch him carefully for a reaction. Would I even know if he’s telling me half truths?

“I could ask you the same question, Attila,” he spits. “Because your anger outweighs the circumstances. And for the record, nothing happened between us.”

I watch as he gets up from his seat and heads toward the back of the plane, where he takes a seat with one of the mercenaries and buckles his seatbelt.

“This is not like you, Attila,” Dante points out, sitting back in his seat.

“I don’t like secrets, nor surprises.”

“I don’t believe he meant either. He considered the situation and took the necessary action required to remedy the situation.”

“The fact that we got into the car and drove for almost an hour, and neither brought up their conversation. That’s where I’m coming from. Why keep it from me?”

“What’s really going on here, Attila?” Dante asks. He’s not one to pry, and I know he’s just coming from a place of brotherly concern. But I don’t even know how to answer that. The Jekyll was right; my anger is not justified. He did what he thought best at the time, and for whatever reason, he kept it from me. It could be any one of a number of reasons, all of which I didn’t want to harp on.

When I don’t answer, Dante looks out the window momentarily, as though weighing his words, before turning back to me.

“You know. It’s okay not to have control all of the time,” he tells me. “I know you like to be in control of every situation. And that’s good... most of the time. But it’s okay to sometimes let go and let the chips fall where they may.”

“Like I said, I don’t like surprises.”

“But sometimes it’s the surprises that keep us going and give us something worth fighting for.”

23

LUNA

He takes me to the house in Tulum. Back to the house of horrors. My body tenses and locks as soon as the car comes to a stop outside the soaring walls of the fortress. It’s near impenetrable, its sandstone walls towering high above the cliffs overlooking the

Caribbean Sea. If not for the nightmares I had of this place, I'd otherwise describe it as idyllic. All things considered, it is anything but.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask, my voice small and weak. I can't take my eyes off the house that holds so many of my childhood memories. I turn my face to look at my father. I can't interpret his expression as he stares straight through me, his eyes hard, devoid of all emotion.

"Not sure why you wouldn't want to be back where it all started," he says, his voice reaching me as though from far away. "This is the house you were born in."

My face blanches as heat envelopes me, starting from my head and moving through my body. There's no escaping the meaning of his words. I was born in this house, and I would probably die in this house.

"I don't want to be here," I tell him.

"That's not up to you to decide," he hisses. "You will do as you're told."

"Where are my brothers?" I ask, desperately grasping at something. Anything that could save me from the fate that awaits me. My father does not have good intentions when it comes to me.

"Shut up and get out of the car," he orders, digging his gun into my side. I turn my face away from him, but not before I catch a glimpse of the driver watching in the rear view mirror, his eyes hard as he watches the interaction. It's the same driver from before; the one who narrowly escaped my father's bullet.

"I don't want to be here," I gasp, as I fling the door open and step out.

I start to run.

I run as fast as I can, heading for the cliff. There's nowhere else to go, but if I have to throw myself off the cliff to my death, then that's what I'll do. But I won't let him destroy me again. I run, and I don't stop until a shot rings out, stopping me in my tracks. I skid to a halt when his voice rings out and turn to face him, my arms raised in surrender.

“Take one more stepperra, and I will not hesitate to put a bullet in your back and feed you to the hyenas. I will deprive you even of a burial. Then I will do the same to your beloved brothers.”

“You vile, evil man,” I spit out.

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“If you die, it will be at my hands, and my hands alone. I. OWN. YOU.”

* * *

Nothing about the house has changed. The halls are still cold and dark and I know that ghosts rest within each crevice. Just like they did when I was younger. I may have been gone for years, but the ghosts still live here. I can feel them in the very marrow of my bones.

“Why have you brought me here?” I ask, when what I really want to know is what his intentions are. What does he plan to do to me? Any delusions I have that the tracker will work and that TJ and Attila will make the trek to Mexico to rescue me from my own father are quickly dashed as he directs me down the long hallways and down the steps that lead into the dungeons. I couldn’t bring myself to even play here when I was a child. The chill alone, which carried with it the scent of dead, tortured bodies was enough to keep me away.

My father leads me into a cell and pushes me in when I linger a little too long at the door. He tells me to make myself comfortable then locks the door and walks away without another look back. I push away from the bars and fall onto the wooden plank that serves as a bench, folding my hands between my knees.

I’d had three years of freedom, living away from his tyrannical hold over me. Granted, I’d always had to look over my shoulder, but they were three wondrous years, nonetheless. I’d been a normal girl, studying and working and basically just living without the constraints of a father who only sought to control me. And the added bonus, I wasn’t being pimped off to a man much older than myself who had

struck a financial deal with my father.

I allow my mind to cast back a few days to when I met Attila and TJ. Something is niggling at the back of my mind. No one stalks a woman, rescues her at the most opportune time, then puts their life on the line with guns and bullets trying to protect her. Then gives the woman a tracker so they can rescue her yet again. Unless... what did they actually want? And why had they come into my life? If they wanted to hurt me, surely they would have done so when they had the chance? No, this was something more, and I had to find out what it was.

I continued to let my mind think up wild theories. I didn't have anything they wanted, or they would've taken it. But obviously, they wanted to know where I was because I could lead them to something or someone. My mind thought up all sorts of exaggerated theories, not least of which was that they'd needed me to lead them to Nadia. But that didn't make any sense, because they would've seen her at the club that night, and they would've acted on that scenario then. It had to be something else.

"Think, Luna, think," I urge myself.

What were the chances that they would track me here? And if they did, what would they find? Would the thing they wanted be found wherever I was? What would they find if they came here to Tulum? Me. My father. A host...

I stop thinking. I clear my mind and retrace my steps.

My father.

Of course.

That was it.

But why?

Granted, he had more enemies than the President, but how did they even know him? What were their ties, if any, to him? And where the fuck were my brothers?

24

ATTILA

The tracker is in Tulum, Mexico.

“Any known residences there?” Dante asks. “It would be handy to get blueprints for the location before we arrive.”

The Jekyll looks up from his laptop and regards us carefully. “The tracker has been static for the past couple of hours.” His eyes focus on me and I realize there’s something he doesn’t want to articulate.

“What is it?” I’m guarded, weary, and I don’t miss his hesitation before he speaks.

“No movement. And her location is the edge of a cliff overlooking the Caribbean Ocean.”

The words slice through me, right down the middle, until there are two parts to a whole and I am destroyed. Shattered. I wasn’t made to give a damn. About anything. But now I find myself caring what happens to her and I suddenly understand why I’ve always kept my emotions securely locked away behind a thin, unscalable wall. This fucking hurts. Caring hurts. And it’s not a feeling I want to become accustomed to.

“That could mean anything,” Dante says, looking at me. The way his eyes penetrate

my soul tells me he knows the demons I'm fighting. I hate that I've become so transparent. I slept with the girl one fucking time and it's like I've grown a conscience.

"It could also mean she's at the bottom of those rocks about to be washed away by the sea," I snipe back. "Not that it matters either way." The tremor in my voice betrays my words. The Jekyll rears back, regards me with disgusted eyes, then scoffs and turns away. He's really taken a liking to the girl. Fucking bleeding heart.

"You don't mean that," Dante says, his way of telling me to stop talking and get a grip on myself. "Regardless of who she is, she's a human and she's a woman. You know what the rules are."

Yes, I know what the rules are. But rules are meant to be broken. They're broken every day. But I can't allow myself to give a fuck. Doing so could be my ruination.

I straighten my body as I rise from the bench, turning my face away from the flickering light on the tracking device. I wonder how The Jekyll has access to such equipment; it's my understanding that his background is in construction, not security.

"You're being a little hard on him, don't you think?" Dante says, coming to sit beside me. He chucks his chin in The Jekyll's direction. I follow his eyes to the man I've spent the past two weeks with and watch as he jokes with some of the soldiers in the back of the plane. If I had to admit it, even if only to myself, The Jekyll is anything but what his name States. He is one of the most humane people I've ever come across. He's intelligent and he's a warrior. But we're just not on the same page.

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“There’s no one else other than you or Caleph I would’ve chosen to be with on this mission,” I tell him. “But The Jekyll comes in a close third.”

“That’s your underhanded attempt at a compliment?”

“I can trust him. But he’s too invested emotionally.”

“He has to be, Attila. It’s obviously the only thing that’s kept him going in his search for Castillo. His feelings for his dead wife; that’s what will keep him focused enough to get this job done. One way or another.”

“He needs to switch off,” I argue.

Dante shakes his head and looks at me sympathetically. I’ve obviously misunderstood something about life that he and The Jekyll understand very well.

“If anyone ever hurt Kingsley the way his wife was killed, I would burn the whole damn country down. I don’t know how the man is actually still functioning.”

When Dante says this, I’m humbled into lowering my head and saying no more. All the men playing a part in my life have been affected in one way or another by a woman. Caleph has found Ariadne, and although he’s still the strong, powerful businessman, he now has a soft spot reserved just for the woman who shot into his life like a typhoon. In finding Ariadne, it’s like he’s complete and he’s come full circle. Dante, too, did a 180 when he met his beautiful wife Kingsley. He became a beast when it came to defending and protecting what was his after she was taken by a madman. All this even before she became his wife. There’s a light in Dante’s eyes

which doesn't often touch men like us. Men who reside in the dark. That light was put there by Kingsley. The same way that Ariadne put the light in Caleph's eyes. Even The Jekyll, who lost his wife prematurely, had a darkness in him that stemmed from a light placed in him by his deceased wife. He at least had something to occupy him, albeit vengeance. But he had still been privy to that light that fulfilled him. Who was I to tell him he had to turn off his emotions in order to deal Coyin Castillo and his ilk their death blow? Who was I to deprive him of doing things the way he wanted to do them? At his own pace, in his own way. The way I saw it, he'd been waiting five long years for his taste of revenge, and this was the closest he'd ever gotten to it. Getting to that final finish line, whilst still doing things his way, was probably precisely what he needed in order to move on. To have the closure he needed. And properly mourn the death of his wife. But he wouldn't do it at the expense of another.

"There's movement."

I look up at The Jekyll as he comes into my line of view. I don't even know his real name. We have a common goal, one that may get either or both of us killed, and yet I don't even know his name. I don't know his story — not all of it, anyway. And I have no idea what he'll do or what will happen once we complete our mutual mission. But at the moment, he's a trusted ally, and I need to treat him as such.

The Jekyll lowers the tracker until it sits between us and I watch the screen as the tiny red dot moves back and forth, like a pendulum.

"Could they have found the tracker?" I ask him. I try not to be infuriated when he grins back at me wickedly.

"Doubtful. I think this means our girl has resumed her irritating habit of pacing again."

LUNA

I'm in a prison cell on my own, in the dark. It's cold. And unforgiving. There are so many bad memories in this house. So many tortured souls, and I don't know why he's brought me here. I've always loved the area, but never this house. This monstrosity which will always serve as a shrine to my mother.

I have to believe that they'll come for me. It's all I have left to cling to. So I sit and I hope and I pray that they are invested in finding me — no matter the reason — and that they come soon.

It's cold in the dungeon, and I'm still wearing the clothes I wore yesterday. My father hasn't given me any food or water, and my throat is scratchy with dryness. I could expire in this very cell and no one would ever know. Would anyone even care? Nadia — if she's still alive — would never know what became of me. And there'd be no one else to mourn me. No one that cares enough to shed a tear over me or say a prayer that I'm in a better place.

It's so, so cold at night that my teeth chatter against each other in the absence of a blanket or any warmth. My father is a cruel, cruel man. He makes the devil look simply angelic.

I lay my body against the wooden plank of the makeshift bed, made this way specifically to make a person as uncomfortable as possible. "No comfort for the weary", I remember him saying when I was a child and he would emerge from the belly of the house, his lips twisted into a cruel, wicked gash meant to pass for a smile. I curl my body in on itself, seeking warmth from my bound energy as I fold into myself. If my father doesn't kill me, the cold certainly will. My head starts to hurt, a sharp icy pain radiating against my scalp. It rattles and thunders between the layers of tissue and blood, the pain a dull, unforgiving ache.

I convince myself that I should have kept running towards the cliff. I should have. That fate would have been a far sight better than the one I'm facing now. Death by suicide would have been more courageous than death by my father's hand.

My mind flutters and dives into the past, going back in time as it recalls the horror of what my father is actually capable of. How does a child come back from watching their father kill their mother? How do I unsee the unforgivable? Undo the unthinkable? And after all is said and done, knowing what I saw with my own two eyes, he actually tried to convince me that I'd imagined the whole thing.

Singlehandedly, and I don't care what he says, because I know what I saw, he had managed to deprive me of the scent of my mother. Her smell, her perfume. Her presence. I would grow up without a mother, literally an orphan because he didn't even act like a father. I would grow up without a role model, that strongest of female connections. And I still didn't know why he'd done it. One could say it was a momentary lapse in judgment. A moment of anger. A bad decision. One of a whole lot more he was bound to make. But how, really, could you profess to love someone so completely, then be the perpetrator of such a heinous crime? How?

Their fights were louder and more frequent than ever, my father's raised voice booming above my mother's fragile one. She was beautiful, my mother. What one would call 'ethereal'. With her dark blonde hair and gorgeous whiskey colored eyes that beguiled. I would see the way that people stared at her. Even I looked at her in awe.

Whenever anybody asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would always inevitably say, "I want to be just like my mommy". Little did I know then that I would probably never get that chance. Not with the life and the destiny that was written for me. No, I would rot in this hell.

That day, my father's voice was exceedingly loud. It was more like a roar, but my

mother's strangled sobs are what finally made me walk toward their room. Their door was open. I stood in the doorway, looking in as though in a trance. My mother was lying on the bed, my father hovering above her prone body, a knife in his hand. His knuckles were white. He was so angry. So venomous.

I heard my mother. Heard the whimper that escaped her lips. I digested the words that fell from her mouth and drummed through my ears, sealing her fate. Why did she say that? Why would she say that?

"I don't love you," she whispered, her lowered tone a deafening clang to my heart. "I don't love you."

My father, almost as though realizing I stood there, looked up and caught sight of me, his eyes going wide as though something fell into place for him. He finally understood something. I don't know what, but that much was obvious, because his face shuttered, and he was never the same man again.

That day, I lost both my parents. I lost my mother when my father turned back to her and swiped the knife across her throat until she gargled and left this world. And I lost my father as he disappeared into his own misery and became unknown to me.

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I never knew why he did it. He never brought it up, and any time I tried to open the subject with him, he would shut me down so quickly, he'd make my head spin. I was nine at the time, and nothing in the years between then and now had done anything to diminish the pain that I felt.

After that, he found reasons to disappear for long stretches of time, leaving me alone with Maria. She did a good job of looking after me, but she wasn't my mother. He all but ignored me. As though I was there but I wasn't. If faced with my presence, he would look through me, instead of at me. Like he couldn't stand the sight of me. And as he spiraled out of control and continued on his descent into the depravities of hell, I continued to be just another burden on his wicked soul.

26

ATTILA

Luna has four brothers. She's the youngest child, the only girl in a family of men. This is what The Jekyll tells me now. I don't know why I never stopped to ask before, or maybe it was that I didn't care. Or I wasn't listening, which he accuses me of now before he launches into a full scale information dump.

“Enzo, Franco, Danielo and Coyin Junior.”

He rattles off the names of Coyin Castillo's sons, then tells us that he lost sight of them a while back and that's how he ended up watching Luna. She was the only Castillo he could get eyes on.

“You don’t think it’s strange that no one has seen nor heard from them in a while?” Dante asks. The Jekyll shrugs and tells us he doesn’t know what to make of it.

“My interest lays more in how you were able to find the girl if you can’t get a bead on any other family members,” I say, looking at him curiously.

The Jekyll sucks in a breath and bites the inside of his cheek. There’s something he’s not telling me. Something that could probably turn this whole thing on its head.

“I can’t tell you my source.”

“I don’t want a name,” I tell him. “I want what you’re not telling me.”

He pauses for the longest time, before Dante breaks the showdown between our eyes as he clears his throat. The look he sends The Jekyll tells him he needs to talk and he won’t settle for anything less.

“If we’re to work together, all our cards need to be on the table,” Dante says. “That means no secrets.” He turns to me. “That means you can’t touch anyone that led us to the girl or now to the father.”

“He had to have known something for him to go to the trouble of securing a tracking device. What are you not telling us?”

“I only got this far in my search by not telling anyone anything,” The Jekyll explains. “Every little scrap of information I got I held securely until I verified it and the pieces fell into place.”

“I don’t want justifications for anything you’ve done. What do you know that we don’t?”

The Jekyll wipes a hand down his face and shakes his head like he'd rather not be doing this. There is an internal battle going on when he pulls and pushes at the idea of revealing his source.

"I've got the Castillo maid," he finally reveals.

"As in..."

"The maid who's worked for the Castillo family for years; she's also the one who led me to Luna."

"Why would she give her up?"

"She didn't. I fed her some half assed story about wanting to help the girl and she fell for it. Turned out the woman knew the girl needed all the help she could get."

"Help from what?" Dante asks.

"She helped Luna escape the night of her engagement," The Jekyll tells us. "And she did a good job of tipping her off anytime Castillo got a whiff of where she was."

"Why did you put the tracker on her?" I ask him. He's done everything but answer the question that's been searing my skin, itching to get out. I need to know what he knows.

"Luna was honest with us when she told us the story of how her father was forcing her to marry Nestor Gamboa. I spoke with the maid; she verified everything. And when I went to get her clothes, I called Maria; I wanted to know what Castillo was really capable of doing to her daughter."

"And?"

The Jekyll sighs and lets out a strangled gasp before he curses. His intention was to never betray the maid's confidence. But now he realizes he has to.

“Whatever he intends to do with her, it's not good.”

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He says this matter-of-factly as he looks at me out of the corner of his eye.

“What makes you say that?” Dante asks.

“Because she’s not his daughter.”

* * *

It is the last thing I expect to hear. But it explains why Castillo is comfortable selling her, especially as there isn’t any blood relation. But he has gone to extreme lengths to retrieve her; I can’t imagine this is just to fulfil a contract with another business partner.

“If he’s not her father, then who is?” I ask, and it’s all I can think about. The fact that she’s not really a Castillo. Her use to us as a pawn has been moot from the beginning.

“And why does he want her back so bad?”

“To understand that, you need to go back to the beginning,” The Jekyll starts, stirring in his seat. His massive frame is too big for the chair.

I roll my wrist, telling him to get on with it. He is slowly killing me with his dribs and drabs method of spoon feeding us information.

“Luna’s mother had an affair with one of Castillo’s soldiers. Actually, a lieutenant he was quite close to. Luna was a result of that affair. When Castillo found out, he flew into a murderous rage and killed her mother. Then turned the gun on his colleague.

Either he didn't have the heart to destroy Luna, or he saw the bigger picture and decided to keep her around."

"Does Luna know?" I ask.

"She knows only that her father killed her mother, because it happened in front of her. Castillo did a good job of covering it up, but she saw what she saw. She told me when I was showing her how to use the tracker."

"She doesn't know that he's not her father?"

He shakes his head. The girl had a miserable, motherless childhood, and now even as an adult, she was still suffering. No wonder she'd taught herself self defense; it was the only armor she had. The only protection in which to wrap herself when the need called for it.

"How reliable is the maid?" Dante asks. "Can we trust her?"

"She despises Castillo; that's reliable enough in my books."

27

LUNA

I know he's coming because my father's boots thunder down the narrow space in front of the cells like he's a giant on a mission. My hands grip the bars, my desperation licking through the air, as if this will make him open the door and let me out instead of keeping me here like a caged animal. It's what he did to me as a child every time I brought up my mother's death and tried to get past him holding a knife to her throat. He'd lock me up down here until I acquiesced and told him I was mistaken. And he swore if I ever told my brothers, he'd keep me down here until I rotted into the

ground and became nothing but a speck of dust.

I can smell the alcohol on his breath. I rear back, let my hands fall from the cool metal and take a step away from the bars. I feel hopeless and helpless. I don't know how long I've been down here, but it seems like I never left from the first time he put me in here as a child. I know in reality, it can't have been more than one or two days.

"I want to know who those men were back in Arizona and what you were doing with them."

His voice is gruff, scathing. I feel like a child being scolded again. I feel like anything but human. Who treats a person this way?

My breath comes in hitched little gasps as I inhale the stale, musty air. This again. He really wants to know who those men were, and I don't have the answer for him. This, I know, will only make him angrier than he already is.

His bloodshot eyes stare through me, unblinking. He's put on weight since I last saw him, a paunch protruding ridiculously against his shorter frame. I don't know how my brothers and I managed our height with our father being so short.

"Where's Enzo?" I ask. "I want to speak with Enzo."

My eldest brother has always had a soft spot for me. They all had, actually, but Enzo especially had always been my guiding light. He was hard, ruthless, damaged probably beyond repair at our father's hands, but for me, he's always been soft.

"Your brothers don't want to see you," my father spits. "Not after the shame you've brought upon our family name."

"What shame is that, hmmm?" I dare to defy him. "That I chose to live my

lifemyway? That I won't bend to your rules? I'd love to see any one of you accept a marriage to a person you don't want to be with."

"If it's convenient, that's what we do in this business."

"This business. I'm not part of this business."

“Aren’t you? Who werethose men?”

His roar fills the cavernous dungeon, and I can swear I feel the ground shift with his anger. An anger I know all too well. My father has never hesitated when it comes to meting out his retribution. And his vengeance has always been cut-throat and swift. He could so very well annihilate me right here and right now in this very cell. I don’t think he’d even blink. He definitely wouldn’t shed a tear for me.

My mind strays to the time he had four men on their knees in our courtyard, their hands bound behind their backs. Four defenseless men, on their knees, about to meet their deaths. He hadn’t even asked anyone else to do the deed. He had stood behind each man and one by one, put a bullet in the back of their heads until each fell forward and left this world. He had made every one of his men watch, including my brothers. Enzo’s jaw had moved back and forth in anger, standing tall with his eyes fixed on a place beyond the bodies. Franco had stood with his eyes lowered to his feet. Danielo’s hand had started to flicker, a nervous habit he’d always had that my father said made him look weak. Coyin Junior, who hated carrying the namesake, looked through his father as though not really seeing him.

And me. I watched on with a mixture of horror and fury as my father looked up at my window, his eyes challenging me to open my mouth and say anything. He had expected me to be there. I held his gaze, the only one able to do so, my place at the table cemented. I may have been born a girl, but I was the lion amongst the four boys.

* * *

If I had known what the name would do to my father, I would have spit it out from the

beginning. If only to watch him shrivel into himself with the fear I see in his eyes. It is only fleeting, but I see it nonetheless. And I relish it. Because it gives me something.

He doesn't believe my whole story about how the men had been following me around then came to my rescue the night that he had sent his men to bring me back home. He doesn't believe it one bit. Because you can't go from stalking a girl to being her protector, he tells me. It sounds true to my own ears. I still don't know what the men had wanted from me, although I'd had a suspicion, no matter how minuscule, that they'd been after my father. They want him. And nothing could have been truer than that niggling thought after the reaction he displays when I tell him their names.

"Names, Luna. I want names."

He's growing impatient as he watches me pace around the cage after telling my story. I've given him everything but identities. When that's really all he wants to know.

"TJ. Attila."

"Attila?"

His face blanches and his eyes go wide before he is able to revert his expression to the same stoic one he's always had. The name Attila has affected him for some reason. He says nothing as he continues to watch me, no doubt wondering if I'm telling the truth. Obviously, there's something about Attila that's got him concerned. There must be some sort of history there. But I don't know what that history is. And I may never know. If I end up dying down here in this dungeon, I may never know what it is that put that fear in my father's eyes, no matter how temporary.

ATTILA

There are cars waiting for us on the small private airstrip when the plane touches down. We haul what little luggage we have and make our way to the waiting vehicles, with Dante, The Jekyll and me piling into one of the middle cars before the convoy takes off.

“I need you to remember this is Mexico,” Dante says, looking out at the landscape as we fly through the countryside. “Don’t let your guard down; expect the unexpected.”

I look over at The Jekyll, sitting quietly in the passenger seat. We’re that close to Castillo. I can’t imagine that he’s ever been as close as he is now to getting the revenge he’s craved for his wife’s murder. The fact that he’s nearing the end of his journey has left him somewhat jarred; I can sense this in the silence that’s enveloped him. For five years, he’s lived and breathed nothing but Coyin Castillo. It’s all he’s known. What will he do once he’s accomplished what he set out to do? If everything goes to plan, this will be one chapter he’ll be closing, but he’ll have to open another.

“Caleph sends his regards,” Dante says, looking up from his phone. I sit next to him, my hands steady on my knees, but say nothing. I can imagine what Caleph must be feeling right now; we’re so close to his enemy yet he’s so far away. He won’t be able to partake in this final leg of our journey. He won’t be able to witness the satisfaction of putting Coyin Castillo down. I know this is what he’s looked forward to since he was fourteen. I know this is all he’s ever wanted. Until there was more. He may have always wanted to dig Coyin’s grave, but there’s one thing he wants more than that. And that’s to live a long and relatively uneventful life with the love of his life, the woman who’s stolen his heart. The one thing more important to him than driving a dagger through Coyin Castillo’s heart is not losing Ariadne. If he left her to take care of this, she’d know. And she’d never forgive him. She did it once before, but she wouldn’t do it again.

I would make sure Coyin Castillo was destroyed once and for all. I would ensure Caleph's vengeance. As well as The Jekyll's. He deserves that; if it wasn't for him, we probably wouldn't have gotten this far in our search for the man who has stained our lives for so long. I'm nothing if not man enough to admit this.

"You know, I don't even know your name," I say, breaking into The Jekyll's train of thought. He looks back at me, locks his jaw and seems to consider my words.

"TJ, remember?"

He smirks, goading me. I can't deny we don't work well as a team. Because we do. He's the sort of man I would want on my team. The sort of man I know I can trust and depend on. When required, he would get the job done. Better than anyone else.

"Yourrealname," I whisper. "Not the name I gave you to make you mad."

My words are a truce of sorts. They also tell him what he probably doesn't want to hear; if I died here today, at least I'd die knowing his name.

* * *

"Fuckyou,man. Don't even think about dying on me."

I laugh at The Jekyll's warning and sit back in my seat. I watch Dante as he busies himself with something on his phone, then as his lip curls up in a salacious smile and a flush of heat causes the side of his neck to redden.

"Wifey?" I ask him. He looks up in surprise, tucks his smile away, then adopts his poker face.

Dante has a special smile reserved just for his wife, the same way that Caleph softens

around Ariadne. Much in the same way that The Jekyll probably adored his wife. These are men that come from the most ruthlessly dangerous underbelly of crime. I know, because I'm one of them. Yet each one of them softens in the presence of a woman. And not just any woman. The woman that has captured their hearts.

The Jekyll may have joined the party late, but he's one of us now. Looking at him, I suddenly understand the magnitude of his pain. I couldn't imagine Caleph without Ariadne, nor Dante without Kingsley. And I know, without hesitation, that if they ever had to live without their significant other, they'd be carrying around the same pain that The Jekyll is drowning in right now.

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I shudder at the thought. I myself would not be able to stand the pain this possibility would cause my brothers. By the same token, I hope I never find myself in a similar situation — where I'd be worrying day and night over the safety of a woman. Where a woman would come along to shatter my hard exterior in order to infiltrate the inside of me. A situation where I would neatly reserve certain expressions and reactions for one person who would turn my life on its head. No. I rather prefer being on my own, controlling what I can of my own life without distraction.

We drive on, until we reach a villa and the cars come to a stop in a circular driveway. Dante informs us this will be our home base for the next few days until we can put our plan into action then hotfoot it out of Mexico, a country which is not our own and causes our anxiety levels to escalate. We don't like what we can't control.

I'm the first out of the car, swinging my duffel over my shoulder as I stand looking at the massive house that awaits us. The Jekyll comes to stand beside me; we are almost the same in height, and he looks up to observe the house through my eyes.

"Cesar," he says. "Cesar Cavalho." He says it so low, almost as though he doesn't want anyone else to hear. I don't know why the turnaround, but the name is befitting of the lion of a man who stands beside me. "And I stand by what I say — don't go getting yourself killed, Attila."

29

LUNA

I have no delusions about what my father is. Never have. I'm surrounded by made

men. Even when I ran away, I somehow managed to find myself in their company. TJ and Attila could only be part of this life. There's no other way to explain their capabilities. Their knowledge of all things criminal. Their use of guns. The sophistication of everything they'd done to date. And the way that my father's face contorted when he heard Attila's name fall from my lips tells me that Attila is far from dead. Otherwise, his reaction would have been a very different one.

Attila's coming. I can feel it in every fragment of my bones. He wants something from my father and he aims to get it. The tracker is what will bring him here, so I have to ensure it stays with me at all times. I have to make sure it stays safe.

Heavy footfalls sound in the dungeon. They're not my father's. I stand back from the bars and wait, holding my breath. It's the driver. The one my father almost killed. He comes to stand in front of the cell and regards me carefully. There is resentment in his eyes. Curiosity. I've never seen him before, but it feels like I've met him previously.

The man opens his jacket, and I take another step back into the dark. I'm defenseless in my cage; he could so easily produce a gun and put a bullet in me. Maybe that's the one thing my father wouldn't be able to do himself.

Instead, he produces a bottle of water and passes it through the bars with a grunt. I step forward and take it; it's still sealed. I haven't had anything to eat or drink in days. I know a person can survive without food, but not water. Three days without water and I could expire.

"Drink," he says, his gravelly voice a soothing beacon compared to my father's.

He's tall and dark; everything about him is dark. Black hair, olive skin. Dark eyes that are almost black and seem like they're ringed with kohl. His clothes are dark, and there's darkness in his soul. There's a jagged scar running down the length of his right cheek. Oddly enough, it lends him a certain amount of beauty amongst all his

darkness. The man has lived.

“Thank you,” I whisper, putting the bottle to my lips.

I’m careful not to waste it; this could be my only supply and I need to make it last. The man shakes his head and tells me to drink it all.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” he says. “I have to take the bottle back with me or he’ll know.”

My father. He’s going against my father. Does he know what happens to people who betray my father? Of course he knows... he almost got killed a few days ago for far less. For veering off the road erratically when my father tried to throttle me. This is one gutsy move, and it’s like the guy is asking for a death sentence. I wonder what is motivating him.

“Why are you doing this?” I whisper, after I’ve chugged down the bottle of water. I’m grateful for it.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to,” he tells me.

“I need to get out of here,” I whisper. He may have taken mercy on me and brought me water. But would he go as far as helping me escape my prison?

“You can’t.”

His voice is firm, final. He knows there’s no chance of escape.

“Do you know my brothers? I need them to know I’m here.”

“Enough,” he says, his voice gruff. He’s not a man of many words. “Just do as he

says.”

He as in my father. Even I know this. But why does he want me to do what my father asks? He brings me water as a peace offering, but in the same breath he tells me to be obedient to my good for nothing father? Wait... did my father send him to butter me up for something? Is this all a carefully constructed ruse to intimidate me into doing something?

“Who are you?” I ask.

A man my father tried to kill would never help me unless maybe he knew his days were numbered. There was no way this man was helping my father do anything.

“No questions,” he repeats. “Just do as you’re told and try to stay alive.”

* * *

When the man leaves, I plop down onto the uncomfortable wooden plank and think. His words sounded ominously like a message. But if so, who was the message from? Scarface had quickly turned and walked away once he delivered his warning, his footsteps fading quickly until I was left with nothing but the dank air. Almost as though he’d never even been here. I lift my knees until my feet are laying flat on the plank, then start to do situps. If nothing else, I have to stay fit while I am down here. The water helped, revitalizing my energy, but it would only get me so far if I was ever able to get away from this place; I needed to stay fit, and in the absence of any machinery, situps it is. I push my weary body to do fifty then stop as sweat beads across my forehead. I throw my feet against the side of the plank, knowing in a few hours I’d feel the strain of the exertion I placed on my muscles today.

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The workout has left me feeling thirsty and deprived. I play Scarface's words over in my mind; I wonder if I'm so exhausted that I dreamt the whole thing up. Was it just a dream? His words play on a loop in my mind, too vivid to have been a figment of my imagination.

"No questions... just do as you're told and try to stay alive."

Something is coming. I can feel it in my bones. Something big.

30

LUNA

I'm sitting on the dusty ground with my back against the edge of the wooden plank when I hear the footsteps. Not my father's. Scarface. The beat of his rapid steps echoes through the chamber until he's standing at the bars, his eyes adjusting to the dark. I look up at him; he sees me sitting on the floor and a flicker of emotion crosses his face before he tilts his head, inviting me to approach him.

I stand, wipe my grimy hands on my jeans and approach him. He hands me a bottle of water and a protein bar.

"Eat, drink," he commands, watching me carefully. Like a parent would watch a child to make sure they're getting all their vegetables.

"You sure you haven't put something in this?" I ask, taking a bite of the bar. Again, it is sealed, but he seems mighty invested in making sure I eat it all. Which gives me

cause for concern.

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head slightly, urging me to finish. When I've consumed both items, he tucks the remnants into an internal pocket in his jacket and watches me. His hands reach up to the bars, his fingers curling around the metal. His knuckles go white from how tight he holds them.

"Listen carefully," he whispers.

"I'm all ears."

For some reason, my snarkiness irritates the hell out of him, and his eye twitches as he grows impatient with me. I don't think he's much of a jokester, even if only to lighten the mood.

"Okay, I'm listening."

I could give him that, at least. I move closer, eager to hear what he has to say. Obviously it's important, or he wouldn't be down here.

"There's no time to repeat myself." I nod quickly, telling him that I understand.

"There's going to be an auction. Two nights from today."

"An auction?"

"For fuck's sake, don't interrupt me."

He is seething.

"Okay, okay."

“Castillo is going to auction you off to the highest bidder.”

He could've slapped me and I would've felt more emotion. Instead, I stand numb and speechless as his words sink in. When I open my mouth to protest, he shuts me up by pressing a finger to his lips. He wants me to listen only, and I understand the urgency in his message when he turns to look quickly toward the exit of the dungeon.

“Listen to me. It can't happen. That auction has to happen, so make sure you're at that auction.”

“But...”

“If I'm unable to come again, just know. That auction is the only way for you to get out of here. Don't fuck it up.”

* * *

When I was younger, I quickly learnt the power I wielded as a woman. Great women have brought greater men to their knees. Great women have toppled empires. Great women have shattered, destroyed, ended dynasties. I am no exception. I may not be able to overthrow a whole entire cartel, but I do have the power to bring men to their knees. I learnt this early, from the moment I turned twelve and boys started looking at me differently. By sixteen, the courageous ones who weren't afraid of my brothers or my father started flirting and asking me out on dates. Of course, I was never allowed to go out, so it wasn't in the cards for me to be moonlighted by some teenager. But of course, when I went to university, there was no stopping me. Especially with the level of anonymity I was afforded. No one knew who I was. Even I didn't know who I was.

I went to college all the way on the other side of the country, and with a surname as common as Castillo, I was able to blend seamlessly into the landscape of college life. The boys came flocking. In droves. Being unattainable made them want me that

much more.

I knocked each and every one of them back until I found a man. A real man. A totally hot local businessman who was ten years older than I. He was my first and he spoiled me and treated me like I was his queen. I thrived on his attention; it lasted four months, until I found out he was married and broke it off without a backward glance. I think it hurt him more than it hurt me, because he wouldn't let go. I couldn't get rid of him until I threatened to tell his wife about us. I never heard from him again after that.

So I've always known my worth as a woman. But I've always been able to pick and choose who I wanted to be with and which direction I wanted an encounter to go. That's why when my father tried to marry me off to Nestor Gamboa, it felt like he was driving spikes into my soul. I couldn't be a part of something I couldn't control, or in a relationship with someone I didn't want to touch.

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Scarface asking me to go along with my father's plan put me right back in that place where I lost control of my own destiny. He wanted me to play along and get auctioned off to the highest bidder. Did he, or any man for that matter, understand the sacrifice in undertaking such a collaboration? Did they understand the premise of reaching in and pulling someone's heart out of its place? Because that's what it felt like.

I knew I'd have no trouble fetching a pretty penny at the auction, and perhaps that's what had swayed my father's ambitions for me. Why sell me to one when he could sell me to plenty and get the highest possible price? He is evil incarnate — planning to pimp me to a room full of men who had nothing but money to play with. The thought turned my stomach — I don't know why Scarface feels it's so important for me to play along. Unless he possibly had something to gain by the sale? I can't delude myself into thinking that an absolute stranger would decide to help me in any way. What would he have to gain by doing that?

31

ATTILA

We're half way through going over our plan when Cesar gets a phone call. He's gone from The Jekyll to TJ, and now he's Cesar. I insist on calling him by his real name, and somehow, this one act has strengthened our bond.

"It's my contact," he says, walking a short distance away. Dante and I look across the table at one another, then watch as Cesar paces back and forth while he takes the call. He listens carefully, looking back at us only once before finishing the call and

coming back toward us.

“A development?” Dante asks, his eyebrows rising.

“We may have a problem.”

We wait quietly as Cesar considers his words before spitting them out. Whatever it is, it can't be good.

“Coyin Castillo is throwing a party.”

We both look at Cesar like he's lost his mind, even though the news didn't originate from him.

“What kind of a party?” Dante asks, and I note the caution in his voice.

“An auction. And the way I hear it, he'll be auctioning the girl off.”

* * *

Two things happen to me all at once. My body starts to hum with an involuntary vibration, and a red hot fireball of anger surges through me until I literally can't see in front of me. This has only ever happened to me once before, and although I recognize what it is, there's no way I can warn the others what's about to happen.

I throw my head back and roar, my bellow invading the air all around us. My hands grasp the desk in front of me, and I've overturned it even before anyone can make a move toward me. The desk and all its contents go crashing to the ground. I kick the chair that stood behind the desk, and it scuttles and goes crashing into the wall with a heavy thud, leaving its mark with a gaping hole.

I don't see anything in front of me. There is movement around the room, and the echo of voices, but I'm otherwise blind as a raging fury obliterates my view. I cross the room, my hands landing on the bookshelf; I don't even notice what's on the shelves. But with a swipe of my hands, I've emptied the shelves and the books go crashing to the ground in a heap at my feet.

Strong arms grab mine, bending them backwards as I'm held back, and I feel the pinch of handcuffs as they close around my wrists, binding me with metal. I continue to gnash, my body lashing out at everything and anything it connects with. I scream again, my voice a deafening pierce that shrouds the night in its unforgiving pain.

"Attila. Attila!"

Dante's voice starts to take shape in my ears as his image materializes in front of me. Cesar is holding me back, restraining me from doing any further damage. A calming balm washes over me as Dante continues to say my name, accepting my insolence without actually understanding it.

* * *

When I'm finally calm enough to see straight, Dante comes into view. He's sitting in front of me, leaning forward in his chair, his hands clasped between his outstretched legs. He watches me like a hawk, curious but without judgment.

"Don't make me call Caleph," he warns. Which is just the thing he needs to say to me, because neither of us wants to ruin Caleph's honeymoon. I know that Dante needs an explanation, but he doesn't probe. Instead, he watches me, waiting for me to give him something. I notice that Cesar is not in the room — it's just Dante and me, and the room is trashed beyond acceptable.

"This happened to me once before," I tell him, trying to explain. It's not something I

can control; like a phenomenon that appears then just as quickly disappears.”

“That time when Caleph got shot,” he says, and I don’t know if he guesses or if he’s aware. He answers my curiosity. “I heard about it.”

“I can’t control it.”

“You can,” Dante says, and I hate that he feels like he needs to give me a counselling session, a pep talk.

“It comes on so suddenly, it consumes me.”

“The girl is obviously your trigger,” Dante says, sitting back in his chair. “What happened between you two?”

“It doesn’t matter. It meant nothing.”

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“It didn’t look like nothing just now.”

I sigh and look up at the ceiling, praying for the patience I need to keep up with this conversation. I don’t know what Dante will think if he finds out I slept with Luna. For some reason, it matters to me what he would think. It matters a lot.

“Where’s Cesar?” I ask.

“He stepped out. Tell me you can keep your cool through this. I can’t have you losing your shit when it matters.”

“It won’t happen again.”

“Ahhh... but you can’t guarantee me this.”

“It was a moment. It’s fine now. I’ve got this.”

It was a moment. One I never want to relive again. Hearing that Coyin Castillo planned to auction off his daughter struck at something deep inside my soul. I didn’t think I had it in me, but I found that I cared. I care what happens to her, and I care that some dirty old bastard won’t think twice about bidding on her. If the circles that Castillo moves in are any indication, there will be only perverts and monsters at that auction. The thought makes my blood simmer and I have the urge to kill someone. To kill them all; every last man that attends that auction with the intention of defiling Luna Castillo.

“It’s not a weakness to feel, Attila,” he tells me. “We’re men made of steel and grit

and power, but we're still human. I'd be more concerned if you didn't care."

"I shouldn't care."

Dante shakes his head and disagrees.

"Think not what you should or shouldn't do. But how you can change the situation."

"She means nothing to me," I say, but I sound like I'm trying to convince myself more than I'm trying to convince him.

"Regardless. Any one of us would be considered morally vacant if you don't care what happens to her."

32

THE JEKYLL

I know how he feels. How could I not? I once had a wife that I was madly in love with. Watching him torture himself took me back to my own savage days after I lost Sisely. If anyone understands his pain, I do. Even though I still don't understand when he had time to develop feelings for the girl.

It could've happened on any of the stakeouts when we were watching her. It could've happened as he watched her face down the man harassing her friend that night. It could even have happened that first time he saw her sitting in the window of the coffee shop when he first laid eyes on her. All without his knowing. If I recall correctly, I'd loved Sisely since we were children playing together, but I'd never realized it until her brother pointed out the obvious. What I couldn't see, everyone else could.

A man like Attila... a man like that would prefer to spend his whole life alone rather than admit he grew feelings for a girl. I understand it. Definitely. It's the armor we wear to protect ourselves; if I hadn't developed feelings for Sisely, losing her wouldn't have crushed me. It would be so easy to say one would rather save themselves the pain and suffering of such a huge loss. But I would take knowing and loving then losing her any day over never having known her at all. Over never knowing the feeling of that all consuming passion that we shared.

When I finish the call with Maria and hang up, I head inside and find Attila and Dante in the kitchen eating cheerios. Like nothing happened. Like a pair of schoolboys enjoying a quick snack after school.

"Showtime," I say, sitting at the bench and pulling up a plate. Grown men doing little boy things.

"Changes?" Dante asks.

"We'll have to fine tune our plan, but I think I have a way to get us in to the party without a problem. Castillo will be there."

"So will every other dirty bastard this side of the criminal world," Dante points out.

"This is our best shot to finish this."

I don't know how I lucked out with Maria, the Castillo maid for more than thirty years. If I know anything about her, it's that she despises Castillo. Loves the kids, but couldn't stand the patriarch, and would literally do anything to see him fall. She is the one who told me all about the masquerade ball which would double up as an auction for the sale of Coyin's daughter. Maria's the one who originally set me on to Luna's location, believing I was actually helping to keep her away from her father. She fed me the information about Luna's mother and her death at Coyin's hand. And she, of

course, told me what not even Luna herself knew — that the girl in fact wasn't Coyin's biological daughter. This had come from information she'd overheard through the years which pointed to Luna being the child of the affair her mother had. I never doubted Maria's eagerness to help me; the horrors she had seen in that house over the years told me she had more than had enough.

“Maria will get us into the house via catering. It's a masquerade ball and Castillo has insisted that everyone wear masks.”

“That's going to make things a little difficult to identify people, don't you think?” Attila asks, his concerned eyes raking over me.

“It does. But it also gives us the anonymity we need. That's paramount.”

“Ok, so we're in. Then what?”

* * *

I paint the picture for them. At various intervals, one stops me and pokes a hole in my plan. So we revise. Over and over again until we've fail proofed the plan and we think it's solid enough to run with. Of course, there are always variables which appear out of nowhere that we have no way of controlling. Issues that crop up. Things we didn't foresee. But we'd deal with them as they arose.

"You ready to do this?" Attila asks me, as we walk down the long hallway through the house. I've since learnt that the house belongs to Kingsley Murray's estate. That would be Dante's wife. From what I hear, the only person on the planet wealthier than Dante is his wife.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"This will be your closure. After this is done, you'll have fulfilled your journey and you'll have to move on. There'll be no avoiding that. This is the end of the road for you."

"Moving on doesn't mean I'll ever forget my wife, Attila," I tell him. "It just means I'm no longer holding on to my grief. I can move past that."

"Thank you," he tells me. "Thank you for bringing this to a close. I know Caleph will be forever grateful."

"Does that mean he'll forgive my past transgression with his wife?"

“Not on your life, buddy. You dragged his unconscious wife through the streets, almost killing her. You almost killed them both.”

“But I ended up saving them both,” I remind him.

“That you did. I just don’t think it’s quite enough, Cesar.”

“What about you? Are you ready to accept whatever happens at that party tomorrow?”

“I’m ready to accept anything.”

We go over the plan again. Fine tuning. Refining. Tossing possible scenarios of what may or may not happen. We talk well into the night, sleep evading us. Until our nerves become fraught with sleep deprivation and we know it’s time to lay our heads down.

I think of all the possibilities ahead. All the good and all the bad that may come of tomorrow night’s event. Castillo has kept it under wraps; if Maria hadn’t contacted me, there’d have been no way for us to ever have known what was happening. It is, after all, a low key event. Although all the high rollers will be there. All those filthy, ugly organizations that thrive on young girls’ pain. They would like nothing better than to ruin the lives of the females involved in the bidding wars. They would like nothing than for them to suffer. And they probably would all like nothing better than to tarnish and stain the girl they believed to be ‘Coyin Castillo’s daughter’.

33

LUNA

Idon’t see Scarface again. Instead, I’m honored with my father’s presence. He

tramples down the stairs and thunders through the dungeon until he's standing in front of me behind the bars, sneering at me with a certain measure of disdain.

Gone is the man that lost his color when faced with the information of who had attacked his men in Arizona. He may have gone white when he heard Attila's name, but he's back to his usual, hard self today as he tortures me with his presence.

I could never understand why he's never had time for me or why he's always brushed me aside and treated me cruelly. It can't be because I witnessed his crime against my mother. It can't be because a little girl threatened his world with what she knew. It can't be anything other than the man didn't have a place in his life for a daughter he didn't know what to do with.

He puts his hands on his thick hips, forcing his suit jacket back as he regards me thoughtfully. When he tells me about the party, I do a great job of acting surprised — then delighted — that I will be let out of my prison. I act as dumb as I possibly can without arousing too much suspicion.

“You will be on your best behavior,” he warns. “Otherwise, you'll find yourself back here without respite, and that's if I'm feeling generous. Otherwise, your home is your coffin.”

Well then, that doesn't give me very many options.

“Someone will be by shortly to get you made up. And I've selected a dress for you to wear.”

“Who will be there?” I ask, trying not to overdo my enthusiasm.

“Expecting someone?”

I shake my head and clamp my lips shut. I can't say anything more, otherwise he's going to get suspicious of me.

“Tonight I'll choose a husband for you.”

My face morphs to one of horror. I know it's what's expected of me. Inside, my blood is on fire as I think of all the things that could go wrong tonight. Considering I'm putting my trust in a complete stranger, who may or may not be assisting me, there are so many things that could work in everyone's favor but my own.

My father smiles when he senses my discomfort. I gave him just the right amount of torment and it was just what he needed to believe that I was well and truly surprised. He knows I've never been one to consider marriage, let alone one of convenience.

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“Don’t try anything funny, Luna. I’m warning you.”

“Do I even get a choice in who I marry?” I ask. Because of course, that too is what is expected of me.

“No.” At least he gives me his honesty. “May the best man win.”

And with that, he turns and walks away, leaving me on my own again.

* * *

A little while later, Scarface brings a woman down to the dungeon and asks that I stand back from the door. She appears to be in her late thirties and she’s carrying a black hardcase that looks like it weighs more than she does. She has a garment bag folded over one arm and she struggles with everything she’s carrying as Scarface lets her into the cell then closes the door again.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” he directs at the woman, before he takes his leave.

She sets her bag down on the wooden plank and asks me to sit, her eyes glancing off me quickly. I dare say she’s been told not to ask questions and not to engage me in conversation. She brings out her tools and makes quick work of looking over colors as she turns my face this way and that, considering angles and shades.

There’s no mirror here, so I have no idea what she’s doing, and I probably won’t even see the finished product, but she starts to apply base layers and foundation before she glides a brush elegantly across my cheeks. I slant my eyes towards her as she works,

hoping to catch her eye, but she doesn't meet my gaze, working instead as though she's on auto pilot.

"What's your name?" I ask.

She doesn't flinch.

"My name's Luna."

She could be deaf for the lack of reaction I'm receiving.

"How long have you been doing makeup?"

She ignores me as she traces a pencil against my lips. I continue to watch her out of the corner of my eye, but she doesn't bat an eyelid. Any help I had hoped she could offer me is non-existent. She's not interested in hearing my story.

I wonder if she even knows who I am. Does she know that I'm the daughter — the one and only daughter — who will probably be sold off tonight? Does she know what I sacrificed to get away from this place? The kind of life I've had in this home, so different to the life any person would assume a person in my position would live?

Does she know anything? Does she? Would she have accepted this job had she known it was to makeup a girl that's been kept in a dungeon? Most likely to torture her some more? What does she know?

She doesn't want to know anything beyond the job she's been paid to come and do. She just wants to get the job done and leave, never to see me again. Maybe that's easier for her. It's easier to stomach the dark when you know you'll never see this person again. It's just so much easier not to care.

“My father killed my mother...” I say. If she won’t answer my questions, at least she’ll hear. It’s the faintest flicker, but her hand stills and the eyeliner stops stroking against my lids. Her eyes flutter, then glance in my direction, before she looks away quickly. Her hand starts to move again, but it’s shaky at best. So, she’s not immune to me. But her fear of my father is greater than her empathy.

34

ATTILA

Castillo’s maid Maria was made for this life. I guess being around a cartel boss for so many years has taught her a thing or two. When the RSVP’s for “The Auction Of The Century” start coming through, she collates the invitations into those attending and those who will not be. She alone controls this information. And she alone has the foresight to make a note of those not attending, who she turns around and adds to the ‘attending’ pile.

The majority of our men will be infiltrating the venue in the catering trucks as wait staff. A few of us will be walking in as invited guests, thanks to Maria. The fact that the party is a masquerade ball is the added bonus that has us lining up all our ducks in a neat row. This is by far the luckiest break we have had so far.

I’ve been fortunate enough over the years to remain off everyone’s radar. My name may be whispered in darkened hallways, and I am referred to at times as the Bogeyman. No one really knows if I actually exist, because I’m an enigma, and those few who have had the pleasure of dealing with me and lived to tell the tale have been tight lipped at best. This is the code by which Caleph and I have always lived — to keep a low profile and give people only what is absolutely necessary. This formula has served us well.

I tie my hair back in a short, low ponytail. It’s nothing to write home about, but it

does wonders for my image as a man with too much money and nothing to do with it. I wear my tuxedo, my shoulders filling out the jacket like a footballer's. This is the way I was built. I don my mask and take a look in the mirror. There's enough mystery there that even someone who has intimate knowledge of my existence wouldn't know who I am behind the mask and the disguise.

The drivers arrive and we travel toward the venue in two different cars. Dante and I will be arriving separately through the front door, 'invited guests' keen on bidding. Cesar will be with the wait staff. We've accounted for every possible scenario, but there's no telling how this will go. Anything can happen and something probably will.

* * *

We've done extensive research on all the players at the ball. Thanks to Maria, the list of guests she provided us with was invaluable. I have to remember to reward her well once this is all over. Without her, there's no way we would have gotten this far in the game.

For security's sake, Dante and I arrive separately, within minutes of one another, giving our names at the door and gaining access easily. Too easily, I think, but Castillo is a desperate man. And unless someone betrays us, there's no way he'd see us coming.

The ballroom is so crowded with people, it's not hard to blend in and avoid scrutiny. I estimate about a hundred and twenty or so people in attendance, the majority of whom are men. A handful have brought along female partners. Sadistic couples who like to play.

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To cement my presence and throw off any suspicion, I grab a drink from a passing waiter and press the glass to my lips, taking a sip. Then promptly find an out of the way plant and tip the contents into the pot. I don't need to be drunk this evening.

I move through the faceless crowd seamlessly. Everyone wears a mask, making it hard to recognize anyone. Which is both a good thing and a bad. I identify Castillo across the room by body shape and the gait he has when he struts across the floor. He is flanked by men on either side. They all wear masks, but one of the men is looking directly at me. I turn my eyes away and merge with the partygoers until I appear on the other side of the room. I don't need or want any unwanted attention tonight. That could shoot our whole plan to hell.

“Hors-d'oeuvre?”

I turn at the sound of a male voice. My eyebrows rise then just as quickly drop when I recognize Cesar ‘The Jekyll’ Cavalho standing in front of me. He's seething at the uniform he's been forced to wear tonight; black dress pants and a waistcoat without a shirt underneath, tonight's uniform for the waiters. His head is covered by a short black wig, his face hidden behind a mask, but I'd know that scowl anywhere. His arms bulge with muscle as they hold a tray aloft.

I reach for a delicacy and he moves away, serving the party attendees. It's been agreed that he should spend as much time as the night allows on the floor mingling amongst the guests. Observing every move, every action, paying attention to what's going on in various corners of the room. We need to be ready if Castillo decides to make a move.

I cast my eyes across the room; I haven't seen any sign of Luna yet. I'm starting to think someone must have gotten the details wrong when Castillo announces dinner and waiters lead the crowd through a hallway until we reach a huge room set up with about fifteen round tables, each large enough to seat ten or so people.

I find the table with my place card on it and take my seat, my eyes finding Dante sitting a few tables away. There is a makeshift stage at one end of the room, no less than a meter high, accessible by a set of stairs located off to one side. The waiters bring out our food as Castillo takes the stage, stands behind a microphone and informs us that dinner is served.

“And as a special surprise for you all tonight, our entertainment for the night will be brought to you by my very own daughter, Luna Castillo. The one and only listing on tonight's auction agenda.”

Castillo calls out for the auctioneer as knives and forks tap delicately at dinner plates. I'm probably one of the only men in the room repulsed by what is about to happen. The auctioneer takes the stage, and there are low murmurs as Castillo exits the stage behind a curtain, then comes back dragging along a heavily made, shackled Luna.

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LUNA

I stumble onto the stage in sky-high sequined stilettos.

He's made me up like a whore. “Just like the whore you are,” he said, before he grabbed my shackled hands and dragged me through the house. I almost fell and broke my neck with how quickly he made me walk. I'm not used to heels. And I'm definitely not used to dresses this short. It's a short purple flapper style dress that barely covers my ass, it's embarrassing. I've never been so ashamed or humiliated in

my life as I am now, standing in a room full of nameless strangers, my father putting me on display like a trophy. He pushes me forward, whirls me around viciously until I am facing the crowd, then tips my chin up so I am standing almost regally. I don't know who this man is.

My father pushes his face mask up until it rests against his head. His eyes are hard and unforgiving, limitless in their hatred toward me. He's looking at me, but it seems like he's looking through me for all the desperate hatred in his eyes. I think possibly I will die not knowing what I ever did to make him loathe me so much.

"Coyin, you bastard!"

Someone in the crowd roars with anger. I follow my father's eyes until they land on a tall man standing in the back of the room. Nestor Gamboa. My one time fiancé. The man I ran away from. All heads swivel in Nestor's direction. No doubt everyone already knows who he is and the history between him and my father.

"You promised her to me, and now you're selling her? To the highest bidder? We had a deal!"

My father lifts his right arm and swipes it through the air, as though summoning some unseen power to converge on the ballroom floor. And it does. Sort of. A mini army of my father's men swarm towards Nestor. A man on either side lifting him from his underarms, flanked by half a dozen other men as they drag him through the room. I catch the horrified look on the faces of some of the attendees; they must be politicians that don't want to contend with fallout over this scandal.

"You traitor!" He yells, as he's dragged away. "You snake! I will gut you Castillo, you hear me? I..."

His voice becomes a distant garble as he's led out of the room. Murmurs have started

to spread amongst the attendees. Some have risen from their tables and, without a word to my father, make their way out of the room.

My father watches on in fury. All he's ever wanted was to belong in this world that doesn't want him. But the respect he's found so hard to attain is not something he's earned. You can't simply live by your own code and expect everyone to bow to your ways willingly. Even I, at my tender age, understand that.

The auctioneer breaks the moment by stepping up to the podium and clearing his voice before he addresses the crowd. It takes a while, but the murmurs finally stop and all heads turn toward the stage. I can't see any faces; they're hidden behind fancy masks, and I think I'm the only one in the room whose face is uncovered. But my eyes. My eyes scan the crowd; zooming in a lens focus, as though I'm looking through a telescope. I try my hardest to spot my brothers amongst the guests, but their presence evades me. I don't see a single face I know amongst the diners.

When the auctioneer finally speaks, he thanks everyone for their attendance and apologizes for the intrusion earlier. He tries to make a joke about how some men won't take no for an answer, but no one laughs and he moves on. It's not a laughing matter when they're all here for the same reason; to take me against my will, effectively also not taking no for an answer.

My father steps up to the auctioneer and whispers something in his ear before he steps back to me. I watch as the auctioneer's face turns beet red then as he clears his throat and starts again. My father is such a bastard.

I think of all the things I could do to avoid going home with some random stranger tonight. All I can think of is to run from the stage and take a leap, but the stage is so low I'd only end up breaking a few bones at most, and I don't relish the pain of that.

"Mr Castillo would like to reiterate that it was Nestor Gamboa, nothe, that reneged on

their deal. Just to make things clear. And now, without further ado.” He stops and claps his hands together, as though about to reveal the much anticipated winner of an award. “Let’s begin, shall we?”

He rattles off my ‘specifications’. My name, age, height and weight. My attributes. My talents, of which there are not many. He fluffs on and on and on, and he bores me because most of what he’s saying is untrue. Never was I an upstanding pillar of the community. I never wanted to be a ballerina. And I definitely can’t sing to save my soul. But my favorite, and of course there has to be one, I was never pursued relentlessly by a Sheikh who fell in love with me the moment he saw me. If that were true, why then would I be here? Being auctioned off? I hate the man. Hate that he’s made me so boring, so pedestrian, in the hopes that I’d be more interesting to those in the market to buy a new toy.

All heads are turned in my direction, and I can feel the sizzle of eyes as they bore deep into me. Everyone is watching me seriously, no doubt wondering how much of the auctioneer’s description is accurate. I wonder if they all know that I’m my father’s daughter. I doubt it. Who in their right mind would support a father giving away his own daughter?

“Ladies and gentlemen, let the bidding begin. And may the best man — or woman — win.”

ATTILA

In a perfect world, Nestor would have been my ally. We would have hated Coyin just as fiercely as one another. Yet any business I'd do with him would have to result in me handing him Luna on a silver platter. I just won't do that. I am, after all, a man of honor.

Castillo has literally dragged Luna onto the stage. She's wearing a dress so short, it wouldn't be hard for someone to simply angle their head and look up the skirt to her crotch. A seismic anger swells within me as I think of men fawning all over her.

And her so called father. That piece of shit. His death at my hands will be the most pleasure I will ever take in putting someone down. The way he looks at her, like he despises her beyond all reason, stirs something deep in my gut. I don't know how she managed to get through life with that much hatred weighing on her.

Castillo manhandles her, forces her to stand up straight so in her heels she can look much taller than she actually is. She towers over him, but she may as well be a mouse for all the venom he directs towards her.

I watch as her eyes swivel around the room; it takes her but a few seconds, but that turn of her head changes everything. There's a flicker of disappointment on her face as she realizes she can't find what she's looking for. Possibly me. Possibly The Jekyll. Maybe even someone else. Or her brothers.

Defeat caresses her face like an old friend, but just as quickly as it touches her, it drops out of sight and she stands straight, pushing her shoulders back in defiance.

She's going to face whatever comes her way with dignity and grace. She can worry about everything else later.

There is silence amongst the guests as the auctioneer asks for a starting bid. Complete and utter silence. Even I am surprised. It's not that the girl is not desirable, so I wonder what has them holding back. I can only imagine everyone's wondering what the punch line is. They could be making an enemy in Nestor Gamboa. And they could be getting swindled by the not so trusted Coyin Castillo; what sort of a man would sell his own daughter, after all?

The auctioneer rattles on, repeating all of Luna's attributes, which I'm sure he pulled out of his ass. How he has the nerve to undertake this job is beyond me. I drown out his voice as I look at Luna. Despite the cheap and tacky dress she's wearing, I can't take my eyes off her. I just want to storm that stage and grab her and drag her off and out of this house of horrors. I haven't thought about what I would do with her beyond that point, but I know I can't leave her here to fend for herself. I can't leave her in the care of her father. And I won't leave her at the mercy of some random man who will probably treat her even worse than her father does. I've heard the stories. No one here tonight comes with anything other than cruel intentions.

"Five hundred thousand!"

The words break into my mind as a man in the back yells out the opening bid. I wonder if Coyin paid him to get things going. The woman sitting beside him has removed her mask and set it on the table, and I realize that the man is a local jeweler known for his rather nefarious tastes in young girls.

Another hand rises, and the bidding is at six hundred thousand. I turn to Luna and see her eyes widen in surprise and worry. I don't understand why she's surprised, but then, how would she even know how these things work? She could fetch millions if the right person were looking. Whatever Nestor offered her father obviously wasn't

enough, otherwise he wouldn't be auctioning her off this way.

"Seven hundred."

The bidding continues, with several men and a woman getting bids in. When the bidding hits a million dollars, it drops to fifty thousand dollar increments. Luna shifts uncomfortably from one foot to the other, expecting the worst. Her father is still standing beside her, and he pulls at her arm, daring her to move again.

I'm not in the least surprised when the bidding hits one point four, but I do eye the bidder with dubious eyes. A tobacconist whose cigars are exported all over the world. With more money than he knows what to do with, but in this instant, he looks bored. Like he came to shop but wasn't expecting much, and now he needs to move on.

The majority of the guests have now removed their masks. They sip champagne and eat a ridiculous amount of food as they watch on, the auction their entertainment for the night.

When the bidding stalls at one and a half million dollars on the jeweler, Castillo looks perplexed. This is obviously somewhat short of what he'd expected, but he can't lose face now and retract his daughter. He has to keep going, even though the disappointment he feels has never been more apparent on his face than now.

I stand, one of the few with his mask still fixed firmly in place, and button the front of my jacket. I know my shoulders fill out my suit like a footballer's, making me a formidable sparring partner. No one would dare question me, even without knowing my name.

"Two million dollars," I say, walking slowly towards the stage. I'll need about fifty steps to get there, but I don't anticipate any problems and I take my time. Luna's lips are parted as she looks my way, and I see the moment she recognizes that it's me. She

manages to maintain her composure, even with all my attention directed at her. “I’ll pay two million dollars for her, and I doubt anyone has the nerve to bid above me.”

I reach the stage and climb the short steps until I’m standing looking at Luna. I ignore her father, although the corner of my eye rests on him for safety’s sake. His proximity is too close to ignore, and I may be here with backing, but this is ultimately his home. His people. He knows the lay of the land better than we do.

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LUNA

My breath catches as he comes to stand in front of me. He holds out his hand for me to take it, and I’m momentarily dumbfounded and stare down at his hand like I’ve never seen it before. Which works out in my favor because I realize how it would look if I just took his hand and rode off into the sunset with him.

My mind stutters... what is he even doing here? Who is this man that has such a reach that he can just appear randomly out of nowhere? Here, in my father’s home?

He flutters his fingers, urging me to take his hand; still, I don’t move. It’s only when my father speaks that the spell is broken and I turn away from Attila.

“Not so fast,” my father warns, throwing an arm out in front of me. It’s a move that has nothing to do with protection and everything to do with ownership and payment. “Who are you?”

“Does it matter?” Attila asks, turning to face my father. If it were at all possible, I could swear that my father shrunk back at that moment.

“Of course it matters. I need to know who I’m transacting with.”

“You invited all these people here tonight,” Attila reminds him. “Therefore, you’re transacting with one of them. The who is not important.”

They’re loud enough that the guests can hear. Murmurs start circulating amongst them, and everyone turns to watch on in curiosity. Interested in the man who bought me. The enigma who won’t give a name and is eager to get me home to his bed.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:51 am

“It’s important. I need to know who I’m doing business with. And how will payment be made?”

Attila brings out his phone, taps a few numbers, then holds the phone up for all to see.

“I’ll make the payment now then be on my way,” he says.

My father eyes him suspiciously. For some reason, he’s not satisfied with this transaction, and I wonder if it’s because he was expecting more money. Is he going to renege on this sale too, and make another enemy other than Nestor?

“I need to know your name,” my father says. “And see your face.” He pulls me closer to him, holding me roughly by the arm. I see the way that Attila’s jaw locks when he sees the firm hold of my father’s fingers around my arm.

Attila sighs like he’s bored and just wants to be done with this. But I guess he knows what he’s doing, otherwise he wouldn’t be so calm and confident as he faces my father.

“Take your hands off her,” Attila commands, his voice a low growl. If anything, my father holds on tighter.

“Show me your face.”

Attila lifts his hand to his mask and pushes it up past his forehead until it’s resting on the top of his head. His dark hair is an impeccable mass of strands, his eyes hard and unforgiving. I’d be afraid if I were in my father’s shoes. I’d be very afraid.

I watch as my father's face contorts to one of misunderstanding. He doesn't know this guess he's invited into his home. Is he a gatecrasher? How did he get past the guards? I know exactly what my father is thinking, because he's become so predictable.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"You can call me Attila."

* * *

All hell breaks loose. One minute I'm standing in front of Attila, the next minute, my father has grabbed me and is using me as a shield, a knife pressed into my side. I know Attila sees the knife, because he quietly directs my eyes to his, telling me it's going to be okay. He can't have me falling apart right now. But there's too much activity going on around me and I find it hard to keep my eyes on him.

Guests are spilling out of the ballroom, knocking over each other in a bid to leave quickly and safely. Others look on in curiosity as men come running down the length of the room, from all angles, pointing their guns on us and then at one another, before fighting erupts.

A gunshot rings out. Attila doesn't bat an eyelid. He has his laser focus on me and my father, a hard glint in his eyes. It's scaring me that he won't look away just to see what's happening. Like he already knows... like he doesn't care. The house could go up in flames right now, but still he doesn't care.

"This is what's going to happen," Attila tells my father. "You step away from the girl, turn around, and walk away. It's the only chance you have of survival." He is calm and cool, his voice barely rising. Just another conversation over tea and cookies.

My father sneers, then presses the knife into my side until he cuts through the dress and nicks my skin, readying himself to go deeper. I suck in a breath, holding back the curse I'm longing to hurl at him.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Attila warns.

"Do you think I'm stupid enough to believe you'll just let me walk out of here alive?" my father hisses.

"No. But I think it matters to you which way you die."

This earns me another shove and the knife slides in deeper, penetrating my skin until warm liquid drizzles down my body. I can feel it as it slides down my hip and coats my thighs. I don't know how much Attila sees, but his eyes become harder, darker — fathomless pools of black.

"You have a death wish, Coyin?"

"The greatest pleasure I will have before you kill me is watching you watch me gut this perralike a fish. That's the way I wish to kill you."

My father's words — or maybe it's the blood — stain my mind and make me light headed. I feel nauseous as I watch my blood pool at my feet, staining the garish purple stilettos in their brightness.

There is chaos and mayhem all around us, but it's as though we're in a bubble of our own. The noise of the outside world collides with our conversation, jolting me back to life. I can't die now. I won't die this way. Not by my father's hand. If I give in to him, I am slowly but surely facing my own horribly premature death. I won't allow him that satisfaction. I straighten, take a deep breath and wobble unsteadily in the stilettos, making sure not to look down again. There is not an ounce of nervous

tension in me as I look back at Attila, cementing my eyes to his. That's where I need to be right now.

"Drop the knife, or I'll use it to feed you your own dick before I put a bullet in your brain," Attila says. Honestly, I spent a few days with him, but I never would have guessed Attila had it in him. I never saw this ruthless side of him.

"Drop it."

It's another male voice I don't recognize coming from behind me. And then I hear the cocking of a gun and squeeze my eyes shut, preparing for the worst.

ATTILA

The sight of her blood as it drips down her leg does something strange to me. It makes me angry. But it also gives me pleasure. It's then that I realize I want her pain. I want it all. But I want it on my terms. By my hands. Not the hands of her useless, would be cartel leader father who is sapping all the air in the room. I've wasted too much energy on him and I've just about had it with him when Dante steps out of the shadows and puts a gun to the back of his head.

Like the coward he is, Castillo drops the knife. Even knowing nothing is going to save him from the corner he's backed himself into. This is the moment he faces his retribution. This is where he pays with his life to avenge Caleph's parents. Cesar's wife. Luna's mother And countless other innocents along the way. The man is the very definition of a monster.

"You'd shoot a man in the back?" Castillo jeers at us. Deflecting from his own cowardly ways.

"No," I tell him. "I would never. Neither would any of my men."

"Then what?"

He spreads his arms out as though to say, "come and get me." If nothing, he's a somewhat smart man, buying time with conversation, banking on his men finally coming to his rescue. But what he doesn't know won't hurt him. His sons may not be in attendance today, but his younger brother — his right hand man — is. And he was the trigger man in Sisely Cavalho's murder. I've promised Cesar free rein over him; I

would never deprive him of that satisfaction.

“Let go of the girl and step away from her,” I tell him.

“I just want to know if the puta’s cunt is lined with gold,” Castillo spits, his eyes sliding to Luna. He doesn’t let her go and he looks like he could lunge and wrap his hands around her neck at any moment. “What did she do to make you come all this way to save her,” he roars. His resentment toward her is unfounded at best. He’s the fool who couldn’t be a father to her.

I ignore him and wonder at his stupidity. He has a gun to the back of his head and yet he still demands answers to questions that he knows will remain unanswered. I look at the short, pudgy man and my mind goes haywire. I’ve wasted too much time on him already and I don’t know why I continue to entertain him.

Luna is still looking at me, and she’s heroic in her efforts, but she’s fading quickly. At the end of the day, he’s still her father — in her eyes, anyway. She doesn’t know what we know. He’s still the man that raised her; the man she grew up with. I realize my hesitance to end him is because I have no idea how this will affect her. He’s still her father; she must feel something for him, despite what he’s done to her.

“Get. Away. From. The. Girl,” I hiss, but he just gives a jerk of his head and steps closer to her, his grip on her arm biting into her skin. A blaze of fury coats my eyes until I can no longer see in front of me.

My body moves of its own accord. I reach into the back of my pants and pull out a gun as I take the last few steps toward him. I lift the gun and hold it to his temple, point blank range. Castillo has a gun at either side of his head, but he won’t wipe that smirk off his face. He won’t drop the knife and he won’t let Luna go. There is no more repentance for this animal.

Dante steps away, tucks his gun into his holster and stands off to the side, his hands clasped below his belt. Waiting patiently. I have to finish this. I will finish this.

“You wouldn’t...”

I pull the trigger.

* * *

This is what I came here for. Coyin Castillo lays in a heap on the stage, his final resting place. Cesar has dragged the body of his brother and right hand man and slumped it at his right side. I notice that the man is missing both hands. He did say that once he caught up with him, he’d cut off the hands of his wife’s killer. Other men from the Castillo cartel — those that didn’t flee once they saw their leader go down — also share the stage with their one time leader.

Dante finishes sending through pictures to Caleph. This was the one outstanding matter he still had to attend to; one that’s been years in the making, and now that chapter is finally closed. He can finally move on and have a life with Ariadne that won’t be tainted with the unavenged blood of his parents.

“You might want to check on the girl,” Dante says, coming to stand beside me. I cast my eyes across the room to where Luna sits with a blanket coiled around her. It’s stinking hot, but the shock has left her shivering. She sits looking at nothing in particular as a waiter sets down a cup of hot tea on the table beside her.

“She’s better off without him,” I mutter, justifying it only to myself what happened here today.

“Still. He was her father. She has his blood all over her.”

Maria, God bless her heart, is the sort of woman I would want on my payroll. She's done all the leg work for us, and then some. Right down to having a doctor on standby should things go south. He's done a good job of stitching Luna up and cleaning as much of the blood off her as possible, although some things can never be erased, even with water.

I walk towards her, lift the teacup and hold it to her lips.

"Drink," I command her.

She lifts her eyes to mine, then parts her lips and takes a sip, before shaking her head for me to lower the cup.

"You okay?"

"You have blood on you," she gasps, frowning.

"Does it bother you?"

"That it's my father's blood?"

39

LUNA

“It’s time to move.”

A voice breaks the moment before I can answer his question. I lift my eyes and find Scarface standing there, his brows furrowed as he looks at me. Why is he here? Why is he talking to Attila? Doesn’t he work for my father?

“We need to go,” Attila says, holding his hand out to me. I rise, although I don’t understand why. I don’t know where we’re going or why. Isn’t his work here done?

“Where?” I ask, then follow up with a question about my brothers. Both men look at each other then turn back to me as TJ comes floating down the aisle, roaring that it’s time to go, go, go.

“Police are on the way,” he says, clapping his hands together. When he reaches me, he takes one look, frowns then steps toward me.

“Luna. We have to leave. You can’t stay here.”

“Why not? This is my home,” I remind him.

He tsks and shakes his head, putting his hands on his hips as he faces me. He looks like he’s getting ready to rip off a band aid.

“You can’t be here when the police arrive, Luna. There are things in this house you won’t be able to escape.”

I hold the blanket closer to my chest, my safety net, and turn toward the exit. Somehow, his words have made a difference, and I’m escorted out of the house and into a waiting black van where I sit opposite Scarface and Attila. TJ sits beside me, a meter of space between us.

We drive away from the house, down the winding road beside the clifftop, at a speed that makes my heart palpate irregularly. I may as well follow my father to his grave; death by accident. I don’t know what his death does to me. The realization that he is gone and I am now an orphan — devoid of either mother or father — flutters inside me like a bird trying to escape its cage.

“Where are we going?” I ask, my voice a hoarse whisper. I can’t look at Attila; any time I do, I see him pulling that trigger, and it grates at something deep inside me.

“Somewhere safe,” TJ says.

“Why?”

“What do you mean?” He is soft, patient with me. When these traits probably go against everything he knows.

“Why are you here? What brought you here? Where are you taking me and what do you want?”

“So many questions, little one.”

TJ gives me a small smile. It’s sad, in a way, and I wonder what he has to be sad about. I just lost my father. I lost everything. He wasn’t the best father, but at least

with him around, I always knew my purpose. I always knew what to expect, I guess.

“Are you going to answer them?”

“One of us will answer your questions. Once we’re relocated and settled into a safe house.”

“In Mexico?”

“For now. As soon as the jet is ready, we’ll leave for the States.”

* * *

“Who are you?” I ask Scarface, as I come into the living room. I showered and changed and had a nap for I don’t know how long after a doctor came to check on me and literally shoved a pill down my throat. I’m feeling more like myself, although I’m still a little numb.

Scarface is sitting in front of the coffee table, cleaning out a gun. I sit on a nearby sofa and watch him as he works, wondering where everyone else is.

The house is whisper quiet, and ironically, it’s just a few miles down the road from my father’s house, also overlooking the sea. Surrounded by a massive stone wall, it’s a more modern take on Mexican architecture, and it’s beautiful. I find myself wondering who the house belongs to as I look around the room. Obviously someone with immaculate taste in decor.

“Does it matter?” Scarface responds. I lift my eyes to his and wonder again about the jagged scar running down his cheek.

“How are you here if you worked for my father?”

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:51 am

“I work for the person who gives me what I want.”

“And what is it that you want?”

I’m actually curious to know, but instead of answering, he turns away and goes back to assembling his gun. Choosing to ignore my question.

“Where is everyone?”

He lifts his chin and points it in the direction of the large bay window looking out toward the sea. I stand and walk slowly; it feels like I’ve taken a beating, and my side hurts where my father’s knife plundered my skin.

The men are standing in a tight circle on the grassy lawn that leads to a drop into the ocean. I can see the azure waters off in the distance beyond the cliff, the softly lapping waves rippling like silver streaks across the sea.

Attila and TJ are standing with two other men — Dante, who I now know is the man who held the gun to the back of my father’s head. And the fourth man, handsome and impeccably dressed in a navy suit, the top button of his shirt undone and his tie missing. He has his hands on his hips as he talks to the men, and although it’s obvious he’s powerful and a leader, I can’t differentiate who is the elder amongst them. They all seem to have an equal footing. Except... that they’re arguing.

I can’t hear a thing from where I am, but judging from the looks on their faces and the gesturing back and forth, it’s Attila against the fourth man, while TJ and Dante stand quietly by allowing the dispute to happen. At times, TJ speaks, and the fourth

man directs weary eyes toward him. Once or twice, Dante says something that has the unknown newcomer deferring to him.

The tension between the two men — Attila and the newcomer — is palpable. I cock my head and watch, trying to decipher their body language, but I get nothing. Until Attila looks up at the window and sees me standing there. He holds my gaze, even as the fourth man continues to speak, until all the men turn to the window to see what's captured Attila's attention. Four sets of eyes blaze through me, each different yet all the same. The eyes of made men.

40

ATTILA

I knew it would come to this. Although I didn't.

Caleph somehow managed to make his way to Mexico. It had been decided that he'd have nothing to do with Coyin Castillo's downfall. That would be all me and Cesar, with a little help from Dante Accardi. That was what was decided and agreed upon, to maintain the integrity of his budding relationship with Ariadne; he couldn't afford to fuck that up before it even started.

Yet now he is here. And how. We argue back and forth about the Castillo cartel. Not that he's not grateful that we've rid the world of the scum of the earth that was Coyin Castillo. But he seems to think we've got an even bigger problem now with the mess that Castillo has left behind.

"You really think his sons are just going to let this pass?" he asks, hands on his hips. A vein in his neck pops as his anger swells.

"The boys haven't been seen in a while," I remind him. "We don't even know if

they're alive."

"How can four of his sons. Four grown men. Just disappear off the face of the earth?"

"We're working on it," Cesar tells him.

Caleph turns his acidic gaze toward Cesar. He's still not over The Jekyll's role in Ariadne's kidnapping, no matter that Cesar has made amends for that error in judgment.

"Why?" he asks. "Why are you working on it? You got your vengeance for your wife's murder; why are you still here?"

Cesar stiffens. His back goes rigid with the implication of what Caleph is saying. It's true; Cesar has gotten what he came for; why then, is he still here? We hadn't spoken past what would happen after we destroyed Coyin Castillo. We hadn't considered the road we would take; either together or separately.

"I did get what I wanted," Cesar admits. "We all got what we wanted." He pauses, looks out toward the sea before his eyes skirt back to us. "But there's no telling what the aftermath of this operation will be; I'm not willing to leave Attila to deal with that on his own. We started this together... we'll see it through together."

"I commend your loyalty, no matter how misplaced it may be," Caleph starts, but he's interrupted by Dante.

"Cesar is right. There's no telling what the backlash will be. We don't want to be looking over our shoulders for the rest of our lives."

Caleph thinks about this. He knows there will be repercussions from Coyin's offspring. He knows there could be problems. In our years long search for the man,

it's the one thing we hadn't cared about — because there's never been anything any one of us had worth losing. Now there is. None of these men wanted the Castillo cartel touching anything good in their lives, including their wives.

I see movement out of the corner of my eye and turn toward the house. Luna is standing at the window watching us, obviously intrigued by this meeting between four men who are virtually strangers to her. She cocks her head curiously, and I know she's trying to read the situation.

“What about the girl?” Caleph asks, following my eyes to the window. When I don't respond, they all turn and notice her there.

“The girl has nothing to do with this.”

* * *

“What's going on?” Luna asks, as I walk into the house with Cesar. Dante and Caleph are still outside talking. Honestly, I love my brothers to death, but their hovering over me gives me whiplash.

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“Have you had something to eat?” I ask her, realizing she hasn’t eaten anything since probably before we picked her up at the auction.

“Why won’t anyone answer my questions?” she asks, furious. Cesar reverts to grunting as his main method of communication and leaves the room, opening the door for me to deal with Luna. I relent and sigh, then ask her what she wants to know. Eventually, she’ll know. And what’s more important is that we find her brothers — the Castillo boys — before they find us. “Who are all these people, and what are you doing here?”

It’s the first chance we’ve had to talk since the auction and the death of the man she considered her father. I fall into position on a sofa and watch as Gabriel rises and walks quietly out of the room, giving us some privacy. It amuses me that Luna refers to him as Scarface, but I guess she had no other option considering the circumstances. She sits on the same sofa, then angles her body so one leg is resting underneath her thigh and she is facing me. Maria was thoughtful enough to send over a bag of Luna’s clothes, and she’s settled on a comfortable sweatsuit that looks like she was poured into it.

“Well, you know who TJ and I are, but those two,” I wave my hand toward the window, “are colleagues. Dante Accardi and Caleph Rojas.”

She gives me an odd look. I believe she’s heard the names circulated before, because she doesn’t probe in that direction again.

“But who are you, really?” she asks. “I know your name. But that’s all I know. Why are you everywhere I turn? And why did you kill my father?”

“It’s a long story, Luna.”

“And I have all day.”

I sigh and run my eyes over her. She’s starting to get her color back, although I think she’s lost weight since I last saw her a week ago.

“Your father’s death was inevitable,” I tell her. She may not want to hear it, but she needs to know that her father was going to die regardless of what he was doing to her. He was not a good man.

“My father was an evil man,” she affirms. “But why did you come to Mexico?”

“He came here because we had unfinished business with Coyin Castillo.”

Cesar walks into the room, his large frame overshadowing everything around him. His choice of words is not lost on Luna as she looks up at him. Cesar, in turn, looks at me. “She has to know,” he tells me. I wanted to delay this as much of possible, but he’s lifted the timestamp I set myself and forced my hand.

“Know what?” Luna gasps, looking from Cesar to me then back to him again.

“Your father was not a good man,” I tell her, still referring to Castillo as her father. Cesar, I know, is angling for a different direction.

She looks disgusted. “You think?” She of all people would know what her father is capable of.

“Your uncle killed my wife,” Cesar tells her, his voice low and solid, matter-of-fact. “Your father killed Caleph’s parents and he also killed your mother.”

Luna's eyes shoot toward me. She's looking for a reaction from me; when she doesn't get one, she understands that I already know this information. And she's wondering how we know this information if she never told us.

41

LUNA

I'm glad I haven't eaten anything, because if I had, I would have hurled everything right then and there. As it stands, bile rises up my throat until I'm almost choking on it, then settles there like a nasty vapor waiting to be let out.

So many things they're telling me make sense right now. But that thing... that thing about my father killing my mother. That episode that he tried so hard to repress, telling me I imagined the whole thing, turns out it's true. He did kill my mother. There's no two ways about it.

Everything that comes after that horrifies me. My mother was having an affair; had been for years and years. With my biological father. That's when my father found out that I wasn't his daughter. That's when he turned on me. And killed my mother, depriving me of her. Then he killed my father. I don't stop to ask his name. It's too much. And there's only so much I can take.

I start to hyperventilate, until Attila orders me to lean forward and walks me through breathing exercises. My shallow breaths even out and I raise my head, my eyes moist with tears. I don't want to go through this again. I can't go through this again. I urge him on — I want to know everything, and I want to know it now. Because I never want to go through this pain again.

“Castillo came up in the ranks by picking off competition one by one. He also staged elaborate armed robberies; banks, hotels, wealthy clients. That's how he came into

contact with Caleph's parents. It was a home invasion that took their lives. I met Caleph right after his parents passed; he and Dante had been family friends for years, but it was only then that the three of us became close."

"What about your wife?" Luna asks, looking up at Cesar. She looks sick to the stomach.

"My wife was at an ATM while the bank was being robbed. She had no idea. As she walked away from the machine, she was accosted by your uncle and gunned down. It was caught on the cameras. She died instantly."

I'm horrified, my body shivering with an overwhelming pain as I think of all the lives my father has destroyed. I try to hold back the liquid pooling in my eyes, but it starts to slide down my cheeks as I digest the information I'm given. The images in my mind of the suffering these men have had to endure. I thought the worst possible thing my father could do to hurt me was to kill my mother and sell me off. Turns out, there's more than a dozen other ways that my father could run a knife through my heart.

"You're not like him," I whisper, my eyes flitting from TJ to Attila. I remember them following me around, then saving my life. More than once. Tracking me down, then saving me again from an uncertain future. At any point in time, they could have killed me, got their vengeance and stuck it to my father. But they didn't.

"We're nothing like him," Attila growls, his dark blue eyes turning midnight.

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I know they're nothing like my father. And yet... they're killers. Just like my father. They are morally gray at best, with dubious intentions. They are part of this life that takes men and turns them into beasts.

"You didn't stand a chance with him, Luna," Attila tells me. "Your father had already pre-determined your destiny."

* * *

I curl up on the sofa and lift a blanket to my chest. I'm fully dressed but I may as well be naked for all the chaos going on in my head. Everyone in this house knows more about me than I know about myself. That's all I can keep thinking as the tears continue to come, well after I'm exhausted and I think I have nothing left to give.

I wonder what they think of me. What they think of me being Coyin's daughter. His daughter for all intents and purposes. I lived under his roof from birth, and well into adulthood. He's the only father I've ever known, even if he was a tyrant.

"I need to ask you something," Attila says, coming to sit beside me. He lifts my legs and places them in his lap, soothing me with a hand on my feet. Telling me in that one touch, without words, that he's here and everything's going to be okay. He pulls the blanket to cover my feet and I look up at him, waiting. He could ask me anything and I would give him the world. The same way he gave me back my life. My freedom. He saved me from death and destruction, and I don't know that there'd ever be any way that I could repay him.

"So ask," I prompt him.

“Your brothers,” he starts, and almost involuntarily, I suck in a harsh breath. The mention of my brothers does painful things to my heart. “Did you see them when you were with your father? Do you know where they are?”

I shake my head. It’s unlike my brothers to not come and see me or ask about me. I know that I left them without a word and never looked back, but they’re nothing like my father. I can’t imagine that alone would be enough to keep them away from me.

“He shut me down every time I mentioned them. I never saw them. Why do you ask?”

“No one’s seen them in months. Is this usual practice in your family? I know it took us years to track down your father because he stayed under the radar. But what about your brothers?”

“My brothers were very outspoken about my father’s...” I pause, press my eyes together painfully, then backtrack. “His practice. They didn’t always see eye to eye.”

“So they’ve broken from your father?”

“I wouldn’t say that. They were still very much loyal to him. But I’ve been away for three years. I don’t know what’s happened in that time.”

“Do you have any idea where they might be?”

“No idea. But I know someone who might.”

Luna won't eat. She curls up into a little ball on the sofa until she falls into a fitful sleep and I'm thankful for the pills the doctor left behind. She cried until her voice was hoarse, with no respite in sight no matter what I said to her.

Her idea that Maria might know where her brothers are proves fruitless. No one has seen nor heard from the Castillo boys in months. As if they fell off the face of the earth.

"Will she be okay?" Gabriel asks, coming to stand beside me in the doorway. She's been asleep for hours, her soft breaths filling the room as darkness descended upon it. I glance up at him; his concern is endearing, and I'm glad she has him. Even if she doesn't know yet who he is.

"She'll be fine. She managed to stay alive this long in this life; I'm sure she'll continue to do so."

"I think I want to tell her."

I slide my eyes toward him. They're so different, yet there's something about the eyes that makes their connection undeniable. I understand where he's coming from, but I don't agree that overwhelming her with too much in so little time is what's best for her.

"Can you put it off a little longer?" I ask him. "She's not in the best mental state at the moment. You can see that."

His eyes find Luna in the darkened room, resting there momentarily before he nods, agreeing to wait until the time is right, before he turns and walks away. I don't know how we're going to tell her that Gabriel is her half brother, fathered by her biological father. The moment he'd found out that Coyin Castillo was his father's killer, he had planted himself in the Castillo camp, waiting for his chance to take vengeance for his

father's murder. It was purely by chance that we found such an ally amongst Castillo's staff, and as with Maria, Gabriel's help had proved invaluable to us.

Luna looks so peaceful curled up on the sofa, I'm almost too afraid to approach her, so I stand watch over her, listening as her steady breaths hitch then rest as she exhales softly.

I'll be the first to put my hand up and say I didn't think this one through. I've let a woman get to me. And I may have freed her of her father's control over her, but in doing so, I don't know how many more enemies I have added to my list. The fact that we can't find the Castillo boys is cause for concern; they could show up at the most inopportune time and lay claim to their sister, picking up where their father left off.

"Attila."

Dante's voice rasps behind me and I turn, follow his eyes to the patio door then join him outside. Caleph is waiting for us in one of the chairs around the table that serves as an outdoor dining area.

“How is she?” Caleph asks.

“She’s sleeping. She’s been through enough for today.”

Caleph looks at me carefully, trying to decipher the meaning behind my words. I’ve never so much as cared about any woman; that I would even sympathize with what she’s been through makes him pause. It makes me pause; I’ve never found myself in a position where all I think about is protecting someone. Because that’s exactly how I feel about Luna right now. Protective.

“We’re leaving for the US tomorrow,” Dante says, going for the gut punch. I know he’s telling me this to gauge a reaction from me. To maybe see where my head is at. We’ll be leaving, so where will that leave Luna?

“Even without knowing where the Castillo boys are?”

“We can’t live in limbo,” Caleph says. “We’ll deal with them if and when they’re found.”

I have no idea where Luna’s head is at. And it may be too early to ask her. She fled Mexico because she was trying to get away from an arranged marriage to Nestor Gamboa. Now that that is no longer on the table, would she stay, or would she want to leave? And why does the thought of leaving her behind tear slowly at the edges of my sanity?

Telling me we’re going back to the States means all of us. They don’t have any intention of leaving me behind. We’ve always worked as one unit, and we’ve always

been on the same page; that's not about to change now.

"What do you intend to do about the girl, Attila?" Dante asks.

I hadn't given it much thought. Our return is moving much quicker than I anticipated.

"I won't leave her here defenseless," I tell them. Loosely translated to mean that she's coming with us. It does not mean I'll desert them and stay behind, and they know this well. They know this as well as they know me.

"What if she decides to stay?" Caleph asks, obviously interested in my answer. By now, he's probably gauged that I have no intention of leaving her behind.

"I have a plan to get her on that plane."

I do. It may be unethical. Perhaps even a little conniving. But it's a plan, nonetheless.

"What about The Jekyll?" Caleph asks.

"I know you have your history with him, but I think he's proved himself as an asset."

"What are you saying?"

"I agree with Attila," Dante steps in. "The man is very capable and I believe he deserves a seat at the table."

Caleph's face is hard when he looks from me to Dante. I know that we have always trusted each other's judgment, and that's not going to change now. Caleph may have had his issues with Cesar in the past, but he would never let that stand in the way of a good business decision. We all know this.

“We need a solid man on our team. If he’s interested, give it to him. But just so you know... he’d better stay away from my wife.”

43

THE JEKYLL

I haven’t given much thought to what I’ll do once this mission is over. I’ve done what I needed to do and avenged my wife’s murder. In the process, we were able to collectively avenge the deaths of many others. All while rescuing Luna from the hands of a madman. So I’d say all in all, we’ve done a good job.

My best friend and former brother-in-law Marden calls and urges me to come home. Home. It’s such a vacant word right now. Home is where a person’s heart is, and at the moment, I no longer possess that all important of beating vessels. My heart died when I lost Sisely. Marden understands this well; he lost his sister that day, too. But for me, I lost everything. So effectively, there’s no place I call home.

“I’ll fly out and meet you,” he says. I know he will. He wants to come out to Mexico to convince me to come back home, where we can run business together. We’ve known each other since we were kids. Maybe some day I will go back. But right now, I’m enjoying being on my own, and the prospect of a new adventure with Attila. Caleph still regards me with some suspicion, but I can see him letting his guard down around me ever so slowly. It gives me purpose, being around a group of men who move in such perfect symmetry that their lives appear orchestrated.

“I’m flying to the States this afternoon,” I tell him. “We’ll talk when I get there.”

I hang up after promising to touch base with him once we land and look out the window as the sun creeps over the horizon.

Luna's small voice reaches me as she stirs from her sleep and she asks what time it is.

“Just after 5am.”

“Where's Attila?”

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I'm not surprised that she's asking about him. He hasn't left her side since we brought her to the house, and he's only stepped out now at my insistence that he get some rest.

"Asleep. You want something to eat?"

She shakes her head and throws the blanket off her as she sits up and rubs the sleep from her eyes.

"How long was I asleep for?"

"A while. From late afternoon yesterday."

"Wow. I feel like I've been asleep for a year."

"You didn't miss much," I tell her.

"Were you saying something about flying out today?"

I inhale and let out a deep sigh. I don't know how much I'm supposed to tell her, but I do know that Attila wants her to return back with us. But now that the threat of her father is no longer looming over her head, I don't know what she wants to do.

"What's next for you, Luna?" I ask, avoiding her question with one of my own.

"There you go, changing the subject again," she accuses.

“We’re flying back to the States today.”

There’s no point in being dishonest with her, and it’s not something we’re trying to hide.

“All of you?”

Her eyes widen, a delicate fear coating her face. I don’t know if she’s afraid of being left on her own, or the unknown now that her father is gone, or the fact that we’ll be leaving her life. I don’t know what upsets her more.

“The decision was made while you were sleeping, Luna. Attila hasn’t had a chance to tell you.”

“Whereabouts in the States?”

“I believe they’re based in Seattle.”

“Maybe I could fly back with you and then hitch back to Arizona,” she says, a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

“You’re not staying here?”

Luna shakes her head and tells me there’s nothing left for her in Mexico. She’s made a life for herself in the States and she quite likes it there. She has only bad memories here and she doesn’t want to live out the rest of her life being reminded that she was once Coyin Castillo’s daughter.

“I need to check on my friend Nadia,” she says, a faraway look in her eyes. I give her the update I’ve been given by Nadia’s doctor when I checked in with him yesterday. The girl was making progress, although the trauma she’d suffered at the hands of

Castillo's men would take a while to diminish. I downplay the trauma bit and avoid giving her specific details about her injuries, although I suspect she already knows if the look on her face is anything to judge by. If Coyin were alive again, she'd probably kill him herself.

"He ruined so many lives," she whispers, doubling over herself like she can't take the pain.

"He's gone," I remind her. Dwelling on what he did would help no one. The evil he did while he was alive was enough to destroy lives and homes and families. But now he was gone, it was enough for everyone to just be grateful and move on.

"Any word on my brothers?"

I shake my head, and she gives me a sad look. In one fell swoop, she lost her father and her brothers. The man she believed to be her father was dead with a bullet in his head, his blood staining her skin. And four family members unaccounted for. She was well and truly on her own now, and she probably felt it.

"Nadia is all I have left," she whispers. There's a fierce determination in her voice. A sense of new beginnings and looking forward. She has finally attained the freedom she sought, but at what cost?

"You really have no idea where we can find your brothers?" I ask her.

She frowns, grabs a nearby pillow and holds it to her stomach, as though that will protect her from any more impending pain. Concern washes over her face when she looks up at me again. "You're not going to hurt them, are you?"

I don't want to lie to her. There's no telling how this will go. But I don't want to sugarcoat the matter, either. Instead, I try for diplomatic.

“Not if they don’t try to hurt us first.”

44

LUNA

There’s a thunderous crash in the rear of the house. TJ turns his head back toward the window just in time to scream for me to duck before he drops to his haunches and crawls toward me. I’m already on the ground, meeting him half way as a series of calamitous bangs pervades the air. A deafening spray of bullets breaks the silence of the night, before the tapping of feet running down the hallways reaches my ears.

TJ has his gun out and pushes me behind him, telling me not to get up.

“Stay back!” he hisses, as he rises and points his gun out of the now shattered window. He aims at something then squeezes the trigger, before falling back behind the relative safety of the wall.

Thick arms fold around my stomach, dragging me back across the floor until I’m nestled in the shadows, facing Attila. He’s wearing nothing but sweatpants and a menacing glare, his upper body with all its ink on display. He presses his index finger up to my mouth, indicating my silence.

“Crawl back down the hallway until you get into my room. Go inside and lock the door. Don’t come out until I come for you.”

“I’m not leaving you,” I hiss. He cuts me off with a stern look, then indicates to the

direction of his room. I look at him reluctantly, then start to crawl away. I've not moved two paces on my knees before I'm stopped by a pair of heavy boots standing in my way. I'm like a mouse that can't get to the cheese, and I lift my head slowly, looking up at the man who has blockaded my movements. I don't recognize him. But I don't have to think about the matter long, because his head goes flying to the side and he topples sideways until he's sliding down the wall. Scarface comes running down the hall, a gun in his hand, followed by Dante and Caleph. They're all armed.

"Take the girl," Caleph says, lifting his legs to cross over the dead intruder. Scarface moves toward me, pulls me up by the hand and tucks me under his arm, shielding me like wings as he runs me through the house toward safety. I turn back once, only to see both Dante and Caleph stepping out beside TJ to join the gunfight. Attila is nowhere to be seen.

* * *

"What's happening!?" I screech.

Scarface bundles me into the room and locks the door. Sweat coats his forehead as he moves toward the window to look out. I don't know what he sees, but he curses in a low voice, reels like he's lost momentarily, then reaches into his pocket for his phone. I don't know who he's calling, but he speaks quickly into the phone, telling whoever is on the other end that we're under fire and shooting off a location.

I don't know what's happening. I don't know anything about these men to know who would want to harm them. Aside from maybe my brothers, in an attempt to avenge my father's death. My mind won't switch off to think of him as anything other than my father.

"Help is coming," Scarface says, putting his phone away. "They're coming."

No sooner has he pocketed the device but there's a loud bang and a screeching whistle echoes through the room. Something has crashed into the window, sending shards flying everywhere, before it rolls to the ground and activates, a vaporous cloud enveloping the room. Smoke billows through the air until I'm rendered helpless and blind as I fumble my way through the room. There's another loud bang as the door is flung back ferociously, banging into the wall. Through the haze of the smoke, I can just make out the shape of a man in a suit standing in the open doorway.

"Luna?"

I hear Scarface calling my name before I hear his grunt and his body goes slumping to the ground, quickly followed by my own.

* * *

When I come to, I'm being dragged through the house. My body, even in its unconscious state, refuses to move, as though sensing that if it left this house now, there'd be no return. I open my eyes, my lids heavy with sleep, but what I see is so far from what I expected that I stutter and trip, catching my foot on a rug. It's all I need to buy me the few precious seconds I need to evaluate the situation and take action. If I don't do something now, I'll probably be gone for good the next time I get up, so I have to make every second count. Because Nestor Gamboa is in this house and he's trying to take me away. What is it with men thinking they can just drag me away and run my life the way they want?

When he moves to lift me up by my elbow, I see my opening and slam my arm back into his face, knocking the wind out of him. He's much larger than my petite frame, much more powerful than I'll ever be, but he almost stumbles, and I take this opportunity to take flight, running in the opposite direction. I don't get far though, before he reaches out and pulls me back by my collar so savagely that he almost chokes me in the process.

“Don’t fight me, princess,” he mutters. But it’s like I don’t hear him, because I rear back and spit in his face. Even knowing this will most likely send him over the edge. Which it does, because he lifts his arm and sends his palm crashing against my cheek. Hard. But it’s all the excuse I need to go crashing to the ground, buying me more time. If I leave this house, I know I’m never coming back. As long as I’m here, I know I stand a chance.

“Stupid bitch!” Gamboa hisses, leering over me. “I should just do you here then kill you and leave the scraps for everyone else.”

“I dare you!” I hiss back, my defiance a challenge.

“Wait until I string you up by the neck, then dare me, perra.”

I’m feeling extremely confident in myself as I stare up into his eyes. I can see movement beyond us, and I engage him in eye contact to keep him distracted. Hopefully, help is along the way.

“Get up!” he commands, leaning over me.

“Fuck. You.”

He pulls at my arm again, jolting me from the ground, then tells me to keep moving, his hand a firm manacle around my skin.

I hear a shot from somewhere behind me, feel the loosening of his grip on my arm, and I could swear I hear him squeal. I turn back. Dante Accardi is coming towards us, his gun trained firmly on Gamboa, who falls to one knee, anguish etched on his face. Oh my God, he kneecapped him. From behind. I relish his pain, take comfort in it, even.

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The house is now eerily quiet. Where is Scarface? I have to check on him. On everyone else. What even happened here today? I turn and see Attila stalking down the hallway, a gun in either hand lowered to his side. His head is lowered, but he's watching us from beneath angry, hooded eyes, like a bull about to charge. Attila is disheveled, his hair falling over one eye, a beautiful malicious mess coming back from war. There is a thin film of sweat coating his naked torso. There is blood smeared in several places on his body, and I know this isn't his blood, but the thought that it could be makes me lose my breath. He flicks his eyes toward me, as though to make sure I'm okay, before he looks down at Gamboa drowning in his own blood.

"I should kill you here," Attila says. "But that would be way too easy. Instead, I'm going to string you up and drain you of all your blood until you're no longer alive. And I'm going to take great pleasure in doing it. If only because you touched her."

45

ATTILA

I string him up. Just like I promised. From a beam in the roof of the back patio. I string him upside down by his feet, until I'm satisfied I have him right where I want him to be and fury settles deep in the pit of my stomach.

No one holds me back. No one tells me not to. Everyone knows when I get this way, it's better to let me have my way. Everyone except Luna. She tries to argue with me, telling me not to stain my hands with his blood. Little pup; she doesn't understand how stained my hands already are. Even after seeing me put a bullet in her father's head, she still doesn't know me at all.

I order her outside. I want her to see just the sort of man I am. Exactly what I'm capable of. She needs to get smart and wise to the world. She's on her own know, drowning in a sea of evil and bedlam.

"I would advise against it," Dante says from his place on the sofa, his voice bored. The room is littered with bodies and glass and remnants of the chaos from the night's battle, but it's like he's sitting on a bed of roses. That's the thing about men in this life. After a while, things like this no longer affect us, and we thrive off the energy and adrenaline of the danger we face. This is us; it's the way we are. But Luna is different. She's not immune to the sensitivities of our world, even though it's a world she was born into.

I throw Dante a glance; he holds his hands out as though to say, "I warned you" before I

I force her out onto the patio, my dark eyes holding hers as I command her to watch. I tear his shirt open, the sound of his buttons hitting the ground the only sound amongst the otherwise relative quiet of the day. I drag my knife down his back, drawing blood as I scar him. To his credit, the man barely gasps.

Luna turns her face away as the first blow lands and I prod and poke at Nestor. She bites her lip so viciously that she draws blood.

"Look at him," I order. She doesn't turn her face back. My voice is a dull roar when I once again demand that she look at him. Fury surges through me as she continues to look away. I move to stand before her, forcing her face back to Nestor.

I grab his hair and pull his head back so she sees his face. She's terrified of watching, but there's not a trace of remorse in me as my hands pull at his strands. He has to pay for what he did here today. He has to be punished for ever even having the thought of laying a finger on her. And there must be retribution, because I'm sure that Luna is

not the only girl he ever tried to defile with his perverted ways. His intentions were bad, but mine are so much worse.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Cesar come to stand in the doorway as he watches us. He cocks his hip against the doorframe and folds his arms against his chest, looking on in interest. When he realizes what I'm making Luna do, he admonishes me gently by saying my name, a soft warning. Telling me with his tone that there's only so far I can push her. I do my best to ignore him and turn back to Nestor.

"Look at him!" I yell, guiding her attention back to the man that so easily could have destroyed her life. "This is the man that tried to buy you. He would have forced you to marry him. He would have touched you!" My voice reaches across the patio and carries on the breeze out to the ocean, my anger more violent than the sea. "He would have raped you, degraded you. And you want to show him mercy?"

"Stop," she pleads, her voice hiccupping as tears pour down her face.

"You would forgive him all that, even knowing what sort of a monster he is? If it's not you, Luna, it's another girl. This is what he does!"

"Stop!" She screams, covering her ears with her hands.

Cesar echoes her sentiment, then steps forward and steers Luna away by the elbow. She's had enough.

"He'll stay strung up here until you understand what sort of a creature he is. And then, until he takes his last breath," I call after her as she and Cesar walk across the lawn to the edge of the cliff. I give Nestor a look of disgust, before I shake my head and turn to walk back into the house.

I need a stiff drink to work out the knots in my shoulder and the tension thrumming

through my body. I no longer know what I'm doing. In a past life, I would have put a bullet in his head and been done with Nestor. Now it's like I have something to prove. To myself. To Luna. To everyone who whispers the name 'Attila' in the halls and the alleyways and the places in-between.

Attila the Hunter.

They don't call me Attila the Hunter for nothing.

I earned the moniker that's put fear in every man that crosses my path. Every single man except Nestor Gamboa. He's the exception. Even knowing that she's in my care, he dared to touch her. He dared to take her from me. That's an offence punishable by death. And I aim to collect on his retribution.

Caleph and Dante are standing in the living room when I step inside and go straight for the liquor cabinet. The place looks well and truly trashed, riddled with bullets and overturned furniture.

Both men stop talking and turn to watch me as I wrap my hand around the decanter. I'm pouring the liquid into a glass when the shot rings out. One shot. A deafening echo that rings through the house like an explosion. But it came from outside. From the patio.

Luna.

My mind swirls, my hand shakes, and I knock over the bottle in my haste to run outside.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:51 am

“If it’s not you, Luna, it’s another girl. This is what he does...”

Attila’s words turn over and over in my mind. He’s right, of course. He may not be a saint, but he knows the world works a certain way. He knows the evil that pervades the air. That which lurks in plain sight. I don’t understand his anger, but I do. All too well.

I was born into this life. Whether or not I’m Coyin Castillo’s daughter — I was born to this ruthless, evil world where men take what they want with their currency. Men in this life, they deal in all sorts of things. They trade in human flesh. Their business model comprises everything from drugs to assassinations to trafficking. If you want to survive in this world, you have to be a jack of all trades. You have to play by the rules as set out in the specific code of made men.

What, then, of Attila? He is repulsed by what Nestor did. He’s repulsed by so many things, but nothing so much as the attack on a woman. As seen in my dealings with him. He differs in that way. There’s probably nothing more sacred to him than the life of an innocent. No. He doesn’t kill simply for the pleasure of doing it.

TJ tries to calm my nerves as we stand staring out at the ocean. I’m starting to understand the trouble that will be dropped on these men’s doorstep for saving me. Nestor is one of those problems; for some reason, he fixated on me and dared to make a move to steal me from my saviors. Bad move. And then, there was the matter of my brothers. What would their retaliation be for the death of our father? He may not have been my biological father, but they are still my brothers. How would they feel about what has happened? How do they feel? I have to stop thinking about them in terms of their having disappeared, never to return. They had to be somewhere and would make

their whereabouts known eventually.

“Oh my God... where’s Scarface?” I ask, turning suddenly toward TJ. He looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Gabriel,” I amend. “I last saw him when he dragged me out of the living room and Nestor found us. Where is he?”

“He’s fine. A few scrapes, but he’s okay.”

I breathe a sigh of relief then look out at the sea, Attila’s words infiltrating my thoughts again.

“This is the man that tried to buy you. He would have forced you to marry him. He would have touched you... He would have raped you, degraded you. And you want to show him mercy?”

Attila was right about one thing. Nestor doesn’t deserve my mercy. He deprived me of being home for three long years. He came here and shot up this house, and would have inflicted maximum damage given the chance. I don’t know how many men were killed or injured in the attack. How many of his men did Attila lose? And for what? So that Nestor could control and destroy me? To spite my dead father? Because that’s what he wanted? Because that’s what he paid for? Did he even know who he was messing with when he attacked these men?

“If it’s not you, Luna, it’s another girl. This is what he does...”

“I think I want to go inside now,” I tell TJ, looking back at the house.

“You sure?”

He seems reluctant to take me back to the house. I nod with a certainty my brain is at odds with and we start the short trek back to the house.

“What’s the time?” I ask him, as we near the patio.

TJ reaches into his pocket and brings his phone out, looking at the screen before he tells me the time. It’s still early morning. A soft breeze whistles through the air. I slow my pace, lagging behind TJ as he scrolls distractedly through his phone.

I see Nestor hanging from the ceiling as we close the gap between us and the house. He swings involuntarily from his one leg. At some point, someone must have left his other leg out, making it extremely more uncomfortable for him. I know he’d also be experiencing trouble breathing in this position, with all the blood rushing to his brain.

I despise him. I despise what he’s done. I hate this version of our world. But I also know that he’s going to die a slow and painful death strung up in this position. Even I don’t have it in me. I can’t watch him die like this. And I won’t. But I can help him along.

We’re merely steps away from Nestor now. TJ is still scrolling on his phone as my eyes skim to his waistband. He is so distracted that the opportunity presents itself. I quietly step closer to him and swipe at his waistband. I have the gun in my hand and I’m running toward Nestor, releasing the safety as I run.

“Luna!” TJ gasps, and I can feel the beat of his feet against the ground as he tries to catch up to me. But I reach Nestor before he can even stop to catch his breath, and I have the gun pressed to the man’s temple. Nestor looks up at me as my hand shakes and the gun ripples against his skin. He doesn’t think I’ll do it.

“Luna, don’t!” TJ hisses, as he nears me and slows down. He treads carefully, knowing that one false move and it could be game over for one or more of us. “Don’t do this.”

“You heard what Attila said, TJ. He’ll just keep doing it over and over again. He

doesn't deserve my mercy."

"Let me do it," TJ says, stepping closer. I shake my head and fix him with a hard stare, daring him to come closer.

"No. I may not have been Coyin Castillo's real daughter, but I saw enough to know that men like this — they never change."

And I pull the trigger.

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ATTILA

I race through the house like a madman. To find Luna standing there holding a gun at her side, Nestor Gamboa's brains splattered all over the ground. Once again, she stands with the blood of another staining her skin. Her father's blood, and now Nestor's blood. I hate to say it, but she looks so damn hot.

I walk towards her slowly. I think she may be in shock, but it looks more like Cesar is the traumatized one. This may be just the cleansing she needed, because she looks up at me and gives me a small, tight smile, before she twirls the gun dangerously around her finger then hands it to me.

"He deserved it," she says, before she turns and walks toward the house. I turn and watch her brush past Dante and Caleph, who seem to have developed a new found respect for the girl.

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:51 am

“She really did it,” Caleph breathes. He’s awestruck.

“Damn,” Dante whistles, before he turns amused eyes my way. “That girl’s going to give you a run for your money, brother.”

* * *

I stalkthrough the house until I get to her room. The cleaning crew is already here, clearing out the bodies and fixing any damage around the house. Once they’re done, there’ll be no trace left of what happened here today. We have barely hours to spare before we get on a plane back to the States and I still haven’t discussed our plans with Luna.

“When were you going to tell me that you’re leaving?” she asks, when she opens the door for me. She’s fresh out of the shower and she has a towel to her head as she dries the strands.

“It hasn’t exactly been time efficiency around here,” I point out. “TJ told you?”

She nods and a low rumble starts in my throat as I bite back the curse that threatens to erupt. Either she or TJ — one or the other will be the death of me.

“In his defense, it came up in conversation, and he didn’t lie when I probed him. He’s not the lying type.”

“And I am?”

“I didn’t say that, Attila. You may not lie to me, but you do a great job of keeping things from me.”

“I tell you what you need to know.”

“Exactly.”

“There’s nothing left for you here,” I tell her. I need to get her on that plane. There really is nothing left for her here.

“I need to find my brothers.”

I sigh and lift a hand to her dark blond hair, brushing a wet strand back over her shoulder. “You’re not going to find your brothers here, princess,” I tell her. “If we couldn’t find them, you won’t.”

“I can’t just pretend they never existed, Attila.”

The vulnerability in her voice destroys me. Her brothers are the last remnants of a family that no longer exists. I can understand and appreciate that she would want to hold on to that with everything in her.

“I’m not asking you to pretend. I’m asking you to let me find them — my way. Without you endangering yourself.”

“Why? Why do you care?”

I regard her for the longest time, my jaw locking back and forth. Her innocence fractures my heart. We haven’t spoken about what happened between us back in Arizona. It was something that happened that got us through that day, but it’s something that’s burrowed in my brain in a way that’s foreign to me.

“I’m not leaving you here, Luna.”

I can come right out and say that. But I can’t tell her why. I can’t form the words. My brain can’t process what it is that I ultimately want from her. I just know that I don’t want to be away from her. I need to protect her. Firstly from herself, because she’s headstrong and stubborn, and all the things the world can’t handle right now.

“I need to find my brothers.”

“We will find them,” I assure her. “But not while we’re here. It’s too dangerous for us to be here right now.”

* * *

Gabriel sits at the outdoor table, his leg bandaged all the way up to the hem of his shorts. He got the long end of a shard of glass that shattered through his skin and left a gash running along the length of his right leg.

“How’s the battle scar?” I ask him, as I sit opposite him.

He grins and in this moment, I see the similarity between him and Luna. They have the same grin.

“I’ll live,” he tells me.

I nod and tell him I’m glad he’s okay. Before I launch into what I need from him. His eyes widen in surprise; I’ve done a 180 from my request yesterday not to tell Luna that he’s her brother.

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“She’s worried about her missing brothers. But I’m worried about her. I can’t stay here, and I won’t leave her behind.”

He looks at me curiously, and immediately I know that he’s wondering what his sister means to me. But he believes it’s not his place to ask. Not when he hasn’t been in her life for the past twenty five years. As far as she knows, he’s a stranger who offered her a protein bar and water when she was imprisoned in a dungeon by her own father.

“You want her to leave Mexico?”

“It’s not that I want her to leave you, Gabriel. It’s what’s best for her under the circumstances.”

He nods slowly, swallowing back the lump that’s formed in his throat. He doesn’t want to lose his sister just when he’s found her.

“This is an open ended invitation, Gabriel. I want to keep Luna safe, and that extends to her family. She needs you in her life, so you should come with us.”

He looks up in surprise then frowns.

“She doesn’t even know that I’m her brother.”

“We have to tell her, Gabriel. She may be more willing to leave if she knows and you’re willing to travel with her. It’s the only way.”

LUNA

There's something I have to do before we leave. And I have to do it on my own.

We pile into the cars and drive the short distance to what was once my family's vacation home in Tulum. It's also the house where my mother died. The house where so many memories are dead and buried.

"I'll come with you," Attila offers, but I hold up my hand to prevent him getting out of the car. The look on my face must tell him how serious I am because he locks his jaw back and forth but says nothing. Instead, he slides his palms to his thighs and holds them there, something I've come to understand he does when he can't control a situation. Attila knows there's only so far he can push me before I reach my breaking point.

"You've cleared the house?" I ask.

He nods once but says nothing. Like he already knows what I'm planning to do and he's doing everything to hold his tongue. To hold back from dragging me back to the car and telling me to come to my senses.

Senses have nothing to do with this. This is my house of horrors. Regardless of where my brothers are, this has to be done. I already know that the bodies have been removed. It's funny how easy it is to buy local law enforcement when the man that's dead is someone that's been untouchable to them for years. These men did the Mexican government a favor by ridding them of my father and his ilk. One less piece of trash for them to take out.

I enter the house through the back door. There's nothing to see here, the house as quiet as a tomb. Blood stains the tiles at various locations, but I avert my eyes wherever I can as I continue to trail through the house. The only blood that counts is

that of my mother's. She's long gone, but she's really the only parent that ever mattered. Coyin may have raised me, but his treatment of me tells me he did it not out of obligation, nor duty, nor any other reason a father could have to raise his daughter. He raised me because he saw an opportunity, and he wanted to stick it to my mother. Even from beyond the grave, he wanted to punish her for all eternity by spiting her with the way he unhinged me. It's funny how at one point I looked up to him, and how definitively I looked down at his body when he lay dead and bleeding and felt nothing. Only emptiness.

I continue to wade through the house until I reach the room I'm looking for. The occupants that once inhabited this room are gone. Coyin changed everything in the room after my mother was gone, including the furniture. He even positioned the new bed differently. He hardly spent any time here after she was gone, and I liked to think it was because my mother's death haunted him, but I don't delude myself for long. Nothing could've haunted Coyin Castillo, not even the wife he slaughtered in their own bed.

This is the room of so many nightmares. The horror of my childhood, that secret that I held close to my chest as I blossomed into adulthood. That one solid memory from when I was nine years old that Coyin tried so hard to erase, telling me I was crazy and dreamed the whole thing up. I know I didn't. I know what I saw. And now more than ever, I know I wasn't crazy. Not with everything that came after.

I step into the garage, see the can sitting in the corner where it's always been. It hasn't moved from its place in years, although I know it's full. I lift it, almost tumbling with the weight that causes my body to angle to one side. I unscrew the top, tip out a bit of the liquid, then drag the can through the house, splashing the contents across the ground as I go. When I get back to the bedroom, I lift the can, ignoring the pain that shoots up and down my shoulder, approach the bed and douse it until it's wet. Until it's soaked in cleansing liquid. My own brand of vengeance. I do the most damage in this room. Then I haul the can back to the kitchen and spray kerosene all

over the bench tops, through the hallway, ensuring that my aim is precise enough to target the mouth of every room. When this monstrosity goes up in flames, I want to make sure there's no chance of saving a single foot of it. I want it gone. I want to burn my memories. Turn them to ash. Soak my past in the fiery prison of today before I can move on to tomorrow. Who knows what tomorrow will bring? Who knows what the future holds? I, for one, have no idea where my future lies or what it holds for me, but I don't mean to waste my life chasing the scars of my past. I don't deserve that. I deserve a life. I deserve my freedom. Free of the demons that haunt me day in, day out.

When the can is empty, I stand in the grand foyer that a few days ago welcomed hundreds of guests into its bosom. To an auction where I was the grand prize. I think how my life would have turned out if the auction had run its course and someone had purchased me. For their own devilish amusement. I wonder about Coyin, my would be father, and the satisfaction he would have gotten from the sale, the way he would have taunted me for the rest of my miserable life had he still been alive.

I take the matchbook out of my back pocket, look down at it sadly; it's devastating, but sometimes you have to destroy something in order to rebuild it. I light the match, hold it up in front of my eyes, then throw it across the room, watching as the spark licks the liquid and flames jump through the air. It's so quick, it causes me to catch my breath. I watch as the fire races across every surface, carrying down the hall to the rooms; it's only small still, but I know pretty soon this entire house of horrors will be engulfed in flames.

"Rest in peace, Mama," I whisper, as I turn and walk out the front door for the final time.

I watch as Luna makes her way down the stairs at the front of the house, held back only by Cesar's insistence that I give her some time alone to resolve what she needs to. She lifts her hands to her hair and folds back her long dark blonde tresses and pins them into a ponytail. She has a look of peace on her face as she takes measured steps towards us. I'm leaning against the car, my arms crossed against my chest, as she approaches.

"Thank you," she whispers, as she comes to a stop in front of me.

"For what?" I quirk an eyebrow in question.

"For giving me this."

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I lift my eyes to the house and watch as flames scurry from room to room, demolishing everything in their path. A window shatters on the other side of the house, and I know it's only a matter of time before the house is engulfed in flames and it crumbles to the ground.

I say nothing as I lift my chin and direct her to the car. She gets in beside me, looking one last time at the house through the car window before she exhales a heavy sigh and we drive away. She'll probably never come back here again. She wouldn't want to; otherwise, she wouldn't have burnt down the damn thing.

I understand why she did what she did; she wants to burn the bridge between her past and her future, but there remains the question of her brothers. Four missing brothers, and there's not a single clue as to their whereabouts. Or how they'll handle the situation when they realize their father is dead and Luna is with the man who killed him. We know nothing about them or the type of men they are. By all accounts, they doted on Luna when she was younger, but who knows how much they know and what has changed?

I turn to look at her as we put distance between ourselves and the wreck that is her childhood home. Her neck is craned as she looks out the window, watching the Mexican landscape as we travel towards our next destination.

"What's wrong?" she asks, turning her amber eyes towards me lazily. I don't know how she does that, but it's like she has a sixth sense or eyes in the back of her head. My eyes flick to Gabriel and Cesar sitting in the front of the car, chatting in hushed tones; I wonder if their conversation will halt now that we're chatting. I don't want to have conversations with Luna in front of anyone. I don't want to share any piece of

us in front of others. Not until I know what this is. Not until I learn how to navigate what's happening between us, because I find myself in a situation where I'm like a fish out of water.

"You okay?" I ask her.

She doesn't say anything for the longest time as she searches my eyes. As though looking for something. As though memorizing something, or touching on a memory that's been tucked away at the back of her mind.

Is she, like me, thinking about the time when I touched her and she somehow breached my soul? Is she thinking about the way she climbed my impenetrable walls and threw herself over into my world? Is this what it's like to crave someone so much that you want more, more, more?

"What's the measure of okay I should use?" she asks me. "Compared to being a thing on an auction line? Compared to not knowing where my brothers are and wondering if Coyin disposed of them like trash the same way he did my mother? Or worse, that they find out that he's dead and I live out the rest of my life on the run from my own flesh and blood until they find and annihilate me?"

She is so calm as she speaks, she scares me. She's not afraid; there's not a shred of fear in her. Almost like she expects them to come looking for her, and when they do, she'll be ready.

I swallow back the lump forming in my throat. The thought of anything happening to her stabs at something deep inside me, and I suddenly understand Cesar's years long commitment to hunting down the man that killed his wife. How does one live with the loss of his other half? A limb? How do you get past losing the woman you love at the hands of another? In such a senseless way.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” I whisper.

She shakes her head, sadness cresting her face.

“When they come for me, not even you will be able to stand in their way.”

* * *

“I want you to find the Castillo brothers,” I tell Cesar, as we close the gap between the car and the waiting jet. Caleph and Dante are already waiting patiently on the plane.

“You know they’re shadows at the moment.”

“I know that. But so was Coyin Castillo. Yet you found him.”

Cesar’s curiosity heightens as he looks from me to Luna as she walks ahead with Gabriel at her side. He’s had his suspicions, but hearing them confirmed by me causes a look of certainty to cross his face. There is no longer any doubt about what has to be done. And he’s on board. He has to be. He is the only person that could possibly understand the torment of a man living through what he has lived through. Cesar may have come from humble beginnings. He may have at one point been a straight arrow, but life — and death — made him what he is today. He came into our lives because he had to become a monster like us. And he is the best man — the only man — that can get the job done.

“Consider it done,” he says, finality coating his words. If he says he’ll do it, he’s as good as his word. I knew that having him on board would only make us stronger, and I’m glad that my judgment wasn’t misplaced. Even Caleph has started to take to him.

Even before we’re on the plane, his phone is out and he is typing away furiously. I know that he’s already made enquiries, but now there’s a sense of urgency, I’m sure

he's tapping into his contacts, who'll be tapping into their own contacts. If anyone can find Luna's brothers, it's Cesar.

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LUNA

I wonder how much new and shocking information a person can digest before they implode. The punches just keep rolling until I fear my brain might actually give out on me.

Scarface is my brother.

Actually, his name is Gabriel. But for some reason, I still adore Scarface for him.

I look at him sitting across the aisle from me, deep in conversation with TJ. Who, by the way, is not really TJ. He has been known for the past five years or so as The Jekyll, but before that, he was an unassuming businessman named Cesar Cavalho. I told you — punches.

“You need to eat something,” Attila says, breaking into my thoughts. My eyes stray back towards him, taking in the fatigues and t-shirt he's wearing. He's a handsome bastard when he wants to be.

“How much longer before we land?”

“A couple of hours.”

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The four of us will touch down in Arizona, while Caleph and Dante will fly on to Seattle. My condition of coming back to the States was that I would be able to check in on Nadia. I have to see for myself that she is alright. Attila has promised that we will go straight to see her at her mother's house where she's staying.

Attila bites the inside of his cheek as he looks at me, furrowing his brows thoughtfully. In so little time, he's become everything to me, the one solid constant in a world of chaos. With him, I feel safe. I feel protected.

He rises from his seat across from me and buckles into the chair beside me. He takes one of my hands in his and rests his head back against the leather of the jet. I knew money in my father's lifetime, but nothing like the grandeur in which these men reside. You can smell money on them, its power all-consuming, and their lack of regard for it. Financial gain is not what fuels these men.

"You doing okay?" he asks again, tilting his head toward me. His eyes slide against mine like a feline's, so many unspoken rhythms that make my heart stutter and fall.

"Define okay," I laugh.

"You're doing just fine," he decides. There's something delicate yet final in the way he looks at me. He doesn't remove his eyes from mine for a moment, and I find my heart catching as I return his stare.

We've never spoken about what happened between us in Arizona. It was one slip one lazy afternoon when the tension culminating between us resulted in us falling into each other. We never spoke about it afterward, nor since. The interaction hangs there

between us, a silent thread unspooling. Something warm and fuzzy tickles at the base of my stomach, inching slowly up the length of my body, threatening to erupt. I wonder if he feels it too. Or is it just my imagination? I've been with men before, but I've never felt this sort of tension that coils in the base of my back, then unravels slowly. I've never felt this primal hunger, like I've eaten my fill but I'm still not satiated. I'm not finished with Attila yet. And I don't think he's finished with me either.

* * *

Nadia sits outside in the blistering heat, the sun lapping at her face. She's the opposite of what I expected. She's smiling and glowing and so happy to see me. She lifts herself gingerly from her chair and falls into my arms, happy to see me.

When she looks over my shoulder at Attila and TJ, I turn and introduce her to them.

"You guys were at the bar that night," she says. "Then at my house." She scrunches her face in confusion. She's wondering how I know them and how I came to be in their company. Where I've been all this time before waltzing back into her life. I explain to her that it's a long story but I'll tell it to her later when we catch up.

I can't ignore the way her gaze lingers on TJ. I've introduced him to her as Cesar, even though my mind won't quit calling him TJ.

"Thank you," she directs at him. "For helping me."

I remember Attila telling me it was TJ who insisted they take Nadia to the hospital.

"You're looking better," he murmurs, and for once I catch a whiff of his awkwardness. Nadia is looking so much better than better. She's beautiful, and she hasn't allowed my father to make a victim of her. He may have ruined many lives,

but Nadia is defying the odds and refuses to fall prey to a dead man's misdeeds.

"How are you feeling, really?" I ask her, as TJ and Attila leave us. They don't go far, though. They pull up two chairs a few feet away, out of ear-shot, and thank Nadia's mother as she sets down two sweating glasses of iced tea in front of them.

"I feel amazing, Luna. Truly. I'm thankful, I'm alive. And that's what matters."

I look away, shame washing over me. My father did this to her. He almost ended her life, probably would have put a bullet in her if the boys hadn't arrived when they did. I know my father; he was not a merciful man.

"Hey." She forces my gaze back to her. "This is not on you. Your father did this to me, not you. It's not your fault. And I finally realize why you ran away from him. I do."

"He's dead," I tell her.

"How does that make you feel?"

That's Nadia. Always thinking about how I'm feeling instead of what she's been through, or what her feelings are. Always putting others first, even at her own expense.

"He wasn't my real father," I deadpan. "Maybe that's why there was never that connection between us."

Nadia is silent for the longest time. I know she expects me to go on, to talk about my feelings. She's very big on things like that. I think sometimes she forgets I'm not one of her students.

“So many things make more sense now,” I tell her. I haven’t told her my whole story. I don’t know that I ever will. Some things, I just prefer to keep close to my chest. “Turns out he wasn’t my father, and I have a half brother from my biological father.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“It is. But shit happens, right?”

Silence falls between us as I regard my best friend. She’s the best thing that’s happened to me since I left Mexico. The only truth in a world drowning in lies and deceit.

“How’s Dwayne?” I ask her, remembering the boyfriend she was too good for.

“You were right,” she smiles. “He was a good for nothing piece of shit, and I’m so glad I finally got rid of him.”

ATTILA

We're heading to Seattle. Luna has convinced Nadia to follow us out. A fresh start. For everyone. I can't ignore the lingering glances that pass between Nadia and Cesar as we leave her standing at the door to her mother's house. I'm glad. I haven't seen him look at a woman that way since I met him. Maybe now that he's avenged his wife's death, he'll find it easier to move on. And the task I've given him, of finding Luna's brothers, will give him a purpose, some sort of direction.

He slides his phone into his pocket, a pensive look on his face, before he comes to join Luna and me where we sit on the jet.

"Problem?" I ask him. It's only a matter of time before he gives me the information I need about the Castillos. Luna whips her head in his direction, a curious look on her face.

"Marden." He mentions his best friend, also his former brother-in-law. "Wants me to come home."

I'm silent as I try to read the emotion of his face. His body language won't give me anything. We haven't been working together long, but what started out as a need in both of us to rid the world of our mutual enemy has turned into so much more than that. We work well together. Our empire is growing. And we could use a man like Cesar on our team. No. Weneeda man like Cesar on our team. There's probably no one I would trust more than him to get the job done. Plus, there was the matter of

Luna's four missing brothers. We'd tried for years to track down the elusive Coyin Castillo, but it was Cesar, working on his own, who finally managed to find him. I had no doubt he was the best person to find Luna's brothers and give her the closure she would need.

"What are you going to do?" Luna asks, saving me from caring. She looks devastated. She, too, has become accustomed to the man who watches over her like a second shadow.

"I don't know yet. But I've never been to Seattle before."

He looks up and grins at her. He's torn between his past, his present and his future. Only time will tell where he lands.

Luna exhales softly and settles back into her seat, never taking her eyes off Cesar as she also tries to read him. She's been through so much change recently. I don't know that she'd be able to deal with him exiting the stage, especially as she tries to navigate this new and foreign way of life without Coyin Castillo hovering over her.

When Gabriel joins us, he hands out packets of nuts and juices, then gives Luna a pointed look when she tucks them into a side pocket in the seat.

"Eat. You haven't eaten anything all day."

I watch the exchange between brother and sister. So different, yet so similar. She's fair to his dark, but I can see the similarities in the crane of their neck and their profile. He's taken to her as though he's known her all these years, the caring and protective older brother who will stop at nothing to ensure her safety. He risked his own life trying to help her when Coyin had her imprisoned in the dungeon underneath his home. Luna told me he got close to getting his head blown off by Coyin. He'd known all along that Luna was his sister. He'd also had his suspicions that Coyin had

killed his father. So he'd done what any warm blooded creature with a pulse would do in our world; he got close to Coyin, serving as his driver and bodyguard, in order to get close enough to find his sister then get rid of Coyin himself. He'd played the only card he had, and that had paid off for him in the long run.

I like that she has Gabriel to fill the void while she waits on news about her brothers. He's protective without smothering her, watchful without being a stalker. And he cares enough about her to have risked his own life to protect her.

I point to the scar on his right cheek. It's vivid without detracting from his features; if anything, it lends him an air of mystery. "You never told me where how got the scar," I comment.

Gabriel smirks and corrects that it's nothing more than a scratch.

"A pretty deep scratch," Luna murmurs. "Did you get into a bar fight?"

"Long story," he tells us. "Maybe I'll tell you... sometime."

We change the subject as the jet glides seamlessly through the air and Gabriel joins Cesar across the aisle, while we settle into our seats. Luna sits with a pensive look on her face, looking out the window nearest to her.

"What are you thinking about?"

When she turns to me, her eyes are glazed with a fragility I haven't seen in her before. I can't get the image of her jumping over the railing that first time we spoke out of my head. She was untouchable then, mesmerizing, taking me by surprise with her ferocious lack of fear as she faced two grown men — strangers — head on. She literally kicked my ass without even trying, and I'd been awe-struck by the mechanics of the way her body moved as she jumped from the first storey and landed ever so

gracefully on the pavement. Like a feline. Like a cat.

But now there's something almost broken about her, and for the first time I notice the dark rings under her eyes. I haven't been paying attention. She probably hasn't slept well in days. I know she's not eating, either. She breaks into my haze as I continue to catalogue her.

"I've always known where I was going, Attila. My destiny; what was meant to happen to me. My whole life has been dictated for me."

"He's gone now," I tell her. "You dictate your own destiny."

"What if I have no idea what I'm doing? What if I get it wrong?"

I tread carefully as I assess her and consider her words. She's like a little girl lost, even though at her age, most women pretty much know where they're going and what they're doing. I try to picture her life as it was, Coyin controlling her every move, dictating what should and shouldn't be. Moving her around the board like a chess piece. Depriving her of a mother... a female role model to look up to. It can't have been easy.

"You have good people on your side, Luna. You won't get it wrong."

52

LUNA

Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 8:51 am

I don't know what I'm doing. Literally. I'm on a plane headed to Seattle, but I have no idea why. Attila says it's because he doesn't know where my brothers are and what they're capable of, but I think it's more than that. And for the first time in my life, I feel as though I'm a fish drowning in my own water.

I ran away from my 'father' three years ago because I didn't want to marry his choice of a husband. I wanted my freedom, my independence, but instead, I spent three years shuffling from place to place when I got even a whiff of him finding me. I was a prisoner in a cage of my own making. But the alternative was much worse.

Attila takes my hand and places it on his denim clad thigh, then covers it with his own as the plane touches down smoothly. My insides feel giddy as I consider all the possibilities to come. Seattle is a new beginning. It's a springboard to other things. I know I'll be safe here, and I'll be with friends. Attila and Cesar have done their best to protect me, and they haven't failed. Who crashes a party and steals a girl right from under the host's nose? Before putting a bullet in him? Gabriel, too, my half brother, is new in my life and I want to stay close to him. The fact that he picked himself up, left his life behind and joined me on this trip speaks volumes. He wants me in his life just as much as I want him in mine. It may not be easy navigating this new terrain, but a spark of excitement surges through me as I think of what lays ahead. The great unknown. But I am the artist, and this is my palette.

* * *

Coyin was a hated man. He didn't have many friends. He clawed and clawed but never quite hit that chord of being accepted into the world in which he lived. He was a despicable man who did despicable things and never garnered the respect he spent

his life yearning for.

This is never more apparent than when we walk into a towering glass building and the men stroll casually past the doorman, who tips his hat to them in welcome and addresses Attila by name. The man is larger than life, his presence turning heads as he enters the building like he belongs here. Which he obviously does. The concierge slides a swipe card across the desk and bats her eyes at Attila and Cesar. She ignores me. We go up in the elevator, waiting several minutes as the car ascends, then step straight out into the wide foyer of a residential apartment. I can hear voices to my right; Attila sets down his duffel bag in a corner of the foyer and slides that way until we are all standing in a massive glass encased living room with a desk at the far end. Caleph and Dante are standing by the desk, enjoying some amber liquid. They turn when we enter, obviously expecting us. The smiles on their faces, sincere and unapologetic, tell me they're happy to see Attila. He commands the same sort of respect they do without even trying. Who are these men?

I stand back, watching as they greet each other, and give a meek wave as their focus comes to me. I feel like I'm on display as Caleph and Dante look at me curiously, as though I am a puzzle they can't solve.

"You convinced her to come," Caleph says, turning to look at Attila.

"It was hard, but my charm never fails me."

"This is a safe place, Luna," Dante starts. "I'm glad you could come."

I give him a tight smile but say nothing. I don't even know what I'm doing here, and I'm already second guessing coming. Plus, I convinced Nadia to make the trip out and meet me here.

"Any news?"

The men's response is negative as they shake their heads at Attila, and I know they're referring to my brothers. It's disappointing to hear, but I guess no news is good news.

"They'll turn up eventually," Gabriel says, coming to stand beside me. He puts a comforting hand to my elbow and gives me a short nod. If he believes, I should believe.

"I'm worried, Gabriel. I haven't heard from them in so long. What if he killed them?" I whisper.

"Come on now, Luna. Why would he do that? They're his sons, his namesake."

"You didn't know him like I knew him, Gabriel. You don't know what he's capable of."

"Luna..."

Attila's bark cuts through my worry and my eyes dart to where he's standing watching me become more agitated. I hold his glance, too enthralled to turn away. I may have slept with the man, but I never really paid much attention to his commanding presence. It's baffling me how he put a spell on me in so little time.

"We'll find them."

His words are forceful. Full of certainty. He too believes that we will find my missing brothers. He has made this his one priority, and now everyone in his circle has joined the party. They're all working towards the same goal. I still don't understand why they would want to help; they got what they wanted when they killed Coyin and severed the head of the serpentine cartel that was a thorn in everyone's side. They got what they wanted; why saddle themselves with more baggage in the form of their enemy's 'daughter'? I blink slowly, then slide my eyes toward TJ. He stands to the

side, hands on his hips, a hulking behemoth, and he too believes. He gives me a nod of reassurance, and I know in that moment. I know that if my brothers are to be found, it will be these men that find them and give me the closure that I need.

53

THE JEKYLL

I'm new to this world. I may have spent the last five years hunting down Coyin Castillo and his brother. I may have come in contact with dubious characters with copious amounts of funds who bankrolled my search because they all wanted something from the Castillo cartel, but I've never been in the presence of this much money.

This whole building is owned by the three men who were standing in the living room barely an hour ago. The suite we were standing in is considered a 'conference suite'. It's where they go to hold their meetings, before each goes back to their own suite. Each man occupies a floor of the building, which is a primary residence. They have offices on other floors and in a building across the street, which I learn is owned by Dante's wife. It's mind boggling, and for once, I have trouble keeping up.

After showing me around, Attila takes me back to his suite, where we'll all stay and watch over Luna while we gather intel and decide what to do.

"You'll get your own suite," Attila tells me. "As a base. But of course, we do travel extensively for work."

I gawk. My own suite. What would I even do with a whole suite?

"For now, I want Luna surrounded by as many of us as possible to ensure her safety. At least until we identify any threats."

“You know, it’s interesting,” I start. “Why are you protecting her? She’s served her purpose. Coyin is dead and the Castillo cartel has fallen. You don’t owe her anything.”

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I already know what he doesn't. What he won't articulate or put a name to. But I feel it's necessary to give him an out if I'm wrong. I can just as easily ensure her safety in the care of someone else if this is going to affect him. I work for him now, so he's my priority. Yet I care enough about what happens to Luna to make sure she stays safe.

Attila shakes his head, walks to the window and plants his hands on his hips. He's silent for the longest time, and I can feel the wheels turning in his head before he turns back and regards me carefully. He doesn't say it, but unspoken words are there in his eyes, clear as day. He's caught feelings for her.

"She was never part of the long term plan," he explains. "But that doesn't mean plans don't sometimes change."

* * *

My world shifts, my priorities change, and I'm slowly starting to reprogram myself to adjust to this new life. I now work for one of the most powerful organizations in the world; the fact that three men from the same world can come together in collaboration, pool their resources, and create the largest criminal enterprise in the world without killing one another or letting greed get in the way baffles me. But it's happening, and successfully. Although they may argue that there's nothing illegal about their business. They've done a good job of legalizing all their assorted businesses; elements of their criminal activity only come into play when necessary. Such as when they're trying to protect their loved ones, or fight back an unsavory opponent looking for more. On the surface, these men are as legitimate as they come, but peel back the layers, and they'll do anything it takes to protect what is theirs.

I fit right in to their practice and values. I can never go back to being a man sitting behind a desk, signing off on contractors and inspecting job sites daily. That worked then, but it won't work for me now. For the simple reason that I rather enjoyed righting the wrongs in the world and cleansing the world of the scum of the earth. I've got my vengeance, there's one damn cartel down, but there's plenty more where they came from.

The upside for me is that the enterprise these men carry out doesn't touch on what I consider morally gray activity like the skin trade or drugs. They don't deal in body parts or murder for hire, and they, like me, have lines they won't cross. We do, after all, have a moral code to live up to.

Marden checks in on me almost daily; asks when — if — I'll be coming home. I'm no longer vague about the timeline of my return. He'll always be my best friend and brother in law, but I think he finally understands that this is the break I need to make to move past Sisely and the constant reminders of her back home. He promises to come out for a visit soon if I don't make it back home instead. This is not altogether an unwelcome trip; he's previously done business with Caleph and I know the businessman would welcome him in with open arms.

When Maria, the former Castillo maid who led me right to Luna calls, I answer on the first ring, snatching my phone up from the counter without hesitation. Once again, I've enlisted her help to try to find the Castillo brothers, and I know she must have something for me if she's calling. Even the vibration of the call somehow tells me she has something to say.

There's no answer as I press the phone to my ear, only static as air breathes down the line from across the border. Until there's a wave of words, cutting out at best, as she starts to talk. The line is so bad, I only get fragments of what she's saying. But I pick up the most important words, the ones I've been waiting to hear.

“Cas...tillo...estor...live...casa...” the blur of words travels through the space between us before the line goes dead. I try to call her back — multiple times, but there’s no answer as the phone rings out over and over again. I mutter a curse and press my lips into a tight line. She’s my main contact in Mexico; I can’t lose her now.

54

ATTILA

Ibought her fair and square.That’s all I can think as I look across the room at Luna. Bastard that I am. It was a job, one I undertook willingly. But now I find myself in a precarious situation and I can’t find the door.

I find myself thinking about her, maybe more than I should be. I steal glances at her when she’s not looking. I’ve slept with this woman. But she won’t chance me a glance anytime she’s around me. Which is next to never. She’s holed herself up in her room and rarely comes out, except to eat or ask for any updates. She’s getting restless as she waits around for nothing to happen, and I try to put myself in her place to understand how she’s feeling.

When I talk to her, she answers in stilted, barely one word sentences, her attention focused elsewhere. Like she could conjure up her brothers out of thin air. The look on her face tells me she thinks they’re already dead; she wouldn’t put it past Coyin to have killed them, especially if they had tried to revolt against him.

I bought her fair and square.The words keep playing in my mind over and over again as I try to catch her attention. I’ve never had to force a woman’s attention. Contrary, I’ve always had to fight them off. Not this woman. When she looks at me, it’s like she’s looking right through me, disinterested. As though we never happened. Which makes me want her more. Which makes me all the more determined to win her over. But she’s built like a great wall, hiding behind her emotions, refusing to let me in.

And all I can think is I bought her fair and square. I've never had to force a woman onto me. I've never had to force a woman, period. But technically, I won her at that auction. We haven't spoken about it since, but a fine dusting of fire prickles against my skin as devious thoughts start to take hold. The fact that I'm even thinking about resorting to that card doesn't sit well with me. I'm not that man. I've never been that man. But thoughts of her screech through my mind like a car without brakes, muddling my senses. I don't want to be that man, but if push came to shove, would I become that?

She resides for the most part in her room, depriving me of her presence. Even after I disappear for hours on end for work meetings, she's nowhere to be seen. She's either still dwelling in her corner of the suite or she's in the private rooftop gym practicing her moves with Gabriel. I finally learnt that it was her eldest brother Enzo who had insisted on her learning martial arts when she was a child, even above his father's protestations. She'd kept up with the sport throughout her teenage years until she'd mastered enough of the art to ensure she could always protect herself. And she's been able to do so for the most part — except when her father held a gun to her head and forced her into a car to take her back home. Except when Nestor Gamboa also held a gun to her and tried to steal her away from me. Because that's exactly what he tried to do. I bought her fair and square.

"There's movement," Cesar says, coming into the room. Luna turns from her place by the window and hurries over to join us, her fingers flying across her phone as she no doubt shoots off a text to Gabriel.

"What is it?"

Cesar shakes his head and tells us he couldn't make out much because the line was so bad, but he believes Maria has information that could lead us to the Castillos.

"Call her again." Gabriel says, catching the tail end of the conversation.

“Phone’s ringing out. I think it’s best I fly back and deal with it.”

“When? I’m coming.”

I turn to look at Luna in all her eagerness to find her brothers. That’s our priority now, but so is her safety.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I tell her, and she shrinks back in surprise. It’s already been decided that Cesar will travel to handle this when the need arose, but as I look at her, I realize I can’t bear to be in the same room with her and have her look at me with that indifference. Something has to give. “Cesar and I will handle it.”

Cesar throws me a surprised look. Plans change, and this one just got a whole lot more complicated. He hadn’t expected me to go along on this ride, but now I am. Just as quickly as his eyebrows shoot up, they slide back down as he moves his gaze towards Luna. He understands exactly what’s happening here; how could he not, when by all accounts, he’s lived out his love story and knows all the cues. He probably understands what’s happening here even better than I do.

“They’re my brothers,” she argues. I see Gabriel flinch, although it’s subtle. He’s wondering if she’d do the same for him. She hasn’t known him as long as the boys she grew up with. He’s a virtual stranger to her. But I’m guessing she’d fight just as fiercely, if not more, for Gabriel. For the chance to get to know him better and have him in her life.

“It’s not safe,” Cesar says. “It’s not safe for you when we don’t even know what we’re walking into.”

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Luna's eyes meet mine, an edge of concern laced in them. She's worried about us. About her brothers, but also about us. And she feels helpless.

"We can't afford to be worried about you when we're there," I tell her, pushing off the sofa I'm leaning against. "Cesar and I will go. We'll leave in a few hours once the flight plans are lodged."

I look toward Gabriel as he starts to say something. I know he's going to offer to come with us, but I can't have that either. "You need to stay with your sister," I tell him. "I need someone that's totally invested in her safety to watch over her. Make sure she doesn't do anything stupid."

Such as try to sneak off or grab a gun and kill a man.

55

LUNA

Sometimes it's easier to be told what to do, to have someone make all the hard decisions for you, than to have to make them yourself. The decisions have always been made for me. My life was mapped out for me even before I was born.

I am a girl born into a world ruled by men — Castillo men — my every move dictated by a man who raised me under a veil of betrayal. My mother betrayed him. So he killed her. Effectively killing me.

He dictated every step of my life, down to what I should wear and how I should

behave. Who I should marry... That was the one decision I would not live by. I wouldn't marry a man of his choosing, and I did not. Instead, I ran away. As far away as I possibly could, which wasn't very far, considering he found me easily enough.

My father was betrayed in more ways than one. By my mother, who cheated on him because he may not have been much of a husband. By my brothers, who helped me run away; their stipulation that I don't make contact otherwise he'd find out and kill us all. By me, who ran away without a backward glance, deserting him. Even the maid betrayed him every time she contacted me from a payphone to let me know that he was getting closer. This last time, I have learnt, he told no one and made the trip himself, and that was the reason he was able to find me.

He was a cruel and malicious man — yes, I still refer to him as my father, because effectively, he was my father. He was the man that raised me, the man I considered my father for twenty-five years. Something inside me hurts when I think of all the ways he hurt me. But I won't lie and say his loss doesn't hurt more. It hurts like a bitch. Because he may not have been the best father, but he was my father. And he was there.

I don't voice my feelings, because I know it might come off as crazy, that I would still have a smidgen of love left in me for the man. But crazy as it seems, he was still my father and I can't just shut off my feelings. I'm only human.

A thin film of sweat coats my skin; I brush the towel against my face and down my arms as I turn away from Gabriel and pick up my water bottle. Gabriel. My brother from another father. He's soft spoken and resilient, a quiet strength hidden beneath the surface. He moves away from the boxing bag and comes to stand beside me as I catch my breath.

"You've had a rough few weeks," he reminds me. The standard of my training just now proves I've lost some of the zest that he knows lurks within me. I'm a fighter

by nature. I'm fearless. And I'm adept at figuring situations out.

"I don't like that I can't control this situation," I tell him, rubbing my palms together. My muscles ache with the endless kicks I sent flying into the bag. Gabriel stretches a soothing hand to my arm. This can't be any easier for him than it is for me, not knowing what the future holds for us.

"Just let go, Luna. Trust that Cesar and Attila will find them."

"I still feel like I need to be there for them. What if they're hurt? I'm their sister; I need to be there."

He shakes his head and tells me I'm only going to be one additional thing for the men to worry about.

"Let's go in — they'll be leaving soon. We should at least say goodbye."

After Attila refused to let me go to Mexico with them, and Cesar concurred, I had gone up to the roof to let off some steam. It had helped, but now the worry is starting to set in. Especially as Maria is no longer answering her phone; the gnawing fear that something is terribly wrong only heightens my anxiety, and I know it won't disappear until the mystery of my missing brothers is put to bed once and for all.

I traipse down the hall between the bedrooms until I'm standing in the open doorway of Attila's bedroom. His back is to the door as he stuffs clothes into an overnight bag. He turns when I rap my knuckles on the door and fixes his ice blue eyes on me. Attila has beautiful eyes, but when he's angry, they're more like the fathomless sea during a thunderous storm. He turns back to what he's doing as I step into the room.

"I would've thought you have someone to do your packing," I start. "Need help?"

“All done.”

He zips the bag and lifts it onto a nearby chair, ready to grab it as he leaves.

“When do you leave?”

Attila checks his watch and tells me an hour. He’s dressed in fatigues and a black t-shirt that clings to the hard ridges of his upper body like a second skin. He’s all set to leave. Ready and waiting for the word that the jet is fueled and ready to whisk him off to his destination. To certain danger. They don’t even know what they’re walking into. They’re going in blind.

“I need you to promise me you won’t leave this building,” he says, fixing me with a hard stare. He’s angry. Why is he so angry?

“Nadia’s coming. I thought we could see the sights.”

He shakes his head, adamant in his resolve. I’m not, under any circumstances, allowed to leave the building, he tells me. This is the safest place for me to be; every inch of the block is covered by soldiers and he doesn’t want to get a call that I’ve defied him. Defied. Him.

“That’s a strong word, don’t you think?”

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“Not where your safety is concerned.”

“Why Attila? Why? Why do you care so much what happens to me?”

“I thought that answer would have been obvious by now,” he says, lifting his bag and leaving the room.

56

ATTILA

We have eight of our strongest men with us, all ex-Navy Seals who now serve on our security team. They may be only eight men, but they’re a formidable army; I’ve seen four of them take down two dozen gang members without so much as sneezing.

Maria answers her phone when the plane touches down in the private airstrip we left only a few days ago. She’s breathless as she speaks into the phone and tells Cesar that her daughter was giving birth so she had her phone off. We collectively breathe a sigh of relief that she is okay and Cesar asks her if she’s okay to talk now.

I’m second guessing only bringing eight men with us as she tells us the story she’s heard about the missing Castillo brothers. A thin rod of fire inches down my spine as the last shred of hope I had of finding them alive disappears.

“A year?” I whisper, my voice hoarse. “They’ve been missing a whole year? How did Luna not know this?”

I sit in disbelief as we drive through the countryside of Mexico, slowing down at a clearing to collect our bearings. This information gives us nothing, yet it changes everything.

“So Nestor took the boys and dangled them over Coyin’s head until he returned Luna,” Cesar repeats the words that Maria said. Even she didn’t know the boys were missing; she had seen them so rarely since they moved to the city, she didn’t think much of it when they no longer attended the country estate.

“That doesn’t make sense though. Coyin had Luna; why wouldn’t he give her to Nestor in exchange for his sons?”

Cesar’s face blanches as the realization dawns on him. Nestor must have double crossed Coyin, who must have found out his sons were not coming back. They were dead. And the only way to spite Nestor was to sell Luna to the highest bidder.

“Why then, would he invite Nestor to the auction?”

“He didn’t. He had him removed, remember? Probably to be killed, but he somehow got away.”

“Which means he had someone on the inside working for him — how else would he have known about the party?”

“I think the best place to start would be Nestor’s residence. Do you have an address?”

Cesar pulls up a map on his phone and directs the driver there, before sending a text to the cars waiting behind us to let them know what’s happening. “The man’s dead — how far could we possibly get going to his home?” he asks.

“It’s a start, if nothing else.”

* * *

Nestor Gamboa's home resides behind a high stone wall; the area is flooded with light as we approach it, holding back fifty feet or so when we see that the huge black wrought iron gate is open. We leave our cars concealed by the trees and walk stealthily on foot as we approach the house, using only our eyes and fingers to indicate. The sound of men shouting in Spanish carries on the night air as the sun slips behind the horizon. We stop and listen, attentive to every word; Nestor Gamboa may be dead, but it looks like his soldiers are well and truly still alive.

“Yo digo que los matemos. Eso es lo que Nestor hubiera querido.” (I say we kill them; that's what Nestor would have wanted.)

“Nestor se fue, pendejo. Why dirty your hands with this filth!” (Nester is dead, asshole)

“Someone has to take over. Estoy tomando las decisiones ahora.” (I'm making the decisions now)

“Manuel, I Implore you, brother! Let's...”

A shot rings out, followed by a bellow, before more voices join in the conversation and chaos ensues. We can't see from our vantage point, but by the sound of it, there's a power struggle going on behind the wall, and there could be bloodshed. Bloodshed which may lead to more questions and none of our current ones answered.

“Go!” I hiss, sending the Seals in, before Cesar and I crouch and follow. We fall through the open gates, hidden within the shadows, as we survey the scene quietly. The house is relatively close to the gate, and we get a bird's eye view of the front stairs, where four men are on their knees, their arms extended behind their heads, execution style. Four men on their knees, four missing brothers. It doesn't take much

for us to connect the dots as I do a silent count of the men with guns pointed in their direction. One man is on the ground curled into a ball, obviously the man who was arguing, having taken a bullet to his knee.

“Careful not to hurt the Castillo brothers,” I whisper, before adding, “Take them now.”

My men work in perfect symphony, each turning their gaze on one man then training their gun in that direction. A cacophony of gunfire ensues, and I watch as the Castillos fall forward, flat on the ground as they protect themselves against the spray of bullets.

It takes less than a minute to disable the armed men; two of our men run forward, guns aimed, as they check that the remaining members of Nestor’s firing squad are dead. All except the man with the bullet in his knee, who now cowers into the darkness, his arms up in surrender as a spray of blood gushes from his shattered knee.

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When we're satisfied there is no further danger, we surge forward. "Anyone in the house?" I ask the man with the bleeding knee. He shakes his head, and four of ours enter the house to do a sweep as two more pull the Castillo brothers to their feet. They almost topple over again for how weak they are; malnourished and gaunt, their clothes hanging off them.

"Name?" Cesar asks, stopping at the first.

"Franco."

"And you?"

"Danielo."

"Enzo."

"CJ"

Cesar pauses, looks carefully at the man, waiting for elaboration. I thought we'd never hear the name again, but then he whispers his name, the youngest amongst the sons, and closest in birthdate to Luna.

"Coyin Junior."

I've been called many things in my lifetime. I can't say inhumane is one of those things. The first order of the day is for the men to be looked over by a doctor. Although severely dehydrated and malnourished, the doctor tells us they're fine otherwise and takes his leave.

We're in the house in the side of the hill where we were only days ago. The house where the Castillo brother's captor lost his life at the hands of their sister. The men are quiet as they look at us from various positions around the living room, waiting for some sort of introduction. They still don't know who we are; all they know is they had guns trained at their heads, and now they're in relative safety. It's the eldest, Enzo, who finally speaks.

"Who are you? Did Coyin send you?"

"Coyin is dead," I tell him. A flicker of surprise crosses his face, before he lets out a steady exhale. The men look at each other curiously. Change is here.

"What happened?"

"I killed him," Attila speaks up. The man is fearless as he faces the sons of the man he killed. He owns his actions. He owns every man's frailty that besieges him.

Enzo nods slowly, as if agreeing this had to happen. He swallows, a harsh sound filling the room with the difficulty it causes him. He's swallowing his emotions. His father was not a good man, but he was still his father.

"Who are you?" he asks his father's killer.

"They call me Attila."

Enzo nods again. His brothers all lift their eyes to look at Attila.

“Coyin was terrified of you,” Enzo, who has taken up the position of spokesman for the brothers, says. “You were his Bogeyman — he knew you were coming for him.”

“I’ve been hunting him for years,” Attila tells him, folding his arms across his chest as he adds that Coyin did a good job of evading him.

“So if you killed our father, why did you save us?” he asks.

“I saved you because I promised your sister I would.”

* * *

The Castillo brothers are a contradiction of sorts. Where I had been concerned that they would seek vengeance for their father’s death, they’ve done nothing but fall over themselves in gratitude that he is finally gone. They, like Luna, were thrust into a life not of their making. Not of their choice. Given the option, this is not a life anyone would choose for themselves, especially to be someone with a deranged father like Coyin Castillo. Add into the mix the fact that they knew he killed their mother, even though he protested it loudly, and they were glad to finally be rid of him.

Their main concern now was for Luna and her welfare, especially after they learn that she had been the one to pull the trigger on Nestor.

“It’s ironic,” Franco says, as he leans back into his chair at the outdoor setting. “She’s not even his daughter, and yet she’s the one that most resembles him when it comes to being ruthless.”

Attila bristles beside me; I implore him quietly with my eyes to stay calm. The very concept of Luna being anything like Coyin Castillo is ludicrous; anyone pushed to their breaking point is capable of pulling a trigger.

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“She didn’t pull that trigger unnecessarily,” I point out. “The man tried to kidnap her. He would’ve raped her, possibly killed her. Luna was in a kill or be killed situation.” I don’t see the need to tell him that Nestor was hanging upside down by his legs when she put a bullet in him. There’s no need for him to have that image in his head.

“His point is she had the guts to do what we were never capable of doing,” Enzo speaks up. “Luna has spirit, but she’s a humanitarian before anything else. She’d never take a life without reason. We know that.”

Enzo fixes his brother with a hard stare, willing him to stay quiet. They’re all different, the brothers. Each unique in his own way. But the one similarity they all share is their love for Luna. Their unwavering support for her. They love her more than they loved their father. And that’s all we need to know to be satisfied that she is safe. Every threat to her that we knew of has been eliminated. Even the dumbass at the bar that night is long gone.

“When can we see her?” Coyin Junior asks. There’s barely two years between his sister and him, but they might as well be twins for all the physical similarities they share. He has the same color hair and the same amber eyes as Luna, and they are so similar in age and height, you could easily mistake them for twins.

“I’ve arranged for her to come here,” Attila says, and this is news to me. But that’s what he promised her; that once he could be sure she was safe, she would be free to leave. It’s not necessarily what he wanted, but he won’t hold her back when she has brothers to consider.

“Gabriel’s staying behind,” Attila tells me, as we leave the men and walk toward the

edge of the cliff. “He wants to give her time with her brothers.”

“You think she’ll be okay?”

“Hard to tell. But the brothers are glad to be rid of Coyin, so they have that in common. And they seem very fond of her.”

He turns to look back at the men, watches them quietly as they laugh and chat and Daniello reaches over and messes up Coyin Junior’s hair. They’re more like boys than men, and I realize that could be because in our world, boys have to grow up quickly. They don’t have time to be boys. They don’t have the pleasure of living out their childhood.

“Someone else I know seems very fond of her, too.”

Attila whips his head back and settles his thoughtful gaze on me for the longest time, saying nothing.

“I think we’re past the point of pretending you don’t have feelings for her, Attila. This is the same exact thing I did with my wife Sisely before I married her.”

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ATTILA

Luna squeals as she disembarks from the jet and flies into me, almost knocking me over. Her excitement sends a wave of trepidation through me. She’s excited to be seeing her brothers, but where does that leave us?

“Where are they?” she asks, jumping on the balls of her feet in barely contained excitement. Nadia joins us, looking better than she did when we left her in Arizona.

“They’re waiting for you,” I tell her, as we walk toward the waiting car. I don’t tell her that I left a watchful eye on them in the form of Cesar.

We drive the short distance to the house, with Luna animated the entire way as she tells me she met Dante’s wife Kingsley and Caleph’s fiancé Ariadne.

“They are... amaaaazing,” she croons. “I can’t describe to you how well we got along.”

“I heard,” I snicker. “You guys stayed up all night watching old movies. Caleph and Dante were fuming.”

“Why?” she whips her head in my direction curiously. “We were right there in the building.”

I shake my head and laugh. “They’re not used to sleeping without their women beside them. They don’t like it one bit.”

Luna lifts her shoulders in a shrug and tells me the girls had fun and that my friends would survive one night on their own.

“They weren’t really angry, were they?” she asks, a worried frown creasing between her eyebrows.

“They had a bit of a bitch, but like you said, they’ll survive.”

“Their partners are lovely — no wonder they don’t want to spend a moment away from them.”

I look at Luna thoughtfully. I don’t know how I’m going to spend a moment without her after all this is over. She’ll probably decide to stay in Mexico, although I don’t

miss the absence of a bag. She'll want to be with her brothers. She'll want to be in the comfort of family, not strangers.

I turn away from her and glide my eyes toward the window as we near the house. I don't miss Nadia's gaze as our eyes cross and she gives me a little shake of her head and rolls her eyes.

* * *

I sit with Enzo, watching Luna as she frolics on the grass with her brothers. They're like little kids seeing each other after an extended absence, their laughter echoing off the cliff side as they play tip. Nadia and Cesar are sharing a coffee at the other end of the patio; Cesar listens to Nadia, nodding and grunting at certain intervals as he hangs on every word the woman says.

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“I haven’t had a chance to thank you,” Enzo says, turning to me. “For saving my sister. She told me what you did. And for saving us.”

“It was the right thing to do.”

“No,” he shakes his head. “People like us — people in our world — don’t care about doing the right thing. I’ve seen the way you look at her.”

I shift in my seat, an uneasy tension forming between us. I hadn’t thought it was that obvious, even though I’ve limited my interactions with her.

“I’m not saying this to make you feel uncomfortable,” he hurries to add. “I just wanted you to know that I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for us, and I wouldn’t mind you for my sister. If I’m reading the situation right and that’s what you want.”

“Your sister’s not interested.”

“I don’t think Luna even knows what she wants. If you want her, you’ll have to make her want you.”

* * *

Coyin Castillo died almost broke. What remained were the scattered properties across Mexico that he had mortgaged to the hilt. He was, at the time of his death, effectively bankrupt. A cartel leader with no money was as good as dead even before he woke every morning; cartel members that don’t get paid don’t hang around for free.

This, I know, is a hard pill to swallow for the Castillo boys. They have to start over from scratch; it's only a matter of time before the banks reclaim everything that's theirs. I know they don't want to be part of what their father established from everyone else's hard earned money. They don't want to be thugs, and they don't know how to rule in this world. So I devise a plan. I run it past Caleph and Dante, get the go ahead and put my plan in motion. It's up to them whether or not they accept.

Enzo tells me they have no desire to leave Mexico. This is where they've lived all their lives, and this is where they'll stay.

"So what will you do?" I ask.

He shrugs, tells me they'll work it out. Go back to the beginning. I tell him I have a proposition for him; he looks at me uncertainly until I start to outline my idea for him.

"And who will bankroll this venture?" he asks.

"None other than Nestor Gamboa."

"The man is dead," he reminds me, deadpan.

"But his money isn't."

I go on to tell him that Nestor forfeited any right he had to anything in our world the minute he decided to attack us. I had Pietro, Dante's trusted security whizz and resident hacker, sink his teeth into Nestor's offshore accounts. And there was plenty to write home about there. This is what we call the spoils of war. The dead businessman left behind a fortune and no one to claim it, so we seized it. And we'd put it to good use.

“We’ve been thinking of avocado farming,” I tell Enzo, who regards me with some skepticism. He must think I’m crazy. I know there’s a massive market for avocados in the US; my plan is not limited to Mexico, and I tell him so. “You and your brothers will run the business side of things; overseeing production, transport, export. I will supply the contacts in the US. It’s a lucrative industry, Enzo, and it’s only getting bigger.”

“And if it fails?” He’s hesitant. It’s a business venture and he’s using someone else’s money.

“It won’t.”

“What’s the catch?”

“There is no catch. All I ask is that you employ local farmers, you treat them well and you pay them their due. A third party will be conducting regular compliance audits.”

“You really think it will work?”

“I know it will. But I can’t do this unless you’re on board.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“This will be beneficial for all of us,” I tell him. “We’ve been thinking about it for a while, but it’s been on the back burner until we could find someone to run the venture. This is the perfect opportunity.”

“We don’t want any part of any shady or illegal dealings. We lived that with my father.”

I put my hand to my heart in faux horror as I tell him that’s not what we’re about.

This is a legitimate business and it will stay as such. I watch as he turns to his siblings, then as he lowers his eyes to my outstretched hand and puts his palm in mine.

LUNA

Enzo walks me to the edge of the cliff and we stand at the railing, looking out at the sea. It's so blissful and freeing to be standing here, I almost forget the events of the past few weeks.

My brother looks at me with some concern, asks me if I'm alright. I'm more than alright. I'm fine and I'm happy and I'm finally free. Free of the stifling noose that Coyin had around my neck. Free of having to look over my shoulder everywhere I went. Free of the threat of Nestor becoming my husband. It's an exhilarating feeling, finally letting go of the shackles that have besieged me.

"I'm sorry, " Enzo whispers. "Sorry we couldn't protect you better from him. Sorry we didn't do more."

I shake my head, washing away his guilt. He has nothing to be guilty about, even though I know he feels it deep in his soul. "You helped me get away from him. When no one else would."

"It wasn't enough."

"It was a start. The rest was up to me. You did what you could, Enzo."

He looks up, huffs, then turns back toward the outdoor patio where everyone is sitting enjoying drinks after lunch. I follow his eyes, watch as his gaze falls on Attila, who's watching us intently, his tense knuckles folded over the armrests of the chair he sits on. I'm still caught in Attila's stare as Enzo turns back and says something that flies

right over my head. When he nudges my elbow, I snap my eyes to my brother, my lips parting in surprise.

“What’s going on there?” he asks, a soft smile coating his lips.

“Where?”

“You and Attila stealing glances when you think no one is looking.”

A heated blush moves up the side of my neck as my embarrassment takes hold of me. I’ve never spoken with my brothers about boy stuff; we’ve never had to. They don’t even know anything about my past with the opposite sex, and that’s how I’ve always liked it. Talking with him now is hard.

“Nothing’s going on,” I tell him.

Enzo smirks, lifts his eyebrows in a way that tells me he doesn’t for one second believe that, then asks me what my plans are.

“Attila told me about Gabriel. Where does he fit into your life?”

“I have to have a place for him in my life, Enzo.”

I’m asking his permission, even though I’m an adult and I can basically do what I want. But I just don’t know how my brothers will adjust to me having a half sibling that none of us ever knew about.

“If he’s in your life, he has to be in ours, as well,” he says, looking off into the distance once again. “I think it’s time for us to meet him.”

Enzo’s acceptance of Gabriel makes my heart sing. What doesn’t make my heart sing

is his reluctance for me to stay in Mexico. He tells me I have my whole life ahead of me, that bigger and brighter things wait for me outside of my native country, and that I should leave and not look back, except for short visits here and there. Somehow, I have a feeling his attitude towards me staying has more to do with me and Attila than me actually staying in Mexico.

I feel like I'm being exiled as I face off with my older brother, until Franco joins us and tries to keep the peace between us.

"You can't force me to stay away," I argue.

Franco throws his arm between us in a time out, then hauls me back when I continue to move toward Enzo. Franco, always the peacemaker.

"Listen to what he's saying, Luna. He's not exiling you."

"You're mybrothers. I haven't seen you in three years! And now you want me toleaveagain?"

"Only until we get this new business up and running, then you can come back," Enzo States. I know that's all the time he needs me to stay away for him to figure a way to keep me out of Mexico.

"Why can't I stay here and help you?"

"Do you know the fallout we're going to be facing over the recent events that went on here?" Franco reminds me. "You can't be a part of that, Luna."

I shrink back at his words, knowing he's right. There could be backlash. There could be retribution. There could even be police involvement or cartels trying to muscle in on dead men's territory. We just don't know yet the extent of the damage that Coyin

and Nestor left behind, even though Attila and Cesar have assured me that my brothers are safe.

“Give us six months,” Enzo whispers, and from the stab of his voice, I can see that his request pains him. He does not want to be sending me away. It’s the smart thing to do. The right thing to do. Considering the circumstances. “After six months, you can come back if you want to. I won’t stop you.”

* * *

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“He’s only doing what he believes is in your best interests,” Nadia says, looking at me with sympathetic eyes. I’m so glad I have her to remind me to look at things differently. She’s been here only days, but already she’s developed enough of a rapport with my brothers to understand why they’re doing what they’re doing.

“I want to be here with my brothers,” I argue.

“You’ve been away from them for three years, Luna. Another half a year won’t kill you.”

“I know that, but still. It just hurts being sent away.”

“This is how they keep you safe. There’s four of them, Luna, and they’re all in agreement. You know what I’d do to have just one brother who cares for me that way?”

I give her a lop sided grin then elbow into her. “You have Cesar for that.”

I haven’t missed the way they’ve been around each other the past few days; always finding a corner to lurk in as they talk. Cesar gives her his rapt attention. Nadia is animated as she tells him stories about her life teaching kids. I watch as his eyes track her across the patio, or as she moves when she sets down platters of chopped fruit on the table for all the men to enjoy. And I’m glad for her. I’m glad that she finally has a real man in her life. And I’m glad that Cesar is finally starting to move on from the tragedy of losing his wife prematurely.

ATTILA

“The jet’s fueled and ready for us,” I say, walking into the living room. It’s been a fun few days, but it’s time to get back home and down to business. It’s taken a while for the boys to convince Luna to come back to the States with me, but she finally relented, with a promise that she’d be back in six months, if not earlier.

“Take care of her, man,” Enzo says, as he leans in to slap me on the back in farewell.

“She’ll be well looked after,” I remind him, before moving along the line of boys and saying our farewells.

I wait in the car and watch as Luna clings to her brothers, each one in turn, then swipes at her eyes before she turns away and walks quickly to the car. We drive away in silence, my eyes fixed on her as she looks out the side window, her tears continuing to roll down her cheeks.

“Luna.”

She ignores me.

“Luna.”

She sighs and turns to me, doesn’t try to conceal the fact that she’s still crying. We haven’t spoken about what’s going to happen when we get back to Seattle. She may want to go back to Arizona. Maybe somewhere else. We haven’t discussed the mechanics of what’s happening, nor the logistics of her stay. But I more than welcome the possibility of her staying with me in Seattle.

“You can come back and visit any time you want to. And I’m sure once they’re settled, they’ll fly out to see you.”

“Why did they do this?”

“It’s the smart thing to do, Luna. If they let their guard down for one minute, they’ll regret it for the rest of their lives. They can’t focus on you and a business that’s in its infancy.”

“I would’ve thought I’d be more important to them than a business.”

My eyes soften in understanding. She thinks they chose the business over her.

“Luna. Coyin left your brothers with nothing. Nothing. What standard of living could they offer you without even a roof over their heads?”

“That bad?” she gasps, and I nod in answer.

“Coyin was a despicable man who did despicable things, but he was also bankrupt. Your brothers are starting from the bottom. That’s not an easy thing to do. And I commend them... for having the balls and the guts to go at it again.”

“So what will happen to them?”

“They’ll be fine, Luna. I promise you.” I lean my head back against the headrest then roll my head in her direction. “Before you know it, they’ll be on their feet again, and you’ll be on a plane back to them.”

* * *

Kingsley ribs me as soon as I walk into the dining area, my eyes scouring the room for Luna.

“I see you brought her back with you.”

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I growl, a low chesty rumble that threatens to erupt like an earthquake. Before I even have a chance to respond, Dante is at his wife's side, sliding a protective arm around her waist. Since she's come into our lives, Kingsley has become more like a sister than the wife of one of my best friends. I take her jabs on the chin; our thing is for her to make fun of me and me to act like the wounded hunter I am.

"The hunter giving you trouble again, King?" Dante asks, his eyes holding his wife's.

"The only trouble he's giving me is the sort where he drags his feet about finally finding a woman to settle down with. Even when the woman is staring him right..."

I stop listening as I catch movement in the doorway and Luna walks in laughing, arm in arm with Caleph's wife, Ariadne. They're closely followed by Caleph, who can't take his eyes off Ariadne, and Cesar with Nadia, who's typing away furiously on her phone. Cesar spares her a concerned look, then looks away, obviously curious but not wanting to overstep.

Every man in the room has his eye on a woman. The electricity surging through the room is fire as I look at each one of my friends in turn. I want that. I want what they have. I want to know the thrall of having that someone in my life that mirrors the other half of me. That person that I can't fall asleep unless she's sleeping beside me. That woman that will fulfil everything in me that I've been yearning for. I want that all consuming passion that has touched each one of my friends and continues to act like magic around everyone they come in contact with. I want that, and I want so much more.

I think of everything that's come to pass over the last few years. So much has

happened. We're not over yet, not by a long shot, and I'm sure the best is yet to come. But we've had to work together to bring down a crazy motorcycle gang, we've had to wage a war to get one of our own back. Hell, we even at one point went to war with Cesar because he had taken Ariadne. We had to scale walls and knock down careers when we were up against some corrupt government officials, not to mention eliminating some threats within our own ranks. Coyin Castillo proved another challenge in himself, and he brought with him so many other disasters. I'm sure we haven't endured the last of our troubles; there's more to come, I have no doubt. But for now... for now, there's peace and quiet and a soft longing.

Dante — he married the daughter of his father's enemy. I've never seen a couple more in love. They're a powerhouse with their collective fortunes combined, and they belong together. I watch as Kingsley looks up at her husband, wonder in her eyes. And that wicked glance he throws back at her; this is a man that burned down a city to get her back.

And Caleph. Who met Ariadne under the strangest of circumstances. He fell in love with her when he wasn't even entertaining the idea. Even I almost fell in love with her the first time I met her. He didn't stand a chance. He, too... Caleph killed to ensure that Ariadne would live. He executed the signatories of the contract on her life, thereby nullifying the bounty. Dead men don't pay contracts, after all.

It's new days yet for Cesar and Nadia, but I can see them blooming into something more. We haven't been friends for long, but I now consider Cesar, at one point my enemy, one of my closest friends. He's joined the ranks of a very rare few who have that sort of access to my life. And he's quickly marching up those ranks.

I watch him as he watches Nadia, see the look of agitation that crosses his face as Nadia hisses into the phone in a corner of the room. Luna notices and walks toward her. Nadia slams her phone shut and it looks like she's seriously considering hurling it across the room. Cesar and I walk toward the women simultaneously, breaking into

their conversation when it looks like Nadia is hyperventilating.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

Luna places a small hand to my arm. I look down where her hand meets my skin, causing it to tingle, then meet her eyes. She doesn’t draw her hand away; instead, she clings to me like I am her lifeline. I want to be. I want to be her everything; all her yesterdays and all her tomorrows. I want to be her now and her forever. I just want to be. In her life, in her thoughts.

“Nadia’s ex,” she whispers, as Cesar leans into Nadia and holds her close to him, giving her exactly what she needs. I frown; this man knows exactly what to do, and when.

“What about him?”

“They broke up after the attack on Nadia. But he won’t take no for an answer. He keeps calling her.”

“It’s definitely over?”

Luna nods, adamant that Nadia no longer wants anything to do with her ex.

“Next time he calls, you let me or Cesar answer the phone,” I tell Nadia over Cesar’s shoulder. “His business is with us now.”

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LUNA

Cesar organizes a new phone and number for Nadia; it gives my friend the measure

of hope she deserves, and she sags into Cesar comfortably every chance she gets.

Since we've been back in Seattle, I've been surrounded by nothing but love. It's all around me. Kingsley and Dante, with the absurd story of how they met and how they got together. It's so ridiculous, I think they've made up the story, until Attila assures me every bit of it is true, and I snap my mouth shut before I launch another debate on the story of how their union came to be. Caleph and Ariadne, soon to be married, are also on my radar. They are so in love, it makes my heart stutter to be in the same room as them. Even Cesar and Nadia, without having put a label on their relationship, are so obviously falling for one another, and I'm over the moon at my best friend's happiness. It looks like my best friend has finally found a man who will lift her up and put her on a pedestal.

Then there's Attila and me. We're intimately familiar with one another, yet we tiptoe around each other every chance we get. I can't stop the way my heart races whenever we're in close proximity. And I can't ignore the lingering glances between us. I can't deny the chemistry that exists, yet we both seem reluctant for some reason to take that final step into the unknown.

"What are you so scared of?" Ariadne asks, as she comes to stand beside me, a knowing look on her face.

We've just finished dinner and everyone else is standing around mingling over drinks, while I stand in my corner listening to Nadia chatter on while my eyes linger on Attila. He is the very epitome of a warrior, a hulking male with well defined muscles and the heart of a beast. But with me, he's like a teddy bear. With me, he's gentle and soft, and he leaves the gruffness for where it's needed.

"What?" I look at her innocently, playing dumb. Her face softens as she gives me a comforting look.

“Come on, Luna. Any fool can see you two are hung up on each other. What are you so afraid of?”

“What if he doesn’t feel the same?” I ask her. “He hasn’t made a move.”

“Because he doesn’t want to crowd you. That’s not his style, Luna. Attila’s waiting for you.”

I shake my head, unsure. This is a whole new world in which I’m playing this ball game. I don’t know how to play. Maybe I would if I were in my own backyard. But not here.

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“Attila’s a keeper, Luna. But he doesn’t know how to do relationships. You’re going to have to teach him.”

* * *

I find him on the terrace, looking out at the city as the twilight fades behind a blanket of cold. Ice clinks in his glass as he lifts his drink to his lips and takes a sip, a contemplative look on his face.

“Mind some company?” I ask, hooking my foot in the railing as I come to stand beside him. I clasp my hands together over the railing, waiting. He turns to me, saying nothing, his eyes conveying all the words he wants to speak.

“I want you to stay,” he says. I throw my thumb over my shoulder and indicate the group of people waiting inside.

“They’re waiting for us.”

“No, I meant in Seattle,” he corrects. “I want you to stay here.”

“Why?” I dare not wish. I hold my breath expectantly, waiting for him to say something. He swallows sharply before speaking again.

“I don’t want to leave, but I need a reason to stay, Attila.”

“I want to see where this will go.”

He indicates the space between us with a finger that peels away from his glass. I move to take the glass from his hand and set it down on a nearby table. I close the space between us slowly, deliberately. If this is going to happen, I'm going to have to make it happen, because he's taking his sweet time about it.

“What do you want, Attila?”

He sucks in a breath. I'm direct and to the point, but I have to rip off this band aid. If he wants us to be together, he's going to have to tell me so. He stays silent for the longest time, while I wait and the night grows darker with us staring each other down.

“You're a man used to getting what you want. I've seen you at your darkest. I've seen you be ruthless and calculating and devious when you want to be. I watched you as you decided and then actioned — the death of a man. You're a man used to getting what you want, when you want it. Why, then, is it so hard for you to take what you want here and now?”

Attila tips his head to the side inquisitively, then grabs my hand and leads me away from the terrace. He drags me through the living room of Dante and Kingsley's house. I scramble to keep up with him, but he won't let my hand go as we cross the room, ignoring the curious looks from the intimate congregation. He finds the nearest bathroom and locks us in, then pushes me against the door, lifting my hands above my head. He looks at me for the longest time, as though waging a war with himself over what he's doing.

“I'm a man used to getting what he wants, and what I want is you.”

His voice is hoarse as he speaks, before he bends and claims my mouth with his. I don't fight it. If anything, I push into his body. More, more. I want more. My lips melt into his as our tongues do their happy dance; he doesn't let me come up for air. Instead, he becomes everything and anything as he drinks me whole, savoring my scent as we entangle ourselves in a mess of limbs.

“What took you so long,” I murmur, in between breaths. He pushes his body into mine, until I can feel the hard ridges of muscle and I look down at where our bodies meet.

“Eyes, Luna. Eyes on me.”

“What. Took. You. So. Long,” I hiss, as he bites against my neck.

“I didn’t want just one more night, Luna. I wanted forever. I waited for you to tell me you were ready to start our forever after. And you just did.”

* * *