
VICIOUS
TEMPTATION
THE SEVERED HEIRLOOM BOOK 2
ELLE MALDONADO

Vicious Temptation

The Severed Heirloom

Book Two

Elle Maldonado

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Afterword
Also by Elle Maldonado

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Cover Design: Artista Gráfico

Editing: Mackenzie Letson of Nice Girl, Naughty Edits

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Anal Play
Sexual Use of Lollipop
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Fleeing and Eluding Police
Sexual Harassment
Law Enforcement Corruption

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Playlist



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For the ones who bite back, love hard, and were never meant to be tamed
May you find someone who sees all that fire and falls in love with the burn

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Author's Note

Before you dive into Remi and Thiago's story, I just want to say thank you.

This book became so much bigger than I ever expected it to be. My girl Remi has been waiting a long time to tell her story and get her happily ever after. When it was finally their turn, they stepped up and completely took over. And I let them.

They're messy, emotional, and sexy. They love each other with everything they have, and it's beautiful.

I poured so much of myself into these two, and I hope you love them as much as I do.

Welcome back to the Severed Universe.

Now buckle up.

Remi Cain is behind the wheel.

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Prologue

Thiago



Most people assume a phone call in the middle of the night means someone is dead. Sometimes they're right.

Tonight, the call sends me to a warehouse on the outskirts of Philadelphia. I park beside a black SUV, kill the engine, and look up at the unmarked building. Not a single light shines through the blacked-out windows.

I've spent the last year carrying out Helios assignments under Houston's command. Tonight is my first briefing since the transfer. Elena Duvall hadn't offered an explanation, only an address and a time. She's the handler assigned to my precinct. Three months ago, she stepped into the role of commander, and as far as the department is concerned, that's all she is.

Climbing out of my truck, I move across the rain-slicked concrete toward the front entrance. The double doors, illuminated by a dim yellow lamp, swing open the moment I touch them.

I step cautiously into an empty lobby.

“Hello,” I call out into the silence.

Nothing.

Under different circumstances, I’d turn around and walk right back out, but I know Helios doesn’t operate like a police department. It works in the spaces where paperwork, warrants, and jurisdiction become obstacles. In other words, red tape has no place here.

My phone vibrates.

UNKNOWN: Room 8B. Second floor.

As if whoever sent the message is watching me, the elevator across the lobby chimes and its doors slide open. I step inside and roll my shoulders once as they close behind me. The quiet ride to the second floor gives me just enough time to wonder why Elena wanted to meet here instead of the precinct.

The elevator opens onto a narrow hallway lined with identical slate-gray doors. I step out and follow the numbers until I find Room 8B near the end. Wrapping my hand around the metal handle, I pull the door open, stopping cold at the sight of a young woman with striking blue eyes, dressed in all black, standing at the far end of the room.

She isn’t who I expected because, from what I know, Elena is at least two decades older.

The woman uncrosses her arms the moment she sees me, looking just as confused as I am.

"Who the hell are you?" she asks, looking me up and down.

"I'm here to meet somebody." I keep my eyes on her. "You?"

She doesn't answer, just stares at me for a long moment, her shoulders visibly tense.

"Who are you with?"

"Ninth precinct."

Her gaze narrows before drifting past me to the open doorway.

"That's impossible," she mutters, more to herself than me. "There's only one transfer to the Ninth."

She's right.

There was only supposed to be one transfer, so I don't know what to make of it. She's clearly Helios, and there's no reason to assign two agents to the same operation. It creates unnecessary risk.

So why are we both here?

My mind lands on the only explanation that makes sense. One of us is in the wrong room.

It's a mildly irritating thought, but I spent half of yesterday unpacking boxes, hanging clothes, and trying to make my apartment feel like a place I might actually live for the next several weeks or months. If I end up being reassigned before I even get started, I’ll be pissed.

"Maybe you should call your handler," she says, taking a cautious step closer.

It's the logical next move. Even so, I don't reach for my phone. I was transferred here for a reason, and until someone tells me otherwise, I'm not walking away from the assignment.

"After you."

She lets out an annoyed breath but pulls out her phone. A sudden, heavy click sounds behind me as the door locks. Before either of us can react, our devices vibrate at the same time.

UNKNOWN: Drawer C.

Nothing else.

I look up, and she's staring at her phone, eyebrows drawn together until her attention shifts to the metal cabinets lining her side of the room. Mine follows to the matching set on my own. We move at the same time, and I wrap my fingers around the handle labeled C and pull. A disassembled pistol rests inside, and beside it lies a single round.

I stare at it for half a second, trying to understand what I'm looking at when a speaker suddenly crackles somewhere above us.

“Only one of you will leave this room.”

When I glance over my shoulder, the woman isn't looking at me anymore. She's already reaching into the drawer, snapping the pistol together piece by piece.

Shit.

This isn’t a briefing, and she isn’t just my competition for an assignment. Someone brought two agents into this building knowing one of us would be dead before the night was over.

I grab the frame, throwing mine together as fast as I can. By the time I slam the magazine home and rack the slide, she’s already turned toward me. Two sharp clacks echo through the room as we chamber our rounds and raise our weapons.

Her chest rises with a quick breath, and her muzzle wavers, but I don't wait. I squeeze the trigger.

For one brutal instinct, I see the fear in her eyes and know she must see the same in mine. This woman isn’t some armed suspect threatening a civilian or a target I tracked down because she hurt someone. She’s standing in the same fucking room I am because Helios put her here, holding the same weapon and facing the same impossible choice.

None of that changes what happens next.

The shot cracks through the air, and she gasps as the round strikes her square in the chest. Her gun slips from her hand, and her eyes widen as she crumples to the floor.

The ringing left by the shot fills the room as I keep my weapon trained on her. She doesn't move. My firearms instructor taught us that a fraction of a second could mean the difference between going home and becoming the next name carved into a memorial wall. I learned never to hesitate long before Helios recruited me.

Knowing why I pulled the trigger doesn't make this any easier.

I don't know her name, how long she's been an agent, who recruited her, or whether someone is going to wake up tomorrow wondering why she never came home. All I know is that she wanted to survive this room as badly as I did. And I killed her for it.

I became a police officer because I believed the badge meant something. I joined SWAT because I wanted to stand between innocent people and those who would hurt them. Helios promised the same mission but never mentioned I'd be pointing my weapon at one of its own.

The door swings open, and I whip around, raising my pistol on instinct even though I know it's empty.

A woman who looks to be in her forties steps inside, dressed in a charcoal pantsuit with a long black coat draped over one arm. Her dark hair is pulled into a low bun, not a strand out of place.

Her gaze lands on me first and lingers as she assesses my stance and the empty pistol in my hand. Then her attention shifts to the woman on the floor and the blood spreading beneath her.

Not a single flicker of shock or concern crosses her face.

I hate how casually she looks at the body. There's no grief or anger, not even disappointment. Whoever she was before tonight doesn't seem to matter at all.

She studies the scene with the detached focus of someone reviewing a completed training exercise, then looks at me again.

"Operative 427," she says. "I'm Commander Duvall."

My grip remains firm around the empty pistol.

"What the hell was this?"

"Your introduction to how things operate under my command."

She walks toward the fallen operative, her heels clicking against the tile.

"I had to know which of you would walk out of this room."

Crouching beside the woman, she presses two fingers to the side of her neck, confirming the kill before rising again.

“Operative 309 was one of our best,” she says. “But clearly, she wasn’t good enough.”

I look down at the woman bleeding across the tile. Whatever years she gave Helios have already been reduced to a number and a failed test. Elena shows more interest in the blood staining her floor than the body at her feet.

Anger burns beneath my skin, but I keep it buried. Maybe that’s another part of the test, to see if I’ll question her, threaten her, or lose control over someone I didn’t even know five minutes ago. Only, that’s the problem. I shouldn’t have needed to know her. She was one of ours.

When I look up again, Elena Duvall is watching me with faint satisfaction as she reaches into her pocket and removes a small black drive.

“But you are.” She holds it out to me. “And you’re exactly the man I need for the contract on this drive.”

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One

Remi



“¡Hijo de puta!”

Metal slams into metal, the impact jolting through my baby so hard that it rattles my teeth. The rear end kicks out, tires screeching as we fishtail and the world swings sideways.

“Remi!” AJ braces herself against the dash.

“I’ve got it.”

I don’t lift off the gas because easing back now is exactly how I’ll lose control. I lean into it, keeping a firm hand on the wheel as I countersteer and ride the slide, forcing the car back into alignment. The engine snarls in response, sounding just as pissed off as I am, before we finally snap forward.

“Did you see that?” AJ asks, her dark hair whipping around her face, eyes wide and her smile even wider.

A year ago, when she first asked to ride with me, I hesitated, because three years before that, I nearly lost Valentina on the track, and I still didn’t know whether the people responsible were truly gone. If anything happened to AJ, I’d never forgive myself.

I should’ve known better than to worry.

Alessandra has Cain blood in her veins, and she’s just as addicted to speed as Val and me. The only difference is that she prefers two wheels beneath her instead of four. She’s damn good, too, already races

competitively, and tomorrow, she’s off to Spain to train with a development team that could put her on the road to Moto3.

I’m proud of her, just like I’m proud of Val.

Sometimes, though, no matter how fast I drive, it feels like everyone around me is moving forward while I’m stuck in reverse. Val has Maksim and a new life in Russia, and AJ is leaving for Spain tomorrow. I’m happy for them, but I haven’t figured out what comes next for me.

“Check your mirrors, Rem.”

A blacked-out Camaro rides my flank, too close and too aggressive, trying to force me out.

Fucking rookie.

“You really wanna play?” I mutter.

“He’s been riding you since the last turn.”

“Yeah,” I say, shifting and pushing harder. “I noticed.”

AJ glances my way. “Are you sure? You seem a little...off.”

“Are you questioning my driving?” I ask, feigning offense.

The road ahead tightens, construction barriers closing in on both sides and leaving just enough space for one clean pass. And it's exactly what I need.

“Remi...”

“I said I got this.”

AJ grips the dash and the handle above her head, but I don’t have time to worry about her. The Camaro edges closer again, lining up for another hit. I ease toward him, letting him think he has me.

“Do it,” I whisper.

He takes the bait.

Steel collides again, the impact shuddering through the car, but this time, I’m ready. I drop a gear and bury the throttle. The turbo screams as we surge through the narrowing gap, leaving the Camaro scrambling for space until it clips the barrier and sends sparks across the pavement.

AJ twists in her seat. “Oh shit, he hit it!”

Adrenaline rushes through me, and I let out a wild laugh.

“Yes!”

The city stretches out ahead, and the finish line is only a few turns away. I already know I won’t catch the cars in front of me, but beating that asshole should be enough to have me grinning the rest of the night.

It isn’t.

Some days, racing still gives me the same high it always has. Other days, I cross the finish line and wonder why I don't feel a damn thing anymore. This is one of those nights.

I pull into the lot and kill the engine. Usually, AJ would already be replaying every corner I took. Tonight, she just sits there.

"You gonna tell me what's going on in that head of yours?"

"Maybe the real question is what's going on in yours?" she asks, turning to face me.

"Okay, you're saying a lot without saying much. Spill it."

AJ reaches over the center console and squeezes my hand. "Rem, I leave tomorrow, and I should be excited."

"You should be." I squeeze her hand back. "So what's wrong?"

"I am excited. So damn excited." She lets out a small laugh. "I just...feel guilty."

I already know where this is headed, and I hate that she's right.

"Val's gone." Her eyes find mine. "Now I'm leaving, too. And you're going to be here by yourself."

I force a smile.

"What? You think I can't handle a bunch of overgrown men?"

She laughs.

"No. I know you'll keep the guys in line." Then her smile fades. "I just want to know you'll be okay."

Family has always meant something different to us. We grew up knowing the people we loved would do whatever it took to protect each other, even if it meant getting blood on their hands. There was never any judgment because none of us ever had to wonder who would be standing beside us when things went to shit.

Valentina and I have always been close, and despite the miles between us now, she'll always be like a sister to me. As AJ got older, she and I naturally gravitated toward each other, too. Between late nights at my garage and weekends being reckless behind the wheel, she stopped feeling like my little cousin and became one of my closest friends.

The fact that my closest friends are also my cousins probably says something about my social life.

God, I really am that lame.

But trusting anyone outside my family hasn't exactly worked out well for me.

“I’ll be fine,” I say, reaching into the glove compartment for my emotional-support lollipop. “You go to Spain and kick some ass.”

“You know I will.”

I pop the candy into my mouth, freeing my hands before pulling her into a hug.

“I’m proud of you, AJ.”

She wraps her arms around me and squeezes tighter.

“I love you, Rem.”

“Love you, too.”

Just like that, she grabs her bag and climbs out of the car, turning around to blow me a kiss before heading toward her bike.

The Camaro from earlier rolls up beside her as she pulls on her helmet.

I don’t wait to find out what they want. Shoving my door open, I cross the distance in a few quick strides and place myself between AJ and the car.

“Can I help you?”

The guy in the passenger seat lets his gaze drag from my face to my boots before making the slow trip back up, pausing briefly on the Glock riding my hip.

Losing the race apparently bruised more than his car, and now he needs to prove something.

Alessandra doesn’t need me to protect her. The girl has an itchy trigger finger and a rotating moral compass, but I’ll be damned if I let these assholes get close enough to find that out.

“Just came by to say...” He exhales a stream of smoke. “Nice driving.”

AJ nudges my shoulder as she steps up beside me. I rest a hand against her forearm, silently telling her to stay put.

“You should try using the steering wheel next time instead of my bumper.”

The corner of his mouth lifts around his cigarette.

“Fair.” He flicks it onto the pavement. “Catch you next time.”

They take off before anything else can be said, leaving me with an uneasy feeling I can’t quite explain. Maybe I’m reading too much into it, and they’re just your regular assholes. But we’ve been through too much to let our guard down, even all these years later.

“What was that about? You know them?”

I shake my head, still watching the street where their taillights disappeared.

“No. Never seen them at Furia before today.”

“KXZ-4187,” she says.

“You caught the plate.”

I look at her, impressed but not even a little surprised.

“Of course.” She shrugs. “You did too.”

I cup her face and plant an exaggerated kiss on her forehead, making her laugh. AJ will be okay.

“Get home. Text me when you get there.”

She blows me one last kiss before climbing onto her bike and heading down the opposite street from the Camaro.

Then it’s just me.

People still fill the lot, and another race is already starting beyond the crowd, but none of it keeps my mind occupied for long. AJ was right. Val is in Russia, she’ll be in Spain tomorrow, and I’m going home alone.

I know what happens when I give myself too much time to think. The grief comes first, followed by memories I’ve spent years trying not to revisit and tears that still find me some nights.

“I need to move.”

I jump back into my car, fire up the engine, and peel out, cranking the music loud enough that I won’t have to think about any of it.

My fingers drum against the steering wheel as I hum along with the bass thumping through the speakers, but the car suddenly stumbles beneath me.

“What the fuck?”

The throttle feels sluggish under my foot.

“Come on...”

Easing off the gas, I roll back into it. The response is delayed, followed by a sharp cough from the exhaust. A second later, the check engine light flickers to life. Of course it does.

I glance down at the gauges.

Oil pressure is fine.

Coolant temperature is steady.

Fuel sits just under half a tank.

Another violent shudder rattles through the chassis.

“This is just fucking perfect.”

The impact from the Camaro must have knocked something loose. That son of a bitch.

I flip on my hazards and guide her onto the shoulder just as the first fat drops of rain splatter across my windshield. By the time I throw the car into park, the sky opens up.

“Oh, great,” I mutter.

Popping the hood, I step into the downpour, already reaching for my flashlight. Rain soaks through my shirt within seconds as I scan the engine bay, checking hoses, clamps, wiring, and belts for anything out of place.

“Talk to me, baby.”

Another flash of lightning splits the sky, followed by a low rumble of thunder as I work through the obvious possibilities first. Everything looks exactly where it should be.

“Come on. Give me something...”

I grab my toolkit from the trunk and get to work. Fifteen minutes turn into twenty, and I’m no closer to figuring out what the hell is wrong. Water drips from the end of my nose as I wipe my hands on my jeans, smearing grease across the soaked denim.

“You’ve got jokes tonight, huh?”

There goes my evening. I was already looking forward to a hot shower, a movie playing in the background while I scrolled aimlessly, and maybe finally trying out that little toy Val mailed me last week.

I laugh under my breath.

“Always looking out for me.”

Thinking about her makes me realize how much I fucking miss her.

I’m happy she found the kind of love she has with Maksim because she deserves every bit of it. I just wish a small, selfish part of me didn’t miss when it was just the two of us against the world, convinced we could burn the whole damn thing down.

“She’ll be back soon,” I murmur, leaning over the car again as I resist the urge to take a crowbar to this bitch.

At this point, I’m going to have to call a fucking tow truck. I reach for my back pocket and find nothing.

“No...”

I check my other pocket, then hurry around to the driver’s side and yank the door open, hoping my phone slipped onto the seat or landed in the center console instead of ending up in AJ’s bag.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

I slam the door shut and brace my hands on the roof, letting the rain soak me to the bone as I try to get my frustration under control.

“Okay, Remi...get it together. Suck it up. You got this.”

Pushing off the chassis, I tear open my toolkit. What’s a little rain? Everything’s still exactly where it’s supposed to be, just…wetter. I lean over the engine again and reach for another wrench.

Maybe I’m off my game, or maybe the storm is so loud that it swallows every other sound, because I never hear a car pull up or boots crossing the pavement. I only realize I’m not alone when a presence beside me makes itself known.

Every possibility runs through my head at once. Who walks up on someone in the middle of a downpour, in the dark, without saying a goddamn word? One thing my family made sure I learned early on is that hesitation gets people killed. If someone means to hurt you, they only need one chance.

In the next heartbeat, I draw my Glock, chamber a round, and aim center mass...at the biggest fucking chest I’ve seen in a long while.

“Whoa, whoa! I’m just here to see if you needed any help,” he says, his voice edged with the slightest Texan drawl.

I don’t lower the gun.

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Two

Remi



Rain pours between us, soaking him just as much as me, but he doesn't even flinch. He slowly raises both hands, careful with every movement, like he understands exactly why I'm pointing a gun at him and has no intention of giving me a reason to pull the trigger.

My grip tightens as I take him in properly. He's tall as hell, with shoulders broad enough to block the rain and a build that looks more suited to carrying trucks than driving them. His once-white athletic shirt clings to his body, outlining enough muscle to make me wonder if he has a gym membership or a second mortgage paying for protein powder.

"Funny," I say. "You don't look like roadside assistance."

The corner of his mouth twitches as he brushes curls back from his forehead.

"Didn't think I did. But you look like you're having a rough night."

"No, I look like someone you should've announced yourself to before walking up behind."

His eyes move between me and the barrel of my Glock, but he still doesn't seem particularly concerned about the possibility of catching a bullet. I've met plenty of men whose sense of right and wrong shifts whenever it suits them, and I haven't figured out where his lines are yet.

Either he's exactly who he claims to be, or he has one hell of a poker face.

"Fair. But I promise I'm not here to hurt you. I was just passing by and saw you stranded with your hood up."

“Yeah?” I tilt my head without lowering the gun. “That’s exactly what a serial killer would say.”

He laughs. “I walked right into that one.”

I don’t budge, even as the cold sinks deeper with every gust of wind. At this point, he can probably see the outline of the diamonds piercing my nipples, which is just fucking great.

“Let me use your phone,” I say.

He shakes his head, sending water from the ends of his curls.

“I was at the gym and left it in my locker. That’s why I’m out here in this weather. I was heading back to grab it.”

I narrow my eyes.

“That sounds like very convenient bullshit.”

He raises his hands another inch.

“I know. I can see how this looks. But I couldn’t just drive past you. Besides, I’m cold as fuck, and I wouldn’t mind getting out of the rain.”

“No shit. You look like a drowned bodybuilder.”

For a second, I consider taking his truck, but that still leaves me with the problem of what to do with him. I glance toward the empty stretch of highway, then look at him again.

“Turn around,” I tell him, motioning with my pistol. “All the way.”

He hesitates before complying, turning in a slow circle and giving me a clear enough view to confirm he isn’t carrying.

Remi, you better not regret this.

I lower my weapon but keep it in my hand.

“A GT-R,” he says, sounding a little more relaxed. “Nice. Want me to take a look?”

“No. I’ve got it.”

He nods once. “Okay. I respect that.”

I almost roll my eyes. Most men hear I’ve got it and treat it like a personal challenge.

“I don’t have my lamp, so I need you to hold this flashlight for me. Think you can manage that without getting shot, Mr. Maybe Serial Killer?”

He laughs, and my attention drops to his mouth before I catch myself. I’m not fucking blind. The man is ridiculously attractive, but that doesn’t mean I’m stupid enough to trust a pretty face.

I holster my Glock and bend over the engine again, handing him the flashlight as he moves beside me.

“Hold it steady.”

He adjusts the beam exactly where I need it without trying to take over, which earns him at least one point in his favor.

I lean closer, using the better angle to inspect the areas I couldn’t see clearly before.

“Fuck,” I mutter as I reach deeper and run my fingers along the fuel line, checking the connections by touch.

“It’s starving.”

“What?”

“Fuel. It’s not feeding right.”

I follow the line toward the rail, searching for anything the impact might have knocked loose, but I come up empty this time too.

“It held through the run,” I say, thinking out loud. “Then it started cutting after the hit. The throttle was hesitating, too.”

“Sounds expensive.”

I look at him. “Everything about this car is expensive.”

His mouth twitches, but I’m already over the engine again.

“Could be the fuel pump, or the line isn’t holding pressure.”

I check the housing one last time before accepting what I already know. I can’t fix this on the shoulder of the road with no way to properly test the fuel system.

“Can you fix it?” he asks, as if reading my thoughts.

“Not tonight.”

That leaves me with one very expensive paperweight sitting on the side of the highway. He steps closer and adjusts the flashlight.

“You have any idea what you’re looking at, or are you just trying to impress me?”

“Not nearly as much as you do,” he admits. “I’m Thiago, by the way.”

I pause at the name. It’s not one I hear every day, and I wonder where it’s from before reminding myself that curiosity isn’t the same thing as trust.

Trusting a man built like a freight train who appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the night would be a questionable decision under any circumstances.

Unfortunately, neither of us has a phone, my GT-R isn’t going anywhere, and his truck is the only way I’m getting off this shoulder before sunrise.

“Well, Thiago, I might take you up on that whole not leaving me stranded thing.”

He smiles. “Good. I was starting to think you were going to shoot me and steal my truck.”

“Don’t tempt me.” I glance toward the dark silhouette parked a few yards behind him. “There’s still plenty of time for you to fuck this up.”

He doesn’t seem fazed. Either he thinks I’m joking, or he’s the worst judge of character I’ve ever met.

I step back and let the hood slam shut.

“All right,” I say. “Let’s go.”

He reaches for my toolkit, and we make a run for his truck as the rain comes down even harder, our boots splashing through puddles. By the time we climb inside, we’re both drenched.

The storm becomes a muffled roar when I close the passenger door. I’m not surprised. It’s exactly the kind of feature a serial killer would appreciate.

Thiago starts the engine and cranks the heat.

“That should help warm you up,” he says before reaching behind my seat.

My hand goes straight to my Glock, but instead of trying to strangle me, he holds out a folded white towel.

I stare at it, then look at him.

“I promise it’s clean. I always keep extras for when I work out.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, taking it and feeling a little dramatic for nearly pulling a gun on him again.

“Where to?”

I’m already pushing my luck by sitting in a stranger’s truck. There’s no fucking way I’m giving him my address, too.

Mamá would kill me if she knew.

“There’s a gas station at the next exit. They should have a phone I can use.”

He pauses for a second and nods.

“Sure,” he says, pulling back onto the road.

Several minutes pass before I catch him glancing my way.

“Can I ask your name?”

“What difference would it make?”

He clicks his tongue. “Well, I gave you mine.”

“I didn’t ask.”

His eyes crease with amusement. “Are you always like this, or is it because you think I’m about to veer off and drag you into the woods?”

My fingers slip into my jacket pocket before I even realize what I’m doing. They find Papá’s signet ring, and I roll it between my thumb and forefinger, tracing the grooves carved into the metal.

Thiago’s attention drops briefly to my hand before returning to the road.

“Hey,” he says. “I’m not...That’s not what I meant.”

“You were right back there,” I cut in. “I am having a rough night. And in case you couldn’t tell, I’m not the kind of woman who gets into trucks with strangers.” I turn toward him. “I pulled a gun on you, Thiago. I don’t carry it for show.”

“Understood.”

The conversation dies there, but my brain refuses to follow. I think about AJ leaving tomorrow, my GT-R sitting on the shoulder, and whether I remembered to lock my toolbox before Thiago tossed it into the back seat.

My thumb continues over the grooves in the ring until I can focus on one thought at a time again.

When the gas station comes into view a few minutes later, a small part of me almost feels bad for being so cold to someone who stopped to help.

Almost, but not enough to regret it.

I don’t owe him a damn thing for something he chose to do. I don’t owe him a smile, my trust, or even common courtesy before I’ve decided he’s earned it.

We pull into the dimly lit lot where two cars idle at the pumps while another sits a few spaces away. Thiago leaves the engine running and taps his thumbs against the steering wheel, like there’s something he wants to say.

I decide to save him the trouble.

“Thank you for stopping and driving me out here...and for not dragging me into the woods.”

“I was already soaked down to my socks, and my ego’s a little bruised. Figured I shouldn’t add a bullet wound to tonight’s tally.”

Before Thiago can catch me smiling, I push open the door.

“Remi,” I say as I step out into the rain. “My name is Remi.”

He looks up, but I close the door before he can respond and head toward the mart without looking back.

A few years ago, I probably would've asked for his number. These days, getting into his truck was already further than I would have usually let him get.

"What can I help you with, sweetheart?"

The clerk looks to be in his seventies, too old to be working the night shift at a run-down gas station. His kind brown eyes remind me of Abuelo Antonio, so I let the endearment slide.

"Do you happen to have a phone I can use?"

"Of course—"

"You can use mine."

A man in a faded blue hoodie appears from one of the aisles with a bag of chips in one hand and a forty-ounce in the other. He flashes me a grin as he approaches, ignoring every reasonable boundary of personal space. Stale cigarettes and cheap liquor reach me before he does.

"I've got something for you in my front pocket, pretty girl." His words slur together. "Better yet, come home with me. I'll get you out of those wet clothes."

I give him a moment to reconsider whatever the fuck he thinks he's doing.

He doesn't.

"No, thanks." I turn back to the clerk. "Could I still use that phone?"

Apparently, being ignored isn't enough to discourage him because he steps closer.

"Come on. Don't be like that."

His sour breath turns my stomach.

"I said no."

"You don't mean that."

His hand starts to lift, like he's thinking about touching my arm, but he's about to learn how much I fucking mean it. I shift my weight, already deciding how to put him on his ass without breaking anything important. Jail sounds exhausting tonight.

"What the fuck did you just say to her?"

I hear Thiago before I see him, and so does the drunk. His grin disappears as his attention moves past me.

"Hey, I'm sorry, man," he says quickly. "Didn't know she was yours. Can't let a pretty little thing like her walk around alone."

His eyes drag over me again, and I resist the urge to spit.

Thiago steps between us. “Back up.”

There’s nothing easy about his voice anymore.

“I didn’t touch her.”

“I said back up.”

The guy hesitates, then stumbles away. I leave them to it and push through the door, stepping outside into what’s left of the rain. By the time I reach the truck, the downpour has faded to a light drizzle.

I wait beside the passenger door until Thiago comes out a few seconds later and unlocks it.

“Why were you still here?” I ask once we’re both inside.

“You think I was just going to drive off without making sure you were okay? I noticed that asshole the moment you walked in.”

I stare at him, unsure what to do with that. He doesn’t know me. I’m just someone he met by the road, and he still stayed because he noticed something was off and wanted to make sure I walked back out.

I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, always have been. But the fact that any of it mattered to him gets to me more than I want it to.

“I guess he should thank you, then.”

Thiago looks at me. “Him?”

“Yeah. He was about to have a worse night than I was.”

He shakes his head, but this time, he’s smiling.

“You’re scary, you know that, Remi?”

I roll my eyes at how quickly he takes advantage of finally knowing my name, but I can’t completely deny that I like hearing him say it.

“Good,” I say. “That means you’re paying attention.”

He starts the engine.

“Were you able to get in contact with someone?”

“Change of plans.” I say it before I can question why I’m suddenly willing to spend another minute in this man’s truck. Maybe I’ll regret it tomorrow, but he stayed when he didn’t have to, and not once has he acted like helping me earned him anything in return.

Ryuji would’ve stayed, too.

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Three

Thiago



We pull up to what looks like a large warehouse with wide metal doors stretched across the front. I barely cut the engine before Remi is out of the truck without a word. Unbuckling my seat belt, I climb out after her. The rain is barely a mist at this point, but the cold cuts straight through my wet clothes the second my boots hit the pavement.

She glances over her shoulder before continuing toward a side door as though she's already decided I'll follow. I remind myself to be patient. The first time I saw her picture, the night she was assigned to me back in Texas, something told me she'd be…complicated. Less than an hour in her presence has proven I seriously underestimated her.

She already pointed a Glock at my chest without the slightest hesitation, and everything about the way she handled that weapon told me it wasn't panic that made her draw. She watched my hands instead of my face, controlled the distance between us, and never once let the muzzle drift. Those aren't instincts you pick up at a gun range on the weekends.

Her file warned me she was dangerous, but it never mentioned how disciplined she was.

Remi presses her thumb against a small panel beside a heavy steel door. A green light flashes, and she pulls it open. The lights overhead flicker on one by one as we step inside. She moves differently once we're through the door. Her attention shifts to every corner and exit we pass, taking stock of the space before continuing deeper into the building.

That answers one question. Whatever training Remi has goes far beyond knowing how to handle a gun.

The corridor opens into a larger space with a bar, a low sofa, and enough entertainment to keep someone occupied for hours.

“This is nice,” I say, taking it all in.

As expected, she doesn’t answer. She simply gives me a look that tells me she knows I’m only trying to keep the conversation going.

I don’t bother trying again.

She slips out of her jacket and drapes it over the back of a chair, revealing intricate black ink that winds from her shoulders to her wrists. The tattoos suit her. Nothing about Remi feels accidental; from the way she carries herself and sizes up a person to the art she’s chosen to wear on her skin.

Rain still glistens in the loose strands of her hair, and her shirt clings to her frame, but she never bothers smoothing it down or checking her reflection. It’s as if none of it crosses her mind.

Most people want to be seen. Remi only seems interested in seeing everyone else.

“I’ll be right back,” she says before disappearing up the spiral staircase.

She doesn’t strike me as the type to bring a random man home, and while this place has everything someone could need, it doesn’t feel completely lived in.

The air carries the faint scent of oil and metal with something heavier beneath it. I remember the oversized doors at the front of the building. Between the smell, the layout, and the way she handled herself under the hood, I’m willing to bet there’s a garage on the other side.

“A tow truck is already en route.”

I turn toward the staircase. She’s halfway down, tugging a black hoodie over a fitted tank top. The movement is quick, but not quick enough to hide the outline beneath it before the fabric falls into place.

“Hopefully, they get to it before someone else,” she says, making her way behind the bar.

“Yeah, that car wouldn’t last past sunrise out there.”

She shrugs as she cracks open an energy drink. “I’d find it.” She says it with the same certainty as when she told me she had it handled earlier. There’s no threat behind the words because, to her, it’s already a fact. “I

obviously don’t have dry clothes for you to change into, but I can toss your shirt in the dryer for a few minutes.”

I reach for the hem, then stop. “Is this all right?”

“I offered, didn’t I?”

I should’ve expected that answer. Pulling the shirt over my head, I hand it to her. Her eyes make one quick pass over me before she turns away. No pretending she didn’t look, and no interest in looking twice.

I’m not sure which one surprises me more.

“So what do you do, Thiago?” she asks when she comes back. “Other than spending your Friday nights at the gym and forgetting your phone.”

“I just got to Philly a couple of weeks ago. I work downtown, mostly behind a desk for now until I get my bearings.”

Remi tosses me a beer without asking, and I catch it one-handed.

Her eyes narrow. “You don’t really seem like a desk guy.”

I chuckle, shifting on the stool and pretending to get comfortable when, really, I’m trying not to topple off the damn thing.

“I won’t be for long. It’s just a transition thing.”

“Ah,” she says, sounding almost bored as she brings the can to her lips. “And where did you move from?”

“Houston. I lived in Texas most of my life. After my father died, my aunt took me in.”

She doesn’t offer condolences, and I’m grateful for it. I stopped knowing what to do with people’s sympathy a long time ago.

“Texas, huh? I had a feeling.”

“Yeah? You ever been there?”

“No, but my—” She cuts herself off with a long drink. “I haven’t.”

Whatever she almost told me stays buried, and I know better than to push when I’m finally getting somewhere with her.

“Can I ask you something?”

“You’re going to ask anyway.”

“Why did you change your mind back there? Why did you decide to come with me after all?”

She gives me a long look before setting her drink on the counter and rounding the bar. Instead of keeping the distance between us, she drags the stool beside mine closer and takes a seat. Under the brighter lights, I finally get a good look at the woman I’ve spent the last few weeks studying in photographs.

Her eyes catch me first. I'd seen the blue in her file and caught flashes of it through the rain, but neither came close to seeing them from a few feet away. They're striking against her black hair and the dark olive tone of her skin. I spend a second longer looking than I should.

And then there's her mouth, painted a deep red that somehow survived the rain.

"You weren't supposed to stick around," she says. "So...why did you?"

"It was late. You were alone, without a phone. Vulnerable..."

She rolls her eyes.

"You know what I mean. What kind of man would I be if I just left you there?"

"The kind that doesn't know me," she shoots back. "So they wouldn't care."

"Knowing you wasn't a requirement."

She reaches over and steals my beer, taking a drink like it already belongs to her.

"I didn't need you to do that for me—"

I let out a dry laugh.

"Most people would just say thank you."

"Most people wouldn't interrupt in the middle of me trying to say thank you."

I reach for my bottle, but she's quicker, pulling it out of reach.

"You're really fucking huge, Thiago. Do you live at the gym?"

I shake my head as she hides a smile behind the rim of the bottle.

"I wouldn't say I live there. I like knowing my body can do what I ask of it. I like to be ready."

"Ready for what? War?"

"I hope not." I tip my head toward her. "I'd rather spend years preparing for something that never happens than need those years and not have them."

She takes another sip before nodding. "I guess I can respect that," she says, looking away from me. "And I heard sitting behind a desk can be life or death."

I catch another smirk she tries to hide.

"Was that supposed to be a joke?"

"Maybe."

I'm still smiling when she drains the bottle and steps off the stool, heading toward a side door. She doesn't ask me to follow, but considering

she hasn’t kicked me out yet, I take my chances. We’re halfway across the room when it hits me that I haven’t thought about the assignment in several minutes.

That realization puts my attention back where it belongs.

I take in the space as we enter the garage. Bright honeycomb lights glow overhead, reflecting off the gunmetal epoxy floor. Three custom builds sit lined up near the doors I noticed earlier, and off to the right, a black Demon rests on a lift, stripped down enough to tell me it’s in the middle of a rebuild.

Remi heads straight for the cars without checking where I am. For the first time tonight, she's not watching every move I make.

“So you do know your way around an engine. I’m impressed.”

She rolls her eyes again, but the smile stays as she walks past me. “I’m insulted you doubted me in the first place. You think I’d be out in the rain under the hood for fun?”

“No, I suppose not.” I trail after her. “Is this what you do? Fix cars?”

“I don’t own a public garage or anything. This is for me.”

Her hand glides over a bright green Supra.

“That’s one hell of a car. And that GT-R back there...whew.”

“I brought this one back from the dead a few years ago,” she says. “But it isn’t mine. I’m just keeping her safe for someone I care about.”

I don’t ask who. The way she touches the car tells me enough.

This is the part Elena’s file couldn’t give me. I knew where Remi lived, where she worked, who she spent her time with, and enough of her history to recognize the names that mattered. But standing here with her is already showing me how much simple words on paper can leave out.

“I think your shirt is dry enough now,” Remi says.

“Kicking me out, huh?”

“You can leave on your own, or I can help. Your choice.”

That sounds more like the woman who held me at gunpoint less than two hours ago.

I nod once. “Message received.”

Five minutes later, I’m standing beside my truck, turning the night over in my head. We didn’t exchange numbers, she didn’t invite me back, and she still doesn’t trust me.

She has no reason to.

I press the key fob, but before I can climb in, the large garage door behind me begins to rise. The low rumble of a motorcycle follows as Remi rolls to a stop a few feet away and flips up her visor.

“One more thing, Texas.”

I grin despite myself. “What’s that?”

“Don’t come back around here.”

For some reason, hearing her say it bothers me. But she doesn’t wait for an answer. Her visor drops into place, and a second later, she’s gone. I watch her taillight disappear down the road before climbing into my truck.

She told me not to come back, but that’s going to be a problem.

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Four

Remi



The smell of warm tortillas, fried eggs, and a hint of spice from simmering salsa hits me the moment I step through the door. No matter where life takes me or how long I've been on my own, this kitchen will always smell like home.

I follow the aroma straight to the kitchen, expecting to find my mom, but Estela is there instead, moving between the stove and counter with ease. A pan sizzles beneath her hand while steam carries the bite of onions and toasted corn through the room.

She hasn't noticed me yet, so I linger in the doorway and watch her for a moment.

I was six when she started working for my parents, and I gave her hell. Not because I wanted to be cruel, but because I was grieving, angry, and convinced nobody could ever take Milly's place. She'd helped raise my mom before helping raise me, and losing her felt like losing another member of our family.

Estela never tried to replace her. She just kept showing up with extra pieces of *pan dulce* she pretended weren't meant for me until one day I stopped pretending I didn't like her.

"Looks delicious," I say, reaching into the pan and tearing off a piece of tortilla soaked in salsa. I ignore the heat as I pop it into my mouth.

Estela spins around before breaking into a smile and pulling me into a hug.

“*Mi niña* Remi. I haven’t seen you in over a week. What a wonderful surprise. And you’re here early today.”

I hug her just as tightly.

“Yeah, I ran out of food at home. Figured I’d come freeload for a bit while I wait for my groceries to be delivered.”

She laughs and shakes her head.

“Well, your timing couldn’t be better. I made extra since Matteo spent the night.”

“And I’m glad I did.”

I turn at the sound of Matteo’s voice, already rolling my eyes.

“Aren’t you and Gio a little too old for sleepovers?” I ask, stealing another piece of tortilla from the pan.

He laughs and pulls me into a one-armed hug. Matteo mostly outgrew the puppy-dog crush he had on me through his teens, and now it’s just a running joke between us. He knows he’s another little brother to me and always will be.

I tip my chin up to look at him and realize “little” brother might not be the best description anymore. He’s tall as hell these days.

Almost as tall as...

I stop that thought before it gets any farther.

Letting a complete stranger into my garage last night, apparently, wasn’t enough bad judgment because now I’m standing in my mother’s kitchen thinking about him without a shirt. It certainly doesn’t help that Thiago is built like he spends his free time carrying refrigerators for fun.

I press my tongue against the inside of my cheek and shove the image from my head. I’ll probably never see Mr. I’m-not-a-serial-killer again anyway.

“You still with us?” Matteo asks. “You look like you’re fighting demons over breakfast.”

I shove him back. “Don’t you and my brother have a playdate to get to?”

“Funny.” He stuffs his mouth with a forkful of fried eggs. “Gio has a fight today. I’m driving him. You know, in case he gets his ass handed to him.”

I wave him off and start toward the door. Halfway there, I glance back just in time to catch his eyes drifting south.

“Eyes, Leone,” I warn.

Estela smacks him upside the head. “*Respeta a la niña*.”

“What?” he mumbles around a mouthful of eggs, lifting a shoulder in an innocent shrug.

I laugh and shake my head. Some things never change.

“Señora Amalia is out back,” Estela calls after me, knowing exactly who I’m looking for.

I head down the hallway lined with my mother’s paintings until one in particular catches my attention. It’s the painting of Villa Dorada, and it’s always been my favorite.

Stopping in front of it, I run my fingers along the edge of the frame.

It was where my mom grew up, where she fell in love with my dad, and where she lost my Uncle Giovanni, the man my brother was named after. It’s been decades since the estate left my family’s hands. I’ve never seen it for myself, but I’ve always felt drawn to it somehow. Maybe it’s the history buried there, or the reminder that something beautiful managed to grow in a place marked by so much loss and violence.

My fingertips brush the painted wildflowers along the entrance, following the strokes my mother put there years ago. She used to tell us stories about Villa Dorada. About the house, the gardens, the people who filled it, and the life she had before everything changed.

For some fucking reason, that reminds me of Thiago telling me about Houston. I pull my hand away from the painting like it’s on fire.

“Seriously?” I managed to make it less than five minutes this time.

“Hey, Rem!” Giovanni darts past me, then doubles back just as quickly to press a kiss to my temple. “Gotta run.”

“Good luck,” I call after him.

Determined to make it the rest of the way without thinking about Texas, pretty curls, or one obnoxiously broad pair of shoulders, I keep walking.

The steady thud coming from one of the back rooms tells me exactly where Mamá is. I push open the door just as her arm extends and an axe leaves her hand, cutting cleanly through the air before burying itself dead center in the target.

Of course she hits the bullseye.

I grew up surrounded by incredible women, all of them strong and resilient in their own ways, but there’s no one I admire more than my mother.

Before she was my mom, Amalia Montesinos was La Mercenaria.

I can’t remember how old I was when I learned the truth about my parents and the rest of my family. It feels like I’ve always known I was born into a family of assassins, where learning to fight, survive, and protect the people you love was as ordinary as learning to tie your shoes. Maybe the rest of the world would consider that a cruel reality for a child to grow up with, but I wouldn’t change it. These people are everything to me. I give Matteo hell most days, but we both know there isn’t much I wouldn’t do for him.

Family isn’t just blood. It’s who you’re willing to spill it for.

“Murder before breakfast?” I ask as she lets another axe fly.

Mamá doesn’t startle or turn. She takes her time retrieving another as though she knew I was standing there before I ever opened my mouth.

Knowing her, she probably did.

My whole life, people have told me how much I resemble her. They say I move like her and think like her, but I’d give anything for that to actually be true.

I was never an easy child, and I spent most of my teenage years testing every ounce of my mom's patience. She loved me through all of it, even when I gave her plenty of reasons to lose her mind.

Watching her with Valentina had always made me wonder more than once if she wished I’d turned out a little more like her.

I know I do.

“*Mi amor*, you didn’t tell me you were coming by this early. I would’ve had Estela make your favorite.”

“Mamá, anything Estela makes is my favorite. And since when do I have to announce myself?”

She chuckles and pulls me into a hug. “You know that’s not what I meant.” Her hand lingers at the back of my neck when she pulls away, her thumb brushing beneath my ear the way she used to when I was little. “You know you’re always welcome. This is your home. Now, tell me, what really brings you by?”

I laugh because I should’ve known she’d ask. The only problem is, I don’t have a good answer. I woke up this morning, ordered groceries, and somehow ended up here before they could even be delivered. I could blame it on missing my family, but I know there’s more to it than that.

Less than twelve hours ago, I pulled a gun on a stranger. Then I climbed into his truck, brought him to my garage, drank with him, and spent half the

morning thinking about him when I should've forgotten his face the second he left.

Thiago is no one to me, but my brain hasn't gotten the fucking message.

My hand slips into my pocket, and my fingers close around my father's ring.

Mamá notices.

She doesn't ask what's wrong. Instead, she crosses the room, braces a boot against the stand, and pulls the axes free before extending one to me.

"Estela won't mind if we're a little late," she says. "It always helps take the edge off."

I curl my fingers around the handle and step up to the throwing line. "The day I pass up target therapy is the day you need to worry."

"That's my girl."

I roll the axe once in my grip, draw my arm back, and let it fly. And just like hers, it buries itself dead center.

She smiles. "Again."

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Five

Thiago



The locker room hums with overlapping voices, the clank of metal, and the steady drip of water hitting tile. Everyone moves through the familiar routine of stripping off gear, showering, and getting the hell out after a long shift.

I sit on the bench and drag a towel over my head, scrubbing the last of the water from my hair. The shower did little to burn through the adrenaline still buzzing beneath my skin. Today was my first day in the field with the Ninth, and we got thrown straight into it. A couple of low-level dealers had taken a family hostage after a deal went sideways. By the time we breached the house, they were shooting. We returned fire, cleared the rooms, and got everyone out alive.

I'd say that's a pretty damn good way to introduce myself to the team.

But Philadelphia still feels different from Houston, and it isn't the crew or even the work. I've spent the last five years following orders without question, moving from one assignment to the next without giving much thought to the people behind the files once the job was done.

Remi is already proving harder to dismiss.

It's been a week since I met her, and I can still picture her standing on the side of that highway with a gun aimed at my chest, completely prepared to use it. Maybe it's curiosity or the fact that nothing about our first meeting went the way I expected. Whatever it is, I've thought about her more times than the assignment requires.

I drop the towel around my neck and reach for my shirt, smiling when I remember the look she gave me.

Apparently, having a gun pointed at me is memorable when Remi Cain is the one holding it.

A locker slams a few feet away, dragging my attention across the room.

“Hell of a first day, Braga.”

Ryan, one of the guys from my unit, leans against the lockers across from me.

“Not bad,” I reply, tugging my shirt down.

“Not bad?” He scoffs. “You cleared that building like you’ve been running with us for years.”

I shrug. “Got lucky.”

“Yeah,” he says, not buying it. “We’ll go with that.”

Pushing off the locker, he grabs his bag. “A couple of us are heading out for drinks. Nothing crazy, just down the street.” He jerks his chin toward the door. “You should come. First round’s on me.”

I consider the offer for a second. On any other night, I might have taken him up on it, but I’ve already put off meeting with the commander longer than I should. She expected me days ago.

“Appreciate it,” I say, slinging my bag over my shoulder. “But I’ve still got some things to take care of at the new place. Rain check?”

Ryan gives me a long look before nodding. “Yeah, I get it. New city and all. But next time, offer stands.” He starts toward the door, then glances back. “Don’t be a stranger, Braga. We’re not just a team out here, man. We’re brothers.”

With one last nod, Ryan heads out, his voice fading as he calls to the rest of the guys. The room empties gradually until the conversations and slamming lockers fade enough for me to hear the faint buzz coming from inside my bag.

I pull out my phone.

There’s no name or number attached to the message, but there never is. This one contains a single instruction to report. Only this time, I won’t be reporting to some off-site Helios location. Elena’s office is a floor above me, hidden in plain sight within the same department where everyone knows her only as Commander Duvall.

I grab my bag and leave the locker room, taking the stairs instead of the elevator. When I reach her floor, most of the offices are dark, and the halls

are nearly empty. Her door sits at the end of the hall, a small plaque bearing her name and title beside it.

After the way she introduced herself, I wouldn't put it past her to have another test waiting for me on the other side.

I knock twice.

"Come in."

Elena's standing behind her desk with an open file in front of her when I enter. She doesn't acknowledge me right away and continues reading as I close the door. After a few seconds, she turns another page, and I start to wonder if she enjoys making people wait.

"You're late, Operative."

"Had to establish a routine. You know how that goes."

"You had seventy-two hours," she says, finally looking at me.

"I used them."

"And?"

"I made contact."

"I take it that went well," she says, her voice even, "considering you're standing here, and as far as I know, Cain is still alive."

I'm not sure what the hell she expected to happen.

"Of course she is."

Elena studies me for a moment before rounding the desk and taking her seat.

"Of course. But—"

"Listen," I cut in. "If you want this intel, I need time. She's not going to hand me a damn thing just because I ask. I need to gain her trust and get close enough that she stops questioning why I'm there. This isn't a matter of days."

Most of my jobs have been simple. Get in, acquire what I need, sanitize the rest, and move on.

This assignment requires me to stay.

I knew the Cain history before I ever set foot in Philadelphia. Meeting Remi only confirmed that none of it is exaggerated. She put a gun to my chest without so much as a tremor in her hand, and if she's any indication of the people who raised her, rushing this would be fucking suicide.

"Weeks?" Elena asks.

"At least."

Her expression tightens.

“You gave me a family of trained assassins with decades of blood behind them. They've killed some of the most dangerous people in the world and survived plenty who came after them in return. Whatever they know, they’re not going to share it with someone they met five minutes ago. Remi sure as hell won’t.”

“Fine.” Elena leans back in her chair and lets out a long breath, as though giving me what I need is already an inconvenience.

I bite back a response. Whether she likes it or not, I’ve made my point, and arguing with this woman isn’t going to get me anywhere.

“You’ll have your time, Operative. Until you don’t.” She plants her palms on the desk and rises. “But don’t let retirement and family dinners make you forget who these people are. The Cains have left bodies across continents. Some of them might have deserved exactly what they got, but that doesn’t change what they’re capable of.”

“I read the files.”

“Then you know I’m not sending you after regular civilians.” Her eyes hold mine. “Find the Ledger. Find out who still has access to it and what they intend to do with it.”

The Ledger is the entire reason I’m here.

According to Elena’s intel, it’s a record compiled over decades, containing names, operations, and secrets powerful people have gone to great lengths to keep buried. Helios believes someone in the Cain family either has it or knows where it’s hidden. My job is to figure out who before any of that information falls into the wrong hands.

“And if someone in that family becomes an active threat?” I ask.

“You neutralize them.”

I watch her for a moment, making sure there’s no room to misinterpret what she means.

“And if they don’t?”

“Then you bring me the Ledger, and no one has to die.”

Sloane’s Gun & Tactical stays open late on Friday nights. From what I know, Remi co-owns the place with her cousin, Valentina Cain, daughter of Derek Cain, Remi’s uncle and one of the most formidable names in their

family. She's out of the country for now. She also rotates shifts with a small staff, so I have a decent chance of finding her here tonight.

I got off work later than expected and didn't have time to confirm whether she'd be here, so I'm taking a shot. If she isn't, I'll have to try again another night. I tell myself that's the only reason I'm hoping she is. I admit, I want to see her in person again. She's beautiful. That's all there is to it.

The lobby is quiet, with a few customers browsing merchandise while others sign waivers and check in. A young guy I don't recognize stands behind the counter, but Remi is nowhere in sight. So I pay for a lane instead of asking for her. If she is working tonight, I'd rather cross paths naturally than walk in asking for the woman who told me never to come back.

A few minutes later, I'm geared up and standing in a stall. I line up my shot downrange and squeeze the trigger, firing until the magazine runs dry.

"Thiago?"

I recognize Ryan's voice.

"T, what are you doing here? Thought you said you were patching up some drywall at your place."

Another night, another one of his invitations blew off, and now I'm standing ten feet away from the guy I lied to about why. Of all the places in the city, I didn't expect to run into him here, especially when the precinct has its own range. Then the woman beside him loops her arm through his, and I understand why he came.

"I was," I shout over the gunfire. "Messed some things up and needed to decompress."

"Feel that." He nudges his date. "This is my girl, Natalie, and that's her sister, Desiree, over there, the one completely missing the target."

I give them a polite smile while already trying to figure out how quickly I can get out of here. With Ryan around, finding an excuse to run into Remi just got a hell of a lot harder.

"You wanna hang with us, T?" He motions over his shoulder at Desiree. "She could use a good instructor."

I'm about to turn him down when I notice the way she's holding the gun. Her grip is loose, her finger is on the trigger, and her stance leaves her fighting the recoil instead of controlling it.

"Ryan—"

The gun jerks in her hands, and a shot cracks overhead. The bullet pierces the ceiling, sending debris raining down as everyone on the range turns toward her.

“Desiree, put it down,” Ryan orders.

She freezes with the gun still in her hand.

I cautiously move toward her. “Take your finger off the trigger.”

“I didn’t mean to. I don’t know what—”

“Don’t move.” I reach for the weapon, but she turns in my direction before I can take it. The gun fires, and heat tears across my upper arm.

Fuck, she actually shot me.

I clamp a hand over the wound as the door flies open and slams against the wall. Remi storms in, takes in the scene, and closes the distance in seconds. She grabs Desiree’s wrist, strips the gun from her hand, and forces her to the ground before aiming the weapon at her.

“Stay down.”

“Wait! It was an accident,” Ryan cuts in, stepping forward.

“Then don’t fucking move.”

He stops.

Remi turns toward me, instantly noticing the blood slipping between my fingers.

“Thiago? What the fuck is going on? Are you shot?”

“I am. But it’s mostly a graze.”

“She fucking shot you?”

“It was an accident,” I tell her. “A reckless one, but an accident.”

Remi glances at Desiree, who’s now crying and still shaking on the floor.

“She put two rounds where they had no business going. One into my ceiling and one into your arm.”

“I’m aware.”

Her expression hardens. “Clearly not enough if you’re defending her.”

“I’m not defending her. I’m telling you she isn’t a threat.”

Remi holds the weapon on Desiree for another second before lowering it. She ejects the magazine, clears the chamber, and hands both off to one of her staff.

“Callahan, take care of this. Everyone out. Give them refunds or vouchers, I don’t care. Just make sure the place is clear in fifteen.” She looks down at Desiree. “And you, don’t ever come back here.”

The room fills with low voices and hurried movement as people pack up their things and head for the exit. Callahan takes over with Desiree while Ryan stays close, trying to calm her down.

Whatever plan I had for tonight went to shit the second that first round hit the ceiling. I came here hoping to cross paths with Remi without giving her a reason to question why I was around. Getting shot wasn't exactly how I pictured it happening.

"Thiago," she calls from behind me.

I turn around to find her waiting near the door.

"Come with me."

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Six

Remi



"Inexperienced idiots need supervision. Your little friend should never have been allowed to hold a gun, let alone fire one," I say, skipping the elevator and taking the stairs with Thiago right behind me. "You're lucky she didn't put a hole through your face or one of my other patrons."

He tuts under his breath. "She's not a friend. Never met her before today."

I glance over my shoulder, annoyed by the flicker of relief that hits me at his answer.

At least he's not reckless enough to bring someone who can't handle a firearm to a gun range.

When we reach my office, I turn to face him and finally get a better look at the blood running down his arm.

"Are you sure that's just a graze?"

"It's a gnarly one, but mostly superficial."

There's a hint of a smile on his face, which makes me question whether he's lost his mind, because he barely seems bothered by the fact that a bullet just tore through his arm.

"As long as you don't bleed all over my floor."

Thiago follows me through the office and into the connected bathroom. It's not the biggest space to begin with, and having someone his size in here makes it feel a hell of a lot smaller.

"Sit," I say, nodding toward the toilet.

He does, and I reach for the first-aid supplies beneath the sink as I finally ask the question that's been nagging at me since I saw him downstairs.

"So what are you doing here anyway?" I straighten and look at him. "Are you stalking me or something?"

"You weren't the only one surprised back there. You work here?"

Of all the ranges in Philadelphia, he expects me to believe he stumbled into mine by coincidence. I'm not buying it, but calling bullshit now won't tell me why he's really here.

"What do you think?" I ask, blotting the blood from his arm with a wet towel.

He hisses when I press a little harder. "I think you're enjoying this."

A laugh escapes me before I can stop it. "Take your shirt off."

Thiago stills, and a smirk pulls at his mouth as his eyes meet mine. "That's twice now you've asked me to strip."

"Yeah, well, don't flatter yourself. Both times were extenuating circumstances."

He tugs the T-shirt over his head and balls it up. I try to focus on his wound, but the man looks damn good without a shirt, and fuck if he doesn't smell good, too.

"Better?"

I can feel his gaze on me as I clean the graze and reach for the skin glue.

"Just hold still and give me your arm."

It's only then that I realize I'm standing between his legs. There's barely any space between us, and when I look up, he's already watching me, but I turn my attention back to his arm and finish sealing the wound.

"We have something you can wear downstairs. I might not carry your size, but it's better than a bloody shirt."

"Well, I might have to take you up on that offer."

"Good. That'll be $24.99 plus tax."

He tips his head back and laughs. "No discount, huh? Not even because I was shot?"

"Exactly because you got shot. You probably did bleed all over my floors and let a bullet punch a hole through my wall."

His laughter fills the small bathroom. "Oh, so you'd rather it had lodged inside me instead? That's cold, Remi."

“I’ve been called worse,” I say with a grin, backing away as I toss the soiled towel in the trash.

“I don’t believe that.”

“You’ve seen me pull a gun twice, and you still have doubts?”

He stands, towering over me.

I’ve never liked being crowded, especially in a confined space. Usually, I’d already be putting distance between us. For some reason, I don’t.

“Thank you,” he says, bracing a hand on the doorframe above me as he leans closer. “For helping me out. You didn’t have to do this.”

My back meets the wall. “Well, I guess you didn’t have to stop that night either, so consider us even.” I slip past him into the office before I can find out what happens if I stay there.

I’ve never been one to play coy or shy away from what I want when it comes to men. Thiago shouldn’t be any different. He’s gorgeous, built like a damn brick house, and I know exactly where this kind of attraction could lead.

But walking away with him tonight feels a hell of a lot more complicated than taking him home.

“You have your own office?” he asks, wandering around shirtless with his arms folded across his chest.

I watch his biceps flex before dragging my attention elsewhere. The urge to reach into my pocket hits hard enough that I curl my fingers into my palm instead.

“I told you, it’s my place.”

“Nice. You must get a lot of target time, then. Are you a pretty good shot?”

I scoff. “I thought that was obvious by now.”

“Fair.” He looks through the large window overlooking the range. “Maybe we could shoot together someday.”

“Oh, so you’re a masochist?”

His laugh comes easily, and damn if I don’t like the sound of it. “Why, because you think you’ll bruise my ego?”

I push off the desk and join him by the glass. “No. I know I will.”

“Talk is cheap, Remi. Unless you’re scared I’ll outshoot you even with one arm down.”

The way he says my name is distracting enough without him attaching a challenge to it.

“Are you trying to bait me like I’m some kid? What’s next, calling me chicken?”

His eyes shift to mine, and without warning, he clucks.

The man actually fucking clucks.

I stare at him for a second before I burst out laughing. “What the hell was that?”

I never would’ve imagined a sound like that coming from a man standing about six foot six. He does it again, somehow worse this time, and I laugh even harder.

“You’re an idiot.”

“And you’re avoiding the challenge.”

“I’m not avoiding anything.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

I look through the glass at the empty range, already imagining how satisfying it would be to wipe that smug look off his face. Then I remember I still don’t know why he showed up here tonight. I brought him upstairs because he was bleeding, patched him up, and that should’ve been the end of it. Instead, I’m standing here laughing with him and considering spending even more time with a man I’m not entirely sure I believe.

I should tell him to leave. The problem is, I don’t want to. That realization bothers me enough that I almost do it anyway.

But I spend so much time questioning people’s intentions lately that I’ve forgotten how easy it can be to enjoy someone without knowing what comes next. Thiago makes me laugh, and for tonight, maybe that can be enough.

“I haven’t eaten,” I say.

His eyebrow lifts. “Are you asking me to dinner?”

I guess I could have phrased that better.

“Absolutely not.”

“Sounded like it.”

“I’m hungry, and you put a hole in my ceiling. You can buy me food.”

“I didn’t put the hole in your ceiling.”

“Minor details.”

His smile widens as he reaches for his bag. “All right. Where are we going?”

My gaze drops to his bare chest before I can stop it.

“You’re not going anywhere like that.”

He looks down at himself, then back at me. “I thought you liked me like this.”

I roll my eyes and head for the door before my face gives him the satisfaction of knowing he’s right. “Come on.”

He follows me out of the office and down the stairs. I could still walk him to the front door and forget this entire idea before it becomes anything. But I lead him toward the shop.

One meal isn’t going to kill me.

By the time we reach the retail floor, I’ve committed to my questionable decision and move behind the counter to scan the shirts stacked along the shelves. At the very least, I’m about to get some entertainment out of it.

I grab the biggest navy Sloane’s T-shirt we carry and toss it at him. I’m not convinced it’ll fit, but he better make it work, because a shirtless Thiago is becoming a serious liability.

He catches it and holds it up, giving me a skeptical look. “This is the biggest you have?”

“Is there a problem?”

His eyes narrow slightly before he tugs it over his head without another word. I press my lips together to keep from laughing. Just like I expected, the fabric stretches across his chest and arms like it’s fighting for its life, and the hem stops several inches too high, exposing a strip of skin above his waistband.

Somehow, this is worse.

I let my gaze linger long enough to appreciate my terrible idea before forcing it back to his face.

Head in the game, Remi. Not in his pants.

My eyes immediately betray me and drop lower. When I look up again, Thiago is watching me with a grin. That cocky fuck knows exactly what I was looking at.

“Where to?” he asks.

I grab my bag from beneath the counter and walk past him. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“That doesn’t inspire confidence.”

His laughter follows me outside.

The rational thing would be to take one vehicle, but fifteen minutes alone with him in an enclosed space seems like an unnecessary test of my

judgment.

When he follows me into the lot, I stop beside my car and turn to face him. “Think you can keep up?”

He nods, catching the message without making me spell it out, then looks over the car behind me. “Where’s that sweet GT-R? Still giving you problems?”

“The car is fine,” I lie.

“Good. I was starting to think I’d have to rescue you twice.”

“Careful, Texas. You’re already wearing a shirt three sizes too small. Don’t embarrass yourself any further.”

The drive to my favorite spot passes quickly. Thiago stays a few cars behind me, his headlights remaining in my rearview mirror most of the way.

At the first red light that separates us, they disappear. I check the mirror, then I check it again. His truck eventually comes around the corner, and I turn my attention back to the road.

Ridiculous.

I wanted space, and apparently even an entire car between us isn’t enough to keep him out of my head.

I pull into the lot and cut the engine, pushing the door open before the sudden silence gives me another chance to question what I’m doing. Thiago is already out of his truck, parked closer to the front doors than I am, but instead of waiting there, he jogs across the lot to meet me.

“Mexican?”

“What? Are you surprised?” I ask without slowing my stride.

“No. I love it. Is that where your family’s from?”

His obnoxiously long legs have no problem catching up with me.

“My mom was born there.” I glance over at him. “What about you, Thiago? Where are you from?”

“My parents were Brazilian. They met in Miami and had me a few years later.”

He told me the night we met that his father died when he was young and his aunt took him in. I hadn’t given much thought to what that meant for his mother, but the past tense grabs my attention now.

There’s obviously more to the story, but I don’t ask. I know better than most how complicated family can be, and whatever happened is his to tell if he ever wants to.

I slow as we reach the double doors and turn toward him. “I have a feeling you’ll like this place. They make the best chilaquiles I’ve ever had.”

The claim lasts all of two seconds before Estela’s version comes to mind.

“Okay, second best.”

Thiago opens the door for me. “I can’t wait.”

Marie, the longtime hostess, greets me with a smile that immediately shifts to Thiago. I can’t blame her. The man already sticks out among the regular human population, and the impromptu crop top isn’t exactly helping.

“Hey, Remi! Just two?” she asks, already grabbing a pair of menus and motioning us toward a table before either of us can answer.

Thiago rests a hand lightly against the small of my back as we follow her toward the booth. It’s barely a touch, but I’m aware of it until the moment he pulls away and waits for me to slide into my seat.

“JB will be by to take care of you in just a bit,” Marie says.

She steps away, and the second she’s safely behind Thiago, her mouth falls open. She looks from him to me, giving me an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

Jesus.

I narrow my eyes at her, but she’s already disappearing around the corner. Heat creeps up my neck as I reach for one of the menus before Thiago notices.

Damn you, Marie.

“How’s your arm?” I ask, pretending to study the entrées as though I don’t already know them by heart.

“A little sore when I think about it, but nothing too crazy.”

I lower the menu and meet his eyes. “You know, I’ve never met anyone who takes being shot so lightly. And don’t tell me it’s not your first time, because then I’ll have to seriously consider walking out.”

I’m only half-joking. The more time I spend around him, the more curious I become about the things that don’t quite add up.

He chuckles and rests his forearms on the table. “I told you it’s barely a scratch. The only thing I’m worried about is the scar cutting through one of my favorite pieces.” He glances at the tattoo on his arm. “And avoiding the ER means I get to take you out to dinner, so I’d call that a win-win.”

I lower the menu another inch. “Take me out to dinner?”

“That’s usually what it’s called when two people go somewhere and eat together.”

“You’re buying me food as restitution for damages.”

“Right.” His mouth twitches. “Completely different.”

“Glad we cleared that up.” I lift the menu again before he catches how close I am to laughing.

JB comes by as promised, takes our orders, and sends me a wink before leaving. Apparently, everyone here has decided this is a date except me.

They’re going to have a hell of a lot of questions when I show up alone next time.

“So,” Thiago says, “about that GT-R.”

“What about her?”

“Her?” His eyebrows lift.

“Yes, her.”

“How long have you had her?”

“A few years.”

“That color is unique. Not something you see every day. What made you choose it?”

My fingers find my father’s ring in my pocket as memories of Ryuji surface. Katsura orange was never meant to blend in, and neither was the GT-R. But I didn’t choose the color because I wanted people to look.

I chose it because of him.

That part of my life isn’t something Thiago has earned, so I give him the easy answer instead.

“It’s pretty,” I say with a shrug.

“And you did all the work yourself?”

“Most of it.”

His eyes narrow slightly. “Now I’m curious.”

“What’s got you so curious?”

“How much of what’s under that hood came from the factory.”

I grin. “Not much anymore.”

“See, now I feel like you’re showing off.”

“You asked.”

“I did.” His gaze stays on mine. “So how’d you get into cars?”

The question catches me off guard because most people who ask why I work on cars make it sound like they can’t understand why I’d want to. There’s none of that in Thiago’s voice. He seems genuinely interested.

“I grew up around them. My dad always had something in the garage, and once I was old enough to understand what he was doing, I started following him around and getting in the way.”

“So he taught you?”

“He started it. I took it from there.”

“That explains a lot.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, you don’t seem like someone who does anything halfway.”

I study him, unsure whether it’s an observation or a compliment. Maybe both. “You say that like you know me.”

“Not even close.”

My fingers remain curled around the ring.

“But I’m trying.”

There’s no arrogance behind the answer, no assumption that he already has me figured out. Sitting across from him like this, talking about cars and family and things that have nothing to do with why we met, I start to realize I’m trying too. I’m just not sure what I’m supposed to do with that.

My grip on the ring eases before I realize it.

“Chilaquiles and birria tacos.” JB appears beside the table with our food before I have to figure it out.

Perfect fucking timing.

He sets the chilaquiles in front of me and the tacos in front of Thiago, along with a small bowl of consommé.

“So do you always order the same thing?” Thiago asks. “Or have you tried a little bit of everything?”

“I grew up eating this food. Of course I’ve tried everything.” I point my fork at the plate in front of me. “But here? I ordered these the first time I came and never looked back.”

“You haven’t tried anything else on the menu?”

“Why would I if this is perfect? It’s like fixing something that isn’t broken.”

Thiago looks between our plates and nods. “Okay, but if they’re that good, why did you let me order something else?”

“I’m not your mother. You can make your own bad decisions.”

He laughs and picks up one of his tacos. “Maybe you should try one.”

“I don’t need to.”

I take my first bite and ignore him, but a few seconds later, half a taco appears over my plate. I look at it, then at him.

“I have my own food.”

“Come on. I bet you’ll like it.”

“Right, because it would be my first time trying a taco.” I narrow my eyes but take it from him anyway. “If this is better than mine, I’m still not admitting it.”

The look on his face tells me he’s already counting that as a win. Of course the damn thing is good. That’s not the point. I swallow and give him a sarcastic thumbs-up. Thiago shakes his head and glances at my plate. Without thinking, I cut off a piece and hold the fork across the table. His eyes lift to mine before he leans forward and takes the bite. It isn’t until I’m pulling the fork away that I realize I just fed him.

Well, shit. Apparently, we’re feeding each other now.

I slowly pull the fork back. “Well?”

He takes his sweet fucking time chewing. “Tacos are better.”

“Get out.”

We both burst out laughing, earning a glance from the table beside us, but I don’t care. Between arguing over food and watching Thiago practically stretch his way out of a shirt I gave him as a joke, I stopped questioning why I brought him here. I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun with someone I barely know.

So for once, I leave it at that.

Taking the last bite of vanilla ice cream and cinnamon churros, I lean back against the booth, stuffed to all hell.

“Ready to get out of here?” Thiago asks, finishing the dessert we somehow ended up sharing.

“You say that like we’re leaving together.”

“I don’t know. We could.” He leans back. “My challenge still stands.”

I scoff. “Might I remind you that Sloane’s is closed and we just ate?”

“You’re the boss, and that sounds a lot like an excuse.”

I point my spoon at him. “Thiago, if you fucking cluck in here…”

His lips press together.

“Don’t.”

His shoulders start to shake.

“I swear to God.”

He holds up both hands, fighting a laugh. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You were about to.”

“Oh, you can read minds now?”

“No. Your face is just really fucking obvious.”

He grins, and I already know I’m going to regret what comes out of my mouth next.

“Fine. One round.”

His eyebrows lift. “One?”

“That’s all I need.”

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Seven

Remi



The first target slides into place, and I glance over at Thiago in the stall beside mine.

"Last chance to protect that ego, Texas."

He slips on his ear pro. "You've been talking a lot of shit for someone who hasn't fired a single round yet."

"I was giving your arm time to recover. I like a fair fight."

"How generous of you."

"I have my moments," I say with a shrug.

Sliding on my own ear protection, I load the magazine, already looking forward to wiping that confidence off his face.

I don't know what makes him so sure of himself, whether he's actually a good marksman or just another man who sees a woman standing beside him and assumes he has the advantage. Either way, he's about to learn.

I've been lining up shots since I was barely out of diapers, so unless this man has been hiding a very specific set of skills beneath all that muscle, he doesn't stand a chance. After the last couple of hours in his company, I'm starting to hope he at least puts up a decent fight.

"Ready?" he calls out, leaning just far enough out of his stall to look at me.

I chamber a round and grin.

"X marks the spot."

I fire first, and Thiago follows half a second later. Neither of us lets up until our slides lock back. I drop the empty magazine and reach for another,

slamming it home. The next round chambers, and I'm firing again. Each shot punches through the bullseye, widening the same hole until there's barely a center left to aim for.

But I keep going.

I can feel him watching me now, and even though this started as nothing more than a stupid competition, I refuse to give him anything less than perfect. Because perfect is what I expect from myself. It always has been.

There are too many things in my life I can't control, but this isn't one of them. I know exactly what my hands can do with a weapon in them. I know how to breathe, where to aim, and when to pull the trigger. And there's comfort in that certainty.

I load another magazine and adjust my stance. My grip tightens as I draw in a slow breath and let it out. This time, I raise the gun with one hand. The recoil snaps through my wrist and up my forearm as I fire, sending round after round through what remains of the bullseye.

I don't miss a single shot.

When the last round leaves the chamber, my mind takes me somewhere I don't want to go. Boaz's bloodied face flashes behind my eyes as I remember emptying my gun into him for what he did to Ryuji. Even as he lay dying, he kept laughing and taunting me.

"Goddamn."

Thiago's voice pulls me back. I blink and force the memory away, but whatever he sees on my face wipes the amusement from his.

He steps closer. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." My voice comes out softer than I intend, and he clearly doesn't believe me. His hand rises slowly, giving me every opportunity to move before his thumb brushes my chin. Instead of pulling away, I lean into his touch before I realize I'm doing it.

"That was…" His eyes shift toward my target, where not a single errant hole breaks the pattern, before returning to me. "Wow. Remind me not to get on your bad side."

I laugh, and the heaviness of the memory loosens enough for him to join me. His thumb remains against my chin, and the laughter fades as I become aware of just how little space is left between us. When his eyes drop to my mouth, my pulse kicks harder.

"Tell me to leave."

I know I should.

Dinner was already more than I planned on tonight, and coming back here extended a night that should have ended hours ago. Now I’m standing close enough to kiss him, and for once, the part of me that questions every decision isn’t the loudest voice in my head.

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I don’t want him to leave.

Thiago waits, watching me as though he expects me to tell him otherwise. I say nothing, and his gaze drops to my mouth again.

“Remi.”

Am I biting my lip right now?

His head dips toward mine. I know what he’s about to do, but I stay where I am. Then he kisses me.

For a few seconds, I give in. His mouth is warm against mine, his hand still cupping my chin, and every reason I had for keeping my distance disappears beneath the rush of finally finding out what he tastes like. Until one thought bulldozes through everything else.

I never told him he could.

Thiago stumbles backward when I shove him away, and he hits the stall with a hard thud, surprise flashing across his face.

“Did you just kiss me?” I snap, my breath uneven and my heart racing.

His hands lift slightly. “I thought you wanted me to.”

“I didn’t say that.”

His expression changes immediately. “Shit. Remi, I’m sorry. I thought—”

“I know what you thought.” I step closer and jab a finger into his chest. “But men don’t just get to touch me because they think I want them to.”

“You’re right.” His hands stay up. “I fucked up.”

I stare at him as I try to get my breathing under control. The problem is that he wasn’t wrong about what I wanted. He was wrong to assume.

Because I did want him to kiss me, and I still fucking do. I fist the front of his ridiculous little shirt and yank him down to me.

This time, *I* kiss him.

Thiago freezes for a beat, then his arms close around me. I grip the back of his neck and pull him harder, taking exactly what I wanted now that I'm the one choosing it.

His hands slide to my thighs, and the next thing I know, he lifts me off the floor, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carries me back against the wall of the stall. I laugh against his mouth before dragging him back to me. And when I finally pull back, I only go far enough to look at him. His breathing is as ragged as mine, my red lipstick smeared across the corner of his mouth, and the satisfaction on his face almost makes me laugh again before he leans in and catches my bottom lip between his teeth.

"Fuck," he mutters.

I couldn't agree more.

It's been a long time since I've let myself do something simply because I wanted to. I'll probably pick apart every second of this later, but that's a problem for tomorrow.

Right now, I want him.

I lean in again, my mouth barely touching his, when a faint voice reaches me through the glass.

"Remi! Remi, where are you?"

I freeze.

The voice is small and muffled, but unmistakable. I'd know it anywhere.

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Eight

Thiago



"Put me down."

She pushes out of my arms, and I reluctantly let her go, staying where I am as she clears her weapon and starts packing up her gear without sparing me another glance, as if the last several minutes never happened.

I shouldn't care how quickly she shuts me out, but I do.

This was always the assignment. I'm supposed to get close, gain her trust, and take whatever she's willing to give me so I can get what I need. Kissing her was never part of the plan, and wanting to do it again sure as hell wasn't either.

"Who is that?" I ask, finally forcing myself to move as I start packing up my own gear.

"Family." She throws the bag over her shoulder. "I'll see you some other time, okay?"

And just like that, I'm being dismissed.

"Wait, Remi."

She turns back to me, but before I can figure out what the hell I'm trying to stop her for, another voice cuts through the room.

"Everything all right, Rem?"

A man steps inside with a little girl, maybe five or six, trailing behind him. The guy is tall, damn near eye level with me, which doesn't happen often. He looks younger than I expected, but there's nothing uncertain about the way he assesses me before his attention shifts back to Remi.

I recognize the protectiveness immediately. What I don't recognize is the ugly twist in my gut when I look at him.

"Of course," she says, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

Then the little girl spots her. "Remi!"

Whatever tension was left in Remi's body disappears as the kid races toward her, and she bends just in time to catch her.

"Hey, menace. How was school today?"

She huffs out an exaggerated breath, her little shoulders sagging. "They sent me home."

Remi kneels in front of her and tips her chin up. "Again, baby?"

The girl shrugs, sending a head full of caramel-colored curls bouncing forward. "They just don't understand me, Remi."

I can probably count on one hand the number of times I've interacted with a kid in the last ten years that wasn't job-related. Back in Texas, it was mostly me, my aunt, and a handful of cousins my age. We all went our separate ways once we reached adulthood, and my Aunt Priscilla is the only one I still keep in touch with.

I don't know who got married or had kids. I don't even know where most of them live anymore.

Watching Remi with this little girl affects me more than I expected. I've spent the last several weeks reading about the Cains and everyone connected to them, and the files only paint a bloody picture of assassins for hire.

None of that prepared me for this.

The little girl looks at Remi like she hung the fucking moon, and from the way Remi smiles back at her, the feeling clearly goes both ways.

I lift my gaze to the man still standing near the door, watching us. He's dressed as if he stepped off a plane from Europe, all tailored clothes and Italian leather. His eyes, two different colors, don't waver from mine. Neither does his stance. There's a confidence to him that feels older than it should. I could be wrong, but he looks too young to be the girl's father. Maybe her brother.

"Who's he?" the girl asks, looking up at me with a bright smile.

I can't help but return it. She's about the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen.

"That's Thiago. He was just leaving."

"Thiago," she repeats. "Is he your boyfriend?"

“No, Zara. He’s just a guest.”

“Oh.” Her gaze shifts back to Remi. “Do you kiss all your guests on the lips?”

Remi’s eyes widen before shooting toward the man by the door, who hasn’t moved. His shoulders are rigid, and whatever suspicion was in his expression before is nothing compared to the way he’s looking at me now.

And I wonder exactly who he is to Remi. Before I can think better of it, I close some of the distance between us as Remi straightens.

“No…Zara, I do not. He’s just…He’s a friend.”

I know she’s saying it for the girl, but hearing her call me a friend lands differently. Less than an hour ago, I was the stranger she still wasn’t sure she trusted.

Now, apparently, I’m something else.

The man at the door finally speaks, scoffing under his breath. “How about a formal introduction to this friend of yours with the interesting taste in clothing?”

I already don’t like this prick.

“Thiago, this is Matteo, and this curious little one is Zara. Family.”

“Hi, Remi’s friend who she kisses at work.”

“Zara!”

“I saw you!” she squeals, puckering her lips and making exaggerated kissing noises. “He is your boyfriend, isn’t he?”

Remi laughs as she scoops her up and carries her toward the counter like luggage, Zara giggling the entire way.

I start to follow them, expecting Matteo to do the same, but he steps into the doorway instead, planting himself directly in my path. I don’t recognize him from the files. Remi says he’s family, but if he isn’t directly tied to a Cain in the system or The Six, there’d be no reason for Helios to have him on its radar.

That doesn’t mean I dismiss him.

I meet the steel in his eyes. “Something wrong?”

“I don’t know, friend. You tell me.” His gaze drags over me from head to toe. “Never seen you before. Doesn’t look like you’re from around here either.”

“I’m not.”

He nods once, like that confirms everything. “How do you know Remi?”

I hold his stare, refusing to give him an inch. “That depends. How much of an answer are you looking for?”

His mouth sets into a hard line. “Enough to know whether you’re a problem.”

“That’s funny. I was thinking the same thing about you.”

His expression darkens, confirming what I already suspected. The tailored clothes and expensive shoes might make him look polished, but I’ve spent enough time around dangerous men to recognize when there’s more underneath. Matteo is young, but there’s nothing inexperienced about the way he holds himself. He watches me without shifting his weight or breaking eye contact, completely at ease with the tension building between us.

Then his attention cuts toward Remi again. And that ugly feeling in my gut makes another appearance.

Whatever their relationship is, they’re close. And I realize, I don’t fucking like it.

“Then let’s make this simple. You hurt her…” he trails off, but he doesn’t need to finish.

I tilt my head slightly, meeting him without backing down. “If I had any intention of hurting her, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. And Remi strikes me as the kind of woman who can hold her own.”

“Damn right.”

I slide my hands into my pockets as a chuckle slips free. Neither of us says another word until Zara’s laughter carries in from the other room, completely at odds with the tension between us.

Matteo watches me for another second, then steps aside just enough to let me pass.

“Nice shirt,” he says as I walk by.

I huff out a laugh but keep moving.

Remi’s eyes find mine as I approach. Zara sits on the counter beside her, legs swinging as she works on a red lollipop.

I haven’t even had time to process what happened between us. Dinner was supposed to be another opportunity to get closer to her, but I spent half the night laughing, sharing food, and forgetting why I was there in the first place. Then I kissed her, and everything got a whole lot more complicated.

Nothing about that kiss felt like part of an assignment. I wanted it, and when she pulled me back for another, I stopped thinking about Helios

altogether. Now I’m standing here wondering when getting close to Remi stopped feeling like a job.

“You have really big muscles like my daddy. Is that why you were carrying Remi?”

“That’s enough, Zara. Eat your lollipop while I walk Thiago outside.”

The little girl grins around the candy.

“It was nice to meet you, Zara,” I say, offering her a genuine smile, then turn toward Remi. “And before you kick me out, I still owe you for the shirt.”

“You’re seriously going to pay me for that thing? The seams are barley holding together.”

“You charged me $24.99 plus tax, remember?”

“I was joking.”

“I’m a man of principle.”

She looks pointedly at my exposed stomach. “It’s about to become part of your DNA.”

“That still doesn’t make it free.”

She laughs as I reach for my wallet. “Fine. Give me twenty bucks, and we’ll call it even.”

Remi leans forward, and the glimpse down her shirt distracts me enough that my wallet slips from my fingers and hits the floor. Zara is off the counter in a flash, snatching it up before I can reach it. The wallet falls open in her hands.

“Thiago Braga,” she reads from the card inside, then her eyes light up when she notices the badge beside it. “You’re a police officer like my Auntie Eva!”

Remi goes completely still behind the counter. Her gaze drops to the wallet in Zara’s hands before slowly lifting to mine, and I watch every trace of warmth disappear from her expression.

Fuck.

Behind me, Matteo shifts. When I glance back, he’s already watching me differently. Whatever questions he had about me before, Zara just answered one of them.

Completely oblivious, she swings the wallet in her hand. “My Auntie Eva has one just like this. But she’s not a police officer anymore.”

I step forward and gently take it from her. “That’s pretty cool,” I say, keeping my voice steady as I tuck it away.

When I look at Remi again, she’s already moving toward the door.

“Remi.”

She cuts her eyes toward me, and I know better than to make her say it, so I follow.

“Rem,” Matteo says from behind us, his voice low.

She stops and looks back at him. “Stay with Zara.”

Then she keeps walking.

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Nine

Remi



The door slams behind us, the sound rattling through the space as I pace a few steps before turning back to him.

"You're a fucking cop?"

"Technically, SWAT. But yeah."

"You've got to be kidding me."

I don't do cops. I don't want them as friends or acquaintances, and I sure as hell don't want one anywhere near my life. Aunt Eva is the only exception because she's family.

But Thiago? A bitter laugh leaves me as I drag a hand through my hair.

God, you're so stupid, Remi.

It was all there. The truck, those damn tactical pants, the way he handled himself at the range. I should have fucking known.

Thiago steps closer and reaches for my wrist, but I jerk back before he can touch me.

"Don't. You don't get to put your hands on me."

His jaw clenches. "Come on, Remi. It's not like I lied to you."

I stare at him in disbelief. "Not like you lied? You told me you had a desk job downtown."

"I did. I was still in training and hadn't gone out in the field yet."

"Bullshit." I step into his space. "Being a cop is a pretty fucking important detail to just gloss over."

"Look, I'm sorry. When we met, I didn't think I'd ever see you again, and telling a woman I'd just met that I was a cop felt like an overshare."

“And what about dinner?”

He huffs out a heavy breath. “I should’ve told you then.”

“Yeah, you should have.”

“I know. But I wasn’t trying to keep it from you. Not in the way you’re thinking.”

“Of course,” I mutter, folding my arms across my chest. “How convenient for you.”

I should turn around, go back inside, and shut the door on him before this gets any harder than it already is.

He’s no one. He’s just a guy I met by chance, had dinner with once, and made the mistake of kissing. Yet my feet stay planted because some part of me refuses to let it end that easily.

“You weren’t exactly giving me a breakdown of your life or career choices either.”

“That’s different.”

He throws his arms up. “Of course it is. And what’s so bad about me being a cop anyway? Why does it bother you this much?”

The way he says it, like a challenge instead of a question, reminds me that I haven’t used my knife in weeks, and right now, I’m tempted to change that.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I step closer until there’s barely any space left between us. “Don’t ever come back here. I mean that.”

Neither of us looks away until I finally brush past him and head for the door.

“You kissed me back there,” he calls after me. “Remi…”

I keep walking. “You think you’re the first man I’ve ever kissed?” My hand closes around the handle. “Or the first to beg for my attention, *Officer Braga?*”

Without giving him a chance to respond, I tear open the door, then slam it behind me and lock it.

Fuck him.

“Everything okay?” Matteo asks as he comes around the corner with Zara in hand. “You need me to handle something for you?”

“No,” I say, forcing a small smile. “He won’t be a problem anymore.”

“Was it something I said? Is that why Officer Thiago left?” Zara lowers her gaze, disappointment softening her pretty features.

I gently tip her chin up. Technically, it was something she said, but not what she's thinking. Thanks to her, I found out who Thiago really is before…

I stop myself before the thought can go any further.

"No, Z. Absolutely not."

She smiles, but I can tell she's not fully convinced, so I pull her into a hug.

Zara is my unlikely little best friend. I see so much of myself in her at that age. She's spunky and precocious, speaks without a filter, and has never quite fit the mold people expect of her.

Matteo's gaze drifts beyond me as Thiago's truck roars to life.

"Are you sure you're okay? We saw you two—"

"Lapse of judgment. That's all. But like I said, he won't be back."

"Understood." He nods once. "You know all you have to do is say the word, Remi. I've got you. Always."

Zara looks up, her eyes shifting between us.

When we were kids, we came to understand the world we were growing up in, and the roles our parents played, one layer at a time, year by year. For now, Zara knows what she needs to. She knows her family will always have her back and that we look out for each other. She knows there isn't a person standing here who wouldn't do anything to keep her safe.

One day, she'll understand exactly how far that anything goes. A part of me wishes she never has to.

I look at Matteo again and flash him a grin. "Yeah, but where's the fun in that?"

Stepping into him, I wrap my arms around his middle, holding on a little tighter than I normally would. He doesn't ask why. He just laughs and presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Zara wanted to invite you out for ice cream. It's why we stopped by. But I understand if you're not really in the mood."

"Please, Remi! Come with us," she chirps, bouncing up and down.

"You know I'd never miss out on a sugar rush with my mini me." I pull back, already moving. "Let me grab my stuff, lock up, and I'll meet you two outside."

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Ten

Remi



I lean over the engine bay, lollipop shifting between my teeth as I tighten the last coil pack and step back. I've been at this for hours…maybe. I lost track of time two playlists ago.

"Come on," I mutter, wiping my hands on a rag already stained beyond saving. "Don't start this shit with me."

Tearing open the door, I drop into the seat, turning the key while silently praying to a higher power.

"This is it."

The GT-R fires up, smooth for a second, then stutters.

Again.

"God-fucking-damnit!"

I squeeze my eyes shut and exhale through my nose before climbing back out and heading under the hood.

"Pick a problem and stick with it, Remi," I mutter as I pull the coil back out. "You already fucked up once."

The lollipop taps against my teeth as I inspect the plug, turning it between my fingers and searching for anything that explains the stutter. Everything looks fine. Of course it does.

What the fuck am I missing?

I swap it anyway, grabbing another from the tray and pushing it in harder than necessary before snapping the coil back into place. I know I'm using too much force, but I don't stop. I'm too wired, too frustrated, and too disappointed in myself.

Thiago is no one. This isn't about him. And if he knows what's good for him, he'll stay away, and I'll never see him again.

No. This is all me.

"Either work or don't," I mutter, tightening everything down. "Don't play games with me."

I slam the hood and slide into the driver's seat again. The engine catches, running smoothly for two breaths before the same uneven break in rhythm returns, like one cylinder is just off enough to throw everything else out of sync.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

At this rate, I'm going to turn the steering wheel to dust. My grip eventually eases as I listen to the inconsistent stutter, trying to figure out what the hell I'm missing.

I press the lollipop against my cheek and lean forward until my forehead touches the steering wheel.

"Get it together," I mutter. "It's a fucking coil. It's not that deep."

Except I know it's not just the coil.

It's the way his mouth felt against mine, the way I shoved him away, only to pull him right back and kiss him myself.

Absolutely not.

"Bad idea, Remi. *Real bad*."

I push out of the car and pop the hood again, ripping the coil out like it personally offended me.

"You don't get to show up, kiss me, and then…"

My jaw clenches when I realize I'm arguing with a man who isn't even here.

"Yeah. No. We're not doing this."

I grab another even though I already know the damn thing isn't the problem and shove it into place.

"Fix the car," I tell myself. "That's it. That's the job."

I drop into the driver's seat and turn the fucking key. The engine catches, and I hold my breath, waiting for it to screw with me again.

One second. Two. Three.

"Fuuuuuck."

That same goddamn stutter. I sink against the seat with a frustrated laugh, pull the lollipop from my mouth, and toss it somewhere behind me.

"Of course. Why the fuck would anything be easy tonight?"

“Remi?” Papá calls over the music I didn’t even realize was still playing.

I must really be off my game if I didn’t notice him walk in. He’s standing beside the hood with a warm smile as he reaches over and switches off the speaker, leaving the garage painfully quiet.

Without the music filling my head, everything I’ve been trying not to think about comes rushing back. I grip the gear shift until the pressure against my palm gives me something else to focus on. Once I trust myself to move without losing my shit, I climb out.

“*Princesa*, I called you five times.”

“Why? Is someone dead? Dying?” I ask, grabbing a rag and wiping the oil and soot from my hands and forearms.

“Not yet.” He smirks and opens his arms for a hug.

“I’m filthy. I’ll ruin your jacket.”

He doesn’t care. He pulls me against his chest anyway, and I wrap my arms around him, resting my cheek against a place that has felt safe for as long as I can remember.

My father has never asked me to make myself easier for anyone else to understand. I’ve never had to be quieter around him or pretend to be the daughter anyone expected him to have. Whatever version of myself I brought home, he loved her.

The criminal underworld may know him as Kai Cain, a former contract assassin for Ares and The Six whose name still carries weight decades later. I just know him as Papá.

“Let’s go for a ride.”

I look up at him. It’s been a while since we’ve gone on one together.

He’s the reason I fell in love with engines and speed in the first place. I remember sitting beside him as a kid, fascinated as I watched him work and wanting to be just like him. It was one of the few things that could hold my attention for hours. Some of my favorite memories are of the two of us riding the back roads with nowhere we needed to be.

“Really?”

I’m not even on my bike yet, and the idea already sounds like exactly what I need.

“Yeah. I’ll give you some time to get cleaned up and meet you out front.”

When the door closes behind him, I turn back to my car and grimace. “Later, you and I have a bone to pick.”

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Eleven

Remi



The bike is already waiting for me out front, engine idling low and steady.

Papá glances over his shoulder as I step out, and that's all it takes for me to know he suspects something is off. But he doesn't ask. He just nods once and swings onto his own bike.

I grab my helmet, slide it on, and throw a leg over mine. The familiar weight beneath me feels like second nature, and when my fingers curl around the grips, my body finally starts to relax for the first time all night.

"Ready?" he calls over the rumble.

"Always."

He taps his helmet in a silent ask to sync our comms, then rolls the throttle without waiting for a response and takes off. I follow behind him, letting the miles from the shop put some space between me and everything I've been thinking about.

Cool air filters through my jacket as we weave through the city, the lights blurring as the buildings spread out and traffic thins. The farther we go, the easier it becomes to focus on the road ahead instead of everything I left back there.

For a while, we ride in silence, just the two of us like old times.

When I was younger, most of those rides were on the back of Gloria, the old bike he kept long after he had newer, better ones sitting in his garage. I asked him once who Gloria was because, even as a kid, I knew my father well enough to know he wouldn't give something a name without a reason.

He went quiet for so long I thought he hadn’t heard me, then told me she was someone he never wanted to forget. I accepted the answer and never thought to ask him about her again.

I don’t really know when we stopped riding together. Maybe it was after everything that happened with Ryuji and Val. I do know it was me who made excuse after excuse until he stopped asking, not out of anger or frustration, but because he’s always known when to give me space.

His bike slows slightly, falling back until he’s riding just off to my side.

“Car trouble?” he calls over.

I let out a short laugh. “You could say that.”

“Misfire?”

“Yeah.”

“Coils?”

“I swapped them.”

“Plugs?”

“Checked.”

A beat passes between us, and I can almost hear the words sitting on his tongue before he finally says them.

“Then maybe it’s not the car.”

My fingers tighten on the throttle. “It’s the car. It’s always the car.”

He doesn’t argue, but watches me for a long moment, then eases ahead again.

There isn’t much he doesn’t know about me, and we’ve never been the kind of family that keeps things from one another. I’m not trying to start now. I just don’t see the point in telling him I let someone get close without knowing something as basic as what he did for a living.

After everything that happened, we all know better than to forget there are still people out there who could come for us. Thiago turned out to be a cop, but he could have been someone far worse, and I let him get close enough that Zara was standing only a few feet away from him.

“You’re riding tense,” he calls back after a while.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

I hate that he can tell, but I force my shoulders to loosen and my breathing to even out. We ride like that for a few more miles until he hangs back again, pacing me.

“You gonna talk to me, *princesa*, or how long are we gonna play this game?”

I hesitate, keeping my eyes on the road as the yellow lines blur beneath me. “Met someone,” I finally say.

He keeps riding, waiting for me to continue, but when I don’t, he presses.

“Yeah? And?”

“It’s not what you’re thinking. Not even close. But I let him in, and he turned out to be something I wasn’t expecting.”

Another stretch of road passes beneath us before he speaks again. “Turned out to be what, exactly?”

There’s enough warning in his voice to make me smile despite everything.

“He lied about what he does. Tried to hide the fact that he’s a cop.”

“Oh.”

A hollow chuckle crackles through my speaker.

“Yeah. A cop is the last thing I need in my life. The last thing any of us needs is someone poking around, digging into things that will only end badly for them.”

“But it’s not what you wanted?”

“No one wants to be lied to, Papi. But if you’re asking if I’m torn up or missing him, I’m not. I barely know the guy. I just…” I exhale. “I wanted to know him.”

Maybe that’s the part bothering me, that I wanted to see where something went instead of finding a reason to walk away from it.

“So forget him,” he says so nonchalantly, like it’s that easy.

I wish it were.

I have this annoying habit of hyperfocusing on the shit I mess up, replaying every mistake until I’ve picked it apart from every possible angle. And Thiago has already taken up more space in my head tonight than he deserves.

Grinning behind my helmet, I accelerate, letting the speed drown out everything else.

Fuck Thiago and fuck his badge.

“Try to keep up, old man,” I tease, pushing my bike a little harder.

“Ease off, Remi girl. We’re about to hit some traffic.” He slips into his dad voice, but I hear the amusement in his tone as his engine climbs.

Up ahead, headlights cluster near a stretch of highway I know too well. I didn't set out to come here tonight, but seeing them makes me wonder if some part of me knew exactly where I was going.

Furia looks a lot different from the days Val and I used to run it, but the energy hasn't changed. I can already feel that familiar rush building as I remember the first night we rolled up with ten grand in our pockets and fire in our eyes.

"Tonight?" Papá asks. "You sure you're up for this?"

"It's as good a night as any." I glance over at him. "Be my co-pilot?"

He wasn't thrilled when he found out what Valentina and I were up to on weekends. I'd had my driver's license for barely a month before my first race. But as always, he knew it was something I needed and loved, and with every win, it became a little easier for him to accept. Mamá took longer to come around, but for someone who was spilling blood for money at my age, I suppose she didn't have much room to argue.

I slow as we approach, recognizing the lineup, along with one car in particular. The matte red Demon 170 is a pretty little thing, almost as pretty as my baby.

It belongs to an old acquaintance, Rafe. I haven't seen him in over a year, but I'd never forget his face or the scar slashing across both corners of his mouth. He's told five different stories about how he got it, and I'm sure the truth is buried somewhere beneath the bullshit.

I roll up behind him and cut the engine, taking in what he's working with. The wide drag radials tell me the car is built to launch hard and run straight.

"Remi Cain, is that you?" he asks with a sly grin. "Almost didn't recognize you without the hair."

I flip a strand over my shoulder out of instinct, remembering the platinum streak that used to be my signature look. I've been all black for about three years now, but maybe it's time to bring her back.

"Haven't seen you around in a while," I say.

He folds his arms, a smile breaking through like he's in on something I'm not. "Yeah, well…I've been a little tied up. Got locked up in another county for a bit. Some shit charge that took longer than it should have to clear."

"That so?"

He shrugs. "You know how it goes."

I nod once, then tip my chin toward the Demon. “You racing that tonight?”

“Was planning on it.”

I look over the car again, already making the call. “Let me take it. We’ll split the win.”

Rafe takes a second longer than I expect to answer, but then he pushes off the car, digs into his pocket, and tosses me the keys.

“Anything for you, *reina*.”

Papá comes up behind me, and whatever confidence Rafe had a second ago slips when he notices him, and he takes a step back. I glance over my shoulder to find Papá watching him. My father has never meddled in my life, but bullshit has never gotten past him easily either.

I turn back to Rafe with a smug grin. Maybe it isn’t normal to be proud of your parents for the violent things they’ve done, but in their world, survival never came clean.

“See you at the finish line, Rafe. And thanks again.”

Once I add my name to the roster, we climb inside the beautiful machine. I take a second to get a feel for the wheel, the pedals, and the controls around me.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this. Your mother is going to kill me,” Papá says as he clicks his seatbelt into place.

“So don’t tell her.”

His gaze slides my way, and he tuts under his breath. “Right. You think I got a death wish?”

A laugh slips out of me as I turn my attention back to the road. I roll my shoulders and ease the Demon forward into position, lining up with the others. My eyes sweep over the stretch ahead, mapping every curve and break in the asphalt.

A girl in a light green skirt and see-through halter steps out in front with one arm raised. For a traitorous moment, my mind goes straight back to Thiago, to his mouth on mine and the badge I never saw coming.

I push him from my thoughts and focus on the race.

“Drive like I taught you, baby girl. And don’t hold back.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. The woman’s arm drops, and I launch.

The Demon shoots forward, tires gripping hard as the force presses me back into the seat. I shift smoothly as the other cars surge around me, their engines screaming in competition as we tear down the straightaway.

She’s built for this, and I can feel it in the way she responds to me. Clean power, brutal acceleration, and no hesitation as the numbers climb and the distance between me and the others stretches.

The first curve comes up fast, and I ease off just enough to guide her through it. Her weight fights me, heavier than my GT-R, but I know how to handle it. I know this car. She may not be mine, but I know her bones.

“Come on,” I mutter between clenched teeth as I push through the turn and come out clean, already setting up for the next stretch.

Papá says nothing, but I can feel him watching every move.

“You okay?” I ask, biting back a chuckle when I notice his death grip on the handle above him and his other hand braced against the leather seat. “I thought you were used to these kinds of speeds.”

“I am,” he says, his voice tight. “When I’m in control. Not like this. But I trust you. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here.”

The road bends again, tighter, and I adjust my speed as I enter the curve, balancing the Demon’s weight through the turn and keeping her exactly where I want her. Headlights flare up ahead, too many and way too close. My focus sharpens as two cars pull out from a side road. They aren’t part of the race, and neither one slows as they move to block the lane.

“Remi, brake.”

I don’t.

I cut left, then snap the Demon right, aiming for the narrowing gap as one of the cars swerves to close it. The Demon fights me for a fraction of a second before I muscle her through, clearing the bumper by inches.

The race route disappears behind us as I tear down a side road I’ve never driven before. It’s narrower and darker, but it’s open, and right now, that’s all I care about.

“Who the fuck are they? You think they’re looking for Rafe?”

“Whoever they are, they’re not friendly.” Papá reaches for his Glock. “You armed?”

“Always.”

“That’s my girl.”

One of the cars catches up fast and swings toward my rear, trying to spin us out. I accelerate before he can make contact, putting enough distance between us to avoid the hit as I scan the unfamiliar roads and recalculate with every turn. I’m not chasing a finish line anymore. I’m looking for a way out.

“Stay on it, Remi,” Papá shouts as he lowers his window.

He leans toward the opening and fires, three shots ripping through the night.

“Be careful!”

The car behind us jerks across the road. Papá fires again, and this time, it veers hard, tears off the pavement, and disappears into the embankment.

I check the mirror, but there’s no time to celebrate because the second car is still coming. Gunfire erupts behind us, bullets piercing Rafe’s roof and rear bumper.

Fuck.

“Papi! Are you good?”

“Not yet.”

He takes aim again, leaning too far out the window, giving them too much of a clear shot, so I reach across the center console to drag him back inside, but he fires before I can. One shot, then another. Glass explodes from the car behind us, then swerves violently. The tires scream right before it goes airborne, slams back onto the pavement, and spins across the highway.

“Get down!” I snap, yanking him back into the seat.

I wrench the Demon around the wreck as pieces of metal and glass scatter across the asphalt, then keep driving until the twisted car disappears from my rearview and there’s no sign of anyone else following us. Only then do I bring the Demon to a stop.

For a few breaths, neither of us moves. The only sounds are the ticking of the Demon’s engine and the rush of blood pounding in my ears.

Papá and I look at each other.

“We have to check.”

I throw the car into park and reach for my weapon.

“Remi, wait. I’ll do—”

I’m already out of the car and moving toward the wreck with my gun drawn. This is too familiar, too close to what happened four years ago. I need to know if it’s them, if they’re back.

“What are you doing?” he asks as he catches up to me. “More could show up, and we’re out here in the open.”

“I have to make sure…”

The rest dies on my tongue when I see the driver hanging halfway through the shattered windshield. His eyes are half-lidded and fixed on

nothing, and the damage to the side of his neck leaves no question that he's dead.

The passenger is still alive.

He drags himself free of the mangled car, his boots scraping through broken glass as one arm hangs at a sick angle and the other claws at the ground. Blood has soaked through his shirt and runs down his side as he tries to crawl away from us.

I raise my weapon, keeping my finger alongside the trigger.

"Don't move."

He freezes, chest heaving, then turns his head just enough to look at me. Blood coats his teeth when he tries to speak, and maybe my brain is fucking with me, because I swear his mouth pulls into something that almost resembles a smile.

I press my boot against the man's injured arm, and he howls as I lean closer.

Papá catches my elbow. "Remi…"

"He tried to kill you. Kill us. He deserves this."

His eyebrows pull together, and there's something in his expression I'm not used to seeing from him when it comes to me. Concern. Not for what this man might do, but for what I'm about to.

I'm too worked up to care.

Crouching beside him, I bring the barrel of my gun to his temple while turning his bloodied arm over with my free hand. I hold my breath, expecting to find a scorpion tattoo, but there's nothing there. I check the other arm. Bare too.

"What is it, *princesa*?"

"I thought…" I stare down at him, trying to make sense of it. "I thought he was one of them. Why else would they do this? No one knew I'd be here tonight, let alone driving that car."

Before either of us can say another word, sirens blare in the distance.

"Gotta go, Remi girl. Leave him. He's as good as dead."

I search the man's pockets, pulling out his wallet and a phone smashed beyond use.

"No loose ends, Papá."

"Remi."

I know that tone. But I also know what this man did. I rise and fire once into the back of his head.

Papá goes silent beside me.

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Twelve

Thiago



The weight slams back into the rack harder than I intended.

I sit up and drag a hand over my face as sweat drips down my temples, my chest still heaving from the last set. The burn in my muscles should be enough to clear my head, but it hasn't done shit.

It's been two weeks since I last saw Remi, since that kiss and everything that followed.

I've tried telling myself this is nothing more than frustration over a job that went sideways, but I know better. This isn't just about a girl with a pretty face, because Remi isn't just that.

And she isn't the only thing weighing on me.

The commander has been breathing down my fucking neck for days, demanding updates and near-daily check-ins on my comings and goings. Something about it doesn't sit right. I've never had a handler this invested or this overbearing about a job. There's always a timeline, so that's nothing new, but what she's asking for involves too many moving pieces to rush. I need to earn Remi's trust before I can exploit it.

She isn't the type to hand over access to her world easily, especially after what happened between us.

"You got a lot on your mind?"

My partner, Grey, leans against the rack, draining his water bottle as his eyebrows pinch when I don't answer right away.

"What was that?" I ask, pulling out my earbuds.

“I asked if you had a lot on your mind. You look like you’re a million miles away, Braga. Work getting to you?”

If he only knew.

“Nah. Got some shit to sort out. Nothing important.”

He glances away and sighs like he doesn’t believe a single word, but he lets it go. His attention shifts past me a second later, and I catch the change immediately. The look in his eyes and the smirk tugging at his mouth tell me there’s a woman involved.

“Fuck. Me,” he groans, straightening his shoulders. “That is one fine piece of ass.”

Good. Maybe he’ll walk over and introduce himself and leave me alone. He’s a decent guy and a solid teammate, but on a normal day, the last thing I want is to hold a conversation while I’m working out, let alone when I’m already in a shit mood.

I follow his line of sight anyway.

Of course it’s fucking Remi.

She makes her way toward a Smith machine with the same confidence she seems to carry everywhere, completely unaware that I’m watching her from across the gym. My hand closes harder around the bar as every thought that’s been fucking with my head for the last two weeks suddenly has a face again.

Grey lets out a low whistle under his breath and shifts his stance like he’s about to make a move. There’s no fucking way I’m letting that happen. I set the weight down and sit up, my eyes never leaving her.

“Don’t,” I say, keeping my voice low.

Looking at me, his forehead creases. “What?”

“That one.” I nod in her direction. “Not your type.”

The smirk creeps back onto his face. “Since when do you decide my type?”

I don’t answer because I don’t have one that makes any sense. Remi made it clear two weeks ago that she wants nothing to do with me. Who Grey talks to shouldn’t matter.

But it does.

“Look, I’m just trying to save you the headache.”

Grey pauses, then turns back to face me. “You know her or something?”

I push to my feet and grab my towel, buying myself a few seconds before I have to answer.

“Something like that,” I say, wiping my face as I watch her. She hasn’t noticed me yet. Otherwise, she’d probably run out the door or chase me out herself.

His eyebrows lift. “Yeah? You wanna elaborate, or am I supposed to figure that out on my own?”

I finally glance at him, just long enough to make my point. “Drop it, Grey.”

That only makes his grin widen. “Yeah, you definitely know her.”

I don’t deny it, which is answer enough.

“What? She some kind of psycho?” He folds his arms and licks his lips as his attention drifts back to her. “I’d risk her wrath any day. Look at that.”

I make the mistake of doing just that. She’s in the middle of a set of squats, and for several seconds, I forget all about the man standing beside me. My cock stirs at the view.

“Goddamn, Braga. I don’t care what you know. I’m going for it.”

Every instinct in me wants to tell him to stay the fuck away from her, but I keep my expression neutral. We’re part of a team, and the last thing I need is to start shit with one of the guys here. It won’t do me any favors with the unit or the commander.

But the thought of him walking over there gets under my skin in a way it has no business doing.

She’s mine.

The words come out of nowhere, so immediate and possessive that I almost laugh at myself. She isn’t mine. She never was. And Remi sure as hell doesn’t belong to anyone.

My gaze swings back to Grey, who’s still staring, and I decide to let him learn the hard way.

“Okay,” I say with a sigh, gripping the bar again like I’m about to start another set. “Your funeral.”

He chuckles and tosses a towel over his shoulder. “Not that I need your approval, but I appreciate the concern.”

I reset my grip without looking at him. I can hear the confidence in his voice, though, and I already know it’s about to get him into trouble.

“Go ahead,” I mutter. “Knock yourself out.”

He claps me on the shoulder as he passes and heads straight for her.

This should be entertaining.

Grey leans against the Smith machine beside her, and I catch Remi's eyes in the mirror when she notices him. The warning in them is clear, but she doesn't stop her set or acknowledge whatever he says.

He tries again.

A smirk pulls at my mouth. I did warn him.

Remi finishes her rep, racks the bar, and pulls out her earbuds before turning on him. I can't hear a damn thing from here, but judging by the look on Grey's face, she isn't letting him down easy.

His hands come up in surrender, and the only words I can make out are the ones he mouths next. *I'm sorry.*

I'm already laughing by the time he starts the walk of shame back to me.

"If you say I told you so, or even think about saying it, I swear to God, Braga."

"Wouldn't dream of it." I grab my water bottle, failing miserably at hiding my grin. "Well? What did she say?"

"You mean other than asking what the fuck would possess me to think I could talk to her? There were some other choice words in there, too."

More laughter spills out of me.

"She's mean, Braga. Stuck-up bitch."

My laughter dies. "She's a bitch because she's working out and not interested?"

He shrugs and takes another drink of water. "Come on. She knows what she's doing, showing up looking like that, dressed like that, then acts offended when a guy tries to talk to her."

I stare at him, waiting for some indication that he's joking.

There isn't one.

"Or maybe she came here to work out."

Grey scoffs. "Whatever. Women like that think they're too good for everyone. Sometimes they need someone to knock them down a few pegs."

I didn't know this side of him existed.

"Yeah," I say, my voice flat. "That's not how that works."

"Jesus, relax." He tosses up a hand. "She's all yours."

"She's not—"

I glance across the gym and find Remi staring straight at us.

Fuck.

From the look on her face, I have no idea how much she heard or saw, but whatever conclusion she came to isn't good. She snatches up her bag and water bottle and heads for the exit without looking back.

I leave Grey standing there and take off after her. "Remi, wait."

Of course, she ignores me and keeps walking through the parking lot.

"Fuck off, Braga."

"Can we at least talk?"

"Why don't you send your little friend? He seems to be really good with words."

"Grey isn't my friend. We work together, and for the record, I warned him not to bother you."

She scoffs. "Ah, another pig. Why am I not surprised?"

"Come on, Remi. That's not fair. I'm nothing like him."

She stops so suddenly I nearly run into her. When she turns, the anger on her face tells me I've somehow managed to make this worse.

"Yeah, you're right," she says. "At least he's straight up about what a fuck-ass scumbag he is. Unlike you, liar."

She turns away again.

"Remi, just give me a minute."

She stops but doesn't face me.

"I'm asking you to let me explain. That's all."

A few seconds pass before she finally turns around. Her eyes narrow as she looks me over, and despite her obvious fury, she's still the most beautiful woman I've seen in a long fucking time.

"Okay, Braga. Explain why the hell you're here. Out of all the gyms in this whole goddamn city, you just happen to end up in mine, the same way you slithered into my range." She squares her shoulders. "So I ask you a second time. Are you stalking me? Because I promise that won't end well for you."

"Is that a threat?"

She closes the distance between us without a hint of hesitation. "It's whatever the fuck you want it to be."

I hold my ground, refusing to give her the satisfaction of backing away. "I didn't see your name on the door."

I wait for her comeback, but she says nothing, so I continue.

"What I do for a living doesn't define me. My father was a detective…" I drag a hand over my jaw. "Look, I know plenty are assholes. It doesn't

mean I’m like that or whoever else made you hate cops enough to look at me like I’m the enemy.”

“What someone does means everything.”

There’s something in the way she says it that strips the argument right out of me. This isn’t about Grey, and I’m starting to think it isn’t entirely about me either.

I’ve read the files, but those pages reduce entire lives to names, operations, arrests, and body counts. They tell me what people have done without telling me what brought them there.

“Thiago,” she says, and some of the anger has faded from her voice. “I don’t want to see you again. I don’t want whatever you think this is or could have been. It can’t be, and it won’t ever.”

That shouldn’t bother me as much as it does.

I came here to get close to her. Whatever happened between us was supposed to make my job easier, nothing more. Except that in the last two weeks, I stopped thinking only about the job.

Remi takes two steps back, then turns away from me and walks toward her car. I stay where I am as her engine rumbles to life, and a few seconds later, she tears out of the parking lot.

Fuck.

“Looks like you’ve got your work cut out for you.” Elena’s voice startles the shit out of me.

I turn and find her sitting behind the wheel of a black SUV, a cigarette balanced between her fingers.

“How long have you been there?”

“Long enough to know you’re fucked,” she says casually, amusement threading through her voice.

“I told you I need time.”

“No, that’s not what I’m referring to.” She takes another drag from her cigarette. “And I think you know that.”

I stare at her. “I don’t follow.”

“Of course you don’t.” She taps the ash out of the open window. “She is beautiful, isn’t she?”

“I won’t deny the obvious, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be objective.”

A knowing smile touches Elena’s mouth. “Beautiful, dangerous, and completely uninterested in making this easy for you. I can see the appeal.”

“You’re reading too much into it.”

“Am I?” Her gaze shifts toward the street where Remi disappeared. “Because from where I’m sitting, you looked more concerned about her walking away than you did about losing access to the Cain family.”

I don’t answer, mostly because anything I say will only give her more ammunition.

Elena exhales a slow stream of smoke through the open window. “You don’t have the luxury of forgetting what this is, Operative. Fall for her, and you become compromised. We both know what that means for you.”

The warning grates on me, but I keep my expression neutral. She may be my handler, but I’m not about to let her question my ability to do the job based on one conversation she watched from across a parking lot.

“I’m aware of the stakes,” I say. “I’m also aware of how to do my job, and I haven’t given you a reason to question that.”

Her eyebrow lifts as she studies me.

“No,” she says after a moment. “Not yet.”

It’s the last thing out of her mouth before the dark-tinted glass slides up, cutting me off as the SUV pulls away.

I stand there long after she’s gone and drag a hand over my face, my gaze returning to the street where Remi disappeared minutes ago.

Two weeks, and I still haven’t figured out how to get back in. The bigger problem is that I’m no longer sure how much of me wants another chance because of the assignment and how much I simply want another chance with her.

Either way, it doesn’t change what I have to do.

Whether Remi wants me there or not, whether she hates everything I represent, this doesn’t end with me walking away.

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Thirteen

Remi



Estela opens the front door before I finish entering the last number on the keypad. Her eyes crinkle into a warm smile as she pulls me into a hug.

"*Mi niña*, you're early!"

"Yeah, I left the guys in charge at work." I peer around her, looking for my favorite head of curls. "Because someone kept texting me nonstop to come over and bake cookies."

Zara jumps out from her hiding spot with her best attempt at a terrifying roar. She almost gets me, but I slap a hand over my heart and gasp instead, giving her an Oscar-worthy performance.

"Did I scare you, Remi? Like, actually?"

"You did, menace. I almost shi—"

I clamp my mouth shut, nearly forgetting about her little ears. Not that it matters, because Zara immediately bursts into giggles, knowing exactly what I was about to say.

Estela nudges my shoulder. "Nice save."

I wink at her before reaching for Zara's hand. "Where are those cookies you promised me?"

"This way. Come on! But just a warning, Estela won't let me taste the cookie dough."

"What? That's the best part."

"I know!" she says, already dragging me toward the kitchen.

Estela follows behind us. "Your mom and dad are flying in tonight. The last thing I want is for you to have an upset stomach on my watch. Just be

patient, *chiquita*. The first batch will be out of the oven in ten minutes."

Zara pouts until she looks up at me. Her expression brightens when I silently mouth, *I got you*.

"Remi, don't spoil her. It took me an hour to convince her not to sneak a bite."

I shrug, pop a piece of dough into my mouth, and slip another into Zara's waiting hand.

"It's not my job to follow rules when it comes to her. I'm the fun cousin, remember? Don't mess with my rep."

Estela shakes her head, holding back a laugh as she starts gathering ingredients for dinner.

"Where is everybody?" I ask, now stealing a handful of chocolate chips.

"*Señora* Amalia and Kai are out and won't be back until later tonight. It's their anniversary week."

I chuckle around a mouthful of chocolate. "Week? Figures."

I don't know what was in the water when they all got together, but their love is adorably gross. Even decades later, my parents still act like they can't get enough of each other.

And because my brain hates me, that thought instantly brings *him* to mind.

Absolutely fucking not.

It's been almost a week since that day at the gym, and I promised myself I wouldn't think about Thiago, that kiss, or anything else about the man I shoved into a mental vault and sealed shut.

The problem is that he keeps finding his way through the cracks.

Why are you lying to yourself, Remi?

Okay, maybe I broke down once and looked him up on social media. That hardly counts as anything, especially since the man has the online presence of someone's grandfather. His entire profile consists of two photos from a year ago without a single caption between them. One is a sunrise and the other a sunset, both taken somewhere in Texas, if I had to guess.

I hate that I stared at them longer than any sane person should.

They were beautiful, though, and they made me wonder where he was when he took them. And what made him stop long enough to pull out his phone and capture what he thought was worth remembering. Then my thoughts drift to my mother and whether she ever stood beneath those same Texas skies when she was younger.

I smile as I picture it.

Then I mentally slap myself back to reality for the slip. It's not that I like the guy. I just happen to have eyes, and who isn't a sucker for a man with a pretty face who looks built to disrespect me and toss me around the way I like it?

"Remi…" Zara's voice hits me like a bucket of ice water, and I startle more than I did when she jumped out at me by the door.

"Hmm?" I pop another piece of chocolate into my mouth and try to play it off, though it's ridiculous since she can't read my thoughts.

"Are you still mad at Officer Thiago?"

This child must be practicing sorcery.

I slam my fist on the counter as the chocolate goes down the wrong pipe, sending me into a coughing fit. Zara instantly jumps onto her stool and starts patting my back.

"Oh no, Remi. Maybe Estela was right. Are you gonna throw up now?"

I shake my head as the coughing slowly subsides. "No," I manage. "I'm fine. It just went down the wrong way."

"Who is Officer Thiago, *mija*?" Estela asks, placing a glass of water in my hand.

I barely catch my breath before Zara beats me to the answer.

"He was her boyfriend."

Estela's eyes widen. "Her boyfriend?"

Of course she would say that.

"No!" I say, swallowing a gulp of water and setting the glass down. "No, he wasn't. He wasn't even my friend."

Zara turns to Estela and says matter-of-factly, "Cousin Remi kisses her not-boyfriends on the lips."

"Zara!"

"You do. I saw you." She turns back to Estela. "I saw her."

This is getting worse by the second.

"Why haven't you told me? This is great news," Estela says, already co-signing Zara with an eager nod.

I press two fingers to my temple. "News? There's no news. It was just one kiss. It meant nothing, and I haven't even seen him in almost a week. There's absolutely nothing to tell."

Estela studies me with narrowed eyes, then turns to the little traitor. "*Chiquita*, go to my room and grab my purse. It's in the first drawer of the

nightstand by my bed. We have to run to the market to pick up something for dinner. Think you can do that?"

"Yes!" Zara hops off her stool and runs out of the kitchen.

I wait until she disappears down the hall, then turn back to Estela. "Before you ask, Thiago is no one."

Fuck, I broke my own rule and said his name.

"I've known you for most of your life, Remi, and something about that boy has you all frazzled, tripping over your feet as you try to explain him away. Is that who you were daydreaming about?"

First of all, frazzled? When has she ever used that word? Second, no one is tripping over anything. And how the hell did she catch me daydreaming about Texas sunsets?

"Estela, I promise that the day I find the love of my life—or even a friend with benefits—"

She swats me with a rag.

"—you'll be the first to know."

"It's all I ask," she says, cupping my cheeks. "You're too pretty *para quedarte vistiendo santos*.*"

I groan and roll my eyes. Some old traditions and ways of thinking really need to die, preferably before Estela decides it's her mission to marry me off.

She keeps going on about finding a good man and eventually having babies, a conversation that sends chills down my spine, but I'm only half-listening when several texts fire off from my back pocket.

Callahan: Remi

Callahan: 911

Callahan: City inspector's here. Says the ventilation system isn't up to code. Need you to come deal with him.

Me: That's bullshit. Everything is up to code. What's he talking about?

Callahan: Won't say. Just keeps asking for the owner.

Of course he is.

I stare at the screen, irritation erasing every thought of Thiago, marriage, and babies.

Me: Okay. I’m heading out now.

I slip my phone back into my pocket and push off the counter just as Zara dashes back into the kitchen.

“Come with us, Remi. Let’s go to the market with Estela.”

“I’m sorry, menace.” I shake my head and reach for my keys. “I’ve gotta run back to the range. Some work stuff came up that might take a while.”

Her shoulders sag. “Wait, what about your cookies?”

“Next time, Z.” I tip her chin up and press a kiss on her forehead. “Do me a favor, though. Keep an eye on Estela.”

I look over at Estela and shoot her a quick wink. “She gets distracted sometimes and wanders off, so make sure you hold her hand tight and don’t leave her side. Just in case.”

Zara perks up at her new responsibility. “Got it!”

“Later, baby,” I say as I make my way out of the kitchen.

“What? No goodbye for me?” Estela calls out after me, laughing. “Is it because I told you not to stay single forever?”

I wave her off without looking back. “Keep it up, and I’ll make it a personal goal.”

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* A Spanish expression meaning “to end up unmarried.”

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Fourteen

Thiago



I don't want to see you again. I don't want whatever you think this is or could have been. It can't be. And it won't ever.

I'm halfway through clearing the second room when I hesitate. Her words replay in my head, followed closely by the commander's warning in the parking lot. I haven't shaken either of them off, and now they're fucking with my focus.

"Again," Grey snaps from behind me.

I reset and force my attention back where it belongs, sweeping the room, checking every corner, and clearing every angle. Everything has to be clean because hesitation in the field gets people killed.

The irony isn't lost on me.

I spend my days protecting lives, and another part of my life takes them. I've always been able to reconcile the two because Helios doesn't send me after innocent people. The names they hand me belong to men and women who leave bodies behind, all without losing a second of sleep.

At least, that's what I've always believed.

Then Remi happened.

Helios wants me to see the Cain name and everything attached to it. The violence and bloodshed.

But I’ve also seen Remi with Zara.

I’ve watched the same woman Helios considers dangerous drop to her knees for a little girl, tease her, hold her, and look at her with nothing but love.

Maybe those things can exist in the same person. They exist in me.

“Braga, focus,” Ryan calls from the doorway.

“I am,” I shoot back, already moving into the next room.

This time, I push everything else aside and focus on the drill. I check the corners, clear the angles, and move faster, but the distraction is still there, waiting for the second I give it room.

“Clear,” I call out as I step back.

“About time,” Grey mutters.

I ignore him, grab my helmet, and toss it onto the bench as we cycle out of the drill. Sweat clings to my skin and soaks through my shirt as I rake a hand through my hair and head for the lockers.

Hurried footsteps follow me into the locker room.

“Hey, T, you good?” Ryan asks.

“Yeah.”

He snorts. “Bullshit.”

I don’t respond as I pop open my locker and reach for my towel.

“You’ve been off all morning.” He continues. “You missed a shot on the first run. That never happens.”

“It happened,” I say flatly, wiping the sweat from my neck.

Ryan leans against the locker beside mine, studying me as if he’s deciding how far he wants to push.

“Gym girl?”

My hand pauses over the towel. “What?”

His expression tells me all I need to know.

Fucking Grey.

“Don’t listen to him. He’s just being a dick.”

Ryan’s a decent guy. We’ve gotten close since I joined the unit, gone out for drinks, and done all the usual bro shit, but I’m hoping he can read the room well enough to know that Remi isn’t a subject I want to discuss.

“He didn’t mean anything by it,” Ryan says with a shrug. “But the way he described her, she sounds a lot like the woman from the range. Is she?”

I shut my locker harder than necessary.

Ryan’s eyebrows shoot up. “Oh shit, she is.” A grin spreads across his face. “Okay, now I get why you’ve been distracted. You two had something going on that night, didn’t you?”

“Drop it.”

“I’m just saying, you practically disappeared with her, and now Grey says you nearly bit his head off for trying to talk to her. Doesn’t take a detective.”

“Ryan.”

He raises his hands. “Yeah, all right. I’m done.”

The look on Ryan’s face tells me he’s not finished thinking about it. I’m about to shut the subject down for good when a voice cuts through the locker room from the speaker.

“All units, listen up. We’ve got a robbery in progress at a downtown bank. Suspects are armed with possible hostages inside.”

Everything changes.

Whatever was happening in my head disappears as the room erupts into motion. We move as a unit, grabbing our gear and preparing to roll out as years of training take over.

By the time we arrive, the scene is already in chaos. Patrol cars crowd the street, their lights flashing as officers hold civilians back behind barricades. People spill onto the sidewalk, some crying while others stand frozen, staring at the bank as if waiting for someone they love to walk through the doors.

I step out of the vehicle and take in the scene, filtering through the sirens and shouting as I search for what matters.

“Braga,” our team lead calls, moving toward the perimeter. “Three armed suspects. They came in hot and opened fire. We’ve got multiple hostages still inside, possibly children.”

“How many?” I ask, falling into step with him.

“Unknown. Bank employees and civilians. Last report has them being held near the main floor.”

I curse under my breath as I scan the building, checking every window and reflection for signs of movement.

“Any contact?” Ryan asks from behind me.

“Minimal. They aren’t interested in negotiating yet. They’ve made only one thing clear. They’re willing to start killing hostages.”

My heartbeat pounds hard and fast as I look at the bank. This is the part training can't make ordinary, knowing there are people inside waiting for us to get through those doors before gunmen decide they've run out of time.

I adjust my vest and check my weapon.

"All right." The lead continues, turning to face us. "We go in, take control, and get those people out. Clean and fast. No mistakes."

My attention shifts to the bank's entrance. The glass doors are shattered, and beyond them, the interior is almost pitch-dark.

"Lights are out," Ryan says.

"They want the advantage," I reply, adjusting my grip. "They know the building. We don't."

Our lead nods. "Then we take it away. Night vision on. Stay tight."

I lower my visor, and the darkness gives way as the interior comes into view.

"Stack up."

We move into position behind him, weapons raised, each of us covering our assigned sector.

"On me."

We breach the shattered entrance, glass crunching beneath our boots as we funnel inside. The sirens and shouting outside fade behind us, replaced by my team's controlled breathing and the muted sounds from my comms.

We find the first casualty before we make it far. A security officer lies face down near the entrance, blood pooled beneath his head. I drop to the floor beside him and check for a pulse.

"Nothing," I say, pushing myself back to my feet. "Security is down."

"Copy. Keep moving."

The lobby opens in front of us. Desks are overturned, papers cover the floor, and blood streaks a white column before trailing across the tile.

Whatever threat they made outside wasn't empty.

"Clear left," I say, sweeping my sector.

"Right clear," Ryan answers.

We advance through the lobby, checking every angle and blind spot as we move. My pulse remains steady, my body falling into the rhythm drilled into me over years of doing this.

Movement draws my attention to the left corridor.

"Contact," I warn.

A shot rings out, shattering what remains of the glass behind us.

“Cover,” our lead barks.

We break formation and take cover as rounds tear above our heads. I position myself behind a concrete pillar and lean out just far enough to search for the shooter.

“Left side, behind the column,” Ryan calls.

“I see him.”

I adjust my angle and wait. Another muzzle flash cuts through the darkness, giving me exactly what I need.

I fire.

The suspect drops, but a second later, he starts crawling toward the gun that fell beside him. I fire again before he can reach it, and his body goes still.

“Suspect down,” I confirm.

“Second contact, right,” Grey calls.

Gunfire erupts from deeper inside the bank, and rounds strike the wall close enough to send debris flying across my shoulder.

“Moving,” I call.

Ryan covers me as I shift positions, and we advance together, cutting off the suspect and pushing him back.

“Drop the weapon!” our lead commands.

The suspect responds with another burst of gunfire, and then I see what’s behind him. A handful of hostages are huddled on the floor. Some are bleeding, others are holding on to each other, but every one of them is still alive.

Adjusting my position, I search for a clean angle that won’t put any of them in the line of fire. We need to end this without another casualty.

I step into the opening he gives me and take the shot, sending him crashing to the floor.

“Clear,” I call, scanning for movement.

“Clear,” Ryan echoes.

“Hold positions,” our lead orders.

I control my breathing and keep my attention on the room. Two suspects are down, but one remains unaccounted for. That’s when I hear it.

A child is crying somewhere beyond the lobby, the broken sound carrying from a corridor opposite the group of hostages.

“There,” I say, motioning toward the dim hallway.

We move together, following the cries deeper into the bank. When we round the corner onto the main floor, the full extent of what happened here comes into view. Bodies are scattered across the floor. Some people lie completely still, while others are curled in on themselves, trembling, their hands covering their heads.

“Police.” Our lead’s voice is firm. “Stay down and keep your hands where we can see them.”

No one moves beyond a few frightened glances our way, and the crying continues.

There’s still one armed suspect in here, and judging by the bodies around us, he hasn’t hesitated to use his weapon. I sweep the room, searching every doorway and shadow before my gaze falls on a small figure crouched near the far side of the room.

Caramel-colored curls.

No fucking way.

I look more closely, and recognition hits me, knocking the air from my lungs.

“Zara?” I whisper.

“Braga?” Grey questions.

I don’t answer right away. I force myself to check our surroundings again before my attention snaps back to Zara

She’s crouched on the floor, blood coating her skin and clothes. One of her tiny hands is wrapped around someone else’s, their body mostly hidden behind a broken piece of furniture.

They aren’t moving, and a sickening thought tears through me.

What if that’s Remi?

I can’t see enough of the person to tell, and with Zara sitting beside them, covered in blood, my mind jumps to the worst possible conclusion. Everything in me demands that I cross the room to reach her, but an armed suspect is still somewhere between us.

“Zara!” I call. “Stay down!”

Her head jerks up at the sound of her name.

A shot rips through the room before I can say anything else, slamming into the pillar beside me. I pull back behind cover and raise my weapon.

“Contact,” Grey shouts.

“Back right,” Ryan calls.

I search the area until I catch the suspect shifting behind the counter, his weapon raised as he searches for another shot.

“Drop the weapon!” our lead commands.

He answers by firing again. The man is desperate and running out of options. He knows he isn’t leaving this bank unless it’s in cuffs or a body bag. With his back against the wall, every shot he fires grows more reckless than the last.

We need to end this before someone else gets hurt.

I track him, the angle, and every shift of his weapon, but Zara remains at the edge of my awareness, so I lean out just enough to return fire, forcing him back behind the counter.

“Still up,” I say, repositioning.

Grey covers me as I move, cutting off another angle while the suspect fires again, his shots growing wilder.

“Next time you move, you call it,” Grey grits out over the comms.

I ignore him. We can hash it out later.

The suspect shifts, giving me the opening I’ve been waiting for. I steady my aim and take the shot. He collapses behind the counter. The gunfire stops, but I keep my weapon raised as the seconds stretch out.

“Suspect down,” I confirm, scanning the room for another threat.

Surveillance showed three suspects entering the bank, and all three are accounted for, but none of us lowers our guard until we clear the rest of the room.

“Clear,” Ryan confirms.

My eyes immediately lock onto Zara.

I cross the room and drop to my knees in front of her, lowering my weapon as I search her for injuries. There’s so much blood on her that I can’t tell what’s hers and what isn’t.

Then I look at the woman beside her.

It isn’t Remi.

Relief hits me first, immediate and instinctive, then guilt follows when I get a better look at the woman.

She’s older, with blood soaking the front of her clothes from a wound at her neck. One look tells me there’s nothing I can do for her.

“Zara,” I say, keeping my voice steady as I lower my mask.

Her head lifts slowly, eyes wide and glassy as they search my face, as if she’s struggling to make sense of what she sees.

“Officer…Thiago?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” I ease closer to her. “You’re safe now, Zara.”

She shakes her head and looks back at the woman. “She won’t wake up. I-I tried. She told me to stay down, and I did. I did exactly what she said.”

“You did good,” I tell her. “You listened, and you did everything right.”

I reach for her, and Zara grabs my vest. Her little body shudders against mine as I lift her from the floor, her sobs muffled against my chest.

I don’t know who the woman is, but Zara refuses to let go of her hand until the distance between them forces their fingers apart. That tells me enough. Whoever she was, she loved her.

“Do we have an all clear?” I ask as I rise with Zara in my arms.

Confirmations come through my comms as the team secures the bank.

“All clear.”

“Front secure.”

“No additional contacts.”

Ryan falls into step beside me as I carry Zara toward the exit. A female officer approaches and reaches for her, but her arms lock around my neck. Protocol tells me to hand her over and let the officers outside get her to EMS. But I find myself holding her a little closer.

Maybe it’s because she recognized me, and I’m the only familiar face in a room full of armed strangers, or maybe seeing her like this made the whole thing personal in a way I wasn’t prepared for. Whatever the reason, I can’t bring myself to pass her off yet.

“Come with me, sweetie,” the officer says, resting a gentle hand on her back.

Zara recoils and buries her face deeper against me.

“No,” she whispers, clinging tighter. “No, don’t leave me, Officer Thiago. Please, don’t leave me.”

“I’ve got her,” I tell the woman. “I’ll take her to EMS.”

The officer nods and steps aside.

“You know her?” Ryan asks, clearing a path as we move.

Before I can answer, a familiar pair of blue eyes meets mine across the street.

Remi.

She has a phone pressed to her ear, but her hand slowly falls to her side as she stares at the little girl in my arms. Then she runs, ducks beneath the barricade before the officer beside her can stop her, and races across the

street toward us. Several cops move to intercept, blocking her path as one reaches for her arm.

“Let her through,” I call out.

“She can’t be in here,” one of them shouts back.

“She’s family.”

Ryan steps forward. “Let her through.”

The officers hesitate before stepping aside.

Zara lifts her head at the sound of the commotion, and the second she sees Remi, her fingers twist even harder into my vest.

“She’s not hurt,” I say quickly, reading the panic in Remi’s eyes. “The blood isn’t hers.”

Remi looks at Zara from head to toe, taking in every inch of her, then her gaze shifts past us toward the bank. She doesn’t ask. Her lips tremble, and I know she understands.

“Zara! Oh, God, you’re okay.”

Matteo reaches us and pulls her against his chest, his hands moving over her hair and face as he checks her himself.

“She still needs to be medically assessed,” I tell him. “I’ll walk you over.”

He looks at me, emotion breaking through the hard expression I remember from the range, and places a hand on my shoulder.

“Thank you.”

I nod, but my attention returns to Remi. She hasn’t moved or spoken a word.

Her eyes meet mine. A week ago, she looked at my badge and saw everything she hated. She told me that what I do for a living told her everything she needed to know about me. Now she’s looking at me like she doesn’t know what to see. And maybe I don’t either.

“Remi,” Zara says, her voice breaking.

Remi turns to her.

“I did what you said.” Zara reaches for her, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I didn’t let go, Remi. I held her tight…I didn’t let go.”

The last of Remi’s composure disappears.

She takes Zara from Matteo and pulls her into her arms as a sob escapes, burying her face against those caramel-colored curls as tears stream down her cheeks.

I stand there watching them, unable to look away.

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Fifteen

Remi



Hannibal coils lazily around my forearm, his weight familiar and grounding in a way nothing else has been over the last few days. His scales are cool against my skin, and his muscles shift slowly as he moves, completely unbothered by the silence that's taken over the apartment.

I sit on the floor of the room I built for them with my back against the wall and my legs stretched out in front of me. Normally, this much quiet would have me reaching for the nearest speaker or turning on every TV in the condo just to fill it. It's still crawling beneath my skin, but I'm too fucking drained to do anything about it.

I don't know which is worse, the silence or the endless what-ifs.

If I hadn't gone back to work, I would've been with them. Estela never would've needed to stop at the bank because I would've had cash. And even if we had gone inside, I could've protected them.

I would have protected them.

I've replayed every possible version of that day so many times that I don't know how to make my brain stop conjuring new ones. Every road leads me back to the same place, where I think about what I could've done differently and wish like hell I could go back and do it.

So I've been hiding in here instead.

My thumb glides along Hannibal's body, tracing the patterns of his scales as I count without meaning to. One, two, three, four, five. I follow the darker band near his spine, then the lighter one beside it, noticing how each shape repeats without ever being exactly the same.

I focus on the snake’s rhythm and the texture beneath my thumb, on the subtle movement of muscle beneath his scales, until there isn’t room in my head for anything else.

For a little while, it works.

Then a memory slips through anyway…A cabinet door left open, flour dusted across the counter, Estela laughing behind me.

My head lifts on instinct, as if I hear her for real.

But there’s only silence.

It rushes back in too loudly, and I blink hard, dragging a hand down my face as my thoughts scatter, jumping faster than I can catch them. We were just in the kitchen together, with Zara sneaking cookie dough and Estela giving me shit for encouraging her.

I stop the memory the second the sting starts behind my eyes, shoving it back where it came from before it can break through.

I’m done crying. I have to be.

Hannibal tightens slightly around my arm, and I refocus on him as another thought works its way in.

“He saved her,” I whisper. “I know that’s part of his job, but it complicates everything. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

A soft rustle comes from the enclosure to my right, and I glance over at Clarice. She’s already awake, her head lifted as her tongue flicks out in slow, deliberate licks of the air.

Despite everything, I smile.

I’ll never be able to handle her the way I handle Hannibal. A pit viper can’t be tamed, but even from behind the glass, there’s something about her that feels familiar, the way she watches everything around her, perfectly still until she has a reason not to be.

I return Hannibal to his enclosure and secure it, then move closer to Clarice.

A sudden clatter from somewhere inside my condo stops me, making every thought in my head disappear. I drop to one knee and unlock the hidden compartment beneath Hannibal’s enclosure, where I keep my Benelli M4.

Right day, wrong condo. If there was ever a perfect moment for live target practice, today, the day of Estela’s funeral, is definitely it.

I ease through the crack in the door, careful not to let it creak, then slip into the hallway. Light footsteps move closer, but I’m too numb to feel the

adrenaline that should be kicking in. I rack the shotgun and swing around the corner, my finger hovering near the trigger until the smallest gasp stops me.

And I'm staring straight at my favorite person.

"Valentina…"

The tears I haven't cried all day flood my eyes, stealing the rest of my voice. The shotgun slips from my hands as my knees give out, and I would've hit the floor if her arms hadn't wrapped around me.

"Baby," she whispers, her voice breaking. "I'm so sorry."

"Y-You came."

She presses a kiss to my temple and holds me tighter. "Of course I came. I would never let you do this alone. Not without me."

I cling to her and finally let myself fall apart, because if there's one person in this world I don't have to pretend with, it's her. We stay like that until my breathing evens out and the worst of the tears pass. When I finally pull back, my gaze drops to the shotgun lying on the floor beside us.

My stomach twists.

"Fuck, Val. I almost shot you."

"But you didn't," she says, already knowing exactly where my mind is headed. Like always. "And I probably should've announced myself before sneaking into the home of a woman with enough weapons to arm a small country."

She glances down at herself and smooths a hand over her dress.

"You were this close to ruining my outfit."

A breath of laughter slips between us, and I finally feel steady enough to pull away.

"I missed you so much, *pendeja*," I say with a sniffle, wiping beneath my eyes with my thumbs.

"Me too. So why the hell are we living so far apart?"

"It's Maksim's fault. Ditch him."

She laughs, soft and breathless. "Absolutely not."

"How is he?"

"Good. Hated that he couldn't come with me, but there was no way he could leave work right now."

I smile because as much as I miss having her close enough to show up whenever I need her, Valentina deserves every bit of happiness life has

given her. I'd never begrudge what she and Maksim have, even if I occasionally want to kidnap her and bring her home.

"Tell him I said hi."

"I will."

She throws her arms around me again, and I hold on tighter this time. Another wave of sobs breaks through, and I bury my face against her shoulder.

"Let it out, baby. It's okay," she murmurs against my hair. "I've got you. I'm not going anywhere."

By the time I pull back again, I'm exhausted from crying but lighter than I've felt since the bank.

"Okay. No more crying."

"No more crying," she agrees, gently wiping the last of the tears from my cheeks. "Do you need a few minutes before we leave?"

I shake my head and take a deep breath. "I'm better now."

"Good." Valentina takes my hand and pulls me toward the kitchen, where she grabs my helmet and holds it out to me. "Old times?"

A grin breaks across my face. "You already forget what it feels like to lose?"

She tips her head back and laughs. "I think you're the one who forgot who's second best."

The vibration runs through my body as I swing a leg over my bike, grip the handlebars, and lean forward. I don't want to think or feel anymore. I just want to ride with the person who means everything in the world to me.

I didn't realize how badly I needed her until she was in my arms, or that without her showing up today, I probably wouldn't have left my condo.

We pull out side by side and accelerate down the street. The wind cuts through me, dragging everything loose with it, and carrying it away as Valentina keeps pace beside me.

"How long are you staying?" I ask, already dreading the answer.

Her voice comes through the speaker softly. "Two weeks."

I sigh, the sound crackling through her helmet.

"I'm sorry. Maksim has work, and things are…"

"I get it, V. I do. I just miss you."

Her quiet breath fills my ear. "You can always come with me for a bit. For as long as you need."

I swerve around a blue sedan, and she follows. “You know I can’t do that. I have Sloane’s, and I want to be here for Zara, and…” My voice trails off as a certain SWAT officer slips into my head.

Thiago.

What the hell was I even going to say? That I need to stay because of him? I don’t even want to see him. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

“Remi? And what?”

“My mom,” I answer quickly. “Estela’s death has hit her pretty hard, and I can’t leave her.”

Valentina goes quiet for a few seconds, and I know that silence. She heard everything I didn’t say. There’s no way she knows about Thiago, but she’s the one person I’ve never been able to hide much from. She always knows when something’s off.

The problem is that I don’t even know what that something is yet. I’m grateful when she doesn’t press. Instead, she pulls up beside me at a red light and revs her engine.

I smile behind my visor. “You’ve been out of the game for a long time. Are you sure you want to get whipped your first day back?”

She laughs and revs again. “Please. I was winning races before you even learned how to shift.”

“Fuck, Val. Go easy on me. I can’t help that I was born four years too late.” I glance over at her. “But you might want to look both ways this time.”

The light flips green, and I floor it.

Valentina is still laughing, which costs her precious seconds.

“Remi, you bitch!”

I shoot through the intersection as her laughter fills my helmet. She catches up fast, her engine roaring beside me as she pulls even.

“Cheap shot!” she shouts through the comms.

“You hesitated,” I fire back, shifting and pushing harder.

The road opens ahead of us, and we fall into the rhythm we’ve known for years, reading the traffic and each other without needing to say a word. We take the next turn together, leaning low as the bikes move beneath us. She edges ahead for a few seconds, just enough to make her point, but I close the gap and pull even again as the pavement stretches out.

My thoughts are finally quiet for the first time in days. It almost feels like before, when we were just two girls chasing speed and the thrill of racing, without everything life would eventually throw our way. But when I catch a glimpse of the black dress beneath my jacket, the illusion shatters.

The cemetery comes into view ahead, and we both ease off the throttle. Valentina pulls up beside me, and neither of us says a word as we pass through the gates.

Reality has caught up with us.

I park and dismount my bike, but I can't bring myself to move any farther. Valentina comes to stand beside me, hooks her elbow through mine, and rests her head against my shoulder.

"We'll go whenever you're ready."

I stare toward the rows of headstones and draw a steady breath. "I'll never be ready."

As promised, Valentina hasn't left my side. She's held me, cried with me, and held me again, while Mamá has stayed wrapped around my other arm. Only when it's over and the cemetery slowly empties do I realize how hard I've been holding myself together. The quiet returns, and part of me wants to run, to climb on my bike and ride until I can't feel any of this anymore.

But I stay.

Because beneath all the sadness, there's also a strange sense of peace in standing here with her one last time. I stare at the fresh mound of earth. My sweet Estela.

From everything we know, the bank robbery was random. Estela and Zara weren't even supposed to be there. They were going to the market when Zara asked for a treat from a street vendor who only accepted cash. The ATM outside the bank wasn't working, so Estela took her inside.

Such a small fucking thing.

One broken ATM, and one innocent request from a little girl. A few minutes in either direction and maybe none of it would've happened.

But tragedy doesn't care about maybes.

A faint smile touches my lips despite the ache. When everything went wrong, Estela did what she had always done for the people she loved. She

protected Zara, and I'll spend the rest of my life grateful to have known her, loved her, and been loved by her.

The last thing she ever gave me was another act of love, a text warning me of what was happening.

"I'll meet you at home, *mi amor*."

Mamá presses a kiss into my hair, followed by Papá and Gio. I watch their car pull away until it disappears from view.

Aunt Leni steps up beside me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders and pulling me against her. Growing up, I used to think she was naturally more drawn to Valentina, and maybe in some ways, she was. Intuition and all that, for her future daughter-in-law.

But as I got older, I realized Aunt Leni always knew how to love us differently. Val needed one version of her, and I needed another. Somehow, she always seemed to know which one to give us.

Having a woman like her in my corner is something I'll never take for granted. Once one of the world's most ruthless assassins, she helped shape the world I grew up in. I admired her confidence and skill long before I understood the cost of becoming that woman.

"Let me know if you need anything," she says, leaning closer to my ear. "But I also need you to tell me if you know the man about twenty yards to your right." Her hand drifts toward the blade hidden at her waist.

"He's been standing there for the last fifteen minutes, just watching." Her gaze stays fixed beyond me. "And before I leave, I need to know you and Vali are good."

I follow her line of sight.

Even from this distance, where I can't make out his face, I know exactly who he is. There aren't many men built like Thiago Braga.

"Yeah, I know him." I place my hand gently over hers, easing it away from the blade. "We're good."

I should probably leave it at that, but my feet are already carrying me toward him.

"I'll be back."

He starts walking too.

I don't know what I'm going to say, but I know I need to say something. He took care of my girl and ensured she was safe, even if it makes everything so much more complicated.

Thiago reaches me first but stops a few feet away, as if there's a line between us that he knows better than to cross. Up close, there's no missing the tension in his shoulders or the way his jaw is set, like he's holding something back.

"Remi."

My name sounds different when he says it now, or maybe I'm the one hearing it differently. I'm not sure. He doesn't move any closer, reach for me, or tell me he's sorry for my loss. I'm glad he doesn't, because I have no idea what I'd do if he did.

I cross my arms over my chest, grounding myself while keeping the space between us. "I didn't know SWAT made house calls."

His gaze flicks past me for a moment before returning to mine. "We don't."

"Then why are you here?"

He's quiet for a second, yet he doesn't look away. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

The words sting, but I shake my head and force out a breath. "You've got a funny way of doing that."

"I wasn't going to come up to you or anything. I just needed to see for myself."

The silence stretches between us as I study him, really looking at him this time, and the image returns as clearly as if I were standing outside that bank again. Zara was covered in blood and wrapped around him like he was the only safe thing left in the world, while Thiago held on to her just as tightly.

"You got her out," I say finally. "Zara."

His expression changes, like he's back there with her too. "She did exactly what she was told. She stayed low."

"That sounds like her." I look down for a moment, gathering the words I came over here to say. "I owe you," I tell him, lifting my gaze back to his. "For bringing her back to me. She's special to us. That's our baby."

He shakes his head immediately. "You don't owe me anything."

"I do."

"No," he says, firmer this time. "You don't."

I should leave it there, thank him and walk away before this becomes anything more than it needs to be. But then I hear myself say, "You were there when I wasn't."

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I should’ve been with them.” The admission scrapes its way up my throat. “I got caught up at work, and I can’t stop thinking about what would’ve happened if I hadn’t left. Maybe they never would’ve gone to that bank. Maybe Estela would still be here.”

Thiago takes a step toward me before stopping himself. “You can’t put that on yourself.”

“You don’t get to decide that.”

“No, I don’t.” His voice softens, but there’s nothing uncertain about it. “That doesn’t make it any less true.”

I look past him toward the rows of headstones, trying to get myself back under control. He doesn’t understand. If I had been there, I would’ve emptied every bullet I had into those men before they touched Zara or Estela, torn them apart with my bare hands if that was what it took.

But I wasn’t there. And Thiago was.

I swallow against the burn in my throat and look back at him.

Maybe coming over here was a mistake. I thought I could thank him and walk away, but standing in front of him only makes it harder to shove him back into the neat little box I put him in the moment I saw that badge.

He lied to me, and he’s still a cop. Neither has changed. But he also carried Zara out of danger. He stayed with her when she was terrified and brought her back to me.

I don’t know what to do with both versions of him yet.

“Thank you,” I say, my voice softer now because it’s the only thing I trust myself to give him. “Just know…this doesn’t make us friends.”

He lets out a tut under his breath. “I had a feeling.”

“Take care of yourself, Officer Braga.”

I turn and walk away without waiting for a response. Only this time, I make myself keep going.

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Sixteen

Thiago



Stalking? No. Strategically using circumstances to my advantage? Absolutely.

When a water main broke in the C wing of the precinct, flooding the area beside the range, I suggested we book Sloane's instead of canceling tonight's firearms training. It's been a week since I last saw Remi, and I gave her time to grieve before finding a reason to put myself in her path again.

Despite our brief civility at the cemetery, she told me we weren't friends, and I believed her. But that doesn't mean I'm giving up. Little by little, I'm chipping away at her walls, and I can see the first cracks forming. Eventually, I'll gain her trust and take what I need.

Even thinking about it makes my stomach turn.

My Aunt Priscilla always said a guilty conscience feels like a punch to the gut, a sick feeling that tells you when you're heading down the wrong path. Lately, I've started to understand exactly what she meant. But I have to believe I'm doing the right thing, that whatever guilt comes with this is worth it for my father and for everyone else who's died at the hands of The Six and organizations like it.

What I won't do is lie to myself by pretending Remi is just another assignment, that she's simply the enemy or someone meant to be neutralized. I know better now.

She's dangerous in more ways than one, including every way a woman can be lethal to a man.

“Nice choice of venue,” Ryan says, clapping me on the shoulder and shaking his head with amusement as we head toward Sloane’s entrance.

There are eight of us tonight, including Grey.

We aren’t in tactical gear, but there’s no mistaking what we are. Every head turns in our direction the second we step inside. It’s not every day a group of armed men walks into a gun range looking like they’re ready for a raid instead of target practice.

Remi seems to be the only one oblivious to our arrival, her back to us as she talks with her cousin, whose face I recognize immediately from the files.

Valentina Belova, another Cain tied directly to The Six.

The woman’s eyes flick toward us before returning to Remi, then she subtly motions in our direction.

Remi turns.

Our eyes meet across the lobby, and for a few seconds, I forget about the seven men standing around me.

She’s as beautiful as I remember, but something about her has changed. A thick platinum streak cuts through one side of her dark hair, stark against the black waves spilling over her shoulder. It reminds me of some of the older pictures I’d seen of her, before the color disappeared completely. My gaze follows the streak down to those red-painted lips. Fuck, I love that color on her. Maybe a little too much, considering how badly I want to smear it across both our mouths again.

The last time I saw her, she was standing in a cemetery, dressed in black, tears in her eyes. The change feels significant, as if there’s a version of Remi from before that day and another standing in front of me now.

Whatever passes between us disappears when her pretty face twists into a scowl and she mouths, *You’ve got to be fucking kidding me*. Both palms hit the plexiglass counter as she pushes to her feet and stalks toward me.

“Your girl looks happy to see us,” Grey mutters, trying to sound annoyed, but I catch the grin on his face as he watches her approach.

Before I can respond, Remi grabs my wrist and pulls me away from the others, past the lobby and toward a nearby display.

“I thought I told you never to come back here,” she snaps. “And not only did you come back, but you brought your asshole friend with you.”

“One, I already told you, he’s not my friend. We’re teammates.” I glance back toward the group. “And two, I was never served a trespass

order.”

“That can be arranged.” She steps into me, and I hold my ground. “Leave.”

“Come on, Remi. I thought we were past this.”

“One conversation out of pure obligation while I was out of my mind, and you think I’m just going to forget that you lied to me?” she asks, tilting her head.

“No, but I was hoping you’d hate me a little less.”

“Keep hoping.”

My attention drops to her lips, and all I can think about is how fucking good she tasted. Then her eyes drop to my mouth, and there it is. I smile, wondering if she’s remembering the exact same thing I am. Leaning closer, I brace an arm against the wall beside her without touching her, and her next breath deepens.

“We had an emergency at the precinct. A busted pipe flooded the area near our range, so we needed somewhere else to train tonight. Your place happened to be available.”

Remi folds her arms and makes no effort to move away. “You and your convenient bullshit.”

“What can I say? Sometimes things work out in my favor.”

Her eyes narrow. “You had a hand in this, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t break the pipe.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

I give her a careless shrug, which earns me a hard shove to the chest. Stumbling back a step, I laugh under my breath as déjà vu hits me, only this time without the reward that followed.

“Listen, Officer Braga, if you or your team of idiots annoy or piss me off even once, you’re out. And I’ll make good on that trespassing order,” she says as she turns away. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got someone named Callahan to stab.”

A laugh bursts out of me because I have no doubt she means it. Then my gaze drops to her ass as she walks away, and apparently, self-preservation only gets me so far.

“Hey, Remi.”

She stops but doesn’t turn around.

“I like your hair. It looks really good.”

She stays there for another second, long enough that I wonder whether she'll respond, but then she keeps walking and rejoins Valentina at the counter.

"You good?" Ryan asks as we head toward our reserved room. "She looks pissed."

"No, that's just her face," Grey says. "I swear that chick is such a waste. Someone needs to teach her how to better use that pretty mouth."

Any amusement I had vanishes.

"Shut the fuck up." I plant a hand against his chest, stopping him in his tracks.

The grin drops from his face, and Ryan's eyebrows lift beside me as his gaze shifts between us.

Grey scoffs and knocks my hand away. "Relax, man. I thought you said you didn't care about that broad."

"Whether I care about her has nothing to do with it. Have some goddamn respect. She owns this place."

His stare hardens.

It's no secret that Grey and I butt heads more often than not. From the moment I arrived, he's treated me as a threat, though I've never figured out exactly why. Maybe it's how quickly I earned the commander's trust, or what he sees as preferential treatment on her part.

Whatever the reason, this has nothing to do with our usual bullshit. The tension between us draws the attention of the guys nearby, and even the ones loading magazines stop to glance our way. Grey glares at me for another second, then looks around at the rest of the team before snatching his bag off the floor.

"Fuck this."

"Oh, come on." Ryan steps in, playing mediator, like always, even when he knows Evan Grey is a dick.

What Ryan doesn't realize is that I'm a bigger one.

Standing here now, watching Grey walk away, I know my reaction had very little to do with respect or with the fact that Remi owns this range. I didn't like hearing him talk about her that way. I didn't like him looking at her at the gym, and I sure as hell don't like the thought of him anywhere near her now.

That feels a little too personal for a woman I'm supposed to be using to complete an assignment. And figuring out what the fuck that means is a

problem for another day.

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Seventeen

Remi



My finger taps against Papá's ring as I watch Thiago and his teammates move through their drills on the monitor.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Valentina's hand covers mine, stopping the movement.

"Are you finally going to tell me who he is?"

Before I can answer, she reaches for the controls and switches the camera angle.

"Hey." I side-eye her like she just interrupted my favorite show, then immediately switch it back. "Thiago Braga."

"No shit. I can read his ID just fine." She narrows her eyes at me. "Who is he to you? He's the guy from the cemetery. I know that much. I didn't ask that day because, well…that day sucked. Then I forgot." She pauses, studying me. "And do I really have to drag information out of you? I haven't been gone that long. You hate me or something?"

That gets my attention enough to pull my eyes away from the screen.

I sink back into the chair with a sigh, because she's right. Distance and time will never dull what we have, but things have changed. If she still lived here, Val would've known every detail by now, from the night Thiago and I met to why he showed up at the cemetery and to every scathing word we've exchanged in between.

"I met him one night when my car left me stranded on the side of the road. He seemed cool, and..." I hesitate, already regretting what I'm about to admit. "We might've kissed once."

Her eyes widen. “You kissed him?”

“Can you not look so excited about it?” I point to the monitor. “He lied to me, Val. He made it seem like he was someone else, and then I found out he’s a cop.”

She keeps staring at me like she’s waiting for the part that explains why I’m sitting here watching him. Apparently, the cop thing isn’t enough for her.

“Look, no offense. You know Aunt Eva is like another mother to me, but that’s not my story. I’d never risk everything, everyone, for a man.”

Val nods slowly, her lips pressing together. “Okay, fair enough. So why are you sitting here watching him?”

“Because shit got complicated.” I glance back at the monitor. “He’s the one who saved Zara.”

Understanding replaces the skepticism on her face. “Okay, yeah. That complicates things.”

“Exactly.” I reach into the drawer and pull out a lollipop. “And I can’t prove it, but I feel like he’s low-key stalking me.”

Valentina turns back to the monitor and zooms in on Thiago as he absolutely shreds through a rifle course.

“Stalking, as in, he’s interested, or the creepy kind?”

“When is stalking not the creepy kind?” I scoff. “This isn’t some smutty book, Val. If a man keeps conveniently showing up everywhere you are, that shit isn’t cute.”

She snorts. “Okay, first of all, relax. He booked a training session at your range. He didn’t build a shrine for your bathwater.”

“First, the side of the road, then Sloane’s, the gym, the cemetery, and now he magically ends up here again with his entire team?” I point the lollipop at the screen. “That’s a lot of coincidences.”

“You own a gun range, Remi. And you just said he’s a cop.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“Yours.” She laughs. “I’m just saying this one actually makes sense.”

I narrow my eyes at the monitor, watching Thiago finish the course before stepping aside.

“And why is he standing like that?”

Valentina blinks. “Standing...how?”

I jab the lollipop toward the screen again. “Like that! Valentina, you have eyes. Look at him.”

He knows exactly what he's doing. Those big fucking arms are folded across his chest, straining his shirt tight enough to make me irrational, and I swear he's flexing because he knows I'm watching.

Popping the candy into my mouth, I force myself to look away.

"Remi," Val says gently, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm not taking his side. If your gut says there's something off about him, listen to it. Just make sure you're keeping him out because you don't trust him, not because you're scared of what might happen if you let yourself want him."

I turn and stare at her.

She throws an arm around my shoulders. "You're fucking stunning. Of course the man is going to find every excuse he can to be around you."

"I thought you said you were on my side."

"I am." A grin tugs at her mouth. "Which is why I'm reminding you of something you once told me."

I chuckle softly. "I've said a lot of things to you, and you probably shouldn't have listened to half of them."

Val dips her head with a laugh. "Maybe, but this one was actually decent advice." Her smile softens as she nudges my shoulder. "You've been through some shit, Rem, and you deserve to be happy. You also don't have to marry the guy or trust him with your deepest, darkest secrets to have a little fun."

I already know I'm not going to like where this is going.

"Take him for a test drive."

I snort. "Ah, there's that sage advice."

"Exactly. And you know there isn't another man alive I'd ever look at besides Maksim." Her eyes drift back to the screen. "But I'm not blind. Thiago is hot. And huge."

I slowly slide the lollipop across my bottom lip as my gaze finds him again.

She's not wrong.

The temptation alone is enough to make my pulse race because I could have him if I wanted to. I know that. One little opening, and I have no doubt Thiago would take it.

But I shouldn't want him. And I'm not going to.

I close my eyes and shake my head, hoping to physically knock the thoughts loose, but of course, that does absolutely nothing.

My phone suddenly buzzes against the glass, offering a much-needed distraction. Between whatever the hell is going on with Thiago and everything I'm still trying to process after Estela's death, my head has been a mess.

Lachlan: Hey, Rem. Got a client asking for you tonight. Can you swing by?

Me: What do they want?

Lachlan: Couple hours max. Clean linework.

I started freelancing at Venom & Velvet Ink two years ago, mostly taking on occasional clients whenever Lachlan needed another set of hands. I never expected much to come of it, but word spread fast. Before long, people were requesting me by name, and I was spending most weekends at the shop with a tattoo machine in my hand, turning skin into art.

Me: I can be there in one hour.

Lachlan: See you then.

I blow a lock of hair out of my face, then reach over to adjust the camera angle.

Valentina side-eyes me, amusement written all over her face, then snatches the lollipop straight from my hand and pops it into her mouth as she stands up.

"You're gross."

"I love you too." She winks and pushes to her feet. "I need to stretch my legs and call Maxy. I'll be back."

I wave her off, pretending to be annoyed, though deep down, I couldn't be happier she's here. Having her beside me feels like old times, and I've missed her more than I realized, which makes knowing I only have one more week with my Val feel nowhere near long enough.

The next hour drags on painfully slowly, especially now that I'm alone with my thoughts and avoiding room camera B like the plague.

Aunt Leni picked up Valentina thirty minutes ago, and I would've gone with them if I hadn't already committed to Venom. Now I'm starting to regret that decision.

Most of the patrons have cleared out, along with Thiago and the rest of his team. At least, I assume he's gone. He didn't say goodbye, stop by the counter, or even look for me as he left. I pretend not to notice the stupid little sting of disappointment that comes with that realization.

"Stop it, Remi. It's for the best, and you know that."

Once the last straggler makes his way out the door, I head upstairs to grab my bag from my office, then come back down to close up.

"Remi."

I nearly jump out of my fucking skin, my hand instantly going to the blade at my waist as I spin toward the sound. Thiago stands near the entrance to the reserved rooms, bag slung over one shoulder. His eyes drop to my hand, and I wonder if he knows exactly how close he came to being stabbed.

"What is actually wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." He raises his hands in surrender, though I don't miss the hint of amusement on his face.

Fucking asshole.

"Scare me? You almost got eviscerated." I glance around the empty range, then look back at him. "What the fuck are you still doing here? The lights off and everyone else leaving didn't ring any damn bells?"

"I was packing up."

"For thirty minutes?"

His mouth twitches.

My eyes narrow. "Thiago."

"I might've taken my time."

The way he just stands there, looking entirely too good for my liking and not saying a word, is seriously starting to piss me off.

"I just needed to talk to you," he says at last, stepping close enough that I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze.

I swallow harder than I'd like to, and against my better judgment, I stay exactly where I am.

"What now?"

"Nothing." His voice drops as he leans in slightly. "I just like talking to you."

I'll be damned. My traitorous stomach flutters.

This is the moment I should shut this down and send him straight to hell, because I know better than to entertain whatever this is becoming. But

Val's voice chooses this moment to creep into my head.

Take him for a test drive.

Fuck it.

"I haven't exactly been friendly." I step into him until my chest brushes his. "You really are a masochist, Officer Braga. Is this some kind of kink of yours?"

"Kink?" he repeats, a low growl rumbling in his chest, sending heat straight through me.

Well, shit.

"Maybe." His gaze drops to my mouth. "So I'll take that as my sign to stick around because I have a feeling you can be meaner."

I let out a hollow laugh. "You haven't seen anything yet." Turning my back on him, I head for the exit. "Get out."

"Where are you going?" he asks, following me.

We step into the parking lot, and he waits while I lock up and arm the security system.

"None of your business," I toss over my shoulder as I walk toward my bike.

"Let me take you out for drinks," he says. "Or a late dinner if you're hungry. Nothing fancy. We can keep it quick."

I won't deny I'm getting a little enjoyment from making him work for it. Stopping beside my bike, I slowly turn to face him.

"Oh, so you think I'm the kind of woman who deserves a quick, cheap meal?"

"Fuck. No." He runs a hand down his face. "That's not what I meant."

The smile I've been fighting finally breaks through. "Relax. I'm fucking with you."

His eyes narrow. "You enjoy this way too much."

"Maybe I do." I reach for my helmet. "But I'm not going home. I have a client waiting for me."

"A client?" His focus intensifies. "What sort of client?"

I should be annoyed because if his reaction means what I think it does, then what right does he have to judge me? And why the hell was that his first thought?

Rolling my eyes, I grab my helmet, but he steps in front of me before I can put it on.

There’s a fire behind those pretty brown eyes that wasn’t there a second ago, and suddenly I see another side of him. He’s not just the chivalrous, apologetic guy he keeps showing me. There’s something darker beneath, something possessive that has no business making anticipation burn beneath my skin.

Especially when my mind immediately goes to his touch and to the memory of his lips on mine.

Remi, no.

“I’m trying here,” he says, quieter now.

Something about that admission takes some of the fight out of me.

“I take clients at Venom & Velvet Ink. I got called in tonight.”

“Tattoos?”

“Yeah.”

The tension in his face disappears so quickly I almost laugh.

“Cool.”

I shake my head, unable to suppress another smile. “See you around, then.”

As I try to step around him, he shifts with me, putting himself right back in my path.

“Can I come with you?”

“What?” I stare at him. “Absolutely not. I told you, we’re not friends.”

“You also said you owed me.”

Bastard.

Is he really trying to cash in on that now, even after telling me I didn’t owe him a damn thing? And why am I even standing here entertaining this in the first place? He’s a cop, and he lied to me.

“I’m pretty sure you told me I don’t,” I remind him.

“I lied.”

Of course he fucking did.

The word “fine” starts to slip from my lips, and I don’t stop it because I don’t want to. Apparently, that makes me a fucking masochist, too.

“Fine, Officer Braga, but only if you can keep up.”

A grin splits his face as he steps back, giving me room to put on my helmet and swing a leg over my bike. I fire up the engine, and Thiago takes off across the parking lot toward his truck.

By the time I pull onto the street, every instinct I have is telling me that letting Thiago Braga follow me anywhere is a terrible fucking idea. I know

he’s hiding something. I know I shouldn’t trust him, and I definitely shouldn’t give him another chance to get any closer than he already is.

But knowing better has never kept me from making a bad decision.

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Eighteen

Thiago



The second her bike tears onto the street, I understand two things. Remi Cain rides like she was born on two wheels, and I'm completely fucked.

City lights reflect across the glossy black of her helmet as she leans into the first turn. I follow behind her, watching the effortless way she moves with the machine beneath her.

Jesus.

There's something about seeing her like this that makes it damn near impossible to keep my thoughts straight. Her body moves with the bike as she takes another turn, her dark hair whipping behind her whenever she accelerates hard enough to send the loose strands flying. She rides the way she does everything else, with a fearlessness and confidence that demand attention without asking for it.

I'm not even sure she realizes the effect she has.

I shouldn't be looking at her like this, and I definitely shouldn't be thinking about dragging her into my lap to see if she tastes as good as I remember. Knowing better isn't doing a damn thing to stop me.

I didn't have much of a plan for tonight. All I knew was that I wanted another chance to see her, but the problem is that I can't even pretend Elena is the only reason anymore.

I told her that Remi needed time to grieve and that pushing too hard while she was dealing with Estela's death and still furious with me would get us nowhere. Elena reluctantly gave me a few days, and I used every one of them.

At first, I told myself I was being strategic, but when Remi agreed to let me join her tonight, I wasn't thinking about Helios or what I might learn by staying close to her.

I was just fucking happy she said yes.

That might be the most dangerous development yet.

My attention returns to Remi as she weaves through traffic, one hand briefly lifting to flip off a car that cuts too close. A laugh slips out before I can stop it.

I'm looking forward to tonight, not because Elena expects me to get closer or because every minute with Remi gives me another chance to learn something useful. I realize I want to spend time with her because I enjoy being around her. Every bit of herself she gives me, whether intentional or not, hooks a little deeper beneath my skin, and instead of thinking about how I can use it, I find myself wanting more.

I ease back into my seat, one hand loose on the wheel, and catch myself smiling like a damn idiot as I follow her through another turn. Then my phone lights up against the center console.

ELENA.

The smile disappears. I tighten my jaw and answer through the truck speakers.

"What?"

"You sound irritated," Elena says, her voice smooth.

"I'm driving."

"Haven't heard from you in a few days, Operative."

My eyes return to Remi's bike ahead of me, her taillight glowing red against the dark.

"I wasn't aware there was a daily check-in clause."

Her deep inhale crackles through the speakers, and a flicker of satisfaction moves through me at the sound of her annoyance.

"You report to me whenever I ask, morning, noon, or night. And might I remind you that you don't call the shots? One phone call is all I need to have you shipped right back to where you came from...or worse."

She lets the silence hang after that, giving the threat time to sink in. I bite back everything I want to say and give her what she wants instead.

"I'm following her now," I mutter through gritted teeth.

"Remember, Operative. She's the reason you are who you are. The reason your father and thousands more were murdered in cold blood. Don't

forget it.”

The line goes dead.

I stare at the disconnected call for a long moment before slamming my palm against the steering wheel.

The reason.

That’s what Elena called her, as if Remi had personally pulled the trigger. As if everybody left behind by The Six could somehow be laid at the feet of a woman who was born into this world long before she had any say in it.

I know exactly what Elena is doing. She wants me angry enough to stop asking questions, focused enough to keep digging, and detached enough to use whatever Remi gives me without caring what it costs her.

And part of what she's saying is true.

The Six has blood on its hands. My father is dead because of them, and I still don't know how deeply Remi is involved or what she might be protecting. But blaming her for every person who died before she was old enough to understand any of it is bullshit.

My eyes find her again as she weaves through traffic ahead of me.

The woman I’m getting to know bears little resemblance to the one Elena keeps describing. Every time I’m around Remi, another piece of the picture I was given no longer fits.

And I’m starting to wonder why.

I follow her into the back lot of the tattoo shop. By the time I climb out of my truck, she’s already pulling off her helmet, shaking loose her dark waves, and tucking it beneath her arm.

Our eyes meet, and I catch the subtle bite of her lower lip before she turns away. I’m still pissed off, slamming the truck door harder than necessary.

Remi looks back at me. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.” She gestures toward my truck. “You look like you want to punch something. You don’t have to be here if you don’t want to. You invited yourself, remember?”

She turns and heads toward the building.

“Remi.”

She keeps walking.

“It’s not you.” I catch up with her. “I got a phone call that put me in a shitty mood, and I’m sorry.”

She glances at me but doesn’t ask who called, and I’m grateful because that's one question I can't answer.

Remi tugs open a dark-green door, and a man in his mid-thirties with a shaved head looks up from behind the counter. His face breaks into a smile when he sees her, but his eyes narrow the moment they land on me.

“Hey, Lach,” she says, and I notice the slight change in her voice. It’s almost sweet.

“Who’s your friend?” he asks, like I’m not standing right in front of him.

“He’s with me.”

She doesn’t call me her friend or even bother to give him my name. I’m just someone she brought along, and for some reason, I hate how much that distinction bothers me.

“Oh, okay.” He reaches under the counter and tosses her a set of keys. “Lock up when you’re done. Your client said he’ll be here in about ten.”

“Got it.”

“He must trust you,” I say as we head to one of the back rooms.

“Why wouldn’t he?” she replies casually. “I’ve known Lachlan for two years now. He’s cool.”

I pick up one of the portfolios on the workstation and start flipping through it. The artwork stops me after only a few pages, and I wonder if it belongs to Remi. Her linework is incredibly clean, and each design is detailed enough that I find myself slowing down to study them.

“This is your work?”

“My mom’s an artist,” she says, and the answer surprises me. “I always wanted to be like her, so I practiced and eventually fell in love with making pretty things.”

Her fingers trail across the edge of the portfolio. “Only my canvas happens to be skin.”

“You’re really good,” I tell her, flipping another page. “Amazing, actually.”

“I know,” she says so casually that it catches me off guard, and I laugh.

“Glad we don't have to worry about your confidence.”

She grins. “Never a problem.”

“Maybe someday I’ll need a new piece.”

She doesn’t say yes, but she doesn’t say no either.

I take the chance and lightly brush the back of my hand against the sleeve of her jacket. “You do any of these yourself?”

“No. Lachlan’s done most of them. One was done by my brother.”

I know exactly who she means. Giovanni Cain is two and a half years younger than Remi, and in the photos, they look similar enough that I recognized the connection immediately.

“Your brother’s an artist too?”

“Yeah, but he prefers sketching.”

She shrugs out of her jacket as she says it, revealing the Glock holstered at her waist.

“How’s Zara doing?”

I regret asking the second her expression changes. She looks away and starts readying her station instead.

“Better. She’s spending some time out of town with her parents.”

Neither of Zara’s parents appeared in the files, and instinct has me filing that away for later. The thought leaves a sour taste in my mouth. I came here tonight because I wanted to be with Remi, yet I’m still cataloging everything she tells me as if it might become useful.

“Hey,” I say.

She looks over at me, and I hesitate before resting my hand lightly on hers.

“How are you holding up?”

Her fingers still beneath mine as she slowly lifts her eyes. “I’m okay.”

I don’t believe her, but I don’t push.

For a few seconds, neither of us moves. The tension between us feels different now, stripped of its usual push-and-pull, and I find myself wondering what would happen if we stopped fighting it.

The soft chime of the front door buzzer cuts through the moment.

“Client’s here,” she murmurs.

I pull my hand away, and she heads for the lobby while I stay behind near the station.

“You must be Jaime,” I hear her say.

“Yeah. You Remi?”

Before I hear her answer, gunfire erupts inside the shop.

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Nineteen

Thiago



As an officer, I'm trained to run toward danger and protect lives even at the expense of my own. I could tell myself that training is what sends me charging toward Remi without hesitation, but the fear ripping through my chest has nothing to do with the badge.

My feet can't carry me fast enough as I sprint toward the lobby, desperate to see her and confirm she's unharmed. I have no idea who fired or whether this is a random attack, but the possibility that she was the target sends my adrenaline spiking.

Remi is already crouched there with her gun in hand, and the second I see she's okay, relief floods through me.

"Braga, are you armed?"

"Yeah. What the fuck is happening?"

"Just me and this son of a bitch exchanging a little friendly hello." She yanks a spare magazine from her boot, slams it into her Glock, then rises just enough to fire several rounds at the shooter.

I pat my pockets, searching for my phone to call for backup, only to realize I left it in the truck after my conversation with Elena.

"Shit."

I shove my keys into Remi's hand. "Go out the back door, get in my truck, and use the radio to call for help."

She looks at me like I've grown another head.

"Fuck that plan. I'm not leaving."

For one stupid moment, I wait for her to add “without you,” and the fact that I want to hear it tells me exactly how fucked I am.

I draw my Sig and return fire. Remi rises beside me, and together we keep the shooter pinned until he exposes himself long enough for us to take the opening. He drops near the front door.

“He asked my name,” she says, breathing hard. “Then he pulled his weapon.”

“Do you know him?” I ask as I reload.

Shaking her head, she starts toward him, but I step in front of her, keeping my gun trained on the body.

“Stay down!” I bark. “Keep your hands where I can see them.”

He doesn’t move, and the only sounds he makes are wet, choking gurgles.

“Remi, do you have your phone? I need to call this in.”

She doesn’t answer as she edges around me, moving closer to the bleeding man sprawled near the door.

“What are you doing?”

“I need to see something.”

“Don’t get close to him.”

She kneels anyway, ignoring me as if I’m no longer in the room.

“Remi,” I grit out.

Before she can touch him, tires screech on the pavement outside. My attention snaps to the front windows as two blacked-out cars barrel into the lot, and armed men pour out.

Fuck.

This wasn’t random.

“Incoming!”

Remi’s head snaps up, but there’s no time to explain. I sprint toward her, hook an arm around her waist, and haul her up as I run toward the back of the shop.

“Thiago!” she shouts. “Put me down. What is it? What did you see?”

I kick open the back door and set her on her feet. “More men. Armed. Move.”

That’s all it takes.

She runs beside me toward the truck, and I yank open the passenger door.

“Get in.”

For once, she doesn’t argue.

I barely wait for her door to slam before throwing the truck into gear. The tires spin as I punch through a chain-link fence and tear down the back alley, checking the rearview mirror until several turns put enough distance between us and the shop that I’m certain no one followed us.

“What the hell happened back there?” I demand.

“What makes you think I know?” she fires back. “I’ve never seen that bastard in my life.”

I believe her.

“Can you think of any reason someone might target you?”

She stares through the windshield, her lips pressed tightly together as her breathing slowly evens out.

“No.”

This time, I’m not sure I believe her. She won’t look at me, and there’s a stiffness in her posture that wasn’t there a second ago.

But I don’t push.

She was just shot at and nearly killed. No matter how composed she looks, nobody walks away from something like that unaffected.

“I have to call this in. You’re going to have to stick around for questioning.”

“Take me home.”

I exhale slowly. “Remi, I can’t do that. There’s probably surveillance footage, and we can’t sweep this under the rug.” I look over at her. “I need you to understand that.”

Her gaze finally meets mine. “Of course.”

There’s something in the way she says it that makes me wish I could give her a different answer. Reaching across the console, I take her hand, half expecting her to pull away.

She doesn’t.

“I’ll be with you every step of the way,” I tell her.

“I’m fine. It’s not my first time dealing with cops.”

Her other hand remains clenched in her lap, fingers working something inside her palm. I’ve seen her do this before when she’s tense, rubbing whatever she keeps hidden there beneath her thumb over and over.

I still have no idea what it is.

A passing streetlight catches a flash of metal before she closes her fist, concealing it from view.

Time for another novel.

Pick your next read on Lokepub.

The truck idles in the condominium parking garage. She didn’t ask me to take her back to the other place like last time. She asked me to bring her home.

After hours of questioning, statements, and enough paperwork to make my head split open, they finally released us. Both our weapons were confiscated pending the investigation, but not before half the department stared at Remi like she was some kind of wild animal sitting calmly among them. A few looked at her a little too long for my liking.

Through all of it, she stayed close to me. Maybe not physically, but whenever someone approached or another question was thrown her way, I could feel her attention shift toward me. She never asked me to stay, but she never tried to push me away either.

Now we’re sitting beneath the building where she actually lives, and I’m beginning to understand what it means.

She’s letting me in.

“Are you hungry?” she asks suddenly.

“I can take you wherever you want to go.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I mean, do you want to come up? Eat something?”

My grip tightens on the steering wheel before I realize I’m doing it. “I’d like that.”

The elevator to the penthouse requires biometric access, similar to the hidden garage at the warehouse. Remi stands beside me as the scanner reads her fingerprint, close enough that our arms nearly touch.

And I like having her there.

“Are you sure you’ll be safe here?” I ask. “Fingerprint scan or not, everything has a loophole, and we still don’t know who’s targeting you or why.”

“This place was purchased under an alias,” she says casually. “There’s no record of me owning any of my properties.”

“Properties?”

Her eyes find mine, and for the first time since the tattoo shop, a smirk tugs at her lips.

“Yeah. I’m a trust fund baby, Officer Braga. What can I say?”

The reminder of her family’s wealth brings everything I know about them rushing back. Money like theirs comes with a history steeped in blood.

It’s easy to forget that when I’m standing inches away from her.

Another biometric pad grants us access to a second door, this one thicker and built to withstand far more than an attempted break-in. I study the steel frame and reinforced locks, wondering how much protection is hidden behind the walls.

I can feel her watching me, probably waiting for the questions to start, but I keep them to myself. I’ve gotten this far with her, and the last thing I want is to make her feel that bringing me here was a mistake.

Besides, after what happened tonight, I’m relieved to know that getting to her here wouldn’t be easy. Then the irony of that thought sinks in. She has multiple layers of security designed to keep threats out, yet she just invited one upstairs without realizing it.

The difference now is that I hate being that.

“Leave your shoes by the door,” she says, already kicking out of hers.

I toe off one boot, then the other, my attention fixed on her as she moves through the foyer. Maybe I’m a son of a bitch, but not watching the sway of her hips or the way those leggings hug her ass would be a damn crime.

As if she can feel my eyes on her, she glances back, biting her bottom lip, making my fists clench at my sides.

This fucking woman is going to kill me.

“What are you in the mood for?”

You.

“Anything, really. Whatever you have,” I say, following her into the kitchen.

She tugs open the fridge, nearly disappearing behind the massive double doors from my angle, leaving only the top of her head visible.

While she searches, I take in the penthouse around me. Polished stone and dark finishes stretch beneath floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the

city, but it’s the smaller details that hold my attention. A half-finished sketchbook sits on the kitchen island beside a bowl of lollipops, and a set of expensive keys lies tossed on the nearby marble. My gaze drifts into the living room, where her leather jacket hangs over the back of a designer chair. Motorcycle gloves sit nearby, and what look like tattoo reference sheets cover part of the end table.

The place is undeniably expensive, yet Remi is everywhere I look.

She moves through the kitchen with restless energy, opening one cabinet before changing her mind and moving to another. Watching her here, surrounded by all the things she loves, I finally understand why she keeps this place so well protected.

This is where she comes when she wants the rest of the world shut out.

“How about pizza?” she asks, balancing on her toes to reach the top shelf of a cabinet.

I never thought I’d associate the word adorable with someone like Remi, but watching her stretch for something she can’t reach makes it impossible not to think of anything else.

My gaze travels down her body before I force it back to her face. She’s beautiful, as I’ve known since the second I met her, but this feels different.

“Pizza is good,” I manage.

She snatches her phone off the counter and starts pulling up a menu. “Pepperoni?”

“What do you want?”

“Oh, I don’t share, Braga.” She shoots me a look over her shoulder. “So what I want is irrelevant.”

I laugh. “Sounds a little selfish.”

“No,” she says, leaning against the counter. “Protective. What’s mine is mine. There’s a difference. Plus, I have to really like you before I share.”

Pulling out my phone, I open the Notes app. “Goal number one,” I say as I start typing, “get on Remi’s good side so she’ll share her favorite foods with me.”

“You’re a cop. You’ll never be on my good side.” She eyes me with a grin.

“Really?” I ask, stepping closer. “Because I distinctly remember you sharing your chilaquiles with me once.”

Her eyes narrow.

“By your own rules, that means you liked me.”

“That was a lapse in judgment.”

“Sure it was,” I say with a grin.

I stop directly in front of her, close enough to catch the faint trace of smoke and something sweet lingering on her skin. She tips her face up to mine, and my mind immediately goes to what she’d look like pinned beneath me, those pretty red lips put to better use.

“So you bring all your cop friends to this maximum-security penthouse?”

She laughs softly, shaking her head. “I don’t have cop friends.”

“Then let me be your first.”

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Twenty

Remi



Thiago has a way of making everything around him seem smaller. His massive frame dominates every space he steps into, and my extra-large sofa is just another casualty. He sits sprawled across one end of it, one arm draped along the back cushion, looking entirely too good for a man I absolutely should not be letting this close to me.

I don't know what I was thinking when I invited him up.

Maybe it's the leftover adrenaline from tonight's shootout, or maybe I just didn't want to be alone afterward.

That's bullshit, Remi, and you know it.

I do know it. I could've gone to Valentina's or to my parents'. I could've called any number of family members who would've dropped everything to be here, but I chose Thiago because I wanted more time with him.

I'll probably regret that decision the second I wake up tomorrow morning, but tonight, I'm letting myself enjoy his company without overthinking what it means.

"Are you okay?" he asks, pulling me out of my thoughts. "What happened back there..."

"I'm fine. We're good, and that's all that matters."

Fuck. I answered too fast.

I know he's a cop. He sees violence and death more than most people ever will, so he also knows how someone is supposed to react after nearly being killed.

And it probably isn’t reloading and returning fire as if it’s second nature.

I look away and sigh, forcing a slight crack into my voice for the performance. “I just...don’t want to think about it right now.”

There’s the slightest twitch near his eye, as if he catches the bullshit, but if he does, he doesn’t call me out on it.

The room goes quiet again, and within seconds, the silence begins to crawl beneath my skin.

My thumb rolls absently over Papá’s ring until I realize I’m practically grinding the metal into my palm. Before Thiago can notice, I slip it back into my pocket and push to my feet, stretching my arms above my head.

His eyes follow the movement, drifting to the exposed skin beneath my shirt and lingering near my navel piercing.

I like having his attention there way more than I should.

“I have to check on Hannibal and Clarice. Pizza should be here in about ten minutes.”

“Hannibal? Clarice?” He stands even though I didn’t invite him to join me. “Like the movie?”

“Yeah. Exactly like the movie.”

I deliberately slow my pace as I lead him down the hallway, hyperaware of him following me. Every time I ease my steps, the warmth of his body draws a little closer.

“Pets?” he asks.

“Companions,” I correct, turning to lean against the doorframe.

Thiago stops directly in front of me, leaving barely any space between us. Somehow, it still feels like too much. He braces one forearm against the wood above my head and dips his face toward mine.

“I meant what I said earlier.”

My eyebrows knit together. “About what?”

He lifts his hand slowly, giving me time to move away, but again I don’t. The backs of his fingers skim the platinum streak in my hair before he gently traces it.

“This,” he murmurs. “I like this. It’s beautiful.”

“Thanks for the stamp of approval.”

We smile at the exact same time, and that might be the most dangerous part of all this. He’s so damn easy to talk to, charming without even trying. It would be so much easier if he were just an asshole.

He’s a cop, for fuck’s sake. The least he could do is act like one.

But he stands here, looking at me, his curls falling over his forehead, his dark eyes lingering on mine with an interest he isn’t even trying to hide. I know right then that if I stay this close for even one more second, I’m going to do something incredibly stupid.

So I reach behind me, turn the knob, and slip into the room.

I head straight for Hannibal’s enclosure. He’s curled beneath one of his hides, his thick body coiled lazily as I press my palm against the glass, feeling the faint vibration of the filter beneath my skin. My eyes close for a moment as soft rock hums from a speaker tucked near the shelves, low enough that I can still hear the buzzing of the heat lamps.

“A ball python,” Thiago says from beside me.

“Yeah.” A small smile pulls at my lips. “He’s a good boy. Likes being held and wandering around sometimes.”

Thiago’s attention then shifts to the second enclosure across the room, darker, with heavy rockwork and twisted driftwood arranged throughout.

“Why aren’t they together?”

“That would be a very stressful and ultimately fatal situation for him.”

“Why?” Thiago drags out the word, one eyebrow lifting with mounting suspicion.

“Because Clarice is a Mexican cantil,” I explain. “A pit viper. She’s highly venomous and extremely aggressive.”

“That doesn’t sound legal.” He takes a noticeably more cautious step toward her enclosure. “Why would you even have this?”

“Reason number infinity why I should never befriend a cop.”

He glances at me over his shoulder, a grin on his face. “So you’re saying we’re friends.”

“I absolutely did not say that.”

I move closer to Clarice’s enclosure. She’s coiled beside a flat stone under the heat lamp, her tongue flicking in the air.

“She’s special to me,” I say. “She was injured when I found her on a trip, so I had her patched up. She fought like hell the whole time.” I watch her for another moment, then add, “Maybe it’s selfish, but I couldn’t let her go after that.”

My eyes linger on the snake. “She reminded me a lot of myself.”

The words are already out there, far more personal than anything I meant to share with him. I immediately question why the hell I gave him

that much, but when I glance over, Thiago isn't looking at me. He's staring at Clarice, watching how she watches him right back.

"I get that," he says.

There's a sincerity in his voice that I wasn't expecting. I don't know how he could possibly understand me when he barely knows me.

"Is that the tattoo you have?"

I glance down, then lift the hem of my shirt and tug my waistband lower to expose the ink. A rough sound escapes him, and I pretend I don't hear it.

"Yeah," I murmur. "She was one of my first pieces."

Thiago reaches toward me slowly. Again I don't pull away.

His fingertips brush along the tattoo, tracing its outline with enough care that every inch of skin beneath his touch feels suddenly sensitive. When I lift my head, he's no longer looking at the ink. His eyes meet mine, and the question in them is unmistakable.

The world is a special kind of cruel because if he were anyone but Philly PD, my legs would already be wrapped around him. I'd let him put those massive hands wherever the hell he wanted just to find out exactly what a man his size is capable of doing to me.

I've never been the type to deny myself a man I wanted when I knew he wanted me too, but Thiago isn't just anyone. He's the one man I know I shouldn't have.

My phone rings, saving me from making a decision I'll probably regret tomorrow. I let my shirt drop and step away from him.

"Pizza's here."

Thiago's hand curls into a fist at his side before he lets out a slow breath, as if forcing himself to reset.

Same.

"You never did tell me your flavor of choice."

I move toward the door, and he falls into step behind me.

"Spicy pepperoni, extra cheese, and hot honey."

A laugh slips out of him. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

"It's cute that you think you know me."

"I'm taking notes."

I stop so suddenly that he nearly walks into me. His hands land on my shoulders to steady us both, their weight making me acutely aware of how little space there is between us.

“Is that right?” I ask, tipping my head back to look at him. “And what exactly do you think you know so far?”

His thumbs brush lightly against my skin as he studies me.

“I know you pretend not to care about people nearly as much as you actually do,” he says. “You found an injured snake that probably wanted to kill you and brought her home because you saw yourself in her. And I’ve seen you with Zara. You love hard, Remi. I can see that.”

I don't know what to do with the fact that he sees that so clearly.

“I know silence bothers you because there’s always noise somewhere around you. Or you make the noise yourself.” His mouth twitches. “Then there are the lollipops you keep in crystal bowls like somebody’s grandma.”

I bark out a laugh. “Fuck you.”

His smile lingers as his eyes drop to my hands. “I’ve also noticed you’re always fidgeting with something when you get nervous or maybe get stuck in your head.”

That wipes the amusement from my face.

His gaze returns to mine. “You do it constantly.”

“That’s creepy observational skills for someone I’m definitely not friends with.”

“Occupational hazard,” he says, his eyes locked on mine. “I also know you’re reckless enough to invite a cop you barely trust into your home after a shootout.”

“That doesn’t sound very smart.”

“Maybe.” He steps a little closer. “But I think it means you wanted me here anyway.”

I can’t bring myself to give him a smart-ass response.

A man who pays this much attention is dangerous. Thiago is already noticing details I never meant to show him, and the worst part is how much I want to let him keep looking.

“How’d I do?” he asks.

“Barely scratched the surface,” I say, grabbing the front of his shirt.

His grin turns smug. “Sounds like I’ve got work to do.”

I release him while I still have enough self-control to do so and head toward the front door, expecting the doorman to buzz up any second.

“Careful, Officer Braga,” I toss over my shoulder. “Don’t dig too deep. You might not like what you find.” Glancing back, I catch his eyes roaming over me. “Or maybe you will.”

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Twenty-One

Thiago



Remi Isabel Cain is a liar.

Forty-five minutes ago, she looked me dead in the eyes and told me she doesn't share food unless she really likes someone. Now we're sitting on opposite ends of her couch, two pizza boxes open between us, and she's sliding a slice of hers onto my plate.

"Try it."

I look down at the spicy pepperoni covered in hot honey, then back at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Her eyes narrow. "Then why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm not looking at you like anything."

"Yes, you are."

I pick up the slice before she can change her mind. "You said I should try it."

"I did."

"So I'm trying it."

She watches me take a bite, suspicious as hell, as I fight the urge to remind her of what she said in the kitchen.

I have to really like you to share my food.

There are some victories a smart man knows better than to celebrate out loud, especially when the woman sitting across from him probably has weapons hidden throughout her apartment.

“Good?” she asks.

I chew slowly, mostly because I know it’ll annoy her, just like it did that day at the restaurant.

“Braga.”

“It’s all right.”

Her mouth falls open. “All right?”

I barely get the words out before she reaches for the slice. I lift it out of range, and she immediately climbs across the cushion after it.

“Give it back, asshole.”

“Nope. You gave it to me.”

“Because I thought you deserved nice things. I was clearly wrong. First my chilaquiles and now my favorite pizza? You’re insufferable, Braga, and your taste buds suck.”

I laugh as she reaches across me again, one knee sinking into the couch beside my thigh. There’s something strangely normal about sitting here with her after the night we’ve had, arguing over pizza while music plays behind us.

This isn’t how tonight was supposed to go. I followed her to the tattoo shop because getting closer to Remi is exactly what Elena expects of me, and sitting in her home while she willingly tells me about herself should feel like progress.

But it doesn’t.

The woman trying to steal a slice of pizza from my hand no longer feels like an assignment, and every minute I spend with her makes it harder to remember that I’m supposed to treat her as one.

“If I take it back, can I finish my pizza in peace?”

She pauses, as if realizing how far she’s intruded into my space. “Fine.” She eases back onto her side of the couch. “But you have one more chance to prove yourself. Diss my lollipop, and it’s over.”

“Noted.”

She casts me one last glance before we settle into a comfortable silence and finish our dinner. I watch her when she doesn’t think I’m looking, catching her humming along to a song I don’t recognize.

“So how are you liking Philly?”

I hear the question, but I’m too distracted by the movement of her lips to answer in time.

“Braga? You awake?”

“Yeah.” I drag my attention back to her eyes. “I mean, it’s great. I’m settled and getting my way around.”

She lifts an eyebrow but doesn’t look my way, suddenly fascinated by the rim of her glass of water.

“You’ve been going out, meeting people? Desiree shoot your other arm yet?”

“Really?” I laugh and sit up straighter. “What are you actually asking me?”

Remi sets her glass on the side table, then turns to me. “You think I don’t know what I mean?”

“I think you know exactly what you mean. Maybe I just want to hear you say it.”

She’s the one laughing now. “If you think it’s anything but morbid curiosity, you’re delusional.”

“And yet, I still haven’t heard you ask the question.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. Have you been seeing anyone since you moved here?”

“There it is.”

“Don’t make me regret asking.”

I grin. “No. I haven’t.”

Her expression barely changes, but there’s a hint of satisfaction she doesn’t hide quickly enough, and I file it away for later.

“And you? Are you seeing anyone?”

She shakes her head, smiling at first, but it fades a moment later as something heavier takes its place.

“Was there someone?”

Remi looks away. She draws one knee to her chest, wraps an arm around it, and rests her chin on top. I’ve only seen her like this once before, at the cemetery, when grief had stripped away so much of the woman she usually shows the world. Only this time, I don’t know if she’s mourning a person or what they had together.

“There was. He was…special.”

“Did you love him?”

She twists to face me. “He was murdered in front of me four years ago.”

Fuck. This isn’t where I wanted the conversation to go. Not because I don’t want to know everything about her, but because I’d rather see her

giving me shit over a slice of pizza than see her look the way she does right now.

I could tell her I'm sorry and let us sit here awkwardly until the subject changes, but I have a feeling she's heard those words enough. So I give her something else instead.

"Tell me about him."

Her eyes stay fixed on mine, narrowing briefly as if she can't believe what I'm asking. Then her features soften, and the faintest smile touches her lips.

"His name was Ryuji Kuroda. To many people, he probably looked a little scary," she says with a small chuckle. "But with me, he was different. He listened. He never judged me or underestimated me."

I'm starting to understand how much that matters to her. She doesn't want to be judged by what people see on the outside or reduced to whatever they've already decided she should be.

"You asked me once about my car. Why I chose Katsura orange."

I nod.

"He once shared a story with me, one his grandmother used to tell him about two lovers whose souls were intertwined so tightly that even death couldn't fully separate them. When one of them died, a Katsura tree bloomed from the grave. Every autumn, its leaves turned gold and orange before falling, and their scent carried on the wind to wherever the other lover was."

Her voice falters on the last few words.

Looking down, she blinks rapidly and rubs her thumb against something hidden in her palm. The smile she wore seconds ago vanishes as she tries to pull herself back together.

"His grandmother told him it was the soul's way of saying, 'I was here. I loved you. And some part of me always will be.'"

The final word breaks slightly.

Remi presses her lips together and turns her face away, but not fast enough. A tear slips down her cheek, and she wipes it with the heel of her hand almost angrily.

"Fuck." A shaky laugh escapes her as she looks up at the ceiling. "I haven't talked about this in a long time."

I don't interrupt her or tell her she doesn't have to continue. After a moment, she looks back at me.

“That’s why you chose the orange,” I say.

She nods, another tear gathering along her lashes. “After Ryuji died, everyone remembered how he died. I did too.” She pauses, struggling with the next words. “For a while, that was all I could remember. All I could see.” Her fingers tighten around whatever she’s holding. “But I loved him before I lost him.” This time when her voice cracks, she doesn’t try to hide it. “I needed something that reminded me of that.”

My chest tightens as she wipes another tear away.

“So when I bought the car, I had it painted Katsura orange.” She gives me a watery smile. “It was my way of keeping the beautiful part.”

I move closer and brush away the tear beneath her eye with my thumb. She doesn’t pull away, even as my gaze drops to the fist curled tightly in her lap. The same one I’ve watched her fidget with more times than I can count. I rest my hand over it and wait until her eyes meet mine.

“This,” I say. “Can you tell me about this?”

For a few seconds, she doesn’t move. Then her fingers slowly uncurl beneath mine, revealing a dark signet ring in the center of her palm.

I’ve seen expensive jewelry on Remi before, but this is different. The metal is worn in places from years of being handled.

“It’s my father’s,” she says. “It was my father’s.”

My attention shifts to the emblem engraved into the face of the ring, and recognition comes immediately.

It belongs to Ares.

I’ve seen the symbol enough times in files to know exactly what I’m looking at.

“He gave it to me years ago.” Lifting the ring from her palm, she places it in mine, closing my fingers around it. “We all have a story, Thiago. Sometimes it’s ugly and tainted, but without it, we wouldn’t be who we are.”

I’m not prepared for how deeply I feel her words, but even after everything she just said, it’s the sound of my name on her lips that stays with me.

She didn’t call me Officer Braga or even Braga this time. She called me Thiago, and I fucking like how it sounds coming from her.

I turn the ring between my fingers once before giving it back. “Thank you for telling me.”

She closes her hand around it and stares at me for a heartbeat. “Okay, that’s enough feelings.”

A laugh catches in my throat. “Enough feelings?”

“Yes. You’re making this weird.” Reaching for the bowl on the coffee table, she grabs a lollipop. “It’s time for your final test.”

“Wait, were you serious about that?”

“Deadly.” She unwraps it and holds it out to me.

“And what happens if I hate it?” I ask, taking it from her.

“You leave.”

“You’d kick me out over a lollipop?”

“I have standards.”

I suppress a laugh and pop it into my mouth as she watches me with such intense focus that it feels like an actual evaluation.

“Well?”

I roll it over my tongue, pretending to consider my answer.

Her eyes narrow. “You better choose your next words very carefully.”

“Watermelon. It’s sweet.”

“That’s generally how candy works.”

I grin around the stick. “I like it.”

Her shoulders relax dramatically. “Congratulations. You can stay.”

“Does that mean we’re friends?”

The question hangs between us as Remi holds my gaze before reaching for another slice of pizza.

“Don’t push your luck, Braga.”

My phone vibrates against the table. I pick it up and glance at the screen.

ELENA: REPORT

Well, it was great while it lasted.

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Twenty-Two

Remi



I tighten the ratchet beneath the hood of my GT-R, music echoing through the vast space as the car fights me another goddamn day. Most people would've given up already and handed the problem off to someone else, but I've never been good at walking away from something I know I can fix.

Eventually.

I wipe the sweat from my jaw with the back of my wrist, then lean farther over the engine bay, adjusting the socket against the timing assembly.

"Come on, baby," I mutter. "Don't embarrass me. It's been weeks."

The engine coughs when I try again, but I hear enough of a difference to know I'm getting closer. I wipe my forehead and can't help but grin.

This is exactly why I prefer cars to people. Engines make sense. Every problem has a source, and every sound has meaning. People…now, that's the complicated part.

My brain immediately proves the point by supplying the image of a six-foot-six SWAT officer sprawled across my white couch two nights ago, eating my pizza and smiling at me as if he belonged there.

I slam the hood.

"Nope," I mutter to myself. "We are not doing that. Dangerous territory, Remi. Dangerous fucking territory."

Except I've been doing exactly that for the last forty-eight hours.

Thinking about Thiago Braga brings back the scent of his cologne and the way he rattled off details about me I didn't even realize he'd noticed.

Then I remember telling him about Ryuji and placing Papá's ring in his hand—two things I don't share easily with anyone.

Yet somehow, I trusted him with both.

My thighs clench together when I remember reaching for my vibrator last night, only to shove it back into the drawer the second I realized whose name would've fallen from my lips.

Shaking my head hard, I force the thoughts away, slide behind the wheel, turn the ignition, and hold my breath for one agonizing second before my baby finally roars to life.

A triumphant laugh bursts out of me as the engine settles into a smooth, aggressive purr that vibrates through the entire car.

"Yes! Finally." I slap the steering wheel. "That's my girl."

I barely get a chance to celebrate before the side door slams open, echoing through the garage. I jolt, my hand flying to the Glock at my waist before I realize who it is.

"Mamá? What the hell?" Cutting the engine, I climb out.

She stands near the doorway, her arms tightly crossed over her chest, fury radiating from her.

"Is everything...okay?"

I'd be worried someone was hurt, maybe worse, but there's nothing on her face except for absolute rage.

Growing up, I always knew when I'd fucked up. She never held back when it came to calling me out, and I usually took the punishment, apologized, and we moved on. This time, I have no clue what I supposedly did. Sure, I forget things sometimes, but whatever this is pissed her off enough to storm all the way down here instead of calling or texting first.

Without a word, she stalks over to my speaker and shuts off the music.

Now I'm irritated. I happened to like that song.

"Remi Isabel," she grits out. "After what happened with your dad, you didn't think it was important to tell us that someone tried to kill you again?"

Ah. That little detail.

"Look—"

"No," she cuts me off. "There's no excuse. You, of all people, should understand what I've just been through. If something happened to you..." Her voice trembles. "I can't even say the words, Remi."

My frustration fades. I step forward and pull her into a hug, careful not to smear engine grease across her pretty blouse.

“Mamá,” I murmur, “because of what happened, I didn’t want to put this on you too. And I’m okay.”

“It’s not okay.” She pulls back to look at me. “That Lachlan man told me they still haven’t caught everyone involved. And how do you think I felt when I drove by and saw the windows boarded up and police tape still hanging across the parking lot?”

She cups my face between her hands. “*Mi amor*, you know what’s at stake here. You know there are powerful people out there. That night, it was the tattoo shop. Tomorrow, it could be the range.”

“Well, they’d surely fuck up then, wouldn’t they?”

“Remi, this isn’t a joke, and you’re not bulletproof.”

I slip gently from her grasp and lean against the hood of my car. “I know I’m not, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop living.”

“I’m not asking you to do that.” The anger in her voice gives way to something closer to fear. “I’m asking you to be careful and keep us informed. I can’t protect you if—”

“I don’t need you to do that for me anymore.”

Regret hits me the second I see her face. Her lips twitch, and something shifts in her eyes. The last thing I ever want to do is hurt my mother. But they raised me to survive without them, trained me to fight back and protect myself when no one else could.

Isn’t that what all of it was for?

“I can handle myself. And I did. He’s dead, and I’m not.”

“Who was with you that night?”

“A friend.”

The word leaves my mouth so naturally that it takes me a second to register what I just called him. I guess Thiago got his way after all.

“A friend?” Her eyebrows lift, disbelief written all over her face. “And he helped you gun down those men?”

Fair question. Outside our family, there aren’t many people in our lives who could walk into a shootout and know exactly what to do.

“Yeah...he’s a cop.”

She blinks rapidly, as if she’s waiting for the punchline.

I push off the hood and start pacing, suddenly wishing Papá’s ring weren’t sitting on the workbench, out of reach.

“I know what you’re thinking, but he’s not like that.”

I almost want to take it back. Not because I don’t believe it, but because I might be starting to.

Mamá exhales slowly, as if the weight of the entire city were on her shoulders. I hate being the source of that look, even though I’ve probably spent most of my life causing it.

“I-I don’t even know what to say.” She shakes her head. “I don’t know if I have it in me to dissect that right now.”

“Aunt Eva was a homicide detective,” I point out. “What’s the difference?”

Why the hell am I defending him this hard?

“Because that was a one-in-a-million chance.”

“Well, I happen to live a one-in-a-million kind of life, don’t I?”

She keeps talking, and I hear the concern in every word, but my mind is already drifting from the conversation. Between her fear, everything that happened at the tattoo shop, and whatever the hell I’m doing with Thiago, I need to get out of this garage and clear my head.

“I gotta run, Mami.” I grab my bag and Papá’s ring.

“Remi—”

I cut her off with a quick kiss to her forehead.

“Lock up for me!” I call over my shoulder as I slide into my newly working GT-R.

The garage door groans open overhead, and I back out without looking at her again. I don’t need to see her face to know what’s there. She loves me more than anything in this world, and I terrify her because of it.

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Twenty-Three

REMI



The unmistakable growl of a Supra echoes behind me, and I smile the second Valentina's little green monster appears in my rearview mirror.

After a quick shower at home, I called her and asked her to meet me at Furia, just like old times.

The hours I have left with her are slipping away too quickly, and when I think about her leaving again, the heaviness in my chest becomes a little harder to bear.

Since she moved, we've called whenever we could, but the best chisme, inside jokes, and random bullshit we usually share just don't feel the same with thousands of miles between us. I've tried to act like I don't miss her as much as I do, but lately, it doesn't take much to get to me.

"Don't you fucking cry," I mutter, wiping quickly beneath my eyes. "That's the last thing you need right now."

I take a couple of deep breaths until I get myself under control. Valentina pulls up beside me, and I lower my window as she matches my speed.

"You fixed her!" she shouts over the wind.

"Did you ever doubt me?"

"Never." She flips me off and guns it down the road.

I laugh as her Supra shoots ahead, slipping through gaps in traffic that have the drivers around her laying on their horns. But I know Valentina, and she sees every opening before she takes it, knowing exactly what her car can handle.

Unfortunately for the rest of Philadelphia, I'm worse.

I drop a gear and bury the throttle, my GT-R surging forward as I chase after her.

"Oh, you're asking for it."

Her taillights flare red before she takes the next corner at a speed that would make most people piss themselves. I follow, grinning as my tires grip the turn.

God, I missed this and missed her.

I punch in her contact, and laughter immediately crackles through my speakers.

"Still trying to keep up, Remi?"

"Talk less, drive more."

She flips me off out the window again, and I do the mature thing and blow past her on the straightaway.

"Remi!" she shouts, laughing harder now. "You bitch!"

"A bitch and the winner. What more can I ask for?"

For a few perfect minutes, it's just us again. No family drama or people trying to kill us, and especially no drop-dead gorgeous cop built like a fucking tank taking up entirely too much space in my head.

I can't even get through a drive without thinking about him.

"Why the hell are you here?"

"Hey, you called me, remember?" Valentina says, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I rub at my temple. "No, not you. Ignore me."

She doesn't answer right away, but I know that silence.

I have a feeling she knows something's off, and that it has nothing to do with the shootout at Lachlan's I told her about earlier.

"We can go back to your place," she offers. "Order dinner and binge some shitty movies."

My condo is the last place I want to be. I've had two days to get rid of every trace of Thiago, but I swear I can still smell his cologne every time I walk into the living room. Lighting candles and spraying some disgusting fruity shit I found under the kitchen sink only made the place smell like him, mixed with a tropical nightmare.

That's the exact opposite of what I need.

"No, I'm good. I want this. I need the distraction, Val."

"Killing egos on the track is just as good as any therapy session."

“I love you, *pendeja*.”

She laughs as we pull into Furia side by side, the parking lot already buzzing with music, revving engines, and people packed around cars beneath neon lights.

“I’m still going to smoke you, though.”

Before I can fire back, I spot Rafe and stop cold.

That asshole has been dodging me since that night. He hasn’t answered a single call or text, and he hasn’t even bothered to pick up his car, which is still sitting in my garage riddled with bullet holes and busted glass.

Valentina’s smile disappears the second she sees me heading across the lot toward him. Her footsteps follow close behind.

“Remi, what’s going on?”

I hear the familiar sound of her Glock racking behind me and can’t help but smile.

My girl.

Rafe has his back to us, completely oblivious that I’m coming for him. Some tall chick with a black bob notices us first and taps him on the shoulder, but she’s too late.

“Rafe!” I snap. “What the fuck?”

He whips around so fast he nearly trips over himself as he backs away, stopping only when his spine slams into the driver’s side door of his car. His hands shoot up, and his face twists into the worst attempt at innocence I’ve ever seen.

“Remi? W-What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong?” I jab a finger into his chest. “I’ve had your piece-of-shit car in my garage for weeks, and you can’t even answer your fucking phone?”

“Hey, put some respect on her name,” he protests. “Ruby isn’t a piece of shit. And I was gonna call you back, I swear—”

“I was nearly run off the road, chased, and shot at while driving your car. One nobody knew I’d be taking except for you and Sam.”

Rafe’s expression falters for a second. “Remi...” He swallows hard. “You’re not seriously implying I set you up, are you?” His hands spread helplessly. “Would I really come back here if that were true?”

“I don’t know what you’d do, and honestly, I don’t care.” I step fully into his space, nearly eye-level with him. “Explain yourself.”

A crowd starts forming around us. People stare as phones lift to record and whispers already spread through the lot, but I couldn't care less.

Rafe owes me answers, and whether he walks away from this depends on how much I like them.

Before he can get a word out, a heavy hand clamps down on my shoulder.

I whip toward the touch, my eyes lifting to the woman with the black bob glaring at me like she wants a problem.

"Back up," she snaps.

I don't move an inch.

"Do you like that hand?" I ask calmly. "Because if you do, I suggest you remove it."

She smirks, clearly convinced her size is supposed to intimidate me. "Or what?"

I give her one chance, and she wastes it.

My fist connects with her jaw before she can react, jerking her head sideways as she staggers into Rafe's car so hard it rocks on its suspension. She spits blood onto the pavement and grabs the dented door for balance, staring at me as if she genuinely can't believe I hit her.

"Bitch!" she shouts, cupping her busted lip. "Rafe, you going to let her do that to me?"

I turn to him and tilt my head. "Are you?"

"Look, Remi, we're friends—"

"Negative."

"I've just been out of town—"

"Lie better." Moving closer, my hand rests on my blade.

Rafe starts sliding along the side of his car, putting distance between us while keeping the hood at his back.

"I'm telling the truth," he blurts. "I didn't know they'd try anything that night. I swear."

A chill runs through me.

"Who are *they*?" I demand. "My father was in that car."

The woman with the bob spits blood onto the pavement as she pushes herself upright. "You're a pussy, Rafe," she snarls. "Letting this bitch press you like this."

Valentina steps between us. She always has my back, but I don't want her in the middle of this. Throwing punches in parking lots was me four

years ago. V is somebody's wife now, and all I can picture is Maksim finding out I dragged her into another mess.

He'd kill me.

Then another man comes to mind. What would Thiago think if he saw me right now? The fact that I even care pisses me off. I barely have time to process that realization when one of Rafe's idiot friends lunges at me, swinging wildly in an attempt to sucker-punch me. I step out of the way on instinct.

Guess it doesn't count as fighting if I'm defending myself.

She comes at me again, reaching for my hair, but that's the wrong move. I drive a right hook into her face, then follow it with a left that knocks her off balance. I hit her twice more, fast enough that she doesn't realize what happened until blood sprays from her mouth and she stumbles backward into the crowd.

My knuckles throb, but I ignore it and turn back toward Rafe, only to find Valentina on the ground, with the woman from earlier trapped in a filthy armbar. The bitch screams as Val cranks her wrist farther than it's supposed to bend.

That moment of distraction is all Rafe needs.

He slams into me, knocking me onto my ass, then drives a brutal punch into the side of my abdomen while I'm still trying to recover.

Pain rips through my side. "Motherfucker—"

Around us, Furia has descended into absolute chaos. People are throwing punches between parked cars, someone gets tossed across a hood, and I can hear Valentina cursing at somebody behind me.

"You hit me?" I rasp before driving my knuckles straight into Rafe's windpipe. He chokes, folding forward as both hands fly to his throat, fighting to draw a breath.

I'll never delude myself into thinking I'm stronger than the average man. That kind of arrogance gets people killed. I don't need to overpower someone when I know where to hit and how much damage I'm willing to do to walk away.

I never imagined Rafe would be someone I might have to hurt this badly. We used to laugh and race together. Sometimes we'd end up eating greasy food at three in the morning, talking shit until someone finally decided to go home.

But whatever he knows about the attack, he kept it from me. He ignored every call afterward and left me wondering whether my father and I were almost killed because of him.

Rafe was never my friend.

I draw my blade and start toward him as he's still hunched against his car, clutching his throat and struggling to breathe. Then the most aggravating fucking sound imaginable reaches the lot.

Sirens.

People make a mad dash for their cars. I lock eyes with Rafe for a moment, and words aren't necessary. He knows exactly where we stand now. Muttering something under his breath, he forces himself upright and climbs into his car. I turn around just in time to see Valentina land another punch that leaves the bob-haired woman crumpled and unconscious on the pavement.

"Val, we gotta go before we get pinched," I call out, moving toward her.

She straightens and spits. "Did I just get blood in my mouth? I got blood in my mouth."

Her front teeth are streaked red, and I can't decide whether to laugh or throw up.

"No...maybe just a little."

"Bitch ripped out one of my earrings," she grumbles, spitting again as we hurry toward our cars.

"My place!" I shout, then climb into the GT-R and slam the door.

Valentina nods through her windshield, and seconds later, Poison Ivy shoots toward the exit with me right behind her.

We force our way onto the crowded street as everyone pours out of Furia at once. Cars shove into whatever openings they can find, tires squeal on the pavement, and horns blare from drivers unfortunate enough to get caught in the middle of it.

Valentina stays a few cars ahead of me, her Supra's green easy to spot among the other vehicles until a Mustang cuts across two lanes, forcing me to brake while Valentina slips through an opening ahead.

"Asshole."

I swing around him and search for her again, but she's disappeared into the mess of cars racing in every direction.

"Fuck."

I reach for my phone to call her when red and blue lights fill my rearview mirror.

One cruiser.

And he’s directly behind me.

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Twenty-Four

REMI



"Shit."

I jerk the wheel right and take the next turn hard, the cruiser staying right on my ass as we tear down the road.

"Out of all the fucking cars, you choose mine?"

"Pull over!" his voice booms through the speaker behind me.

For a moment, I actually consider it. I could stop, take whatever ticket he wants to throw at me, and probably spend the next few hours explaining why I was fleeing an illegal street race where half the crowd decided to beat the shit out of each other.

Or I could run.

My eyes flick to the rearview mirror again. It's just one cruiser. I know these streets, and I know my car.

"Sorry, buddy."

I drop a gear and floor it.

My car launches forward, shoving me deeper into the seat as the speedometer climbs. The cruiser tries to keep up with me, his lights washing over the inside of my car every time he gains a little ground. But I cut into the next lane, slip around a slower car, then move back over. A horn blares behind me, followed by another command from the cruiser telling me to pull over.

"Yeah, I heard you the first time."

The road ahead opens up, and I give the GT-R more gas. This isn't the first time I've run from the cops after Furia, but usually everyone scatters

and the police pick whichever unlucky asshole happens to be closest. We split up on different streets, wait for things to cool off, and laugh about it later.

Tonight, I’m the unlucky asshole.

The cruiser stays with me through the next light, but I gain ground as the road curves. I know what’s coming before I reach it, easing off just enough to take the turn without losing traction, then getting right back on the throttle.

His headlights fall farther behind.

“Come on,” I whisper, watching the mirror. “Come on.”

For a few seconds, all I see are distant flashes of red and blue, then another set of lights appears ahead.

“Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me.”

A second cruiser pulls out of a side street and swings across the road, trying to block both lanes. I don't have enough room to stop.

So I don't.

There’s a narrow opening between the cruiser and a row of parked cars, barely wide enough for me. But barely is still enough. I grip the wheel with both hands and aim straight for it, shooting through the opening with inches to spare, close enough that the passenger mirror nearly clips the cruiser’s front bumper. I hold my breath through the gap and don’t let it out until both mirrors clear.

“Holy shit!” I burst out laughing. “Still got it.”

My pulse is hammering now, and I fucking love it. The speed, the split-second decisions, knowing one wrong move could ruin everything. This is the kind of high I live for.

The second cruiser swings around behind me, and a moment later, the one I almost lost is back as well. Their lights fill my mirrors as I take another turn and push deeper into the city.

Two of them, I can handle.

I blow through the next intersection just as the light turns red, checking both directions before I cross. One of the cruisers follows, but the other gets trapped as traffic behind me starts moving.

“One down.”

My phone starts ringing on the passenger seat.

Valentina.

I hit the button on the steering wheel. “Hey.”

“Where the fuck are you?”

“I’m a little busy right now, Val.”

“What does that mean?”

A siren wails behind me as the remaining cruiser closes some of the distance. She goes silent.

“Remi.”

“I may have picked up a friend.”

“A friend with flashing lights?”

“Unfortunately.”

“Pull over!”

I laugh. “Absolutely not.”

“Remi Isabel Cain.”

“Oh, don’t you start using my government name too.”

“Where are you?”

I glance at the street sign as I fly past it. “Heading east on Lehigh.”

“I’m coming.”

“No, you’re not. Go to my place like we planned.”

“Remi—”

“Val, I’m fine. I’ll lose him and meet you there.”

Another set of lights appears in the distance, wiping the smile from my face. The cruiser comes straight toward me, then cuts across the intersection and pulls to a stop sideways. My stomach tightens at how perfectly it positions itself. They’re coordinating now, which means every turn I take is giving the next unit time to get ahead of me.

They know where I am. Not just the cop behind me, but all of them.

“Actually, I’m gonna call you back.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I think I pissed them off.”

“Remi, what the fuck does that—”

I end the call and grit my teeth. The cruiser behind me is gaining on me, and the one ahead has blocked the route I would normally take to get back to my condo.

“Okay,” I mutter. “You wanna play?”

I turn down the next street instead. The road narrows almost immediately, with parked cars lining both sides and leaving barely enough room for two vehicles to pass. But I know this stretch. Three blocks ahead,

it’ll spit me out onto an industrial road that runs parallel to the river. If I can make it there, I can lose them.

The cruiser follows me in.

“Bad choice.”

I accelerate, and the GT-R devours the narrow street while the Explorer struggles to keep up through the turns. I take the next corner and finally gain enough distance that his lights disappear behind the buildings.

My grin returns…until I reach the industrial road, where a third cruiser is already waiting for me.

“Oh, fuck you.”

It pulls away from the curb before I can reach him, blocking most of the road and leaving me nowhere to go but the narrow strip of pavement along his passenger side.

“You guys really need to stop doing that.”

Yanking the wheel, I squeeze past him, so close I hear metal scrape behind me.

Not mine.

At least I fucking hope not.

The road ahead opens, and I push harder, putting as much distance between us as I can. I know I won’t outrun their radios, but if I can get far enough ahead, I can change direction before the next unit knows where to look.

A voice booms behind me. “Pull over the vehicle!”

“Still no.”

I take the next turn, and I immediately regret it.

Traffic.

“Fuck. Me.”

Brake lights stretch ahead for nearly two blocks, and the sirens behind me are growing louder.

I scan the street for anything I can use and spot a delivery truck pulling away from the curb half a block ahead. There’s just enough room to squeeze through beside it.

Cutting across the lane, I make it around the truck before the gap closes again. The cruiser behind me isn’t as lucky. He gets trapped between the truck and a line of cars as horns erupt around him.

“That’s embarrassing,” I say with a laugh.

I take another turn and finally get a clear stretch of road…for about five fucking seconds.

Red and blue lights appear at the next intersection, followed by another cruiser coming up fast from behind.

“How many of you fuckers are working tonight?”

The one ahead slows in the middle of the intersection, forcing me to choose between left and right.

I go left.

He moves left.

I cut right.

He jerks back the other way, but he commits too late.

“Too slow.”

I shoot past his front bumper and hear another order through the speaker.

“Stop the car and pull over!”

The command hits a nerve. I’ve never been particularly good at doing what I’m told.

Two nights ago, another cop sat on my couch, eating my pizza as I trauma dumped. He held Papá’s ring in his hand and looked at me without a trace of judgment.

Now I’m running from men who wear the same badge, and I almost laugh at the fucking irony.

Still want to be my friend, Braga?

I bite the inside of my cheek and try to push the thought away before I can decide which answer bothers me more, but it stays with me until another cruiser appears in my rearview mirror, forcing my attention back to the road.

I know I need to get off the city streets. There are too many intersections and too many places for them to cut me off. The highway entrance is coming up on my right. If I can reach it before they close it, I’ll finally have room for the GT-R to do what she was built to do.

I check the mirror, judge the distance to the cruiser behind me, then take the ramp.

His lights follow.

“Come on, baby,” I mutter, pressing the accelerator harder. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

The ramp curves ahead, and I take it fast, holding my car tight to the inside before the highway opens in front of me.

Finally.

I press the gas pedal to the floor. The GT-R surges forward, and the cruiser behind me starts to lose ground. His lights shrink in my mirror as I move through lighter traffic, taking every opening I can without forcing anyone else off the road.

“There you go, baby.”

The speedometer keeps climbing, and for the first time since this started, I finally have room to breathe. No intersections for them to block or parked cars squeezing me into narrow streets, just the open road and a cop behind me who picked the wrong fucking car to chase.

As his sirens grow more distant, I can’t help wondering what Thiago would think if he could see me right now. I doubt it would be anything good.

That thought brings me right back to the reality I’ve been trying to avoid.

Thiago and I come from two completely different worlds. He’ll never truly accept all of me. Not my family or the violence woven into every corner of my life, and definitely not the things I’ve done or the things I’ll still do if I have to. Maybe the cruelest part is that I let myself believe we could actually be friends.

Or worse, something more.

I glance at the mirror again, and the cruiser is even farther behind.

“Should have stayed home.”

Another mile passes, and eventually his lights disappear completely. I wait, expecting them to show up again.

Nothing.

A laugh breaks out of me as some of the tension finally leaves my shoulders.

“Good fucking luck explaining that one.”

I ease off the accelerator. Getting away is one thing, but getting myself killed because I’m too busy celebrating is another. My phone lights up with Valentina’s name, but I leave it alone for now. I’ll call her once I’m off the highway and sure no one is still following me. The next exit is less than a mile ahead. I’m already planning which back roads to take home when something starts bothering me.

The cruiser gave up too easily.

My jaw sets as I replay the last mile. The sudden lack of sirens feels more suspicious than reassuring.

He stayed on me through half the city, followed me onto the highway, then suddenly stopped trying the second I had nowhere else to go.

“Oh, shit.”

I look ahead.

At first, all I see are distant flashes reflected off the signs above the highway. Then I get closer, and that’s when I see red and blue lights stretching across every lane.

Several cruisers are parked nose-to-tail ahead of me, blocking the entire road as officers move into position behind their doors. Across the pavement in front of them, something catches in my headlights.

Spike strips.

“You sneaky motherfuckers.”

My eyes dart toward the shoulder, searching for a way around, but another cruiser is already sitting there.

They didn’t lose me. They sent me straight here.

I check the mirror and see red and blue reappear behind me, blocking the highway in the other direction. There’s nowhere left to go.

With a groan, I start bringing the GT-R down to a lower speed.

For one stupid second, Thiago crosses my mind again. He keeps asking if we’re friends. Now I’m about to be dragged out of my car by his coworkers after leading them on a high-speed chase through half the fucking city.

I let out a hollow laugh. *Yeah, Braga, this should go over great.*

My phone starts ringing again as I slow down, and when Valentina’s name flashes across the screen, I answer through the speakers.

“Did you make it to my place?” I ask.

“Yeah, but I don’t see you. Are you on the way?”

“Not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

I bring the car to a stop several feet before the spike strips and stare through the windshield at the line of cruisers blocking the highway.

“Apparently, Philadelphia PD really wanted to spend some time with me tonight.”

“Remi.” The concern in her voice wipes the smile from my face.

“I’m fine, Val.”

“What happened? Did they catch you?”

I glance in the rearview mirror as two more cruisers pull in behind me, boxing me in completely.

“You could say that.”

“Baby, tell me where you are, and I’ll come get you.”

The doors ahead start to open. Officers step out with their weapons drawn, using the cruisers for cover as more lights flash inside my car.

My pulse picks up again when the first gun points my way. I may have treated this like a joke, but I’m not stupid enough to forget that armed cops are a very different problem than one in my rearview.

“Yeah, I don’t think they’re going to let you drive up and get me.”

“What the fuck did you do?”

“Nothing that bad.”

“Remi Isabel Cain, what did you do?”

A voice blasts through the speaker outside. “Driver, turn off the vehicle and place both hands where we can see them!”

I stare down at the steering wheel for a moment. Getting arrested isn’t exactly new territory for me, but this is definitely the most dramatic anyone has ever been about it. I shut off the engine.

“Val?”

“I’m here.”

“You still love me, right?”

“Oh my God.”

“Driver, open the door and slowly step out of the vehicle!”

I do as they say and climb out with my hands raised while at least a dozen officers watch me like I might pull a grenade out of my ass.

“Remi, talk to me,” Valentina demands through the speakers.

“Face away from us!”

I turn around.

“Walk backward toward the sound of my voice!”

“You know,” I say to Val as I walk, “remember when you suggested shitty movies and dinner?”

“Yes.”

“I’m starting to think we should have done that.”

“Oh, Remi.”

An officer grabs my wrists and pulls them behind my back. The cuffs close around them, and I look over my shoulder at my car sitting perfectly intact.

At least I managed that much.

“Don’t tell anyone,” I say, loud enough for the car to pick me up, “but I’m gonna need you to bail me out.”

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Twenty-Five

THIAGO



My apartment is quiet when I get home. It's always this way. Empty. Until recently, that was my preference. Being alone works for me because what I do for Helios isn't something I can hide from friends, family, or anyone close enough to notice the cracks. I stopped forming attachments a long time ago because of that, and I've never had a reason to question it.

But tonight, the silence bothers me.

I toss my keys onto the kitchen counter and look around the space, already knowing why.

Remi isn't here.

"Fuck," I mutter with a hollow laugh.

Forty-eight hours ago, she trusted me enough to give me pieces of herself I know weren't easy for her to share. Tonight, I'm standing alone in my kitchen, wishing I could hear her talking shit from across the room.

I can pretend this is business all I want, but I know the truth. I'm getting too close, thinking about her when she isn't around, wanting to touch her, and making excuses to see her again. None of that is part of the assignment. The more I learn about who she really is, the harder it becomes to reconcile that woman with everything I've been told about her family.

Opening the junk drawer, I look for the charger I keep forgetting to store in my truck, and move aside batteries, pens, and shit I haven't touched since moving in.

Something black catches beneath them, and I stop.

The worn leather is instantly familiar as I pull it free, even after all these years.

It's my father's old detective notebook.

I run my thumb along the faded edge before opening it. His handwriting fills the first page, compact and hurried, with a date at the top and notes from a case I don't recognize beneath. Names, times, a license plate, and a phone number circled twice.

Flipping through a few more pages, I find the same thing. Pieces of investigations he probably forgot about as soon as the cases closed. It's evidence of a life that ended long before I was ready for it.

I haven't opened this in years.

For some reason, I think about Remi's ring again and what she told me when she placed it in my hand.

We all have a story, Thiago. Sometimes it's ugly and tainted, but without it, we wouldn't be who we are.

Maybe that's why I don't put the notebook back. I leave it on the counter and pick up my phone instead. Remi's contact photo fills the screen, a candid shot of her mid-bite into a slice of pizza, glaring at me around a mouthful of pepperoni after accusing me of stealing one of her fries.

A smile tugs at my mouth as my thumb hovers over the call button. I've never been the kind of man who needs conversation after a long shift. Usually, I prefer coming home and shutting out the rest of the world for a while.

Apparently, that's changing too.

Before I can call her, another name flashes on the screen.

Aunt Priscilla.

Guilt rolls through my gut when I remember I'd promised to call her at least once a week.

It's been way more than that.

I answer and make my way into the living room.

"*Oi, tia*," I say. "*Tudo bem*?"

"Don't you give me that."

I close my eyes and rub the back of my neck. Of course that didn't work.

"I haven't wanted to bother you, so I gave you time. But nearly two months, Thiago."

“I know, I know.” I sigh. “I’m sorry. Work has been...work. I’m still getting used to the new atmosphere, the guys. But I should’ve called.”

“You always disappear into yourself when things get heavy,” she says, her voice gentler now. “Just because you’re grown doesn’t mean you stop having people who worry about you.”

The guilt digs in deeper because she’s right.

I would’ve been lost without her after my father died. She gave me a home and never once made me feel like I was something she’d been forced to take on. Yet whenever life gets complicated, I shut everyone out and convince myself it’s easier that way.

“How are you doing?” she asks, and I can picture the concern on her face even from thousands of miles away.

“I’m okay,” I tell her, undoing my belt and tugging my shirt over my head.

“You sound tired, *meu filho*. Like you’ve got a lot on your shoulders.”

I sit on the edge of the couch and rub my face, wanting to tell her everything. To tell her how conflicted I am and how every line I once thought was clear has blurred the deeper I get into this assignment. But mostly, I want to tell her about Remi and how being around her has me questioning things I stopped questioning a long time ago.

But I can’t.

She can never know what I’m really a part of. To her, I’m still the good man my father would have wanted me to be, the hero I spent most of my life trying to become.

For a long time, I thought I was that man too.

Lately, I’m not so sure.

“It’s part of the job, *Tia*. No rest for the wicked, huh?”

She laughs, but it sounds forced, as if she hears more in my voice than I meant to let slip.

We move on to easier things after that, where she tells me about her garden, complains about her neighbor’s dog digging holes beneath the fence again, and eventually makes me swear I won’t wait another month to call.

“I mean it, Thiago.”

“I know, *Tia*.”

“Don’t disappear on me.”

“I won’t.”

The words stay with me after we hang up, probably because we both know I've made that promise before.

I head back into the kitchen to grab some water, and my eyes fall on my father's notebook still sitting where I left it on the counter.

I was too young when he died to remember much of him. Most of what I know comes from stories my aunt told me, old photographs, and the few things of his I've carried with me all these years. Sometimes I think the hardest part of losing him so young is that I don't know what it feels like to sit across from my father as a grown man and ask him what the hell I'm supposed to do when life gets complicated. I never got to tell him about my first day on the job or ask whether he ever questioned it the way I do now.

I never got to tell him about a woman.

My eyes drift back to the notebook. Right now, there's a lot I wish I could tell him.

I pick it up and flip through pages filled with his handwriting until I reach the first blank one. There's a pen in the junk drawer. I grab it and stand there for a second, feeling like an idiot because I have no fucking idea what I'm doing.

Then I think about the reports I've written more times than I can count. At least I know how to do that. I write the date at the top of the page, followed by two words beneath it.

MISSION REPORT.

The pen stays on the paper while I decide what comes next.

Subject: Remi Isabel Cain.

This should be easy enough, except that the first thing that comes to mind has nothing to do with the mission.

She shared her pizza with me.

I stare at the sentence and laugh under my breath.

"Great fucking intelligence, Braga."

I should cross it out, but I don't.

She likes spicy pepperoni, extra cheese, and hot honey. She knows more about cars than most people ever will. She hates silence almost as much as she pretends to hate cops. She talks to herself, and she loves people harder than she wants anyone to know.

I can still see her sitting across from me on that couch, wiping away tears as she told me about Ryuji Kuroda. Then I remember her father's ring and how she trusted me with something that meant so much to her.

Another line finds its way onto the page.

I think you would've liked her, Pai.

My hand goes still.

For a long time, I just stare at what I wrote, wondering whether this is a mission report at all…or maybe I just miss my father.

I close the notebook and leave it on the counter before heading to the bathroom. By the time I set my phone on the vanity. The shower is already running, and steam begins to fill the room as I strip off the rest of my clothes. Every muscle in my body aches for the heat, but just as I'm about to step inside, my cell starts buzzing.

I almost ignore it, too exhausted to think of anything but climbing into my bed. Whatever problem is waiting for me can probably survive another twenty minutes without my attention. But of course I turn back and check the screen anyway.

It's a message from Ryan.

I unlock my phone, and nearly lose my footing when a fucking mugshot of Remi fills the screen.

"Drop the charges," I bark into the phone as I tear into the county parking lot. "Make them disappear."

Elena says nothing on the other end. Of course she doesn't. She's probably enjoying every second of knowing that Remi is sitting in a holding cell, facing charges that could follow her for years.

Ryan couldn't tell me much beyond what was already in the system. Aggravated battery, fleeing and eluding, reckless driving, and enough other bullshit for the department to make an example out of her if they wanted to.

My fist slams against the steering wheel, pain shooting across my knuckles.

"Say something."

"She ran from the police," Elena replies, far too calmly. "What exactly did you expect would happen?"

"She's not a criminal."

The words come out so easily that it takes me a second to hear how fucking ridiculous they sound. I know what she's done and what her family

is capable of. But none of that is what I see when I think about her anymore. Now she's sitting alone in a cell, probably furious, wanting to tear the place apart and maybe…scared, even though she'll never admit it.

I throw the truck into park.

"Get rid of the charges," I say through gritted teeth. "Now."

"You think it's that simple?"

"You and I both know it is." Shoving open my door, I climb out. "You want your answers? Your information? Then good luck getting any of it while she's buried in courtrooms for the next few years."

Elena goes quiet again, and I know she's considering it because she knows I'm right.

Helios has people everywhere, in police departments, courtrooms, government offices, and places I probably don't even know about. I've watched them make problems disappear and create new ones whenever it served whatever they deemed the greater good.

For years, I accepted it because I believed we were protecting people from something worse. But lately, I've started wondering how different we really are from the people we hunt.

"Have a good night, Operative."

The line disconnects without another word.

I shove my phone into my pocket and storm toward the entrance, where a clerk who couldn't possibly care less who the hell I am meets me.

"Have a seat."

That's all I get. There's no urgency, just rehearsed bullshit about protocol and procedure while Remi sits somewhere behind those walls.

Time drags by, and by the fourth time I get up to demand answers, I'm one irritation away from losing my shit.

"Officer Braga," the woman behind the desk says with forced patience, "I understand your concern, but the inmate will go through processing like everyone else until she appears before a judge and her bond is set."

Inmate.

Hearing her referred to that way makes something ugly twist in my chest. I grind my teeth and pull out my phone, fully prepared to call people above her pay grade, when movement near the doors catches my attention.

Valentina Cain rounds the corner, her phone pressed to her ear.

"Maksim, you do not need to fly out here," she says firmly. "I'm fine, I promise. And Remi is as okay as she can be right now."

“Valentina,” I say carefully.

She turns at the sound of my voice, and recognition flashes across her face.

“Baby, I’ll call you back.” She pauses, her eyes locked on me. “A friend of Remi’s.”

Hearing her call me Remi’s friend hits differently after the other night. Remi might still argue the point, but I’m starting to think I stopped believing her a while ago.

Valentina ends the call, slips her phone into her bag, then narrows her eyes at me.

“You’re Thiago, right?”

I nod. “I’ve been trying to see if there’s anything I can do, but so far, I’ve hit a wall.” My jaw tightens as I glance at the secured doors again. “Have you spoken to her? Is she okay?”

Valentina stares at me for a second before answering. “She’s fine. Mad as hell, but physically, she’s okay.”

Relief floods through me so quickly that I finally take a full breath for what feels like the first time since I saw her mugshot.

“What happened?”

Valentina glances around the station, clearly checking who might be listening in. “That’s probably not a conversation we should have here, or maybe not at all.” Her gaze returns to mine. “You should ask her yourself.”

She doesn’t seem nearly as worried as I expected, and then it clicks. These people have connections, protection, and enough money and influence to bend situations like this to their favor. Maybe even erase them entirely.

“So you came down here for her?” Valentina asks.

“A colleague let me know what was happening.”

She tilts her head, as if studying me more closely, and I get the distinct feeling I’m being evaluated.

“Remi is special, Thiago. To me and to everyone in our family.” A faint smile touches her lips, but I don’t miss the warning behind it. “I don’t need to tell you not to hurt her because I’m pretty sure you already know that.”

If she only knew.

I’m standing here pretending to be Remi’s friend while using the trust she’s given me to gather information that could eventually be used against her and everyone she loves.

And she has no fucking idea.

“I know,” I say.

Valentina holds my gaze for another second before her attention shifts past me, and relief washes over her face. I turn and see Remi stepping through a thick steel door, an officer trailing behind her, looking less than thrilled about letting her walk free. Whatever orders came down clearly weren’t optional.

Remi doesn’t acknowledge him.

She spots Valentina and heads straight for her, exhaustion and irritation written all over her face. Her hair is a mess, dried blood stains her knuckles, yet somehow, she still looks as beautiful as ever. They wrap their arms around each other, and I give them space even though I want to cross the room and touch her myself, make sure she’s okay instead of taking everyone else’s word for it.

When Remi finally lifts her head from Valentina’s shoulder, her eyes meet mine. Any relief I feel at seeing her vanishes as her expression hardens, and she walks straight past me without a word.

Valentina gives me a slight shrug before following her outside. I stand there for a moment, wondering if coming here was a mistake. After everything she’s been through tonight, the last person Remi probably wants to see is another cop. But I’m too selfish and too worried about her to care, so I head outside after them.

“Remi, wait,” I call out as I cross the parking lot.

She keeps walking.

“Remi, come on. I didn’t arrest you.” I close some of the distance between us. “That wasn’t me.”

She finally slows and says something quietly to Valentina, who gives me a long look before getting into the car.

“I’m exhausted, Braga,” Remi says. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m kind of having the day from hell.”

She still won’t look at me.

I step in front of her, gently turn her toward me, then take her hand. I expect her to pull away, but her fingers remain loosely curled in mine.

“You hit someone?” I ask, inspecting her bruises.

“They deserved it.”

I nearly laugh because I’m not even remotely surprised by that answer. My attention drops to the dried blood on her knuckles before I notice she’s

favoring one side.

My hand moves to the exposed skin along her abdomen. “They hit you?”

Anger rages through me at the thought of anyone putting their hands on her.

“Lucky shot,” she mutters with a small smile, finally lifting her eyes to mine.

My jaw clenches as I look her over again, making sure there isn’t any other injury she’s hiding from me.

Then the cop in me asks the question before the man standing here with her can think better of it.

“Why’d you run from the cops, Remi?”

I know I fucked up when her expression sours. Whatever softness she allowed between us disappears as she pulls her hand from mine and steps away.

“Goodnight, Officer Braga.”

“Remi, I didn’t mean it like that.”

But she’s already opening the passenger door, climbing inside without looking back. A second later, it slams shut.

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Twenty-Six

Remi



Sunlight cuts through the massive windows of my condo like it's a personal attack.

I groan and bury my face deeper into the couch cushion, my entire body aching from yesterday's disaster. My knuckles are bruised, my side throbs with every deep breath, and sleeping on this sofa instead of my bed didn't help.

The smell of coffee drifts through the living room along with the sound of cabinet doors opening and closing.

"You're alive." A man's voice carries from the kitchen, and panic shoots through me for one horrifying second before I recognize it.

Matteo.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, lifting my head just enough to glare at him over the back of the couch.

"Valentina," he calls out from near my espresso machine. "She said she'd be back later and told me to watch out for you."

Rolling my eyes, I drag myself upright, immediately regretting the motion.

I love Matteo. He's probably the most tolerable pain in my ass after Giovanni, but he's definitely not the person I wanted to see first thing in the morning after the night I had.

When I finally made it home, I couldn't get into the shower fast enough. I turned the water up until my skin was red, desperate to wash away the

feeling of county holding cells and stale concrete. A few hours in lockup were enough to make sure I never wanted to go through that shit again.

Valentina insisted on staying the night to keep me company and to figure out our next move with Rafe. We went over everything that happened at Furia, who might know something, and why he'd been avoiding me since the attack.

Somehow, talking about a man who may have helped set me up to be killed was easier than talking about Thiago and all the ways he's starting to fuck with my head.

Exhaustion eventually won, but I didn't stay asleep for long. Nightmares I hadn't had in years crawled back, dragging me straight into the worst night of my life. Ryuji was dying in my arms again, blood everywhere as I tried uselessly to hold him together while the pavement beneath us turned red.

I left Val asleep in my bed sometime before sunrise and curled up on the couch with some random rerun of *Criminal Minds* playing in the background. Eventually, I drifted off again. Only this time, when the dream came back, Ryuji wasn't the one bleeding out in my arms.

Thiago was.

Even thinking about it now knots my stomach. I force the image away and leave Matteo to fend for himself as I disappear into the shower, letting the hot water beat against my skin until some of the exhaustion finally eases.

I emerge wearing bike shorts and one of Gio's oversized T-shirts I stole a few months ago. Matteo is sprawled across my sofa, flipping through channels. He hands me a mug the second I drop down beside him. I breathe in the steam curling from the mug, and it smells like productivity and emotional survival.

"Who else knows?" I ask before taking my first sip.

"Just me and Gio." His attention shifts from the television to me. "But don't you think we should tell everyone? This could be connected to the same people from four years ago, Rem."

"I know."

His eyebrows pull together. "And why are they only going after you?"

I shrug, then set my cup of coffee down. "I'll fill everyone in today."

Matteo goes quiet for a moment before glancing at the blanket still tangled at the other end of the couch.

“You slept out here?”

“Eventually.”

“With Val in your bed?”

“Why are you asking so many questions before I’ve had a chance to drink my coffee?”

“Because I know you.” He stares at me for another second. “You okay?”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I lie, offering him a smile.

“Sure it wasn’t.” His expression tells me he doesn’t believe a word of it, but thankfully, he knows me well enough not to push me when I’m not ready to talk. Leaning in, he presses a kiss to my cheek. “You know you don’t always have to pretend you’re fine with us, right?”

“I’m not pretending.”

“Right.”

I shove his shoulder, and he laughs as he gets to his feet.

“I gotta go. I promised Zara I’d bust her out of dance camp today and take her to the zoo.”

I laugh as I follow him toward the door, leaving my untouched coffee on the table.

“Didn’t they just get back into town two days ago? And you’re already pulling her out?”

“That,” he says smugly as he grabs his keys, “is exactly what I’m here for.”

“You’re a terrible influence.”

“I prefer fun older brother.”

“Of course you do.” I pull him into a hug. “Give Zara a big kiss from me and tell her I’ll see her soon.”

“Will do.”

With one last squeeze, Matteo disappears into the hallway.

It isn’t until I close my front door that something clicks. If no one knows about my arrest, how the hell did the charges get dropped so quickly? I hurry across the living room to find my phone. Val needs to know, but maybe Maksim pulled strings without telling her.

“That has to be it,” I mutter to myself.

The second I unlock my screen, a knock echoes through the condo, and I turn toward the door, assuming Matteo has probably forgotten something.

“I’m coming,” I yell, hopping over an ottoman and jogging across the room for the second time in less than a minute.

Expecting to find my cousin, I swing open the door, only to come face-to-face with the very man I spent half the night dreaming about, bleeding to death in my arms.

All I can do is stare at Thiago while my brain catches up with the fact that he's actually standing here.

I peer around his shoulder before glancing down at my phone. "How did you get up here? I never received a notification."

He tries to step forward, but I don't budge. I always have to tilt my head back to look at this man, and I hate what that alone does to my insides.

"Matteo let me up," he says, making another attempt to cross the threshold.

Of course Matteo fucking did. He gave me no warning or heads-up, just casually delivered a six-foot-six emotional crisis to my front door.

I place my hands on my hips and scowl at him. I can't tell whether I'm pissed at Thiago or just angry at life and everything swirling around me right now. It doesn't help that every time I look at his face, I see the nightmare.

"What do you want?"

"To talk."

"Look, I'm not exactly in the mood for guests. I have important things to deal with and—"

"Remi, we both know that's bullshit."

My mouth parts. "Excuse you?"

"I just want to talk," he says, his voice gentler. "Give me ten minutes, and then I'll leave you alone. I promise."

Something inside me finally snaps.

"No. You don't get to show up here and decide when I have to talk to you." I step closer, and all the frustration I've been choking down since last night suddenly spills out.

"I was chased through the fucking county by cops, Braga. I was cuffed, shoved into a holding cell, and spent hours staring at concrete walls."

A flash of guilt crosses his face, but I'm not done.

"And now I wake up to another cop at my fucking door telling me he wants to talk?" I let out a sharp laugh. "Read the room."

"Remi, I'm not here as a cop."

"I don't care what you're here as." I point toward the hallway. "I want you to leave."

“Just give me a chance to explain.”

“I don’t want an explanation, Braga. I want you gone.”

I turn away from him, but his fingers close around my wrist. My gaze drops to his hand, then slowly lifts to his face.

“Let. Go.”

“Remi, just listen to me.”

“I said let go.”

He doesn’t, and that’s the last fucking straw.

I spin and drive my fist straight into his abdomen, or into the brick wall cosplaying as one. Pain shoots through my already-bruised knuckles, but I ignore it.

I was trained better than that.

My next punch lands on his ribs and finally draws a grunt from him.

“Remi, stop.”

But now I’m the one not listening.

I twist out of his grip and drive my elbow toward his jaw. He catches my forearm before it can connect, so I pivot and sweep my leg behind his knee, knocking him off balance by a step.

“Remi…”

Ripping free, I throw another punch straight at his throat. Thiago blocks it, but not cleanly, and my knuckles clip his jaw, snapping his head to the side.

“That all you got, Officer?” I hiss.

His head turns slowly back toward me, and the fire in his eyes pushes all the wrong buttons. Then he comes at me for real.

Thiago catches my wrist again, but I move with him instead of fighting against his strength. I twist beneath his arm, drive my fist into his ribs, and slam my shoulder into his chest.

He barely fucking moves.

Most men would already be on the floor by now, but Thiago absorbs the hit and looks down at me as if I just confirmed something he’s been wondering about.

“Jesus,” he mutters, sounding almost impressed.

My gaze darts to the foyer table and the hidden compartment beneath it, where I keep one of my blades.

Thiago follows my eyes.

I move anyway, but I barely take two steps before his arm hooks around my waist and yanks me back against him. I drive my elbow behind me, catching part of his ribs, but he holds on as I twist and fight to get free.

“Remi, enough.”

“Fuck you.”

Planting my foot, I use his weight against him, throwing us both off balance. We crash onto the hardwood together, and the impact knocks the air from my lungs.

I immediately try to roll away, but Thiago recovers faster.

He catches both my wrists now and pins them beside my head before I can get enough leverage to throw him off. His body settles over mine as we fight to catch our breaths, neither of us willing to look away.

Any other man would’ve caught a bullet long before we ever got here. But Thiago doesn’t scare me, and that’s precisely the fucking problem. I know what it feels like when someone is trying to hurt me. This isn’t that. This is something far more dangerous.

It’s foreplay.

And if the look in his eyes is anything to go by, he knows exactly what this has become, too.

“You’re fucking heavy,” I hiss, arching my back in a useless attempt to throw him off.

The problem is that I’m not trying nearly as hard as I could. His gaze drifts down my body before slowly returning to my face.

“Why are you so stubborn?” he asks, his mouth brushing my ear. “I’m done, Remi.”

“Done?”

“Yeah.” His voice drops. “Done being nice.”

Heat rushes through me at the threat in those words, which only pisses me off even more.

“Are you now?”

He nods as his nose trails along the side of my throat, and my eyes close despite every reason they shouldn’t.

“*Você é uma fera*,” he murmurs against my skin.

A beast. A wild thing.

And coming from him, it sounds nothing like an insult.

I take a moment to steady my breathing before trusting myself to speak.

“What do you want from me?”

His lips graze mine, barely there, and the inhale that leaves him sounds almost tortured.

Some ridiculous part of my brain chooses this exact moment to be grateful I never touched the coffee Matteo made me. I guess coffee breath is where I draw the line while pinned beneath a man I was trying to punch thirty seconds ago.

His entire body stiffens as if he's fighting for control just as much as I am. But instead of destroying the last fragile shred of restraint between us, he shifts his weight and flips me onto my stomach.

"What the fuck?"

My cheek meets the floor as he pulls my wrists behind my back. I twist beneath him, but cold metal locks around one wrist before I can wrench myself free.

"Don't you fucking dare."

The second cuff clicks into place. After everything I went through last night, being handcuffed again sends my temper straight through the fucking roof.

"Thiago," I warn, struggling against his grip, "if you keep these on me, I will slit your throat at the first chance I get."

"I know you will."

The bastard actually sounds sincere. His hands close around my waist, and he hoists me over his shoulder like a sack of goddamn potatoes.

Oh, he's fucking dead.

"Put me down," I snap, kicking against him. "And uncuff me. Now."

"Not until you hear me out first."

There's a saying for situations like this. Something about keeping a cool head and playing the game long enough to get what you want.

If violence isn't solving your problems, you're not using enough of it.

No, that's definitely not the one.

Something about catching flies with honey instead of vinegar.

That's the one.

I stop fighting and consider my options.

The sooner I cooperate, the sooner he'll let me go, and then I can properly throat punch him.

"Fine," I mutter. "I'll let you have your little kink. Just know this won't end well for you."

A laugh rumbles out of him before he drops onto the sofa with me still thrown over his shoulder, then shifts me across his lap as if it takes no effort at all.

Deeply offensive.

Even worse is how quickly my body reacts to being pressed against him.

You are not actually falling for this caveman bullshit, are you?

Unfortunately, I absolutely am.

I keep my expression flat anyway and glare at him.

“Talk fast.”

“First,” he says, one hand resting firmly against my hip, “I owe you an apology for last night. I shouldn’t have asked that question when I did.”

I look away as if I’m completely unaffected, trying very hard not to focus on the fact that this man is obnoxiously large and painfully warm beneath me.

“I came here because I wanted to see you.” He pauses. “And because I wanted to be the first to tell you what happened.”

The change in his tone pulls my attention back to him.

“What happened now?”

He hesitates before answering. “Your mugshot is trending.”

I stare at him for a breath, then smile.

“As it should. What can I say? Give a girl the perfect red lip, and she’ll rule the goddamn world.”

Thiago rolls his eyes. “I’m glad you find this amusing. You haven’t seen the vile shit people are saying online.”

“Why would I care what a bunch of strangers think about me?”

“Of course you don’t. You’re fucking reckless.”

I still don’t know what to make of this man. I tell him to leave, and he refuses. I swing at him, and he cuffs me. Now he’s sitting here pissed off because strangers on the internet are looking at me.

Maybe I’m done trying to figure him out. And maybe I’m done fighting whatever this is between us too. A smile curves across my mouth as I lean closer and brush my lips along the edge of his jaw.

“You know, Officer Braga,” I say softly, “what if the only opinion I care about is yours?”

His hand leaves my waist, and he waits until my eyes meet his before grabbing a handful of my ass and pulling me tighter against him. The

sudden movement steals my breath as his other hand slides around the back of my neck and into my hair.

“Well?” I whisper. “What do you have to say?”

“What do you want to hear?” His grip on me tightens. “That I fucking hate knowing your face is all over the internet for every asshole to fantasize about?”

“Why?” I ask, rolling my hips just enough to test him.

His nostrils flare as he draws a slow breath.

“Because they don’t deserve you,” he says, his voice dropping. “You don’t belong to them, Remi.”

“No?”

“Fuck no.”

A smile threatens my lips, but I hold his gaze as I move against him again.

“And exactly who do I belong to, Officer Braga?”

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Twenty-Seven

Thiago



Her question hangs between us, the answer on the tip of my tongue, dangerously close to slipping free.

Mine.

The thought comes too easily, and that alone should scare the hell out of me.

She has no idea I was drawn to her long before that night on the road or at the tattoo shop, before pizza, snakes, and late-night conversations in her condo. Before she ever looked at me with those extraordinary blue eyes that somehow make me feel like I'm the one being hunted.

It started the night her face appeared on that screen in Texas, when I told myself she was just another job. I didn't know it then, but I was already paying too much attention to her. All I know now is that the professional boundaries I once had with Remi Cain are disappearing fast. I can't keep my distance from her the way Elena demands, and every time Remi lets me in, walking away becomes a little harder.

Right now, with her in my lap, her wrists cuffed behind her back and her lips parted just enough to ruin me, I know one thing with absolute certainty: I'm losing my fucking grip where she's concerned.

"Well?" she asks, taunting me as she shifts in my lap, rubbing against the erection trapped between us and making coherent thought nearly impossible.

"Remi," I scrape out, pressing my forehead against hers. "Remi, Remi…what the hell are you doing to me?"

Her smile curls slowly, as if she already knows she's won. Maybe she has, but for the first time in a long time, I don't think I care.

"Take the cuffs off," she whispers. "And let me show you."

The tip of her tongue brushes my cheek, and whatever control I have left takes another fucking hit. I'm too consumed by her to think straight, too far gone to care that I should stop.

"Or better yet…" She looks directly at me. "Don't."

I know she feels it too. This is our last chance to stop whatever the fuck we're doing.

Neither of us takes it.

Our mouths collide after weeks of tension, curiosity, and restraint. She matches every ounce of chaos I throw at her, biting my lip and drawing a groan from my chest as I pull her closer. I thought I remembered what she tasted like, that I'd memorized the feel of her from our fleeting touches and near misses. I was fucking wrong. The memory in my head doesn't even come close to the real thing.

"Fuck," I rasp as she rolls her hips again, smiling against my mouth.

"Is this what you meant when you said you wanted to talk?"

I tighten my grip on her hair, and the small hiss that escapes her only makes me want her more. "You're making that very difficult."

"Good."

I kiss her again, more slowly, savoring every second as my hand leaves her hair and slips beneath the hem of her shirt.

"Remi…"

"Shut up," she murmurs, tipping her chin as my mouth trails along the side of her neck.

"You still threatening to kill me?" I ask against her skin.

"Yes." Her answer catches on a breath. "But maybe later."

My hand moves higher, and my thumb brushes against something small and metallic under her bra.

She has a piercing.

Fuck me.

Her teeth sink into her bottom lip as I trace it again, and curiosity gets the better of me.

"Later?" I ask, discovering another piece of jewelry on her other nipple. "After I fuck you in your living room?"

She laughs breathlessly as I reach for the clasp of her bra.

“Aren’t you cocky?”

“Then tell me to stop.”

She doesn’t.

Instead, she leans into me, making her answer perfectly clear, and I give her exactly what we both want. I grip the front of her T-shirt and rip it down the middle, revealing her pretty brown nipples, each pierced with a silver barbell capped with diamonds at either end.

I look down at them before lifting my gaze back to her.

“What? You thought you had me all figured out?”

I laugh. “Not even fucking close.”

“That’s the point.”

There’s something almost smug about the way she says it, as if keeping me guessing is half the fun for her.

I hook a finger beneath the torn edge of her shirt and tug her toward me.

“You really enjoy fucking with me, don’t you?”

“Immensely.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that impression.”

Her smile widens as she leans in, stopping with her mouth barely touching mine, breath uneven. “Then shut me up.”

My hand glides along her waist as I kiss her again, and she meets me without hesitation. The anger from earlier has burned away.

“Last chance, *fera*.”

She leans in and presses her mouth against mine. “I already told you to shut me up.”

I kiss her again, and whatever happens after this, there’s no pretending we crossed this line by accident.

We chose it.

I lower my mouth to her chest and close my lips around one of her piercings. The metal is warm against my tongue as I trace it. Remi arches into me with a sharp breath as I gently draw the barbell between my teeth. Then I shift to the other, giving it the same slow attention. Her head tips back, her cuffed hands flexing behind her as if she’s dying to get them on me.

By the time I return to the first piercing, she’s restless against me. Remi settles over my thigh, and my hands instinctively close around her hips as she rocks her cunt against me, another moan slipping between us.

It goes straight to my cock. I kiss her as she keeps moving, swallowing the next little noise she makes. Each one gets a little less restrained until I'm fucking addicted to hearing them. I break the kiss and drag my lips along her jaw, then down the side of her neck. She tilts her head to give me more room.

One hand slides slowly up her body until my fingers curl around her throat. Her attention snaps to me as my thumb brushes her skin, her pulse racing beneath my palm while the steady movement of her hips never stops.

"I want to watch all that attitude disappear when you come for me, *fera*. I already know you're going to look fucking beautiful.".

"You sound pretty confident."

"I am."

She rolls her hips again, and a breath slips out that she clearly didn't mean to let me hear.

"That sound right there. Give me another one."

Her eyes hold mine.

"Then give me a reason to."

Fuck.

Remi's lips part as she moves against me, soft moans slipping free despite her best efforts to swallow them.

"That's it," I tell her, tightening my hand at her hip. "Don't hold back on me now."

"I'm not."

"Liar."

She glares at me, but the look loses some of its bite when I pull her tighter against my thigh. Her forehead drops against mine, and the confidence she started with begins to crack as her rhythm grows more erratic.

"Thiago."

The way she says my name nearly has me busting in my fucking pants.

"Again."

She pulls back to look at me. "What?"

"Say my name again."

Her brows draw together, but I can feel how close she is to losing that attitude completely.

"Thiago."

"Fuck, I like my name in your mouth."

I kiss her, swallowing the next sound she makes before breaking away to see her face.

“No.” My hand slides into her hair, holding her right where I want her. “I told you I wanted to watch.”

Her cheeks are flushed now, each breath coming short and uneven as she keeps her eyes on mine.

“I fucking hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

She tries to laugh, but it catches halfway out when her movements falter and her arms tense behind her as the last of that stubborn control finally shatters.

I don’t look away. I watch her fall apart, the woman who has fought me from the moment we met shuddering against me as pleasure takes over.

I keep one hand at her waist while she catches her breath, taking in the flush covering her cheeks.

“Beautiful,” I murmur.

Her lashes lift.

“Shut up, Braga.”

I laugh and kiss her.

There’s my girl.

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Twenty-Eight

Thiago



I’m nowhere near finished with her. Watching Remi lose herself for me only made me hungrier. I kiss her again, deeper this time, as my hands glide down her sides and hook beneath the elastic waistband of her bike shorts.

She realizes what I’m doing right as I pull.

“Thiago, wait!”

The warning in my name does absolutely nothing to stop me. I tear the waistband and drag the ruined fabric away, earning a look from her that promises violence later.

“Those were expensive.”

“Send me the bill.”

Remi’s glare barely lasts before I lift her from my lap and set her on the cushion. I wanted to watch her break for me, and she did. Now I want more.

Her breathing is still ragged when she whispers, “Uncuff me.”

I reach into my pocket for the key and unlock one, then the other.

“Put your hands on the back of the couch.”

She does as she’s told, reaching forward and curling her fingers over the top.

“Spread your thighs for me.”

Again, she slowly opens them for me, and I slide my hands down her legs as I lower myself to the floor between them.

And I just fucking stare.

Pink cheeks. Lips swollen from my kisses. Her chest rising and falling with each unsteady breath. Her torn clothes leave almost nothing hidden from me, and the sight of her sitting there with her thighs spread, pussy dripping through her panties, watching me like she's waiting to see what comes next makes my cock fucking throb.

It strains painfully against my sweatpants, and shifting against the pressure does nothing to help.

God, she's beautiful.

Even with her hair a mess from my hands, knowing I'm the reason she looks this thoroughly wrecked only makes me want to do it all over again.

My palms slide along the insides of her thighs, and her muscles tense.

Fuck, I could stay right here all day.

"I want you to come all over my fucking mouth this time," I tell her. "Think you can do that?"

That familiar challenge flashes across her face.

"I think that depends on you, Braga."

I grin. "Then keep those pretty eyes on me."

Slipping the soaked red strip of underwear to the side, I inhale, nearly coming from her scent alone. Gripping one ass cheek, I drag her toward the edge of the couch and put my mouth on her, my tongue sliding along her slit.

A moan spills from her lips as her chin tips upward.

"I said eyes on me, *fera*."

Her chin lowers again, and she meets my eyes.

"Fuck. You taste so fucking good."

With another shaky breath, her hips shift toward me, and she bites down on her bottom lip, trying to contain the next sound, but I hear it anyway. Her gaze starts to slip before she catches herself, determined to give me exactly what I asked for.

I fucking love watching her try.

My tongue drags over her again as my hands curl around her thighs.

"And you feel even better when you start losing control for me."

The Remi who was threatening to slit my throat minutes ago is still there, stubbornly fighting to hold herself together even now. But her flushed cheeks and trembling thighs are betraying her.

And I already know I'm going to need more of her.

I’m going to crave her after I leave this condo, when I wake up tomorrow, and every fucking time she gets near me and reminds me what it feels like to have her like this.

Goddamn, I’m already addicted.

Her teeth release her lip on a shaky breath, and this time, her eyes close.

“No, no, you keep looking at me,” I murmur against her swollen clit, flicking it with my tongue.

She cries out and opens her eyes, finding mine as her fingers plunge into my hair. Grabbing a fistful, she pulls, sending a sharp sting across my scalp that drags a groan from my chest.

“You like that,” she breathes as her grip tightens.

“Fuck, yeah. Pull harder.”

A soft laugh slips from her, only to break into a gasp when she tugs my head against her and grinds against my mouth.

Watching her take exactly what she needs from me brings out a possessiveness I have no business feeling. I want to give her everything she can take and then push her for more.

“*Isso, porra. Usa minha boca*.*”

I slide one hand between her thighs and ease two fingers inside her while my tongue stays on her clit. Her hips jerk against me.

“Fuck. Curl your fingers. Make me come.”

I do exactly what she commands, stroking her slowly while keeping the same rhythm against her clit. One hand stays buried in my hair, guiding me exactly where she wants me, while the other braces against the couch.

I fucking love seeing this side of her.

The woman who always has something ready to throw back at me is slowly losing the ability to form words. A broken moan escapes her, her thighs trembling as she fights to keep looking at me.

“Don’t fight it,” I murmur against her. “Let me have you.”

Her hand tightens in my hair as she looks down at me, flushed and breathless. “You already do.”

The words affect me in a way they shouldn’t. Heat and hunger are easy. I know what to do with those. But hearing her say I already have her makes me want to forget how much of myself I’m still hiding from her.

Then Remi rolls her hips, dragging me straight back into the moment.

“Thiago…”

I work my fingers deeper inside her.

“Come on, baby. Give me another.”

She yanks my hair as she clenches around me, and I watch her lose herself all over again. Her head tips back, her chest rising rapidly as each pulse moves through her until she finally goes slack against the couch.

I slowly pull free and bring my fingers to my mouth. Remi watches me suck them clean, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

But I’m a greedy motherfucker when it comes to her, and she’s so damn sweet that I can’t bring myself to stop. Not when she’s crying out my name or when her body twists beneath my hands as if she can’t decide whether to escape the sensation or chase more of it.

I grip her ass and lower my mouth to her again, licking up every drop as she writhes beneath my tongue.

“No, no…Thiago. Fuck, fuck.”

I finally force myself away from her, but my cock is fucking aching now, and tasting her only makes me want to be inside her even more.

Rising from between her thighs, I trail slow kisses up her back. Tremors still ripple through her as I make my way to her shoulder, brushing her hair aside before pressing my lips beneath her ear..

“Tell me you have a condom.”

She turns to look at me. “Why?”

“Because I need you, Remi.” I brace my hands at her hips. “And I need you now.”

“Someone’s impatient,” she says with a grin.

“You have no fucking idea.”

“Side table. Top drawer.”

I drag myself away from her and cross the room. Yanking open the drawer, I find the condoms tucked inside and grab one.

When I turn around, I stop.

Remi has stripped away what was left of her torn clothes and tossed them onto the floor. She stands beside the couch completely bare, hair thoroughly fucked from my hands, cheeks still flushed, and those silver barbells catching the light.

Fuck me.

My gaze slowly travels over the woman I’ve been trying and failing to get out of my fucking head. She starts toward me.

There’s no hesitation in her now. She takes her time crossing the few feet between us, watching me as my entire body reacts to every step. By the

time she reaches me, breathing has become a fucking chore.

The corner of her mouth lifts as she takes in my face.

“I think I like you like this,” she murmurs.

“Like me how?”

“With my cum on your face.”

I stare at her, then laugh as I drag my tongue along my bottom lip, tasting her again. “Yeah, I like it too.”

“I know,” she says, taking the condom from my hand and trailing the wrapper up my stomach and over my chest before pressing it to my mouth.

I open for her, catching the wrapper between my teeth.

Remi hooks her fingers beneath the hem of my shirt and starts dragging it upward. She gets it past my stomach and halfway up my chest before she stretches onto her toes.

“A little help?”

I laugh around the condom and lift my arms as she pulls the shirt higher until my height finally wins the battle. Grabbing the back of it, I yank it over my head, tossing it somewhere behind me. Her gaze travels across my bare chest as her palms glide across my skin. She leans in, pressing a slow kiss over my heart, and the tenderness of it catches me completely off guard. Then her hands drift lower to the waistband of my sweatpants. She pushes them down with my boxer briefs, and as soon as they clear my hips, she freezes.

Suddenly, Remi has absolutely nothing to say.

Her lips part as she takes me in, her attention dropping first to my cock and then to the metal pierced through it.

“Well, that seems fucking excessive.”

The condom wrapper shifts between my teeth as I fight a grin. Remi steps closer and rises onto her toes, taking the packet from my mouth before tearing it open. She rolls the condom into place as I lean in, speaking against her ear.

“You’re already thinking about what that’s going to feel like when I fuck you, aren’t you?”

Her hand pauses on me, and she looks up through her lashes.

“Maybe I’m trying to get this fucking condom on you without dropping to my knees first.”

Fuck.

I brush my mouth over her cheek.

“You know, you make it really fucking hard to remember I’m supposed to be the one in control here.”

She finishes rolling the condom down and wraps her fingers around me.

“Who made that arrangement?”

My hand closes around her throat, and her chin tips up, that little smile staying right where it is. I kiss her hard, then hook one arm beneath her ass and lift her off the floor in one smooth motion. Her legs wrap around my waist as I carry her to the couch.

God, I need to fuck her. I want to be inside her so fucking badly I can barely think straight, to feel her wrapped around me with nothing between us but the thin barrier she just put there.

Remi pulls me to her as soon as we hit the cushions.

“*Fera*, tell me you want this.”

Her lips brush mine when she answers. “I think I’ve made that pretty fucking obvious.”

“Say it anyway.”

Her hand slides around the back of my neck, fingers tangling into my hair as she pulls me down to her.

“Officer Braga, I want you to fuck me.”

I go still.

“Say that again.”

She drags her nails lightly over my scalp. “Officer Braga.”

Fuck.

“Say it again when I’m inside you.”

“Then get inside me.”

I kiss her hard and guide myself into her slowly. Her fingers find mine, and I lace them together, holding her hand against the couch.

I’m not even halfway in when she gasps against my shoulder, her entire body going rigid beneath me.

“Fuck…Thiago…wait.”

I stop immediately.

“I know.” I press my lips beneath her ear. “Breathe, baby. I’m not moving.”

Her fingers squeeze mine as she draws in a slow breath. I stay still, letting my lips travel along her throat until the tension in her thighs starts to ease and her grip on my hand loosens.

“Jesus, you’re fucking huge,” she mutters.

My mouth twitches against her skin. “You want me to stop?”

“No.” She carefully rolls her hips, taking a little more on her own. “Just give me a fucking minute.”

I laugh softly against her neck. “You’ve got it.”

She breathes through the movement, working herself farther down my length before pausing. Her nails press into my hand, but this time the tension leaves her faster.

I don’t move until she does.

Remi takes another inch, her thighs tightening around my waist. She exhales slowly, then turns her face toward mine and kisses me.

“More,” she murmurs against my mouth. “Give it to me.”

I press deeper. “Take it. It’s all yours.”

I’ve wanted to have this woman for so long, but wanting her and finally being inside her are two completely different things. Every time she moves beneath me, whatever control I thought I had over this gets harder to hold on to.

I’m already too far gone.

Remi breaks away. “Braga.”

There’s a warning in the way she says my name, but the smile on her lips tells a completely different story.

“What?”

“If you start being gentle with me now, I’m going to be really fucking disappointed.”

My hand slides up her throat as I drive into her harder, and her fingers clamp around mine with a sharp cry.

“Like that. God, just like that,” she breathes.

I bury my face against her neck, kissing and biting my way toward her shoulder as she matches every thrust with one of her own. Her free hand hooks around my neck, her nails scraping across my skin.

All I can think about is her. The sounds she makes, the way she feels around me, her tits bouncing with every thrust as she demands more, like there’s any fucking chance I could deny her.

I lift my gaze and take her in, wild and flushed beneath me, and that same possessive thought comes rushing back.

Mine.

Before she can guess what I’m about to do, I shift my weight, slip out, and flip her over. Remi gasps as she lands on her stomach and looks back at

me over her shoulder.

“Hold on to the arm of the couch.”

Her eyebrows lift.

“Is that an order, Officer Braga?”

“Yeah, that’s a fucking order.”

Her lips curve as she reaches forward and wraps both hands around the arm of the sofa. “Then make it worth listening to.”

Fuck, she really does love pushing me.

I gather her hair into my fist and draw her head back toward me. That smile only widens. “You ever know when to quit?”

“Not when I’m having fun.”

I lean over her, bringing my mouth close to her ear. “Then hold on.”

Settling behind her, one hand still tangled in her hair, I slide my other arm around her waist and pull her back against my chest. A sharp inhale leaves her when I push inside, and I groan at the feel of her around me again.

She tightens her hold on the arm of the couch as I start moving.

“That all you’ve got, Officer Braga?”

I loosen my grip around her waist and guide her forward again until she’s braced against the couch. My palm comes down across her ass. Her entire body jolts as a startled moan slips from her, but that smile is still there when she glances over her shoulder.

“Was that supposed to scare me?”

I bend over her, bringing my mouth close to her ear. “No.”

“Good. Do it again.”

I give her exactly what she asked for.

Her reaction is completely different this time, half gasp and half moan. Her head dips, but when she looks back at me again, she’s still fucking smiling.

“You’re trouble,” I mutter.

“You like trouble.”

I fucking love this particular kind.

My hand slides around her waist as I press my lips to the back of her shoulder, trailing them toward her neck as she grows more restless beneath me.

There’s nothing left in my head except her. Every reaction drags me deeper into this. Every time she reaches for me or demands more, I want to

give her everything I have until neither of us remembers why this was ever supposed to be a bad idea.

Her head turns toward me, searching for a kiss, and I meet her halfway. It's messy and hungry, breaking when a moan slips between us.

"Don't stop."

"I'm not stopping."

There's no fucking chance I could. Not with her like this, pushing back against me and asking for more with every movement, so I wrap an arm around her waist as the rhythm between us builds, feeling the first tremors working through her. She's almost there, and realizing I'm right behind her makes it even harder to hold back.

This time, I want to come with her.

Her body tightens around me, and I curse against her shoulder.

"Oh fuck, Remi. Your pussy feels so fucking good."

She pushes back against me with everything she has, meeting every thrust with the same intensity as she starts to unravel beneath me.

"Fuck, baby, I'm right there. Come on my cock. Come with me."

Her fingers clamp around the couch as a cry breaks from her, her body pulsing around me as she comes.

That fucking does it.

My hips jerk against her as I follow, every muscle locking as I drop my head against her back.

I stay folded over her, chest pressed to her back while both of us fight to catch our breaths. Her fingers slowly loosen from the couch, and I press a kiss the damp skin beneath her ear. Whatever I thought one night with Remi would cure, I was dead fucking wrong.

I turn her over beneath me, and her eyebrow quirks when she realizes I have no intention of moving away. She's still breathing hard when she looks up at me.

"What?"

I brush my thumb across her swollen bottom lip.

"I'm not done with you yet."

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* That's it, fuck. Use my mouth.

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Twenty-Nine

Remi



Ten, twenty, maybe thirty minutes pass before my body and brain start functioning again. I'm still staring at my ceiling, noticing little grooves I'm pretty sure weren't there before today. And is that a new color?

I close my eyes and shake my head, trying to clear the daze I seem trapped in.

Fucked nine ways to hell by a cop.

A cop with a dick that had absolutely no business being that fucking big. And pierced. Seriously. Six foot six wasn't enough? The universe had to make him proportionate too?

Remi, you dumb bitch.

You stupid, stupid, utterly satisfied dumb bitch.

"Say something," he mutters into my shoulder.

I can't look at him yet. It will make this all too real, and I don't think I'm ready to face reality and what it means. My knuckles whiten around the throw blanket on the floor beside me.

"Thank you. I needed that."

It's not a lie. We could all use a little soul rearranging now and then, especially after hours in a dingy cell.

Thiago lets out a hearty laugh, and I almost join him.

"My pleasure." His slight Texan drawl slips out, forcing me to clench my thighs and come to terms with the fact that I really enjoyed sex with Thiago.

Enough that apparently being thoroughly wrecked three times wasn't enough to keep my body from considering a fourth.

And why the fuck not?

I finally turn over to face him. His curls are disheveled, falling over his forehead, and my fingers itch to touch them. He's so damn handsome for no reason.

"This isn't what you think."

Sliding an arm around my waist, he pulls me closer. "What is it you think I think?"

"This thing between us...it's just fucking. That's it."

"We have a thing? And it's fucking? As in, more fucking is in our future? Sounds great to me."

I scoff. "Don't get cocky."

"Can't help that," he says, throwing one of his enormous legs over mine until our bodies are flush together.

A strange feeling comes over me, one I haven't felt in...maybe ever.

I'm not the type to ask for help or look to others for safety. Slay your own dragons. Stab your own creepy men. That's always been my energy. But with Thiago wrapped around me like this, my head finally quiets.

I look up at him. "I'm not looking for a boyfriend, Braga."

"Good. Me neither," he says with a grin.

I sigh, stifling a laugh. "I mean it. No strings, no expectations."

"So friends with benefits."

It's not a question.

"I thought I told you, we're not friends."

He's hard again, his dick pressing against my stomach. "This seems pretty friendly to me."

"You know what I mean," I say, trying to untangle myself from him, but he keeps me firmly in place.

"You know what, *fera*? You're right. We're not friends yet, but if you don't mind, I'd like to be."

Friends with a cop. Is this what my life has come to?

Considering I'm naked on my couch with his dick against my stomach after letting him fuck me into another dimension, I think that question has already been answered.

Yes.

Absolutely yes.

Before I can say another word, he gently takes my hand and brings it into view. His thumb brushes the faint pink marks around my wrists from the cuffs, but those aren't what hold his attention. It's the bruises and split skin on my knuckles.

"Can you tell me what happened out there?"

I swallow hard, tempering my rage when I think about Rafe and about being arrested. I debate how much to tell him, or whether to say anything at all.

Am I really about to narc on myself?

He must notice the internal battle because he reaches up and tilts my chin. And I'm disgusted by how intensely he makes my stomach flutter.

"It's okay if you don't—"

"Off the books?" I cut in.

Thiago hesitates, then sighs and nods.

"Off the books," he repeats.

"Someone I thought was a friend betrayed me. He lied. The kind of lie you don't come back from. And he deserved everything he got."

All the humor vanishes from Thiago's face as he listens.

"I'm a firm believer in the saying that when someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time."

"I'm sorry about your friend," he says, his thumb now slowly brushing back and forth across my lower lip.

I shrug. "He's dead to me. No second chances."

Thiago stills. "You forgave me, Remi. Why?"

That's the million-dollar question.

I don't really have an answer other than maybe I've lost it. It's my turn to reach up and drum my fingertips against his jaw.

"Don't fuck this up. Because then I'd have to kill you."

For the briefest fraction of a second, something flashes across his face, but it's gone before I can make sense of it. Then he tugs me forward and presses his mouth to mine.

I hadn't kissed anyone since Ryuji, but now I'm wondering if I've ever been kissed at all.

Thiago is the right kind of passion meets dominance. He knows exactly what to give, what to take, and how to leave me breathless and craving more. Maybe that's why I've never stopped thinking about him since the day I climbed him like a fucking tree and tasted his lips for the first time.

He sits up, pulling me with him until I’m straddling his lap, the same position that got me into this mess in the first place.

“Hey, Braga,” I murmur between kisses.

“Hmm,” he all but growls.

My hair is in his fist again, the delicious sting forcing my eyes shut as he tips my head back and kisses along my chin, down the front of my throat to my clavicle.

“You can’t fuck anyone else while you and I are doing this...thing.”

I roll my hips against him, imagining what he’d feel like without any barrier between us.

“So we’re exclusive?”

This time, I can’t suppress a laugh fast enough, but it dies the moment he grabs my jaw.

“No one else.” His expression turns serious, sending shivers down my spine.

“No one.”

“Then that answers your question then.”

“What question?” I manage to ask just as his thumb flicks my nipple piercing.

“Mine.”

My heart stutters at the gravel in his voice as he says it.

“Yours?” I tease, my tone surprisingly composed despite feeling like I’m melting on the inside.

“Yeah. You asked who you belonged to. If I’m exclusively fucking you, then that makes you mine.”

Fuck.

“Does it now?” I murmur as his teeth clasp the metal of one of my nipple rings and tug just enough to make me gasp.

“Your cum is still drying on my face, Remi.”

My eyes just might migrate to the back of my head.

Get a hold of yourself. He’s just a man. And two can play that game.

I reach between us and wrap my fingers around his thick cock, pumping twice as my thumb presses against his piercing.

“For now.”

“We’ll see about that.”

The teasing fades as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I pulled some strings for you last night.”

There it is.

“What? That was you?”

I tap the arm wrapped around me, and after a moment of hesitation, he lets me go. I grab my clothes from the floor and turn to face him, my pulse racing for an entirely different reason. Thiago has only been in Philly for two months. He told me so himself. There’s no way in hell he has that kind of pull.

He rises to his feet with a look of confusion.

“What’s wrong? I thought you’d be happy that—”

“That wasn’t just pulling strings, Braga. Those were serious charges.”

My brain starts firing a mile a minute, connecting dots that refuse to form a picture.

“Remi—”

“No.” I shake my head. “You told me you were SWAT. You told me you were new here. So explain to me how a guy who’s barely unpacked his boxes somehow has enough influence to make aggravated battery, fleeing and eluding, and reckless driving vanish in a matter of hours.”

The room suddenly feels smaller because, for the second time since I met him, I’m wondering what else he hasn’t told me.

No second chances.

I should make him leave. Call it all off. Forget it ever happened. But goddamnit, I don’t want to. I look at him, silently pleading for the truth, no matter what it looks like.

He draws a deep breath and takes a step closer.

“I told you who my father was. Using his name, his legacy, to bend the rules isn’t something I’m proud of. But if it meant getting you out of that cell, reducing your charges, or eliminating them altogether, then so be it.”

“You barely know me.”

Thiago slips his hand into mine. “And I already told you that I want to change that.”

I stare at our joined hands, wanting to believe him. Maybe part of me already does. But there’s something in all this that still doesn’t fit.

“Your father was a detective in Miami. A good one, from what you’ve told me.”

“Yeah.”

“And somehow his name reaches all the way to Philadelphia and gets felony charges dropped overnight?”

The question burns between us as I study his face, waiting for a twitch, a nervous tell, anything that might give him away. Yet his expression never cracks.

“People still respect him.”

He could be right. But respect and influence aren’t the same thing.

My gut twists, and that same instinct that warned me about Rafe starts whispering again. Not loud enough to drown out everything I feel for Thiago, but loud enough that I can’t ignore it.

“Hey,” he says, pulling me against him. I make no effort to pull away.

“There are things that happen behind the scenes, things I don’t want to get into with you.” His fingers slide beneath my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. “People owed me favors, Remi. That’s all I can say.” He pauses, his jaw flexing. “And I hope it doesn’t change how you see me.”

“As a cop?”

“Yeah.”

Just as I start to answer, the front door swings open.

Only four people have biometric access to my unit: my parents, Gio, and Valentina. The first three know damn well they’re supposed to knock, so, with my ass on full display and Thiago very, very naked, I send up a quick prayer that the person standing behind me is the only one who routinely ignores that rule.

“Oh, shit. Bad timing.”

A wave of relief washes over me.

Valentina.

Thiago immediately shifts behind me, using his massive body to shield mine and giving her an eyeful of his ass cheeks in the process. Then he looks at me like I’m supposed to know what the fuck to do about this.

“Ah, V, can we get a minute?”

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Thirty

Remi



"You seriously couldn't wait for me to get out of the shower?"

Valentina's silhouette is blurred behind the fogged glass. She's perched on the vanity, one of my lollipops in her mouth, legs swinging like a little *chismosa* waiting for the tea.

"No. Spill it. How'd you go from *there's no way in hell I'd ever be friends with a cop* to fucking said cop in your living room?"

How do I even begin to explain the chaos that led to multiple orgasms, the best of my life, might I add, with Thiago's name on them?

Let alone what we agreed to afterward. Friends with benefits. Fuck buddies. My idea, by the way.

And then there's the part I still can't make sense of.

My charges. All gone before I'd even made it home because a SWAT officer who's been in Philadelphia for a little over a month apparently knows exactly which strings to pull. Thiago gave me an explanation. I'm just not sure I believe all of it.

I dip my head beneath the hot spray and gather my thoughts.

"He came over to see me. Told me my mugshot went viral. We fought. Then he handcuffed my hands behind my back. Sex was just the natural progression."

"What?" she says, nearly choking on a laugh as she yanks out her phone. "A viral mugshot? I have to see this."

It only takes her a moment to pull up Philly PD's social media page before she's squealing and jumping off the sink.

“Remi Isabel fucking Cain, you absolute legend.”

I kill the shower and step out, wrapping a towel around myself. She turns the screen toward me and bursts out laughing again. I can’t help but join her when I see the photo. My tongue out, knuckles bloodied, looking completely unbothered by the fact that I’d just been arrested.

In reality, I was pissed the fuck off.

“That intake officer was a total bitch,” I say with a grin. “So I did what I had to do. Though I never thought that’d be the shot they’d go with.”

“Are you kidding?” Valentina gasps. “This is the most you mugshot I’ve ever seen. We need to put this on a T-shirt.”

“Hey, it’s the only one you’ll ever see again. And don’t you dare.”

“That’s exactly what someone headed for another mugshot would say.”

I lunge for her phone. “Valentina.”

She shrieks and jumps backward, holding it above her head. “I’m making it my lock screen.”

“No!”

“Christmas cards.”

“Absolutely not.”

“A life-size cutout.”

“I will push you down a flight of stairs.”

She doubles over laughing, stumbles into the hall, then tosses herself onto my bed. “Rem, these comments are gold.”

“Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not, but I’m going to read them to you anyway.”

I roll my eyes and head into my closet, where I pull open a drawer, drop my towel, and grab a pair of black underwear.

“The classic, *I can fix her*,” she says as I step into them. “‘Respectfully, I’d let her ruin my life.’”

“God, people are weird.”

“Oh, it gets better.” She clears her throat dramatically. “‘Your Honor, she was framed.’”

“Tell that to the twelve cops who chased me across the fucking city.”

“Still not funny, Rem.”

“What? I’m not laughing.”

“You’re smirking.”

“That’s different.”

She rolls her eyes and looks back at her phone. “‘I don’t know what she did, but I support women’s rights and women’s wrongs.’”

I snort as I pull on my jeans. “Okay, that one’s funny.”

“I knew you’d like it.” She scrolls farther. “‘She looks like she carries a knife and has no patience for stupid people.’”

“Accurate.”

“‘This isn’t a mugshot. It’s an album cover.’”

“Also accurate.”

“‘The officer who posted this definitely has a crush on her.’”

“Fuck no,” I say, pulling on my shirt.

“That one has nine thousand likes.”

“People need hobbies.”

Valentina cackles.

“‘She looks like she’d win the fight and steal your girlfriend.’”

I walk out of the closet and plop down beside her. “I mean...”

“True.” She points at me before scrolling again. “Oh, and BigDaddyDavid wants to know what that tongue do?”

Valentina laughs so hard she nearly falls off the bed. I whack her with a decorative pillow, sending the phone tumbling from her hand.

“That’s disgusting.”

“Okay, okay,” she says, taking a deep breath as she tries to get herself under control. “We have more important things to discuss. For example, on a scale of—”

“Twenty,” I blurt out, already knowing what she’s about to ask. “Hands down. Probably the best I’ve ever had.”

Val sits upright, her eyebrows damn near disappearing into her hairline. “Oh, fuck. I know what that means.”

“That he dicked me down real good.”

“No. I mean, yeah, obviously. But that’s not what I’m talking about.” She points at my face. “That right there. You’ve got it bad. Like, *bad* bad.”

I scoff. “Don’t.”

“Remi, the best of your life? Please. I know that look.”

“I don’t have a look.”

“Oh, yeah, you do.”

“It’s just sex, Val. Straight fucking. That’s all. I don’t even know him like that.”

And after what I learned about my charges this morning, I know even less than I thought.

Valentina grins. “Well, hell, Rem, you do now.”

Another pillow goes flying in her direction, and she catches it effortlessly before lunging at me. We fall back onto the mattress, laughing until it fades, leaving us sprawled beside each other with her head resting on my shoulder.

“I’m excited for you, baby.” Her voice softens. “I don’t know what it is, but I have a good feeling. And whether it’s just sex or eventually becomes something more, you deserve to feel like this. So damn happy. I haven’t seen you this way since…” she trails off, maybe regretting bringing up the subject. But I squeeze her, letting her know it’s okay.

That I’m okay.

Valentina rolls over and props herself up on her elbows.

“You had this light about you when you were with Kuroda,” she says quietly. “I see that again.”

My smile trembles when her eyes turn glassy.

This isn’t only about me and Thiago, or even Ryuji. This is her way of saying goodbye. Of telling me she feels better about leaving because there’s one less part of me that she has to worry about. Because after everything, I finally look happy again.

But I’m not ready to let her go. I don’t think I’ll ever be ready.

“Don’t leave me, Val,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “I need you.”

“I’m sorry,” she says and pulls me against her chest. “But you’re going to be okay. I know you will. And I’ll be back sooner than you think. I promise.”

My sobs shake both of us, and she only holds me tighter. Learning to live without Valentina has been one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. I don’t know how I’ll make it through tomorrow, let alone every fucking day she’s gone.

My tears eventually dry up, and our cries subside until only the occasional sniffle fills the room.

“Remi, I need you to promise me you’ll be careful. Ease up on Furia for a while until things die down.”

I hate feeling like I have to stop living my life. For the past four years, I’ve looked over my shoulder, dissecting and analyzing every detail, from

sideways glances and unfamiliar faces to anything that even slightly feels out of place. It's exhausting. Suffocating, even for me.

But I understand it.

"I know."

Valentina turns to look at me, her expression serious. "And no more mugshots. Don't let these fifteen minutes of fame go to your head."

I scoff. "I'm internet famous now, Val. There's no going back."

"Oh, my God." She sits up, laughing as she wipes the last trace of moisture from her cheek.

"People are probably making edits as we speak."

"Absolutely they are."

"I might even have a fan club."

It's her turn to throw a pillow at my face.

"One mugshot, and you think you're a celebrity."

"Not a celebrity," I correct, crossing to my vanity to apply my favorite red lip. "An icon."

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Thirty-One

Thiago



Eyes closed, head resting against the seat, hands clutched tightly around the steering wheel, I try to decompress after my shift.

Today was a day from hell.

Two back-to-back calls, a drug bust, and a hostage situation. Three dead perps should be cause for celebration, but I fumbled more than once. Nothing serious enough for anyone else to notice or to put my team in danger.

But I noticed.

I hesitated when I should've moved and missed a detail at the hostage scene that normally would've jumped out at me. They were small mistakes, but mistakes all the same, and the kind that become dangerous if they turn into habits.

The truth is simple. I wasn't fully there today because every chance my mind got, it wandered back to Remi. The way she felt in my arms, her legs wrapped around me, the way she looked at me when she finally stopped fighting what was happening between us.

Goddamn.

I scrub a hand over my face and let out a slow breath. This is exactly what Elena warned me about. Getting attached, losing perspective, and compromising the mission. Every operative thinks they're immune to it until it happens to them. I always thought I'd be smarter and more disciplined.

But now I understand it.

Nobody wakes up one morning and decides to betray everything they believe in. You make one exception, then another, convincing yourself you still have control until you realize you crossed the line a long fucking time ago.

That's where I am with Remi.

I know exactly what I'm doing, and I'm doing it anyway.

Friends with benefits.

I can pretend it's all part of the job, that I'm playing the role I was sent here to play. Then she smiles at me and looks at me with trust in her eyes, and the guilt gets harder to carry.

She thinks I called in favors and bent a few rules. In theory, that's exactly what I did. But the truth is so much worse.

With a sigh, I stare out at the city beyond the glass. Sooner or later, she's going to learn who I really am and what I've been doing since the moment I entered her life. The question isn't whether she'll hate me. It's whether I'll be able to live with it when she does.

I reach across the passenger seat, open the glove compartment, and pull out my father's notebook. For a few seconds, I just hold it, then I grab the pen tucked inside and turn to a blank page. I don't know why writing to him feels easier than admitting any of this to myself, but the words come anyway.

I'm in trouble, Pai.

I'm supposed to be watching her, but lately I spend more time thinking about her than about the mission. I'm making mistakes. Losing focus. And the worst part is, I know exactly why.

I pause, staring at the page.

I care about her.

There it is.

The one thing I haven't been willing to say, even to myself.

My phone buzzes somewhere inside the center console, breaking the silence. I close the notebook and slip it back into the glove compartment without bothering to reach for my phone.

I already know who it is.

Elena.

She's been calling and texting since I got off shift. Four missed calls after my shower. Six more messages lighting up my screen on the drive to

Sloane's. Elena wants check-ins, "touching base," she calls it. But I know it's her way of keeping tabs on me.

As I step out of the car and shove the phone into my back pocket without looking, I decide I'm done with it. Tomorrow, I'm going over her head. I'll call my superior to request a handler change. Elena's become too involved, too invested. She's lost the goddamn plot, and I'm tired of it.

I walk into Sloane's expecting to find Remi behind the counter, but she's nowhere in sight. Giving the main floor a quick once-over, I head up to her office. I've barely reached the top of the stairs when a woman rounds the corner ahead of me, and my stomach drops.

I recognize her, know enough about her past to know that accidentally crossing paths with the woman formerly known as Amalia Montesinos is about the last fucking thing I need right now.

She doesn't know me, though, and I need to keep it that way.

I continue toward her without breaking stride, even as my instinct tells me to be careful. She's beautiful, but there's nothing soft about the way she carries herself. Her head is high, her shoulders squared, and there's an unmistakable authority in every step that makes it easy to imagine people moving out of her way without being asked.

But I know what most of them don't. Amalia Cain spent years making dangerous men regret underestimating her, which makes perfect sense considering who she raised.

I've barely made it down the hall when Amalia's attention shifts to me, and the subtle change in her expression, how her eyes harden as they travel down my body and back to my face, shows that she knows I don't belong up here.

"Can I help you?" she asks in a way that should have me saying no and turning around.

"I'm looking for Remi."

"And you are?"

"A friend of hers."

Her eyebrows knit as she glances toward Remi's office, then back at me. "If you're a friend, you can wait for her downstairs."

I almost tell her that Remi has brought me up here before, but I'm not sure arguing my right to wander a restricted floor with her mother is going to improve the situation.

"She knows I'm here," I lie instead.

Amalia’s eyes narrow. “Does she?”

Fuck.

I’ve spent years being questioned by people trained to pull information out of me, and somehow Remi’s mother manages to make two words sound like she already knows I’m full of shit.

“She will in about thirty seconds.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“No, ma’am. It is not.”

She holds my gaze after the “ma’am,” unimpressed by my attempt at respect, then moves closer, putting herself squarely between me and the direction I was headed. Normally, someone her size stepping in front of me wouldn’t register as much of an obstacle. With Amalia Cain, I know better.

“I’ve never seen you before,” she says. “And my daughter has enough going on without strange men showing up where they aren’t invited.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?”

I lock eyes with her, resisting the temptation to look toward Remi’s office. “I’m not here to hurt her.”

Her face goes completely still.

Shit. Wrong choice of words.

“I didn’t suggest you were.”

“No, but maybe you were thinking it.”

“And you thought saying it would make me less suspicious?”

Despite myself, I almost smile. “No. I realized how bad it sounded about halfway through.”

For the first time, something other than suspicion touches her features, but it disappears before I can decide whether I imagined it.

“Go downstairs,” she says with finality. “If Remi wants to see you, she can find you there.”

Pushing my luck with Remi’s mother would be stupid even if I didn’t know what she was capable of.

I’m about to turn around when Remi’s voice comes from farther down the hall.

“Thiago?”

Amalia looks toward her daughter, and I finally let myself do the same. Suddenly, I forget all about the woman standing between us.

Fuck, it’s good to see her.

It’s only been a day since I left her condo, but seeing Remi again hits differently after having her the way I did. My mind immediately goes places it has no business going, with her mother standing five feet away, replaying flashes from yesterday that I’ve already spent most of my shift trying to forget.

Then I get a better look at her face, and every one of those thoughts disappears.

“Hey, Remi.”

Her eyes shift from me to her mother. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to see if you felt like grabbing something to eat after closing.”

Amalia glances between us. “You know him?”

“Yeah, I know him.”

The answer seems to ease some of the tension in Amalia, but only slightly.

“Thiago, this is my mother, Amalia.”

I give her a polite nod, maintaining the pretense that her name means nothing to me. “Nice to officially meet you.”

“Likewise.” She still doesn’t sound convinced.

My attention returns to Remi, and now that I’m looking at her closely, I can see what I missed at first. Her makeup does a decent job of hiding it, but not quite enough. Her eyes are pink around the edges, her lashes slightly clumped, and there’s a faint puffiness beneath them.

She’s been crying.

Remi usually meets me head-on, ready with a smart-ass comment before I can get one out myself, but she’s barely said two words since she walked into the hall.

I don’t like it.

Not one fucking bit.

As if she can tell I’m two seconds away from reaching for her myself, Remi closes the distance between us and slips her hand into mine.

I wrap my fingers around hers without thinking.

“Mamá, give us a minute.”

Amalia looks down at our joined hands before turning that same guarded stare on me. Whatever she sees doesn’t make her any happier about leaving us alone, but after a moment, she looks at Remi.

“I’ll be downstairs.”

Her eyes come back to me one last time before she walks away, and I wait until she disappears before turning my full attention to Remi.

“What are you doing here?” she asks again.

“I told you. I just—”

“Yeah, I got that. But you can’t just show up. That’s not what this is. Now I have to play twenty-one questions, and I’m really not in the mood for it.”

She tries to pull her hand from mine, but I tighten my hold enough to stop her.

“Something’s wrong.”

She looks away and sighs. “No. There’s nothing wrong other than you showing up here unannounced.”

“Remi.” I draw her closer, relieved when she lets me. “Tell me. Did someone say something to you?” Another possibility occurs to me. “Did someone hurt you?”

“No.” She answers as if the question itself offends her. Remi would probably bleed out before admitting she needed someone to take care of her, but the red around her eyes and the exhaustion on her face tell me she could use it right now.

I gently tilt her chin. “Let’s get out of here.”

“I can’t.”

“I clocked three employees downstairs, plus your mom, and only six customers. Trust me, you can.”

She chews on her lip, considering it.

“You don’t want to be here.” My thumb traces the line of her jaw. “And you definitely don’t want to spend the rest of the evening explaining to your mom why this huge motherfucker came looking for her daughter.”

She cracks a smile, and some of the worry in my chest eases as she fists the front of my shirt and shakes her head.

“You’re ridiculous. And too damn full of yourself.”

“Yet here you are smiling.”

“Fine,” she breathes, suppressing a laugh. “I guess you can buy me dinner.”

Her eyes stay on me as I pull up to the entrance, like she's still on the fence about coming with me. She hesitates again, her hand on the door handle, before glancing back through the glass. Maybe she's reassuring her mother that everything's all right.

Remi is twenty-two and fiercely independent, but the Cains are close. Their circle is small, their loyalty absolute, and anyone who threatens one of them tends to have a short life expectancy.

Which makes Remi willingly climbing into my truck all the more dangerous.

"Déjà vu," she says as we pull away from the curb. "Where to?"

"There's a spot I know just outside the city. Sometimes when I need to clear my head, I go there. I found it one day after…" I let the sentence trail off.

Remi waits, giving me a chance to finish before I feel her attention shift my way. I can't exactly tell her I ended up there the night after the cemetery. That I sat by that lake for hours, questioning everything I thought I believed, and seriously considered getting in my truck and driving back to Texas.

"After a tough shift," I say instead.

A few seconds of silence pass.

"That bad?"

Worse.

"Something like that."

"And what makes you think I need to clear my head?"

We stop at a red light, and I turn to her. The glow from the brake lights ahead washes over her face, catching the angles of her cheekbones and the curve of her mouth.

I'll never get over how beautiful she is. But beneath it, I can still see the sadness in her eyes.

"Remi, were you crying?"

Her jaw flexes as soon as I ask the question. I reach for the hand resting in her lap, and she lets me take it.

"It's not what you think," she mutters. "I just...I always get like this when she leaves. Valentina. It's stupid, I know, but—"

"It's not."

She goes quiet.

"You love her," I say. "You miss her."

Her fingers tighten around mine, and she looks out the window.

The rest of the drive passes in silence. I give her the space she seems to need, and at one point, I swear she dozes off beside me.

For the first time, I let myself consider what would happen if I didn't finish the assignment. Helios won't simply forget about Remi Cain because I decide I can't go through with it. They'll replace me with someone who doesn't know her. Someone who won't give a fuck about the woman behind the name in a file.

I hate the thought, but the reality is worse. Either I finish the assignment or someone else will.

By the time we reach the lake, the knot in my chest has only tightened. Remi doesn't wait for me. The second I park the truck, she unbuckles and climbs out. I follow her down the wooden ramp to the pier, giving her a few feet of space as she moves toward the edge.

Nobody else is around. The water stretches into the darkness, moonlight breaking across the surface in ribbons of silver while a handful of lamps cast soft pools of light over the weathered dock.

The world feels quiet out here. Remi draws a deep breath beside me.

When she slips a hand into her pocket, I know exactly what she's reaching for. I slide mine over her wrist before she can pull out her ring. She stills but doesn't resist when I ease her hand free and weave our fingers together.

At first, I'm the one holding on, but a few seconds later, her grip tightens around mine.

"It's pretty," she finally says, looking out over the water.

"Very," I agree, even though I'm looking at her.

"Thiago, I'm sorry if my mom came off a bit…"

"Intimidating?"

She chuckles and shrugs. "Yeah. She's a little overprotective, especially after everything."

Remi pauses, catching herself before she says too much and wanders into a part of her life she hasn't shared with me, one I shouldn't already know.

"The tattoo shop?" I offer, giving her an out.

She nods. "And getting arrested. Well, she doesn't know about that yet. None of them do, actually. But I know it's coming. I'm just not ready to deal with the lectures and all that shit."

“Understandable. But it’s only a matter of time before that mugshot makes the rounds. The precinct took it down, but you know the internet is forever.”

“Oh God,” she says with a laugh. “I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“You know there’s an investigation into who leaked that photo.”

“I mean, it’s a damn good shot.”

“That it is.”

Remi turns to me, her smile lighting up her face. “Thank you for what you did. For being a corrupt-as-fuck cop and using your connections to get me off.”

My laughter carries across the lake. “I’m glad my criminal behavior is appreciated.”

“It is.”

Her smile lingers as she squeezes my hand, completely unaware of how fucking undeserved that gratitude is. She thinks I broke a few rules for her.

If only it were that simple.

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Thirty-Two

REMI



It’s the first time today, since my last hug with Valentina before she boarded her flight, that I haven’t felt sad. And to my absolute horror, it’s because of Thiago.

He isn’t trying to keep me talking, push for answers, or get into my pants. He’s just...here, giving me space, letting me decide whether I want to talk, and actually listening when I do.

Strangely enough, the quiet with him doesn’t make my skin itch or send me scrambling for a distraction. I don’t feel the need to turn on music or fill the silence with pointless noise. I can just stand here, breathe, and that’s enough.

The lake is beautiful, but I don’t think that’s why I feel lighter. I’m pretty sure it’s him, though I’m not ready to figure out what the hell it means.

I slip my hand from his and bend to untie my boots.

“Is there anything in this water that’s going to bite my toes off? Sharks? Alligators?”

He laughs. “This is a freshwater lake in Pennsylvania, Remi. Not Florida or Texas. I think your toes are safe.”

I side-eye him even though I know he makes sense.

“A girl can never be too sure. Besides,” I say, sitting at the edge of the pier and slowly dipping my feet into the cool water, “I need these toes to drive. And to put a boot to your neck when you get out of line.”

“Fair point.”

I splash water at him with my foot. “Never get too comfortable, Braga.”

He crouches beside me, resting his forearms on his knees as he watches the ripples spread across the lake.

“I wasn’t worried. You’ve threatened to kill me once or twice since we met. I’d be concerned if you stopped.”

“Just once or twice?”

His mouth twitches. “I may have lost count.”

For a few moments, neither of us says a word as the water laps gently against the posts beneath the dock. Somewhere in the distance, a frog croaks, followed by another. The sounds blend with the rustling trees and the occasional chirps of insects.

It’s dangerously peaceful.

“Thanks for this, by the way,” I say, gesturing around us. “I needed it. Needed to get out of my own head for a while.”

The teasing leaves his face, and his eyes warm as they meet mine. “You don’t have to thank me for that.”

“Maybe I do.”

He holds my gaze for a few seconds before looking back out at the water. “Anytime, Remi.”

I dip my head, trying to hide the corny smile pulling at my lips. “And you’re not as bad as I thought you’d be...for a pig.”

I’m starting to really like the sound of his laughter. He’s quite the sight, as big as he is, balancing in a crouch just to stay level with me.

“You got holes in your socks or something? The water feels great.”

“Nah. I just prefer my toes dry and not eaten by freshwater crocs.”

Panic shoots through me, and I yank my feet out of the water before I catch the grin on his face.

The asshole.

He laughs harder, and I roll my eyes.

“Ha ha. Very funny.”

My fingers fist around the collar of his shirt, and I tug him closer.

“But now I’m not sure which is the lie. I’m going to need a real-life test.”

His gaze drops to my hand gripping his shirt, and realization flashes across his face a second too late. With gravity on my side, I use his unstable position to my advantage and shove him straight into the lake. The splash of his massive body echoes across the water.

I quickly pull my feet back and grip the edge of the dock, peering over the side as I wait for him to resurface, completely pissed off. I know how to handle an angry Thiago. This softer version of him is becoming a problem I have no fucking clue what to do with.

Expecting him to pop up any second, I scan the dark water. When he doesn't, my smile fades. Another few seconds pass, and my nails dig into the wood as my heart pounds.

"Thiago?" I lean farther over the edge, trying to see through the murky water, but there's no sign of him.

Oh, fuck. What if he can't swim?

I never even asked. I just assumed a man built like a fucking linebacker wouldn't sink straight to the bottom of a lake.

"Thiago, this isn't funny."

The lake remains still.

"Thiago!"

The word barely leaves my mouth when he erupts from the water. His hands close around my shoulders, and I shriek as he yanks me off the dock.

The cold swallows me whole, stealing my breath before I kick toward the surface. When I break through, sputtering and gasping, Thiago is right in front of me, soaked and laughing so hard I'm surprised he can stay afloat.

"You asshole!" I shout, shoving water at his chest.

"You should've seen your face."

"I thought you drowned!"

His smile only widens. "Good."

I splash him again, sending a wave straight into his face. The bastard laughs harder, grabs my shirt, and pulls me flush against his chest. His feet are planted firmly on the lake floor, but mine can't reach the bottom, so I wrap my legs around him and loop my arms behind his neck.

"You were worried about me."

"Yeah. I just got arrested. You think I want another charge hanging over my head?" I tighten my hold on him. "That's all. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Sure, *fera*."

"What is it with you and that nickname?"

He brushes the tip of his nose against mine, droplets sliding between us.

"It suits you. Especially after you tried to drown me."

"It's not my fault you're so damn big you sink like a brick."

Our mouths graze, our breaths tangling together.

“Now I’m going to have to keep my phone in rice for a week.”

He catches a trickle from the corner of my lips with his tongue, and my nails rake lightly against his nape.

“Stop being a cheap bastard,” I murmur. “And upgrade to the waterproof version.”

“Says the trust fund baby.”

I burst out laughing, tipping my head back as he carries us toward the ramp. As I start to unwrap myself from him, he squeezes my thigh, shakes his head and smoothly tosses me over his shoulder.

“Thiago...”

With one hand on the dock and a small leap, he climbs out of the water. His grip on me never wavers as he bends to snatch up my boots with effortless ease.

Goddamn.

If I wasn’t already soaked, that little display of strength might have done the job.

Are you that easily impressed, Remi?

By him? Absolutely.

We reach his truck, and he pops open the tailgate before setting me down. My boots hit the ground, and when he turns away, I catch the front of his wet shirt and tug him back between my legs.

“This is the second time I’m completely dripping wet in your truck.” I press a kiss to his jaw.

His hands cup my face, and his mouth finds mine before I can tease him again.

Friends with benefits. It’s what we’re supposed to be, what we agreed to. What we need to be. Except right now, with his hands on me and the last of our laughter fading between kisses, it doesn’t feel nearly that simple.

I pop the button on his jeans and nip at the side of his throat. He laughs, and presses his forehead to mine, breathing hard.

“It’s just sex, Braga. Don’t overthink it.”

A rough laugh escapes him. “You have no idea how badly I want to fold you over this truck and fuck you until you cry for me, *fera*.”

I run my tongue across the corner of his mouth. “Do it.”

His eyes close briefly, then open again. “I don’t have a condom, baby,” he says against my lips. “So stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to ruin me...ruin my self-control.”

I smile. “Maybe I am.”

His hand slides around my throat, his breathing unsteady.

Fuck.

“Don’t test me, Remi.”

“Why?”

“Because when it comes to you, I’m starting to realize I can’t say no.”

I should make a joke. Deflect. Turn this into something I know how to handle before either of us says anything we can’t take back. Instead, I reach for him, and he pulls me into his arms. I’ve spent most of my life making damn sure I never needed anyone to make me feel safe, but sitting here, wrapped around this man, I let myself feel it anyway.

“If you’re not going to fuck me, where’s that dinner you promised?”

His chest shakes with laughter. “I know just the place. And I am going to fuck you.”

I grin and let him pull me closer one last time before slipping from his grasp.

Dinner. Sex. No strings.

I can handle that. It’s everything else happening between us that I’m starting to worry about.

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Thirty-Three

THIAGO



“A food truck?”

“Is a food truck beneath you, Remi Isabel?” I ask as I throw the truck in park and turn toward her.

Her nose scrunches immediately. “Don’t you ever call me by my full name.”

I laugh. “Why not?”

“Because only my mom uses it when she’s pissed off or trying to prove a point. And the only other time a man should say it is when he’s on one knee, holding a pretty little box with a ring. So, basically, never.”

She keeps talking before I can respond, which is probably a good thing because I have absolutely no idea what the fuck I’d say to that.

“And to answer your first question, no, of course not. Val and I love trying different street vendors. It’s kind of our thing when she’s back home, and it’s sort of a running joke about my Uncle Derek.”

Derek Cain.

I know enough about the man to understand why his name carries weight, but Remi says it with the kind of affection reserved for someone she’s loved her entire life.

“He’s not a fan?”

“No. Some infamous incident no one is allowed to talk about,” she says with a laugh.

“Not even with his daughter? Or you, considering how close you two are?”

She pauses before answering.

“Uncle Derek is like a second father to me. I grew up splitting my time between his house and mine.” Her smile softens. “But there are some secrets that a man will take to the grave, and Food Truck Gate is apparently one of them.”

I laugh. “Food Truck Gate?”

“That’s what Val and I call it.”

“Sounds serious.”

“Oh, it is. The second anyone brings it up, he changes the subject so quickly you’d think we were discussing classified government secrets.”

“Maybe it is.”

“At this point, that’s the leading theory.”

I shake my head, smiling despite myself. It’s strange hearing her talk about a man with Derek Cain’s reputation like any other uncle with an embarrassing story he refuses to tell.

Then again, I’m starting to realize that’s exactly what he is to her.

“So we’re just supposed to sit out there like we’re not drenched down to our underwear?” she asks, hopping out of my truck.

I follow, rounding the hood to meet her.

“I have an extra jacket if you’re cold.”

She shakes her head. “I’m fine.”

I extend my hand to her, but she purses her lips and stuffs hers into her wet pockets.

“Fuck buddies don’t hold hands in public like a couple.”

“They also don’t go on dates, but here we are.”

She laughs. “Who said this was a date, Braga? I’m just a girl cashing in on a free-food promise.”

“That’s a date.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“You voluntarily left work with me, let me drag you an hour outside the city, sat by a lake holding my hand, and now you’re getting food with me.”

“Keep talking.”

“I’m just saying, if it walks like a date and talks like a date—”

She plants a finger against my chest. “Finish that sentence and I’ll push you back into the lake.”

I glance over my shoulder. “We’re nowhere near the lake.”

“Details, details.”

Catching the edge of her jacket, I pull her toward the food truck. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, baby.”

“I don’t date cops.”

I pull her back against me and bring my mouth to her neck. “But you’ll fuck one.”

“Don’t be insufferable, Braga.”

I laugh into her hair as she tries to squirm out of my grip. She can call this whatever the hell she wants. I’m not going to argue with her.

At least not tonight.

We place our order at the window and grab one of the nearby picnic tables beneath a tent strung with multicolored lights. The owners have sectioned off the seating area, giving the place a warm, welcoming atmosphere.

I discovered this spot after one of my nights at the pier. It was well past midnight, and I was starving. Few places are open that late, so finding this family-owned food truck was a pleasant surprise. They serve some of the best pastéis I’ve had outside Brazil. One bite of the flaky crust and savory filling takes me straight back to summers in Rio.

The only thing that makes it better is sharing it with good company.

While I wait for our food, I glance over at Remi. She’s sitting alone at one of the tables, picking at a loose thread on her shorts. She catches me looking and holds my gaze for a second before turning away like she couldn’t care less.

I smile to myself.

A few minutes later, our order is called. I pay, grab the tray, and turn around, only to find Remi no longer alone. A tall woman stands beside the table, her back to me, and I recognize her before she even turns around.

Elena.

What the fuck is she doing here?

I start toward them, already running through every reason she might have for showing up. None of them are good. She knows I’m with Remi and exactly where we are, despite my ignoring every call and message she's sent tonight.

And now she's approached her without warning.

My hand slips into my pocket, fingers gripping my knife’s handle before I realize what I’m doing. Elena is my handler, but she’s an operative first.

I cross the remaining distance between us, unable to shake the possibilities running through my head.

“Remi...”

The moment I speak, Elena turns, a smug smile already on her face.

“Officer Braga. I thought that was you.”

I should respond, but my attention goes straight to Remi, checking her face, her hands, and every visible inch of her.

She catches it immediately, and her posture tenses as she glances at Elena, then back at me. “Thiago?”

There’s a question in my name, but I give her a small nod.

“Commander.”

I set the tray down, release my grip on the knife, and take the seat beside Remi.

“What brings you out here?” I ask. “Pretty far from home.”

“Oh, probably the same as you.” Elena smiles. “Good food. A break from the city noise. The perfect way to spend a Friday night.”

Her attention shifts to Remi. “I see you’re in good company, so I won’t impose and take up any more of your time.”

“Have a good night.”

Elena takes a step back before stopping. “Oh, and Op...Officer Braga.” Her smile widens. “Do check your messages when you get a chance. There are a few notes I’d like to pick your brain about before our next debrief.”

“Of course.”

“Wonderful.”

Her attention shifts back to Remi. “It was nice meeting you. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name.”

Remi rises from her seat, her expression cold as ice. She stops directly in front of Elena, nearly eye level with her, holding nothing back.

“I didn't give it.”

Neither of them looks away.

I stay quiet and let Remi hold her ground. Elena is used to walking into a room and taking control, but Remi doesn’t give her an inch. And I probably shouldn’t enjoy it as much as I do.

Elena breaks eye contact first, not because Remi intimidated her, but because I know Elena well enough to recognize when she’s gotten what she wants. She came here to see Remi for herself, and now she has.

“Monday,” I say.

Elena gives me one last nod, then walks away without another word. When I turn to Remi, she's still watching Elena as she crosses the parking lot.

"I don't like her," she says. "Don't trust her. You shouldn't either."

The words land square in my chest. Because the person she shouldn't trust isn't walking away. He's sitting right beside her.

"She is who she is," I say with a shrug. "If a power trip were a person."

"Is she always like that with everyone?" Remi asks, finally turning to me. "Or just you?"

Elena keeps everyone at arm's length, but whatever is happening with me has nothing to do with whether she likes me. She wants results, and lately, I've given her every reason to question whether I can deliver them.

"Everyone," I lie.

Because lying is what I do. Every lie I give Remi comes with another one buried beneath it, and the closer we get, the worse they become.

Maybe Elena and I aren't as different as I'd like to think.

"You mind if we take this to go?" Remi asks, glancing again toward the parking lot.

"Whatever you want to do."

I grab a few containers and bags from the counter, and within minutes, we're standing beside my truck. When I head to the passenger side to open the door for her, she steps in front of it, blocking the handle.

"Can I drive?"

I blink. "Can you what?"

"Drive. Did I stutter?"

A laugh slips out as I fold my arms across my chest, knowing damn well Remi Cain could probably drive circles around me blindfolded. Still, I play my part.

"You want to drive my truck?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, God. Don't tell me you're one of those."

"One of what?"

"The guys who think their cars are sacred and that nobody else is allowed to touch them."

"Hey." I point at her. "I saw your little collection back there. You know exactly what I'm talking about when it comes to vehicles."

She smiles. "Then you also know you're wasting your breath."

I say nothing and toss her the key fob. She catches it and heads around the hood. By the time I settle into the passenger seat, she's already adjusting the mirrors and the seat.

"It's all stock," I say as she brings the engine to life and pulls onto the street.

"Oh, trust me. I know."

"You say that like it's an insult."

"It's not an insult." Her hand glides over the wheel. "It's an observation, Braga."

"You looked offended."

"I am offended."

I bark out a laugh. "By my truck?"

"By the wasted potential." She presses the accelerator a little harder. "And by the fact that you're driving on factory tires."

She looks at me, clearly waiting for me to defend myself. But nothing comes out. Because fuck me, she's adorable. And sexy as hell. Watching her behind the wheel has me thinking about having her again, tasting her again, and all the things I'd rather be doing than sitting in this passenger seat.

I shake my head and rest an elbow against the open window before my thoughts get me into trouble. We roll to a red light, and the rumble of another engine pulls Remi's attention toward the lane beside us.

Looking past her, I spot a middle-aged man behind the wheel of a vintage baby-blue convertible. The car is definitely not stock. It's immaculate, the kind of machine someone has poured years of money and obsession into, but the guy behind the wheel isn't interested in my truck. His attention is fixed entirely on Remi.

He leans back in his seat, one hand draped over the wheel, trying a little too hard to look cool as he tips his chin in greeting. Remi scoffs and faces forward again, but that only seems to encourage him.

When he revs the engine twice, I watch Remi reposition her hands on the steering wheel.

I know exactly what that means.

"Remi. No."

"What?"

"You know exactly what."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

The sweetness in her voice might be convincing if I didn’t know her better. The convertible revs again as we wait for the light to change, and I can practically feel her restraint slipping beside me.

“Remi.”

“Braga.”

“Don’t.”

She turns to me with wide eyes and an expression so innocent it’s complete bullshit. “Are you accusing me of something?”

“Are you really trying to street race? In my truck? With me sitting right here?”

“Why? Are you going to arrest me?” She bites her lip. “Cuff me again?”

The woman plays dirty, and my mind immediately goes back to her bent over the arm of the sofa.

“Not helping, Remi.”

“He started it.”

“What happened to my shitty stock truck? You think you can beat that?”

“Your words, not mine.” She glances my way. “And you don’t always need mods. Sometimes it’s all about who’s behind the wheel.”

“So not only do you know your way under a hood, but now you’re a professional driver too?”

“Most guys, when they learn that about me, they either get hard dicks or bruised egos. Which one are you?”

I laugh. “Take a guess.”

“Confident answer.”

The light turns green a moment later, and Remi takes off. The rear tires chirp on the pavement as the truck propels forward, throwing me back into my seat. Engine roaring, within seconds, we’re half a car length ahead of the convertible.

She laughs as she shifts, smooth and fast, without taking her attention from the road. I grab the handle above the door.

“I’m never letting you drive again.”

“Well, then I better get my money’s worth.”

The convertible starts gaining on us, its front bumper creeping forward until it’s nearly even with my window.

I look at Remi, expecting her to push harder, but she doesn’t. She checks the mirror, looks ahead, and eases off the accelerator.

“What are you doing?”

“Driving.”

“He’s passing you.”

“I can see that, Braga.”

Remi lets him pull ahead, but there’s no frustration or desperate attempt to catch him. She waits until the road opens up before pressing on the gas again.

The truck shoots forward, and this time, I’m mostly prepared for it.

We’re beside him again in a few blinks, and the man looks over, surprise replacing the smug expression he wore at the light. But Remi doesn’t even spare him a glance.

She keeps her attention on the road, driving a truck she’s never driven before as if she already knows all its limits. There’s nothing reckless about the way she handles it. Every move is deliberate, from how she controls the throttle to the distance she keeps between us and the other cars.

I knew Remi could drive, but I didn’t realize just how fucking good she was.

Waiting until the road is clear, she gives the truck everything it has left. And just like that, the convertible falls behind us. When I check the mirror again, the distance between us is only growing.

“Relax.”

“You’re the reason insurance agents drink.”

Her laughter fills the cab.

The sound does absolutely nothing to ease my concern, but it does plenty of other things to me. I should be annoyed that she just raced my truck through the streets and worried about the possibility of flashing lights appearing behind us.

But I can’t stop watching her.

This is the same woman I found at her range earlier, trying to hide that she’d been crying. Now her hair is whipping around her face in the open window, and she’s laughing as if the last few hours never happened.

I wanted to get her out of her head tonight. I just didn’t expect seeing her happy again to feel this damn good.

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Thirty-Four

Remi



"You missed your floor."

The bag of food is tucked against Thiago's side as he looks at me with a furrowed brow, then watches the elevator pass my level and continue toward an unmarked floor.

Our dinner is probably cold as hell by now, but I can't bring myself to care. As much as it annoys me to admit it, I'm enjoying his company, and the thought of ending the night by going back to my condo alone sounds depressing as fuck. So, instead of pressing the button for my floor, I bring him up to the terrace. It's the one place in this building that's entirely mine, where the noise in my head quiets enough for me to breathe. Bringing Thiago up here wasn't part of the plan, but apparently neither was most of tonight.

"I know where I'm going, Braga."

"Of course you do."

The metal doors slide open, and cool night air sweeps through my hair as I step onto the terrace. No one else in the building has access to this floor, though many have asked over the years. I've never brought anyone up here except family, and that thought almost makes me reconsider what I'm doing.

Thiago steps out behind me, and the elevator doors slide shut at his back.

"Wow." He looks out over the terrace, then spots the water. "A pool? Up here?"

I shrug. “I need somewhere to get my laps in, especially now that I’m avoiding the gym.”

Thiago turns to me with a scoff. “And why is that?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I walk to the railing and look out over the city. “Some creep who clearly doesn’t value his life seems incapable of taking no for an answer.”

“That’s a very serious accusation.”

“It gets worse.”

“Does it?” He steps in behind me, bracketing me against the railing as he rests his arms on either side of mine.

“He keeps showing up everywhere.”

His laughter vibrates against my back as his lips brush the side of my neck. “Sounds like a dangerous individual.”

“The worst,” I murmur, closing my eyes.

I hate how good he feels against me and how easily my body leans into his.

“This is your place?”

I nod. “Just mine. Trust fund baby, remember?”

He chuckles against my skin.

“The city looks beautiful from up here.”

“It’s perfect.” I rest my forearms against the cool metal. “You hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Everything. The world never shuts up.”

He falls silent. “You like the noise.”

I glance at him over my shoulder. “I need the noise.”

Thiago doesn’t ask why or give me the same confused look I get from people when I try to explain it. He just nods, as if needing constant sound to quiet my own head makes perfect sense to him.

This place works the same way for me. The city is always moving from up here, filling the night with cars, sirens, music drifting from open windows, and hundreds of conversations I’ll never hear clearly. There’s always something for my brain to latch onto, which keeps the rest of the chaos from getting too loud.

“Thank you,” he says, his thumb tracing over my knuckles. “For sharing this with me.”

“Your lake for my pool.”

We stop talking again, but this time, my attention doesn't drift back to the skyline. I find myself listening to his breathing, feeling the steady warmth of his body behind me and the subtle rise and fall of his chest against my back.

Usually, having someone this close only gives my brain one more thing to process, but with Thiago, it's different.

Most people add to the noise already crowding my head. Somehow…he quiets it. I'm starting to understand why sitting beside him at the lake felt the way it did. It wasn't the water or the city's absence. It was him. Thiago feels like quiet, and I'm not sure when that stopped being something I wanted to avoid.

"Are you ready to eat?" I ask before I can think too hard about what this all means.

"I am."

There's enough hunger in those two words to send heat crawling beneath my skin, and I'm pretty damn sure the food in that bag has nothing to do with it.

"Thiago—"

My feet suddenly leave the ground, and I gasp as the city tilts behind him. He lifts me away from the railing and tucks me securely against his chest.

"Come here, *fera*."

"Braga, what are you doing?" I ask as he backs toward the pool, clearly up to something.

"You wouldn't."

"Oh, I would."

"My panties were just starting to dry."

His arms hold me closer as his heels reach the edge. "You won't need them."

My nails dig into his shoulders, and my thighs press against his hips. The smug bastard knows exactly what saying shit like that does to me.

"Thiago, wait..."

He ignores me and steps backward into the pool, taking me with him. I shriek and throw my arms around his neck as the cold hits, and we disappear beneath the surface. When we come up, I'm sputtering and laughing while Thiago looks entirely too pleased with himself.

"You asshole."

“You’re welcome. I’m just getting that lake water off us.”

I wrap my legs around his waist and push my wet hair away from my face. “Ever heard of a shower?”

“No time and no patience.”

He carries me to the underwater ledge, sets me down, then looks around the terrace. “You said no one has access up here?”

“No one,” I murmur, licking a droplet from my lip.

He steps closer, hooking his fingers beneath the hem of my top. “Good.”

That one word sends a shiver over me that has nothing to do with the cold water.

Thiago lifts my shirt slowly, peeling the wet fabric from my skin, then pulls it over my head and tosses it onto the concrete behind me.

“You know there are easier ways to get me naked.”

“Not interested in easier.” His hands return to my waist, and I watch him slowly unbutton my shorts.

“You’re taking your time for someone with no patience.”

“I changed my mind.”

“About?”

His mouth brushes mine as he slides the wet denim down my legs. “Taking my time with you.”

I lift my hips enough to help him, and he pulls the shorts free, my thong with them, then tosses both onto the growing pile behind me. He steadies me at the waist, and I reach for him, but he catches my wrist and lowers my hand back to the ledge.

“Thiago.”

The warning in his name only earns me a grin. I try again, hooking my leg around his waist to drag him toward me, but he plants his hands on either side of me and refuses to budge.

“You enjoying this?”

“Very much.”

I slip my fingers into the waistband of his shorts and pull him closer. “Then you’re wearing too many clothes.”

He catches my wrists again. “This isn’t about me.”

“It is if I say it is.”

“Bossy.”

“You like me bossy.”

“I like you every fucking way.”

He kisses me, slow and gentle, and the teasing answer on my tongue dissolves as his hands slide around my waist, drawing me against him.

The water moves around us as he steps between my legs, and I instinctively press closer.

“Are you cold?” he murmurs.

“Not even a little.”

His mouth glides up my neck as his hands creep between my thighs, tugging me to the edge of the ledge.

“Take your pants off, Braga. You’re naked from the waist up. I’m naked from the waist down. The math is pissing me off.”

He chuckles against my neck. “Better fix that, then.”

Stepping back, he strips, tossing his shorts onto the concrete with the rest of our clothes. As soon as he’s within reach again, I grab him and pull him back between my legs.

His mouth crashes into mine.

There’s nothing gentle or patient about him now. One hand slides into my wet hair while the other locks around my waist, his cock hard against my abdomen. I reach between us and wrap my fist around him, my thumb brushing over his piercing, then glance up to watch his face tense.

I fucking love knowing I did that, that right now, I own him and his pleasure.

“*Fera*, you make me crazy,” he rasps, my hair tight in his hand as he thrusts against my grip. “I’ve never felt like this with anyone, you know that?”

I’m still not fully sold on the friends with a cop part, but the benefits are making one hell of an argument for themselves.

Except fuck buddies probably don’t have heartfelt talks, spend time at a lake that means something to one of them, and end it at a place the other only shares with people they love and trust.

I shove that thought aside before it can become something I don’t want to examine. This doesn’t have to mean anything. I wanted him up here, so I brought him. I want him now, so I’m going to have him.

It’s that simple.

“Fuck me already, Thiago. We’re the worst friends with benefits. You’ve only fucked me once.”

Thiago lets out a low laugh. “Keeping count?”

“It’s not exactly difficult when the number is one.”

His hand slides beneath my ass. “Sounds like I’ve been neglecting my responsibilities.”

“You absolutely have.”

He kisses me again, and the teasing leaves his voice when I tighten my legs around his waist and rock my hips, grinding against his cock.

“Then I should probably fix that.” He grips my hip, but instead of giving me what I want, he pulls back. “But there’s still that little problem.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a condom.”

I bite my bottom lip.

Well, fuck. That’s right.

We used one last time, and going without one was never part of whatever arrangement we made. But with him naked between my legs and my body already aching for him, the idea suddenly feels a lot less terrifying than it should.

“I’m on birth control.”

He looks me directly in the eye. “You sure? I’m clean, but I want you to be sure.”

I hesitate, actually giving myself enough time to answer that question instead of letting my pussy do it for me.

I started taking the pill years ago, because apparently my uterus enjoys trying to murder me once a month, but pregnancy isn’t what makes me pause.

It’s the intimacy of it, knowing there’s nothing between us.

Fuck, I want that.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

His forehead presses to mine. “You change your mind, you tell me.”

“I will.” I rock against him again. “Now stop making me regret being responsible enough to take birth control every damn day and fuck me.”

“My girl is needy,” he rasps against my ear.

“And you’re still talking.”

He kisses me hard. Then he lines that pretty dick up with my entrance and eases in the tip, the metal of his piercing grazing sensitive skin and wiping every smart-ass thing I was about to say from my head.

My arms close around his shoulders as I take him in, slower than either of us probably wants because there’s nothing between us this time, just heat

and skin and the overwhelming awareness of how different he feels without a barrier.

“Fuck,” I whisper against his mouth.

He’s barely halfway in, and already my thighs are straining around his waist.

Thiago stops moving, giving me room to adjust while his hands hold me securely beneath my thighs.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I shift my hips, taking another inch as my grip firms around his shoulders. “You’re just fucking huge.”

He laughs against my cheek. “You knew that already.”

“Knowing and trying to fit all of you inside me are two very different things.”

Drawing in a slow breath, I roll my hips again. The stretch makes my toes curl against his back, but I keep going, easing myself farther down his length a little at a time.

Thiago doesn’t rush me. He stays still and lets me control how much I take, though the tension running through his arms tells me how much restraint it costs him.

“Fuck, *fera*,” he murmurs against my temple. “Watching you work for it is going to kill me.”

“Then stop being so damn big.”

“I’ll get right on that.”

I laugh, but it breaks into a moan when I shift again and manage another inch. Eventually, my body refuses to give me any more, leaving a small part of him still outside me.

I look down between us. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.”

He laughs.

“You don’t have to take all of me.”

“Wasn’t planning on giving up that easily.”

“Of course you weren’t.”

I give myself a few breaths to adjust, then deliberately tighten my muscles around him.

His fingers dig into my thighs. “Remi.”

I smile against his lips. “What?”

“You know what.”

I squeeze him again.

“Keep doing that and you’re going to make it very hard for me to take my time with you.”

“Who said I wanted you to?”

He pulls back just enough to make me feel every inch I worked so hard to take, then pushes forward again.

My head tips back, and I moan. “Fuck.”

He does it again, slowly at first, letting my body adjust to the movement instead of the fullness alone. The water ripples around us with every thrust, spilling over the edge of the ledge as I lock my ankles behind him.

His piercing feels different without the condom, adding another little spark every time his hips roll forward.

“Oh my God.”

Thiago’s mouth finds my neck. “Better than once?”

I grab a fistful of his wet hair and pull his head back. “Don’t ruin it.”

His laugh is low and breathless as he picks up the pace.

I cling to his shoulders as he fucks me against the ledge, each thrust pushing me right to the limit of what I can take without ever forcing me past it. My body has finally adjusted enough that the stretch has turned into pure pleasure, and every time he pulls back, my hips follow, already wanting him deep again.

Thiago notices.

“Look at you,” he murmurs, watching my hips meet his. “Could barely take me two minutes ago, and now you don’t want to let me out.”

“Shut up and keep moving.”

Smoothing his hand up my back, he grips the nape of my neck.

“Gladly.” He drives into me harder, and the ledge scrapes faintly beneath my ass as the water sloshes around us. The next thrust hits so deep my belly tightens and my thighs clamp around him. “Fuck, *fera*. Take every fucking inch.” His grip shifts to my hip, holding me exactly where he wants me while I meet every thrust. “Tell me how it feels.”

I open my mouth to answer, but he gives me no chance to speak before my teeth sink into his shoulder instead. His hand slides into my wet hair, pulling my head back just enough to expose my neck.

“Use your words, baby.”

“You feel fucking incredible.”

His mouth brushes my ear. “Better without the condom?”

“Yes.”

“How much better?”

I drag my nails down his back as he thrusts again. “So much fucking better.”

“That’s my girl.”

He kisses beneath my jaw and watches my face. “You like feeling all of me like this?”

“Yes,” I whimper.

“Then take what you can. I’m not giving you anything your body doesn’t want.”

I hook my ankles behind him and pull him closer. “My body wants plenty.”

His laugh turns into a groan when I squeeze around him again.

“Yeah,” he rasps. “I can fucking tell.”

He drives into me again, deeper this time, and I cry out louder than I mean to.

“Thiago, you fuck me so good. So damn good.”

“That’s it.” His hand cups the back of my neck while his other arm stays locked beneath my thigh. “Let me hear what taking this dick actually does to you.”

I bury my face against his shoulder again, but he pulls me back to look at me.

“No hiding, *fera*.”

His hips keep a steady rhythm, each thrust dragging that damn piercing over the spot that has my legs trembling around him.

“You’re so fucking annoying.”

“And you’re squeezing the life out of my cock while you tell me that.”

I would argue, but he rolls his hips differently and the words disappear beneath a moan.

Thiago kisses me hard, swallowing the sound while his hand slides down my back and grips my ass.

“Much better.”

His thumb traces slowly along the curve, and his mouth brushes mine. “One day, you’re going to let me have you another way.”

My breath hitches when his finger pushes against the tight rim of muscles.

“You tell me when you’re ready,” he adds, voice dropping. “I’ll take my time with you, baby.”

The promise burns deep in my belly. God, I want that.

Apparently, my face gives me away because a smug smile spreads across his mouth.

I swipe it away with my thumb. “Keep talking and I’m biting you again.”

“Promise?”

I sink my teeth into the side of his neck. His groan vibrates against my mouth, and the next thrust makes my thighs jerk around his hips.

“*Caralho*, *você é minha**.” He kisses me. “You have no idea how good you feel wrapped around me with nothing between us.”

My stomach flutters. My Portuguese is nowhere near good enough to catch everything Thiago says when he slips into it, but I know enough to recognize that *“minha”* means mine.

He means the condom. I know he means the fucking condom. But hearing him call me his while we’re skin to skin makes that explanation feel a little too convenient.

I pull him closer, impossibly closer, wanting every inch my body will let me have.

Thiago responds with a powerful thrust that draws a moan from me and sends water spilling over the edge and onto the terrace.

“More. Give me more.”

His palm slides up my side and closes around my breast as he settles into a faster rhythm. “That piercing feels different without the condom, doesn’t it?”

I dig my nails into his shoulders when the metal drags across me again. “You already know it does.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“I fucking love it.”

His lips brush my ear. “Good, because feeling you like this is fucking with my head.”

The words make my hips roll to meet him. “Then we’re even.”

He keeps moving, and the control he’s been holding on to starts to slip. The change in him is immediate as his breathing turns rougher against my mouth and his hold on me grows firmer while the water churns violently around our bodies.

“Fuck, *fera*.”

“Thiago…”

A deafening boom splits the night before I can say anything else, and I jolt in his arms.

“What the fuck?”

Thiago stops immediately and looks toward the skyline as a burst of red light blooms over the buildings, followed by another explosion in white and blue.

Fireworks fill the sky.

I stare at them until the date finally clicks into place.

“Oh, shit.”

“What?”

I start laughing, still clinging to him. “I completely forgot it was the Fourth of July.”

He looks back toward the skyline. “Fuck. So did I.”

“With everything going on lately, I barely know what day it is.”

“Apparently, neither do I.”

Another boom rolls across the city, and gold sparks scatter above us, reflecting across the surface of the pool. I’m still watching them when Thiago starts moving again.

The next burst lights up the sky at almost the exact same time he drives into me, pulling a startled gasp from my lips.

He pauses only long enough to look at me and grin.

Gold floods the terrace as another firework opens overhead, and he settles back into the rhythm. His next thrust lands with a deep boom that rolls through the night, so hard I feel it thunder inside my chest.

“Don’t you fucking stop.”

Everything blurs together until all I can register are his hands, the heat of him inside me, and the fireworks shaking the sky. Each blast seems to beat in time with my heart as pleasure builds with every movement. I cling to him, barely aware of anything beyond the way he feels and the flashes of color spilling across his face.

A fresh explosion ripples overhead, and the force of it steals my breath as Thiago drives into me again and again. My body is already too sensitive, every stroke pushing me closer while the fireworks keep bursting in rapid succession.

“Thiago, I’m...*fuck*.”

He hears the change in my voice and pulls me tighter against him. “That’s it, *fera*. Come all over my dick. I want to feel you squeeze every

inch.”

I bury my face against his neck as the pressure climbs faster, my legs trembling around his waist while another burst lights the terrace and shudders beneath my ribs.

“Oh, fuck.”

My whole body locks around him, each pulse seeming to fall in time with the fireworks booming across the sky. He holds me through it, one arm firm around my waist while his other hand cradles the back of my head. I can hear him saying my name against my temple, but everything else has dissolved into water, color, and the pounding of my heart.

I’m still catching my breath when Thiago’s rhythm falters. His face presses into my throat, and the rough sound he makes against my skin sends a weak aftershock through me.

“Oh, fuck, fuck,” he growls. “Keep squeezing me like that.”

I slide one hand into his wet hair and tug his face from my neck until his mouth is inches from mine. “Give it to me.”

His hips jerk against me as he comes, and I feel every shudder that moves through his body.

We stay pressed together on the ledge as the water settles around us and fireworks continue. My breathing slowly evens out, but my heart still pounds so hard that every distant thunder seems to answer it.

Thiago lifts his head and brushes my wet hair away from my face. “You okay?”

I nod, then laugh. “I think I just came to a fireworks show.”

He laughs softly and kisses my temple. “That was one hell of a finale.”

“You’re ridiculous,” I say, tracing my fingers along his jaw.

“Worth it.”

I smile and rest my forehead against his. “Yeah. It was.”

He keeps me close, and I make no move to leave his arms.

“Not a bad way to spend the Fourth.”

“No,” I admit, resting my head against his shoulder. “Not bad at all.”

Thiago shifts us on the ledge until his back rests against the edge of the pool, then pulls me into his lap. I settle between his legs as his arms circle my waist and my head falls against his shoulder.

Another firework erupts, this time casting gold across the night, and I tilt my face toward the sky to watch it fade. After a while, I notice his

thumb moving slowly over my stomach and realize he hasn't looked away from me.

He isn't watching the show at all.

"What?" I ask softly.

"You're beautiful."

I turn toward the sky again, suddenly grateful for the darkness that hides how much those words affect me.

"You have all that happening above us, and you're looking at me?"

"I am. They could light up the whole fucking sky. It still wouldn't be enough to steal my attention from you."

Glancing back, I meet his eyes, unable to stop smiling. I don't have a response, and I don't want one.

Thiago kisses into my hairline, then pulls me more securely against his chest. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For trusting me enough to bring me here. I can tell this place means something to you. And I know you don't bring just anyone up here."

My hand drifts over his forearm where it rests across my stomach as I tip my head toward the fireworks again.

"You gave me something important today. Your lake for my pool."

He threads his fingers with mine. "My lake for your pool."

Gold glitters above us as I stay tucked against him, not wanting to be anywhere else.

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* Fuck, you're mine.

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Thirty-Five

REMI



The door closes behind me with a soft click, and I pause in the foyer, drawing a slow breath.

It's my first time back here since Estela died.

I should've come sooner, checked in on Mamá more, sat with her, listened, and done something other than bury myself in work and every distraction I could find. Instead, I've spent the last few weeks trying to keep up with one disaster after another while avoiding everything I didn't want to face.

It's not an excuse. It's just the truth.

Standing here now, surrounded by memories of a woman who loved us fiercely until her last breath, that truth doesn't make me feel any less shitty.

"Remi!" Zara's voice echoes through the hall, and when I see her sprinting toward me, guilt rushes back. My baby has been in town for days, and I've only seen her once.

Damn, Remi. You really are an asshole sometimes.

I crouch just in time for her to launch herself at me. She hits me with enough force to knock us both back, and my tailbone takes the brunt of the impact. I bite back a wince so I don't worry her.

"Menace, you're going to kill me one of these days. When did you get so strong?"

She giggles and squeezes me tighter. "You came! Auntie Amalia said she didn't think you'd come, but I knew you would." She pulls back just enough to look at me. "Did you get my message?"

“I did.” I tuck one of her curls behind her ear and smile.

“And you ignored it?” Her big brown eyes narrow and her nose scrunches.

Who would have thought that after stabbing and shooting grown men, I’d end up intimidated by a six-year-old?

“I loved all your little emojis, Zara. I miss you too, a ton. I’m sorry I didn’t text back. I’ll make it up to you with ice cream. How’s that sound?”

“And sprinkles? The chocolate ones.”

“We can’t forget the sprinkles,” I say with a laugh.

“She really knows how to lay on the guilt, doesn’t she?”

Matteo stands over us, grinning, with both hands outstretched. We each take one, and he hauls us to our feet.

“I wonder where she gets it,” I tease, throwing an arm around him. “And I have a bone to pick with you. Are we just delivering cops to my door now?”

“He saved my sister. I owed him one.”

“At my expense? I thought I was your favorite, Matteo. I’m disappointed.”

“You could’ve been,” he says with a shrug and a wink.

Zara stares at us, visibly confused. “You two are so weird.” Her face brightens. “Wait, are you talking about your friend Officer Thiago?”

Calling Thiago my friend shouldn’t sound so wrong, considering I told Mamá he was exactly that.

“Yeah. He came to visit me the other day.”

“Is he your boyfriend now? Did you kiss him again?”

Of course she remembers that.

“That’s enough from you.”

Matteo scoops her up and throws her over his shoulder as she squeals.

“Remi, your mom is in her study. She said she wants to talk to you.”

I sigh, already pretty sure what this is about, but I’ll play along.

After blowing Zara a kiss, I head down the hall as Matteo carries her around the corner.

Voices come from the other side of the study door, but the wood is too thick for me to make out what anyone is saying. Mamá clearly isn’t alone, and irritation creeps in before I even reach for the handle. I’m twenty-two. I shouldn’t have to sit through an interrogation about who I’m dating.

Not that I’m dating anyone, because Thiago and I are just friends who happen to fuck, which apparently makes everything perfectly uncomplicated.

At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

I skip the knock and push open the heavy door, only to nearly stop in my tracks.

I expected my dad to be in here with her, not to walk into a full-blown family meeting.

Aunt Leni and Uncle Silas sit by the window, with Uncle Derek and Aunt Eva beside them, while my parents stand behind the desk. The conversation dies the moment I enter, and every pair of eyes in the room turns toward me.

I know everyone well enough to recognize when something is wrong. These are not people who scare easily, overreact, or call the entire family because someone made a questionable life choice. Whatever brought all six of them into this room is serious.

My hand slips into my pocket, fingertips brushing over the ring.

“Wow. Didn’t know this was a party.”

Papá stands, crosses the room, and kisses my forehead before closing the door behind me.

“Sit, *princesa*.”

“I’m good right here.”

He pauses, then gives me a slight nod.

“What’s this about?” I ask, looking around.

“*Mi amor*...”

Mamá.

“We heard what happened.”

“Of course you did.”

“Remi.” She pushes herself to her feet and rounds the desk. “Why did I have to learn from a viral social media post that my daughter was arrested?”

“It was a great picture, wasn’t it?”

“Remi Isabel.” Her voice drops. “This isn’t a joke. Those were serious charges, and after everything that’s happened, you’re out there drawing even more attention to yourself.”

“I took off in my car, Mamá.” I hold her gaze. “I didn’t murder anyone.”

I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth.

Throwing my mother's past in her face is a shitty thing to do, especially when I know that isn't what this is about. She doesn't care about the embarrassment of having her daughter's mugshot plastered across social media, and the charges aren't what scared her enough to bring the entire family into this room.

She's scared that something is going to happen to me.

I exhale slowly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

For a moment, Mamá says nothing.

"I know." She reaches for my hands and holds them in hers.

"But you should've told me. You should've told all of us."

"I would have if I had thought I needed to. There are some things I can handle on my own."

"We know you're capable, Remi," Aunt Leni says from her place by the window. "I taught you myself."

A few chuckles ripple through the room.

"But you know what's at stake." Aunt Leni continues. "You know what they want, and we can't afford to overlook anything that could put you in their path."

"I appreciate that, Aunt Leni. I really do." I glance around the room. "But I refuse to live my life in fear."

"Fear?" Uncle Derek arches an eyebrow.

"Cautious," Aunt Eva corrects.

"Prepared," Uncle Silas adds.

I groan. "There it is. The family intervention."

"Remi girl."

I turn toward Papá, hoping he'll give me something, but one look at his face tells me I'm on my own this time.

"Just the other night, someone shot at you," he says. "Before that, someone took a shot at both of us. Now you're being arrested, and the charges disappear before anyone can figure out how or why."

"That last one worked to my advantage."

"That doesn't mean it isn't part of the problem."

That shuts me up.

Papá holds my gaze. "You keep looking at these things as if they're separate, but I don't think they are. There are pieces moving here that we can't see yet, and I have a sick feeling you're somewhere in the middle of it."

I cross my arms. “So what do you want me to do? Lock myself away?”

“Remi Isabel, *ya basta*[*].” Mamá’s voice cuts through the room. When I look over, her arms are crossed and her dark eyes are fixed on me.

“No one is asking you to do that, but you keep acting like nothing can touch you. Someone has already tried. Twice.”

“I know that.”

“Then start acting like it.” Her composure finally cracks as she throws her hands up. “We’ve asked you to stay away from those races until we know what’s going on, and you refuse to even do that.”

“Because I’m not giving that up.”

“Of course you aren’t.”

Frustration burns behind my eyes, and I blink hard to keep the tears from coming. There’s nothing worse than being pissed off and then crying on top of it, especially in front of six people who already think I’m making bad decisions.

I need to get out of here, and the fact that I know exactly whose arms I want to disappear into only pisses me off even more.

“Remi...” Aunt Eva’s voice breaks through the tension, and I turn toward her.

“I made some calls and spoke with a few former colleagues. I also looked into what happened after your arrest.” She pauses. “There’s no paper trail showing who scrubbed your file.”

My stomach twists.

“Do you know anything about that?”

So much for Aunt Eva being the reasonable one.

“Did that man from the range have anything to do with it?” Mamá asks.

Of course she goes straight to Thiago.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I know bullshit when I smell it, and there’s something about him I don’t trust.”

“That’s not fair. You met him for two minutes and already decided you didn’t like him before you even knew his name.”

“I don’t have to like him, and I don’t have to know him.” Her eyes narrow. “I know things.”

“I’m not a child anymore. Who I’m friends with is my choice, and you don’t get to make it for me. You should trust my judgment enough to know that.”

“We do,” Papá says, slipping into his usual role as the peacekeeper.

“Do you?” I bite back.

“What’s his information?”

I turn toward Uncle Derek, who’s watching me with the same infuriating calm he wears whenever he’s about to ask for something he already expects to get.

“No.” The word comes out sharper than I intend, but I don’t take it back.

“I’m not giving you his information. Leave him out of this.”

I head for the door, desperate to end this conversation before they press any further. The worst part is that their questions make sense. If the situation were reversed, I’d probably be demanding the same answers. But I don’t want them digging through Thiago’s life, pulling apart every detail, and looking for reasons not to trust him.

Because I don’t want them to find one.

I want him to be the man I’ve come to know. The man who saved Zara, who showed up when I needed someone, and who somehow makes all the noise in my head fade away. It hasn’t been long enough for any of this to matter as much as it already does, but clearly no one bothered to tell my feelings that.

If Thiago isn’t who I think he is, it’s going to hurt.

No one tries to stop me as I open the door and leave.

The tears come before I make it halfway down the hall, which only pisses me off more. I swipe them away and keep walking until I nearly barrel into Gio.

“Whoa. Watch where you’re going.” His hands grip my shoulders, stopping me before I can take him down with me.

“Where are you off to like a fugitive?” he asks with a grin, clearly taking a jab at my recent run-in with the law. Normally, I’d have a dozen insults ready to go, but today, I don’t have it in me.

His smile crumples. “Rem?”

I look away, but he catches my chin and gently turns my face back toward him.

“What happened? Did they get on you about the arrest?”

“It’s nothing, Gio.” My voice cracks on the last word. “I’m fine.”

We both know that’s a pathetic lie.

“No, you’re not.”

Before I can argue, he pulls me against his chest, and whatever control I have left evaporates. I fist the back of his shirt and bury my face against him as quiet sobs shake my body.

“Hey,” he murmurs, cradling the back of my head in one hand. “I’ve got you.”

Those three words only make me cry even harder.

“I always fuck things up, don’t I?” I manage to say.

“That’s not true.”

I let out a hollow laugh. “It’s always been true.”

“Remi, I can agree with you if that’s what you want to hear, but I’d be lying.”

He pulls back to look at me.

“You’re the most annoying and aggravating sister I’ve ever had.”

I sniffle. “Wow. Thanks.”

“You filled my room with plastic scorpions when I was twelve.”

A reluctant smile pulls at my lips. “You screamed like Zara.”

“You gave me trauma.”

“Worth it.” I laugh again, and this one sounds a little more like me.

“But you’re so many other things that make you you,” he says, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “And every single person in that room loves you exactly the way you are. Mom. Dad. All of them.”

I swallow past the lingering lump in my throat.

“You know we’re all fucking crazy, right?” he adds with a chuckle.

That earns a real laugh this time. “Yeah.”

“Good, because it takes a special kind of crazy to put up with you. They’re just worried because they love you, Rem.”

“You give the best pep talks.”

“I know. Now stop crying so we can go back to pretending we hate each other.”

I lean in and give him one last squeeze before pulling away and dusting the little-brother cooties off my shirt.

“I didn’t say anything about...him.” Matteo’s voice has me turning around. He’s standing a few feet away, arms crossed over his chest, as if he materialized out of thin air. “They don’t know,” he adds. “And Zara refuses to talk about that day, so for now, you don’t have to worry about anyone finding out from us.”

Some of the tension finally leaves my body. Mamá knows who Thiago is, but she doesn't know about Zara or what happened that day. I doubt she'll bring him up to anyone until she has something concrete.

She'll do her own digging first.

"You heard all that in there?"

He nods, glances down the hall, then looks back at me. "But I do agree with them about knowing exactly who he is. Digging a little deeper can't hurt."

"I already have." I cross my arms. "On paper, everything checks out. So unless he's secretly part of some government psyop program, he's just a regular guy."

"He's a cop," Matteo reminds me, which is rich coming from the man who practically rolled out the welcome mat for him a few days ago.

"Yeah, and? I'm just having fun with him. That's all."

Gio grimaces while Matteo lets out a slow breath.

"Fun like you're teaching him how to swap a carburetor or showing him how to play chess, right?"

"Exactly, little bro." I turn and start down the hall. "Lots and lots of chess."

"Remi, what the fuck?" His disgust follows me down the hall, and I can't help but laugh.

Gio is twenty and far from innocent, but just like I never want to know who he brings home, I'm sure the feeling is mutual. I'd much rather keep thinking of him as the twelve-year-old who nearly lost his shit over a room full of plastic scorpions.

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* Enough.

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Thirty-Six

THIAGO



Who knew sending a simple text message could be so complicated?

If I tell her I miss her, she'll think I'm getting too attached. And despite being exclusive, or whatever the hell we are, she's been adamant we're not a couple. Hell, she swears up and down we're not even friends.

I lean against my locker, the cold metal pressing into my back as I stare at the unfinished message on my phone.

Remi can deny it all she wants. I know she feels it too. It's there in how easily we talk, how naturally we've started to fit into each other's lives, and in the way she comes apart in my arms like there's nowhere else she'd rather be.

Which only makes what I'm doing to her worse.

"Hey, Braga."

I glance up to see Ryan standing in the open locker room doorway.

"You joining us for drinks at Frank's on 5th?"

My attention returns to the phone in my hand. I haven't even sent the damn message, yet some foolish part of me still hopes she'll beat me to it. A text, a call, anything that tells me she's sitting somewhere, thinking about me too. But it's pushing ten, and my screen has stayed stubbornly quiet. I guess neither of us is willing to admit we miss the other first.

"Yeah." I push away from the locker. "I'll meet you there."

Before I can tuck it away, my phone lights up with a new message.

I stupidly hope it's her, but when I see the name, any hope of hearing from Remi disappears.

ELENA: Report. Facility.

Fucking Elena.

Whatever chance I had of grabbing a drink with the guys tonight just went to shit.

I shove the phone into my pocket, pull on my shirt, and grab my bag before heading through the building and out into the night.

The drive to Helios passes mostly in silence. I keep both hands on the wheel and my attention on the road, refusing to think about why Elena wants me there so late or what she might already know.

Once I clear security, I head toward her office, and the unease I've been trying to ignore has settled beneath my skin.

I don't get far.

"Operative." An unfamiliar voice stops me.

I turn to find a man I've never seen before standing several feet behind me. He appears to be in his mid-forties, dressed in an expensive suit and polished leather shoes. He motions toward a slate-gray metal door leading into the training wing. "Through there."

A familiar sense of dread crawls up my spine.

I don't move.

"What's this?"

The man doesn't answer. He simply waits, and I'm reminded of my first day here and of Elena's version of a welcome party. If there's one thing I've learned about Helios, it's that nothing happens without a reason, especially when no one bothers to give you one.

"Now," he orders.

I stare him down for another second before heading for the door. Choice has never meant much inside these walls.

Already bracing for what comes next, I drop my bag and turn.

"Elena."

Silence answers.

The training room is dim, with only a few overhead lights illuminating the mats and leaving the edges of the room in shadow. I scan the doorways and corners for any sign of movement, but I'm alone this time.

"Operative." Her voice comes through the speakers above me.

"Why are you playing these games?"

“Games?” Her tone carries the slightest hint of amusement. “If you think this is a game, you’ve already lost.”

I glance toward one of the cameras mounted near the ceiling. “Why did you call me here? Is this another of your tests?”

She laughs. “You say that as though you’ve passed the others.”

The jab lands exactly where she intended. Elena has a way of turning every conversation into a challenge and every challenge into a threat.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve done everything you’ve asked.”

“Have you? Because I don’t recall authorizing late-night dinners and leisurely walks with your target.”

My entire body goes still at the mention of Remi. “Your job isn’t to micromanage how I conduct my investigation.”

More silence.

“Are you compromised, Operative?”

Looking for more romance to read?

Search **Lokepub** on Google.

I swallow hard and clench my fists. My gaze shifts to the surveillance camera again, and I stare directly into it.

“I repeat,” Elena says, her voice sharpening. “Operative 427, are you compromised?”

I know what I’m supposed to say. The denial should come without hesitation, clean and convincing enough to end the conversation.

But I can’t fucking say it because if being compromised means I care more about what happens to Remi than about completing this assignment, Elena already has her answer.

“Operative 427, effective immediately, you are relieved of all duties related to case number 11-C3578.”

“No.” The word is out before I can stop it.

“Operative—”

“No.” I step closer to the camera. “You can’t.”

“A replacement shall be assigned and brought up to speed—”

“Wait.”

My pulse pounds in my ears as the meaning of those words sinks in. She’s going to hand Remi’s file to someone else. Another operative will follow her, learn her routines, and get close enough to earn her trust. Just as I did.

And whoever Elena sends next might actually do everything Helios asks.

“Commander, wait.”

She continues.

“You are hereby ordered to cease all contact with—”

“I said wait!” My voice echoes through the training wing, and Elena finally goes silent.

I drag in a breath as I keep staring at the camera.

“Please,” I say before pride can stop me. “I can finish this.”

Elena makes me wait several seconds before answering.

“Can you? Because from where I’m standing, Operative, it looks like you’ve forgotten which side you’re on.”

I force myself to breathe evenly. “I can, and I will.”

She doesn’t respond right away, leaving me to wonder whether she believes me. When her voice finally comes through again, there’s no indication either way.

“At the front desk, you’ll receive an envelope. Inside, you’ll find a set of devices designed to override security protocols and bypass firewalls, biometric authentication, and encrypted passwords. You will deploy them where necessary.”

Any relief I felt at keeping the assignment disappears. She isn’t just asking me to gather information anymore. She wants access.

“Each device is equipped with a tracking mechanism.” She continues. “If you leave them sitting in a drawer somewhere, I’ll know.”

Of course they are. Elena isn’t giving me another chance because she trusts me to finish the job. She’s making sure I can’t pretend to do it while protecting Remi from the worst of what Helios wants.

“Are we clear?”

“Clear.”

“You are to respond to every phone call and message in a timely manner.”

I bend and grab my bag from the floor.

“And one more thing.”

I stop and wait.

“Since you’ve worked so hard to gain her trust, it would be a waste not to capitalize on it.”

My body stills.

“You will find a way into the Cain residence. Meet the parents. Learn the layout. Identify vulnerabilities. The devices I’ve supplied should be more than sufficient.”

I stare beyond the camera now as the full weight of the order sinks in. Elena isn’t telling me to break into their home. She expects me to walk through the front door because Remi invited me. To sit across from Kai and Amalia at their table. To smile and make conversation while their daughter sits beside me, trusting me enough to bring me into the one place she should never have to protect from me.

And while I’m there, I’m supposed to plant the devices that will give Helios access to everything her family has spent years protecting.

“Understood?” Elena asks.

I have to force the word out. “Understood.”

“Good.”

The speakers go silent.

I stay where I am, long after Elena is gone.

While I just begged her not to assign Remi to another operative because I couldn’t bear the thought of anyone else getting close enough to hurt her, now I understand what keeping the assignment means.

I didn’t save Remi from the person Helios would send to betray her. I made sure that person would still be me.

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Thirty-Seven

Thiago



My eyes remain fixed on the plain manila envelope sitting in the center of my coffee table.

I tossed it there the second I walked into my apartment, then headed straight for the shower without looking back, but I felt its presence the entire time. Even now, it seems to take up more space than it should, drawing my attention no matter where I look.

I still haven't opened it. As long as the envelope stays sealed, the devices inside remain theoretical. The moment I tear it open, there's no pretending I haven't crossed another line.

I slam my fist against the coffee table, rattling the wood. The envelope doesn't move, and neither does the knot in my chest.

Are you compromised, Operative?

The question has been on my mind since I left Helios, and hours later, I'm still trying to come up with an answer that doesn't make me feel like a fucking liar.

There isn't one.

I'm compromised, and I think I have been for longer than I'm willing to admit.

My phone buzzes on the couch beside me, and the name on the screen sends my pulse racing.

Remi: Are you home?

Me: I am.

Three dots appear almost instantly.

Remi: You mind if I drop by? For some non-friendly company?

A smile tugs at my mouth.

I should tell her no, say it's been a long day and I have a headache, or come up with any excuse to keep her away from me tonight. After everything Elena just ordered me to do, being around Remi is probably the last thing I need.

But as I stare at her message, I realize I'm not sure I can handle not seeing her either.

All I can think about is having her here, even if it's only listening to her complain about her day or watching her eyes light up when she talks about cars. I know I should put some distance between us, but I don't fucking want to. I want whatever time I can get with her.

Me: I could use the company of someone who pretends she's not my friend.

I wait for a response, but nothing comes. Then a soft knock sounds at my door.

My eyes flick from the phone in my hand to the front door. I push off the couch and make my way over, and the second I look through the peephole, my phone vibrates.

Remi: Never leave a girl waiting at the door.

I laugh under my breath. Of course she's already here.

Unlocking the deadbolt, I pull it open to find her standing on the other side, her hair swept into a ponytail, a thin platinum strand framing her face. She's holding her phone in one hand. When she looks up at me through her lashes and smiles, the tension that's been riding me since Helios finally subsides.

"I hope it's not too late." She lifts a white plastic bag. "I brought ice cream. With chocolate sprinkles."

"Well, I'll never say no to sprinkles."

Unable to help myself, I hook my fingers into the waistband of her shorts and gently tug her toward me.

"Get in here, *fera*."

She rolls her eyes but lets me pull her across the threshold.

I should probably take the ice cream from her, but I can’t stop staring. She’s so fucking beautiful that I forget about the envelope only feet away from us.

Tonight, I’ve spent enough time thinking about what I should and shouldn’t do, so I say fuck it, lean down, and press a kiss to her forehead.

“Thanks for coming over.”

The teasing slips from her expression, replaced with something softer, and somehow that simple look does more damage than any kiss ever could.

“We’d better eat this soon,” she says, her voice light. “It’s kind of melting.”

I trace my thumb along her lower lip, then take the bag from her. “I’ll get the bowls.”

As I head toward the kitchen, my attention is caught by the envelope still sitting in the middle of the coffee table. The last thing I need is Remi asking what’s inside. I pick it up on my way past and carry it into the kitchen. When I open the cabinet for the bowls, I slide the envelope onto the shelf behind them, grab two, then close the door.

A few minutes later, we’re settled on my couch with cake batter ice cream drowning beneath an unreasonable amount of chocolate sprinkles.

Remi sits with her legs folded beneath her and her body angled toward mine. Normally, she’d be talking, teasing me, or giving me shit about something, but tonight, she’s unusually quiet.

“What happened?” I ask, setting my bowl on the coffee table and turning toward her.

She pauses, the dessert halfway to her mouth. “Nothing.”

“Liar.”

She gives me the faintest hint of a smile before it disappears just as quickly. I don’t push her. I simply wait until she finally sighs and sets her spoon down.

“I needed some company tonight, and with Val gone, AJ overseas, my brother busy, and Henry, the bellman at my condo, off for the night, well, you were what was left.”

I laugh and scoot closer. “Dead last, huh? I guess I’m just happy I made the list.”

She chuckles and looks down at her bowl, but there’s nothing behind the sound. I slip a finger beneath her chin and tilt her face toward mine.

“Okay. Now tell me why you’re really here.”

She holds my gaze for a moment before answering. “I put on music. I tried to watch a movie. I even took apart my AR and started stress cleaning it.”

“But?”

“It was too loud,” she whispers.

My brow furrows. “I thought you liked noise.”

“No.” Her eyes drop to her bowl. “I was too loud. I couldn’t stop thinking or overthinking everything, and eventually, I got tired of listening to myself.”

Her words take me back to the terrace and to what she told me about needing the city around her. All that sound gives her brain something else to focus on when the noise inside her head becomes too much.

“So you came here,” I say. “To me.”

She looks at me again and nods. “I did.”

“Why?”

Her lips part, and for a second, I think she’s going to tell me. Then the vulnerability leaves her expression, and I watch her retreat behind the same walls she always builds when we get too close.

“Aren’t you full of questions tonight, Braga?”

I laugh, but it doesn’t quite mask my disappointment. I could’ve sworn she was about to give me the answer I wanted, one I didn’t even realize I needed until now.

“You like me, don’t you?” I tease, breaking the tension.

She laughs, then dips her spoon into my bowl. Before I can protest, she brings the ice cream to my lips. Our eyes meet as I open my mouth and take the bite, then hook an arm around her waist and lift her onto my lap.

Her laughter softens, and mine fades with it.

There’s no rush to turn this into sex or to strip away the clothes between us. She came here because she didn’t want to be alone, and for now, having her curled against me feels like enough.

I wrap an arm around her as she keeps stealing bites of my ice cream as if it were hers. Guilt churns in my stomach when I think about the envelope now hidden in the kitchen, but I shove it aside. I’ve already let Helios take enough from me tonight, and I refuse to give them this as well.

Remi rests her head against my shoulder. “What was he like?”

The question catches me off guard.

I follow her gaze to the photograph on the bookshelf, taken the day my father was made detective. Emotions I usually keep buried begin to surface.

“You can tell me to shut up,” she says softly. “You don’t have to answer if—”

“I wish I remembered more about him.” I look at the photograph. “I wish I could remember all the stories my aunt used to tell me or what it felt like when he took me to the aquarium every weekend he had off because I loved watching the penguins and jellyfish.”

Remi gently brushes her fingertips along my jaw.

“I know Raymond Braga from newspaper articles and commendations. I know the decorated detective, the good cop everyone respected, but I barely remember what he was like as my father. Sometimes that fucking kills me.”

She tilts her face toward mine. “I’m sorry, Thiago.”

“He didn’t deserve to die, especially not that way.” Once I start, the words keep coming. “He wasn’t alone, though. According to the case reports, a woman who chose to remain anonymous stayed with him after he was shot. She held his hand and talked to him until he passed.”

Remi stops moving beside me. “That’s...” She swallows. “That’s a beautiful thing to do for someone.”

“Yeah.”

“Whenever I think about his last moments, that’s the part I hold on to,” I admit. “Someone cared enough to stay with him so he wouldn’t have to leave this world alone.”

Sadness crosses her face before she rests her head against my shoulder once more.

“I’m glad he had her.”

I look over at the photograph one more time. “So am I.”

With that thought, I feel a sudden urge to share a part of him with her that I rarely show anyone.

“Can I show you something?”

“Yeah.”

I take her bowl and set it on the coffee table beside mine, then help her off my lap and push myself to my feet.

She looks up at me with one eyebrow arched. “Where are we going?”

I hold out my hand. “Do you trust me?”

The question leaves my mouth before I can think better of it, and regret follows instantly. Trust is the one thing she shouldn’t give me. But Remi

doesn’t hesitate. She slips her hand into mine and nods as if the answer is obvious, while guilt twists deeper inside me because I know exactly how undeserving I am of it.

I take her hand and lead her down the hall toward the room across from my bedroom. The door is already cracked open, so I push it the rest of the way and flip on the light.

Remi stops in the doorway.

Her gaze sweeps across the room, taking in the rows of vinyl lining the walls. I give her hand a gentle tug, and she follows me inside.

“You rob a record store I don’t know about?”

“Something like that,” I say with a chuckle. “You’re not the only one with secret rooms.”

She gives me a sideways look as her fingers trail along one of the sleeves. “You don’t seem like a vinyl guy. No offense.”

“I wasn’t.”

The words come out quieter than I intended, and Remi glances back at me. Talking about my father this much after years of keeping those memories tucked away has left me more emotional than I expected.

As if she senses it, she reaches out and squeezes my arm.

“They were my father’s,” I say. “My aunt gave them to me the first time I moved out.”

Remi’s gaze returns to the collection. “That’s a lot of records.”

I chuckle. “Yeah. He had a problem.”

“Looks hereditary.”

Her teasing draws another laugh from me, and some of the heaviness from our conversation in the living room lifts.

“Do you listen to them?” she asks.

I pull an old jazz record from the shelf, one that always takes me back to weekends at my grandmother’s in Rio. My thumb traces the worn edge of the sleeve.

“I never knew why I liked track six so much growing up,” I say. “Years later, she told me my dad used to play it at every special occasion. Birthdays, barbecues, basically any excuse to celebrate.” I look down at the faded cover. “I don’t remember any of those moments with him, but somehow the song still feels familiar.”

Remi studies the record in my hands. “I guess some things stick with us even when we don’t realize it.”

“Yeah.” I lean against the shelf next to her. “I never really listened to these before, but I do now. Some nights after a rough shift, I’ll put one on and sit here for a while. It helps me relax, but I think part of me also enjoys imagining the things I don’t remember and wondering about all the things that could’ve been different.”

Remi gently takes the album from my hands.

“I think we all do that sometimes,” she says. “Wonder how different things might have been if we’d made a different choice or if something had happened differently.” She rests her shoulder against mine. “I can’t imagine not wondering what your life would’ve been like if your father had lived.”

I look down at her and find only understanding in her eyes. Without thinking, I reach up and cup her cheek, my eyes drifting to her lips before returning to her eyes.

“What are your regrets, Remi? Your what-ifs?”

She holds my gaze for a long moment before looking away. “It’s...complicated. I wouldn’t change my family.” Her voice softens. “They’re everything.”

I wait because I can tell there’s more.

“But...” she trails off as her hands come up to cover mine against her face. Her thumbs brush across my skin before she gently lowers my hands and takes a step back. “Like I said, it’s complicated.”

I don’t push her. Whatever she almost told me is tangled up in the people she loves most, and I know better than to force it out of her before she’s ready to give it.

She turns the record over in her hands, tracing the edges of a life that existed long before either of us knew the other. As I watch her, another what-if takes shape in my mind.

Remi and me without Helios. Without an assignment or a lie sitting at the center of everything between us. If I’d met her under different circumstances, she still would have caught my attention, as she did that night in Texas. I allow myself to picture what that might have looked like. We could have started without deception hanging over us or the knowledge that eventually, every lie I’ve told her will come crashing down. She could look at me the way she does now and have every reason to trust me, and maybe I could actually deserve it.

“Is this one new?” Remi pulls a vinyl from the shelf, still sealed in plastic. The moment she turns it over and sees the cover, curiosity gives

way to amusement. “You listen to Selena?”

I laugh, take the record from her, and make my way over to the turntable.

“I bought it a little while ago, but I haven’t had a chance to play it yet. My aunt’s from Texas, so I practically grew up on Selena. Every Saturday morning at seven o’clock, she’d have one of her albums blasting through the house.”

Remi laughs. “I fear we had the same childhood.”

“Good to know.”

I tear off the plastic, set the record on the turntable, and lower the needle. I can feel her watching me as the first notes fill the room.

“Why Selena?” she asks.

“She reminds me of someone.”

Remi arches an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

I glance at her over my shoulder. “Great smile. Red lips. Big heart.”

Her eyes narrow. “You think you’re smooth, don’t you, Braga?”

A grin spreads across my face. “No.” A cumbia spills through the room. “I know I am.”

She bites the corner of her lip and shakes her head.

“Dance with me, *fera*?” I ask, extending my hand.

“You dance?”

“Let me guess. I don’t look like the type?”

Remi slips her hand into mine, and I tug her forward.

“I never said that.”

“Sure,” I murmur against her hair as I slide a hand around her waist and guide her into the rhythm. “Besides, I didn’t have a choice. My aunt practically forced me to learn.”

Her laughter vibrates against my chest. “Poor Thiago.”

I tilt her chin and brush my lips against hers. “Yeah. Poor, poor me.”

The kiss is brief, but neither of us pulls away. I want to deepen it, yet I know exactly where that will lead. Tonight, I don’t want this to become about sex.

I want this instead.

I want her body warm against mine as we move together, her cheek resting against my chest and her hand tucked into mine. I want the way she relaxes in my arms as the music fills the room, making everything waiting for me outside these walls easier to ignore.

For the first time all day, I feel something dangerously close to peace.

“Remi...”

She tips her head back to look at me, curiosity flickering in her eyes.

“What is it?”

“In a couple of weeks, the precinct is holding a costume charity ball.”

“Costume? In July?”

I laugh. “Well, I figure if we can have Christmas in July, why not Halloween?”

“Why not?” she says with a grin. “You’re dressing up?”

“Sort of. Does a Batman mask count as a costume?”

Her smile widens. “How fitting of you. And I guess so. Just wear a tux and you’ll be good to go.”

I lean closer and whisper, “Come with me.”

Her steps falter. “Go with you?” she asks. “As in your date?”

“Exactly. We’re allowed to bring a guest, and I thought—”

“You’re joking, right?”

I stop moving, but the music continues around us. The amusement drains from her face, taking mine with it.

“No.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Thiago, you’re really asking me to be your guest at a charity event for cops? As in, spend an entire evening in a ballroom full of them?”

I stare at her, caught off guard by how ridiculous the idea sounds to her.

I wasn’t just asking her to attend some fucking fundraiser. I was asking her to come with me, to meet the people I work beside every day, and to spend one night as part of my life outside these walls. After everything we’ve shared tonight, I didn’t think that would be such a problem.

Turning toward the record player, I turn off the music. “What’s so wrong about that?”

“You know how I feel about cops.”

“But you and I—”

“Are exactly what we’ve always been.”

I take a step back from her. “Remi—”

“No, Thiago. You know what this is.” She throws her hands up. “We spend time together. We hook up. We have fun. That’s it.”

“That’s it?”

She looks away. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Make this into something it isn’t.”

I fall back, trying to reconcile what she’s saying with the woman who showed up at my door tonight because she needed me. The same woman who sat in my lap, listened to me talk about my father, and without hesitation told me she trusted me.

“Right. I’m just a cop.”

Her eyes snap back to mine. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

She exhales sharply and drags a hand through her hair. “Thiago, I can’t be the person you’re asking me to be.”

Maybe I’m a hypocritical bastard. I have no right to feel hurt when I’m lying to her every day, but knowing that doesn’t make hearing her reduce everything between us to sex and fun hurt any less.

After everything that happened tonight with Elena and the assignment, somehow this is what finally gets to me.

“I have an early shift tomorrow.”

The words spill from my mouth before I can stop them.

Remi lets out a cold laugh. “Of course you do.” Her shoulder bumps into mine as she storms past me. “Lose my number, Braga.”

I know I should stop her, tell her I didn’t mean it, and find a way to explain why hearing her say we’re nothing got under my skin without admitting how much I’ve started to want us to be something.

But I stand there and let her leave.

By the time I make it back to the living room, the front door slams behind her, the sound echoing through my apartment.

I drop onto the couch and drag a hand over my face as a headache builds behind my eyes.

I really fucked that up.

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Thirty-Eight

Remi



"Not even a damn text message."

My glove connects with the pad in Matteo's hand, the impact echoing through the empty gym.

"He hasn't called." I throw another punch. "He hasn't texted." I follow it with another. "He just goes on with his life as if nothing happened."

Matteo absorbs the next hit and lowers the pad slightly.

"It's been three days."

"Exactly." I fire off another combination. "Three days, Matteo."

"That's not exactly a lifetime."

"It is when some giant idiot spends weeks showing up everywhere, making himself a problem, and then suddenly disappears."

"Ah."

I narrow my eyes. "Don't 'ah' me."

A stupid grin spreads across his face, and I already know whatever comes out of his mouth next is going to make me want to land a jab somewhere other than on the pad.

"You miss him."

I knew it.

"No, I don't."

"Remi."

"Matteo."

"You absolutely miss him."

I hit the pad again, harder this time.

“I’m annoyed.”

“Sure.”

“I’m irritated.”

“Definitely. I think you’ve bruised my palms.”

“I’m considering keying his truck.”

Matteo laughs. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

I roll my eyes and yank off one glove with my teeth, then wipe the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. When I look up, Matteo wears that infuriating smirk.

The worst part is that I know he’s right, even though I refuse to admit it has anything to do with missing Thiago. I’m standing in a gym, ranting about a man who hasn’t called me, instead of doing literally anything else with my time, and that realization only annoys me more.

“Are you going to tell me what happened, or are you just going to keep taking it out on me?” Matteo asks as he lowers the pads again.

“He invited me to his precinct’s charity ball.”

Matteo stares at me, and I stare right back. When I don’t elaborate, his eyebrows lift as if he’s waiting for the part that explains why I’ve spent the past ten minutes trying to break his hands.

“And?” he finally asks.

“What do you mean, and? Isn’t that enough? Me at a party surrounded by Philly’s finest after they hauled me in like some criminal and leaked a photo of me so every creep within a fifty-mile radius could get off on it? Please.”

I snatch my water bottle off the bench and take a long drink.

“And he got upset because you said no?”

“He got upset because I basically told him I’d rather cut off my legs than walk into that party. Then I told him to lose my number and left.”

Matteo bursts out laughing.

I glare at him.

“I’m glad you find this amusing.”

His laughter finally dies down. With a sigh, he slides off the pads and throws an arm around my shoulders.

“Remi, if you told him to lose your number and that’s exactly what he did, then why are you upset?”

I shrug and look away because answering him would mean admitting something I’ve spent the past three days trying very hard not to think about.

I’ve kept myself busy with music blasting in my ears, torn apart the spare RB26 engine I’ve been meaning to rebuild for months, built a custom AR, and burned through two goddamn bags of watermelon lollipops. I’ve done everything I can to keep my hands moving and my mind from wandering back to Thiago.

Sure, that’s dramatic, but staying busy is easier than admitting that maybe, just maybe, a tiny part of me misses him. It’s also easier than admitting I’m pissed he listened to me.

I snatch my gloves off the bench and start pulling them back on. “Another round.”

Before Matteo can answer, the door to his private gym swings open. Aunt Leni strides in, followed closely by Aunt Eva.

I wait a few seconds, half expecting Mamá to appear behind them, but the doorway stays empty. I love her more than anything. But after being cornered and interrogated as if I couldn’t be trusted to make my own decisions, I’m not ready to have that conversation with her yet.

“We heard you two were here,” Aunt Leni says as she looks between us.

Her gaze drops to the gloves in my hands. “Should we come back after you finish beating up Matteo?”

“Too late.” He drains the rest of his water. “She clipped my chin with a two-three combo.”

“You deserved it,” I tease, crossing my arms. “What brings you two by?”

Aunt Eva places a hand on Matteo’s shoulder, and they exchange a look that seems to convey an entire conversation without a single word.

The traitor grabs his bag, leans in, and kisses my cheek. “Take it easy, Rem.”

“Coward.”

His grin widens as he heads for the door.

The moment it closes behind him, both women turn their attention to me, confirming what I suspected. This isn’t a social visit.

“Look—”

“We’re just here to talk,” Aunt Leni says as she moves closer.

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Remi.” Aunt Eva’s softer voice cuts through my irritation, so I turn toward her.

“This isn’t what you’re thinking,” she says. “We’re not here to talk about the other day. We wanted to set the record straight and update you on information that’s been circulating behind the scenes.”

My arms clench across my chest. “What information?”

They exchange another glance before Aunt Leni answers.

“The organization has picked up chatter about a covert, government-sanctioned agency that’s been quietly gathering intelligence. They’re searching for databases, servers, and encrypted files linked to The Six.”

A chill works its way through me. “Encrypted files...” I lower my voice. “The Ledger?”

Aunt Leni nods.

“Do they know we have one?”

“If they had,” Aunt Eva says calmly, “we probably wouldn’t be standing here having this conversation.”

That does little to make me feel better. The Ledger isn’t just information. It’s leverage.

Four years ago, Aunt Leni revealed she had one of the encrypted drives in her possession, and there hasn’t been so much as a whisper about it since. No one outside this family should know we have any connection to the Ledger, let alone that we have one of its drives.

As far as I know, the only person who might have suspected the truth is dead, which leaves me with one very important question.

I look between them. “What does any of this have to do with me?”

“We don’t know. Maybe nothing,” Aunt Leni says. “But this is what your parents were trying to warn you about. They wanted you to be careful because there are things happening that we don’t fully understand yet, not because they don’t trust you.”

She slings an arm around my shoulders and gives me a squeeze. “You know we don’t think that, right?”

Sometimes, I’m not sure I believe it myself, but I nod anyway. From the corner of my eye, I catch Aunt Eva’s expression soften.

“Good.”

For a moment, neither of them says anything, and I start to think the conversation might be over. Then Aunt Leni tilts her head.

“So why were you really upset?”

I narrow my eyes. “Sneaky,” I say with a grin. “But respectfully, that’s mine.”

“Fair.” Aunt Leni arches an eyebrow and taps her chin with a dark-red fingernail. “How about we spar for some information about a certain man you clearly don’t want anyone to know about?”

“Spar?”

She may be decades removed from the contract killer she once was, but she’ll always be one of the most badass women I’ve had the pleasure of knowing and loving.

I spent years training under her alongside Val. I still remember walking into rooms like this one and watching my aunt transform the moment she stepped onto a mat, picked up a weapon, or pulled on gloves.

The loving, doting aunt disappeared, and in her place stood a skilled assassin.

She never coddled us or treated us differently because we were girls. She adjusted for size and technique when necessary, but there was no sympathy, extra breaks, or lowered expectations. She drilled into us that knowing how to throw a perfect throat punch could mean the difference between life and death, and that drawing a weapon a fraction of a second faster than your opponent could mean the difference between walking away and staining the ground red.

Those lessons stayed with me, and so did the bruises.

“I’m not sure this is a fair trade,” I tell her.

Aunt Leni’s smile widens. “Neither am I.”

I consider it for a moment before deciding I could use the distraction. “Fine.” I roll my shoulders. “But if you break a hip, don’t blame me.”

Aunt Leni laughs as she kicks off her shoes and pulls on gloves. “That’s adorable.”

I barely have time to register the challenge before she moves.

One second, I’m standing in front of her, and the next, my back slams against the mat so hard it rattles my teeth.

“What the hell?”

Aunt Eva laughs from the sidelines while Aunt Leni offers me a hand.

“You dropped your guard.”

“That was a lucky shot. You didn’t even say go.”

“Of course it was. And this isn’t the movies, sweetheart. No one is going to give you a villain monologue before going in for the kill.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I ignore her outstretched hand and climb to my feet on my own.

We begin circling again.

I throw a jab, then a cross. Aunt Leni slips both and pivots around me with irritating ease. I adjust and come at her faster, but she's already moving before I commit. She sweeps my leg out from under me, and I'm on the fucking mat again.

I groan. "This is getting embarrassing."

"For you, maybe."

I push myself upright and brush off my hands, but the next exchange goes even worse.

Every move feels half a second behind. My timing is off, and my reactions are sluggish. Twice, I catch myself hesitating, and Aunt Leni capitalizes on it. Before long, she puts me on my ass for the fourth time.

Aunt Eva is openly enjoying herself now, and I make a mental note to remember her betrayal later.

"Okay," I mutter as I get back to my feet. "Now I'm annoyed."

"You've been annoyed."

I open my mouth to argue, but she's not wrong.

The problem is that my irritation has very little to do with sparring. It's about Thiago and his maddening silence. It's about the fact that three days have passed without any communication, and as much as I hate admitting it, his silence fucking hurts.

Something taps my cheek. I blink and realize too late it's Aunt Leni's glove. She sweeps my leg again, and I hit the mat, sending another surge of frustration through me.

"You're distracted."

Heat burns behind my eyes, and I clench my jaw against the tears that threaten to spill. Getting my ass handed to me is bad enough without my emotions deciding to humiliate me as well.

"No, I'm not."

"You absolutely are."

I shove myself back to my feet. "I'm fine," I snap, swiping at my eyes with my forearm.

"Remi." The tone alone tells me she doesn't believe a word of that.

"Let's go."

We start moving again. I focus on her shoulders, stance, and breathing. For a few seconds, it works.

Then, as if my intrusive thoughts have a personal vendetta against me, my mind wanders back to the argument in Thiago's apartment. I replay my words and wonder whether he regrets asking me to the charity ball or if he misses me at all.

Aunt Leni catches my wrist, turns her hips, and sends me crashing onto the mat. Again.

She shakes her head. "You've always had the same problem."

I sit up and glare at her. "According to you, what's that?"

"When something matters to you, you get trapped in your own head. You overanalyze and overthink every conversation, outcome, and possibility until you're no longer paying attention to what's right in front of you." She pauses. "Other times, you do the exact opposite and act before you've thought anything through."

I hate how accurate that sounds.

"That's why you're losing," she adds.

"Or maybe you're just good."

"I am good," she says without hesitation. "But you're better than this. You're better than me."

She crouches beside me. "You know what makes the difference between a good fighter and a dead one?"

I sigh. "You're going to tell me anyway."

"The ability to stay present. The second your attention drifts or you let your emotions start making decisions for you, you become vulnerable, Remi." Her gaze hardens. "And right now, you're so busy thinking about that man that you haven't landed a clean hit in ten minutes."

Heat floods my face as I groan, letting my head fall back against the mat. "Can we go back to discussing government conspiracies?"

"No," Aunt Leni says as she stands and offers me a hand. "Because those are far less interesting."

Against my better judgment, I accept it.

The smug smile on her face tells me she just won far more than the sparring match.

A few minutes later, the three of us are sitting on a bench against the wall, drinking water and catching our breaths.

"We had a fight," I blurt out. "Sort of. I told him not to contact me anymore, and he listened."

"And you didn't want him to?" Aunt Eva asks.

Staring down at my water bottle, I shrug. “I guess not,” I finally admit. “But I’m not going to beg him, either.”

“Sweetheart,” Aunt Leni says, taking a drink of water, “have you seen yourself? Begging anyone has never been an option for you.”

I sigh. “Me and him...we’re not dating or anything. We’re just...”

How exactly am I supposed to explain this? Neither of my aunts is judgmental. If anything, they’ve always been open-minded, but that isn’t the problem. No matter how old I get, there are still certain details I don’t want to share with two women who are basically my mothers.

Aunt Eva’s eyes widen slightly. “Oh.”

Aunt Leni points her water bottle at me. “Well, maybe you have a little soul-searching to do. You need to figure out what you really want from him and whether you’re willing to admit it to yourself.” She takes another drink before adding, “Then you can decide whether he’s worth it. I say that loosely because he’ll have to be one hell of a man to measure up.”

“Agreed.” Aunt Eva nudges my shoulder. “You know you’re one of my girls too, right?”

The knot that’s been in my chest since that day in my mother’s office loosens a little.

“I know,” I murmur, unable to keep the smile from my face.

Aunt Eva reaches over and squeezes my hand. “Val is just a phone call away, and we’re all here for you. So stop carrying all of this by yourself.”

I look away before either of them can see how deeply those words affect me.

“Now, please go visit Amalia,” Aunt Leni adds.

“She knows I love her.”

“She does,” Aunt Leni says gently. “But she’d probably like to hear it from you anyway.”

I let out a long sigh. “Fine.”

“Good answer.”

After another ten minutes of hugs, unsolicited advice, and last-minute pep talks, they finally head out. A short while later, I’m standing under a stream of hot water, washing away the gym sweat and some of the frustration I’ve been carrying for the past three days.

By the time I step out of the shower, my mood has improved marginally, which I’ll take as a win. I work some product through my hair, glance at the clock, and decide that whatever air-drying under a helmet does to it is

tomorrow’s problem. If I’m lucky, I won’t look like I stuck my finger in an electrical socket by the time I get where I’m going. If I’m unlucky, Mamá will just have to love me anyway.

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Thirty-Nine

REMI



"Let me take you for a ride, baby."

I don't bother looking at the owner of the voice because I'm already running dangerously low on patience.

Traffic has been at a standstill for the past fifteen minutes. Normally, I'd split lanes to find a break in the congestion, but cars are packed bumper to bumper as far as I can see.

"Come on, pretty girl. I promise you'll enjoy it."

I tighten my grip on the handlebars and stare straight ahead. I've learned that engaging only encourages men like this, and I have enough on my mind without entertaining some random stranger who thinks yelling at women from his car window is a legitimate way to spend an afternoon.

The light ahead turns green, but nobody moves, and a chorus of useless horns erupts around me.

"That's a beautiful bike." He continues. "I've got a couple at home you can ride—"

"Don't," I snap, cutting him off.

For a second, his brow creases, and I think the message got through, but then he laughs.

"Damn. Feisty. I love that."

There are too many witnesses for me to do what I'd really like to do, so I roll my eyes and force myself to ignore him.

Traffic inches forward, and I ease off the clutch, hoping movement will finally end the conversation. Unfortunately, the black sedan beside me

creeps forward too.

“What’s your name?”

I finally turn to look at him.

The man appears to be in his late fifties, wearing expensive sunglasses and a collared shirt. A wedding band catches the sunlight as he lifts his hand.

Naturally, the asshole is married.

“My name is Not Interested.”

His grin widens. “Well, Not Interested, I’m—”

“Having a midlife crisis?”

His mouth falls open.

“Respectfully, fuck off.”

Before he can respond, traffic finally begins moving. I twist the throttle, slip through an opening, and leave him behind, but not before flashing him the middle finger over my shoulder for good measure.

I slow when brake lights stack up ahead and assume there’s been another accident or more roadwork. Then I catch sight of flashing lights as police cruisers block off the intersection, while yellow tape and barricades force traffic to detour around whatever is happening beyond them.

I barely pay attention until I spot a BearCat with Philadelphia SWAT painted across the side.

My stomach drops to my ass.

Seeing a SWAT vehicle doesn’t mean Thiago is here, but my brain doesn’t give a shit about logic. Before I can think better of it, I pull my motorcycle to the curb and kill the engine, tuck the helmet beneath my arm, and make my way toward the crowd gathered behind the barricades.

As I weave through them, I scan every face, including every officer standing near a patrol car or clustered around the command post. I know it’s ridiculous, but I could pick Thiago out of a lineup of a hundred men. I refuse to examine what that says about me.

A helmet skids across the pavement and rolls to a stop a few feet away. Its owner mutters a curse and jogs after it. He bends to retrieve it, then glances up.

Recognition flashes across his face the moment our eyes meet, and it takes me another second to place him. I don’t remember his name, but I’ve seen him before. He was with Thiago at the range.

“Hey,” he says as he straightens. “You’re Braga’s girl.”

Not that long ago, I would've rolled my eyes at the implication. Now, after three days of silence and entirely too much overthinking, hearing someone call me that way sends an unexpected warmth through my chest. The fact that I don't correct him might be even more ridiculous.

I nod. "Yeah. Is he—"

"Tell him we miss him."

My heart gives a violent thud.

"Miss...him?" I ask.

"Yeah. Tell him to get his ass back to work too. A guy his size has no business letting a simple flu take him out."

I stare at him as the panic that flared inside me gives way to confusion. "Thiago's sick?"

He stares back at me, his brow furrowing. "You didn't know? He's been out for the last three days."

While I've been stewing in anger and replaying our argument, Thiago has been laid up at home with the flu. Before I can ask anything else, someone calls out the officer's name from across the perimeter.

"I've got to go."

He gives a quick nod in farewell before heading back toward the others.

I remain behind the barricade, clutching my helmet to my side as people move around me. The anger I've been carrying vanishes almost instantly, and guilt rushes in to take its place.

I've spent days convincing myself that Thiago didn't care enough to call, even though I was the one who told him not to. Some stupid part of me still expected him to ignore me, to show up anyway and prove that I mattered enough for him to fight me over it.

Meanwhile, he's been home sick, and I never once checked on him.

That makes me feel even more like an asshole. If the roles were reversed and I disappeared, I know exactly what Thiago would do. He'd show up at my door, whether I wanted him there or not. By the time I realize I've made a decision, I'm already heading back to my bike.

Now it's my turn to show up anyway.

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Forty

REMI



The call goes straight to voicemail for the fifth consecutive time.

Shoving my phone into the back pocket of my jeans, I approach Thiago's apartment. I remember the butterflies in my belly the last time I stood outside this door, hoping he was home, and the disappointment and hurt I carried when I left.

I push the memory aside and knock.

Several seconds pass without an answer, so I knock again, a little harder this time. When the apartment stays silent, unease twists in my chest. He has to be home. If he's sick enough to miss work for three days, where the hell else would he be?

My hand finds the doorknob before I fully consider what I'm doing. I turn it, expecting it to be locked, but the door swings open, and relief floods me.

"Thiago?"

No answer.

Even though it's only five in the afternoon, the apartment is dark. Every blind is drawn shut, leaving only the dim glow of a lamp in the living room. The place is unnaturally quiet, and the air carries the stale, stuffy smell of someone who's been cooped up for days.

I cross the threshold and carefully close the door behind me. "Braga?"

When he still doesn't answer, my grip tightens on the pharmacy bag as I round the corner into the living room and come to a stop.

Thiago is sprawled on the couch beneath a blanket, one massive arm dangling over the edge. His dark curls are a mess, and even from several feet away, I can tell something isn't right. The healthy bronze tone of his skin is gone, replaced by a pallor that makes him look exhausted and nothing like the man I'm used to.

Until now, he has always looked invincible. But lying here like this, he looks so vulnerable and completely alone.

"Thiago," I call again, and he finally stirs, lifting his head just enough to glance in my direction.

I turn on a second lamp, and he groans and immediately drags the blanket over his head.

"Go away."

Maybe an hour ago, I would've taken that personally. But I understand not wanting company when you're sick. Unfortunately for him, he's not getting rid of me that easily. I know a man flu when I see it.

I peel back the blanket. He attempts to sit up, but the effort seems to drain what little energy he has left, and he falls back against the cushions.

"Jesus, you look like shit."

"You always know exactly what to say." His voice is rough from sleep and congestion.

"You're welcome."

"You broke into my apartment."

Tossing the plastic bag onto the coffee table, I crouch beside him.

"No. You left the door unlocked," I say, pressing a hand to his forehead. The heat against my palm makes me frown. "Fuck, Braga. You're burning up. Maybe you should go to the emergency room."

He groans again and weakly bats my hand away. "I have the flu, not the plague. I'll survive."

"Debatable."

Men are naturally stubborn, but sick men are somehow worse.

I rummage through the bag and pull out a bottle of ibuprofen, a can of soup, a couple of Gatorades, and the watermelon lollipop I shoved into my pocket before leaving Matteo's.

Thiago stares at it. "You brought candy."

"For morale."

His mouth twitches. "Great idea."

"I thought so."

He drags a hand over his face, and I catch the shiver that runs through him under the blanket. Seeing him like this bothers me more than I expected.

“You didn’t have to come here,” he says hoarsely. “I’d rather you not see me like this. I haven’t even showered today, Remi.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but I noticed.”

That earns me a weak laugh. I slide closer and hold his hand, frowning at how hot his skin feels. For a moment, he simply looks at me.

“How did you know?”

“Your coworker told me.”

A shadow crosses his face. “Ryan?”

“I don’t know his name, but I ran into him by chance. He called me Braga’s girl and told me to tell you the guys miss you.”

Thiago closes his eyes briefly, and the corner of his mouth lifts. “Sounds like Ryan.”

I squeeze his hand. “You should have called me.”

The words leave my mouth faster than I can stop them, and his eyes meet mine.

“I know. I was going to call.” His voice drops. “I wanted to apologize. I just kept thinking I’d feel better tomorrow.”

I give his hand another squeeze. “I should have called too.”

Thiago stares me for a moment. “I thought we weren’t friends.”

“We’re not,” I say with a grin. “But somebody has to make sure you survive the night.”

Another weak chuckle.

“By breaking into my apartment?”

“Technically, you left the door unlocked. So that’s on you, Officer Braga. At least I’m not a serial killer.” I grab the bottle of ibuprofen and twist off the cap. “Here. Take these.”

“I’m not a child.”

“Thiago.”

His gaze lifts to mine. I rarely use his first name, and judging by the way he looks at me, he notices. Maybe it’s the fever or the exhaustion, but whatever fight he had left in him disappears. He slowly pushes himself upright and reaches for the tablets and Gatorade without another word.

As soon as he swallows the medicine, he sinks back against the couch, sighing.

“Good boy.”

He shoots me a look. “Don’t start.”

“Too late.”

Another shiver works through him, pulling at something deep inside my chest. I place my hand over his again.

“You know, whenever I got sick, Estela used to make the best caldo de pollo.”

The words slip out before I realize what I’ve said, and neither of us speaks for several breaths. I haven’t spoken about her out loud since she died, and I fully expect the familiar sting of grief to creep in as it always does when I think of her. But the memory brings something softer, the kind of nostalgia that makes me miss her without completely breaking my heart.

I can almost smell the broth simmering on the stove and hear Estela humming in the kitchen while she cooked. I can picture the way she’d shoo everyone away and insist that her soup could cure anything from a cold to a broken heart.

The memory brings a smile to my face.

“She swore it had healing powers.”

Thiago watches me quietly. “Did it?”

“Absolutely.” My smile grows. “At least, I like to think it did. Sometimes our souls need healing before our bodies.”

A thoughtful look crosses his face before he nods and lets his eyes drift closed again.

I give him another once-over. “You know what else you need?”

“Hmm?” he mumbles, sounding dangerously close to falling asleep.

“A shower.”

His eyes snap open. “Fuck. Is it that bad?”

“No offense, Braga, but it smells like a biology experiment in here.”

He belts out a laugh that’s weak and scratchy and clearly costs him some effort, but hearing it still makes me smile.

“Come on,” I say as I rise to my feet and tug on his arm. He looks up at me with the exhausted expression of a man being asked to climb a mountain.

“Remi.”

“Thiago.”

“I don’t have the energy for this.”

“That’s fine. I have enough energy for both of us.”

He grumbles, letting his head fall back against the couch. I give his arm another tug.

“Get up, you obnoxiously huge motherfucker.”

“You know, most people are nice to sick people.”

“Most sick people lock their doors.”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “You’re impossible.”

“And yet, here I am, taking care of you when I should be home, still angry at you for kicking me out.”

“Way to lay on the guilt when I can’t properly defend myself.”

“What better opportunity?”

With another dramatic sigh, he finally lets me pull him to his feet. The moment he stands, though, he sways, and my smile disappears. I quickly slide an arm around his waist to steady him.

“I’m fine.”

“You almost face-planted into your coffee table.”

“I said I’m fine.”

I roll my eyes. “Congratulations. You’re officially a man with the flu.”

That earns another laugh as I guide him toward the bathroom, and the sound brings warmth to my chest that I choose not to examine too closely.

After I turn on the shower, I reach for the hem of his shirt. Our eyes meet as he lifts his arms, and I help pull it over his head. His sweatpants come next. When he tries to step out of them, he sways again. I plant a hand against his chest to steady him.

“Thiago, when was the last time you ate something?”

“I don’t know.”

I stare at him. “You don’t know?”

“Maybe ice cream…with you.”

“Fuck.” I shake my head as another wave of concern pushes aside my lingering irritation. “I’m making you eat as soon as we’re done in here.”

I pull my shirt over my head and toss it onto the counter, then work on my jeans.

“You don’t have to do this,” he says.

“What happens if you lose your balance and crack your head open in there? Because if you think I’m carrying your giant ass to the emergency room, you’re out of your mind.”

A tired chuckle rumbles out of him.

“Now let me help you. The sooner we get through this, the sooner you can go back to dying dramatically on your couch.”

“I am not being dramatic.”

“You left your apartment door unlocked.”

“That feels unrelated.”

“It isn’t.”

He laughs again, and again, I count that as a victory.

When I finally finish undressing, his attention has drifted from my face. Of course it has.

“You’re unbelievable,” I mutter.

His eyes lift back to mine, and amusement breaks through some of the exhaustion. “I’m sick, not dead. And you have great tits.”

I roll my eyes, clamping my mouth shut to keep from smiling, and nudge him toward the shower.

“Save your strength, Braga.”

His hand finds my waist for balance. “Bossy.”

“Someone has to be. Now get in before I start charging by the hour.”

Warm water cascades over us as we step beneath the spray. I’ve imagined showering with Thiago before, but none of those scenarios involved the flu, a fever, or the need to make sure he didn’t pass out and suffer a concussion.

Steam quickly fills the bathroom, fogging the glass. I squeeze body wash onto a white washcloth and work it. When I reach for him, our eyes meet. He watches as I press the cloth against his chest and slowly drag it across his skin.

“I can do that myself, you know.”

“Considering you nearly fell over trying to take off your underwear, I respectfully disagree.”

I continue washing him, working carefully over his shoulders and arms. The warm water seems to help, easing some of the tension in his body. He closes his eyes for a moment, and without his usual stubborn attempt to convince me he’s fine, I can see how exhausted he really is.

“You don’t have to take care of me, Remi.”

The sincerity in his voice makes me glance up.

“I know.”

“Then why are you?”

I drag the washcloth across his shoulder and shrug. “Because someone should. And you really needed a shower.”

I expect him to laugh or make some sarcastic comment about my bedside manner, but he just watches me. There’s no humor on his face, just traces of disappointment, and it makes me wonder if I said the wrong thing. His gaze stays on mine, giving me the feeling that my answer wasn’t enough, or maybe it just wasn’t the one he hoped to hear.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

We both know it isn’t nothing, but he doesn’t push, and neither do I.

As the water continues pouring over us, I work the cloth across his bicep, and I find myself wondering the same thing.

What the hell am I doing here?

A week ago, if someone had told me I’d be standing in a shower taking care of a sick cop, I would’ve laughed in their face. Now, it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

The realization should bother me, but the truth is that I care. I care that he hasn’t eaten and that he’s been alone for days. I care that he’s sick, which is exactly why I raced here despite spending the last three days angry at him.

When I finally let myself sit with those feelings instead of running from them, I realize I don’t hate what they mean nearly as much as I thought I would.

“Where do you keep your linens?” I ask as I towel-dry my hair for the second time today.

“In the hallway closet right outside the bathroom,” he says as he pulls on a fresh T-shirt.

“Will you be okay?”

He arches an eyebrow. “I think I’ll survive.”

“We’ll see. You need a clean blanket, and that couch needs a cover until we can haul it off to a landfill.”

His laugh is still rough, but at least he’s laughing. “You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

“Nope,” I say, popping the *p*.

Ten minutes later, a freshly showered Officer Braga is stretched out on the couch beneath a clean blanket while the television plays softly in the

background. Meanwhile, I’m standing in his kitchen trying to turn canned soup into something remotely edible.

Sure, it isn’t Estela’s caldo de pollo, but he needs food in his system, and canned soup is better than whatever he’s been surviving on for the past few days. Which is nothing.

I open a cabinet to find a bowl, and a manila envelope tumbles onto the counter. I pick it up and turn it over. There’s nothing written on the outside, and when I tilt it, something small shifts inside.

Whatever.

Sliding it back where it was, I continue searching until I find a blue bowl shoved behind a stack of mismatched plates.

“Found you.”

I return to the living room with the soup, hand it to Thiago, then take a seat beside him. He eats about half before setting it on the coffee table and sinking deeper into the couch.

He didn’t eat much, but baby steps are still steps.

I grab the lollipop and drop onto the couch beside him.

“You already look so much better,” I say as I pop the candy into my mouth.

“You’re eating my morale.”

I shrug. “You weren’t using it.”

Amusement softens his expression. “That’s fair.”

The room grows comfortably quiet as the last of the evening sunlight filters through the blinds.

“Thank you, Remi.”

My stomach does an annoying little flip when he reaches for my hand and squeezes it.

“And just so you know, you seem to care a lot for someone who keeps insisting she isn’t my friend.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Braga.”

“I’ll try.”

His eyes drift closed. I tug the blanket higher over his shoulders and brush his curls away from his forehead. Despite the medicine and shower, his skin is still too warm.

“Get some sleep.”

His fingers tighten weakly around mine. “Stay.”

The request catches me off guard, and my chest clenches.

“I’ll stay for a little while.”

The tension slowly leaves his body. “Good.”

Within minutes, his breathing deepens. I sit there long after he’s fallen asleep, listening to the steady rhythm of his breathing while absentmindedly twirling the lollipop stick between my fingers.

The television keeps playing, and the city keeps moving outside the windows, but as always when I’m with him, I barely notice.

When exhaustion finally catches up with me, I pull a throw blanket over myself, curl up on the opposite end of the couch, and close my eyes.

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Forty-One

THIAGO



I haven’t woken up to a foot in my ribs since I was ten years old, when I had sleepovers in Rio with my cousins.

Rolling onto my back, I feel the offending foot flop onto my stomach so hard it forces a grunt from my chest. I lie there for a moment, taking stock of how I feel. My head is still heavy, but the fever-induced haze that has consumed me for days is finally lifting.

Then I remember that Remi stayed.

My eyes snap open. Morning sunlight spills through the gaps in the blinds, casting pale streaks across the living room. It takes me a second to spot her sprawled at the opposite end of the couch beneath a throw blanket.

One leg hangs over the cushions while the other is draped across my stomach, as if she owns the place. As if she owns me.

I can’t help smiling.

I stare at her longer than I should, tracing every contour of her face and committing every detail to memory. Without the jokes, sarcasm, and distractions she uses to keep people at arm’s length, the armor she wears so effortlessly when she’s awake is nowhere to be found.

Maybe some part of her has always known that getting too close to me is a mistake. But she stayed and took care of me even after our argument, even though she didn’t have to.

Against my better judgment, I let my mind wander again, imagining a different reality where I get to watch Remi fall asleep every night and wake up beside her every morning. I picture pulling her into my arms after hours

of making her mine, her hair spread across my pillow and her sleepy complaints as I wake her too early.

The longer I let myself imagine it, the harder it becomes to ignore how badly I want it to be real.

“Are you just going to sit there and stare, or are you going to offer me breakfast?” She stretches beneath the blanket and slowly opens her eyes. “How are you feeling?” she asks.

When the teasing fades, there’s a tenderness to her voice I’ve never heard her use with me before.

“Better. Not great, but definitely better.”

Her entire face brightens as she sits up and reaches for my forehead. “Still warm.”

I gently take her hand in mine and press a kiss on her palm. “That awful canned soup must have done the trick since we both know it wasn’t the morale lollipop you stole.”

Remi laughs. “Probably not.” She slips her hand from mine and rises from the couch. “Do you have an extra toothbrush, Braga?”

“It’s in the cabinet beneath the sink.”

An hour later, we’re finishing scrambled eggs and toast at my kitchen island.

She made sure I ate and took more cold and flu medicine, hovering over me until I swallowed every last pill. I happily went along with it all because it meant I could keep her here a little longer, listening to her ramble about whatever happened to cross her mind.

There were plenty of them, and I laugh to myself as I think about how easily she filled the last hour with stories, random observations, and questions that somehow led to entirely different conversations.

For a few hours, I got to pretend this was normal. I got to pretend she was mine and there wasn’t a time bomb hanging over our heads waiting to destroy everything.

“I have to head out,” she says sometime around noon. “Promise me you’ll have dinner delivered and not starve yourself while running a fever.”

“I promise.”

Remi rises onto her toes and presses the back of her hand against my neck. “Your fever is just as stubborn as you are,” she murmurs.

A little romance for your reading break.

Browse romance novels on Lokepub.

The concern in her voice does dangerous things to my heart.

"Must have been that pond water," she adds.

I snort. "So what you're saying is that this is your fault because you're the one who pushed me in."

Remi shrugs. "Either way, I paid my dues, Braga. I took care of you and even bathed you, so that has to count for something."

My gaze drifts over her face and the smile that's slowly becoming my favorite thing in the world. "It counts for everything."

Her grin falters for the briefest second. If I say another word, I might tell her exactly how much it means, and if she stays any longer, I might forget all the reasons she can't.

"See you," she whispers as she squeezes my arm.

When she turns to leave, I catch her wrist.

"Remi, I know you keep saying we aren't friends, but—"

"We are."

I blink. "What?"

She rolls her eyes as though the answer should be obvious. "Do you think I'd go out of my way to take care of just anyone?"

I can't stop myself from smiling. "No."

"Exactly." She points at me. "And I brought you my last lollipop."

"You ate it."

She laughs. "It's the thought that counts."

Before I can think better of it, I grab the front of her shirt and gently tug her toward me. She stumbles forward with a surprised laugh, and a second later, my arms are around her.

I rest my chin on her head and close my eyes. The scent of her shampoo fills my lungs, and her warmth presses against mine. Everything about this feels reckless, selfish, and so fucking unfair, yet it also feels right.

Remi's hands settle against my back. "You know," she says softly, "for someone who has the flu, you're awfully clingy. Trying to share your germs?"

A laugh rumbles through my chest. “Give me a break. I almost died.”

“You had a fever.”

“It was very serious.”

She snorts, and I tighten my arms around her for another second before forcing myself to let go. Stepping back, she looks up at me. “Get some rest, Braga.”

“I will.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

She studies me for another second as if trying to determine whether she believes me. Apparently deciding I’m hopeless, she shakes her head and heads for the door.

I watch her go like I always do, and every time she does, letting her walk away gets a little harder.

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Forty-Two

REMI



Thiago: I missed you today.

Me: Missed me not bringing you breakfast?

Thiago: Missed your face.

A ridiculous amount of warmth floods my chest.

I stare at the message for a few seconds, then lock my phone and shove it into my bag. Thiago's flu lingered for nearly five days after I found him half-dead on his couch, and I spent most of them checking on him. I'd stop by before work, and other times I'd show up afterward with food, medicine, or some other excuse that definitely wasn't an excuse.

He's been back at work for the past week and has been spending his evenings training, so our time together has been limited.

Maybe that's exactly what I needed, though. A little distance might have given me a chance to clear my head. Instead, I somehow ended up in worse shape than before. I catch myself thinking about him first thing in the morning, then spend the rest of the day wondering what he's doing, whether he's eaten, and whether he's remembering to take care of himself now that I'm no longer hovering over him.

The man has infected me with something far worse than the flu, and the most frustrating part is that I don't mind it entirely.

"Your situational awareness is concerning." Matteo rests his forearms on my open car window. "I've been standing here for a solid twenty seconds, and you haven't even noticed me."

“Don’t be annoying. Besides, I’m always lost in my head, but never unaware. Don’t confuse the two.”

The statement is only partially true, but I’m not about to admit it when he already thinks he’s onto something.

Matteo quirks an eyebrow. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

“Get in, loser. We have shopping to do.”

He chuckles and rolls his eyes before opening the passenger door and climbing inside. “You know, most people say hello before insulting someone.”

“Most people aren’t me.”

“Very true.”

I pull out of the parking lot, and one look at his face tells me he’s holding back.

“Just say it. Say whatever it is you’re about to say.”

“I didn’t even say a word.”

“You don’t have to.” I point a finger at him. “Your face gives you away. Now spit it out.”

“Fine,” he says with a laugh. “So you and the cop, huh?”

“We’re just friends, Matteo.” Pulling into the next lane, I pass a row of slower-moving cars and press the accelerator.

Matteo immediately grabs the handle above the door, and I have to suppress the urge to laugh.

Some things never change.

He's never been a fan of fast cars, street racing, or anything remotely connected to that world. That has always been my thing and Valentina’s. AJ eventually joined us once she was old enough, but Matteo thinks speed limits are useful suggestions that should be followed.

“Friends,” he repeats. “The kind of friends who nurse each other back to health?”

“It wasn’t every day,” I groan. “God, why did I even tell you that?”

“Because you and I are friends.” His voice softens. “More than that. You know you can talk to me, right?”

I let out a long sigh. “You know it isn’t that I wouldn’t tell you.”

“I know.”

I glance over at him.

Damn him and those stupidly pretty eyes. How could I not trust him? Sometimes I think it’s sorcery. The guy spent years following me like an

annoying little shadow, and at some point he became one of my favorite people.

The irony isn't lost on me, and a laugh slips out.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Matteo gives me a look that says he doesn't believe me for a second, so I turn my attention back to the road.

"It's just hard for me," I admit. "For a lot of reasons."

His expression turns serious. "Because of Ryuji?"

"Partly."

Losing Ryuji fucked me up in ways I don't think I've ever fully admitted. One day, he was there, and the next, he wasn't. I know what it feels like to let someone matter, only to have them ripped away. Maybe I've spent all this time making sure no one else gets close enough to leave that kind of hole.

"And because Thiago's a cop?"

I drum the steering wheel. "Yeah."

The answer comes easier than I expect.

"It's not that I don't like him. It's that every time I imagine what this could become, I hit a wall. He's a SWAT officer, Matteo. His entire life is built around things I don't trust and a system I'm not exactly fond of." I shake my head. "I just don't know how someone like him fits into my life or how I'll fit into his. I have too many secrets. I illegally race. Me and everyone I love would be put in a chair for what we've done."

Matteo doesn't rush to fill the silence. He simply nods as if he understands exactly what I'm trying to say.

"That scares me," I admit.

The truth is, none of this scared me before Thiago. If things got complicated, I walked away and never looked back.

Now I find myself wishing things were different. I wish he weren't a cop and that I didn't have a lifetime of reasons to fear what letting him in could cost me.

Matteo studies me for a moment. "You know what I think?"

"That's usually how conversations work."

He snorts. "I think you're looking ten years into the future when you haven't even figured out what's happening today."

I frown. "Meaning?"

“Meaning, you’re worrying about whether your lives fit together forever, and you haven’t even let yourself enjoy the fact that you like him.”

I open my mouth to argue, then close it because, annoyingly enough, he might have a point. When the hell did he become this insightful? He’s not even old enough to drink.

“I hate that that makes sense.”

“Of course it does,” he says as he settles smugly into his seat.

“Don’t be obnoxious about it, or I’ll drop you off on the side of the road.”

“No, you won’t.”

I shoot him a sidelong glance, and a much better idea comes to mind. “You’re right,” I say. “I’d never do that.”

Just as his shoulders begin to relax, I take a sharp right into an empty lane, downshift, and slam my foot on the accelerator. The car launches forward, throwing Matteo back into his seat.

His fingers latch onto the handle above the door with a grip that could probably crack bone. “Remi!”

I bark out a laugh. “Relax.”

“Relax? You’re trying to kill us.”

The engine climbs through the gears as we surge past a line of slower-moving traffic.

“The store I’m trying to get to closes in thirty minutes. Measures are being taken.”

“There are always cops on this road. Slow down!”

“Oh, enjoy the ride, Matteo.” I roll down the window and let the wind rush in. It whips through my hair and brushes against my skin.

I know staying away from Furia is the right call for now, but I miss the adrenaline, speed, and freedom that come with pushing a car to its limits. And right now, I’m craving a fix.

“Remi, there’s a red light ahead.”

“Really? I hadn’t noticed.” I take a hard left onto the next street, and the tires protest with a sharp screech against the pavement.

“Fuck, Rem.”

I laugh so hard my stomach hurts. “You’re a terrible passenger.”

“I’m a normal passenger.”

“Then act like one.”

Matteo mutters a curse in Italian and tightens his death grip on the handle, which only makes me laugh harder. I have no idea why he keeps getting into vehicles with me, but I suppose that's what friendship is. You make questionable decisions, and the people who love you stick around anyway.

I'm not a frivolous spender unless the purchase involves cars or the latest imports, so spending this much on a custom costume makes me grind my teeth. The price won't hurt my bank account, but that isn't what bothers me.

It's the principle of it.

I'm standing here, spending an obscene amount of money on a costume for a charity ball I swore I wouldn't attend, all because of a man I've spent weeks trying to convince myself is nothing more than a friend. The lengths I'm apparently willing to go to for him are equal parts irritating and alarming.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror, running my hand down the leather, unable to stop myself from smiling.

Damn him, because if I'm being honest, it isn't the costume making me smile.

It's the thought of Thiago's face when he sees me in it.

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Forty-Three

THIAGO



"Where's your girl?"

Grey's voice makes my shoulders stiffen. I don't like the way he says it. Maybe it's because he once tried to hit on Remi and resorted to insults when she told him exactly where he could shove his ego. Or maybe it's because Grey has always wanted Elena's approval more than he's wanted oxygen. The man is ambitious to a fault, desperate even, and lately I've started wondering how far he'd go to stay in her good graces.

What grabs my attention most is why he'd call Remi my girl in the first place. I've never spoken about her around Grey or confided in him about my personal life. I've gone out of my way to keep that separate from work.

Ryan is my first guess, not intentionally, of course. He's just never met a boundary he didn't accidentally bulldoze with good intentions. The man sees the best in everyone, even when common sense tells him not to, and believes those around him share his intentions.

In my experience, that's a dangerous assumption.

"I'm here alone," I say, not bothering to refute his claim.

I finally turn to look at Grey.

Like most of the men attending tonight, he's wearing a black tuxedo. Mine isn't much different, aside from the Batman mask and cape. Unlike the others, he wears a black balaclava stretched across the lower half of his face, with a white Punisher skull glaring from the fabric.

The choice feels exactly on brand.

“Well, that’s a shame.” He tugs his mask and takes a sip of his drink. “You finally feeling like yourself again? Over your little cold?”

I glance down at the whiskey in my hand and let out an unamused laugh. “Mostly.”

“Good.”

There’s no missing the tension between us, and his concern sounds just as hollow as we both know it is. In the field, we’re a team. We trust each other to do our jobs and keep everyone alive because that trust is non-negotiable.

Outside of work, things are different. Maybe it’s a personality clash, or maybe it’s because every conversation with Grey feels less like a conversation and more like a test. Whatever the reason, I’ve never trusted him enough to let my guard down, and lately, I trust him even less.

“Braga. Grey.” Elena slips between us and leans back against the bar as if she owns the place. Her dark hair is pinned into an elegant bun, and a crimson mask conceals the upper half of her face, matching the silk gown draped over her body.

Grey immediately straightens.

Before she can even ask, he’s already signaling the bartender for another drink.

“Cheers,” Elena says with a smile as she lifts the glass and taps it lightly against his.

Grey looks honored before Elena turns her attention to me.

“You’ve been so busy catching up and getting back into the groove that we’ve barely had time to chat.”

The smile on her face never wavers, and neither does the warning beneath it. I take a slow sip of my whiskey.

“As you know, work’s been busy.”

“I’m sure.”

I glance toward Grey and catch the way he watches Elena when she isn’t looking. The admiration is still there, along with the ambition I’ve seen a hundred times before, but there’s something else beneath it now, darker and almost possessive.

I’ve always assumed Grey’s fixation with Elena was entirely professional. But as I watch his gaze follow her, I start to wonder if I’ve been reading him wrong this entire time.

“Stop by my office on Monday,” she says to me. “We can catch up on your progress.”

I grit my teeth.

Every conversation with Elena leaves me aggravated and mentally drained.

I don’t respond, letting my gaze drift across the ballroom instead.

The event is in full swing. Officers, spouses, city officials, and donors fill the room as masks and costumes blend beneath crystal chandeliers. Laughter rises from nearby tables as servers weave through the crowd with trays of drinks and appetizers.

Everyone seems busy living lives that look simple and normal from the outside while I feel the walls closing in around me.

What I wouldn’t give to see Remi right now or hear her voice.

Despite how good things have been between us over the past couple of weeks, neither of us has mentioned the ball since our argument. Part of me wanted to ask her, but I was too afraid of hearing no a second time. And things were finally starting to feel right between us, and I didn’t want to risk ruining that by bringing it up.

So I let it go.

Now, standing in the middle of a ballroom full of people, I wish I’d taken the chance.

As if reading the direction of my thoughts, Elena clears her throat.

“Why didn’t you bring your friend from the other night? What was her name again?”

“Drop it,” I mutter.

But in true Elena fashion, she has no intention of doing any such thing.

“Ah, Remi, was it?” She swirls the drink in her hand. “Pretty girl, that one. She’s got fire in her eyes.”

I say nothing, and Elena nudges my shoulder.

“I’m sure she would’ve loved to attend.”

I turn to her. “She’s not coming.”

Elena suddenly goes still, and the glass stops halfway to her lips as her smile disappears. “I think she might have had a change of heart.”

A strange sensation moves through my chest. I follow her line of sight, and before my gaze reaches the ballroom entrance, every muscle in my body goes rigid with recognition.

The conversations around me fade into the background until the music, laughter, and clinking glasses grow distant.

I know it's her before I even lay eyes on her.

Then I look up, and there she is.

The breath leaves my lungs as I stare across the ballroom. She spots me almost immediately, and her red lips curve into a slow grin.

Remi walks through the entrance as if the room belongs to her, each step carrying the kind of confidence that makes people stop and stare.

My girl is dressed in a black leather catsuit that looks as if it were made for her. The material hugs every delicious curve and catches the light with each measured step she takes across the polished floor. A matching mask frames her eyes, and her hair falls in soft waves over one shoulder.

She looks powerful, untouchable, and absolutely breathtaking.

The room notices her beauty, but I notice the way her gaze never leaves mine.

Despite everything that happened when I asked her to come, Remi changed her mind and showed up for me.

I swallow hard and adjust my tie, suddenly feeling suffocated.

“Thiago,” she says when she reaches me.

“You came.” I pull her against my chest without caring that we’re surrounded by half the precinct. My arms close around her, and she rises onto the balls of her heeled boots to press a kiss to my cheek before leaning close enough for only me to hear.

“You owe me big for this, Braga.”

I laugh, pulling her closer, breathing in the familiar scent of her perfume.

“Baby, I’ll give you whatever you want.” My hand rests against her hip. “You’re here, and I know it’s not something you’re fully comfortable with. I’d be an idiot not to appreciate it.”

A shiver runs through her, sending a rush of satisfaction through me.

When she pulls back, I take a second to really look at her. “Jesus, Remi.”

Her grin widens. “You like?”

I laugh under my breath. “Dangerous question.”

She grips my lapels. “And why is that?”

The answer sits right on the tip of my tongue. Because every man in this room is staring at her, she’s driving me out of my goddamn mind, and if I

keep looking at her, I'm going to forget where we are.

Before I can say any of it, Elena appears beside us, casting a shadow over Remi, and the irony doesn't escape me.

"It's so nice to see you again...Riley." Her fake smile never slips. "You sure do know how to make an entrance."

I immediately step closer to Remi and position myself between them, but Remi isn't having it. She plants her feet and steps forward.

"I'm sorry, have we met?" she asks pleasantly, though her eyes are anything but.

Elena pauses for half a beat. "Very briefly. But the way Braga has been sulking all night, I'm glad you decided to come after all."

"Me too." The words sound innocent enough, but the challenge beneath them is unmistakable. Remi reaches for my hand without looking away from Elena. "Thiago."

"Yeah?"

She finally turns toward me. "Let's get some air." Her red lips curve into a smile. "It's a little stuffy in here."

Satisfaction flashes through me because Remi isn't retreating from Elena. She's taking me with her, and the way Elena looks at our joined hands tells me she knows it too.

"Lead the way."

Without another word, I lace my fingers through hers and guide her toward the nearest exit, leaving Elena beside the bar. Grey remains several feet away, and I can practically feel his stare burning into my back as we leave.

"Some people lack survival instincts," Remi says the moment the ballroom doors swing shut behind us. "Mistake number one." She stops at the bottom of a stairwell and turns to face me. The leather of her catsuit creaks softly as she crosses her arms. "Question is, why is your boss provoking me? Is she into you or something?"

I bark out a laugh.

Then the humor leaves Remi's face.

"Wait." Her eyes narrow. "Do you two have some sort of past I should know about?"

"No! No, we don't." My answer comes out harsher than necessary, but the last thing I want is for Elena to occupy any space in Remi's mind tonight.

“I don’t do well with people like her,” she adds. “And that won’t end well. Take that however you want.” She starts up the stairs before looking back over her shoulder. “I let the Riley shit slide for you. And a little because I was in a room full of cops.”

I can’t help smiling. “Very generous of you.”

“Don’t interrupt.”

I raise both hands in surrender as Remi continues climbing.

“But it won’t happen again.” Her tone leaves no room to question the warning. “I don’t tolerate disrespect.” She pauses on the next step. “Not even from your boss.”

I simply stare at her. Most people might find Remi intimidating, and I understand why. She refuses to bend for anyone, no matter who they are or how much power they hold, and I think it’s becoming one of my favorite things about her.

I take the next step and close the distance between us. “Good.”

Her eyebrow lifts. “Good?”

“Yeah. Because if Elena ever gives you a reason not to let it slide, I’m probably already having the same problem.”

That earns me a grin.

“Where are we going?” I ask as she tugs me along.

“There’s a terrace on the roof.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because there isn’t a building I’ll willingly step foot in without knowing its layout.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“Very.” She glances over her shoulder. “My mom taught me never to enter a room without knowing how I’m getting out of it.”

Of course she did.

I laugh and follow her up another flight of stairs. “You know that’s a little scary, right?”

“Good.”

“Was that the goal?”

“It’s always the goal, Braga.”

I shake my head. “Remind me never to get on your bad side. In fact, maybe this friendship is a bad idea.”

“Too late.”

“Why’s that?”

A mischievous smile spreads across her face. “Because I know you like me.”

She has no idea how right she is. Remi thinks she’s teasing, but I crossed that line a long time ago. Every day I spend with her makes me want more.

“Don’t look so smug,” I say.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

Sliding my hand around her, I pull her to my side. “Fuck, yes, you are.”

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Forty-Four

REMI



The warm night air rushes over us as we step onto the terrace, and the city spreads out in every direction beneath the dark sky.

I walk toward the railing, then turn to look at Thiago. The hunger in his eyes unravels me from the inside out. There's nothing subtle about the way his gaze moves over my body, as if he's already thinking about peeling this catsuit off, and I'm starting to wonder what the hell he's waiting for.

"Don't," I warn.

He stops walking, his mouth lifting at one corner. "Don't what?"

"Look at me like that."

His eyes make another slow pass down my body. "Like what, exactly?"

"Like you're having inappropriate thoughts, friend."

He laughs as he closes the distance between us. "*Fera*, if you showed up in that catsuit hoping I wouldn't have inappropriate thoughts, I've got some bad news for you."

"Yeah?" I trace a black-painted fingernail along his cheek. "What if I came here banking on that very thing?"

My hand trails down the front of his shirt and over his belt before slipping between his legs.

Thiago catches my wrist before I can get very far.

I lift an eyebrow. "Problem?"

His eyes drop to my hand, and I swear it pains him to pull it away.

"Relax, Officer Braga. I don't bite unless you're into that."

With his eyes on mine, his other hand slides around my throat, and his thumb brushes beneath my jaw as he brings his mouth close to my ear.

“I’m very fucking into that.” His grip firms just enough to make my pulse jump. “I’m also very fucking aware that half this building is under surveillance.”

I smile and lean into his hand. “So what I’m hearing is that the cameras are the problem.”

“The only problem.”

“Good to know.” Pushing myself onto the ledge, I pat the concrete beside me. Thiago sits, and I draw a slow breath.

Coming here tonight wasn’t a decision I made on a whim. I spent days weighing every reason this was a bad idea and every way letting him get closer could eventually hurt me. But beneath all that fear was a truth I couldn’t talk myself out of.

I wanted to come, wanted to see him.

More importantly, I was tired of pretending that whatever existed between us was still casual just because naming it scared me.

For weeks, I’ve felt us moving closer to this moment, even as I did everything I could to resist it. Tonight, I’m done fighting.

“I don’t want to be friends anymore.”

His smile sours. “Remi...”

“I can’t keep doing this.” I draw my legs beneath me and lean closer. “I don’t want to be just your friend, and I don’t want to be just your fuck buddy, Braga. There are so many reasons why we don’t work. You’re a cop, I’m me, and our lives make absolutely no fucking sense together.”

Thiago doesn’t interrupt me.

“But I’m tired of letting everything that could go wrong keep me from admitting what I want.”

As he slides his fingers into my hair, his attention remains fixed on me. “What do you want, Remi?” His voice drops. “I’ll give you anything.”

The heat in those words nearly undoes me. I choose not to hide behind a joke or change the subject. I lean closer and slowly drag my tongue along the side of his cheek, giving Catwoman and her Batman their moment.

His jaw flexes.

“I want to be yours,” I whisper against his ear.

For several seconds, neither of us moves. The city hums below us, and music drifts from the ballroom, but none of it matters while Thiago looks at

me like I just handed him the fucking world.

“You’ve been mine for a while now. You just didn’t know it.”

I smile against his mouth. “How bold of you.”

His hold on my hair pulls me closer. “Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you want anyone else.”

I hold his stare, but no answer comes because we both know I can’t give him one.

His mouth curves slightly. “That’s what I thought.”

I crawl into his lap and straddle him.

“Let’s get out of here,” I tease, pressing a trail of kisses along his throat. “I’m more of a show-than-tell kind of girl.”

Thiago tips his head back and exhales slowly before looking at me again. “Your place or mine?”

The sprint to our cars is a blur. I barely have time to start the engine when Thiago’s name flashes on my console.

“Miss me already?” I say with a laugh.

“I missed you the moment I left your garage that night we met.”

My cheeks hurt from all the smiling.

“Liar. I almost shot you in the face twice.”

“Thank God, you didn’t. That would’ve sucked.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I say as I peel out of the garage.

My eyes find the rearview mirror and Thiago’s truck behind me. I tell myself I’m only checking because we’re driving together, but the lie holds for only two seconds. I keep looking anyway, watching him and making sure he’s still there, as if he’ll somehow disappear.

Remi, I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into.

The truth is, I don’t. I don’t know what tomorrow will look like or where any of this ends, but maybe I don’t need to know yet. I’m tired of doubting everything I want and of sabotaging myself the moment something starts to matter.

I deserve this.

“Will your boss be upset when she notices you’re gone?”

“Nah. Maybe.” He laughs. “I’m not worried about her.”

The woman looks at me like I pissed in her Cheerios. There's something about me she can't stand, even though we've only met twice. It's strange, but easy enough to shrug off. At least for now.

I've never exactly been a girl's girl. Aside from Valentina, I didn't have many female friends growing up. Maybe one or two from childhood, but that was about it. I always felt like the odd one out. While other girls talked about makeup, crushes, and whatever trend was making the rounds at school, I wanted to be in a garage, helping my dad take apart engines, getting my hands dirty or at a racetrack.

I never seemed to fit, and I spent years pretending their rejection didn't bother me, even though it did more than I cared to admit. It probably explains some of the fights, the revolving door of detentions, and more than one suspension.

My poor mom had her hands full.

As much as I drove her crazy during the worst of it, she never stopped trying to understand me. She showed up to every meeting, answered every call, and sat through every lecture from a teacher who was convinced I was a lost cause, without ever treating me like one herself. Even when she was frustrated or didn't understand why I did the things I did, she tried, and I'll always love her for that.

I make another mental note to stop by to see her tomorrow, even though I've been telling myself the same thing for over a week and somehow keep finding reasons to put it off.

My thoughts drift back to Elena. It's been a long time since I let anyone get under my skin, and she won't be the exception. She just pisses me off, mostly because I'm convinced she's got a thing for what's mine.

The thought makes me smile.

"Thiago, catch me."

"What?" he asks, confusion in his voice.

"Catch up to me. If you want me, race me."

The line goes silent for a beat, and my heart sinks. He's a cop. What exactly was I expecting? Then his laugh comes through the speakers.

"Fuck, Remi. You're really making me do this, huh?"

A grin spreads across my face. "There he is."

"You know this is illegal, right? My job depends on upholding the law and all that."

“Not if we’re careful.” I glance into the rearview mirror. His headlights are still there. “Well?”

“I’m trying to decide if this is a test, a trap, or just plain crazy.”

“All of the above.”

“Of course it is.”

The city lights blur past my windows as I merge onto the next stretch of road.

“Remi, stay within the speed limit.”

“Braga.”

“Yeah, *fera*?”

“Shut up and catch me.”

His answer comes without hesitation. “Baby, I’ve been trying to catch you since the day we met. And when I do, you’re going to let me fuck you the way you drive. Hard and recklessly.”

A thrill races through me. “I’m not here to play hard to get, Officer Braga. I’m just here to make you earn it.”

The line goes dead.

A second later, the growl of Thiago’s engine reaches me through my open window.

I drop a gear and press the accelerator as I weave through the late-night traffic. When I glance into the rearview mirror, I see his headlights closing in.

“Shit,” I say with a laugh.

Taking the next turn harder than necessary, I shoot through an opening between two cars. His truck shouldn’t be able to keep up, especially if he’s trying to avoid getting pulled over, but when I check my mirror again, his bumper is damn near glued to mine.

The phone rings through the speakers, and I answer without taking my eyes off the road.

“What happened to upholding the law?”

“What happened to being careful?”

I laugh. “I’m being very careful. This is me granny shifting and going easy on you.”

“Is that right?”

“What would happen if your buddies in blue caught you out here street racing with Catwoman?”

I glance at him in the mirror again and catch the wide smile on his face. Even from here, there's no missing it, and the sight only makes the ache between my thighs worse.

"You know," he says, "most couples go out for dinner after they admit they have feelings for each other."

"We can still get dinner."

"At midnight?"

"I know a taco truck."

Thiago laughs, and I can't help joining him. I haven't heard him laugh like this enough, and God, I like the sound. "Take the next exit," he says.

"Why?"

"Because that's the way to my place."

"Or maybe you're trying to trick me into losing."

"*Fera*, the fact that you think everything is a competition is deeply concerning."

"Sounds like something a loser would say."

His laugh comes through the speakers again.

I signal and take the exit. The roads grow quieter as we leave the heart of the city behind, and by the time we turn onto his street, neither of us seems interested in winning anymore.

I pull into a parking spot outside his building and kill the engine. A moment later, Thiago's truck pulls into the space beside mine. The sudden silence feels strange after the constant hum of the road, and I sit there for a second, staring through the windshield.

Then my phone lights up.

Thiago: I won.

I laugh.

Me: In what universe?

Thiago: The one where you still came home with me.

My heart stumbles.

Before I can think of a reply, a knock sounds at my window. I look up to find Thiago standing there with a cheeky grin and a dark curl hanging over the Batman mask still covering the upper half of his face.

The moment I climb out of the car, one arm circles my waist, lifting me effortlessly until my boots leave the ground, and he kisses me.

I'm smiling too much to kiss him properly at first, but neither of us seems to mind. A laugh slips out against his mouth, and he kisses me again,

more slowly.

“Hi,” I whisper.

“Hi.”

“I caught you.”

“Seems that way.” I brush the curl back from his forehead. “Now, what was it you said about fucking me like I drive?”

He groans deep in his throat. “I’m more of a show-than-tell kind of guy,” he says, throwing my own words back at me.

Laughter bubbles out of me as I tip my head back, giving him easier access to my neck. “Touché, Officer Braga.”

I’ve never been the type to swoon over muscles or brute strength, but I’d do questionable things for this man simply because he can lift me like I weigh nothing.

He carries me through the parking garage without breaking stride, his grip on me steady as his mouth glides along my neck. Normally, being carried around like this would annoy the shit out of me. I like my feet on the ground and my decisions in my own hands, but with Thiago, giving up a little control doesn’t feel like losing it. Maybe that’s why I can’t stop smiling.

Tonight, I told him what I wanted, raced him through the city, and ended up exactly where I chose to be. In his arms, heading upstairs, happier than I’ve let myself be in a long fucking time.

The realization hits me all at once, and another burst of laughter escapes me before I can stop it. Thiago pauses midstep and looks at me, equal parts amused and confused.

“What’s so funny?”

I lean in and kiss him softly. “You, me, this, us,” I whisper, unable to stop smiling. “Thiago, this is crazy.”

The happiness on his face fades for a second, as though he’s already bracing himself for whatever I’m about to say next.

I cup his face in both hands. “But you know what? I like crazy.”

Relief relaxes his shoulders.

“And I want this,” I say. “I want you.”

His eyes hold mine. “Me too, *chama*. Me too.”

I don’t know what the word means, but I don’t need a translation. The way he looks at me tells me everything I need to know.

“Thiago, take me upstairs.”

He nods once and starts walking again without making any attempt to put me down.

We cross into the lobby, and I’m sure there are people around, since it’s barely nine o’clock, but I don’t bother looking. No one else matters. And if anyone is staring at Batman carrying Catwoman through the building like she’s the only woman in the world, they might be right.

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Forty-Five

REMI



Thiago kicks the condo door closed and deadbolts it, all without loosening his hold on me. Call me whatever you want, but that alone makes me wet and itching to tear out of this costume and ride this man to oblivion.

I watch him cross the dark living room without bothering with the lights. When we reach his bedroom, he wastes no time tossing me onto the mattress. I bounce once and prop myself up on my elbows while Thiago stands at the foot of the bed, still wearing that fucking Batman mask as he looks down at me.

"Well, Batman," I say, slowly crossing one booted leg over the other. "Looks like you finally caught me."

His head tilts as he takes a step closer. "I did."

"And what exactly do you plan on doing with me?"

Thiago moves between my legs, planting his hands on the mattress beside my hips.

"That depends on how cooperative you plan on being."

I flash him a grin and lift my leg, pressing my heel to his chest. "You really don't know Catwoman at all."

We barely spent any time at the party, and it would be a fucking crime not to have a little fun with this.

"Tell me something, Braga. Why Batman?"

He looks up at me, caught off guard by the question.

"Is it a cop thing?"

He closes his hand around my ankle. “What do you mean?”

“You know.” I gesture vaguely between us. “Justice. Bad guys. Brooding in dark corners while pretending you don’t have feelings.”

“I don’t brood.”

“You absolutely brood.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

I grin. “Fine. So, tell me, why him?”

His thumb moves absently over the leather of my boot, his silence stretching long enough that I start to wonder why such a simple question requires this much thought.

“Because he does what he thinks is right, even when the way he does it isn’t,” he finally answers.

“Because Batman operates outside the law.”

“Sometimes the law isn’t enough.”

There’s something different about the way he says it, and I study what I can see of his face behind the mask. “That’s a pretty questionable philosophy for a cop.”

“Maybe.” His gaze drops to my leg again. “But doing the right thing and doing the legal thing aren’t always the same.”

“You know, Braga, you might be a shittier cop than I thought. I knew I liked you.”

A small smile returns. “You have no fucking idea.”

I laugh, and after a beat, he joins me.

Whatever put that look on his face disappears when I let my thighs fall open, and I decide I’ve spent plenty of time interrogating Batman when I could be having much more fun with him.

“You know, I bought this catsuit and barely got to show it off tonight. It would be a terrible waste not to actually play the part.”

His gaze travels over the black leather covering me. “Trust me, nothing about that suit has gone to waste.”

The reminder of exactly how much he appreciated it earlier has me tempted to let him have his way with me. But I’m not ready to let Batman have his prize that easily.

“You seem pretty confident for a man who’s only managed to catch me once.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Maybe you should be.” I shove my heel into his chest, and he staggers back. I use the opening to roll across the mattress and hit the floor on the other side of the bed.

“Remi.”

I straighten with a grin. “I think you mean Catwoman.”

His head tilts slightly, and even with half his face hidden behind the mask, I catch the slow narrowing of his eyes and a hint of a smile at his mouth.

“Okay, Catwoman.”

I crook a finger at him. “Come get me.”

Thiago slowly rounds the bed, and I match each step in the opposite direction.

“You know how this ends.”

“Do I?”

“With me catching you, pinning you down, and giving that smart mouth something better to do.”

My pussy clenches at the image he just put in my head, and I hate how badly I want him to make good on it.

“Again with the confidence.”

“Again with pretending you don’t like it.”

He moves without warning. I dart away from the bed, but instead of running for the door, I turn and swing. He blocks my fist with his forearm, and I follow with another that he dodges.

“Oh, so we’re actually fighting,” he says with a smirk.

“What did you think we were doing?”

“Foreplay.”

I laugh and throw another punch. “Of course you did.”

Thiago catches my wrist this time and tries to pull me against him, but I turn with the motion and drive my elbow into his ribs, forcing him to let go.

“Still think you caught me?”

“I’m starting to think you just wanted an excuse to beat me up.”

“Maybe I’ve been waiting for this opportunity. It’s not every day you get to beat up a cop without consequences. Dream come true.”

“That’s mildly concerning.”

“You knew what you were signing up for.”

He comes for me again, but I’m faster, and I slip beneath his arm, dragging my fingers across his chest as I pass.

Thiago turns. “Did you just fucking pet me?”

“It distracted you.”

“That was cheating.”

“You’re a vigilante. I don’t want to hear shit about rules.”

His laugh fills the bedroom as he lunges. This time, I barely get out of his reach and retreat until the backs of my thighs hit the dresser. Thiago slows when he realizes I’ve run out of room, and the amusement on his face turns downright smug.

“Looks like you’ve got nowhere left to go.”

I glance behind me, then back at him. “You think furniture is going to save you?”

“From where I’m standing, it kind of looks like you’re cornered.”

“Maybe. But cornered isn’t the same as caught.”

When he reaches for me again, I catch his arm and use his momentum to turn us, but he’s ready for it. His other hand clamps onto my waist, and suddenly we’re fighting for leverage, both of us laughing as I try to twist free.

“Give up,” he says.

“Fuck you.”

“Is that Catwoman talking or Remi?”

I manage to turn in his hold and look up at the black mask still covering his face. The smile I love so much nearly makes me break character and climb him like a fucking tree, but I’m having too much fun to give in now.

“Does it matter?”

“Not even a little.”

Rising onto my toes, I pretend I’m going to kiss him, then hook my foot behind his ankle and shove. He actually loses his balance, and I burst out laughing.

“That was cold.”

“Still almost took down Batman.”

Thiago straightens and stares at me, and I probably shouldn’t find the way his smile slowly disappears as exciting as I do.

“Almost,” he says.

Without warning, Thiago comes at me again. I duck the first grab and twist away from the second, laughing as I put the bed between us.

“Come on, Batman. You can do better than that.”

“You sure you want me to?”

I have a sneaking suspicion he’s holding out on me because he’s enjoying this little game just as much as I am.

“Did I stutter?”

He suddenly plants one hand on the mattress and vaults across it. A scream tears out of me as I take off for the door, laughing so hard I lose precious ground while his footsteps close in behind me. I barely make it into the living room before his massive arm circles my waist.

“Wait! I wasn’t ready!”

Thiago plucks me straight off the floor like it’s nothing. And that will never not be sexy.

“Your screams sound suspiciously like surrender.”

“No, that sounds like you’re a cheater.”

“I caught you. Complain about how I did it all you want, but you’re still exactly where I wanted you.”

I’m exactly where I want to be too.

“Enjoy your victory, Batman. It might be the only one you’re getting tonight.”

His mouth curves beneath the mask.

“Keep talking like that, Catwoman. It’ll make the next one even sweeter.” He turns me in his arms and kisses me hard, all tongue and teeth, cutting off whatever I was about to throw back at him. I pull away, then immediately grab the front of his shirt and drag him back to me. He lets me kiss him for half a beat before he breaks away and sets me on my feet.

So I swing at him.

He blocks the punch, and when I come at him with the other hand, he catches that wrist too. “You done?”

“Catwoman doesn’t surrender.” I bring my knee up fast, stopping just short of actually making contact. Thiago jerks his hips back on instinct, his grip loosens, and I wrench one hand free.

“That was dirty,” he says, eyes wide as he laughs.

“I’m a criminal. You expect any less?”

“You’re really committed to this.”

“You’re the one wearing a cape.”

I shove at his chest and manage to get a few feet away, but he catches a fistful of my hair and brings me right back against him. “That is absolutely cheating.”

“Says the woman who just threatened Batman’s balls.”

“I did not threaten them. I reminded you that they exist.”

“And I appreciate your concern.”

I’m still laughing when I turn and find myself backed against the wall with Thiago blocking the easiest path out. This time, I don’t run.

His breathing is heavier from chasing me around the condo, and mine isn’t much better. The cape hangs crooked behind him, his curls are sticking out around the mask, and whatever intimidating effect Batman had going for him at the beginning of this has taken a serious hit.

I bite my lip to keep from laughing as an idea hits me.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Coming from you, that look is never nothing, *fera*.”

“You trust me?”

He gives me a skeptical look, clearly fucking with me, then nods. I decide to let it slide since I’ll be riding that face soon enough. I grab his hand and tug him back toward the bedroom.

“What are you doing now?”

“You caught me,” I say, glancing over my shoulder and giving him a wink. “I think you deserve a reward.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“For you? Probably.”

When we reach the bedroom, I push him toward the middle of the room and climb onto the mattress, settling back against the pillows.

“Now strip.”

Thiago stares at me. “What?”

“You heard me.”

“You want me to strip?”

“I want Batman to strip.”

His mouth twitches. “How is this a reward for me?”

“Because you get to watch me enjoy every second of it. And if Batman puts on a good show, I might make it worth his while.”

The idea should be ridiculous, but the longer I picture him actually doing it, the more I need to see it.

“What’s wrong? Batman getting shy?”

“I’m not shy.”

I cluck at him twice, giving him the same ridiculous chicken impression he used on me once.

His eyes narrow behind the mask, then it clicks, and he breaks, dropping his head as laughter shakes through him. “You did not just fucking cluck at me.”

“Oh, I absolutely did.” I let my gaze travel pointedly over the clothes he’s still wearing, then raise an eyebrow.

“Then prove it. Strip for me, Batman. Let me see what I’ve been thinking about riding all night.”

His laughter dies down as he shakes his head, but I can already see the challenge getting under his skin. “You’re a pain in my ass, you know that.”

I smile. “Maybe, but you’re the one who told me you can’t say no to me.”

Thiago stares at me, then climbs over my body and kisses me slowly, pressing his already hard dick between my thighs and nearly making me reconsider this entire idea.

“No, I fucking can’t,” he murmurs against my lips.

“Good.” My voice is just as breathless. “Now give me my show.”

His forehead drops against mine as he laughs. “Fine. But if I’m doing this, I’m doing it right.”

He moves off me and heads toward the dresser, turning on his speaker before grabbing his phone. Anticipation has me biting my lip as he taps the screen a few times until the opening notes of “Makin’ Good Love” by Avant fill the bedroom.

My head starts moving with the beat before I even realize I’m doing it. Thiago gives me a look.

“What do you know about this song?”

I narrow my eyes. “Excuse me?”

“I’m just asking.”

“No, you’re implying. There’s a difference.”

His mouth twitches beneath the mask. “It came out before you were born.”

“You too. And? My parents raised me right, Braga. I know Avant.”

“So it’s your parents’ music?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

His laugh gets me, and I point at him. “Keep laughing. See what happens. You want this pussy or not?”

“That pussy is already mine, *fera*.”

Well, fuck.

The words hit me straight between the thighs, wiping the smirk off my face. Thiago knows it too. He winks and steps back as the music settles into its rhythm, and whatever comeback I had disappears with it.

So he's really fucking doing this.

Thiago reaches for the cape and rolls one shoulder free, then the other, taking his time as he falls into the rhythm. My lips part when I realize the bastard can move.

He lets the cape slide from his hand and keeps going, completely committed now, while I sit there trying to make sense of the man who just refused to give me a striptease with Batman currently giving me a fucking show. A laugh breaks through my surprise.

Thiago points at me. "Don't."

"I'm sorry." I cover my mouth, but that only makes it worse. "I wasn't prepared for you to take this so seriously."

"You wanted Batman to strip."

"I did."

"Then behave."

That shuts me up for all of two seconds. I nearly lose it again when his hands go to his jacket and he starts undoing the button. His hips move with the beat, a slow roll followed by a short thrust that has me biting down on my nail to keep it in.

It doesn't work.

Especially when he does it again as he turns, shrugging the jacket from his shoulders and tossing it aside like he's done this a hundred times.

I laugh harder.

But then he faces me again, and the next roll of his hips is so fucking smooth that my laughter falters.

Okay. The bastard really does know what he's doing.

There's something deeply unfair about watching this giant man move like that as he slowly takes off his clothes. Every grind of his hips makes me wetter, and suddenly what started as a joke feels a lot more like torture I willingly signed up for.

He loosens his bow tie, each pull and shift timed to the music, sliding it from beneath his collar, letting it fall, then gives me another controlled thrust of his hips as his hands go to the first button of his shirt.

My teeth sink into my bottom lip.

I make it through two more buttons before I’m done watching from across the bed. I crawl toward him, still biting my lip, and reach the edge of the mattress, rising to my knees. Thiago keeps moving as I reach into the front of my catsuit and pull out a folded bill. He stops dancing when I tuck the cash into the waistband of his underwear.

Thiago looks down at it, then at me. We both lose it.

“Where the fuck did you even get that?”

“Don’t ruin the moment.”

“I’m serious. Where were you keeping money in that thing?”

“Thiago.”

He’s still laughing when I grab the open sides of his shirt and pull him between my knees.

“Less talking. Keep stripping.”

The amusement lingers on his face as he slips the shirt from his shoulders and lets it fall to the floor. Then his hands are on me. He turns me around and gathers my hair over one shoulder, exposing the zipper running down the back of my catsuit. The music keeps playing as he drags it down, taking his time until the leather loosens around me.

His mouth brushes my shoulder as he works the suit from my body, and by the time the song starts again, neither of us is laughing anymore. Tonight, there’s no pretending and no rules about what we are. There’s no fuck-buddy bullshit I can hide behind tomorrow. I told him I wanted to be his, and he told me I already was.

Thiago turns me back toward him, and I barely get my arms around his neck before he lifts me. My legs wrap around him, and his mouth crashes into mine as he turns and sits on the edge of the bed with me in his lap. We kiss like we’ve been starving for each other our whole lives, not just months. Maybe that’s why this feels so different.

I’m his now.

He’s mine.

And knowing it makes me want him with a desperation I’ve never let myself feel.

My fingers disappear into his curls as I kiss him harder, rolling my hips and grinding against his thigh until I’ve made a complete mess of it. His hands cup my bare ass with the same urgency, holding me against him while the fucking song starts over again.

When we finally come up for air, we're both breathing hard. A thin strand of saliva stretches between our mouths before breaking. Thiago reaches up to wipe the corner of my lip, but I grin and catch his wrist.

"You want another taste?"

His gaze drifts to my mouth. "You know I do."

"Then ask me," I murmur, tracing my thumb over his lip. "Show me how much you want me."

His hand glides up my throat as he draws me toward him. "Let me have it, *fera*."

I lean in and run my tongue over his lips as I tug his jaw open and spit into his mouth. He watches me as he swallows, his grip tightening around my throat.

The look on his face says I'm about to find out exactly how much.

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Forty-Six

REMI



Thiago’s mouth is back on mine, the kiss rougher, whatever restraint he had left gone the instant I challenged him to show me how much he wants me. I fist his curls and realize the fucking mask is still on.

Batman.

I almost laugh again, but then his mouth glides along my jaw and the urge disappears. This was supposed to be fun, and it still is. But tonight, every kiss and touch feels different. More honest. As if we finally stopped pretending this is only about sex.

His.

Mine.

Us.

I spent all this time pretending those words were more dangerous than anything else in my life, and now that I’ve finally said what I want, I don’t feel trapped.

I feel fucking free.

The beat still pulses through the bedroom as Thiago holds me against him, and I move with the rhythm, letting it take over where the laughter left off. His forehead rests against mine.

“Remi.”

It’s just my name, but even that sounds different. I let my weight settle over his abdomen as I grab the edges of his mask, slowly lift it from his face, and toss it aside.

Batman had his turn. Now I want Thiago.

He smiles up at me and reaches for mine, sliding it off and letting it drop to the floor beside his. His fingers then sink into my hair as he brings his mouth back to mine.

"Your lipstick is ruined, *chama*."

I chuckle. "Worth it."

He kisses me once more before murmuring, "Sit on my dick."

Remi with the smart mouth would give him shit for ordering me around.

But dickmatized Remi?

Yeah, I'm sitting.

Expeditiously.

I ease back and lift my hips, then lower myself onto him, feeling that delicious little piercing first as he stretches me inch by inch, pulling soft moans from my lips. Bracing one hand on his chest, I squeeze my eyes closed and breathe through it.

"That's my girl."

My eyes open as his hands cup my ass cheeks.

"Look at me. You like hearing me call you that now, don't you?"

Normally, I'd make him work for the answer, but tonight, I don't want to.

"I do."

His eyes narrow slightly, as if he wasn't expecting me to admit it so easily.

"I like being your girl," I whisper.

"Yeah?"

I nod. "Yeah."

One hand slides into my hair again, and the smile he gives me is so fucking soft that my chest aches with it.

"My girl," he repeats, gripping my hip with his other hand and guiding me up and down his cock.

"Your…girl," I breathe.

"Can I ask you a question?"

I swallow hard, biting back a whimper every time the metal drags over my G-spot.

"I'm kind of in the middle of something here, Thiago."

"I noticed."

I glare down at him, but whatever comeback I have disintegrates when he rolls his hips beneath me and reaches for my nipple, tweaking the

barbell. “Fuck.”

His smile is entirely too pleased with himself. “What’s with the red lipstick?”

I blink at him, breathless. “What?”

“The lipstick.” His words come rougher now, broken by his own breathing and need. “Why red?”

“You’re asking me this now?”

“I’ve been wondering.”

My answer gets lost when he pulls me down harder, and I brace myself against his chest.

“Oh, God…so good.”

“Answer me, *chama*.”

I drag in a shaky breath and try to remember what the hell he asked me. “Because I like it.”

“Bullshit.”

A laugh tumbles out between breaths. “You ask me a question while you’re fucking me and then tell me my answer is wrong?”

“I know you.”

The words hit differently tonight, and my hips slow as I look down at him, my breathing still uneven.

“My mom,” I finally manage.

His smile fades, but his hands stay on me, and the teasing disappears from his face completely.

“When I was little—” I stop when he bucks up into me, knocking the rest of the sentence straight out of my head. “Fuck, Thiago.”

“You were saying?”

“You’re an asshole.”

His laugh is strained now too.

“I used to watch her get ready,” I say, digging my nails into his chest. “She always put the red lipstick on last.”

I pause to catch my breath.

“Like the finishing touch?”

“Yeah.” I nod, moving with him again. “And when she was done, she’d look at herself in the mirror like she could take on the entire fucking world.”

“So you stole it.”

I laugh. “How did you know?”

“Because I know my girl.”

My girl. God, I really do like hearing that.

“I was six,” I tell him.

“Thief.”

“Cop.”

I lean down until my mouth is barely above his, smiling as I bounce on his cock. “I put it on anyway. Got it everywhere.” My lips brush his when I add, “But I looked in the mirror and felt like her.”

Thiago’s thumb tweaks my nipple. “And you never stopped wearing it.”

“No.” I lean down until my mouth brushes his. “And as touching as this little interview has been, you’ve currently got that massive dick inside me, Braga. Maybe stop asking questions and put it back to work.”

His laugh breaks against my mouth before he rolls his hips up into me, making me gasp. “Better?”

“Much.”

I throw my head back as I ride him, every movement sending another wave through me. When I look down, Thiago is staring at me like he can’t get enough.

Catching the back of my neck, he draws me back for a kiss, lingering for a moment before his gaze drops to what's left of the red smeared across my lips.

“You’re fucking perfect, you know that?”

“Thiago…” My voice comes out softer than I mean it to, but I don’t care anymore.

Thiago wraps an arm around my waist as he sits up with me, and I grab onto his shoulders. Then he rises with me still wrapped around him and carries me across the room until my back meets the wall.

The song continues on a loop behind us, that same filthy beat filling the room.

“That’s it. Fucking take me.” His voice is rough, breathless. “All that attitude, and all it takes is my dick stretching you open to make you sweet for me.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

He laughs against my neck. “Too late. You’re mine now. This pussy is mine.”

My fingers tighten in his hair. “Fuck me harder. Convince me.”

“You can keep pretending you’re hard to own, *fera*. We both know who you come apart for.” He snaps his hips, damn near fucking me through the drywall, hard enough to send the framed print beside us crashing to the floor. “Now say it. Tell me you’re mine.”

“*Soy tuya*, Thiago…*Toda tuya*.*”

His mouth brushes my temple. “*E eu sou completamente seu, meu amor*.”

And I’m completely yours, my love.

The softness of it after everything else fucking ruins me.

Bass still pulses around us as everything gets harder and faster, each thrust driving me closer. My breathing turns ragged, and I tighten my fingers in his hair as the pressure builds so quickly that I can barely fucking think.

Reaching for my other hand, he threads our fingers together, pinning them against the wall beside my head.

“Oh, fuck, Thiago.”

“I know, baby. I’m right here.”

I bury my face against his shoulder as pleasure coils tighter through my body, my teeth sinking into his skin before I even realize I’m doing it.

“Bite me, Remi. Do it.” His grip firms around mine. “Remember what you said?”

I can barely breathe, let alone remember a fucking conversation. “What?”

“You asked me if I was into biting.”

The memory clicks.

Relax, Officer Braga. I don't bite, unless you're into that.

I lift my head and look at him. “You said yes.”

“I said fuck yes.” His breathing is just as wrecked as mine when he turns his mouth toward my ear. “Mark me, *fera*.”

That fucking does it.

I sink my teeth into his shoulder as my body locks around him, my fingers clamping his while pleasure tears through me in hard pulses.

“Fuck, Thiago…I’m coming.”

“Just like that, baby. Come all over my fucking cock. Let me feel how hard I make you lose it.”

His mouth finds mine, swallowing the rest of my cry as he comes with me, never letting go.

Even after the last shudder passes, he keeps me there, our joined hands still pinned beside my head.

———

Thiago’s bedroom blurs around me as I stare across it from my spot in his bed.

I’m lying on my stomach, the blanket resting on my hips, as he traces circles across my back, occasionally following the path of his fingers with gentle kisses. Goosebumps rise with each touch.

For once, I’m content to lie here without needing to move or reach for something to distract my mind. My thoughts aren’t fighting for my attention, and I’m not trying to outrun them or crawl out of myself because I can’t sit still.

I’m just here with him, and I can’t remember the last time doing nothing felt this good.

“Thiago,” I whisper without turning around. “Say that again. What you’ve been calling me tonight.”

His lips brush my shoulder.

“*Chama*,” he murmurs. “*Minha chama*.”

I turn enough to look at him. “What does it mean?”

“My flame.”

The answer strips away the very last of my defenses. I close my eyes when his mouth returns to my skin, then roll over to face him.

“*Mi refugio*,” I whisper as I tuck myself against his chest, letting the words carry everything I’m not ready to say aloud yet. “My refuge.”

His arms close around me, and I listen to the steady beat of his heart beneath my ear as he holds me. I don’t know if he understands what it means for me to call him that. Maybe one day I’ll tell him.

“Stay with me tonight,” he says. “And for breakfast tomorrow.”

I can’t stop smiling. “I was planning on stealing one of your T-shirts anyway.”

His chest shifts beneath my cheek with his laugh. “Good.” He kisses the top of my head. “Because I wasn’t planning on letting you leave.”

I snuggle deeper into his arms, feeling safer and more wanted than I have in a long time.

Then Ryuji crosses my mind.

Guilt tries to follow me here, but I refuse to let it. Ryuji was important to me, and he always will be. Losing him doesn't mean I have to spend the rest of my life afraid to let anyone matter that much again. Wanting this with Thiago doesn't erase what I had with him. Maybe I'm finally starting to understand that my heart can hold both.

"I've been meaning to ask," he says. "How did you get into the ball? Hank, our security guy, takes his job pretty seriously."

"Hank also has a weakness for women in full-body leather catsuits." I grin. "Don't trust Hank."

He laughs. "I don't blame him." Thiago trails his hand along my back. "You looked edible, *chama*. Every eye in that place found you the moment you walked through those doors."

I push up onto my elbows and meet his gaze. "And yet, I was only looking for yours."

His fingers glide to the side of my neck, drawing me to him. "I hated every fucking one of them looking at you like that," he admits.

I lift an eyebrow. "Possessive much?"

"You have no fucking idea."

"I think I'm starting to," I say with a grin.

"I'm serious, Remi."

"I know."

"No, I don't think you do." He cups my jaw. "You told me what you wanted tonight, so now I'm going to tell you what I want."

I nod and wait for him to continue.

"I want you in my bed, but I want you everywhere else too. I want the mornings when you show up at my apartment with breakfast and the nights you keep me on the phone talking about whatever pops into that head of yours. I want to watch you drive fast and do what you love, even though it scares the shit out of me, and I want to be the person you come looking for when everything gets too fucking loud."

I go completely still, but Thiago doesn't stop.

"I want your smart mouth, your stubbornness, and every complicated part of your life you're convinced should send me running." His hand moves into my hair. "I don't want pieces of you when they're convenient, Remi. I want all of you."

I don’t know what to say. I stare at him as I take in everything he’s offering, then lean forward and kiss him.

“Okay,” I whisper against his mouth.

His brow furrows. “Okay?”

I smile. “I’m yours.”

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* I’m yours, Thiago… all yours.

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Forty-Seven

THIAGO



The soft melody of a familiar song filters into my room, gently drawing me from sleep.

I open my eyes to an empty bed, and panic hits me immediately. She's gone. She woke up, regretted everything that happened between us, and took back every word she said.

Then the chorus drifts through the apartment, and I recognize it.

Of course.

Tension leaves my body, and I push myself upright and listen. The music is accompanied by the clatter of pans, the opening and closing of cabinet doors, and the unmistakable sound of someone singing with far more confidence than skill.

Remi.

I sit there listening to her, relieved. She's still here. My flame is still here.

Running a hand through my hair, I pull on my boxer briefs. As much as I want to go straight to her, I force myself to stop at the bathroom first. I take care of business, brush my teeth, and splash cold water on my face. Only then do I head for the kitchen, where the sight waiting for me stops me in my tracks. Remi is barefoot, wearing one of my T-shirts and nothing else. Her hair is piled on top of her head in a messy knot, and she sways her hips to the music as she cooks.

I lean against the doorway and watch her.

God, she's everything.

The thought of waking up to her like this every morning sends my mind racing toward a future I have no business imagining. Without missing a beat, Remi keeps singing, using an egg-coated fork as a microphone while Selena's "Amor Prohibido" plays in the background.

How tragically appropriate.

She flashes me one of her blinding smiles and crooks a finger, beckoning me toward her.

I happily oblige my girl.

Calling her that feels far too natural for something that became official less than twelve hours ago. I take her hand and spin her gently. She throws her free arm into the air, giving me an eyeful of ass courtesy of my T-shirt. I laugh as she stumbles into my chest, nearly dropping the fork when she starts laughing too.

"I hope you don't mind that I borrowed your record player."

I kiss the tip of her nose. "Not at all."

She closes her eyes and smiles. "And I made you breakfast. Huevos rancheros."

"Smells delicious."

"It had better be. Estela taught me, and she was very particular about the salsa."

I grip her waist and lift her onto the kitchen island. "When I woke up and you weren't there, I thought you'd left. That maybe you'd woken up and regretted last night."

My thumb traces the curve of her cheek. I'm not used to admitting things like this, but I've spent weeks hiding how much she affects me, and I'm tired of pretending.

Remi's expression softens. "Hey," she says, reaching for my hand. "I'm here."

The pressure in my chest finally eases.

"You told me to stay, and I stayed. But not for you. I stayed for me because I wanted to."

I lean in and kiss her, savoring the lingering sweetness on her lips. She wraps her arms around my neck, pulling me closer and pressing me between her legs.

"I also used your body wash."

"I can tell," I say with a chuckle, brushing my nose against hers. "You smell like me."

“Is that a problem?”

“No. But I love the way you smell better.” I look at her sitting on my kitchen island in my shirt, barefoot and completely at ease in a space that has only ever belonged to me. “You should leave some things here.”

Her eyebrows lift. “Things?”

“Whatever you need when you stay over. Clothes, a toothbrush, your own body wash.”

Remi laughs. “Braga, we’ve officially been whatever the hell this is for less than twelve hours, and you’re already offering me drawer space?”

“I’m efficient.”

“You’re insane.”

“You established last night that you like crazy.”

She narrows her eyes. “Using my own words against me already?”

“Absolutely.”

Her smile lingers, but her fingers start playing with the hem of my shirt.

“I mean it, *chama*. I’m not asking you to move in. I just want you to have what you need when you’re here.”

The word “when” comes naturally because I already know I want there to be a next time and another after that.

“How about I think about it, yeah?”

“Take all the time you need. In the meantime…” I kiss her and slide my hands behind her knees, bringing her to the edge of the island. “I’m hungry.”

There’s no going back from here. I don’t know how the hell I’m going to make this right, but I will. Whatever happens when she learns the truth, I won’t let anyone hurt her because of me.

I breathe her in and hold her against me. Remi is mine. And realizing how far I’d go to protect her scares the shit out of me.

“I hope you like it.”

I kiss her harder, my hand sweeping up her thigh as I push my shirt higher.

“I already know I’m going to love it.” My fingers hook the collar, and with one sharp pull, I tear the thin T-shirt straight down the middle.

Remi’s eyes widen. “Well,” she says, glancing down at the ruined fabric. “That’s certainly one way to do it.”

I laugh and cup her breast, brushing my tongue over her nipple. “You sound surprised.”

“At this point, I’m surprised when you use your hands like a normal person. I’m starting to think you just like ripping shit.”

“Only when you’re wearing it.”

“Mmm.” She smiles. “Well, I’m not about to discourage you.”

I start to lower my mouth to her again, but she plants a hand against my chest and nods toward the plate beside her.

“You know breakfast is getting cold, right?”

I glance over at it. “Sorry, I’m distracted. But don’t worry.” Burying my face in her neck, I slip my hand higher on her thigh. “I very much plan to fucking eat.”

Remi laughs and pushes at my shoulder until I finally lift my head.

“Food first. I sacrificed precious sleep after you spent half the night fucking me into a support beam, just to make you this.”

My dick twitches at the reminder, and I squeeze her thigh. “Worth every fucking minute.”

“Agreed.” She reaches for the fork, cuts off a piece of tortilla and egg, then holds it toward my mouth. “But you’re going to try this and love it because I made it, and it’s delicious.”

I laugh as I open my mouth to take a bite, chewing while she watches me expectantly. We’ve played this game before. She doesn’t need my approval. She needs to know whether I have good taste, which apparently means liking all the same things she does.

“Well? What do you think?”

“Your ego is about to become unbearable.”

Her smile turns smug. “That good?”

“Unfortunately.”

“I knew it.” She looks far too pleased with herself as she cuts off a second bite, but I catch her wrist and turn the fork toward her.

“You cooked. You eat.”

Remi eyes me before opening her mouth to let me feed her. A little crema clings to the corner of her lip, and I swipe it away with my thumb. Her gaze drops to my hand before she closes her lips around it, her tongue dragging over the pad.

She slowly pulls it from her mouth, watching me the whole time, then reaches for the plate. Dipping a finger into the crema, she draws a cool white streak down the center of my chest.

“Now you have to use that pretty mouth and clean me up.” I guide her closer as she licks the mess she made. “Something tells me those eggs are never getting eaten.”

“I can make more.”

The way she says it, like making me breakfast again is already a given, hits me almost as hard as her tongue.

I reach for the bowl of crema.

“My turn.”

I draw a cool line from the base of her throat across her collarbone, letting my finger wander lower as her lips part. Her eyes stay on me as I lick her skin. She shifts closer to the edge of the island, her legs tightening around my hips as I follow the trail down.

I work my way back up, stopping at her breast to flick the barbell with the top of my tongue. She squirms against me.

“Still worried about breakfast getting cold?”

A quick shake of her head is my answer before she reaches for me.

“Good.”

I take another taste, letting my mouth linger until her fingers tighten in my hair, then slide my hands beneath her thighs and lift her from the counter. Remi lets out a startled laugh when I toss her over my shoulder and carry her toward the dining room.

“Where are we going?”

I bring my palm down across her ass.

“Thiago!”

She breaks into another fit of laughter as I soothe the sting with my palm, then press a kiss to the spot.

“I need the table. I told you I was going to eat.”

Keeping one arm hooked securely around, I sweep the placemats and centerpiece aside with the other. They hit the floor in a heap.

Remi lifts her head enough to look at the mess. “Seriously?”

“Very.” I lower her onto the edge of the table and step between her legs. “Turn around. Hands and knees, *fera*.”

She does what she’s told. And I give her ass another sharp slap.

“Look at you. Dripping and spread open on my fucking table.”

Her fingers dig into the wood as her hips ease back toward me.

“Who says we can’t have a little dessert before breakfast?”

I drag my knuckles over her clit, and her breath leaves her in a rush.

“Fuck, *chama*.” I lean over her and brush my mouth along her shoulder. “After everything we did last night, I’m wondering if I can still taste both of us on you.”

She rocks back. “Only one way to find out.”

I smile against her skin. “Exactly what I was thinking.” Trailing my mouth down her back, I lower myself behind her. “Stay right there.” My hands slide down the backs of her thighs as I settle between them. “Fuck, *fera*. You have no idea how fucking beautiful you are like this.”

“Has anyone ever told you it’s rude to stare?” she says, glancing over her shoulder.

I grin and nudge her legs farther apart. “You think I’m going to hurry when you’re spread out like this for me?”

“I think you’re talking too much.”

I press my mouth to the inside of her thigh.

“Thiago.” There’s enough impatience in my name that I stop fucking around and haul her closer.

“Touch yourself.”

Her shoulders tense before her hand slips between her thighs.

“You heard me, *fera*. I want you to feel how badly you want this.”

I watch her face as she moves over herself.

“Fuck,” she breathes.

“Feel that?”

Her touch slides lower and dips inside, her hips shifting back instinctively.

“You feel how wet you are for me?”

She nods, breathing harder.

“Tell me.”

“Yes. I’m fucking wet for you.”

“That’s my good girl.”

Her lips part at that, and I squeeze her ass.

“Now move your hand.”

She does, and I catch her wrist before she can pull away, guiding her fingers toward her mouth.

“Go on. Taste it.”

Her eyes lift to mine.

“Tell me how fucking good we are together.”

She closes her lips around her fingers and slowly pulls them clean. “So good.”

My grip firms around her wrist. “That’s what I wanted to hear.”

I lean over her until my chest presses against her back, my lips close to her ear.

“You know you never have to give me control just because you’re mine, right?”

Reaching back, she hooks an arm around my neck. “I know.”

“Then why do you?”

She turns her head toward me. “Because I choose to.” Her hold on me tightens against my neck. “I choose you.”

She chose me.

Knowing what I’m still hiding from her, I don’t deserve how fucking good those words feel.

Her hips press harder into me. “I can still be me and be yours, Thiago.”

“I know you can.”

“Good.” She smiles against my mouth. “Now eat your pussy already.”

I laugh and kiss the side of her neck.

“Did you think being yours meant I’d stop telling you what I want?”

“Not a fucking chance. I’d be disappointed if you did.”

“Then quit laughing and get to work.”

I straighten and give her ass a firm squeeze.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, lowering myself between her legs again. This time, I don’t make her wait.

The first swipe of my tongue pulls a broken sound from her, and her palms flatten against the table as her body jolts toward me.

I anchor her at the waist as I give her exactly what she’s been demanding.

“Oh, fuck, Thiago…right there.”

My name sounds completely different now, stripped of every trace of impatience. I circle her clit, then close my mouth around it until her thighs tense beneath my touch. When I slide two fingers inside her, she pushes back against them.

I can still taste the faintest trace of last night mixed with her, and knowing part of me remains on her sends a hard pulse straight through my cock.

“You were right.” I drag my tongue over her again. “We taste so goddamn good together.”

Her arms begin to tremble, and she lowers herself onto her forearms, pressing her cheek against the table.

“That’s it, *chama*. Use my mouth. Take whatever you need from me.”

Her nails press into the wood as I flatten my tongue against her clit and curl my fingers deeper inside her. She tries to hold herself still, but it doesn’t last. Her hips roll back, and my fingers tighten around her thighs.

“Let your body have it.”

She does.

Remi gives in to the rhythm, rocking back against me and matching my pace. One hand lifts from the table and slaps back down against the wood as she grinds into my mouth.

Fuck breakfast. I could stay right here all morning.

When her movements turn erratic, I feel her pulse around me. “Thiago…Fuck, I’m coming.”

I grip her harder as every muscle in her body tenses. “Come for me, *chama*.”

Her cry breaks against the tabletop, and I hold her through every shudder until the tension starts to leave her. For a few breaths, she stays folded over the table, catching her breath while I kiss along her spine and let her come down.

She suddenly straightens. And just when I expect her to turn toward me, she slides off the edge of the table and drops to her knees.

I meet her eyes. That smug little smile is already back as she reaches for me.

“You didn’t think you were getting breakfast yet, did you?”

I laugh. “Not anymore.”

I’m so hard it fucking hurts, and seeing her on her knees for me doesn’t help.

Remi takes me in hand, her expression downright wicked as she holds my gaze.

I hook two fingers beneath her chin and tip her face higher.

Her cheeks are still flushed, strands of hair have escaped the messy knot on top of her head, and my torn T-shirt hangs open around her body. She looks like a fucking goddess kneeling in front of me, thoroughly fucked and somehow even more beautiful for it.

“Goddamn, *fera*. Look at you.”

A bead of precum gathers at the tip. Remi catches it with her thumb, circling it over the head before leaning in and chasing it with her tongue.

Her lips brush the metal as she traces the piercing, and I exhale through clenched teeth as she works her tongue along me before drawing me closer. I cradle the back of her neck as the first suck makes my thighs flex. She fucking loves this part, watching me lose every ounce of composure I was so proud of five minutes ago.

Remi draws away until only the tip rests between her lips, then wraps her hand around the base and strokes me slowly while keeping her attention there.

I swear she knows exactly how long to keep me there before taking more.

Each time she sinks lower, she holds me for a beat before easing up again, her gaze never leaving mine. Then she changes the pace again, alternating between teasing strokes of her hand and the warm pull of her mouth until sitting still becomes a fucking challenge.

“And you were worried about the damn eggs.” Her eyes crease at the corners.

“Don’t worry, *fera*. By the time we get back to breakfast, we’ll both be well-fed.”

That earns me another smile before she takes me farther. My abdomen draws taut, and I close my eyes, breathing through the pleasure building low in my spine.

“I’m close.”

Remi braces a hand against my thigh and sinks lower.

“Oh, God, Remi.”

When I open my eyes, tears glisten at the corners of hers, her lips swollen as she pulls away, then takes me again.

Fuck, she’s beautiful.

I gather her hair in my fist, and she leans into my hold, guiding me forward until there’s no question about what she wants.

“That’s it, *fera*. Gag on it.”

Moving with her, I start slow. The tears finally spill over, tracking down her flushed cheeks.

“Fuck.”

She urges me on with another deliberate pull, and that’s all it takes to wreck me.

Bracing myself against the table, I give her a few rougher strokes until my body finally gives in. A groan tears from my chest as I come, still holding her hair while she takes every pulse.

Once my breathing begins to settle, she sits back on her calves. Remi swallows, wipes the corner of her mouth with her thumb, then looks up at me like she didn’t just completely fucking ruin me.

I can only stare as that smug smile of hers returns.

“What?”

I laugh, reach down, and bring her up onto my lap. “You are fucking unbelievable.”

“And you’re obsessed with me.” She loops her arms around my neck, and I kiss her.

“Completely, *minha chama*.”

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Forty-Eight

REMI



Thiago: Movie night. My place.

I slide off my glove and stare at the message for all of two seconds before a cheesy grin spreads across my face.

A month ago, I would've laughed at anyone who said I'd be this excited about a text message. Today, I don't even try to fight it. I wipe the residual grease from my fingers with a rag and glance back at the stripped engine bay of the RX-7 I've spent the past three hours bringing back to life.

Me: Is this an official invitation, or are you just assuming I'll show up?

The typing bubble appears almost immediately.

Thiago: Chama, we both know you'll show up.

I laugh to myself, then lean against the bench. He's absolutely right.

Me: Pick a movie, Braga.

It's been two days since the ball, since I laid out my feelings and went after what I wanted, and I already miss him. His job is unpredictable. He's on call more often than not, and there's always some fucked-up situation unfolding somewhere in this goddamn city.

I catch myself checking my phone more than usual, wondering whether he's eaten, sleeping enough, and whether he's safe. Worrying about

someone outside my family like this is still new to me, but I’m starting to realize I don’t mind making room for him in my life.

Remi, Remi, what the hell have you gotten yourself into?

Setting my phone down with a sigh, I pop a lollipop into my mouth, hoping to keep my hands and mind busy until tonight, when the familiar chime of the biometric lock echoes through the garage, pulling me from my thoughts.

Papá strides in, his smile widening the moment his eyes fall on me.

“Sorry to stop by unannounced, *princesa*, but I was on my way home when your mom asked me to check in on you and invite you over for dinner. I’m not saying tonight, but soon.” He kisses my forehead before moving toward the open hood of the RX-7 and looking inside. “Still fighting the rotary, huh?”

I grin around my lollipop. “She started it.”

He chuckles and shakes his head.

“So why didn’t she stop by or call me herself?”

He looks at me for a long moment. “Why haven’t you?”

Good point.

I’m not avoiding her, and I’m not upset. I could never stay mad at her for more than a day. She’s my heart. But if there’s one person in this world I never want to disappoint, it’s Amalia Montesinos.

It's a strange thing, being the daughter of someone extraordinary. I know it's not a competition, and she's never made it one. Still, some days, her shoes feel too big to fill. She’s incredible. A leader, a survivor, and everything I ever wanted to be.

And while I know everyone looks at me and sees someone just as strong and capable, someone worthy of carrying her name, there are days when I don't feel like any of those things. Days when I feel like I'm still trying to become the woman she already was.

I swallow the knot in my throat. “Can I bring someone?”

“Of course.” He smiles, and right now, that’s all I need.

I throw my arms around him, and he squeezes me until I laugh. I tip my head back and look up at him. “I’m getting grease on your shirt.”

“It’s all right, Remi girl. You’ve been getting grease all over me since you were in diapers, following me around the garage and banging up my bike with a ratchet wrench.”

He’s not wrong.

“Now look at you.” He motions around us. “Look at everything you’ve built.” His hand cups the back of my head. “I’m proud of you, and I love you. Don’t ever forget that. And don’t ever doubt how extraordinary and beautiful you are” he adds softly, as if he somehow reached into my head and found every insecurity I try to hide.

Suddenly, I’m five again, standing in his garage with tools too big for my hands, convinced my father can fix anything.

Part of me still believes he can.

We spend the next hour talking cars and engines. I see him off with another of his Hulk hugs, and before long, I’m back under the hood, so focused on what I’m doing that I barely notice the door opening again.

“Papi, you forget something?” I ask without looking up while tightening a bolt.

“Yeah. This.”

My eyes snap up.

A masked man stands a few feet away, a gun aimed at my head. I drop just as the shot explodes, sending the round into the wall above my workbench.

“Shit.”

Of course, this would happen the one time my gun is out of reach.

His footsteps close in as he moves cautiously, unsure whether I’m armed. He has to know the only reason he isn’t bleeding out on my floor is that I’m not.

How the fuck did he even get in here?

The thought of Papá hits me so suddenly that everything else disappears.

What if this man caught him outside?

Panic surges through me, but I force myself to think. There was no suppressor, and I would’ve heard another shot if he’d fired at him. He’s safe, or at least I have to believe he is until I know otherwise.

My fear quickly gives way to rage.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my butterfly knife and snap it open. It won’t kill him, but it might buy me the opening I need. I have one chance to get this right, and if I miss, I’m dead.

I focus on his footsteps as he moves around the front of the car. With one hand braced against the bumper, I shift away from the rear quarter panel and wait for him to come into view.

The moment he does, I throw the knife. The blade hits him, and he fires three rounds as I dive behind the opposite side of the car and stay crouched.

I recognize the Glock 43 and quickly count the shots in my head. He fired once when he came in and three more when the knife hit him, leaving him with two rounds in the standard six-round magazine.

Spotting a loose bolt on the ground beside me, I scoop it up and toss it over the hood.

He takes the bait and fires twice in quick succession.

Fucking amateur.

I round the front of the car with a grin.

“You lose something?”

His dark eyes snap to mine as he fumbles for another magazine, but before he can get it loaded, I’m already moving.

I launch myself at him.

Going after an armed man while he’s trying to reload probably isn’t the smartest move I’ve ever made, but this motherfucker just shot up my garage, and I’m not giving him another chance.

He swings and catches me in the jaw.

Pain erupts across my face, but I swallow it and drive my knee straight into his groin. He doubles over with a strangled grunt, and I introduce his jaw to my right uppercut. It sends him stumbling backward, his eyes briefly losing focus before locking on me again.

“Bitch!” he grinds out as he lunges for my throat.

I pivot out of his reach, rip the butterfly knife from his arm, and plunge it into his side twice. He roars and spins toward me, obscenities pouring from his mouth, but by then I’ve already grabbed the crowbar and swing. The metal connects with his skull with a sickening crack, spraying blood across the windshield of the RX-7.

He collapses face-first against the rim and doesn’t move.

I crouch beside him, searching his pockets for weapons, and toss two spare magazines and another handgun across the garage before ripping off his mask. I don’t recognize him. He looks about my age, with dark, shaggy hair and a face I’m certain I’ve never seen.

“Who the fuck are you?” I ask, breathing heavily as the adrenaline starts to wear off.

I shoot to my feet and grab my phone. Papá answers on the second ring, and relief floods through me at the sound of his voice.

“Papi.” I do my best to control my breathing and keep from sounding like I just ran a marathon or like I cracked a man’s head open with a crowbar.

“What’s wrong?” he asks immediately, as if he can hear the panic I’m trying to hide.

I should tell him. I know I should. There could be more of them.

My gaze returns to the unconscious man on the floor, and rage churns in my blood.

“Nothing,” I lie. “I just wanted to thank you for stopping by. I needed that.”

He doesn’t answer right away. “Of course, baby. But are you sure you’re all right?”

As I pace, I glance at the security monitors. “Yeah. It’s just this rotary. It’s a bitch, and I broke a nail.”

That gets him laughing, and finally hearing it convinces me he’s safe.

We say our goodbyes, and I slip my phone into my pocket before securing the garage door and turning back to the intruder.

Memories of another garage from four years ago surface, bringing me back to the man I killed in front of Val and to the tattoo on his arm. My stomach sinks at the possibility that this could somehow be connected. It’s been years since I last saw that tattoo and read those words, but I’ll never forget either.

Sub umbra venimos.

I kneel beside him and shove up his jacket sleeve, exposing his forearm. There’s nothing but a collection of seemingly meaningless ink. When I check the other arm, I find more of the same. Relief comes with my next breath, but it doesn’t answer the more immediate question of who the fuck this guy is.

“You’re going to tell me who you are and what you’re doing here, the hard way or the harder way.”

Fifteen minutes later, he’s in his birthday suit, bound at the wrists and ankles and secured to the RX-7’s front grille. I glance down at his limp dick and roll my eyes at the Jacob’s ladder.

Of course.

I slap a loaded magazine against his face, wait a second, then do it again. By the third hit, he groans and rolls his head to the side as he regains consciousness.

“Welcome back,” I say as his eyes finally open. “It was touch and go for a while, but I think you’re going to make it. For now.”

“Fuuuck.” He spits out the blood pooling in his mouth, and it dribbles down his chin.

“Gross.” I wrinkle my nose. “So, what brings you around here?”

The man glares up at me and spits again. “Untie me, bitch. Then we can talk.”

I stare at him for a moment. “Your balls are currently resting on my floor, and you still have the audacity to call me out of my name. Bold.”

His eyes widen as if he’s only now realizing he’s naked, and he frantically looks himself over.

“Must be a little chilly in here, huh?” I ask with a smirk, letting my gaze drift to his crotch.

“I should’ve blown your fucking head off when I had the chance. Untie me!”

Pushing myself to my feet, I pace in front of him. “Should have. Would have. Could have.” I stop, then turn to face him. “But you didn’t.”

I crouch in front of him again, tapping the magazine against the top of his head.

“It’s a tough lesson to learn, Jacob’s Ladder, but you should never hesitate. That’s one of the most important rules for surviving this cruel world.” I smile at him. “Luckily for you, you won’t have to worry about making that mistake again.”

He grinds his teeth and thrashes against his restraints. “Let me go.”

“Not until you tell me what I need to know.”

He growls as more bloodstained spit spills from the corners of his mouth.

“Fuck you, cunt. I’m not saying shit.”

My parents did their best to desensitize us to death without turning us into complete sociopaths, and I think they succeeded. I don’t enjoy hurting people for the sake of it because that’s never been who I am. But if you threaten me or anyone I love, you’ve already made the worst decision of your life

I look him over, then smile. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

Okay, maybe I do enjoy the look on his face when I pull out my old jumper cables and let them clank.

“W-What are you doing?” Panic creeps into his voice.

“Do you have any idea how well those pretty little barbells conduct electricity?”

He shakes his head frantically, not because he doesn’t know the answer, but because he knows exactly what’s coming. “No. Don’t. Please.”

Of course he begs when his manhood is threatened.

“Me neither,” I say. “I guess we’re about to run a test.”

I clamp one of the cables to the first piercing, and he jerks and cries out, “Help! Somebody help me! This bitch is crazy!”

“Who are you, and who sent you?”

“Shit. Shit,” he stammers as my finger hovers over the ignition switch. “Okay, okay. It was Rafe. He said you owed him and that you disrespected him on the track in front of everybody. He paid me. I was just doing my job. It’s nothing personal. I swear.”

“Pointing a gun at my head and pulling the trigger feels pretty personal, Jakey.”

I tap my nail against the panel.

“No, please. I told you. I gave you what you wanted.”

“You did, and I’m very grateful.”

He takes several shaky breaths as some of the panic leaves his face. “So you’ll let me go?”

I turn away from him and head toward my workbench. “No.”

“But you said—”

I glance back at him. “I said I was grateful.”

Then I fire.

The bullet strikes him in the forehead, and he slumps as his blood spills across my garage floor.

He came here prepared to kill me for a paycheck. If he’d arrived a few minutes earlier, my father could have been standing beside me when he pulled that trigger. There was never a version of this in which he walked out of here alive.

Pulling out my phone, I call Matteo.

“I need a favor,” I say before he can get a word in. “I need your full discretion and Santino’s cleanup crew at my garage.”

Matteo goes quiet before asking, “Are you good, Remi?”

“I am.”

“Okay.”

His willingness to leave it there is exactly why I called him.

“Oh, I need you to meet me at Furia tonight.”

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Forty-Nine

REMI



"What the hell, Matteo?"

It's the third time I've called and the third time he's sent me to voicemail.

I told him to meet me at the track. Sure, he doesn't race, but he's the closest thing I have to a best friend at the moment, which is as sad as it is tragic.

My thoughts drift to Thiago. The man I'm falling for is a cop, and I'm on my way to Furia to put a bullet between Rafe's eyes. If Thiago knew what I was planning, he'd either have to arrest me or look the other way, and I refuse to put him in that position.

There it is. The problem I've been avoiding because I don't have a solution for it yet. What we have feels too good to give up before I have to, so for now, I'm choosing not to think about what happens when our two worlds inevitably collide.

My phone lights up before I can dwell on it any longer, but it isn't Matteo returning my calls.

It's my mom.

This is the longest we've gone without speaking, and I hate it. The timing couldn't be worse, but there's no way I'm ignoring her.

"Shit."

I hit accept just before the last ring and wait for her to speak.

"Remi," she says softly.

"I'm sorry." The words spill out. "I meant to call. I should have called."

“Me too,” she says. “But I didn’t want to upset you again. I wanted to give you space.”

“Thank you,” I say as I ease off the accelerator.

Silence stretches between us until I hear a faint sniffle on her end.

“Mamá, please don’t cry.”

Her tears are the last thing I need right now, because if she cries, I’ll cry, and showing up to get revenge as a blubbering mess would kind of defeat the purpose.

“I’m not crying, *mi amor*. I’m just happy to hear your voice and to know you’re okay.”

“Of course I am.”

“You know I love you, Remi. Sometimes I let being your mother get in the way of trusting that you know what’s best for yourself. You’re my heart, and the thought of anyone hurting you scares me.”

I sigh. “Mamá…”

“But that doesn’t mean I get to make your choices for you.” Her voice softens. “If you really like this man, I trust your judgment. I trust you know what you’re doing.”

I want to reassure her and tell her that I’m in complete control, but the truth is that I’m doing life raw at the moment, flying by the seat of my ass and hoping I don’t crash.

“I like him,” I admit. “I really do. It’s scary as hell, Mami, but I want to see where this goes.” I hesitate, searching for a courage I never imagined I’d need. “And I want you to meet him. Really meet him.”

“I’d love to.”

The tension I’ve been carrying since our argument finally eases, and I almost forget where I’m headed until the sign for my exit comes into view.

“Can I bring him by for dinner sometime?”

“Your dad mentioned that. He said he stopped by today.”

Of course he did. I expect nothing less from a man as whipped as my father.

“I also spoke to Matteo.”

Any relief I was feeling is gone.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” she says, with her mom voice turned all the way up.

Fucking Matteo is a rat bastard.

“Mamá, let me explain.”

“You’re not alone in this world, Remi. There is nothing you could say or do that would ever make me stop having your back.”

Seconds before bright headlights fill my rearview mirror, the growl of an engine sounds behind me. I’d recognize that purr anywhere. A Hellcat woman through and through, Mamá has owned more than a few over the years, but her latest baby is impossible to mistake.

“If you thought I’d let you do this alone, you must not know who I am.”

There she is. Amalia, *la mercenaria*.

They weren’t exactly bedtime stories, but the ones about her life in Villa Dorada, where she led an all-women mercenary team, were always my favorite.

I can’t help smiling.

“Matteo is a traitor,” I say, unable to keep the humor from creeping into my voice.

“No. Matteo cares about you.” She pauses. “And I threatened his life.”

“That sounds more believable.”

“When Santino called me about his cleanup crew going to your garage, I had to use every ounce of patience and understanding I possessed not to come find you and stop you.”

“And you didn’t.”

“No,” she says. “Because I know you need this.” She goes quiet for a moment. “And maybe I need it too. That man fucked with my daughter, and that’s something I’ll never let slide.” Pulling up beside me, she rolls down her passenger-side window. I do the same. “This is all you, Remi, but I’ll be there when you need me.”

I give her a wide smile before she falls back, then follows me off the ramp.

“Run me through your plan. Is he expecting you?”

The mother who called to make sure I was okay is gone, and in her place is the woman from all those stories, already plotting and calculating alongside me.

“I placed an anonymous bet. Pinks and fifty grand. If he’s the greedy bastard I know he is, he’ll show up.”

“Are you sure?” she asks.

“I have sources, and it’s basically a guarantee.”

I walk her through the rest of my plan. The lot has too many witnesses, but I know the route to the bridge well enough to pinpoint exactly where the

cameras and crowds disappear. All I have to do is get Rafe out there, isolate him, and kill him.

It's simple enough.

Then I'll be home in time to fall into Thiago's arms or to ride his face. Either option is valid, and either sounds like the perfect way to end a chaotic day.

By the time we reach Furia, the energy is electric. The crowd looks twice as big as it normally does on a night like this, and my phone hasn't stopped vibrating for the past twenty minutes. Everyone's talking about the anonymous bid.

I had to leave my GT-R at home because the moment I pulled into the lot, everyone would know exactly who I was. Tonight, I brought out the big guns with a matte-black, stripped-out R35 I've been saving for a rainy day.

It turns out, attempted murder qualifies.

My phone buzzes again, and I pull it out, expecting another string of texts. Instead, Thiago's name appears on the screen.

Thiago: Hey, beautiful. We still on for tonight? Pizza? I'll grab your favorite.

I stare at the message longer than I should.

Beautiful.

I've been called that my entire life, and it's never meant much to me. Coming from him, the word does all kinds of dangerous shit to my insides, and I don't even have anything witty to fire back.

Remi, you are so fucked.

Me: I'll be there, Braga.

Just as I send it, another message pops up in the circuit group chat.

DBN: Black R35 at the line. Gotta be him.

TY345: Fifty grand and pinks? Whoever posted that either has a death wish or knows something we don't.

I pull my hat lower over my eyes and ease toward the starting line, savoring the attention as heads turn toward me. People point, whisper, and crane their necks to get a better look through the tinted windows. Cameras come out and phones rise as curiosity spreads through the crowd.

Exactly what I wanted.

My mom’s Hellcat sits near the edge of the lot. She’s still behind the wheel and will likely follow close behind once the race starts.

The last thing I wanted was to drag her into this, but knowing she’s here doesn’t make me feel any less capable of handling it myself. If anything, I’m proud.

A red Dodge Charger pulls up beside me. The windows are down, the bass is pounding, and Rafe lounges in the driver’s seat, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth and a smug grin on his face.

He took the bait, exactly as I knew he would. Too stupid to piece together what happened to his missing errand boy, but I can’t fault him too much for that. He has no idea who I am or what I’m capable of.

A man with a bullhorn steps into the middle of the street.

I check my phone one last time and see that Thiago still hasn’t replied. It’s probably better this way. I need my head in the game, and that man, all six foot six inches of him, is a massive distraction.

Around us, the crowd gradually falls silent.

I plant one hand on the wheel and rest the other on the shifter as adrenaline floods my veins. Any second now, Rafe is going to learn he fucked with the wrong girl.

The man raises the bullhorn.

“Fifty grand and pinks!” he shouts. “You know the rules. First to the bridge and back wins. No cops, no bullshit, and no excuses.”

The crowd erupts.

Rafe revs beside me, grinning like he’s already spent my money. I fucking love it. It’ll make what comes next that much sweeter.

The horn sounds, and I launch hard, my back slamming against the seat. Tires scream, the engine roars, and Furia disappears behind me in a blur.

“You got this,” I tell myself.

Rafe stays at my rear through the first stretch, his Charger snarling with every shift. I let him think he’s keeping up. I let him believe this is a race, even though I’ve known from the beginning exactly where it ends.

The bridge comes into view, and I ease off the accelerator just enough to let him pull alongside me. He glances over, and even though he can’t see me through the blacked-out windows, I smile.

Just before we reach the stretch I picked out earlier, I fall back to let him pass.

There are no cameras here, and the crowds from Furia are far enough behind us that no one will see what happens next.

Rafe shouts something I can't make out as he takes the lead.

Another pair of headlights appears in my rearview mirror, far enough back to give me room but close enough to reach me if I need her.

Mamá is exactly where I knew she'd be.

Lining up my bumper with Rafe's rear, I brace myself, then make my move. The impact rattles through my car's frame.

I swear I hear him yell, but I can't be sure over the screech of tires and the violent crunch of metal. His Charger spins as dirt and gravel erupt around it. The front tires catch the embankment, and he overcorrects to regain control, lifting the car off the ground and rolling it onto its side.

It flips once, then again, tumbling across the road before crashing upside down across both lanes. I slow and watch the wreckage slide to a stop exactly where I wanted him.

Racking my Glock, I grab three extra magazines, tucking one into each boot and the third down the front of my top.

Mamá keeps her distance and flashes her headlights. I raise a hand to let her know I'm okay, then head toward Rafe. Glass crunches under my boots with each step, and I find myself hoping he's still conscious.

What fun would this be otherwise?

As if in answer to my thoughts, a bloodied hand pushes through the shattered driver's-side window. I keep my gun trained on him, prepared for anything, but it quickly becomes clear that this bastard is too broken to pose much of a threat.

Part of me is almost disappointed. I came here ready for a fight, and putting a bullet in him while he can barely crawl feels too easy. Then again, I'll take my wins where I can get them.

I stop a few feet from the wreckage, tilting my head.

"Beautiful night for a drive, isn't it?"

"B-Bitch…" he stammers, then spits blood onto the asphalt.

The sight of him dragging his ruined body across the ground sends a wave of déjà vu through me.

The last time I watched a man crawl from a wreck like this, I was behind the wheel of his car with Papá beside me, and his friend had already met the same fate.

How poetic.

I crouch in front of Rafe and tap my gun's barrel against his forehead. I should get this over with, shoot him, and be done with it instead of standing here, inviting a villain monologue. But we were friends once, or at least I thought we were, and I need to know what changed.

I guess I should've learned that lesson from Casper, Val's traitor.

"What happened between us, Rafe?" I ask. "I thought we were cool. Did I piss in your Cheerios or something?"

He drags himself into a sitting position, and I step back several steps, staying just beyond his reach. It's not that I think he can hurt me, but I've already made the mistake of underestimating a desperate man once tonight.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he says before spitting another mouthful of blood. "I liked you, Remi. A lot. I respected your skill and everything you brought to this track." His face twists with anger. "But then you got too good. People started showing up to watch you. Racers wanted to run against you instead of me. Money started moving in directions I couldn't control, and every time you showed up, this place became a little less mine."

I stare at him. "So this is about your fucking ego?"

"It's about respect," he spits. "I built something here, and you walked in like you owned it."

"You tried to have me killed because people like me more than they like you?" I shake my head. "That might be the most pathetic shit I've ever heard."

His eyes narrow, but instead of firing back, his attention drops to the gun in my hand. He studies me for a moment before looking back at my face. "Yeah," he says slowly. "My guy came to see you today, didn't he?"

I don't answer.

"Is he dead?"

"Very."

Instead of looking upset, Rafe nods as if I've just confirmed what he already suspected.

"I fucking knew it. The rumor is true."

My expression sours. "What rumor?"

He laughs, then winces from the pain. "The massacre here years ago. Casper. Balterra. People disappearing." Lifting his bloodied face, he meets my gaze. "You and Valentina. You're one of them."

I arch an eyebrow. "One of who?" I ask. "Please. Enlighten me."

“The Six.”

Hearing those words come out of his mouth changes everything. Civilians don’t know The Six exists. They’re not supposed to. So how the fuck does he know?

I level my gun on him again. “Where’d you hear that?”

He runs his tongue over his bloodstained teeth, then gives me a humorless smile. “So it is true? Fuck.”

I realize my mistake a second too late. My reaction gave him the answer he was searching for. “Talk.”

“I’m not telling you nothin’. Either way, you’re still gonna kill me.”

“True,” I say with a shrug.

He shakes his head in disbelief. “This is some real-life John Wick shit.”

Despite the situation and the very real possibility that someone out there knows who my family is, what they were, and is running their mouth about it, I can’t help but grin.

Before I can decide how far I’m willing to push him for information, the roar of approaching engines cuts through the night.

Rafe’s expression changes.

“I’ve been running this track for two years, and I ran one in Miami for five before that. I can spot a bullshit bait bid from a mile away.” He coughs, blood spilling down his chin. “Two steps ahead, Remi.”

Headlights appear in the distance, one after another, and the mistake I made becomes painfully clear. My body tenses as I count them. I underestimated him. Rafe knew the bid was a trap, yet he came anyway because he had a plan of his own.

“My only regret,” he says, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, “is that I never got a taste of that sweet—”

I put a bullet through his face before he can finish. “Taste that.” Pivoting, I sprint toward my car. “Mamá!” I yell. “Ambush!”

Tires screech behind me as a small fleet of cars tears across the bridge. A second later, gunfire erupts, and I brace for bullets that never reach me.

The Hellcat swings sideways across the road, blocking both lanes.

Amalia Montesinos leans out the driver’s-side window, a rifle in her hands and a smile on her face as she unleashes a barrage of automatic fire at the approaching cars.

For a moment, all I can do is stare.

Holy shit.

That’s my mother.

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Fifty

THIAGO



I flip open the pizza box, tempted to take a slice, but close it again and decide to wait for Remi. Checking my phone for what feels like the hundredth time, there's still no call or text from her. She said she'd be here thirty minutes ago. Maybe she got held up at the tattoo shop now that it's back in business, but if that were the case, why wouldn't she call?

Unease works its way through me.

I tell myself I'm being paranoid, but my thoughts immediately turn to Elena. She's been on my ass since I left the charity banquet early, and I know her patience is wearing thin. But she wants information from me. Going after Remi before I have it would jeopardize everything she sent me here to do.

Elena wouldn't take that risk. At least, I have to believe she wouldn't.

I call Remi again, but it goes straight to voicemail. The next two calls do the same. Then I text her and wait. When several minutes pass without a reply, I jump to my feet and start pacing the apartment.

"Remi, where are you?"

I argue with myself for another few minutes before sending one last text. When that goes unanswered too, I'm done waiting. I pull up Matteo's number. I saved it from Remi's contacts, never expecting to use it, but short of losing my mind and calling her parents, he's the only person I can think of who might know where she is. "Fuck it."

Hitting call, I send up a prayer that Matteo answers.

Four painfully long rings pass before a man's voice finally comes over the line.

"Thiago," he says, somehow already knowing it's me.

"Hey, I'm sorry to call you like this, but I'm trying to get ahold of Remi. We were supposed to meet tonight, and she's over an hour late. She isn't answering her phone, and—"

"Look…" He pauses, and when he speaks again, his hesitation is enough to put me immediately on edge.

At this point, I know something's wrong.

"Remi went to the track tonight to settle a score with some asshole. I'm only telling you this because I know you care about her. And I—"

"What's the location?"

Silence follows.

From what I know, Furia isn't tied to one spot. They move around to stay ahead of the cops, which means I can't find her without an address.

"Thiago…"

"The location, Matteo."

He finally gives it to me, and I end the call without another word, then run out the door.

The streets are more congested than usual on a goddamn Tuesday night. I lean on the horn and weave through traffic, sliding the truck between cars while suppressing the urge to bulldoze my way to the off-ramp.

What the fuck are you doing, Remi?

I know she's more than capable of handling herself, but knowing that doesn't make it any easier to stomach that she went after someone alone. I jerk into the right lane and narrowly miss an SUV. A chorus of horns follows me, but I don't spare them a second thought as I keep moving, desperate for open road and a glimpse of my girl.

"Please be okay, *fera*."

As I leave the city behind, traffic thins until there are barely any other cars on the road. Buildings give way to long stretches of darkness, and with every mile, everything around me grows still.

Then a familiar sound cuts through it.

Gunfire.

Every bit of training I have kicks in at once.

I slam my foot on the accelerator, and the truck surges forward as the speedometer climbs past one hundred in seconds.

My phone sits within reach. I know I should call this in. I should get backup and do the smart thing. But calling it in means cops, questions, and an investigation that could put Remi in handcuffs. For the first time in my career, I knowingly turn away from everything the badge demands of me.

Leaving the phone where it is, I give the truck another burst of speed, and the scene comes into view a few seconds later.

An R35 is parked in the middle of the road. A Hellcat sits nearby, and two women take cover behind it as they trade gunfire with a rusted box truck parked across the shoulder.

I recognize Remi immediately and the woman as her mother.

Jerking the wheel, I skid to a stop in front of the Hellcat, positioning my truck between them and the incoming fire, bullets tearing into the body panels. I duck, grab my go bag from the back seat, throw open the door, and dive behind the front end for cover. The second I appear, Amalia swings her weapon toward me.

“Mamá, no!”

At the last possible second, Remi knocks the barrel aside, and the round strikes the dirt instead of my skull.

“Thiago, what the hell are you doing here?” She ejects the empty magazine and slams in another. “How did you even find me?”

Before I can answer, Amalia curses and checks her rifle.

“I’m out.”

I tear open my bag, pull out my spare magazines, and slide them to her.

“There should be enough in there to keep them pinned down until we can make a break for it.”

Then I finally get a good look at Remi. She’s alive, on her feet, and right now, that’s enough.

“We’ll talk later.”

She nods once, pivots back toward the road, and opens fire. I join her, my focus on getting her home. The pressure in my chest lightens, and I drag in my first full breath since I got here.

“When they stop to reload, you and your mom get in the car and make a run for it,” I say, firing several rounds. “I’ll hold them off.”

“No.” She doesn’t even look at me. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

“Remi, it’s not up for discussion. You need to go.”

She leans out from cover and fires, dropping one of the bastards with a bullet to the neck, then turns to me.

“I’m sorry,” she says as she reloads. “You must have me confused with someone who takes orders.”

“He has a point, Remi,” Amalia says, slamming another magazine into her rifle. “Let’s go. You’ll catch up with him later.”

“No,” Remi says. “You go. We’ll be right behind you.”

“If you think I’m leaving you here with…” Amalia’s jaw tightens as she looks at me. “I don’t know him, and I can’t trust him with your life.”

“I trust him.”

Those three words cut through everything happening around us. My next exhale comes out rough, but there’s no time to let myself feel what they do to me. Remi places a hand on her mom’s arm, and Amalia squeezes it.

“We’ll be right behind you. I have a plan. Just trust me. Please.”

Amalia looks at me, and I see the hesitation written all over her face.

“I’ll keep her safe,” I tell her. “I promise.”

Her eyes hold mine for a long second before she gives me a single nod. “You better.”

I turn my attention back to the road and keep firing as they exchange a few more words behind me. The moment the shooting pauses, Amalia jumps into her Hellcat and tears down the road. Bullets follow her, but she’s already moving too fast.

“Remi, I’m on my last mag. We gotta move.”

“They’re not dead yet.”

Another car comes barreling toward us before I can argue. If we don’t get the fuck out of here now, we’re going to run out of ammo and then we’re dead.

Two weapons emerge from the windows, and a fresh barrage of gunfire tears into what’s left of my truck.

“Fuck this.”

I fire back as I move toward Remi, wrap an arm around her waist, and haul her against me. Her legs instinctively lock around my hips as I turn us toward the truck.

“Braga, put me down!”

“You’re not dying on this highway today.” I keep moving, using the truck as cover as bullets tear into the other side. “Besides, I made a promise to your mom. What kind of impression would I make if we both got shot?”

“I can walk.”

“Yeah? Then explain why your legs are wrapped around me.”

Despite the fact that we’re being shot at, I swear she almost smiles.

The few remaining windows shatter as I reach the truck. I shove Remi into the back seat and dive in after her, keeping my head low as another round rips through the passenger door.

I climb over the console, throw the truck into gear, and slam my foot on the accelerator. The tires screech on the pavement before catching, and we shoot down the road with the other car close behind.

“Now would be a good time for that plan,” I say, pushing the ruined truck as hard as it’ll go.

“One bullet left.”

Remi shifts to her knees and takes aim through what’s left of the rear window.

“Make it count, baby.”

“I plan to.”

She waits, watching the car gaining on us. “Almost there,” she murmurs. “Just a little closer.”

The shot cracks through the night, and the pursuing car swerves violently, giving us a few precious seconds of distance.

Remi immediately reaches into her pocket and pulls out her phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting rid of evidence.”

Her thumb hits the screen.

The R35 erupts behind us with a thunderous boom. Flames surge skyward as the last pursuing car disappears in the explosion.

For a heartbeat, I forget I’m supposed to be driving.

“You rigged a two-hundred-thousand-dollar car to explode?”

“I like to be prepared.”

“A replacement is already on the way, isn’t it?”

She drops back against the seat. “Obviously.”

“Right. Trust fund.”

Remi starts laughing, and this time, I can’t help but join her as the burning wreckage shrinks in the rearview mirror. My hands are still locked tight around the wheel, my pulse refusing to come down even though no one is chasing us anymore.

“This is going to be all over the news.”

“Yeah.” Her laughter fades and she climbs into the passenger seat. “You’re going to have to report it, aren’t you?”

I know what she’s really asking, so I take her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

“We were never here.”

Her lips part as she stares at me. “Thiago…I don’t want you risking your job for me.” She goes quiet for a beat. “Wait. How did you even know where to find me?”

“Matteo told me where you were.”

She groans. “I’m going to kill him and his big fucking mouth.”

“To be fair, I’d already heard whispers about Furia.” I glance at her. “Is that what you do, Remi? You street race?”

Remi gives me a look. “Are you asking as Thiago or as a cop?”

“Thiago,” I say without hesitation.

“Then, yes.”

I shake my head, fighting a smile. “Is that why you hate cops?”

“Please. I hated cops long before you started ruining my life.”

“I’m glad to know it isn’t personal.”

“Oh, Braga. Some of it is definitely personal,” she adds with a wink.

I laugh under my breath and turn my attention back to the road.

“Remi, you said you’re not the type to take orders,” I say, squeezing her hand. “But I’m going to need you to bend that rule for me just this once, okay?”

Her mouth twitches. “You’re a shitty cop.”

I chuckle. “Yeah. I think I might be.”

She brings my hand to her lips this time and whispers, “Thank you.”

“Call your mom to let her know we made it out before she doubles back. Then we’ll go home, and you can tell me what the hell happened.”

She nods and reaches for her phone.

“I still have to figure out what to do with my truck. The moment I roll into a body shop with bullet holes all over it, the entire city will be calling the tip line.”

“Well,” she says, pressing another kiss to my knuckles, “it’s a good thing your girl has her own garage and happens to be pretty damn good at bodywork and making problems disappear.”

Your girl.

After everything that happened tonight, hearing her call herself that shouldn’t affect me as much as it does, but fuck, it does.

My girl.

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Fifty-One

Remi



Dead.

I lean back against the elevator wall and close my eyes. Today has been one hell of a day, and saying I'm completely drained and ready to collapse into bed is an understatement.

It took nearly an hour to calm my parents down and convince them not to march straight to some of the local heads of The Six to demand answers about how Rafe knew the organization existed and, even worse, how our names and identities had somehow been caught up in the leak.

They can pretend Thiago doesn't fully have their trust, but if I weren't with him right now, I'm pretty sure both of them would be banging on my door, ready to drag me back home.

"Tired?" he asks, nudging my shoulder.

"Exhausted." I open my eyes to find his. "It's been a while since I've shot up the town."

The corner of his mouth twitches, but the smile never comes. Instead, he looks away, and that tiny shift has my mind instantly filling in the blanks.

How do you explain any of tonight to a cop?

Sure, Thiago didn't call for backup or turn me in. He even helped me get away, which should be enough to convince me he isn't going anywhere. But he still doesn't know the whole truth.

And if he ever does...

Before I can follow that thought any further, Thiago slips one arm beneath my thighs and the other around my back, lifting me into his arms

just as the elevator doors slide open. Apparently, whatever is on his mind isn't enough to make him put any distance between us.

"I thought I told you I could walk."

"You're exhausted, *chama*." His gaze meets mine. "Let me take care of you for five minutes."

Fuck.

Why does he have to say things like that?

I reach for the biometric pad and let it scan my fingers while I remain exactly where I am in his arms. The deadbolts click open, and Thiago carries me across the threshold.

"How romantic," I tease.

He starts to answer, but a faint rustle from somewhere inside the apartment steals my attention.

"Wait." I wriggle out of his arms, and he sets me gently on my feet. "Shh."

His brow furrows as I take a slow step forward. Behind me, I hear the unmistakable metallic click as a round is chambered.

"Remi," he whispers. "What's going on?"

Without looking back, I raise one hand to stop him and press a finger to my lips. "Quiet." I reach for the light switch and scan the living room. Another rustle makes me pause. At the edge of the sofa, the tip of a familiar tail disappears beneath it. "Shit."

"Shit?" he repeats through gritted teeth. "Remi, what the hell is going on?"

"Clarice."

"Clarice?"

I look back at him. "Yeah. My pit viper. The venomous one. She got out."

"Shit."

His eyes widen as they sweep the room. Without a second thought, he steps in front of me, pushing me behind him with one arm and keeping his gun at the ready in the other.

It's probably ridiculous to think about shooting a snake, but that isn't what gets me. Once again, his first instinct is to put himself between me and anything that could hurt me.

Damn him.

I rest my hand on his bicep, and the solid muscle beneath my palm gives me a perfectly good excuse to leave it there a second longer than necessary.

"Thiago, I've got this. This isn't the first time she's escaped. Sometimes I rush after feeding her and forget to fully secure the enclosure."

He slowly lowers his gun, then drags a hand down his face. "Remi, baby, that's…"

"A little careless. I know, I know." I give him a sheepish look. "Just stay here."

As I move past him, Thiago catches my elbow, suddenly serious. "Be careful."

I nod, unable to hold back my smile. "You like me, huh?"

Now he's the one fighting a smile. "Go get your snake, *fera*," he says, though something in his eyes makes it hard to look away.

I force myself to anyway and head for the coat closet to grab my snake hook. "Stay back," I tell him.

"You don't have to tell me twice."

I approach the sofa carefully and crouch far enough away that Clarice can't strike if she's startled. Before I can get a good look beneath it, she slithers out the opposite side and makes a beeline for the hallway.

"Oh, no, you don't." I follow at a safe distance until she slows. "Clarice, play nice, and I'll have a fat, juicy mouse waiting for you at your next feeding. Your favorite."

She stops and coils, lifting her head as I keep the snake hook between us.

"Easy, girl." I lower my voice as I watch her. "See that big guy back there?" Looking over my shoulder, I toss Thiago a wink. "He kind of likes me, and he has pretty good aim, so let's not give him a reason to find out if he can hit a small, moving target, okay?"

When she finally relaxes enough for me to move closer, I carefully slide the hook beneath the front third of her body. Surprisingly, she doesn't protest. She lets me lift her without so much as a hiss. Behind me, Thiago lets out a breath, and I don't have to look at him to know it has nothing to do with being afraid of Clarice.

Damn him again.

By the time I return her to the enclosure and double-check the latch, Thiago is sitting on the couch, with two glasses of iced water waiting on the coffee table.

I mean to sit beside him, but before I reach the cushion, he catches me around the waist and pulls me onto his lap.

“Did you remember to lock it this time?”

“Ha ha.” I roll my eyes. “Go ahead. Make your jokes. I forget things sometimes, okay? Sue me.”

I’m not offended in the slightest, but his smile still fades, and his arm tightens around me. “I didn’t mean it that way.” He searches my face. “You know that, right?”

“I know.”

I do.

Maybe that’s why being this vulnerable with him scares me so much. Thiago doesn’t make me feel like I have to explain every part of myself or apologize for the parts that aren’t always easy. He just seems to understand me. Even now, we can sit here in silence, and I don’t feel the need to fill it. With him, I can simply exist in it.

I curl my fingers into his collar and meet his eyes.

We have a conversation pending, and I don’t know how much of myself I’m ready to give him. Part of me wants to tear everything open and let him see it all, even the darkest ones, while the other part is terrified of what might happen if I do.

So I give him what I can.

“Things got out of control today.”

He nods. “A little.”

I almost smile. “I am who I am, Braga. It started as a race and ended badly. You see the worst of society every day, so you know there are ruthless people out there.”

His hand glides slowly along my back.

“I grew up in a family that prepared us for people like that. My parents taught us to survive the ugliest parts of this world. They taught us never to back down and never to let ourselves become victims.”

Thiago doesn’t interrupt. He just listens.

“So when someone comes for me, or worse, for the people I love…I’m going to stop them.” I force myself to hold his gaze. “Whatever it takes.”

His body goes still beneath me.

“I need you to know that about me.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then asks softly, “Self-defense?” It sounds less like a question for me than one he’s asking himself.

I know what he’s doing. Maybe we both do.

“Self-defense.”

He stares at me for another second before his hand resumes its slow path along my back. “Your mom is one hell of a shot.”

The abrupt change in subject catches me off guard, and I laugh.

“She sure is. She taught me everything I know. I grew up surrounded by some pretty badass women.”

“Explains a lot.”

“Yeah.” I stroke his cheek with my thumb. “It’s not too late to run, you know.”

Thiago shakes his head as his eyes close beneath my touch. “The fuck it’s not.”

I lean in and kiss him. Maybe I’m biased, but this man has the softest, most kissable lips I’ve ever known. “Thiago,” I whisper against his mouth. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

He opens his eyes. “Baby, there isn’t a single thing in this world that would make me leave you.”

I cup his face, brushing my nose against the scruff along his jaw. “I hate you.”

That gets a laugh out of him. “That’s definitely not what I expected you to say.”

“It’s true.” I shake my head. “I hate how easy this is with you. How easily I let you past every wall I’ve spent years building. I tell you things I don’t tell anyone, and half the time, I don’t even realize I’m doing it until it’s already out there.”

He’s serious now.

“And the worst part is that I don’t regret any of it. But…”

Thiago waits, his hand still against me. “Tell me.”

I look down at where my fingers grip his shirt. “I’m afraid.”

His eyebrows draw together. “What are you afraid of?”

There’s a vulnerability in his voice I haven’t heard before.

“I’m afraid I don’t know how to do this, Thiago. Whatever this is growing between us.” I lift my eyes to his. “I’m afraid I’ll fuck it up. That eventually you’ll see all of me, not the girl in the mugshot or the version of me that’s fun to chase around the city, and realize I don’t fit into your world.”

He starts to speak, but I shake my head.

“Tonight is a perfect example. I meant what I said. I’ll never be the girl who backs down. But you’re a cop.” I pause. “I can’t be the reason you throw away everything you’ve worked for.”

“Remi, you have to let me decide what I’m willing to risk.”

“I know, but—”

“No.” His hand comes up to my face. “Look at me.”

I do.

“I already know you’re not the woman strangers online think they know. I’ve seen enough of the real you to know she’s the one I want to keep getting to know.”

I study his face, searching for even a hint of hesitation, but there isn’t one.

“And yes, I might have more questions about how the hell you and your mom cleared a highway full of murderous assholes. But I’m still here, aren’t I?”

I smile and nod. “So you’re saying I’m not as scary as I thought?”

“Baby, you’re terrifying.” He laughs. “And I never want to piss your mom off.”

“That’s probably wise.”

Thiago’s hand comes to rest against the side of my neck. “But you can’t scare me away.”

“I hear you, but…you don’t know what it’s like inside my head. I can’t shut it off. Sometimes…” My voice softens. “Sometimes I forget to breathe. Or to latch the enclosure of a deadly snake.”

He chuckles and brushes his lips against mine. “Then I’ll remind you to breathe and to double-check the damn snake enclosure.”

I smile against his mouth. “You make this sound easy.”

“I didn’t say it would be easy. I said I’m not going anywhere.” He kisses me again, slower, softer. “You make me feel something I haven’t felt in a long time, Remi.”

“What’s that?” I whisper.

He goes quiet, looking at me with an intensity that makes it impossible to look anywhere else. “Alive.”

The word knocks the air from my lungs.

Oh, I’m so fucked.

“This is exactly why I hate you,” I murmur.

“I hate you too, *chama*.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.” His thumb traces the curve of my jaw. “I hate those beautiful blue eyes.”

“Everyone does.” I shift over his lap and loop my arms around his neck.

“I hate your smart mouth.”

“You seemed pretty fond of it the other night.”

His eyes darken. “Very fond.”

I grin. “What else?”

“I hate that fucking lollipop.”

I gasp. “Take it back.”

“Never.”

“That might actually be a dealbreaker, Braga.”

His hand slides into mine, and he turns it over before pressing a kiss onto it.

“And I really fucking hate how right this feels.”

The teasing falls away as our eyes meet.

“Thiago…”

His phone vibrates in his pocket before I can say anything else.

“Go ahead,” I tell him. “After today, who knows what kind of fresh hell has taken over Philly?”

He pulls out his phone and lets out a breath as he reads the screen.

“It’s Ryan. Letting me know the commander was pulled overseas for the next several days.”

“Oh.” I feign disappointment. “I’m sure everyone will miss her.”

Thiago chuckles, tosses his phone onto the coffee table, then grips my ass with both hands and stands, taking me with him.

“You still owe me a movie night, *chama*.”

“It’s a good thing I restocked on popcorn and lollipops.”

“Perfect.” He carries me down the hallway. “But first, we’re washing this day off us.”

“Agreed.”

He makes it a few steps before stopping.

“You definitely locked Clarice’s enclosure, right?”

I’m too busy laughing to answer.

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Fifty-Two

THIAGO



Pai,

I think I'm falling in love with her.

I haven't said it out loud yet. I don't even know if I'm ready to. But I wake up thinking about her. I go to sleep wishing she were beside me. And in the middle of all this shit I've gotten myself into, she's become the one thing that feels right.

You'd probably tell me I already know what that means.

Maybe I do.

I stare at the words for a long moment before closing the notebook I left open on my nightstand for three days.

Admitting it to a page is one thing. Saying it to Remi is another.

I stumble into the bathroom and splash cold water on my face. Lack of sleep is written all over me, which isn't surprising, since I didn't get home until just before sunrise.

We were called in late last night for a downtown barricade. A bomb threat and a handful of hostages turned what should've been a routine operation into an all-night ordeal. I could've slept longer, but summer festivities are in full swing across the city, which means longer shifts, more overtime, and less time with Remi.

The commander being overseas is a welcome relief. Not having to answer to her directly for the next few days gives me some breathing room, even though I know it won't last.

As if thinking about Remi were enough to summon her, my phone vibrates on the nightstand. The ringtone I assigned to her number reaches me from the bedroom, and whatever exhaustion I felt a second ago takes a back seat.

I cross the room and grab my phone.

"*Fera*."

She hesitates. "Did I wake you?" she asks, probably hearing the sleep still clinging to my voice.

"No, you didn't. I was already up." I smile. "And even if I hadn't been, I would've answered. Every time."

"Shit. I should've waited a little longer. You said you'd be getting home late. I'm sorry, I—"

"Remi," I interrupt gently. "If it's you calling, I'm answering. So stop apologizing."

She laughs. "Okay, okay."

The distant hum of traffic filters through the speaker, then the heavy thud of a car door closing.

"Are you downstairs?" I ask, suddenly wishing she was.

Fuck sleep.

"No, but I'm calling to invite you over. Zara's at this summer dance intensive, and I just got a call that she needs to be picked up. Aunt Athena's still a couple of hours away, and Matteo and Santino are tied up." Her voice softens. "I know she'd love to see you."

I haven't seen that little girl since the day I pulled her out of that building, the same day she watched an integral part of her family die.

"I'd like that."

"Good. She's asked about you." I can hear the smile in Remi's voice. "She even asked whether I'd kissed you again."

"Did she? That's a dangerous question."

"Indeed, it is."

I head for the shower, already thinking about how quickly I can get out the door. "There's an ice cream shop two blocks from your place," I say. "It's the one with the pink sign out front. Meet me there after you pick her up."

"Oh, you're bringing out the big guns, huh?"

"As long as you're impressed."

“Anyone who goes out of their way to put a smile on my Zara’s face is a keeper.”

“Good to know. I’ll see you then.”

I’m about to hang up when another question pops into my head. “Remi, wait.”

“Yeah?”

“What’s your favorite ice cream flavor?”

“Coffee Oreo,” she says without hesitation.

I blink. “Coffee...Oreo? That’s a thing?”

“Yes, it’s a thing. Andretti’s downtown.”

“Then that’s where we’ll meet.”

There’s a brief pause on the other end.

“You’re cute, Braga.”

Before I can respond, she hangs up. I stare at my phone and shake my head.

Fuck, I’ve got it bad.

I grab a table by the window and keep an eye on the sidewalk as I wait for Remi and that pretty little head of curls to come into view. The shop isn’t too crowded yet, but the heat outside has drawn more people in over the past few minutes, so I’m glad I got here early.

It isn’t long before I spot them as they round the corner, hand in hand.

I can tell something’s off with Zara. She doesn’t have her usual bounce, and when Remi points toward the ice cream shop, Zara barely reacts, offering a slight shrug as they continue toward the entrance.

The bell chimes when they step inside.

Remi spots me immediately, but my attention remains on Zara. She keeps her head down until Remi gives her a gentle nudge.

When those big brown eyes finally lift to mine, her entire face brightens.

“Officer Thiago,” she says. “You’re Remi’s surprise?”

“I guess I am.” I push away from the table, walk over to them, and lean down to steal a quick kiss from my girl. When I pull away, Zara’s eyes widen.

“You have been kissing him.”

Remi and I look at each other, neither of us bothering to answer as Zara darts toward the display case, suddenly determined to inspect every flavor.

“Is she okay?” I ask.

Remi watches her for a moment. “There was an incident at dance today involving another little girl. Zara wouldn’t tell anyone what happened, so all we have is the other side of the story.”

“Which is?”

“She clocked the girl with her dance bag, and they kicked her out of the intensive program.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Her attention remains on Zara. “Seeing her cry broke me. Girls can be cruel, even at that age. But Zara…she isn’t. Whatever happened, I know she didn’t start it. And it took everything I had not to go back in there and demand more answers.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because she asked me not to.” Remi looks at me. “So I’m giving her time.”

“Then let’s make her day a little better,” I say. “And yours. Let’s get you that weird-ass ice cream.”

She shakes her head, but some of the worry leaves her expression. “Another reason to hate you, Braga.”

I grin. “Hate me harder.”

“Hold still, Officer Thiago. I’m almost done.”

I do my best to obey, even as my neck protests the angle Zara has me bent into. Standing behind me on Remi’s couch, she divides my hair into yet another tiny ponytail while Remi watches from across the room.

I’m fairly certain I look ridiculous, and the amusement on Remi’s face confirms it.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Oh, absolutely.” She grins. “I’m never letting you live this down.”

After several more gentle tugs and two final ponytails, Zara pats the top of my head.

“All done,” she announces proudly. “What do you think?”

I cross my eyes, trying to focus on one of the tiny curls that dangle over my forehead.

The moment I saw Zara walk out with a hairbrush, a spray bottle, and a tub of gel, I knew they weren’t meant for her. All it took was one flutter of those big brown eyes and the sweetest little “please,” and I was a goner.

“How bad is it?” I ask, twirling the curl with my finger.

Remi immediately lifts her phone and snaps a picture before I can stop her.

My jaw drops. “Remi.”

She ignores me and takes another. “For legal reasons, I have to preserve the evidence.”

That sends Zara into hysterics, and she nearly tumbles off the couch. I catch her by the arm before she falls.

“Careful, *princesinha*.”

Her eyes widen at the sudden scare, but once she realizes she’s okay, she beams up at me. “Thanks, Officer Thiago.”

“Anytime.”

Zara suddenly perks up. “Wait! I want a picture too.”

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She hops off the couch and disappears down the hallway.

“What is she doing?” I ask.

Remi shrugs. “With Zara, your guess is as good as mine.”

A few seconds later, she comes running back, a little blue Polaroid camera clutched in both hands.

“I got this for my birthday.” She holds it up proudly. “We need one of all three of us.”

“Absolutely not.” I point to my hair. “Not like this.”

“That’s exactly why we need one,” Remi says.

Zara climbs back onto the couch, wedges herself between us, and hands the camera to Remi. “Come on, Officer Thiago.”

I look at the two of them tucked against me and accept that I never stood a chance. “Fine.”

Remi stretches her arm out, the camera pointed toward us. “Everybody smile.”

Zara throws one arm around my neck and the other around Remi’s as the flash goes off. The little square slides from the bottom of the camera, and Zara snatches it before Remi can.

“Don’t shake it,” Remi tells her.

“I know.”

We watch as the picture slowly develops. My hair looks fucking ridiculous. Zara’s grinning from ear to ear between us, and Remi has her head tilted toward Zara’s, smiling at the camera.

I should hate it, but instead, I can’t stop staring at it.

Zara jumps off, holding the photo to her chest. “I’m keeping this one.”

When I look up, Remi isn’t laughing anymore. She’s watching us with the faintest smile on her lips and a softness in her eyes I’ve only recently begun to notice. Reaching for my hand, she brushes her thumb over my knuckles.

Neither of us says anything. We don’t need to.

I look at Zara clutching the Polaroid to her chest, then back at Remi, and something about this moment gets to me. There’s nothing extraordinary about sitting on a couch with ponytails in my hair while a six-year-old admires her handiwork, but I can’t remember the last time I felt this happy.

For years, being on my own never bothered me. I had my job, my apartment, and a life I’d built for myself. I never thought anything was missing until Remi came along and began filling spaces I hadn’t realized were empty.

Maybe that’s what this feeling is.

Belonging.

Before I can spend too much time thinking about what it means, Zara sets her camera down, climbs back onto the couch, and plops herself between us, blissfully unaware of what’s going through my head.

After all the running around, a few strands of her curls have come loose. She blows one out of her face with an exaggerated sigh.

“Zara?” Remi says, concern creeping into her voice as she reaches out and gently separates a lock of hair between her fingers. “What happened here?”

I look closer.

The front of Zara’s hair is choppy and uneven, where someone has clearly taken scissors to it. Remi crouches in front of her and takes both of her hands.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Zara lowers her eyes to their joined hands and sniffles.

“Greta Van Buren cut my hair.”

“Is she in your class?”

Zara nods.

“Baby, why did she do that?”

“She said it’s messy.” Zara’s voice grows smaller with each word. “And poofy. And weird.”

The change in Remi is almost imperceptible, but I catch it. Her jaw tightens, and something dark flashes in her eyes before she forces it back under control. She takes a slow breath and gently tilts Zara’s chin until their eyes meet.

“You know that was a mean thing to say and an even meaner thing to do.” Her voice is soft yet unwavering. “You also know you’re the prettiest, sweetest, most amazing little menace I’ve ever met.”

Zara grins and throws herself at Remi, wrapping her arms around her and sending them both tumbling onto the floor.

“I love my hair, Remi. It’s just like Mommy’s. And Daddy says she’s the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Of course she is.” Remi brushes a curl from Zara’s face. “And so are you, from these beautiful curls all the way down to those chipped pink toenails.”

She tickles Zara’s sides until she squirms beneath her, filling the room with squeals. I watch them together, struck by how quickly Remi buried her own anger to ensure Zara never carried someone else’s cruelty as her own.

“Come on, menace. Your mom’s on her way. Let’s get you cleaned up. You still have ice cream on your leotard.”

Zara nods enthusiastically as they stand. “Officer Thiago,” she says, planting one hand on her hip and wagging a finger at me. “You better not ruin your hairdo.”

“Aw, come on, kid.”

She gives me a firm shake of her head before trotting down the hallway.

Remi passes me with obvious amusement, but I catch her wrist and pull her onto my lap before she gets far.

“I’m glad you find this amusing, *fera*.” I kiss her slowly, catching her bottom lip between my teeth.

“It’s the hottest I’ve ever seen you,” she murmurs, tilting her chin for another kiss.

Before she can pull away, I tighten my arm around her waist.

“Is she going to be okay?”

“She will be. Once I explain everything to her mom, I’m hoping the school handles this the way they should.”

There’s something unspoken in her voice. I don’t know exactly what she’s thinking, but I know this much: Zara won’t have to face this alone. If I’ve learned anything about Remi and her family, it’s that when someone comes after one of their own, they don’t look the other way until it’s made right.

With one last kiss, I reluctantly let my girl go.

A few moments later, a knock at the door pulls me to my feet. I remember the tiny ponytails still covering my head and decide whoever is on the other side will have to deal with them.

“Braga,” Remi calls out from down the hall. “Get the door. It’s Athena.”

“On it.”

I know Remi’s building has security, and no one gets to her apartment without being cleared first, but the cop in me insists on checking the peephole anyway. The boyfriend in me does too.

Boyfriend.

We haven’t officially put a label on what we are, but the word comes surprisingly easily.

I look through the peephole and see the profile of a woman I don’t recognize. Athena and Santino Leone were on my list of people to research, but my attention has been elsewhere lately.

I unlock the door and pull it open, ready to finally meet Zara’s mother.

The moment Athena turns toward me, I stop. There’s something familiar about her face.

I know those eyes.

They’re older now, but there’s no mistaking them. I’ve seen the same ones on Matteo without ever making the connection, but this woman knew my father.

Her small gasp and the way her eyebrows draw together tell me she recognizes me too. She’s looking at the little boy she once knew, except that boy is standing in front of her as a man now.

“Thiago?” she whispers, taking a tentative step toward me.

Hearing my name in her voice strips away whatever doubt I had left. This is Athena, the woman I first met as a toddler in Miami, then years later in Rio. She was a friend of my father’s.

“Thiago, is it really you?” She takes another careful step. “What are you doing here?”

I back away from her, trying to make sense of something that shouldn’t be possible.

Athena is Zara’s and Matteo’s mother, which makes her Remi’s aunt.

“What...?” I shake my head. “This can’t be.”

“Mommy!” Zara races past me and throws herself into Athena’s arms. “Officer Thiago, look! This is my mom.”

I know, *princesinha*. I just don’t understand how.

Remi comes up beside me and gently touches my forearm. “Thiago, what’s wrong?”

I can’t bring myself to look at her.

My mind drags me back to Rio, to the day a woman took a grieving little boy for ice cream. She told me everything would be all right and promised she would check on me from time to time, but then she disappeared from my life.

Until now.

Athena’s gaze shifts between the two of us.

“How do you know each other?”

I finally look at Remi, and the concern in her eyes makes it even harder to get the words out.

“Baby, you’re scaring me.”

I swallow and force myself to say the one thing I can make sense of. “Athena knew my father.”

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Fifty-Three

REMI



The room feels as though all the oxygen has been sucked out as the truth unfolds before me.

I heard the story once, years ago, about a detective who was killed and the young son he left behind. Back then, I was more interested in cars, racing, and finding new ways to be reckless than remembering the details of something that happened long before I was born.

Never could I have imagined that little boy was Thiago.

I look up at him. His eyes are glassy and rimmed with red, and he seems almost frozen beside me. Cupping his face, I brush away the tear still clinging to his cheek.

"Let's sit down," I say, gently taking his hand.

He doesn't move. His attention remains fixed on Aunt Athena as she slowly approaches us with a confused Zara at her side.

"Thiago," Aunt Athena says softly. "I still can't believe it's you." Her gaze drops to our joined hands, returning to my face as realization dawns. "And you're here with Remi." She looks between us. "Are you two...together?"

"That's Remi's boyfriend, Mommy," Zara announces before either of us can answer. "Officer Thiago."

Of course she does.

Aunt Athena's eyebrows lift. "Boyfriend?"

Her surprise gives way to a smile as she looks at Thiago again.

“Wow. What a small world.” Her eyes soften. “You’ve certainly grown. You look so much like your father.”

Thiago drops his gaze for a moment, his fingers tightening around mine.

“How did you know his daddy?” Zara asks.

Aunt Athena turns to Thiago, silently asking permission to answer. Taking a breath, he gives her a small nod.

“A long time ago, sweetheart, when I was only a little older than Remi is now, Thiago’s daddy was my neighbor.” Her eyes return to Thiago. “He was also a good friend.”

Thiago’s expression crumples briefly before he manages to pull it back together. Zara steps in front of him, clasping her hands together.

“Does this make us family?” she asks hopefully.

The question hangs in the air, and a small, shaky smile tugs at the corners of Thiago’s mouth.

“*Princesinha*, I let you do my hair. I think that makes us pretty close already.”

“Oh,” Aunt Athena says with a laugh. “I was wondering what happened there.”

Thiago lets out a soft laugh, but it fades when he looks at her again. He stares for a long moment, then closes the distance between them and pulls her into a tight embrace.

Aunt Athena wraps her arms around him just as fiercely. Nearly twenty years have passed since she last held him, back when he was still just a little boy.

“Are you okay?” I ask, working my fingers through his hair as I remove the last rubber band while he sits on the floor between my legs.

Aunt Athena and Zara left a little while ago after spending the better part of an hour with us. She wanted to know everything about Thiago’s life, his career, and what had happened to him in all the years since she last saw him. Zara, on the other hand, started calling him Uncle Thiago before they even made it out the door, which is a little silly, considering I’m not technically her aunt. But I love the friendship they’ve built, and I have no intention of correcting her.

“I am.” He lets out a slow breath. “And I’m sorry if I seemed…”

“Don’t apologize. That had to be rough. Grief has a way of finding us when we least expect it, and I can only imagine what seeing her again stirred up.”

He goes quiet for a moment, taking one of my hands and pressing a kiss to each of my knuckles. “It felt like a piece of my father walked through that door,” he says softly. “Like a part of my past found me.”

I brush my thumb across his cheek. “How crazy is it that you and I are connected like this?”

Before he can answer, my phone vibrates on the coffee table, Aunt Athena’s name flashing across the screen. I answer quickly.

“Remi, is Thiago still with you?”

“He is.”

“Put me on speaker. There’s something I need to tell both of you.” She pauses. “I couldn’t stop thinking about seeing him, and on the drive home, I started replaying that day in my head. I realized there’s something I completely forgot.”

Thiago turns toward me, his brow furrowing.

“Okay,” I say, setting the phone on the coffee table between us. “We’re listening.”

“The day your father died, I was supposed to meet Amalia at a café. She was running late, and by the time she got there, I had already been taken and Raymond had been shot.”

The mention of my mother has me sitting a little straighter.

“When Amalia arrived, she found him.”

I turn to Thiago, but his attention remains fixed on the phone as he waits for her to continue.

“Thiago, I need you to know something.” Aunt Athena’s voice trembles through the speaker. “Your father didn’t die alone. Amalia stayed with him. She held his hand and comforted him through his final moments.”

Tears fill my eyes as the truth registers on his face. His eyes glisten, and after a few seconds, they meet mine.

“Thiago?” Aunt Athena says gently.

He drags a hand over his face, then turns toward the phone. “It was her?” he asks, his voice breaking. “Amalia was the woman who stayed with him?”

“Yes,” Aunt Athena says softly. “She stayed with him until the end.”

Thiago closes his eyes and bows his head. “Thank you,” he says.

We say goodbye, and I end the call.

Thiago stays where he is for a moment, taking it in. Then he rises from the floor and settles beside me on the couch, pulling me onto his lap and holding me against him.

“Your mother,” he says, shaking his head as a soft, disbelieving laugh leaves him. “All this time, it was your mother.”

I smile through my tears and brush my lips over the damp trail on his cheek.

“My mother,” I whisper. “This is crazy, Thiago.”

His thumb moves slowly across the back of my hand. “I never imagined it would be the mother of the woman I…”

He stops.

His eyes lift to mine, and the words he doesn’t say hang between us as we hold each other’s gaze. “Fuck, Remi.” Pulling me closer, he buries his face against my neck. I cradle the back of his head and hold him while his breathing turns uneven against my skin.

“I know,” I murmur. “I know.”

All those years ago, my mother held his father when Thiago couldn’t be there, and now I’m holding his son.

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Fifty-Four

THIAGO



The wind cuts through the summer heat as we cling to the side of the BearCat while it barrels through the busy city streets. Three more blocks and we'll be at Los Blancos Warehouse and Parts, the body shop Rafe and several members of his crew operated.

Rafe may be dead, but the men who worked for him are still out there, hiding behind the facade of a legitimate business. As long as they're free, Remi is still in danger.

The shootout on the highway gave us the break we needed. Between the bodies recovered, the weapons left behind, and an anonymous tip linking the gunmen to Los Blancos, we finally had enough to start digging.

It took nearly two weeks to follow the evidence, work through the proper channels, and secure a warrant. Now I'm hoping they were arrogant enough to leave behind the guns, drugs, or anything else we can use to shut this operation down and put everyone involved behind bars.

"Same as always," Ryan says, knocking his fist lightly against my helmet.

I nod. "Fast and clean."

"Fast and clean." Leaning closer, he raises his voice over the howl of the wind. "Drinks are on me tonight. Frank's. Eight o'clock."

"Can't. Busy."

He chuckles. "Of course you are. That girl's got you reeled in tight, doesn't she?"

I don't answer because the grin hidden beneath my helmet says enough.

The last couple of weeks with Remi have been the closest thing to normal I've had since this assignment began. I've been able to spend my nights with her without checking my phone every five minutes or wondering when another order will come through and ruin whatever we're building.

A big part of that is Elena.

What was supposed to be a few days overseas has somehow turned into weeks, and I haven't received a single call or text from her since she left. Whatever assignment pulled her away remains classified, so I have no idea where she is or when she'll be back.

For now, I'm taking full advantage of her absence.

The guilt is still there, but with Elena gone, I can finally breathe. I'm not constantly looking over my shoulder or waiting for the next order that will force me to choose between my mission and the woman who has become the best part of my day.

The BearCat slows as Los Blancos Warehouse and Parts comes into view. Ryan slaps the side of the armored vehicle.

"Game time, Braga."

I grip my rifle. "Let's do this."

"Stack up!" our team leader barks as the vehicle grinds to a stop.

We jump down and move, boots pounding against the pavement as we fan out and fall into formation beside the bay door. Ryan takes his place behind the breacher while I cover our sector, my rifle tracking the windows above the shop.

"Perimeter set," a voice crackles over the radio.

"Copy."

The breacher plants himself in front of the steel door and hoists the ram onto his shoulder.

"Police! Search warrant!" he shouts. "Open the door!"

No one answers. Our team leader gives the breacher the signal.

"Breach."

The ram slams into the steel with a deafening crash. Again. On the third strike, the lock gives way.

"Go! Go! Go!"

The door flies inward, and we pour into the shop. Half a dozen mechanics freeze where they stand, their eyes widening at the sight of armored officers flooding the garage.

“Police! Hands where I can see them!”

“Get on the ground!”

Most of them comply immediately, but one bastard bolts toward the back of the shop.

“Runner!” someone shouts.

I break from the stack and sprint after him. He barrels through a doorway marked EMPLOYEES ONLY and nearly rips it off its hinges. I follow him into a narrow hallway cluttered with tires, toolboxes, and stacks of boxed parts.

“Police!” I yell. “Stop!”

He keeps running and shoves through another door, disappearing into the warehouse beyond, where rows of shelving tower overhead, packed with engines, transmissions, and crates wrapped in plastic. The maze gives him enough cover to keep me from getting a clear line on him, so I push harder, closing the distance with every stride. He’s fast, but I’m faster.

He makes the mistake of looking over his shoulder and slams into a pallet. Stumbling from the impact, he catches himself before hitting the floor, giving me the opening I need. I close the final few feet and launch myself at him, driving my shoulder into his back. We hit the ground hard and slide across the oil-stained concrete as the impact knocks the air from both of us.

Twisting beneath me, he tries to shove a hand into his front pocket.

“Don’t fucking do it!” I trap his wrist before his fingers can disappear inside.

“Fuck!” he roars, bucking beneath me as he fights to break free.

“Stop resisting,” I bark, wrenching his arm behind his back and snapping a cuff around his wrist.

He curses and tries to throw me off, but I force his other arm into position and secure the second cuff. As I pull him to his feet, a black burner phone slips from his pocket and skids across the floor. Ryan catches up and grabs it before the suspect can kick it away.

“Looks like he was trying to warn some friends.”

“Fuck you!” the man spits. “Bitch-ass pigs. I didn’t do shit!”

“Bag it,” I tell Ryan. “Then take him up front with the others.”

Ryan nods and shoves the suspect toward the front of the shop as the man keeps hurling obscenities over his shoulder. I turn back toward the warehouse and continue the sweep, finding a door tucked between two rows

of shelving that leads into a small office at the rear of the building. I clear the room, then step inside and pause beside the desk to catch my breath.

That's when a photograph grabs my attention.

I pick it up, and my stomach drops when I see Remi staring back at me. She's standing outside the tattoo shop, completely unaware that someone's watching her from a distance.

Studying the background, I search for anything that might tell me when it was taken or who was behind the camera. Rafe is dead, but whoever took this may not be. The thought of someone following my girl without her knowing sends anger burning through my veins.

Then my training cuts in, reminding me what I'm holding.

If this photograph ends up in the evidence log, the detectives assigned to the case will start asking why Rafe had been tracking Remi. Her name will become part of the investigation, and eventually, someone will start looking at what happened on the highway. They may not have enough to charge her, but they'll dig into her life, her family, and every connection they can find until they uncover something neither of us can afford to have exposed.

I stare down at her face, knowing exactly what I'm supposed to do. I should leave the photograph where I found it and make sure it gets logged with everything else recovered from the building. But I slip it into my vest. There's no gunfire forcing my hand this time and no immediate threat to Remi's life. I have time to think about what I'm doing, and that should be enough to stop me.

Unfortunately for me, it's not.

I continue searching the office as though it had never been there.

Every report I've written, every warrant served, and every oath I've taken has been built on doing this job the right way. I know what removing evidence from an active investigation makes me. But when it comes to Remi, none of that seems to matter. That should bother me, but all I can think about is whether that photograph is the only trace of her we'll find in this building.

I hope to God it is.

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Fifty-Five

REMI



The impact wrench rattles through the garage as I remove the last bolt holding Thiago's driver's-side door in place. I catch the weight of it before it can hit the floor and carry it over to a nearby stand, where the rest of the damaged panels are already lined up.

His truck took one hell of a beating. Bullet holes pepper the doors, rear panel, and bed. One round clipped a brake line, while another chewed through part of the wiring harness before lodging itself in the frame. It's a miracle we made it back to my garage at all.

Those assholes got exactly what they deserved.

I slide beneath the truck on a creeper and shine my work light along the undercarriage. Fresh bullet holes scar the steel, but thankfully, there's no structural damage. Replacing body panels is easy. Straightening a bent frame is another story.

This is where my brain has always made the most sense because every problem in here has a solution, and every broken part can be repaired or replaced if you know what you're doing and have enough patience.

I wish people worked the same way.

There isn't enough sanding in the world to smooth over what Rafe did, and I haven't figured out how to repair the part of my psyche that keeps waiting for someone else to come after me.

It's been weeks since the highway, and there hasn't been so much as a whisper of retaliation. My parents haven't uncovered anything new about

the rumors surrounding our family either, but instead of making me feel better, the silence has left me wondering what the hell is still out there.

The hardest part has been staying away from Furia.

Some days, I wonder if it's time to let that part of my life go. I'll always have my cars, and I'll always love the speed, the adrenaline, and the roar of a high-horsepower engine. What I haven't wanted to admit is that the track doesn't bring me the same joy it used to when Val and I tore it up together and gave everyone hell.

Maybe Rafe took some of that from me, and I hate him even more for it.

Blowing out a slow breath, I reach for my ratchet, reminding myself to deal with one problem at a time. For now, I can fix the truck and figure out the rest later.

The lock to my garage disengages with a familiar click, followed by the hiss of the door sliding open. I smile before I even see him. By the time I slide out from beneath his truck, he's already standing above me with that panty-melting grin firmly in place.

"Hey, handsome."

He offers me a hand and pulls me to my feet, caging me against the frame.

"Hey," is all he says before capturing my mouth with his.

His hand slides over my bare waist before settling on the coveralls tied off around my hips. Fisting the fabric, he pulls me closer.

"God, I've missed you all day." His tongue sweeps along mine. "Couldn't get here fast enough. There was so much fucking debriefing."

He hooks a hand beneath my thigh and lifts me until my legs wrap around his waist.

"Busy day?" My voice comes out breathless as his mouth trails down my neck.

"Busted a warehouse downtown. Drugs, guns, and enough illegal shit to keep us occupied for a while."

"Baby, I've been sweating," I warn as his lips skim my collarbone, and my fingers tangle into his still-damp hair.

"Mmm," he groans against my skin. "Even better."

A laugh slips out of me, and I tip his chin up until our eyes meet. "By the way, your truck has seen better days."

"What's the verdict, Doc?" He grimaces and scrunches his nose, and I swear it's the cutest thing I've ever seen. I kiss the tip of it and laugh at how

hopeless I am when it comes to this man.

“Well, you’ve got a couple of options. We can order the parts and Frankenstein this beast back together, or we can haul it to the junkyard and let it become scrap metal.”

“What are you thinking?” he asks, his lips now brushing the swell of my breasts.

“A normal person would total it and never look back.” I grin. “But I’m not normal, and this is basically my dream project. Plus, I may or may not have already ordered you a set of Method Race Wheels.”

His eyes lift. “You did what?”

“No more factory for you. Not on my watch. I can’t be seen driving around with you on stock tires. I know people.”

He drops his forehead against my shoulder and laughs. “*Fera*, how much do I owe you for all this?”

“I’ll give you my friends and family discount. Only, instead of lollipops, I want something else from you.”

Thiago growls low in his throat, gripping my ass and rolling my hips against him. “Name your price. Whatever you want, it’s yours. I’m all yours.”

“Your tongue on my pussy is a really good place to start.”

“Fuck, done. My favorite.”

He carries me toward my GT-R and sets me on the hood. His hands go straight for the knot securing the coveralls around my waist, but before I can lose myself in him, something sticking out of his pocket catches my eye.

A folded photograph. I reach for it just as it slips free.

“Braga, you dropped something.”

I unfold it without thinking, assuming it’s nothing important, but the moment I catch a glimpse of the image, every ounce of warmth drains from my body. It’s me, standing outside the tattoo shop, completely unaware I’m being photographed.

“What’s this?” I lift my eyes to his. “Why do you have a picture of me?”

Thiago’s expression darkens.

“Thiago.” I search his face. “Where did you get this? Who took it?”

He opens his mouth, but the hesitation before he answers scares me more than the photograph itself.

“Was it…” The question nearly sticks in my throat. “Was it you?”

His eyes snap to mine. “No. Absolutely not.”

“Then tell me.” My fingers grip the edges of the photograph. “Braga, tell me where this came from.”

“I didn’t want to tell you until everything was over. I wanted to make sure we shut them down first.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The warehouse we hit today belonged to Rafe and the rest of his crew.”

It takes a second for his words to register.

“What?”

“After the highway, we started pulling at every thread we had. The weapons, the bodies, the vehicles, and everyone connected to Rafe. Eventually, everything kept circling back to Los Blancos. We built the case, got a warrant, and hit the place this morning.” His attention shifts to the photograph in my hand. “I found that in one of the offices.”

I stare down at my own face, taken from far enough away that whoever held the camera made damn sure I wouldn’t see them. “So they were watching me.”

“They were.”

“Since when?”

“I don’t know.”

“Was this the only picture?”

“The only one I saw.”

“What about Val? My parents? Did you find pictures of them?”

“No.”

“Names? Addresses? Anything about my family?”

“Not that I found, but they recovered a lot from that warehouse. It’ll take time to process everything.”

I think back to everything Rafe said on the highway. He knew about the massacre. Casper. Balterra. He knew enough about Val and me to realize there was more to our family than anyone outside our world should know. And now I have proof that someone had been watching me.

“Do you think this ended with him?”

“Is there a reason you think it didn’t?”

Shit.

I’ve already said too much.

“No.” I force myself to loosen my hold on the photograph. “I just found out someone was secretly taking pictures of me. I think I’m allowed to be a little paranoid.”

“You are. And I’m not going to tell you there’s nothing to worry about when I don’t know that yet.”

I nod, even though my mind is already racing through everything I need to tell my family. Then another question hits me.

“Wait. If this is evidence, why do you have it?”

Thiago hesitates before answering. “I took it because I didn’t want your name ending up in the case file. The drugs, the guns, the money, we got all of it. We didn’t need that photograph to put them away.”

It takes a second for me to understand what he’s admitting. “You took evidence from an active investigation?”

“I did.”

“For me?”

He cups my face. “I didn’t want anyone asking why Rafe had a photograph of you or digging into your life because of it.” His thumb brushes my cheek. “So yeah, *chama*. I did it for you.”

“You know you could get in serious trouble for that.”

“I know.”

“And you did it anyway.”

“I did.” A small, incredulous laugh escapes him. “But you know what’s even crazier?”

“What?”

“I don’t know if there’s anything I wouldn’t do for you.”

I dig my fingers into the front of his shirt and draw him closer. “That has to terrify you.”

“It should.”

“But it doesn’t?”

“No.”

I kiss him, breathing him in because I don’t know what else to do with the weight of everything I’m feeling.

“I brought you something,” he says.

He walks over to my workbench, where he left a bag I hadn’t even noticed, and turns it upside down. Several dozen watermelon lollipops spill across the stainless-steel surface.

“I also stocked more of these at my place.”

I laugh. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I’ve been told.”

I shake my head, grinning like an absolute fool.

They’re just lollipops, and I know that. They’re cheap, sugary, and ridiculous, but they mean everything because Thiago knows they’re my comfort food and that I always keep one nearby. He noticed something so small that most people would have overlooked, and then he made sure I’d never run out. It isn’t the candy that means so much to me. It’s the fact that he pays attention.

“How are you so obnoxiously perfect?”

He’s beside me again in seconds with a lollipop already in hand. He unwraps it and flicks the wrapper onto the workbench behind him.

“Why watermelon?” he asks, bringing the candy to his mouth.

“I was maybe six. Milly, who was our cook before Estela and practically family, helped raise my mom. She and I were on a grocery run about a month before she passed, and I’d been a real pain in the ass all day.”

Thiago shifts the lollipop to one side of his mouth and chuckles.

“When we got to the checkout, I spotted one and begged her to buy it for me. She said no, which, naturally, was the greatest injustice I’d ever suffered.” I laugh at the memory. “I was crying those big, dramatic kid tears, convinced my life was over.”

I reach for the stick. He lets it slip from between his lips, and our eyes meet as I bring it to my own.

“What happened?” he asks.

“I noticed an older woman drop one of her grocery bags. Everything spilled onto the floor, and even though I was still crying, I ran over to help her pick it all up. I even chased down a stubborn lime that kept trying to roll under the next checkout lane.”

Thiago’s mouth curves as he listens.

“That night after dinner, Milly came into my room and sat beside me on the bed. She kissed my forehead and told me how proud she was of me.” I glance down at the candy between my fingers. “She said I was a good girl and that I should never let the world convince me otherwise.” I smile at the memory. “Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out that watermelon lollipop. She died just a few weeks later.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

Slipping the candy back between his lips, I shake my head. “It’s okay. Losing Milly used to hurt, but it doesn’t anymore. The way losing Estela still does sometimes. Now I like to think they’re somewhere together, watching all the irresponsible shit I do.”

“I bet they’re exhausted.”

“I know I would be.”

We laugh together, and I reach for the stick again, trying to steal it back. He grins around it and refuses to let go as he slides my coveralls farther down my thighs.

“I can see why you like these,” he murmurs, rolling the candy over his tongue. “They’re sweet.”

His attention returns to me, and the playfulness in his expression gives way to something far less innocent. Drawing the lollipop from his mouth, he traces it slowly across my bottom lip, holding it there.

“But I can’t help wondering how much sweeter they could be.”

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Fifty-Six

REMI



Thiago dips to my abdomen, trailing his lips down the center and enjoying every tremor he pulls from me.

"Take that off," he says, nodding toward my top.

"You know, at this rate, I'm never going to fix this truck." Catching the hem of my shirt, I pull it over my head, tossing it at him. "You're too damn distracting, Braga."

He grins and closes his mouth over one nipple, sucking and licking until my fingers disappear into his curls.

"I think that's just an excuse to keep me coming back."

"My pussy is enough to keep you coming back."

Thiago looks up at me, and the grin on his face says he has no intention of arguing.

"You won't hear me disagreeing with that."

"Smart man."

His hands travel along my thighs, peeling the coverall down before he tugs off my boots and pulls the rest free as he lowers himself in front of me. I lean back, palms on the hood.

"I've waited all day for this, *chama*. You have no idea how much I fucking missed you." Thiago kisses his way up my leg, lingering as he reaches my inner thigh.

"I missed you too."

"I miss you when you're not even gone yet." His mouth brushes my skin. "That's the fucking problem."

“I get that a lot.”

He laughs and shakes his head as he straightens, pushing the lollipop into my mouth.

“How about you hold that, *fera*, and get it nice and wet for me.”

“I’m nice and wet,” I say, letting my legs fall open.

Thiago glances between them, and his smile vanishes, lips parting on a rough exhale as he takes in the slick coating my thighs. The lollipop nearly slips from my mouth.

“Always gotta have the last word, don’t you?”

I curl my tongue around the candy and pull it deeper into my mouth just to see what he does.

His jaw flexes, and his fingers close harder around my thigh.

Much better.

“You were saying?” I taunt, drawing it back out with a soft pop.

Without a word, his hand closes around my neck, his thumb tipping my chin higher.

I was never the kind of woman who handed this kind of trust to a man. During sex, I called the shots because relying on someone else meant opening a part of me I kept locked down tight. It was giving them power they didn’t deserve. Even with Ryuji, there were places I never let him reach.

Thiago is different.

There’s no fear when his grip circles my throat. I know exactly how much strength is there, but I also know he’d release me the instant I wanted him to. I trust him with the choice. And somehow, surrendering it to him doesn’t make me feel vulnerable. For the first time, letting someone else hold that power still feels like mine.

“I was saying that you look fucking exquisite on this car, *chama*. Naked, wet, begging to be fucked.”

“Begging? I haven’t even started asking nicely.” I lean into him, kiss him, and whisper against his mouth, “Now pay your bill.”

“Gladly.” He taps the hard candy against my nipple ring, and the cool touch sends a sharp shiver through me. Thiago catches the reaction, then circles the lollipop around the metal with maddening patience.

My fingers find his curls again. “Thiago…”

He drags the candy across my skin and follows the sticky path with his tongue. “You taste so fucking good.”

His voice is low and rough as his mouth closes over me. He alternates between the candy and his tongue, teasing the barbell, sucking my nipple, then licking away every trace of watermelon he leaves behind. By the time he finally moves lower, my breathing is already ragged.

“I want to see you. Let me touch you,” I murmur, reaching for him.

Thiago catches my wrist and brings my palm to his mouth instead. “Let me take care of you first.”

The playfulness is gone from his tone. Nodding, I let my arm fall back against the hood.

His thumb strokes the inside of my knee while his lips travel lower, each kiss making my body hum with anticipation.

“Stay right there.”

I swallow and spread my legs a little farther.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“I know you’re not.”

The certainty in how he says it hits differently than the dirty words.

Thiago rolls the lollipop between his fingers, completely absorbed in what he’s doing to me. Then his mouth returns to my skin, and coherent thought becomes a lost cause as the candy follows. He draws it along my inner thigh, pauses when my legs twitch, then continues, dragging out the anticipation until I’m shifting restlessly.

“You like having all my attention on you, don’t you?” he murmurs.

I bite my lip. “Only when it’s yours.”

His mouth lifts slightly. “Only mine?”

“Only yours.”

The candy glides along my thigh again before reaching my pussy. I suck in a breath when he dips it inside me, coating the watermelon in my slickness before drawing it back and brushing it over my clit.

Thiago braces my leg open.

“Look at me, *chama*.”

I do.

He circles it in slow strokes, never giving me the pressure I want for long. My hips start moving toward each pass anyway, trying to take what he keeps teasing me with.

“Tell me what you want.”

“You know what I want.”

“Yeah, but I want to hear you say it.” Pressing the lollipop lightly against my clit, he holds it there, waiting. And a wicked little thrill runs through me.

“I want your mouth.”

He grins, his breathing growing heavier.

“Where?”

“Thiago,” I mutter between clenched teeth.

The candy moves once, a slow stroke that has my fingers curling against the edge of the hood.

“Tell me.”

“On my pussy.”

The corner of his mouth lifts as he turns the lollipop between his fingers, studying the glossy sheen now coating it.

“You have any idea what you look like right now?”

I shake my head.

“Like a dream. Beautiful. Red, swollen lips, cheeks flushed, so fucking wet and needy that you’re dripping onto your own hood.”

I lightly drag my nails along his arm. “Then quit admiring your work and clean up the mess you made.”

His thumb drags slowly over my clit, then presses down, making my legs tense around him. “Who said I planned on cleaning it up?”

A pleased hum slips from me. “No?”

He leans closer until his breath warms the inside of my thigh. “I plan on tasting every fucking bit of it.”

I open wider for him, loving exactly where his mind is going. “Then pay what you owe, Braga. With that talented mouth of yours.”

“Gladly,” he says with a chuckle. “But first…” He brings the lollipop between us, the candy still glossy with me. “Open.”

I part my lips, and he lays it across my tongue, turning the stick slowly between his fingers.

The watermelon is different now, sweeter and warmer, carrying the unmistakable taste of me. My thighs close around him as I suck the candy deeper, and the look on Thiago’s face darkens with every lick.

“Do you taste good?”

I keep the lollipop in my mouth a little longer, letting him wait while I savor it. “Yes.”

“Damn right you do.”

The praise lands low in my belly, and my toes curl against the edge of the hood. Thiago traces the corner of my mouth with his thumb while the lollipop remains between my lips.

“And you like tasting what I do to you, *chama*?”

I nod.

“I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes.”

“Give it back to me.”

I take the lollipop from my mouth and hold it out to him.

Thiago doesn’t reach for the stick. He leans in and closes his lips around it while I’m still holding it, drawing it deeper as his tongue sweeps over everything I left behind.

Watching him taste me off the candy is filthy as hell, and I fucking love it.

He eases back, lips shiny, and takes it from my fingers. The lollipop rolls once across his tongue before he closes his mouth around it again. “Still sweet.”

My legs fall farther when his attention drops between them again.

“But I want more.”

The hunger in his voice sends a deep ache through me.

“Then take it. Take what’s yours, baby.”

He sets the candy aside and lowers himself between my legs, his lips following the sticky trail along my inner thigh, kissing and licking away every trace of watermelon until he reaches my pussy.

The first stroke over my clit tears a moan from me. I reach for him, and he laces our hands together.

“I want you to look at me. I want you to watch me eat your pussy until you can’t fucking think straight.”

I manage it, even with his tongue making concentration nearly impossible.

He sucks my clit slowly into his mouth, holding the pressure until my back arches off the hood and a tremor runs down my legs. Thiago lifts one over his shoulder and opens me wider, then dives back in. The change in angle hits hard enough that my palm smacks the hood, the crack echoing through the garage.

“Thiago… God, Thiago.”

“Fuck. I love hearing you moan my name while I lick your pretty little cunt.”

His tongue sweeps over me again, more slowly, before two fingers ease inside.

My stomach clenches.

“I want to hear it again.”

I bite my lip, loving how much he wants it.

“My Officer Braga.”

A rough groan vibrates against me as his fingers curl, finding the spot that makes my thighs tense around his shoulders.

“Yeah,” he rasps. “That’s the one.”

I start moving against his mouth, setting the pace myself. My nails rake lightly over his scalp before tangling in his curls as I ride, and he keeps up without missing a beat, never releasing me.

“That’s it,” he murmurs against me. “Use me. Ride my face.”

Heart racing, I fold forward as the tension in my belly winds tighter with every pass of his tongue. “Baby, I’m going to come all over your mouth.”

“I can’t wait.” His fingers stay locked with mine. “Don’t hold back on me.”

I grind against him again, using the grip in his hair to keep him exactly where I need him while his tongue works my clit.

The orgasm hits hard, wrenching a cry from me as my body shakes beneath him. Thiago keeps going through each contraction, drawing it out until I’m breathless and barely holding myself up. Only then does his tongue slow, easing me past the last few tremors as our hands remain laced together against the hood.

I straighten slowly, breathing like I just ran a fucking mile.

His face is slick with me, his hair a complete disaster, and the satisfaction written all over him would be obnoxious if I didn’t love seeing him like this.

I brush my thumb across his cheek, catching some of the wetness there. “Paid in full.”

He laughs, still breathing hard. “Not yet.”

Thiago rises from between my legs and reaches behind his neck, pulling his shirt over his head. He tosses it aside and quickly strips off the rest of his clothes as I sit on the hood, watching him.

The teasing is over now. Stepping between my knees, he wraps his arms around my waist and flips me onto my stomach on the hood. My palms meet the warm metal as his touch glides over my hips and down my ass.

“Now that’s a fucking view.”

The smack lands hard on one cheek, and the sharp sting makes me jolt. A moan escapes my lips as he soothes my skin with a slow caress, then grips me and leans over my back.

“I’ve been thinking about this all damn day.”

I glance at him over my shoulder. “Prove it. Fuck me like you’ve been thinking about my pussy all day.”

The heat in his expression turns downright filthy.

“Careful what you ask for, *chama*.”

The thick head of his cock presses into me, and the stretch steals the rest of my comeback. I brace against the hood and breathe through the first few inches as he eases deeper, giving my body time to take him.

“Fuck.”

He stops there, deep enough to make my legs unsteady but still holding back. “That what you wanted?”

I push back against him. “More.”

That’s all it takes. He sinks the rest of the way in, slow enough to let me adjust until there’s nowhere left for him to go.

“Still think I’ve got something to prove?”

I turn my head toward him, breathless. “You’ve got a lot of convincing left to do.”

His laugh caresses my ear.

“Knew you’d say that.”

“You love it.”

“I love everything about you.”

Before I can decide what the hell to do with that, he draws back and drives into me again, harder, making my palms slide against the hood.

“Oh, fuck. So good.”

His hand moves from my hip to my waist as he builds a steady pace behind me. “You wanted convincing,” he says against my ear. “How am I doing?”

“Barely passing.”

His next laugh is more strained. “Keep talking.”

“You’d miss it if I stopped.”

“I’d miss every fucking part of you.”

That one hits me right in the chest.

I angle my head toward him, and Thiago meets me halfway, kissing me messy and hungry without ever losing the pace of his hips.

When our mouths part, we’re both panting.

“Say it again.”

I know exactly what he means.

“I’m yours.”

His eyes close, and a ragged breath brushes my neck. “Again.”

“I’m yours, Thiago.”

A rough sound leaves him as his forehead comes to rest against the back of my shoulder. “And I’m yours, *chama*.”

I reach behind me and cup the back of his neck, keeping him close as another orgasm starts gathering inside me. “You getting close?”

“Yeah.”

“Good. I want you with me this time.”

He covers my hand against the hood and threads his fingers through mine, his jaw clenched as he holds himself back for me. “Don’t let go.”

“I won’t.”

Thiago kisses me again as he starts fucking me harder, faster, the piercing dragging over that spot inside me with every stroke, and my legs begin to shake.

“Fuck…Thiago.”

“I’ve got you, baby.” His voice is rough against my ear, every word broken by his breathing. I can feel how close he is from the tension of his body against mine, and the way his rhythm starts to lose its precision.

“Are you there?”

“So fucking close.”

“Then come with me.”

He takes my mouth, swallowing every moan and whimper as I tighten around his cock in waves while he drives into me through each contraction.

Thiago lasts only a few more seconds before a groan rumbles against my shoulder, and his arm locks around my waist, hauling me flush against him as his hips drive forward, burying himself as deep as he can.

“Oh, fuck…Remi.” He goes rigid, pulsing inside me as he comes. I love the way this huge man practically folds over me when he completely loses himself.

Slowly, he relaxes against me, but his arm stays wrapped around my waist, and I don't want him to move it. We stay tangled together across the hood, letting ourselves recover while the music plays behind us and our ragged breaths fill the garage.

He kisses the back of my neck. "You okay?"

I nod slowly. "Just don't make me move yet."

"Wasn't planning on it."

I turn my head toward him. His curls are damp, his cheeks red, looking so completely wrecked that I can't help smiling.

"So tell me," he says, still winded. "Worth the wheels?"

I reach back and run my fingers through his hair. "Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Laughing, I pull him down for another kiss. "You still owe me for labor."

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Fifty-Seven

REMI



"You haven't said anything for over a minute. Are you still there?"

"I am... I'm just a little speechless," Val says.

I turn down another aisle, pushing my cart with its one rickety wheel announcing my presence to the entire store. My phone is wedged between my shoulder and ear as I fight to keep the damn thing straight. It insists on pulling right while I try to steer left.

"I know my way around a kitchen, Val."

"I know you do. But you haven't stepped foot inside a grocery store in years." She pauses. "And cooking a full three-course meal for your friend with benefits seems a little more intimate than what I had in mind."

I still haven't told her the truth about Thiago. We're so much more than whatever this started as, and he's quickly become one of the most important people in my life. I've never felt this way about anyone, and maybe part of me has been keeping it to myself because admitting any of that out loud makes it terrifyingly real.

"Valentina," I say, the teasing gone from my voice.

"Remi?"

"Thiago and I are together, and I really like him." I draw in a breath. "Like, really, really fucking like him."

I stop pushing the cart and wait for her response, suddenly nervous about what she'll say. Her opinion means everything to me.

"Oh my God, Remi, baby." Her voice softens. "I'm so happy for you."

I can't help smiling.

“How long?” she asks.

“A few weeks.”

“A few weeks? And you’re just now telling me?” She sighs dramatically. “I mean...I get it. I was in your shoes once. I know what it’s like to want to keep something that special to yourself for a little while. But I’m still going to kill you for not telling me sooner.”

I laugh with her and start moving again, the cart screeching its way down the aisle.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ll catch you up if you come visit.”

“That sounds like blackmail.”

“It’s only blackmail if it’s something you don’t want to do. So, what are you really saying, Valentina Belova?”

“Are you trying to steal my wife from me again?” Maksim’s gruff voice carries through the phone, making me grin.

“You’ve had her long enough. I want my girl back, Maxy,” I tease.

We spend another ten minutes going back and forth before my wrist starts protesting all the multitasking. After a reluctant goodbye, I tuck my phone into my crossbody, curse my cart for the hundredth time, and head off in search of the last ingredient.

Naturally, I find it sitting on the top shelf.

I don’t consider myself short, but this would be a great time to have my giant boyfriend around.

Planting one foot on the bottom rack, I push myself up, stretching for the jar. My fingertips skim the glass, but I can’t get enough of a grip to pull it down. When I drop back to the floor, I land harder than intended and knock into my cart, sending it rolling straight into another shopper’s heel.

“Fuck, I’m sorry!”

The man turns around with his jaw clenched, clearly ready to let me have it. But the moment he sees me, the irritation disappears.

“You’re her,” he says, sounding a little too excited.

With all the shit going on in my life, I have no idea which version of me he’s talking about. He could mean the street racer, the badass bitch from the highway massacre, or even the tattoo artist.

“The girl from the mugshot.”

Oh, hell. He means that Remi.

I don’t believe in entertaining strange men just to be polite, and I sure as hell don’t owe this one anything, especially if he was one of the creeps

leaving crude comments under that photo. I made the mistake of reading through them that night, and the deeper I scrolled, the worse they got.

Pretending he no longer exists, I turn my attention back to the stubborn jar.

“Hey, it’s you, isn’t it? Remi Isabel Cain?”

Fuck me.

His footsteps come up behind me.

“Don’t,” I grit out.

“Oh, come on.” He moves even closer until I catch the harsh scent of his cologne. “I hear you like to drive fast. I got a ride for you.”

The shit that falls out of some men’s mouths will never cease to amaze or disgust me. I’ve heard it all, but hitting on a complete stranger in the middle of a grocery aisle with a line like that is a new low.

The problem with being the kind of person who doesn’t take shit from anyone is that practicing self-control in public can be such a bitch. I could teach him a lesson, bruise his balls or his ego, or maybe both. I could also say nothing, grab my fucking jar, and get the hell out of here.

Growth, Remi.

I cut him a glance and finally grab what I came for.

“Hey, I’m talking to you.”

He’s close enough now that I can feel his breath on the back of my neck and practically taste the tuna melt he had for lunch. I clench my jaw, but before I can say a single word, his hand closes around my arm.

Sometimes, they make it too easy, and sometimes, I’m okay with that.

I pivot and drive my elbow straight into his face, and the crunch is deeply satisfying. His hand falls away, and before he can recover, I shove him, sending him sprawling onto his ass.

“Stop being a creepy fuck,” I snap. “That mugshot should’ve been your first clue not to touch me.”

Blood pours from his nose as he lets out a pathetic, gargled groan.

“Bitch,” he croaks.

“Thank you.”

Dinner smells incredible.

With the table set and the candles lit, my apartment feels less like a place to just sleep and more like a home.

I glance at the clock. Everything is ready, and I should have enough time to squeeze in a quick shower before Thiago gets here. I haven't heard from him since late last night, when he texted to say he'd been called out. I'm hoping everything turned out okay and they cut him loose soon. We usually talk on his drive home, so the fact that I haven't heard from him tells me he's still tied up with work.

Hopefully, it's just the debrief.

The thought does little to ease the familiar anxiety I feel whenever he's out there kicking down doors and putting himself in the line of fire.

I let out a slow breath and decide on a bath instead, hoping it'll calm my nerves. Ten minutes later, I test the water with my fingertips and smile at the nearly unbearable heat.

Exploding sun. Perfect.

I hook my fingers beneath the hem of my shirt, but just as I'm about to pull it over my head, my phone chimes with a notification that someone just used my access code.

I know it's Thiago.

I cut the water and hurry toward the door, pulling it open before he has a chance to knock. But the relief of seeing him lasts all of half a second. He's standing there staring past me, and the emptiness in his expression makes my heart sink.

"Thiago?"

I take in the rest of him and realize he's still in uniform. Dirt, grime, and blood stain the fabric and smear his forearms and hands. Panic shoots through me until I look him over and realize none of the blood is his. I reach for him and rest a careful hand against the front of his vest.

Only then does he look at me.

His eyes are unfocused and distant, as though part of him is still somewhere else. I've never seen him like this, and all I want to do is get him inside and take care of him. There are no tears, only a look that tells me he witnessed something no one should have to. Whatever that was, he doesn't need me firing off questions or asking him to explain. He came here because he needs me, and that's enough.

I lace my fingers through his and guide him inside, locking the door behind us. He follows without resistance, his movements stiff and

mechanical as I lead him down the hall to the bathroom.

“Can I?” I ask as I reach for the clips on his tactical vest.

He gives me a small nod.

Undoing the buckles, I ease the vest from his shoulders. The weight of it drops into my hands, and I carefully lower it to the floor. I remove his duty belt next, followed by his radio, spare magazines, and handcuffs. One by one, the pieces of his job join the vest on the floor until all that’s left is Thiago in a uniform shirt stiff with someone else’s dried blood.

My fingers catch the hem of his shirt.

“Okay?”

He nods again.

I ease it up his torso, and he lifts his arms enough for me to pull it over his head. Carefully working it free, I drop it on the floor with the rest of his equipment. I wish removing the weight of whatever happened tonight were that easy.

“Get in,” I say gently.

Thiago steps into the tub and lowers himself into the water. I kneel beside him as he stares straight ahead, barely seeming to register the heat surrounding him. I reach for a washcloth, squeeze body wash onto it, dip it beneath the water, and wring it out. Starting with his hands, I gently wipe away the dried blood caked into the lines of his skin.

It isn’t his. I have to keep reminding myself of that.

The water clouds pink for a moment before carrying it away. I rinse the cloth and move to his forearms, then his shoulders, making sure I clean every trace.

When I reach to dip the cloth again, his hand wraps around my wrist.

“I...I couldn’t save him.” His voice cracks. “He was only three.”

His chest starts shaking before another sound leaves him. He bows his head, fighting back the sobs until his entire body trembles beneath the effort. Watching him fight this hard to hold himself together makes my heart ache. My baby is hurting, and I want to take whatever it is he’s carrying, but I don’t know how. That’s when I step into the tub fully clothed and pull him into my arms.

His head drops against my chest, right over my heart.

“It’s okay,” I whisper as tears fill my eyes and my fingers slide through his wet curls. “Let it out, baby. I’m here.”

His cries finally come, echoing off the bathroom walls as his arms wrap around me. I hold him tighter, wishing there was something more I could do than sit here and feel every sob tear through him.

“I was right there,” he chokes out. “Right there.”

“I know you were. I know.”

“I-I couldn’t...”

Somehow, I know this isn't just about today. It's about the little boy who couldn't save his father, like he's reliving it. So I hold him tighter, my arms around him as he falls apart, giving him the one thing he came here for. A place where he doesn't have to be strong.

Eventually, his cries begin to slow. I cup his face and press a kiss to his tear-streaked cheek.

“Turn around.”

He leans into me for one more kiss, resting his forehead against mine for a moment, then he does as I ask.

I shift onto the edge of the tub, and he settles between my knees with his back to me as I work shampoo into his curls, massaging his scalp in slow circles. “Lean back.”

He does, surrendering his weight to me as I tip his head beneath the stream of warm water and rinse the shampoo from his hair. I’m working conditioner through his curls when he draws a shaky breath.

“I could hear him crying.” His voice is barely above a whisper. “Then I couldn’t.”

My hands stop in his hair.

“Maybe if I’d moved faster...” Thiago lifts his pruned hands from the water and stares at them as though they’re stained with something no amount of scrubbing will ever wash away. “If I’d gotten there thirty seconds earlier.”

“You did everything you could,” I tell him softly.

He shakes his head. “It wasn’t enough.”

Fresh tears sting my eyes. I’ve never seen him like this.

“He kept asking me why,” he mutters.

“Why what, baby?”

Thiago swallows hard.

“Why his little boy wasn’t waking up.” His voice breaks. “And I had to tell him.”

I close my eyes for a moment, fighting back my tears as I finish rinsing his hair.

When I step out of the tub, water streams from my clothes and pools around my feet. I grab a towel for Thiago and another for myself, draping mine around my shoulders, then kneel beside him again.

I begin drying his hair, working the towel carefully through his curls. There's nowhere we need to be. For as long as he needs it, he can stay right here with me.

Dinner is quiet.

After a few small bites, Thiago gives me a warm smile, letting me know without saying anything that he likes it. I don't take it personally when he stands a few minutes later and carries his still half-full plate to the counter.

"It was really good, *chama*. Thank you."

When I stand, he pulls me into a tight hug and presses a kiss to my forehead.

I hold him a little longer than usual, breathing in the clean scent of his T-shirt. It's one of several pieces of clothing he's left here, all of which have slowly found a place in my closet, just like he's found a place in my life.

"Come on," I say, taking his hand. "Let's get some sleep."

I give him the bathroom first, letting him brush his teeth and take his time. But when I finish and walk into the bedroom, he's gone.

"Thiago?" I check the guest room, kitchen, and living room, but there's no sign of him. "What the hell?" Stopping in the middle of the condo, I remember the rooftop, and I run. I don't even wait for the elevator doors to finish opening before I step inside. "If you're not up there, I'm going to kill you, Braga."

I close my eyes for the brief ride, silently willing him to be there. When the doors slide open, I finally breathe again. He's lying in the hammock, staring up at the stars.

But it doesn't take away the uneasiness that's been following me all night. I know what happened today was horrific, but I can't shake the feeling that there's something else weighing on him.

He's grieving, I remind myself. That has to be all this is.

As I cross the terrace, his eyes find mine, and he reaches for me. I climb into the hammock beside him, resting against his chest the same way he rested against mine in the bath. His heartbeat is steady beneath my ear as his fingers move lazily up and down my back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“It’s okay.” I tilt my head to look at him. “You needed some air. I get it.”

He swallows.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, quieter now.

There’s something different about this apology, but I can’t figure out what.

“Tomorrow is for talking,” I murmur, pressing a kiss over his heart. “Tonight, just let me hold you.”

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Fifty-Eight

THIAGO



I spot her before she notices me.

The late afternoon sun catches the black paint of her motorcycle as she pulls away from the curb. I smile as I watch her and hang back, letting a few cars separate us before easing onto the gas.

Chasing her has become a game between us, even if she likes to pretend she isn't playing.

Her head tilts as she checks her mirror. I can't see her eyes behind the dark visor, but I know the exact moment she spots me. Her shoulders stiffen for the briefest second before relaxing, and then she slips through traffic with a fluidity that borders on reckless.

I've watched her ride enough to know better.

There's a confidence in everything Remi does when she's in control of a machine, whether she's in the driver's seat, beneath the hood, or balanced on two wheels with the city rushing past her. Sometimes I don't think she realizes how remarkable she is.

Three days ago, I showed up at her apartment falling apart, and she knew exactly what I needed before I did. I still don't know what made me go there instead of home. I only knew that I needed to be with the one person who made me feel like I didn't have to hold it all together, and that instinct led me straight to her door.

The irony isn't lost on me. I was sent into Remi's life to find her weaknesses, and she became mine.

We stop at a red light with her bike idling beside my loaner SUV, and I take the opportunity to shamelessly admire her. With one boot planted on the pavement, she turns toward me, flips up her visor, and winks.

Just like that, she has me grinning like an idiot.

Remi knows exactly what she's doing. When the light turns green, she shoots off first, and I fall in behind her.

I told her to meet me at Lachlan's because I wanted her to be the one to give me my first tattoo in three years. What she doesn't know is that this one means more than any other piece of ink I've ever gotten.

My phone lights up with a message from a number I haven't seen in weeks

Elena: STATUS.

A thousand thoughts crash through my head at once. Is she back? What does she want? What happens now?

It's been weeks, and the tracking devices are still sitting inside the envelope exactly where I left them, unopened. I stare at the message until the words begin to blur. Then I delete it, block the number just for tonight, and set my phone face down on the passenger seat. Elena can wait. This moment belongs to Remi, and I refuse to let anyone take that away from us.

By the time I pull into the lot, she's already off her bike, tucking her helmet beneath her arm as she shakes out her hair. I glance at my phone one last time before shoving it into the glove compartment and climbing out.

"Got a little lost back there in my dust, huh?" Remi asks, using the curb to give herself a few extra inches.

It puts her at the perfect height for me to wrap a hand around her throat, pull her against me, and kiss her until she forgets every smart-ass remark she planned to throw my way.

"Come on, get in my chair," she says, smiling against my lips. "Let me hurt you."

I bark out a laugh. "I'll never deny that tattoos hurt, but if anyone's going to hurt me, I'd rather it be you."

"That's what they all say."

She takes my hand and tugs me toward the side entrance while I follow behind her, still caught on that comment.

"Who's they?"

“All of them.” The teasing in her voice tells me she’s fucking with me, but that doesn’t stop my mind from conjuring images I don’t particularly enjoy.

The thought of other men fantasizing about my girl has a way of bringing out the worst in me. I avoided the precinct’s website after her mugshot leaked because I wasn’t prepared for the obscene number of vile comments beneath it, many of them from men who lived right here in the city.

An investigation was launched to find whoever leaked the unauthorized photo, but it went nowhere. Whoever did it covered their tracks too well.

I wouldn’t put something like that past Elena or even Grey. I just hate that I can’t prove it.

“You’re making me second-guess this idea, you know that.”

“Too late. No deposit refunds and no special treatment.”

I lean in, brushing my lips against her ear. “I’m probably still leaking out of you as we speak, *fera*. I think that makes me pretty special.”

Remi shudders against me. “Always so cocky, Officer Braga.”

I grip her chin and bring her eyes to mine. “Oh, I’m Officer Braga again?”

“You’ve still got that badge, don’t you?” she challenges, arching an eyebrow as she takes a step back.

“That’s not the name you were screaming a few hours ago.”

She grins as she continues backing away, silently daring me to follow.

“My memory’s a little hazy.”

I play along until her back meets the wall, then brace my palms on either side of her head, boxing her in exactly where we both know she wants to be. “You’re really trying to test me tonight.”

“Maybe I am.”

I let my gaze travel slowly over her as my hand slides along the inside of her thigh.

“Thiago...” she murmurs, glancing toward the open door.

“Now you want to say my name.” I tighten my hold on her and lift her off the floor. A gasp leaves her as I guide her higher and higher against the wall until her thighs lock around my shoulders, and my hands settle beneath her ass, holding her securely against me.

“Oh, fuck,” she breathes.

“Yeah, that’s better.”

I press a trail of slow kisses along her inner thigh before looking up at her. I know this view too fucking well, and having it while we're fully dressed feels like a special kind of torture.

"What's wrong, Braga?" she asks, twisting a fistful of my hair between her fingers.

"Your pretty little cunt is two layers away from my tongue. What do you think?"

"Who says there are two layers?"

Fuck, this game just backfired on me.

But not all is lost. I pull her closer and bite down gently over the fabric between her legs. Her fist clenches in my hair as another gasp slips from her lips. Grinning against her, I slowly guide her back to her feet.

I'll never get enough of Remi, but Lachlan is just down the hall, and we came here for a reason.

"Time to hurt me, *chama*," I say, punctuating the words with a quick kiss.

Like a good client, I settle into the chair and lean back while she gets everything set up. I take the opportunity to look around at some of her work displayed throughout the room. Maybe I'm biased, but fuck me, this woman is insanely talented.

"Ready? If you're a good boy and there are no tears, you'll get a lollipop."

I laugh and tuck an errant platinum strand behind her ear. "I'll try."

She flashes me one last brilliant smile before slipping on a pair of black nitrile gloves and giving the stencil a final check as she reaches for the tattoo machine. Its familiar buzz fills the room as she loads the needle with ink.

"So, what do these numbers mean?"

"I'll tell you when you're done."

Her eyes flick up to mine, and she rolls them with a grin. "You know, you're not as mysterious as you want to seem."

The machine kisses the side of my neck, and the first pass burns hotter than I remember, vibrating through my jaw and into the base of my skull.

"Oh yeah?"

"Absolutely. You're a cop, a loner, you know you're fucking huge and use it to your advantage, and you have questionable vehicle taste." She

side-eyes me. “A Nissan Rogue rental, Thiago? You couldn’t even spring for a Chevy?”

I fight the urge to laugh and keep perfectly still as the machine continues its steady buzz against my skin.

Remi wipes away excess ink, then stretches the area beneath my jaw with her thumb, guiding the needle through another pass.

“Anything else?”

“The most important one.”

“And what’s that?”

I watch her work, fascinated by how easily she can give me shit without losing an ounce of concentration. I’ve seen that same focus when she’s beneath the hood of a car and behind the wheel. Her mind might always be moving, but when she loves something, every bit of that energy locks onto the task in front of her.

“You’re completely obsessed with me.”

“I won’t argue with that one.”

Her smile softens, but she never stops working.

“You’re beautiful,” I say, losing myself in her eyes the way I always do.

She shakes her head, fighting a smile.

I wish I could freeze this moment and keep us right here, where Elena can’t reach us and the truth can’t tear apart everything we’ve built. I just need more time to find a way out of this before any of it touches Remi. Then I can give her all of me and love her the way she deserves.

“Done.”

She cleans away the last traces of ink and sets the machine aside. Tilting my chin with two fingers, she studies the numbers from one angle, then another.

“Hold still, Braga.”

Her thumb stretches the skin beneath my jaw again as she inspects one final line. Once she’s satisfied, she smooths a thin layer of ointment over the fresh tattoo and presses a clear bandage over it.

“There.” Her fingertips linger against my neck for a moment before she steps back. “Okay. Now you can look.”

I lift the mirror and stare at the number that marks the day everything changed between us. The day we crossed a line neither of us ever wanted to come back from.

Now it’s a part of me, permanently etched into my skin.

“Perfect.”

“So...” She sets the ointment aside. “Are you going to tell me what it means now?”

I set the mirror on the tray and reach into my pocket for the piece of paper I brought. When I hand it to her, she gives me a curious look as she unfolds it.

Her brow furrows when her mugshot comes into view.

Taking it from her trembling hands, I lower it to my lap, drawing her closer until she’s standing between my knees.

“My mugshot number is on your neck.”

“I wanted a reminder.”

“Of what?” she asks breathily.

“The best thing that ever happened to me.”

She glances from the photograph to the fresh tattoo, and I watch understanding slowly give way to disbelief.

“You really did this.”

“I really did.”

Her fingers rise toward my neck but stop just short of the bandage. “This is permanent, Thiago.”

“That was the idea.”

She lets out a shaky laugh as tears begin gathering in her eyes. “You took the number from my fucking mugshot and tattooed it on your body.”

“Technically, you did. And when you say it like that, it sounds a little unhinged.”

“A little?” She shakes her head at me. “This might be the craziest thing anyone has ever done for me.”

I smile. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You shouldn’t.”

She’s smiling when the first tear rolls down her cheek. I wipe it away with my thumb, and her attention returns to the photograph resting in my lap. Picking it up, she runs a finger along the edge.

“I hated this picture for a while,” she admits. “Not because I was ashamed, but because everyone else got to take it and turn it into whatever they wanted. People who didn’t know me looked at one picture and decided who I was.”

I know. I read enough of their comments to want to hunt down half the fucking city.

“But you...” Her attention returns to my neck. “You look at it and think of us.”

“Every fucking time.”

She wipes beneath her eye and gives a watery laugh. “God, I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“No, I really fucking don’t.” She cups my face and kisses me. There’s none of our usual teasing as her mouth moves slowly against mine and her hands cradle my face. When she pulls away, she stays close, resting her forehead against mine.

“That night was a mess,” she whispers. “My arrest. That picture. Everything that came after.”

“I know.”

“But you were the one good thing in the middle of it.”

I want so badly to deserve that.

She glances at the tattoo once more and shakes her head with another disbelieving laugh. “You’re going to have my mugshot number on your neck when you’re eighty.”

“Hopefully, you’ll still be around to explain it to people.”

Her laughter fades, and for a second, I wonder if I went too far. But then she climbs onto my lap and wraps her arms around my shoulders, careful to avoid the fresh ink.

“I better be.”

Those three simple words leave me without a damn thing to say.

I squeeze her, and she buries her face against me, holding me so close that I feel each breath she takes.

“You should have told me,” she murmurs after a while. “I would’ve tried to talk you out of it.”

“That’s exactly why I didn’t.”

“What if you wake up tomorrow and regret it?”

I slide my hand along the side of her neck. “A lot of things can happen tomorrow, *chama*, but regretting this won’t be one of them.”

She searches my face for any sign that I don’t mean it. She won’t find one.

“There’s one more thing.”

“Look, my juvie records are sealed. No more mugshots for you.”

I laugh. “That’s disappointing. I was thinking about starting a collection.”

“You get one, stalker.” Her smile lingers as I run my hand along her back, trying to figure out how to ask for something I’ve spent the last few days convincing myself I’m ready to do.

“I’m flying to Miami.”

“Miami?”

“To visit my father.”

The teasing smile disappears.

“I’ve been thinking about it since that night. Seeing Athena again and finding out your mom was with him when he died brought back a lot of things I thought I’d made peace with.” I take a moment before continuing. “For years, I told myself there was no reason to go back. He wasn’t there, and standing over a piece of stone wasn’t going to change anything. But I think the truth is that I’ve always been afraid to face him. I was never ready.”

I don’t know that I am even now.

Remi rests her hand against my chest. “Thiago, I’m here for whatever you need. You know that.”

I manage a smile. “That’s exactly it. I want you with me.”

“You want me to go with you?”

“Yeah.” I draw her closer. “I haven’t been back since I was a boy, and if I’m going to stand in front of him again after all these years, I don’t want to do it alone.”

She frames my face with her hands. “Then you won’t.”

“I haven't even said when,” I say with a chuckle.

“I don’t care when. Tell me, and I’ll be there.”

I hold her without saying anything, knowing I couldn’t have asked anyone else to do this with me.

“I want him to know about you.”

“Thiago...”

“I know he’s gone, but I still want to stand there and tell him about the woman who's made me happier than I ever thought I’d be.” I draw in a slow breath. “I want to tell him I’m okay.”

Remi blinks away tears as a smile touches her lips. “Then we’ll tell him together.”

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Fifty-Nine

REMI



I send the last of ten rounds downrange and lower my pistol, grinning as I study the tight grouping in the center of my target. I've been smiling so much today that my cheeks are starting to hurt, and apparently, I haven't been doing a very good job of hiding it.

"Okay, those are some pretty clean shots, but I know that's not what's got you grinning like that.

Matteo folds his arms and leans against the divider of my lane. I eject the magazine, lock the slide back, and set my pistol on the bench, then turn to face him. Gio stands two lanes over, still sending rounds into his target, while Madden occupies the lane between us, his earmuffs firmly in place as another shot cracks through the range.

I closed Sloane's early because I was far too distracted to deal with customers but still needed somewhere to burn off all the energy I've been carrying around since last night. The boys were more than happy to stay behind for a little friendly competition.

"I gave Thiago a tattoo last night."

"Okay."

"Only I didn't know he had me tattoo my mugshot number on his neck."

Matteo's eyebrows shoot up. "He did what?"

"Yeah." I nod, still trying to wrap my head around it myself.

"Was he drunk?"

I swat his arm. "No."

"Higher than a kite?"

“No.”

“Concussed?”

“Matteo!” I smack his arm again. “He was completely sober. And why is that so hard to believe? Look at me. I’m a fucking catch, okay?”

He laughs and nudges my shoulder. “I mean, sure, but that’s commitment, Remi. How many guys do you know, especially cops, who would tattoo a mugshot number on their body?”

“It’s crazy, isn’t it?” I bite the corner of my lip, but there’s no hiding my smile. “And then he asked me to go to Miami with him.”

“What’s in Miami?”

“He wants to visit his dad’s grave.” My smile softens as I look down at the pistol resting on the bench. “He hasn’t been there since he was a kid, and he asked me to go with him.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah.”

I’ve told Matteo enough about Thiago’s father that I don’t have to explain why the invitation means so much to me.

“So you’re going?”

“Of course I’m going. He doesn’t want to do it alone.”

Matteo watches me for a moment before a knowing grin works its way across his face. “Oh, you’re fucked.”

I laugh. “Completely.”

“Who’s fucked?” Gio asks, poking his head out from his lane.

I hadn’t even noticed that he’d stopped firing, but Madden has too, and both of them are looking our way now.

“Some guy tattooed her mugshot number on himself,” Madden answers.

He’s the only one of the three who doesn’t know about Thiago and me. Madden spends most of the year traveling for tournaments, chasing his dream of going pro and getting closer every year, so he misses a lot when he’s away. But we always make up for it when he’s back home.

The four of us grew up together, and even though we’re always missing Val and AJ when it’s just us, these boys are as much my brothers as Gio is.

“Damn, Remi.” Gio removes his eye protection and walks toward us. “You got that man all kinds of wound up over you. I bet he doesn’t know you peed your pants at your third-grade Christmas concert. Maybe he should.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Giovanni, you forget we grew up together. I know every embarrassing thing you’ve ever done. Don’t test me.”

The guys burst into laughter, and even Gio can’t keep a straight face for long.

“I can’t imagine ever falling that hard for anyone,” Matteo says, shaking his head. “Not happening.”

“Never say never,” I tease. “When you find yourself on your knees for some poor soul, you’ll think of me.”

“Nah, fuck that.” He steps back into his lane and slides a fresh magazine into his pistol. “Come on. Five rounds. Tightest grouping buys dinner.”

“I can’t. I’m meeting Thiago at the gym later.”

“Oh, fuck,” Gio groans. “Couples workouts? He’s so fucking done.”

“Yeah,” Madden agrees. “Might as well marry the guy.”

“That’s enough,” I mutter, unable to stop smiling as I send a fresh silhouette target downrange.

“Let’s do this. I’m starving,” Matteo adds.

The electronic timer beeps, and our four guns come up in near-perfect unison. Brass flies as round after round tears into the targets and scatters across the concrete floor.

“Is this really even a competition anymore?” I tease after bringing my target in and admiring my grouping.

The guys don’t get a chance to fire back before the front door alarm sounds.

My smile vanishes. We’re closed, so no one should be here.

The four of us remove our EarPros and safety glasses, reload our pistols, and head for the lobby.

“I thought the front door was locked,” I say.

“It was.” Gio checks his pistol as we enter the hallway. “I locked it myself.”

Weird.

Guns held low but ready, we continue toward the main entrance. The boys instinctively move ahead, putting themselves between me and whoever’s waiting around the corner. I don’t argue because I know it has nothing to do with whether they think I can protect myself. They’ve been doing it since we were kids, just like I would throw myself in front of any one of them without thinking twice.

We round the corner, and two uniformed officers come into view.

I recognize one of them immediately as Thiago's colleague, the same asshole who tried hitting on me at the gym. My eyes drop to the name on his uniform.

Grey.

The other officer is shorter and broad-shouldered, with a buzz cut and a face I've never seen before. Both men have their weapons drawn.

We stop several feet apart. Something about this already feels wrong.

As much as I care about Thiago, loving one cop hasn't suddenly made me trust every person wearing a badge. These two somehow got through a door that Gio locked, and now they're standing inside my closed business with guns pointed at my family.

"Put your weapons down," Grey orders.

I keep mine lowered. "You first."

His attention fixes on me.

"You came into my business after hours." I continue. "Tell me why you're here, and we can figure this out without anyone doing something stupid."

Grey's jaw flexes. "We got a call about gunshots. We came to investigate."

I'm too confused to respond, and I glance toward the hallway leading to the range, trying to make sense of what he just said. These walls were built to contain gunfire. We can barely hear the range from the lobby when the doors are closed, much less from outside the building.

Whatever brought these men into Sloane's, it wasn't a call about someone hearing gunshots.

Matteo snorts. "Take a look around. Where the fuck do you think you are?"

"Yeah, that's bullshit," Gio says as he moves in front of me. "These walls are soundproof. Nobody heard a damn thing."

I immediately sidestep him. I'd die before I let my baby brother take a bullet meant for me.

"Whatever call you got has nothing to do with us."

"I'll be the judge of that." Grey looks between the four of us. "IDs."

"Fuck you," Madden growls. "You don't get to ID us just because you feel like it."

Grey turns his attention to him. "Are you even old enough to be in here with a weapon?"

Madden doesn’t flinch.

The youngest of us is also the quietest, and people have always mistaken that for hesitation. Madden doesn’t posture or raise his voice to prove he can hold his own because he’s never needed to. Even now, with two guns pointed in our direction, his weapon remains lowered, and his attention stays fixed on the men in front of us.

He may only be seventeen, but anyone who mistakes his age for weakness learns quickly that Madden is Derek Cain’s son.

As furious as I am, I know how quickly this could turn into something none of us can undo. One nervous trigger finger is all it takes, and I’m not willing to gamble with the lives of three people I love just to prove we’ve done nothing wrong. I’m the oldest one here, and that means getting everyone out of this building safely matters more than my pride.

Keeping my movements slow, I set my pistol on the counter beside me.

“This is a huge misunderstanding.” I keep my attention on Grey. “I own Sloane’s, and these are my brothers. Like I said, this has nothing to do with us.” I hate the next words before I even say them. “I’ll show you identification. We all will. Just stop pointing your guns at my family.”

I motion for the boys to put their weapons down. They hesitate, looking between me and the officers, but eventually follow my lead. Madden is the last to set his pistol on the counter.

“This is bullshit,” he mutters.

“I know.”

The second officer speaks into his radio while Grey takes another step toward us.

“Step away from your weapons.”

Fuck.

Every part of me wants to tell him exactly where he can shove that order. We’ve lowered our guns, agreed to cooperate. There’s no reason for either of them to still have theirs raised.

I step away from the counter, and the boys follow just as the front door swings open and more officers pour into the lobby.

They were waiting.

Before I can process what’s happening, someone grabs my arms and wrenches them behind my back.

“What the fuck?” Gio roars. “Let go of my sister!”

I twist toward his voice, but another cop blocks my view as handcuffs close around my wrists.

“Don’t touch her!” Matteo shouts.

“Get the fuck off me!” Madden snarls.

I catch a glimpse of him fighting against the officers restraining him before three of them force his arms behind his back.

“Stop!” I shout. “He’s seventeen. Stop fucking grabbing him!”

No one listens.

I try to turn toward Grey, but the officer behind me keeps my arms pinned. “What are you arresting us for?”

No one answers.

“Hey!” I shout. “I asked you a fucking question. What is this for?”

Still nothing.

Anger burns through me as I look from Gio to Matteo and finally Madden. We did exactly what they asked, and the second we stepped away from our guns, a team that was already waiting outside came through the door. There was never anything to de-escalate.

They just wanted us unarmed.

I stop fighting the officer behind me and glare at Grey. Whatever brought him into Sloane’s tonight, it had nothing to do with a report of gunshots.

They came here for us.

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Sixty

THIAGO



We pull up to the entrance of City of Miami Cemetery just as the last of the daylight begins to fade. The rusted iron gates are closed, but the clerk at the rental office assured us they usually aren't locked.

Our flight was delayed for several hours because of severe storms, and by the time we finally took off, I knew we'd be cutting it close. At one point, I thought we might not make it here before dark, and I hated the relief that came with that thought.

A canceled flight or a locked gate would've given me an excuse to turn around without admitting that some part of me still wanted one. I've spent years avoiding this place, and now that I'm sitting outside the cemetery, I remember exactly why.

The man buried beyond those gates dedicated his life to protecting people. That's who I wanted to be when I was a boy. I wanted to make him proud and wear his name with honor. Instead, I became someone who lies for a living, manipulates people who trust me, and carries out orders I never would've imagined following when I first pinned on a badge.

My gaze shifts to the woman beside me.

Remi trusted me enough to come here, even though I'm keeping the biggest truth of my life from her. Bringing her to meet the man whose legacy shaped everything I once believed only makes it harder to stomach.

She's also been unusually quiet since yesterday.

It started when she abruptly canceled our gym plans. She told me something came up and promised she was fine, but she never explained

what happened. This morning, she showed up for our flight with the same smile I know and love, though there hasn't been much of it since.

Even the hours we spent stranded at the airport felt different. Remi usually fills every empty minute with something, whether she's talking, teasing me, fidgeting, or finding a new way to entertain herself. Today, she spent most of the delay tucked against my side, quieter than I've ever known her to be.

I've asked countless times if she's okay, and she tells me she is, but I don't believe her.

Whatever happened still bothers her, but she got on that plane anyway because she knew how much it meant to me. I could push her for answers, but given everything I'm hiding from her, I'd be one hell of a hypocrite.

Despite every reason not to trust me, she's still the only person I wanted beside me when I finally came back here.

"I don't see a padlock," Remi says, giving my hand a reassuring squeeze as I bring the car to a stop.

"Stay here." I climb out and make my way to the entrance. The gates groan as I push them open, rust flaking from the black bars beneath my hand. I should turn around and get back in the car, but I force myself to look beyond them.

The last of the daylight filters through the towering oaks, casting long shadows across rows of weathered headstones.

My father is somewhere among them.

I glance back at Remi, give her a brief nod, then return to the car. Once I'm behind the wheel again, I ease onto the narrow road and follow the cemetery map to his section.

The landscape hasn't changed so much as it has grown around my memories of it. The trees stretch higher into the sky, the shrubs fill spaces I don't remember, and new headstones stand among the old. As I turn onto the next row, pieces of a place I haven't seen since childhood begin to feel familiar again.

Pulling to the side of the road, I cut the engine. Remi leans over and kisses my cheek.

"Baby, I'll wait here for now. Give you some time."

I look at her, grateful that she understands what I need without my having to ask for it.

With a nod, I climb out of the car.

His grave sits near the end of the row. I can see the headstone from here, but I keep my eyes on the ground as I walk toward it, one step after another, until I stop at the edge of the grass.

Only then do I look up.

Raymond H. Braga

A Life of Honor and Service

My father.

I stare at the inscription, reading it again and again. Honor and service. Two things I built my entire life around because of him, and two I'm no longer sure I have any right to claim.

Crouching in front of the headstone, I run my fingertips over the cool granite.

"*Olá, Pai.* I know I haven't come to see you in a while, and I'm sorry." Seeing his name this close makes it difficult to keep my eyes focused on the letters. "I wanted to, though. You know that, right?" I lower my head and take a breath before continuing. "I was afraid to face you."

A tear lands on the granite beneath my hand.

"Because I'm not the man you wanted me to be. I thought I was. For a long time, I believed I was doing what was right and saving people, just like you did." I drag my thumb across his name. "But I was wrong."

The admission is harder to make here than it has ever been anywhere else.

"I was lied to, but that's not an excuse. Deep down, I knew things weren't right, and I kept doing what I was told because believing in the mission was easier than questioning what it was turning me into."

I look over my shoulder at the rental car.

Remi is still inside, watching from a distance. She gave me the space to come to him alone without ever making me feel like I actually am.

"Then I met her."

Just looking at her makes me smile.

"She's beautiful, isn't she? Her name is Remi. She's the one I've been telling you about." I turn back to my father and rest my hand on his headstone. "I've never felt this way before. Is this what Mom made you feel? Like your whole heart was living inside someone else? Like you could see your entire future in their eyes?"

My smile slowly disappears.

“Because that’s what I feel when I look at her, Pai.” I lower my gaze to his name again, knowing what I have to admit next. “It’s killing me because I don’t know how to save her without destroying us.” I slam my fist against the rock. “You should be here!”

The anger comes before I can stop it, years of it surfacing in four words.

“If you had been here, I wouldn’t have become this person. I would’ve had you to tell me when I was fucking up. I would’ve been a man who deserved her love instead of someone who has to lie to keep it.”

Tears spill down my face as I brush my thumb over the letters of his name.

“Everything would have been different.” I stare at his name, then look back at Remi. “But I know I still would have found her. Because she’s mine.” My voice drops as I turn back to him. “I think…I think I was born to love her.”

Saying it out loud brings a small laugh through my tears.

“Is that crazy?” I press my palm against the stone. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t lose her. But no matter how many times I replay it in my head, I end up in the same place.” I wipe my face, but the tears keep coming. “I’m running out of time. Everything we’ve built is about to come crashing down around us, and when it does, it’ll be because of me.”

I try to keep talking, but my voice gives out.

For years, I’ve convinced myself I could carry every choice I made and face the consequences when they came. Now Remi is part of those consequences, and I can’t pretend I’m strong enough to lose her.

I brace both hands against my father’s headstone as the first sob breaks free. Another follows before I can recover, and soon, I’m crying too hard to hold myself upright.

I don’t hear Remi approach. She touches my shoulder, and when I look up, she’s standing above me, tears running down her cheeks.

She doesn’t ask if I’m okay or tell me to stop crying. Lowering herself to the grass, she wraps her arms around me. I turn into her and bury my face in her shoulder, holding on as she slowly runs a hand over my back. She stays with me until the sobs finally subside and I can breathe again.

When I’m ready, she stands with me.

“He was a good man,” I say, looking at my father’s name. “Better than me.”

“That’s not true.” Remi reaches up and wipes the tears from my face.

I look down at her and see nothing but certainty. I know she means it, and that's exactly the problem. She's fallen for a man who has never given her the chance to decide whether she could love him, given the truth.

"Do you think he'd be proud of me?"

"I know he would."

I look away.

"Thiago, I know he would." She rests her hand over my heart. "He would because I'm proud of you. You're one of the good ones. You put your whole heart into everything you do, and it shows. Somehow, I know he sees it because I do."

I stare at her.

At the woman who has barely been herself since I picked her up this morning. Something's bothering her, but she still got on a plane and came here because I asked. And now she's standing at my father's grave, telling me I'm a good man.

I pull her against me and hold her as the tears start again. My legs give out beneath me, and I sink to my knees once more, taking her with me until she's standing between them.

If she knew everything, would she still believe that?

"Look at me, baby," she says.

I lift my gaze, and her fingers move into my hair.

"I'm here, and I'll always be." She brushes the dampness from beneath my eyes. "Thank you for bringing me with you."

Wrapping my arms around her waist, I rest my forehead against her belly. "I'm sorry," I whisper against her shirt.

Her fingers keep moving through my hair, and she doesn't ask what I mean. Maybe she thinks I'm apologizing for falling apart in front of her.

I'm not.

I'm apologizing because she's standing here, loving me, while I'm still lying to her. Someday, she'll know exactly what I meant. And when she does, I'm afraid this will be one of the memories that hurts her the most.

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Sixty-One

THIAGO



The burn in my muscles is a welcome distraction.

I finish my last rep on the bench press, rack the bar, and sit up. Sweat runs down my temples as I reach for the water bottle at my feet and take a long drink.

The only sounds in the gym are the steady hum of the air conditioner and the occasional clink of metal. Santino and Athena Leone keep this place overlooking Biscayne Bay for whenever they're in Miami. When Remi suggested we stay here, I didn't argue.

After seeing Athena again, I had questions I couldn't let go of. The biggest was why Helios had never mentioned her.

Every member of the Cain family had a file, as did everyone Helios considered a known associate. They had spent years documenting, yet Athena and Santino Leone didn't appear anywhere in the intelligence I'd received.

It took some digging before I understood why.

The Cain brothers once had a younger sister who was declared dead decades earlier. According to every official record I could find, Athena Cain died long before Helios began compiling intelligence on the family.

Except she never died. She disappeared for years, then returned as Athena Leone.

There was no paper trail linking one woman to the other, which explained how Helios missed her.

Helios had presented its intelligence as exhaustive. Names, photographs, relationships, businesses, properties, histories. They knew enough about the Cain family to make me believe there wasn't a corner of their lives they hadn't uncovered.

But they never found Athena.

Santino was even harder to trace. I found whispers linking the Leone name to the Italian mafia and enough scattered references to suggest his family once held considerable power, but nothing I could verify. Whatever history Santino has, someone made damn sure it stayed off the books.

A few months ago, I would've assumed Helios knew something I didn't know.

I don't make that assumption anymore.

I catch Remi's reflection in the wall of mirrors behind me, standing on the opposite side of the gym, tightening wraps around her hands before stepping up to the heavy bag. She throws a sharp right cross, then another, each punch rattling the chains overhead.

She hasn't said much since we left the cemetery, and neither have I. I assumed some of it was due to everything that happened there until I started noticing the same distance I saw in her at the airport.

Whatever has been bothering her since yesterday is still there.

Maybe that's why we ended up here instead of exploring Miami. Neither of us was in the mood to wander the city or pretend we weren't distracted, and exhausting ourselves together sounded better than sitting in the penthouse with too much time to think.

She meets my eyes in the mirror and gives me a small smile before turning back to the bag, where she lands another combination.

I've given her space because she asked for it without saying the words, but I can't keep watching her work through something alone while I'm standing ten feet away.

"*Fera*," I call out across the room.

She doesn't hear me over the impact of her gloves on the bag, so I push to my feet and walk over, sliding my arms around her waist from behind.

"Remi."

She startles, then relaxes against me, her breathing still heavy from the workout.

"Talk to me."

Turning in my arms, she searches my face instead. "Are you okay?"

Of course, she asks about me. I brush a sweat-slicked strand of hair from her face.

“No, but this isn’t about me. I’ll be okay. My father has been gone for twenty years, and I’ve learned to live with missing him.” I study her face. “You’ve had something on your mind since yesterday. Tell me what it is.”

Her eyes look away from mine. “It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit.” I cradle her face in my hands. “You canceled on me the night before our flight, you’ve barely been yourself since, and whatever happened is still bothering you. Talk to me.”

She watches me for a few seconds, then reaches for the wrap around one hand and slowly unwinds it. “I didn’t want to tell you because the last thing I wanted was to ruin this trip. I knew how important it was.”

My attention drops to her hands. “Tell me what happened.”

“That night, I was at the range with the boys. We were closed, yet somehow two cops got inside.”

“Cops?”

She nods. “From your precinct.”

Every thought of my father disappears. Knowing they could be men I’ve passed in the halls or worked beside makes the whole thing feel suddenly personal.

“What did they want?”

“They claimed someone called to report hearing gunshots.”

“At a shooting range?”

“Exactly. We knew it was bullshit, and we were armed, so I tried to de-escalate.”

I know Remi well enough to hear what she isn’t saying.

“What happened?”

“They drew on us.”

I stare at her in disbelief.

Police officers from my precinct entered her closed business and pointed loaded guns at Remi and her family.

My gaze drops again just as the last of the wrap slips free, revealing purple bruises around both wrists. I take her hands before I even realize I’m moving, then turn them carefully in the light.

“What the fuck happened to you?”

“They stormed the place and cuffed us, Thiago. More officers were waiting outside, and the second we put our guns down and stepped away,

they came through the door.”

I run my thumb along one of the bruises, careful not to press on it. “How long were you in handcuffs?”

“Long enough.”

“Fuck, Remi,” I bite out, my voice tight with anger.

“I’m okay.”

“You have bruises around both wrists.”

“I know.” She looks down at them. When she speaks again, her voice is quieter than before. “They didn’t actually hurt me. It was everything else. I’ve never felt that helpless before. We were inside our own business, and we hadn’t done anything wrong. I put my gun down because Gio, Matteo, and Madden were there, and I was trying to keep everyone safe. But they cuffed us anyway.” She shakes her head, then looks back at me. There’s defiance in her eyes, but underneath it, she still looks shaken. “Seeing my brothers detained like that and being unable to do a fucking thing about it was the worst part.”

I release one of her hands and reach for my phone, because nothing about what she just described feels normal. A report of gunfire at a shooting range might warrant questions, but it doesn’t explain officers entering a closed private business, holding four people at gunpoint, positioning additional officers outside, waiting until everyone was disarmed, and then detaining them.

The more she tells me, the more convinced I become that whoever planned this knew exactly what they were getting into.

“Thiago.” Remi follows me and covers my hand before I can reach for my phone. “Don’t.”

“I need to make a call.”

“No, you don’t. Not from here.” She guides my arm back down. “We’ll deal with it when we get home. Sloane’s is staying closed for the next few days while we get everything together for the lawsuit.”

“A lawsuit?”

“You think I’m letting this go?”

Despite everything she just told me, a smile tugs at my mouth because that sounds more like my Remi.

I sit on the bench and draw her down beside me, but I’m already going through every detail, trying to figure out who would have authorized something like this.

“Did you recognize anyone?” I ask. “Someone from the ball, or one of the guys you’ve seen me train with?”

“I’ve got all their names.” She hesitates before continuing. “But there was one I recognized. That colleague of yours, the asshole who tried to hit on me at the gym.”

I already know who she means before she says his name. “Evan Grey.”

The timing begins to bother me for an entirely different reason.

Grey has never hidden how badly he wants Elena’s approval. I also know how far he’s willing to go to earn it. Then I remember the message on my phone before Remi tattooed my neck.

STATUS.

Elena disappeared for weeks, resurfaced without explanation, and contacted me the night before Grey walked into Sloane’s with his weapon drawn. That could be a coincidence, but I’m not willing to take it at face value.

If Elena sent Grey because I stopped answering her, then whatever happened at Sloane’s may not have been related to a random anonymous call. Remi and her family could have been the reason he was there in the first place.

Because of me.

I keep that possibility to myself. I don’t have enough information yet, and after what Remi went through, I’m not giving her another reason to worry until I know exactly what happened.

“Tell me more.”

I need the rest of the story before I decide what to do next, but the moment we get home, Grey is going to answer every question I have. And if his answers give me even one reason to believe Elena was involved, she’ll be answering mine too.

Remi shakes her head before swinging a leg over mine and settling into my lap. “No.” She moves closer and loops her arms around my shoulders. “This trip is about you, baby. When we get home, you can ask me any questions you want.”

There’s still more I need to know, and my instincts tell me this isn’t something I can leave alone.

I won’t.

But Remi has spent the last forty-eight hours carrying this by herself because she wanted me to have yesterday with my father. If she needs the

rest of tonight before we drag Philadelphia back into this room, I can give her that.

"I'm sorry, *chama*." I lift her wrists and kiss each bruise. "I don't want what they did to change how you see me."

There are far worse things that will.

"I know how you feel about cops, and after something like this…"

"Stop." Her hands glide up my arms, and one rests against my cheek. "That has nothing to do with you, baby. Those men made their own choices, and I'm not letting them take this from you." She takes my hand and rests it against her chest, right over her heart. "It's yours."

I smile. "Mine."

She kisses me, and I instantly stop thinking about Grey, Elena, and all the questions awaiting me back in Philadelphia.

When she pulls away, I take her hand and place it over my own heart.

"You feel that, *chama*?"

She nods.

"That's all yours."

Her smile widens, and she kisses me again as I wrap my arms around her and let myself be in this moment without thinking about everything waiting beyond it.

When we finally part, she laughs.

"We're so gross right now."

I laugh with her as I stand and lift her into my arms.

"I love…" The words nearly leave my mouth before I catch them.

Her eyes meet mine, but I grin and keep walking.

"I love everything about you, even your sweat."

"You're an idiot."

Her laughter follows us into the en suite bathroom.

"Your idiot."

"Unfortunately."

Still holding her, I step into the walk-in shower without bothering to remove either of our sneakers. Water pours over us, soaking through our clothes within seconds.

I look at her and forget what I was about to say.

Wet hair clings to her face as droplets gather on her lashes and slide down her cheeks. The sight takes me straight back to the side of that road, to the first time I ever saw her in person. She was soaked through then, too,

standing in the rain with a gun pointed at me as I tried to figure out how the woman I'd been sent to investigate had somehow caught me completely off guard.

I had no idea what she would become to me.

"He would've loved you," I murmur into her neck. "My father. I know he would have."

She leans back just enough to look at me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I brush her wet back. "Because I…"

The words are right there.

I love you.

For a second, I almost let myself say them. Remi watches me expectantly as water runs between us.

"Because you what?"

I trace the curve of her smile with my thumb.

"Remi, Remi…" I shake my head, smiling despite myself. "What have you done to me?"

"You said that to me once before." Her arms tighten around my neck. "Maybe I haven't been convincing enough."

She kisses me again.

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Sixty-Two

THIAGO



The sight of her on her knees nearly destroys whatever restraint I have left.

"You're fucking trouble."

"You sound surprised."

"I'm not."

She looks up at me as she wraps her hand around my dick and drags her tongue slowly over the tip.

"You like me down here, Braga?"

"You have no fucking idea."

"I think I do." She gives me another slow lick, her hand moving along my shaft. "You know," she says, brushing her thumb carefully over my piercing, "the first time I saw this thing, I'll admit, I was a little intimidated. Impressed, but scared shitless."

I laugh, though the sound comes out rough. "Scared?"

"Yeah, don't get a big head or anything. But you're a big boy, and I wasn't sure where you were trying to put this thing."

"Didn't stop you."

"No, it sure didn't." She toys with the piercing, and my stomach draws tight. "Turns out, I had nothing to worry about."

I slide my hand into her wet hair, gathering it gently at the back of her head while my other hand cups her cheek.

"Maybe you were made for me," she murmurs, leaning into my touch. "And I was made for you."

“I believe that, *chama*.”

“You do?”

The softness in her blue eyes makes the question feel almost fragile.

“More every damn day.”

I hear how much I just admitted, but I don’t take it back. Remi kisses the center of my palm before looking up at me again.

“Good.”

“That all you’ve got to say?”

“No.” Her grin returns. “But I think I can make my point better without talking.”

She takes me into her mouth, inch by inch, her hand working what she can’t take. My head tips back against the tile as I fight the urge to move with her.

“Remi…”

Her hand moves to my hip while she takes her time. When I glance down, one eyebrow lifts, and I can practically hear the comment she’d make if her mouth weren’t busy.

“You like knowing you can do this to me?”

Looking so goddamn beautiful, she nods around a mouthful of my cock.

“This is you, Remi,” I manage, my voice rough. “Nobody else has ever had me like this.”

The teasing disappears from her face, and I know she hears everything I’m not saying. As incredible as her mouth feels, I suddenly need more than this.

Cradling the back of her head, I guide her away. She tips her face up to mine, lips swollen and breathing uneven.

“Come here.”

The words come out rough and needy, and Remi doesn’t tease me or make me ask twice. She rises, and as soon as she’s within reach, I wrap an arm around her waist and kiss her.

I need all of her close, her arms around me, her body pressed to mine until there’s no room left for anything I’m still hiding.

She holds me just as tightly, as if she feels the same desperation I do. “What is it?” she murmurs.

“Nothing.”

Her fingers slide to the back of my neck. “Liar.”

I brush my mouth over hers. “I just need you closer.”

“You need to fuck me?”

“No.”

What I need is to love her.

The realization comes so easily. “I just need you, *chama*.”

“You have me.”

I close my eyes and rest my forehead against hers because she has no idea how completely true that is. All of me belongs to her now, even the parts she doesn’t know about yet.

We stumble out of the shower still kissing, leaving wet footprints across the bathroom floor as we peel off the rest of our soaked clothes. Once she’s completely bare, I’m so distracted by her that it takes me a beat to notice she’s staring past me.

“Thiago, did you bring…”

She pauses. But Remi doesn’t hesitate, and that alone puts me on alert.

“Bring what?”

She exhales slowly. “Your cuffs. Did you bring them?”

“Why would you ask me that?”

I know the answer almost as soon as I say it. My duffel sits half-open on the floor by the vanity, cuffs inside.

“No.” I shake my head. “Whatever you’re thinking, absolutely not.”

A crease forms between her eyebrows. “You don’t even know what I’m thinking.”

“Yes, I do. And the answer is no.”

Crossing the room, I grab the cuffs from the side of my bag and shove them deeper inside.

“Thiago.”

“No, Remi.”

She steps toward me. “I need you to listen to me. I want you to cuff me.”

My thoughts immediately race through every reason she could be asking for this, and none of them make me feel any better.

“No. That isn’t changing.”

Her eyebrows rise. “I need you to hear me out.”

“No, I’m won’t. Because you told me cops put you in handcuffs while pointing guns at you.” I take one of her wrists carefully and turn it over, her skin still red where the cuffs had been.. “Your wrists are still fucking bruised.”

“I know. But remember when you said there wasn’t anything I could ask that you wouldn’t do?”

Meeting her eyes, I shake my head. “Don’t use that against me. I’m not putting you through this, not when it just happened.”

Her attention falls to my hand around her wrist, and her fingers close gently over mine.

“That’s why I want you to.”

I go still, her answer surprising me. Remi takes my hand.

“They took the choice away from me. I put my gun down because I was trying to protect everyone, and they still treated me like I was dangerous. They decided when I could move, where I could stand, what I could do with my own fucking hands.” Her voice stays steady, but I can feel her pulse beneath my fingers. “I hated that I couldn’t do anything about it. But with you…I’m choosing.” She turns her wrist and settles it fully into my palm. “I’m choosing to give you control because I know you’ll give it back the second I ask.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to me.”

“I’m not.”

“Then why do you need this?”

“This is for me. And because I trust you, Thiago.”

I want to deserve that trust more than anything.

“When I remember being in cuffs, I don’t want to remember them.” She comes closer until there’s barely any space between us. “I want to remember you.”

There are a thousand reasons I should refuse, and the biggest one has nothing to do with the bruises around her wrists. She trusts me while I’m still keeping something from her that could destroy everything between us.

My hand moves to the back of her neck, holding her close as guilt sits right in the middle of everything good about this moment.

I look down at the marks again and realize this isn’t about what makes me comfortable. It’s about trusting that she knows what she needs.

“Okay. But if we do this, you tell me the second anything hurts or feels wrong.”

Her expression softens, and some of the fight leaves her face. As if hearing me finally say yes matters almost as much as what comes next. “I will.”

“I mean it, Remi. You don’t push through anything for me.”

“I know. I promise.” A small smile touches her mouth, letting go of some of the defiance she’s been holding on to.

Reaching past me, she retrieves the cuffs from my bag and presses them into my hand. “I want this with you.”

The metal sits heavy in my palm.

“Only if you’re sure.”

She rises to her toes and kisses me. “I’m sure.” A hint of mischief returns to her expression as she takes my hand and leads me out of the bathroom. “But make it unforgettable.”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

I follow her down the hall and into the home gym overlooking the bay. She stops at the squat rack, then tips her chin toward the pull-up bar overhead.

“Up there.”

I look from the bar to the bruises circling her wrists. “You want me to cuff you to that?”

“My choice, remember?”

Any other time, Remi asking me to cuff her naked to a pull-up bar would have me thinking about all the things I could do to her and testing just how many times I could make her come before she started threatening my life.

Tonight, all I can see are those bruises around her wrists.

I nod. “Your choice.”

She reaches behind my neck and hauls me down to her. “Don’t hold back. When I’m all tied up, you’re going to get on your knees and eat this pussy like it belongs to you.”

Catching her around the waist, I pull her against me. “It’s mine.”

“It is. Yours to take however you want.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “However I want?”

“That’s what I said, Braga.”

A smile breaks across my face as I let out a slow breath. “Careful what you ask for.” I kiss her hard enough that she rocks back against the rack when I let her go. “Stay right there.”

Remi’s eyebrows draw together. “Where the hell are you going?”

I’m already halfway through the door.

“I’m naked in the middle of a gym, Thiago. Where exactly am I going to go?”

Her laugh follows me down the hall.

It takes less than a minute to find what I’m looking for. When I return, Remi is beneath the pull-up bar with her arms crossed under her breasts. Her attention lands on the bottle of lube in one of my hands and the bright orange butt plug in the other.

Her eyebrows shoot up, and her arms slowly drop to her sides as she stares at it, then looks at me. “You brought a butt plug on this trip?”

“I did.”

“And it’s fucking orange?”

I glance at it. “Thought you’d appreciate the color.”

“Oh, I do,” she says with a laugh.

I set both on the bench and move in front of her, running my hands over her hips as I kiss my way from her collarbone to her throat. “Still mean what you said?”

The amusement leaves her expression. “Every word.”

I pick up the cuffs and move behind her. “Arms up, *chama*.”

She reaches for the bar, and I secure each cuff carefully, keeping the metal clear of the bruising. Once they’re in place, she rises onto the balls of her feet, maintaining enough contact with the floor so her wrists aren’t bearing her weight.

I run my hands along her sides, checking her position. “Comfortable?”

“Yes.”

“If that changes, you tell me.”

“Thiago, you need me to write this down for you or something?”

I can’t help but smile. Hearing the familiar bite back in her voice takes some of the edge off the worry I’ve been carrying since she first asked for the cuffs.

“Smartass,” I say, reaching for the lube.

Remi glances back as I coat the plug, rolling it between my fingers until the surface gleams. Her next breath comes a little deeper when she realizes what I’m about to do.

“You still with me?”

“Yes, Thiago.”

I set the bottle down and let the excess slick my fingers before running them over the tight ring of muscle, massaging gentle circles until the

tension begins to ease beneath my touch.

Her head tips back toward my shoulder. “Fuck.”

I kiss the side of her neck. “I told you I’d take care of you.”

With one hand anchored around her hip, I keep working her with the other, giving her time to adjust to every new sensation.

We haven’t done anal before. We’ve used a plug, so I know what she likes and how slowly she needs me to go. I’m not rushing a damn thing.

Remi presses back into me instead of pulling away, and that small movement is everything I need.

“More,” she whispers.

I kiss her shoulder. “You’ll get more.”

Her fingers grip the bar above her as I reach for the plug again, making sure it’s thoroughly coated before dragging the cool silicone lightly over her skin first, letting her feel what’s coming.

She exhales shakily. “Thiago.”

“I’m right here. You’re doing so good, baby.”

I keep the pressure gentle until she relaxes against me. When I know she’s ready, I begin easing the plug into place, stopping the second her body tenses.

“Still okay?”

She nods, then remembers what I told her. “Yes. Don’t stop.”

I continue carefully, taking her a little farther until the orange base sits snug against her. Once it’s fully in place, Remi leans back against my chest and lets out a long breath. “How does it feel?”

“Full.”

The roughness in that single word has my dick throbbing.

I spread my hand on her stomach, giving her a moment to adjust to the sensation before brushing my lips along her neck.

“You look fucking incredible.”

She closes her eyes on a low moan. “You haven’t even gotten on your knees yet.”

With a groan, I move around to face her. Her arms are stretched overhead, leaving her completely exposed.

Jesus, look at her. My girl is a goddamn work of art.

I lower myself in front of her and place my hands on her hips. A shiver runs through her as I kiss the inside of her leg and work my way higher. “You told me to eat this pussy like it belongs to me.”

“It does.”

“Then I’m going to enjoy every fucking second of it.”

I reach beneath her and find the small control built into the base of the plug. The instant I activate it, Remi jerks against me with a sharp inhale, her abdomen going taut as it hums to life.

“Thiago…”

I hold her steady while she adjusts. “You okay?”

“Yes.” Her voice is strained, but certain. “Keep going.”

I turn it up a notch, and her grip tightens around the bar as another tremor rolls through her.

“Fuck, Thiago.”

My mouth travels farther up her inner thigh. “Tell me how it feels.”

“So fucking good.”

“You told me not to hold back, *chama*.”

“I swear to God, I’ll kill you if you start now.”

I laugh, unable to help myself. “There’s my girl.”

Her breathing turns uneven as one hand grips her ass and the other slides between her legs, dragging slowly through her wet pussy.

“You still want me to take over?”

“I do.”

“Then let me.”

Her grip firms around the bar as I lift one leg over my shoulder and then the other, taking her weight as the vibrator hums steadily inside her.

“Thiago…”

“I’ve got you.” I pull her closer and slowly drag my tongue over her clit. A moan breaks from her as her thighs tense around me before relaxing.

“You like knowing I have all the control right now?”

“Yes.”

“Say it.”

“I like being at your mercy.”

I have to breathe through the effect those words have on me. “And you trust me with it?”

“Completely.”

That nearly fucking wrecks me.

I secure her against me.

“Then let me make you forget anyone else ever put cuffs on you.”

Whatever she’s about to say disappears when my tongue finds her.

“Fuck, Thiago.”

I keep her legs locked over my shoulders and give her what she asked for, taking my time with her.

“That’s it, baby,” I murmur against her. “You taste so fucking good. I could die here, you know that?”

The vibrator keeps working inside her as I feel every ripple through the body resting against me.

“God…Thiago.”

“Look at me. Who put you here?”

“Y-You did.”

“Who did you choose?”

“You.”

I circle her clit and pull her closer against me, taking in how completely soaked she is as her legs begin to shake around my shoulders.

“That’s what I want you to remember.”

She shudders against me. “Only you.”

Helios pushes its way back into my thoughts. She trusts me enough to give me this much of herself without knowing why I was sent into her life, and the guilt is always there, waiting for a chance to ruin this, but I refuse to let either of them take this from us tonight.

Tonight, she chose me.

I tighten my arm around her waist and slide two fingers inside her, feeling her clamp down around them as her whole body tenses.

Her hips jerk forward. “Oh, shit…Thiago.”

I keep moving my fingers, and each pass sends a fresh shiver through her legs. When I add a third, I go slowly, giving her body time to accept the stretch.

“Baby…”

Moisture gathers along her lashes, and I immediately check in with her.

“You with me?”

“Yes.” Her voice cracks.

“That’s my girl. You’re doing so good.”

Her grip on the bar tightens as a broken sound slips free. “Thiago, I can’t…”

“Yes, you can. I’ve got you.”

The tears spill over. Her breathing is ragged, but she doesn’t pull away or ask me to stop.

I draw my fingers from her and bring them to her lips. “Open.”

She does, taking them into her mouth while I stay between her legs. The vibration of her moan travels into my hand, sending another hard pulse through my cock. I push them a little deeper, and her lips seal around them as she sucks them clean, a whimper muffled around my fingers.

“You like tasting yourself, don’t you?”

Her gaze stays on me while her tongue sweeps over my fingers. I ease them free, trailing them over her bottom lip.

She nods.

“Words, baby.”

“Y-Yes,” she whimpers.

I return to her clit before she can recover, working her with my tongue while the plug continues vibrating.

Her hips buck against me, her abdomen twitching beneath my arm. “Oh, fuck. Thiago…”

I keep pushing her closer, refusing to ease up even as her legs begin to shake violently around my shoulders.

“That’s it. Let it happen.”

“I can’t.”

“You don’t have to do anything, baby. Just stay with me.” I take more of her weight as her strength starts to give out. “You’re right here with me.”

She shakes her head, overwhelmed by whatever is building inside her. “Thiago, something feels…”

She never finishes.

Liquid suddenly spills over my tongue and splashes across my face as her body seizes.

My girl just squirted all over me.

I hold her steady through the release, her body trembling against me until her breathing finally starts to settle.

Her legs go slack around me as she looks down, completely stunned.

“Did I just…”

Grinning, I kiss the inside of her thigh. “Yeah, baby, you did.”

Color rushes into her cheeks. “Holy shit. I’ve never done that.”

I laugh and stay close while the aftershocks fade. “That was fucking beautiful.”

She looks like she wants to argue, but she’s still breathing too hard to manage it. I carefully lower her legs and rise, sliding an arm around her

waist when she wobbles.

“Easy.”

“I’m fine.”

“You can barely stand.”

“I had a very traumatic experience.”

I smile and kiss her forehead. “Apparently.”

Keeping a hand at her waist, I unlock the cuffs one at a time and guide her arms down, rubbing my thumbs over her wrists before letting go.

Then I reach behind her, turn off the vibrator, and pull her against me. She tucks herself into my chest, and for a while, I just hold her, resting my cheek on top of her head. I love this part almost as much as everything that came before it

My dick is still painfully hard between us, reminding me how badly I want her, but I can wait because she needs this more right now.

I stroke her back while her breathing gradually steadies against my neck. Then I bring each wrist to my mouth, pressing a careful kiss to both as I remember how hard I fought against putting those cuffs anywhere near her.

“Thank you,” she says softly.

I lift my head to meet her eyes.

Remi kisses me, lingering until a small laugh passes between us.

“What?”

She pulls back and studies my face. “You’re a mess.” Her fingers sweep over my cheek and along my jaw.

“You complaining?”

“Absolutely not.” She leans in again. “We should definitely do that more often.”

“I’m definitely not arguing.”

Her hand slides between us and wraps around my cock, drawing a rough breath from me.

She glances down before that familiar spark returns to her expression. “So, what are we going to do about this little problem?”

“There’s nothing little about that, and you know it.”

Remi laughs and fists my shaft, wiping the smile straight off my face.

“I thought you needed a minute.”

“I did.” She rises onto her toes and brushes her mouth against mine as I slide my hands beneath her thighs and lift her. Her legs lock around my

waist, ankles crossing behind my back as she hooks her arms around my neck.

“I’m feeling much better now,” she says, dragging her tongue slowly along my still-wet cheek. “Now take me somewhere you can fuck me properly.”

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Sixty-Three

REMI



I ’ve lost track of time.

Day has faded into night, leaving the bedroom lit by the lamps on either nightstand. I’m still draped across Thiago’s bare chest, my ear over his heart, listening to one of my favorite sounds as the ceiling fan stirs the blanket resting low across my hips.

I trace the ink covering his skin with my fingertips, following patterns I’ve already memorized but never grow tired of touching.

Everything feels easier with him. I can slow down, breathe, and lie here without my mind racing toward the next thing that demands my attention. And I wish we could stay like this as long as we wanted.

The thought makes me pause because wanting more of Thiago isn’t new, but admitting exactly how much I want him is. He stopped feeling temporary a while ago. He isn’t simply someone I love spending time with anymore. He’s become part of my days, my routines, my family, and every version of the future I let myself imagine.

I want lazy mornings tangled in the sheets and kisses in the kitchen while one of us forgets dinner on the stove. I want his clothes mixed with mine in the closet and his records taking up more space than I’ll ever admit they deserve. I want to learn every version of him, including the ones he has a harder time showing me.

Most of all, I want to know that he’ll still be there when I wake up tomorrow.

I don’t want to lose him.

That fear has followed me all the way to Miami, but lying here with his heartbeat beneath my ear finally forces me to acknowledge what comes with wanting a future with him.

Thiago deserves to know who he's building it with.

As his thumb traces slowly along my back, my eyes begin to sting. I close them, hoping the feeling will pass, but a tear slips free and lands on his chest.

His hand stills. "Remi…" he whispers.

"Thiago," I say before he can ask what's wrong.

He pushes himself up slightly. "Baby, what is it?"

I tighten my arms around him. "Just give me one more minute."

He doesn't push. Instead, his arms close around me, and I stay there until I trust myself enough to pull away. Then I sit beside him, and when I finally meet his eyes, concern fills his expression.

"When we met, I hadn't been in a relationship for years, since Ryuji."

"Okay..."

I look down at my hands. "But I never told you the whole truth, the reason dating has never been easy for me or something I could ever treat casually." I rub my thumb across my palm, trying to figure out where to begin. "My life isn't normal, Thiago. It never has been."

He sits up. "Remi, whatever this is, you can tell me."

"You don't know that."

"I know how I feel about you."

"That's exactly why I'm scared."

Saying it makes everything I'm risking feel more real, but I've already decided I can't leave this room without telling him.

"I can't keep moving forward with you while hiding this part of myself. You deserve to know who you're with and to decide for yourself whether it changes anything."

His expression shifts so subtly that I almost miss it.

"But I trust you, Thiago. I trust you with everything I love most in this world." Reaching for his hand, I place it over my heart. "And I trust you with this. I just need you to guard it with yours."

For a few seconds, he says nothing. There's something in the way he looks at me that I can't decipher. It disappears before I can make sense of it, leaving me wondering whether my nerves put it there in the first place.

“I will.” The certainty in his voice gives me enough courage to keep going.

“My family does Sunday dinners, birthday parties, Christmas mornings, bedtime stories...everything you’d expect.”

A small smile tugs at my lips as I think about them, but it doesn’t last.

“They also taught me how to line up a shot from four hundred yards, how to defend myself, and more ways to kill a man than anyone should know.”

Thiago watches me closely, without interrupting.

“They didn’t teach me those things because they loved guns or fighting. They taught me because they knew a day might come when I’d need those skills to survive.” I lace my fingers through his. “The world you think you know is far darker than the one most people ever see.”

He draws in a slow breath, but I keep going before he can respond. If I give myself too much time to think about what I’m about to tell him, I might lose the courage to say it.

“I’ve done things, Thiago. Some of them, I’m not proud of, but there are others I would do again without hesitation because the people I love are alive because of them.”

His hand comes to my face, and he brushes a loose strand of hair back behind my ear. “What have you done, Remi?”

This is the part I’ve been dreading. I hold his gaze.

“I’ve killed people.”

For several heartbeats, neither of us says a word, and I watch his face for the moment everything changes. I expect shock first, then fear or disgust as he realizes the woman beside him has taken lives.

None of it comes.

“Not because I wanted to.” I continue. “I’ve never enjoyed taking a life, but there have been times when it was them or someone I loved, and I made my choice.”

Thiago still hasn’t pulled away.

I search his face again, convinced I must be missing something, but nothing has changed since before I told him.

He doesn’t see me as dangerous or as some kind of monster. He still sees Remi, and I don’t know why that makes me want to cry harder than if he’d recoiled.

“There’s an entire network of people out there who deal in death, where blood is currency. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

He takes a moment before answering. “Is that what you do?”

“No.”

“Your family?”

“Not anymore.”

Slipping out from under the blanket, I get to my feet, too nervous to care that I’m still naked. “I know what I’m asking of you by telling you this. You wear a badge, and I’m admitting I’ve killed people and that my family was once part of a world most don’t even know exists.” I turn back to him. “I’m trusting you with things that could destroy all of us if they fell into the wrong hands.”

Now that it’s all out there, I finally understand how much I’ve trusted him. Even with everything at stake, I don’t regret it.

“I couldn’t keep falling for you while hiding this part of myself. You deserve the truth, and if learning it changes what you want with me, I’ll understand.”

“Remi.” He gets out of bed and comes toward me before I can say anything else. His arms wrap around me, drawing me against his chest. “I’m still here. I’m not going anywhere, *chama*.”

Trying to believe it can really be that simple, I hold on to him. “Thiago.” I pull back just enough to see his face. “Do you mean that?”

He cups my cheeks. “*Eu sou seu, meu amor. Enquanto você ainda me quiser*.”

I’m yours, my love. For as long as you still want me.

My eyes fill again as I rise onto my toes to kiss him, but he slips an arm beneath my thighs and lifts me before I can reach his mouth.

A laugh escapes me through my tears.

He carries me back to bed and kisses me as he lowers us onto the mattress. When he pulls the blanket over us, I return to the place against his chest I never wanted to leave.

“I took an oath years ago, and every day, I try to be a better man. I want to be someone my father would be proud of.” His fingers glide gently through my hair. “I’m not perfect, Remi. I’ve made mistakes, and I’ll probably make more. But I’ve never been more certain of anything than I am of how I feel about you.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “Whatever tomorrow brings, this is the truest thing I know.”

I’ve spent this entire conversation waiting for him to change his mind, but he hasn’t. He knows now. Maybe not every name or every ugly detail, but he knows enough to understand who I am and where I come from. He’s still holding me exactly as he was before.

I curl closer and listen to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat as his fingers move through my hair. “Sometimes, I think about it,” I whisper.

His fingertips brush my shoulder. “Think about what?”

I lift my head and rest my chin on his sternum so I can see him. “What my life could look like if I ever left all this behind.”

His touch slows.

“My mother grew up on a beautiful hacienda.”

“The one in the painting in your room?”

I nod. “That’s the one. I used to stare at it, wondering how she ever survived somewhere so peaceful. When I was younger, the thought of living that far from everything sounded like torture.”

“And now?”

I smile as my finger traces one of the ink lines across his chest.

“Now I understand it a little better. I could have acres of green around me, horses outside my window, and mornings when there’s nowhere I need to be.” I glance up at him. “I could watch the sun rise without hearing sirens in the distance and go to bed without wondering who might come looking for us next.”

“Sounds like a dream.”

“It is.” My smile fades. “That’s the problem.”

“Why?”

“Because people like me don’t get to decide one day that we’re finished and walk away. My parents tried. My aunts and uncles tried. They built normal lives and raised us, but none of it erased what came before.” I trace another line. “Eventually, some part of it always finds its way back.”

Thiago takes my hand and interlaces our fingers. “That doesn’t mean you have to spend the rest of your life paying for it.”

“I’ve done plenty of my own.”

“But you’re not only defined by the things you’ve done, Remi. You shouldn’t have to spend your entire life carrying the weight of choices other people made before you were even old enough to understand them.”

“That sounds like something people tell themselves to sleep better at night.”

“Maybe.” He kisses the back of my hand. “Or maybe it’s something you’ve never allowed yourself to believe in.”

I look at him for a moment. “The world is still what it is, whether I believe it or not. Wanting something doesn’t make it possible.”

“And what do you want, Remi?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Thiago waits.

“Tell me.”

I’ve imagined it before, usually in pieces I never let myself put together because wanting a life I might never have seemed pointless.

“I want a family of my own someday.”

His expression softens. “A family?”

“Yeah.” I look down at our joined hands until they blur through my tears. “I want kids who don’t know any of this and never have to. I don’t want them growing up knowing there are people who might come after them because of something their parents or grandparents did before they were born.” I look at him again. “I want them to believe the world is good, Thiago. I want them to be good.”

“They would.”

“You say that like you’re sure.”

“I am.”

“But how can you possibly know?”

He tips my chin up toward him and wipes a tear from my cheek. “Because they’d have you.”

I’m completely unprepared for how much I needed to hear that.

All my life, I’ve thought about the things my family passed down to us. Their enemies, their mistakes, their instincts. Every skill they taught us because they knew their past might one day become our problem. So I’ve never spent much time thinking about what I could pass down that was good.

I lay my head on his chest again as his arms close around me.

Maybe he’s right.

Maybe wanting something different has to start with believing I’m capable of creating it.

We stay that way for a while before another thought I’ve been carrying finally surfaces.

“Baby?”

“Hmm?”

“When we get back, I want you to meet my family.”

His fingers stop moving through my hair.

“I mean, really meet them.” I continue. “Not just running into them or knowing them because of me. I want to bring you home.”

His heartbeat quickens against my ear.

“I want them to know you and understand what we have and what you mean to me.”

Thiago doesn’t answer right away, and uncertainty starts creeping in before I remember what I’ve just asked him to do.

Five minutes ago, I told the man my family once belonged to a world where people killed for a living. Now I’m asking him, a cop, to sit down with them for dinner. I probably should’ve expected a bit of hesitation.

He holds me tighter and says, “I’d love to.”

I smile against his chest, relieved there’s nothing left between us that I’m afraid he’ll know.

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Sixty-Four

THIAGO



The elevator doors slide open onto the second floor of the Philadelphia Police Department, and I don’t break stride. I’m not supposed to be here today. My duffel hangs from one shoulder, more out of habit than necessity, while every officer I pass offers a nod or greeting. But I barely register them because my mind is still on what happened over the last two days.

Remi told me everything last night. Not the information I gathered from files and surveillance reports, nor the pieces Helios fed me when they sent me after her. She sat in front of me, terrified that the truth might change how I saw her, and still chose to tell me anyway.

She told me she’d killed people, confirmed what her family had been and the world they once belonged to, then asked me to come home with her to meet them.

She trusted me with it, and I’ll take every word to my grave rather than let Helios use any of it against her.

I should probably question what that says about my loyalty to the organization I’ve spent years serving, but whatever remained of it took a hell of a hit when I saw the bruises on Remi’s wrists and heard how helpless Grey made her feel.

Those bruises haven’t left my mind since Miami.

I shove open the locker room so hard that it rattles against the stopper.

“Braga?” Ryan calls out as he approaches me. “Thought you were off today.”

“I was.”

He slows as I pass him. “Hey, everything good?”

“No.” I keep walking, searching the rows of lockers until I find Grey standing in front of his. He’s pulling a clean uniform shirt over his head when he catches sight of me in the small mirror mounted on the door.

The fucker grins. “Braga.” He slams it shut. “Didn’t know you were back already. How was—”

I shove him, driving his back into the metal with a crash.

“What the hell?”

I step closer before he can recover. “You went to Sloane’s.”

His eyes narrow. “The gun range?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “What about it?”

“You drew your weapon on them.”

His jaw tightens before he shoves me back. “We had intel.”

“You handcuffed innocent civilians.”

“We secured the scene. It was procedure.”

“The hell it was.”

Grey squares his shoulders. “You got a problem with how I handled my scene?”

“My problem is that you put your hands on people you had no business touching.”

His expression hardens. “Like I said, we got a call. We followed the lead and found four armed individuals inside.”

“In a fucking gun range, after hours.”

“They were still armed. You know the protocol as well as I do.”

“I know you had no probable cause to detain them.”

“We had enough to secure the scene until we knew what we were dealing with.”

“You knew exactly what you were dealing with. Remi told you she owned the place, agreed to show identification, and told everyone to put their weapons down.”

Grey gives me a hard look. “And everyone walked away.”

I grab the front of his uniform and shove him back against the lockers. “She had bruises around both wrists.”

His hands close around my forearms. “Maybe she shouldn’t fight the cuffs next time.”

I tighten my grip on his uniform. “There won’t be a fucking next time, you goddamn piece of shit. You’re lucky that’s all that happened.”

Grey has no idea how close he came to starting a war. If one nervous officer had fired inside Sloane’s, losing Remi wouldn’t have been the only consequence. The Cain family would have torn this department apart to reach whoever was responsible.

“Thiago, you need to calm down.” Ryan places a firm hand on my forearm.

“Were you there too?” I ask without taking my eyes off Grey.

Ryan’s hand drops. “No, I wasn’t, but—”

“Then you have nothing else to say.” I release Grey and step back. “Internal Affairs will receive a report.” Before my anger gives me yet another reason to stay, I turn away from him.

“It won’t change anything,” Grey shouts after me.

I keep walking.

“I get it, Braga.” He chuckles under his breath. “She’s a sweet piece of ass. I’d probably lose my head over her too.”

I’m halfway across the locker room when I turn and head straight for him. Ryan catches me around the torso before I reach Grey, and two other officers grab my arms.

“Fuck you!” I roar as I fight to break their hold.

Grey straightens and dusts off his uniform. “You’re the one who’s fucked.” He points at me. “You’re letting pussy get in the way of doing your job.”

I wrench one arm free, then the other, and Grey’s confidence evaporates as I start toward him again.

“Officer Braga.” The commander’s voice stops me before I reach him. "My office. Now."

The locker room goes silent.

I slam the office door behind me and stalk toward Elena’s desk.

She leans back in her chair as if this is just another day at the precinct, not as if I were seconds away from tearing Grey apart with my bare hands.

“You were the source of the intel, weren’t you?” I slam my fist on her desk. “Tell me. Was it you?”

She studies me before reaching for a cigarette, then lights it and takes a slow drag.

“I’ve been gone for weeks, Operative, waiting for you to fulfill your end of the deal you agreed to.” She exhales a stream of smoke. “Did you plant the devices?”

“Fuck the devices, and fuck this assignment. You’re not getting intel because there isn’t any to find. Remi knows nothing.”

She trusted me enough to share her family’s past, but none of it gives Elena what she wants.

The commander smiles around her cigarette. “Is that right, or are you compromised, just as I knew you would be?”

“I know her better than I did when you sent me after her. If she knew anything, I would’ve found it by now. You want something on the Cains so badly?” I step closer. “Then do it yourself. Walk into their house and take whatever the fuck you think is there. I dare you. But I’m done with this assignment.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Fine. I’ll start your transfer immediately.”

When she reaches for her phone, I snatch it and hurl it at the wall. “I’m not leaving Philadelphia.”

“You don’t get to make that decision.” She rises from her chair and steps around the desk. “You’re in serious breach, Operative. You stopped sending useful reports weeks ago, ignored every check-in I issued, and never confirmed you planted the devices. Did you really think I hadn’t noticed?”

“What are you going to do?” I move toward her. “Put a hit on my head, too?”

Her lips press into a thin line. “Get out.”

“I’m calling HQ to request *your* transfer. You’re out of control, Elena. This stopped being about justice a long time ago. You’re out for blood, and I’m done helping you get it. This isn’t what we do, and it sure as hell isn’t what I signed up for. One of the kids you sent Grey after is only seventeen.”

“I said, get out. Empty your locker while you’re at it.”

I point at her. “Stay away from Remi and her family.”

“Are you threatening me?”

I wrench open the office door. “No. That’s a fucking promise.”

“Do you really think it’s that simple?”

I stop with one hand still wrapped around the handle.

“You don’t resign from Helios, Operative.” Her voice remains calm behind me. “Helios decides when it’s done with you.”

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Sixty-Five

REMI



"That's the fourth dress you've tried on. When have you ever cared this much, Rem? Plus, you look great in anything, and it's not like you're the one trying to make a good impression," Valentina says with a yawn.

My phone is propped against the mirror on my dresser, Val taking up most of the screen as she watches me move between my closet and the bed, adding another dress to the growing pile.

"That's not the point." I hold a black dress with a high slit against me and study my reflection. "I'm nervous as hell, V."

"Why, baby? It's just the family. It'll be fine."

I toss the dress onto the bed, then reach for my phone. "I know. I just really want them to like him."

"They will. If everything you've told me about Thiago is true, they'll love him. He's good to you and cares about you. After everything you told him in Miami, he's still right there beside you, and that's huge."

I fall back onto the mattress, unable to stop smiling. "Yeah. It almost doesn't feel real."

"That tattoo on his neck is pretty fucking real."

I laugh, but my fingers drift absently across my chest.

There's something terrifyingly beautiful about a man willingly branding himself with the darkest parts of you.

I stare up at the ceiling for a moment, then glance back at Val. "I love him."

Her face lights up. "Oh, I know."

“Shut up.” I laugh, grabbing one of the pillows beside me and hugging it to my stomach. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

I roll onto my side to face the phone. “I think I’ve known for a while. I just wasn’t ready to say it yet.”

“And now you are?”

I think about Miami, about sitting beside him and handing him truths I’ve spent my entire life protecting. I think about asking him to meet my family because keeping him separate from the rest of my life suddenly felt impossible.

“Yeah.” I don’t have to think about it. “Now I am.”

Val’s smile softens. “Then I’m happy for you. You deserve that crazy, obsessive, I’d-kill-and-die-for-you kind of love.”

I smile because that’s exactly how this feels.

“I used to think I could have fallen in love with Ryuji, that we could have been something special. We were so much alike, and neither of us would’ve had to change or hide where we came from.”

“Maybe you would have loved him,” Val says. “Just differently.”

“Yeah.” I trace a loose thread in the comforter with my fingertip. “Because I’ve never felt anything like this with him. Not even close. I’ve never felt anything like this with anyone.”

The certainty is there, but so is the one question I haven’t been able to shake.

“Val, do you think it’s too soon? How the hell can I already be this sure of someone?”

“There’s no set timeline. You either feel it or you don’t, and you clearly do.” She gives me a knowing look. “So stop asking yourself whether you got there too fast. Take your time with everything else. Enjoy that man and let yourself be happy. You deserve it.”

I know she’s right. I trusted Thiago with truths that could destroy my family if they fell into the wrong hands, his hands, and then asked him to come home to meet the people I love most. I might not have said the words to him yet, but I’ve already given him every part of me that matters.

“Yeah.” I smile into the comforter. “I think I can do that.”

She tries to hide a yawn, but I catch it. Six p.m. here is one a.m. in Moscow. Back when we were tearing up the track at Furia, we watched the

sun rise more times than I can count. Now Val is a domesticated wife who can barely keep her eyes open past midnight.

I laugh at the thought, and her brow furrows.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I grin. “Get to bed. I’ll update you tomorrow.”

“You better.” She yawns again. “Have fun, baby. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

My phone vibrates before I can set it down, and the name on the screen instantly warms my cheeks.

Thiago: Hey, beautiful. I’ll be there in about an hour.

My stomach flutters as I type a reply.

Me: I can’t wait for tonight. Thank you for doing this.

The typing bubbles appear, disappear, and then appear again.

I frown at the screen. He usually doesn’t take this long to figure out what he wants to say.

Thiago: I’m looking forward to it.

I stare at his reply for another second until the time at the top of the screen catches my eye.

“An hour? Shit!”

I spring into action and grab the black dress with the high slit from the pile. By the time I finish my makeup and curl my hair, I still have thirty minutes to spare.

On my way down the hall, I stop to visit Hannibal and Clarice. My boy is coiled beneath his heat lamp, fast asleep, while Clarice rests in the corner of her enclosure, her patterned body pressed against the glass.

“Hey, girl. You’re wired too, huh?” I rest my elbows on her enclosure. “Must be because tonight’s the night. Maybe you don’t know this, but this whole meeting-the-parents thing is a big deal, especially in our family. Not just anyone impresses them or earns their trust, but I think Thiago has a pretty good shot. What do you think?”

Clarice stares back at me, completely unimpressed.

“Okay, maybe he threatened to shoot you, but to be fair, there was the whole escaped-venomous-snake situation. You get it. Nothing personal.”

I laugh just as my phone alerts me that someone is requesting access to the building.

“He’s early.” I grant access, then look back at Clarice. “Don’t wait up.”

I cut across the living room, and a minute later, the doorbell rings. Pulling up the camera just to fuck with him a little, the smile drops from my face the second I see who’s on the other side.

Thiago’s boss.

“What the hell is she doing here? How does she even know where I live?”

The doorbell rings again, and I ignore it. Whatever she wants, she can take it elsewhere. Her showing up at my apartment makes no sense, and after what happened at Sloane’s, every instinct I have is telling me not to trust this.

I turn away from the door, but another possibility stops me.

What if something happened to Thiago? I grab my phone and open our messages.

Me: Baby, are you okay?

I wait, watching the screen for the typing bubbles that never appear.

“Fuck.”

I call him instead, but it rings until his voicemail picks up. That’s enough to send me back toward the door.

I yank it open. “Where’s Thiago?”

Her expression is cool and unreadable as she steps closer, but I stay planted in the doorway, blocking her from coming inside.

“I have something for you, Remi Cain.”

“What are you talking about?” I grip the doorframe. “Where’s Thiago?”

She ignores the question and holds out a white envelope.

“What the fuck is that?”

“Open it.”

“I don’t have the time or patience for your cryptic bullshit. Tell me what you’re doing here and whether Thiago is okay.”

A smug smile curves her lips. “You’re asking the wrong questions, dear.” She extends the envelope a little farther. “Maybe you should be asking yourself who Thiago Braga really is.”

“What does that mean?”

“All the answers you’re looking for are right here.”

I glance down at the envelope.

“Go on.” She tilts her head. “I think you’ll find it...enlightening.”

I know better than to trust a damn thing this woman says, but against my better judgment, I take it. Then I step back and slam the door in her face without another word.

Wondering why the fuck I answered the door in the first place, I stare at the envelope in my hands. My heart is pounding so hard I can barely swallow. I shouldn’t open it. Whatever is inside came from a woman I already know I can’t trust. But if she’s lying, what the hell is she lying about? What could she possibly reveal about Thiago?

Her last word keeps running through my head.

Enlightening.

I set my phone on the table and break the seal with trembling fingers. A stack of documents slides into my hand. The first page is a demographic profile. My driver’s license photo stares back at me from the upper-right corner, while every detail of my life is laid out beneath it in clean, clinical print. My full name, date of birth, home address, vehicles, known associates, and family members are all listed.

Even Hannibal and Clarice have their own entries. A chill crawls down my spine as I turn the page.

TARGET PROFILE
CAIN, REMI ISABEL
THREAT ASSESSMENT: ORANGE
OPERATIONAL OBJECTIVE: RECONNAISSANCE | INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION | RETRIEVAL | SANITIZE
ASSIGNED OPERATIVE: 427
OPERATIVE: THIAGO BRAGA
COVER IDENTITY: PHILADELPHIA SWAT OFFICER, PRECINCT 9
MISSION STATUS: ACTIVE

My eyes stop on his name.

Thiago Braga.

I read it again, then force myself to keep going, but the words beneath it barely register as my vision blurs when I turn the page.

OPERATIONAL DIRECTIVES

- Establish contact with target and develop rapport.
- Gain target's trust through continued personal contact.
- Obtain access to target's residence, vehicles, businesses, and daily routines.
- Identify current members and associates of the Cain organization.
- Determine whether members of The Six remain operationally active.
- Determine the location and current possession of the Ledger.
- Identify safe houses, financial assets, security measures, and other resources available to the Cain family.
- Maintain cover identity and preserve target trust at all times.
- Await further authorization regarding retrieval and sanitize protocols.

My stomach turns as I reach the next section.

FIELD INTELLIGENCE SUMMARY

Target Habits and Behavioral Observations

- Target co-owns Sloane's shooting range with cousin Valentina Cain.
- Target maintains an extensive private vehicle collection and performs her own mechanical work.
- Target frequently retreats to a private rooftop terrace when overwhelmed or seeking isolation.
- Target uses third-person self-talk while concentrating or under stress.
- Target keeps two snakes, Hannibal and Clarice, inside primary residence.
- Target displays strong protective instincts toward immediate and extended family.

I stop.

“No…no…”

My hands begin to shake as I keep reading.

ACCESS AND RELATIONSHIP ASSESSMENT

• Operative has obtained unrestricted access to target’s primary residence.

• Target voluntarily introduced operative to private rooftop terrace previously restricted from outside access.

• Operative has been introduced to multiple members of target’s immediate and extended family.

• Target has disclosed personal history and demonstrated increasing emotional dependence on operative.

• Target has granted operative continued access to personal routines, businesses, and vehicles.

• Target’s emotional attachment to operative continues to increase.

• Target currently demonstrates a high level of trust in operative.

I brace one hand against the table because I suddenly don’t trust my legs to hold me.

“It can’t be true.” My voice breaks.

I read the page again, desperate to find something that doesn’t fit, something he couldn’t possibly know that would prove Elena put this together from a distance and that Thiago had nothing to do with it. But every line brings back another memory.

My terrace. My home. My family. The nights when I let him see inside my head. My fingers tighten around the paper until it crumples beneath them. I blink as a tear hits the page, only then realizing I’m crying.

Thiago wasn’t learning me because he loved me.

He was studying me.

The thought makes my chest cave in. I press my palm against my sternum and draw a breath, but it catches halfway down. Another tear falls, then another, and the words in front of me swim until I have to wipe my eyes just to keep reading..

As I turn another page, my breaths come faster, each shallower than the last. Then my eyes catch two lines near the bottom, and I stop breathing altogether.

Current Operational Development: Target has invited operative to private family dinner. Attendance will provide direct access to senior Cain family members and an opportunity to assess current organizational activity.
Mission Status: ACTIVE

My heart gives a painful thud as the meaning sinks in. No one. No one outside my family knows about tonight except Thiago.

"No."

I shake my head as more tears spill down my cheeks. There has to be another explanation. There has to be a way Elena found out without him telling her, because the alternative means he walked away from everything I trusted him with last night and reported back to the woman who sent him after me.

But I can't find one.

The denial I've been clinging to finally shatters, and the pain that rushes in behind it nearly doubles me over.

He told her.

He had to have told her.

A sob catches in my throat as I swipe at the stack, sending papers scattering across the floor. I stumble back from the table and wrap my arms around myself, as if I could somehow hold together everything inside me that's coming apart.

"No." I can barely force the word past my lips. "Please...it can't be true."

I back away from them, but there's nowhere to look that doesn't remind me of something I gave him. My apartment surrounds me. The home he was ordered to gain access to. Somewhere above me is the terrace he was ordered to find. Downstairs are the cars he was supposed to document.

I press a hand over my mouth as another sob forces its way up my throat.

"No, Thiago. You didn't do this to me."

My phone vibrates against the table.

Thiago Calling...

I stare at his name.

An hour ago, I would've answered before the first ring even finished. I was standing in this same room, telling Val I loved him, wondering how I could possibly be so sure after only a few weeks. Now I know exactly how.

He made sure I would be.

The call ends, only to start again seconds later, but I can't bring myself to touch the phone.

Everything I thought was ours suddenly has another explanation. The questions he asked. The places he wanted to see. The way he paid attention to every little thing I did. Even the parts of me I thought he noticed because he cared.

I trusted him with all of it.

And he was sent here to make sure I did.

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Sixty-Six

THIAGO



Remi: Meet me on the terrace.

Her text arrives just as the elevator doors slide open, and I step inside.

I can barely hear myself think over the pounding of my heart. It beats so hard I swear I can feel it in my throat.

Before dinner, before we take this next step and she introduces me to her family, I need to come clean. I need to tell her how it all started, how deeply sorry I am for deceiving her, and how each lie I told grew harder to live with as my feelings for her became real.

There's one truth I'm no longer afraid to admit.

I love her.

I've known it long enough that pretending otherwise has started to feel like another lie.

I spent most of last night pacing my room, turning every conversation over in my head, searching for an explanation that would make this right, but there isn't one. Nothing excuses the lies I told or the truths I deliberately withheld from her. I kept rehearsing what I would say anyway, because I need her to hear it from me. I need the chance to tell her the truth before anyone else ever can.

I can only hope she forgives me.

The elevator reaches the rooftop, opening onto the terrace. The pool comes into view first, its surface rippling as the first drops of rain fall. I can't imagine what Remi would be doing up here after spending all that time on her hair and makeup.

“Hey, *chama*. You up here?” I call out as I round a tall potted olive tree. “Remi? Baby, it's raining. We're about to get drenched if we don't go back inside.”

Her voice comes from behind me. “I don't think either of us is going to dinner.”

Every muscle in my body locks as I turn toward her.

She’s standing several feet away, both hands wrapped around her Glock, the barrel trained on my chest. Rain streams through her hair as black mascara streaks her cheeks, mixing with tears she doesn’t bother to wipe away.

One look at her face tells me everything.

The words I spent half the night preparing disappear because I already know I’m too late.

I slowly raise my hands. “Remi, let me explain.”

“Explain what, Braga?” Her voice shakes so hard I barely recognize it. “That you’re not really SWAT? That you’re some undercover piece of shit?”

“No.” I take a cautious step toward her. “That’s not how this happened.”

“Bullshit!” She steadies the gun. “Enough with the bullshit. I saw it. I saw every fucking page.”

I swallow hard. “I’m not denying how it started."

Rain soaks through my shirt, plastering it to my skin as I force myself to hold her gaze.

“But once I got to know you, *chama*, once I knew who you really were...”

“Shut up!” she screams. “Shut up. You don’t get to call me that.”

The gun trembles, and watching her struggle to hold herself together forces me to see exactly what my lies have done to her. I want to go to her so badly that my body keeps leaning forward, but I stop myself. She’s crying because of me, and I can’t even touch her without making another choice for her.

“It’s all a lie. None of it was real, Thiago.” A sob slips free as fresh tears spill down her face. “How could you do this to me?”

“It was real.”

A broken laugh escapes her.

“You expect me to believe that?” She swipes at her tears. “I let you into my home. I let you meet Zara. I told you things I’ve never told anyone.”

Her arms slowly fall to her sides, taking the gun with them. “I trusted you.”

The last three words come out so quietly I almost don’t hear them.

“I thought...” She shakes her head, her face crumpling. “I thought you loved me.”

For a moment, I can’t speak.

She has no idea I spent half the night trying to find the courage to tell her exactly that. Now she’s standing in front of me, believing the only part of this that was completely real was another lie.

“I do.” My voice falters. “And I’m sorry, Remi. I’m so fucking sorry. I should have told you the truth before any of this happened. Before I touched you and before you trusted me. I should have given you the choice I took away from you.”

Her face falls even more, and I close the distance between us.

“No, Remi. Listen to me. Please.” I wrap my arms around her. “I wanted to tell you. I came here prepared to tell you everything.”

She doesn’t move.

“I love you.”

Her entire body goes still against mine. The words are finally out, but the relief I imagined never comes. She gives me nothing, and I tighten my hold because I can feel her slipping away from me while she’s still standing in my arms.

“I do. I swear to God, Remi, I love you.”

A sharp pressure drives into my abdomen, and my breath hitches.

At first, I don’t understand why her body has shifted against mine or why heat is spreading beneath my ribs until she pulls away, and my eyes drop between us.

The black handle of her knife protrudes from my stomach.

I stare at it, then slowly lift my eyes to hers. The pain I saw there hasn’t faded, but fury has taken over her expression. She looks at me as if the man she loved is gone and I’m the bastard who took him from her.

“Liar,” she whispers.

Of all the things she could call me, that one cuts the deepest.

I stumble backward and press a hand over the wound as hot blood spills through my fingers.

“Remi...” I look from the knife to her, still trying to process what just happened. “You stabbed me.”

“You’re a bastard, Braga.” She raises the Glock again. “And you’re lucky I didn’t put a bullet through your skull the second you stepped off that elevator.”

“Remi, I came here to tell you the truth.”

“Well, guess what?” Her laugh twists into another sob. “Your commander beat you to it.”

Elena.

Goddamn you.

“This isn’t how I wanted you to find out.”

“No?” She looks at me in disbelief. “Maybe you should’ve told me the first time we fucked. Remember that?” Her voice wavers. “Or when I let you spend time with Zara. Maybe that would’ve been a good time. Or when I trusted you enough to hand you pieces of my life that belonged to no one else.”

She closes the gap between us, and I don’t move.

Her fist slams into my chest.

“Or that night you showed up at my door.” She strikes me again. “I held you while you cried. I fucking bathed you, you goddamn asshole.”

She pounds against me, over and over, each blow weaker than the last as she loses herself to grief. I don’t stop her or try to shield myself. I take every one because I deserve it. I keep saying her name through it all, but she either can’t hear me or doesn’t want to.

“Remi...”

“I held you together when you were falling apart, Thiago.” Her breathing turns ragged as she looks up at me. “At your father’s grave...” She presses a trembling hand to her mouth, struggling to speak. “I was there for you because I loved you.”

The past tense hollows me out.

My vision blurs, and I blink hard, but the first tear slips free anyway. She said “loved,” as if whatever she felt for me already belongs to a life she’s leaving behind.

I had her love, and I fucking lost it before I ever got the chance to tell her she had mine.

When she sways toward me, my hands lift to catch her before I stop myself. After everything I’ve done to her, I don’t know if I have the right to touch her anymore.

Then her hand closes around the handle protruding from my abdomen, and my eyes fly to hers.

“Rem, don’t…”

She holds my gaze and wrenches the knife free. The pain nearly drops me as blood pours down the front of my shirt.

Before I can recover, she drives a right hook into my mouth, busting my lip open. I barely taste the iron before her left fist connects with my cheek. One of her rings catches beneath my eyebrow, tearing the skin and sending a warm trail down the side of my face.

I should’ve known better than to think Remi wore anything that couldn’t also double as a weapon.

I’m too slow to get out of the way when she slashes the knife across my ribs. Water runs into the cut, burning as I press a hand against my side and feel blood seep between my fingers.

“Remi, stop.”

The blade comes at me again. I bring my forearms up to protect myself, and it slices over them, leaving several cuts behind.

“Fuck you!”

I reach for her wrist but pull back before I can close my hand around it. I could stop her. I know I could, but using my strength against her after everything I’ve already done would feel like another betrayal.

That hesitation costs me when the blade catches two of my fingers.

“Remi, please.” Desperation roughens my voice as I retreat another step. “I don’t want to hurt you, baby. Please stop.”

“Hurt me?”

She laughs through her tears. “How fucking thoughtful of you.”

With her eyes on mine, she hurls the knife at my face. I jerk my head aside, and it passes so close to my temple I feel the rush of against my skin. The steel strikes the concrete behind me with a sharp crack.

We both freeze.

I look up at her and realize the knife was never the thing I needed to be afraid of.

“I hate you.” Another sob shakes her voice. “I hate you so much.” She drags a trembling hand across her face, smearing what remains of her mascara. “Was any of it real, Thiago?”

“It was all real. Every second I got to know you was real.” I step toward her despite the gun and the blood running beneath my shirt. More tears fall.

“Look at me, baby. I lied about why I came into your life, but I will never lie to you about what you became to me after.”

“I can’t.” She shakes her head, sending wet strands of hair across her face. “Because the man I thought I knew...the one I thought I loved...” She struggles to get the rest out. “He doesn’t exist. He never did.”

“Don’t erase him because I was too much of a coward to tell you the truth.” My voice breaks, and I make no attempt to hide it. “I’m standing right here, Remi. I’m the bastard who lied to you, and I’m the same man who held you, laughed with you, fell in love with you. None of that belonged to any mission. It was mine. It was us.”

She stares at me for several seconds, then swipes at her tears with the heel of her hand. When she speaks again, there’s more strength behind the words.

“No.” Her jaw tightens. “You knew my father’s name before I knew yours.”

I open my mouth, but nothing I can say makes that any less ugly.

“You knew my mother. My family. My home. You knew them all before I ever let myself know you.” A bitter laugh slips out. “I thought I was letting a good man into my life, but I was delivering the enemy to their doorstep.”

“I’m sorry I betrayed what that meant to you.”

She raises the gun again, and this time, her hands are steady. “Your mission wasn’t just about me. It was about all of us.”

The barrel is level with my chest.

“That’s where you fucked up, Braga.” The tears gathering in her eyes don’t weaken the conviction in her voice. “Because if I have to choose between the man I love and my family...” Her lips tremble as she forces out the rest. “I’ll bury the man I love myself.”

All I hear is that one word. *Love*. She didn’t say she loved this time. She still loves me, and she’s going to pull the trigger anyway.

Her finger curls around it.

“If you love me, let me fix this.” I take a careful step toward her. “Let me tell you everything. No more lies or secrets. Just you and me.”

Fresh tears slip down her cheek.

“I wish I didn’t.”

I move closer.

“Remi, please.”

She flinches when I reach for her.

“You don’t want to do this. You won’t kill me.”

Her chest rises with a shaky breath as she stares at me over the barrel of the gun. I can see the fight happening in her expression, the fury warring with everything she just admitted she still feels for me.

“You killed me first,” she whispers.

The gun fires.

I close my eyes and brace for the impact, but it never comes. The shot rips across the terrace, followed by the violent splash as a bullet hits the pool behind me.

The Glock clatters to the concrete.

When I look at her again, Remi is staring at her empty hands as if she can’t believe what she’s done...or what she couldn’t do.

She chose not to shoot me.

A sob tears out of her as she wraps her arms around herself, and another tear slips down my face. I don’t bother wiping it away.

I move toward her, but she immediately backs away.

“Don’t.”

“Baby...”

“Don’t call me that.” She drags both hands through her wet hair and looks at me with an anguish I know I put there. “Please...just don’t.”

“I love you. You have to know that. I know that means nothing to you right now, but it’s true. It was true before I stepped onto this terrace, and it will still be true when you hate me tomorrow.”

“Get out.”

“Please, just let me explain.”

“Get out!” she screams. “Go. Right now.” She points toward the elevator. “Because if you stay...” She squeezes her eyes shut before continuing. “If you stay, I’m going to remember every reason I love you, every reason I trusted you, and every way you betrayed me.” Her hand falls back to her side. “And I can’t survive that.”

I stare at her, knowing there’s nothing I can say she’ll believe. Not tonight, and maybe not ever.

When she opens her eyes again, her gaze finds mine. “So leave. And if you ever come back...” Her voice drops, but the hesitation is gone. “I won’t make the same mistake twice.”

This time, I believe her.

“I’ll kill you.”

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Sixty-Seven

REMI



I don’t remember leaving the terrace. I don’t remember driving to the garage, taking off my makeup, or curling up on the couch. Yet somehow, the sun is up.

I squint against the light streaming through the windows, my head still pounding from all the fucking crying. The second I let myself think about why, more tears threaten, so I shove it all away before it can take hold.

I don’t want to remember.

Stop it, Remi.

My gaze lingers on the stripped frame of his truck.

The front fender still leans against the wall where I left it. The driver’s door sits on a stand, half-sanded and awaiting fresh paint. I’d spent hours repairing the bullet holes he took for me.

I’d planned to finish it today.

“Now what?”

I push myself off the couch and walk toward the truck. When I reach the open hood, I stare down at the engine, not registering a single thing in front of me.

Instead, I see Thiago throwing himself between me and a hail of gunfire. I remember him refusing to leave me behind and getting us out before the police arrived. He protected me from those men and then risked his career to keep me out of handcuffs.

My lungs constrict, and I press my lips together as my eyes burn again.

How am I supposed to reconcile that man with the one who lied to me from the start? How am I supposed to hate someone who put his own life on the line for mine?

Or was that a lie, too?

Before I can let myself go any further, my phone vibrates again.

It's been going off ever since I texted my family to let them know I wouldn't be coming to dinner. I told them I was fine and that I'd reach out later.

But they keep fucking calling.

"Leave me alone!" I roar, snatching the damn phone off my workbench. "Why don't you get that? Fuck!"

I hurl it across the garage, where it slams into my toolbox and shatters on impact.

A half-empty energy drink sits near my feet, so I kick the can hard enough that it skids across the concrete and crashes into one of the door panels, knocking it off its stand.

A small white square slips free as the panel hits the floor, landing near my boots.

I stare at it for a moment before bending to pick it up.

It's a Polaroid of Thiago, Zara, and me.

We took it the day we went out for ice cream, using the little camera she'd gotten for her birthday. I'd stuck my tongue out for the picture, making her laugh so hard she'd nearly dropped it.

I never noticed until now that Thiago isn't looking at the camera.

He's looking at me.

I know that expression because I caught it on his face more than once when he thought I wasn't paying attention. His eyes were fixed on me as if nothing else in the room mattered.

"No." I shake my head. "No..."

My fingers tighten around the edges of the Polaroid, but when I try to crumple it, I can't.

I stand there staring at him, then the anger rushes back.

"Fuck you, Thiago Braga."

I crush it into a tight ball, let it fall to the floor, then turn toward the truck.

"Fuck this truck."

The breaker bar hangs from the side of my toolbox. Yesterday, I used it to loosen the bolts securing his replacement fender.

Today, I wrap my hand around it and swing.

It punches through the windshield, spraying glass across the seats.

I swing again, and the front fender buckles beneath the impact.

“You lied.”

The bar comes down on the hood.

“I trusted you.”

Another strike caves the metal beneath my hands.

“I defended you.”

I bring it down harder.

“I chose you.”

The next blow sends a jolt up my arms.

“I loved you.”

I hammer it into the truck again and again.

“I fucking loved you!”

I keep swinging until every word turns into a scream and the truck barely resembles the one I spent hours putting back together.

The breaker bar slips from my fingers and crashes onto the concrete.

“Why weren’t you real?” I stare at the damage in front of me, struggling to catch my breath. “Why did you let me love you?”

A sob shudders through me as I take in what’s left of his truck. After everything I did to it, it’s still here, just like him and every fucking memory.

“Why won’t you leave me alone?”

My attention shifts to the top drawer of my workbench. I yank it open and grab the Glock inside.

“I couldn’t do it.” My hand tightens around the grip as I stare at the wreckage. “But I can do this.”

I raise the gun and squeeze the trigger. The shot echoes through the garage, and the driver’s-side window explodes outward, scattering shards across the concrete.

It isn’t enough, so I fire again.

The next bullet chews through the driver’s door, leaving a fresh hole in the metal. I fire again, this time into the hood. Then again and again and again until the slide locks back. The sudden silence leaves my ears ringing, my ragged breaths filling the empty garage.

I lower the gun and stare at the ruined truck until it blurs behind my tears.

Whatever was keeping me on my feet disappears. I stagger back until I hit the wall and slide to the floor, pulling my knees to my chest as the Glock falls from my hand. I bury my face in them and finally let myself fall apart.

I'm crying so hard, I don't hear the garage door open or the footsteps crossing the concrete. When I realize someone is here, I don't care enough to look.

"Baby girl."

Papá.

"Go away," I whisper between sobs.

"Remi." He crouches in front of me. "Look at me."

I shake my head. "No. Just...just go. Please."

His hand closes gently around my chin and lifts my face.

For a long moment, he says nothing. His eyes sweep over my swollen cheeks, then the bruises across my knuckles before dropping to the gun beside me. When his gaze returns to mine something in his expression has changed. The softness he always saves for me is gone.

"Where is he?"

"No. Don't. It doesn't matter anymore."

"The hell it doesn't."

"Killing him won't make this stop hurting."

Some of the anger leaves his face as he brushes his thumb beneath my eye.

"He hurt you, *princesa*." His voice lowers. "The day you were born, I held you in my arms and made you a promise that if anyone ever hurt my little girl, I'd make them regret it." He presses a kiss to my forehead. "I meant it then, and I mean it now."

"Papi..." I grab the front of his shirt. "It hurts." Another sob tears out of me, and my fingers bunch in the fabric. "It hurts so fucking much, and I don't know how to make it stop."

His arms wrap around me, pulling me against his chest. "You don't have to know." He holds me as my cries grow louder. "And you don't have to carry it alone. I'm here."

I cling to him and let myself be his daughter, without trying to be strong or figure out what comes next. I just sit there with him and let it all out.

“It was all a lie,” I murmur once I can speak again. “And I was so stupid. So fucking stupid.”

“Don’t say that.” He brushes the damp strands of hair from my face. “You trusted someone you loved. That doesn’t make you stupid.”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“You love hard, baby.” His fingers stroke gently over the back of my head. “Just like your mother.”

My breathing slowly steadies, and my attention shifts to the ruined truck, riddled with bullet holes and shattered glass.

I stare at the destruction.

For the past several hours, all I’ve been able to think about is Thiago, his lies, his betrayal, and everything he knew about me before I knew anything about him.

My eyes settle on the holes torn through the metal, and a new thought begins to push through the grief.

Thiago knew about my family and our history, but none of that information started with him. Someone else gave it to him.

Helios gave it to him.

They knew exactly who I was and sent someone to get close enough that I never saw them coming. If they did it once, they can do it again. They know who my family is, where we live, and what we’re capable of. They have access to information we didn’t even know existed and enough reach to put one of their own right in front of me without raising anyone’s suspicion.

I pull away from Papá and wipe away the remaining tears from my cheeks.

“What is it?” he asks.

“It’s not over.”

“What do you mean?”

“Thiago betrayed me, but he wasn’t the one making the decisions.” Saying his name still hurts, but I force myself to continue. “There are people above him who know everything about us. They could be the ones looking for the Ledger and the ones who coordinated the attack four years ago.”

“What aren’t you telling me, Remi? Who are they?”

“There’s an organization called Helios.”

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Sixty-Eight

REMI



Walking into a room full of my family feels intimidating instead of comforting.

Just a few weeks ago, I stood in this same spot defending my decision to be with Thiago. I asked them to believe in his character despite their suspicions because I believed in him.

Now I have to tell them I was wrong.

I take in the room. My parents stand behind the large desk, Papá's hand resting at the small of Mamá's back. Uncle Derek and Aunt Eva sit shoulder to shoulder across from Uncle Silas and Aunt Leni, with Santino beside them. Matteo, Gio, and Madden linger by the window.

On a television mounted to the wall, Val and Maksim watch from Moscow. Every pair of eyes settles on me, but I don't find anger or disappointment on a single face.

That almost makes it worse.

I lower myself into the empty chair and stare down at my hands.

"I'm sorry."

No one says anything.

I wait for someone to question me, or remind me that they warned me about him and I refused to listen, but none of it comes.

They just give me the time I need to continue.

"I trusted someone I shouldn't have." I lift my head, even though meeting their gazes is harder than I expected. "I told him more than I ever should have. About myself…and our family."

The shame I've been carrying since last night weighs even heavier.

"I can't stop thinking about that." I take a slow breath and steady myself. I didn't come here to cry. I've done enough of that. "I don't know what else to say except that I'm sorry for all of it."

"Remi." Aunt Leni is the first to speak. "Look at me."

I lift my head.

"You made a mistake," she says. "A painful one. But that's all it was. It is not a measure of your intelligence, your strength, or your worth."

My eyes start to burn, and I blink hard.

"You trusted someone you loved. That doesn't make you weak. It makes you human."

"I should have known."

"Why?" Her question catches me off guard. "Because you're always supposed to know when someone is lying to you? Because loving someone should come with a special ability to see every secret they're keeping?"

I don't have an answer.

"Thiago deceived you. That belongs to him. You don't get to turn his actions into a reason to punish yourself."

A tear makes its way down my cheek.

"Listen to me, Remi. You've always walked into a room with your head high. You speak your mind and you fight like hell for the people you love. You don't apologize for taking up space." She pauses until I'm looking at her again. "Don't let one man's betrayal make you believe any of that disappeared overnight."

Around me, no one says a word.

"Nothing that happened changes who you are to us. You're still our Remi, and you're still fiercely loved."

Reaching across the table, she extends her hand to me.

"So lift your chin, sweetheart. Don't let him take that from you, too."

I take her offered hand, and she gives mine a squeeze. "Thank you."

Papá waits until I look at him. "A mistake, *princesa*. That's where this ends." His voice leaves no room for argument. "Now we deal with those responsible."

I push to my feet, and everyone turns toward me, but being the center attention of the doesn't carry the same weight it did when I walked in. "I called you all here for a reason."

My eyes find Aunt Leni first, then Aunt Eva and finally Valentina on the screen. Val gives me a small smile, and I hold on to the reminder that I'm not standing here alone.

"Thiago Braga is part of an organization called Helios."

Saying his name still hurts, but I continue.

"According to the file I was given, Helios is some kind of covert operation. I don't know exactly where they fall or who they answer to, but they have access to information and resources they shouldn't have." I look toward Uncle Derek. "The best way I can explain it is that they're the antithesis of The Six. Have you ever heard of them?"

"No."

Aunt Eva shakes her head. "I've never seen that name in any report or database."

"Neither had I until that woman gave me that file. Helios compiled a full dossier on me, including every one of you except the Leones." I rub my palms against my thighs before continuing. "Thiago was sent to learn what we know and retrieve any intelligence we have."

The next part is harder to say.

"If he couldn't or if he learned we were still active, he was supposed to eliminate me."

Mamá goes still.

There's one more thing I've kept from her, and after everything that happened with Thiago, the last thing I want is another secret between me and my family.

"Mamá, there's something you don't know. I asked Aunt Athena to let me be the one to tell you."

She steps closer. "What is it?"

"You met Thiago's father. You were with him the night he died."

Mamá takes a moment.

"The detective from Miami?"

She goes quiet before realizing, "Oh. The little boy."

"That was him."

Santino gives me a small nod from across the room. Aunt Athena must have told him.

"Thiago is also the officer who saved Zara at the bank."

He saved and comforted Zara, someone who means everything to all of us. I think that was the day I started seeing him differently. Knowing he'd

put his own life on the line for her affected me more than I knew how to admit at the time. I believed it showed me exactly who he was. Even now, I don't know if I was wrong about that part. And that's what scares me.

"If Helios knows as much about this family as that file suggests, then they know about Zara too." I turn toward Santino. "Things are already getting dangerous, and she's too young to be anywhere near this."

"Agreed." Santino pulls out his phone. "Athena's already on her way. Zara won't leave our sight."

"We don't know what Helios is planning or how far they're willing to go. We have contingency plans and safe houses for this very reason." I look around the room. "I think it's time we use them."

"Remi."

I turn toward Matteo as he rises from his chair. "What about Thiago?"

I knew someone would ask eventually. I'm still not ready to answer.

In this family, we don't go looking for trouble, but when someone comes for one of us, we make sure they never get another chance to do it again.

And Thiago came for me.

Back on that rooftop, I wanted him dead. I hated him enough to believe that pulling the trigger would be easy. But I couldn't do it. And now the thought of anyone else hurting him, of his life ending because of me, makes me sick.

"I'll deal with Thiago when the time comes."

"Remi." Uncle Derek looks to his brother.

I understand what he's asking without hearing the words. Uncle Derek has loved me like a daughter for as long as I can remember. If my father gave the order, there would be nothing left for me to deal with.

I've never lost sleep over what the men who raised me are capable of. But I would if the man on the receiving end had Thiago's face.

"Please." I look between them. "Give me that."

Uncle Derek's jaw tightens, but after a moment, he gives me a reluctant nod.

Voices rise around the room as phones come out and everyone starts making plans. Mamá comes around the desk and wraps her arms around me.

"*Mi amor*, I'm proud of you." She kisses my temple. "And I'm sorry."

I don't trust myself to answer, so I hold on to her.

All my life, I’ve watched my mother walk into situations that would terrify most people and take control. I used to wonder if I’d ever be able to do the same.

Maybe I already have more of her in me than I realized.

I stood before the people I love most, admitted one of the biggest mistakes I’ve ever made, and offered them a path forward even as my heart was still breaking.

For today, that’s enough.

Chairs scrape against the floor around me, and phones begin to ring. Uncle Derek is already issuing orders as Aunt Eva falls into step behind him on the way out. Santino leaves next, focused on getting back to his family. Papá pauses beside me long enough to rest a hand on my shoulder before following them.

“Remi?” Valentina’s voice carries through the room, and I turn toward the television. After our last conversation, part of me was afraid of what I might find on her face once she knew how wrong I’d been.

I should’ve known better. Val has always been my person. She smiles at me through the screen, her eyes already glistening.

“Call me when this is over, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I love you.”

I manage a frail smile. “I love you too.”

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Sixty-Nine

THIAGO



The Helios building rises from the Philadelphia skyline, looking like every other federal office in the city. Behind its walls, an entire global operation hides in plain sight while everyone outside remains oblivious. The sun is already high, traffic moves through the streets below, and people go about their lives as though mine didn't fall apart last night.

I haven't allowed myself to think about what happened with Remi beyond cleaning the blood from my skin and doing what I could to close the wound in my abdomen. I couldn't risk going to a hospital, so a needle, surgical thread, and enough gauze to stop the bleeding had to be good enough.

It wasn't.

Every movement pulls at the stitches beneath my shirt, and my ribs still burn where her knife sliced my skin. My lip is split, two of my fingers are bandaged, and the cut beneath my brow opens whenever I forget and touch my face.

There's no escaping what happened, even when I refuse to think about it. If I let myself remember the way she looked at me when I told her I loved her, I won't make it through those doors. I owe it to her to make sure she's no longer a target.

As I pull into the parking garage, Ryan's contact lights up the dashboard.

"Ryan, I really can't talk right now." I reach for the door handle.

"Braga, the commander's missing."

I freeze. “What do you mean she’s missing?”

“Exactly that. She didn’t report for a callout last night, didn’t show this morning, and she won’t answer her phone. Grey is conducting a welfare check as we speak.”

The pain in my abdomen becomes irrelevant.

Elena disappeared hours after handing Remi that file.

“Fuck.”

“Thiago...”

Ryan and I have gotten close since I arrived at the precinct, close enough that I know the usual lightness in his voice, even when things get serious, and there’s none of it now.

“You don’t, um...know what could’ve happened to her, do you?”

There it is.

He thinks I had something to do with her disappearance. I understand why. Emotions were high in her office that day, then came my confrontation with Grey, followed by the small detail that Elena fired me.

The accusation still catches me all wrong. Ryan should know me, except he doesn’t. None of them do.

“No, I don’t. I haven’t seen or spoken to her since I left her office.”

The line stays quiet for too long, long enough for me to wonder whether he believes me, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is where Elena is now and whether Remi is the reason she disappeared.

“I have to go,” I say.

“Wait. Braga, talk to me.”

I squeeze the steering wheel. “Listen, I already told you I don’t know...”

“No. I read the report on what happened to your girl, and I just want you to know that despite what it says, I believe you. I did some digging, and that intel was bogus. Grey only followed through to get in good with the commander. I would’ve told him to shove it, too.”

I drag a hand over my face and immediately regret it when my palm catches the cut beneath my eyebrow. The sharp sting gives way to warmth on my skin, and I pull my hand away to find fresh blood on my fingers.

“Ryan, I fucked up. I fucked up the one thing in this world I give a damn about, and all I can do now is try to fix it.” I wipe the blood off my pants. “Even if she never forgives me, I need to know she’s safe.”

Ryan goes quiet, and I can only imagine what he’s making of what I just said. With Elena missing, I don’t have time to explain any of it.

“You love her?”

“More than you could possibly understand.”

I end the call before he can say anything else, then climb out of the SUV. The movement tugs at my stitches, forcing me to brace a hand against the door until the pain eases enough to move.

Making my way through the garage to a side entrance, I pull my badge from my pocket. The bandages around my fingers make it harder to grip, but I manage to swipe it through the reader and wait to see whether Elena has revoked my access.

A quiet chime, and the panel flashes green. At least one thing is going my way.

Security is posted throughout the building, and I make a mental note of every position as I pass. I didn’t walk in here expecting to need an escape route, but years with Helios taught me that complacency gets you killed.

I skip the elevators and enter the stairwell to climb to the seventh floor. The steady rhythm of my boots on the concrete gives my mind too much room to wander, but I refuse to let my thoughts drift back to Remi when I need to stay focused on keeping her alive.

By the fifth floor landing, every breath pulls at the cut across my ribs. The stab wound throbs with every step, and halfway up the final flight, damp warmth has spread beneath the bandage.

I put pressure on it and keep climbing.

At the seventh floor, I swipe my badge through another reader, and the lock disengages with a soft click.

I’m in.

“Sir, can I help you?”

A brunette stands behind the reception desk, wearing a practiced smile that falters when she gets a good look at me. Her gaze flicks briefly to the cuts on my face before dropping to the bandages around my fingers.

“I need to speak with Mr. Miller.”

Her eyes return to mine. “Mr. Miller is fully booked for the evening. If you’ll give me your badge number, I can try to schedule something for next week.”

Next week isn’t an option when Remi might not have that long.

“That’s not going to work.” I turn and head down the hallway.

“Sir! You can’t go in there!”

Her voice follows me as she speaks quickly into the microphone clipped beneath her collar, alerting security before I've made it halfway down the hall.

I pick up my pace. The office door is only a few yards away when hurried footsteps echo behind me.

"You can't go in there!" Another shout joins hers from farther down the hall. I reach the office, wrap my hand around the doorknob, and swipe my badge through the reader. The lock disengages, and I push through the door.

Five men seated around an oval conference table turn toward me as all conversation stops.

"I'm Thiago Braga." I shut the door behind me. "Operative 427. Precinct Nine, undercover. Elena Duvall is my handler." I look around the table. "I need to file a complaint."

The oldest man rises from his chair. Like the receptionist, he looks over my wounds before returning his attention to me.

"Did my assistant authorize this meeting?"

"No, sir." I step farther into the room. "But it's imperative that you hear me out."

He gives me nothing in return, so I continue.

"Agent Elena Duvall has gone rogue. She has repeatedly violated protocol, withheld operational information, and disclosed classified intelligence to a potential target."

The last two words nearly stick in my throat, but I force them out.

No one says a word.

"She's no longer acting in the organization's best interests. This stopped being about the mission a long time ago. It's personal now." I glance around the table. "Her actions have compromised operational security, jeopardized Helios, and put innocent civilians at risk."

The five of them exchange measured glances before the man at the head of the table gestures toward the empty chair opposite him.

"Have a seat, Agent Braga."

I remain standing. "With all due respect, sir, I'd rather not waste time."

His attention lingers on me for another second before he nods. "Very well. Continue."

I tell them everything relevant to Elena's conduct, starting with her growing fixation on Remi. I leave out anything that could further expose

Remi, then explain Elena's decision to hand over classified intelligence. No one interrupts or gives any hint of what they're thinking as they take notes.

When I finish, the man at the head of the table folds his hands in front of him.

"You're alleging that Agent Duvall knowingly violated operational protocols."

"Yes, sir."

"She disclosed classified information to a civilian."

"Yes."

"And you believe her judgment is compromised."

"I do."

He nods. "Very well."

For one brief second, I think they understand why I came here, then his next question changes everything.

"Can the civilian identify the organization?"

I grip the backrest of the empty chair beside me.

"Yes."

"Can she identify personnel?"

"She knows my identity and Agent Duvall's."

"Has she shared that information with anyone else?"

The question puts me on alert.

"No."

He waits a beat before asking, "You're certain?"

"Yes."

The woman beside him taps the tablet in front of her, bringing something up on the screen.

"Remi Cain lives within minutes of several immediate family members and maintains frequent contact with them. Are you asking us to believe that after Agent Duvall disclosed classified intelligence to her, she told no one?"

My stomach twists.

I never gave them her name.

They knew exactly who Elena had compromised before I ever walked through the door.

"I'm telling you I have no evidence that she shared anything."

"Do you believe she did?"

I don't answer quickly enough, and the woman makes another note on the tablet.

“Are these family members capable of acting on that information?”

I feel the trap closing around me.

“That’s irrelevant. Remi isn’t a threat to Helios, nor is her family.”

The man at the head of the table leans back in his chair. “You just confirmed that Agent Duvall exposed this organization to a civilian linked to a highly organized criminal enterprise, and you cannot assure us that the information did not go beyond her.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“It’s what you told us.”

My jaw tightens as the purpose behind every question becomes clear. I came here to put an end to Elena’s operation against Remi, but instead I gave them another reason to look at her.

He turns toward the woman seated next to him. “Begin containment procedures.”

My entire body tenses. “Sir?”

His attention returns to me. “The compromise extends beyond Agent Duvall.”

I shake my head. “No, with respect, that isn’t necessary.”

“Explain.”

“Remi isn’t a threat.”

A crease forms between his brow. “That’s an emotional assessment.”

“It’s an accurate one.”

“She possesses classified knowledge.”

“She won’t use it.”

“You cannot guarantee that.”

“I can!”

His attention drops to the bandages around my fingers before moving to the ones on my face. “Did she do that to you?”

I grit my teeth. “That has nothing to do with this.”

“I disagree.” He gestures toward me. “You walked into this office with multiple injuries, yet you’ve made no attempt to explain them. Now you’re asking me to accept your assessment that the civilian responsible poses no threat to this organization.”

“She was angry with me, and she had every fucking right to be.”

“Was she armed?”

I don’t answer.

Miller’s eyes narrow. “Did she use a weapon on you?”

My silence answers for me. The woman beside Miller is still working that fucking tablet.

“Don’t.” I look directly at her. “You don’t know what happened.”

Miller’s voice remains calm. “Then tell us.”

I can’t tell them she stabbed me and pointed her gun at me with every intention of firing because every detail I give them would become another mark against her.

Miller looks at the hand I still have pressed near my abdomen.

“You’re protecting her.”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation.

“And you expect me to believe that makes your assessment reliable?”

“I know her.”

“You were assigned to observe her for months, Operative. We have years’ worth of intelligence on the Cain family.”

“You have files. I know the woman.”

He pauses, letting that sit between us. “The woman you claim poses no threat attacked a trained Helios operative badly enough that you arrived here visibly injured, yet you are still willing to hide the extent of what she did.” He pauses. “That doesn’t make her less dangerous. It makes you compromised.”

My fist slams against the table. “She is not your fucking enemy.”

“No, Operative. But she is now a security risk, and you have demonstrated that you are incapable of assessing her objectively.”

He glances toward the two agents standing against the wall. “Disarm him.”

The men start toward me.

I know what happens if I surrender my weapon. They detain me, containment teams move on Remi and her family, and I lose any chance to warn her before they arrive.

There’s no walking this back once I make my choice. I also know there’s nothing left for me to choose. My weapon clears its holster before either guard can reach theirs. I fire, and both men hit the floor before they can draw. Two of the executives spring to their feet.

“Braga, wait.”

I don’t. They’ve already decided Remi is expendable, and surrendering would give them the chance to act on it. The moment one reaches beneath

his jacket and another lunges for the alarm mounted beside the door, I fire before either of them can finish the move.

Gunshots tear through the room as the others scramble for weapons, but within seconds, only Miller remains standing. He backs away from the table, his gaze fixed on the gun in my hand, before darting toward the door.

“You can’t do this.” His voice has lost some of its calm. “The entire organization will come down on your head, Operative. Is that what you want?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore.” I move toward him. “Don’t you get that?”

A slow smile pulls at his mouth. “No, Agent Braga.” His eyes shift toward the surveillance camera mounted in the corner. “I don’t think you do.”

I turn toward it.

“From the moment you entered this office, everything has been streamed directly to Central Intelligence.” As if we’re discussing nothing more serious than tomorrow’s weather, he smooths a hand over the front of his jacket. “You can kill me if that’s what you want, but it won’t change what’s already in motion.” He looks me directly in the eye. “You will be classified as compromised, and Agent Duvall will answer for initiating the Cain file without authorization. There was never an operational directive against that family. She acted independently and, in doing so, exposed Helios to a civilian with ties to a criminal organization.”

Cold spreads through me as the truth becomes clear.

Elena did all of this on her own.

“Your testimony confirmed the extent of that compromise.” Miller takes another cautious step back. “By the time this conversation ends, Central Intelligence will already be mobilizing containment teams.”

I came here believing I could protect Remi by exposing Elena, but all I’ve done is give Helios everything they need to justify targeting her.

Miller’s smile widens just enough to make my stomach turn. “You didn’t come here to save her, Agent Braga. You just ensured she’d become our problem to fix.”

That does it.

“Then you better kill me first.”

He barely has time to react before I fire. Three rounds slam into his chest, driving him back into the corner before he crumples to the floor.

I move fast, stripping the spare magazines from the guards' belts and shoving them into my pockets before heading toward the door.

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Seventy

THIAGO



Bullets pierce the wall behind me as I race down the corridor, the tactical team closing in fast. Adrenaline blunts the pain enough to allow speed and agility I shouldn't still have. Ahead, a chime sounds as the elevator doors begin to close.

I push myself harder, and pain sears through my abdomen with every stride, but I force myself to keep moving. By the time I reach the elevator and wedge my arm between the doors, fresh blood is already soaking through the bandage beneath my shirt.

They bounce open, and I stumble inside, pressing the lobby button as voices draw closer in behind me.

"Stop!"

One of the agents lunges for the elevator just as the doors close, his hand reaching through the narrowing gap, but they seal before he can grab hold.

The car starts its descent, and I brace my back against the side panel, my weapon trained on the doors. My free hand presses against my side. When I pull it away, my palm is slick with blood, some of it already soaking through the bandages around my fingers.

Fuck.

The stitches are open.

I bear down on the wound, but the pressure sends a sharp bolt of pain through my body and forces the air from my lungs. I grit my teeth until it passes.

They’ll lock down the lobby before I even reach it. Every exit, stairwell, and vehicle will be covered, and in my condition, I won’t make it past a tactical team waiting for me when these doors open.

I close my eyes for a second and see Remi standing on the terrace.

“*Minha chama…*”

I’m sick at the thought of them reaching her before I do.

I’m not dying here before I know she’s safe.

My hand leaves my abdomen long enough to hit the buttons for several floors. The elevator stops at the next one, opening onto an administrative level lined with offices and conference rooms. I slip into the hallway, leaving the remaining buttons lit as the doors close behind me and the car continues toward the lobby.

Each movement tugs at my wound, and the dark stain spreads across the front of my shirt. I button my jacket and keep my pace steady. Running will draw attention, and right now, blending in is my only advantage left.

A woman hurries past me with a tablet tucked against her chest, too focused on the overhead alarm to spare me more than a passing glance, while another man barks into his radio as he rushes toward the stairwell.

“All tactical units to the lobby. Suspect is descending.”

They took the bait.

I turn down a side corridor and push through a door marked AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

The mechanical room beyond hums with generators and air handlers. I move between the pipes, keeping one hand pressed against my abdomen until I reach the opposite exit. My fingers are starting to feel clumsy around the grip of my weapon. I flex them once before cracking the door.

No one’s there, so I push through.

The hallway is empty, and the security office sits at the end. I punch in the code I memorized weeks ago. When the lock clicks, two analysts spin toward me, surprise written on their faces. One reaches for the panic button, but I’m across the room before he can.

I strike him across the temple with the handle of my gun before driving my shoulder into his partner. Pain tears through my side on impact, but I use my momentum to send him sprawling over his chair. His head slams against the console, and his body goes limp.

I straighten with a grimace as the monitors continue cycling through camera feeds from every floor.

This is exactly what I need.

Moving toward the console, I begin working through the building's security systems, triggering fire alarms, unlocking emergency exits, rerouting cameras, and overriding the elevators. Within seconds, the building erupts into chaos. Red strobes flash across the security feeds as emergency protocols clash with tactical commands. Agents converging on the lobby veer off course, some heading toward evacuation routes while others respond to alarms on opposite ends of the building.

The confusion buys me one thing bullets can't: time to get the fuck out of here and warn Remi. I don't know if she'll ever forgive me or let me get close enough to touch her again, but none of that matters if Helios gets to her first.

I exit through a rear door and follow a narrow maintenance corridor behind the elevator shafts until I reach a concrete stairwell few people outside Helios even know exists. Elena made sure I knew every inch of this building during my training, and now I'm using everything she taught me against the organization she trained me to serve.

The stairs open into the underground parking garage, where engines roar to life as response teams flood in through the vehicle entrance. A black SUV swings around the corner, and the driver reaches for the radio mounted on the dash, but he spots me a second too late.

I yank open his door and drag him from the seat. Another burst of pain sears through my wound, but I drive my elbow into his jaw before he can draw the pistol at his hip. He collapses onto the pavement with a groan.

"Come on, Braga. Almost there," I mutter as I climb into the driver's seat and slam the door.

Because apparently getting out of this building wasn't going to be that fucking easy.

I floor the accelerator, but I'm not fast enough to clear the gate. The reinforced arm crashes into the windshield with a deafening crack, then snaps off its hinges as glass explodes through the cabin. I throw an arm over my face and keep my foot down, driving the SUV through what's left of the barrier and into the street.

Sirens erupt behind me, but Philadelphia keeps moving ahead, completely unaware that the woman I love has just become a target of one of the most powerful organizations in the country.

I grit my teeth. They'll have to kill me before they ever lay a hand on her.

Once I've put three blocks between myself and the Helios building, I pull my phone from my pocket and dial the only person who might listen long enough to warn them.

He answers on the third ring.

"Matteo." My voice comes out rough. "Please don't hang up."

"I only answered to tell you what a piece of shit you are and that if I ever see you again—"

"Yeah, I know." I glance in the rearview mirror as I weave around a delivery truck. "Maybe I am, but there's no time for that. You all need to leave. Right now. They're coming for you."

"What the fuck are you talking about? Your people?"

"They're not my—" I stop myself because none of that matters. "Yes. They're assembling containment teams as we speak, and they could already be on their way."

"What the fuck did you do?"

"I tried to stop it." The admission burns on the way out. "I made it worse." I bury the gas. "Get Remi. Get your parents. Everyone. And don't let Zara out of your sight."

The line goes quiet.

"Braga..."

"She isn't safe. None of you are."

"What the fuck is going on?"

"I don't have time to explain."

A black SUV appears in my rearview and cuts through traffic behind me.

"Fuck. They found me."

"What?"

"They found me." I floor it as they close in. "Matteo, listen to me. If I don't make it to her, I need you to tell Remi I love her." My voice breaks, but I keep going because this might be the last chance I ever get to make sure she knows. "Tell her everything we had was real, every smile, every kiss, every time I looked at her, I meant it." Tears blur my eyes, and I blink hard to clear it. "Tell her I'm sorry, that I'm so fucking sorry I didn't tell her the truth before it was too late."

"Braga—"

Headlights fill my peripheral vision before I can react.

Metal slams into the driver’s side, lifting the SUV off the pavement. The impact throws me against the door, and white-hot pain rips through my wound as the world dissolves beneath the violent shriek of twisting steel.

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Seventy-One

REMI



"You should eat something."

I freeze halfway through slamming a magazine into my Glock and can't help but smile at the irony.

Amalia Montesinos has a body count longer than I could ever begin to grasp. She's led a team of deadly women on missions most people would've called suicide, and she's one of the best strategists I've ever known. But when it comes down to it, no matter how impossible the odds or how deadly the battlefield, she's a mother first.

"I'm not hungry, and we're not done."

She sets her weapon down and braces her palms on the metal table. "Remi, not eating isn't going to make you feel better. It'll only make you feel worse."

"I'm not punishing myself, Mamá. I just don't have an appetite." I slide extra firearms, loaded magazines, and boxes of ammunition into my hard case. "Not with everything that's going on."

She doesn't respond, but simply steps behind me and wraps her arms around me.

My hands go still over the open case as she pulls me against her. I let myself lean into her embrace, close my eyes, and listen to the steady beat of her heart as her familiar scent surrounds me. If only for a few seconds, everything I've been trying so hard not to feel becomes easier to bear.

Her fingers move slowly through my hair, but she doesn't tell me it'll be okay, and I appreciate that more than she'll ever know.

Thiago’s betrayal feels so much like grief that my heart doesn’t seem to know the difference. It comes in waves I can’t predict. One moment, I convince myself I can keep moving, and if I stay busy, I won’t have to think about him. Then something as small as hearing his name or catching myself reaching for my phone brings it all rushing back.

I hate that I miss him, and I hate even more that I still love him.

Most of all, I fucking hate that part of me still wishes I could wake up to find that none of it was real, that he’d be standing in my garage with that smug smile that drives me crazy, teasing me for working through the night as if I’d never learned the truth.

But I did.

And no matter how badly I want him back, I can’t undo any of it.

“Everything your Aunt Leni said back there is true, *mi amor*.”

“I told him about our family. I’ll never forgive myself for that.”

“You loved him. You wanted to be honest, and you wanted him to accept every part of you.” She brushes a tear from my cheek. “I understand that more than you know.”

I pull away and shake my head. “But now look at us. We have to leave everything behind. It isn’t fair, especially for Zara. She’s so little, and now she has to leave her friends, her dance classes...”

“None of that matters as much as keeping her safe. As long as we’re all alive, we can figure out the rest.”

I nod, but it doesn’t ease the guilt I’m carrying. “I have to coordinate transport for Hannibal and Clarice. I’ll meet everyone back here tonight.”

“Derek and your father are going with you.”

When I open my mouth to argue, one look from her shuts me up. It’s the same look that’s ended every debate between us since I was five.

“Fine,” I mutter with an exaggerated sigh.

She smiles. “There’s my dramatic teenager.”

Leaning in, I kiss her cheek before grabbing the handle of my case. “Love you.”

“I love you more.”

I make it halfway to the door when her phone vibrates against the metal table behind me.

“Remi.”

The sudden tension in her voice roots me to the floor. I turn and find her staring at the screen, her fingers tightening around the device.

“Mamá?”

She doesn’t answer. She only lifts her eyes to mine, and every trace of color has drained from her face.

“What is it?”

Without a word, she crosses the room and holds the phone out to me..

The message is from a number I don’t recognize, and the address below it means nothing to me. But then I see the photograph.

Thiago is chained to a chair with his head hanging forward, blood covering one side of his face and soaking through his shirt. One of his hands is wrapped in a red-stained bandage, and I recognize the cuts across his skin immediately.

I did that.

A sick wave of guilt rolls through me as I stare at the damage I caused alongside injuries that weren’t there when I left him. Beneath the photograph are three words.

Come get him.

My mind struggles to process what I’m seeing, but before I can make sense of it, the weapons room door slams into the wall.

“REMI!” Matteo barrels inside, breathing hard, his shirt plastered to his back with sweat. “Thiago called me.”

I glance from Matteo to the photograph on the phone, unable to reconcile the two. “What?”

“He called me.”

“What do you mean, he called you?” I thrust the phone toward him, my hand beginning to shake. “Then who the hell sent this?”

Matteo takes one look at the screen and pales. “Fuck...” He drags a hand over his face. “They got him.”

In seconds, I’m across the room, grabbing the front of his shirt. “Who? Who has him? Matteo!”

“Helios.”

“No.” I shake my head before he can say anything else. “That’s impossible. He is Helios. Why would they take him?”

“Remi.” Catching my wrists, he forces me to look at him. “I almost hung up on him. He was driving, and I could hear sirens behind him. He said they had deployed containment teams and were coming for us.”

I search his face for any sign he misunderstood, but there’s nothing.

“He was warning us.”

My grip slips from Matteo’s shirt. “No...”

“He told me to get everyone out and protect Zara. Remi, he told me that if he didn’t make it to you himself, I had to tell you he loved you.”

Bile rises in my throat.

“He said everything you two shared was real.”

Thiago said the same words to me on the rooftop, and I called him a liar. My eyes burn, and I look away from Matteo before he can see how badly that memory hurts.

“What happened after that?” My voice barely works, so I have to ask again before Matteo answers.

He lowers his eyes. “He said they found him.”

“And then?”

“He got hit. I don’t know whether they ran him off the road or T-boned him, but I heard the crash, and then the line went dead.”

I shake my head. “No, none of this makes any sense.”

“What if it’s a trap?” Mamá asks as she takes the phone from Matteo.

“I don’t think it is,” he says. “He sounded terrified, but not for himself.”

My eyes are fixed on the photograph, still glowing on the screen. “Why would they turn on him?”

No one answers, but as I stare at the blood covering Thiago’s face, the answer becomes painfully clear. He warned my family and tried to protect us, and Helios turned on him for it.

Because of me.

I grab my case and hurry to the door.

“Remi, wait!” someone calls after me, but I keep moving.

The heartbreak, the lies, and the betrayal are still there, but none of it matters right now because Thiago needs me. If I have to put a bullet in him myself after I drag him out of there, then so be it. But nobody else is laying a fucking hand on him.

“Follow me!” I yell over my shoulder without breaking stride.

I may be desperate, but I’m not reckless enough to charge in alone and risk getting us both killed. I need my family with me.

I throw myself into my car and tear out of the driveway. In the rearview mirror, Matteo falls in behind me, followed by my parents, Aunt Leni and Uncle Silas, with Uncle Derek and Aunt Eva bringing up the rear. I don’t have time to explain where I’m going or why. I tell them to follow me, and not one of them hesitates.

“Remi,” Papá’s voice comes through the speakers. “If, for some reason, you get there before us, you hold. Do you understand me?”

“I just need you to keep up.” I push the speedometer higher. “He didn’t look good.”

“I understand that, baby, but if this is what we think it is, charging in without a plan will only end badly.”

Before I can argue, Mamá joins the call, followed one by one by everyone else.

“I found the address,” Aunt Eva says. “The property belongs to a shell corporation with no business filings, no employees, and no operating history. As far as the public record is concerned, the building shouldn’t exist.”

Silence follows her discovery.

“Whatever’s inside that building,” Uncle Silas says, “someone invested a lot of time and money to keep it hidden.”

“Then we assume the worst,” Uncle Derek says. “Everybody stays together until we know what we’re walking into.”

I don’t answer. My eyes stay on the road as the world warps past the windows. Every second we spend talking is another second Thiago is trapped inside that building.

Two days ago, I was ready to kill him myself, and I almost did. Now the thought of getting there too late scares me more than anything he did to me.

I don’t know what will happen if we get him out. I don’t know whether I’ll forgive him, hate him, or walk away the moment I know he’s safe. I just need him to be alive when I get there.

I try to hold on to every reason I shouldn’t care this much. He lied to me, betrayed me and my family, and nothing he’s done since has erased any of it.

But it doesn’t stop me from loving him.

The first siren barely registers over the growl of my engine, but another quickly joins it, then another, until the wail surrounds us. Red and blue lights flash against the buildings ahead and streak across my windshield.

I’ve never been more relieved to see cops in my life until I realize they’re standing between me and Thiago.

As I round the final corner, police cruisers stretch across the street in both directions. Two tactical vehicles block the approach to the building, and officers in black body armor have formed a perimeter behind portable

barricades. Some have rifles trained on the entrances, while others move between the command vehicles and the teams positioned along the neighboring buildings.

Whatever they think is happening inside, they're preparing for a siege.

My attention shifts to the barricades, the armored vehicles, and the line of officers between me and the building. I didn't come here expecting them, and there's no way I'm getting through without them trying to stop me.

"We need to fall back and figure out another way in," Uncle Derek says over the call. "There are too many of them."

I bring my car to a hard stop several yards from the barricade and throw the door open. My name comes through the speakers behind me, but I shut the door and head straight for the perimeter. A SWAT officer intercepts me before I take more than a few steps, with two others moving into position behind him.

"Ma'am, stop right there."

"What's going on?" I try to look past him toward the building. "Who's inside?"

"This is an active tactical operation. You need to move back."

"Remi?"

I recognize Ryan's voice before I see him.

He jogs toward us from the command post and quietly says something to the officer blocking me. The man reluctantly steps aside but stays close.

Ryan looks like he hasn't slept. "You can't be here." His eyes flick toward my family as their vehicles pull in behind mine. "Thiago is..."

I grab his forearm. "What? He's what?"

Ryan glances at the officers around us, then lowers his voice. "We've been told he's holding Commander Elena hostage."

For a second, I can only blink. "No. That's not true."

"Remi, listen."

"That's not what's happening." I reach for the phone, then remember I left it with Mamá. "They have him. I saw him chained to a fucking chair."

Ryan's eyebrows draw together. "What?"

"They sent us a photograph and an address. He was covered in blood."

His attention shifts to the building. "Who sent it?"

"I don't know."

"Then you don't know what you're walking into."

"I know Thiago is in there."

“We have to work with the intelligence we’ve been given.”

“Your intelligence is wrong.” I grab his arm again as he starts to turn away. “He called before they took him. He said he was being chased. He was trying to warn us they were coming for my family, and then someone ran him off the road.”

“Who was chasing him? I don’t understand.”

The confusion on Ryan’s face is real.

Whatever version of this the police were given, they don’t know who’s actually behind it.

“I can’t explain everything right now, but you have to believe me. Thiago isn’t holding anyone hostage. He’s the hostage.”

Ryan looks back at the building, then at the officers surrounding it. “Then let me take this to command.”

“How long will that take?”

“I don’t know.”

“He could already be dying in there!”

“Which is exactly why we can’t go charging inside blind. If what you’re telling me is true, we need to figure out who the hell gave us false intelligence before I send a team through those doors.”

A hand clutches my upper arm.

“Remi, we need to re-strategize,” Mamá says behind me.

They’re right. Running into that building without knowing what’s inside could get Thiago killed, along with everyone who follows me. But understanding that doesn’t make standing here any easier. I step back from Ryan and turn away. Then movement near the command post draws my attention.

One of the BearCats idles several yards from the barricade, nose-first toward the building. An officer climbs down from the driver’s side just as someone at the command post waves him over. He leaves the door open and jogs toward them as another tactical officer at the rear of the vehicle unloads equipment onto the pavement.

My eyes return to the open driver’s door.

The engine is still running.

I look at the building, then at the concrete barriers blocking the entrance.

An armored vehicle built to punch through obstacles is parked less than thirty yards away, with nobody behind the wheel.

“Fuck this.”

I make my decision and sprint toward my car.

“Remi!”

I reach the trunk, throw it open, and grab my hard case as footsteps pound behind me.

“Remi, stop!”

I’m already headed for the BearCat. The officer unloading equipment sees me first.

“Ma’am! Get away from the vehicle!” He drops what he’s holding and charges after me, but I have the lead.

I get to the open door, throw the case inside, and haul myself into the driver’s seat. The officer grabs the edge of the door just as I yank it shut, forcing him to jerk his hand away.

I hit the lock.

“Get out of the vehicle!”

The driver comes running from the command post while officers across the perimeter turn toward the commotion.

Ryan’s face appears outside the windshield. “Remi, don’t fucking do this!”

Several rifles come up, but my family reaches the BearCat at the same time.

“Lower your weapons!” Aunt Leni shouts as she steps directly into their line of fire.

“Don’t you fucking dare point those guns at my daughter!” Mamá yells.

Officers shout for everyone to move back, but no one in my family listens. My father grabs my mom and pulls her away from the front of the vehicle, while Uncle Derek forces Matteo behind him.

The few seconds of chaos are all I need. I throw the BearCat into drive as Ryan slams his palm against the hood.

“Remi!”

I hit the accelerator, and the armored vehicle lurches forward as everyone scatters from its path. I aim for the gap between two cruisers, and a portable barricade disappears beneath the front tires with a violent crunch.

Officers race to clear the approach ahead of me, but I keep my foot down.

Across the property entrance, the security gate is already closing, but I’m moving too fast to stop, even if I wanted to. The BearCat plows through

it, ripping metal from the tracks and sending a section skidding across the pavement.

As the building rushes toward me, I brace myself against the seat, aiming for the glass-and-metal frame entryway instead of the concrete around it.

Then I floor it.

The reinforced grille smashes through the glass, throwing me against the seat belt. Shards explode across the hood as the frame buckles beneath the vehicle’s weight, and we grind to a stop inside the building.

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Seventy-Two

THIAGO



Pain erupts across the right side of my face, ripping me out of unconsciousness.

I suck in a breath and force my eyes open, but everything swims. My head pounds, my jaw throbs, and the taste of blood coats my tongue. When I try to straighten, pain rages through my abdomen, forcing me back against the chair.

Fuck.

Breathing through it, I wait for the room to stop spinning. The wound Remi gave me throbs beneath my shirt, and the wetness spreading across the bandage tells me I've torn the stitches to all hell.

I groan from the ache in my thighs and ribs every time I breathe. There isn't a goddamn part of me that escaped whatever happened after the crash.

The crash.

Pieces begin coming back. The SUV in my mirror. Matteo's voice through the speakers. Headlights coming from my left. Then metal slammed into the driver's side, and everything went black. I don't know how long I've been unconscious or where the fuck they brought me.

I blink until my vision clears enough to make out the space around me. A single lamp illuminates the far corner, leaving most of the room buried in shadow. Damp concrete walls trap the heat, and the air reeks of mildew, rust, and stagnant water.

Something warm slides down my forehead and drips from the tip of my nose. I try to wipe it away, but my hands won't move. Steel cuffs rattle

against the metal bars behind me instead.

“Fuck,” I groan as I pull against them. “Goddamn bastards.”

The last thing I remember is calling Matteo. I told him to get everyone out before Helios could reach them, but I have no idea if I got through to him before they found me.

I have to believe I did.

If Matteo listened, Remi and the rest of her family are already gone, somewhere Helios can’t reach them. Somewhere safe.

Please let her be safe.

The last time I saw her, she stood on that terrace, telling me she hated me as tears slid down her face. If I die in this place, that could be the last memory of us she’s left with. She’ll never know that I meant every word when I told her I loved her, or that I tried to protect her after I destroyed any reason she had to believe me.

The thought hurts more than anything they’ve done to my body.

A soft shuffle comes from somewhere to my right, and I turn toward the sound. The shadows are too thick to make out anything beyond the outline of a person, yet I’m no longer alone. Maybe I never was.

“Fucking do it already!”

Silence answers me.

I throw my weight against the chair, sending the metal legs scraping across the concrete as I yank at the cuffs biting into my wrists. “Do what you came here to do.”

“Now, Operative, where is your training?”

I know that voice.

I blink into the darkness, straining to make out Elena’s figure and wondering what the hell she’s doing here.

“One would think a decorated officer like you would have a little more self-control. And a lot more self-preservation.”

“What is this? What are you doing here?”

But then I remember what they told me at Helios. No official directive ever targeted Remi or her family. The Cain file was created without authorization, meaning everything I was ordered to do came from Elena. I barely made it out of Helios alive after learning the truth, leaving me no chance to figure out why she’d built an entire operation around Remi.

“Why?” I bite out.

She steps into the edge of the light. “Why am I here?”

“No. Why did you do it? Why Remi?”

“Ah,” she says as her smile widens. “I see you’ve been busy playing detective. We all know how that ends, don’t we?”

Bitch.

“Tell me!” I wrench against the restraints. “What the fuck were you doing? You assigned me to a file that never should’ve existed. You fabricated classified intelligence about a civilian and her family, then gave me orders that could’ve gotten every one of them killed.”

Elena gives a dismissive wave as she begins pacing. “Oh, save it. Fabricated or not, you’re delusional if you think that woman’s hands are clean. Her family is even worse. The number of bodies the Cains and their associates have buried is beyond your comprehension. They’ve been spilling blood for decades.” She glances over her shoulder at me, completely unfazed. “But you already knew that, didn’t you, Operative?” She tilts her head. “Or I suppose it’s just Braga now.”

I watch her pace, finally understanding what never made sense about any of this. “This was never about Helios.”

She stops.

“It was never about whatever intelligence you thought the Cains had either.” I glare at her. “You chose Remi yourself. You wanted me in her life.”

Elena slowly turns toward me. “What?” she asks. “Starting to sound personal?”

“Why her?”

“I’m glad you’re finally catching on.”

Before I can demand an answer, an explosion rocks the building, shaking the chair beneath me. Dust and fragments of concrete rain from the ceiling as the walls tremble around us.

Elena’s attention shifts toward the door. “Speak of the devil. The cavalry’s here. The question is, who reaches you first?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I was a little naughty while you were asleep.” Elena slips her phone from her pocket and taps the screen. “I sent out a distress call. I even made sure to use your best angle.”

It takes me a moment to understand what she means.

“You took a fucking picture of me?”

“And I sent it to the one person I knew would come running.”

My blood runs cold.

“Remi.”

“Bingo. Is this the part where I tell you my villain origin story?” She laughs under her breath. “I would, Braga, but I’m afraid you wouldn’t understand.”

Gunfire breaks out somewhere inside the building, shots echoing through the concrete corridors until I can’t tell how close they are.

A sick feeling takes hold of me as I stare at the door.

But Remi still hates me. She wanted me dead and made that perfectly clear the last time I saw her. She wouldn't come for me.

“You’re wasting your time. She isn’t coming.”

Elena doesn’t answer as she slides her phone into her back pocket and shrugs off her jacket. Then I see what she’s wearing underneath. Black webbing wraps around her torso, securing bricks of C-4 across her chest.

My attention locks onto the detonator strapped beside them as the vest’s purpose becomes horrifyingly clear.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

“Don’t look so shocked.” Elena turns to face me. “I have no intention of dying here today, but a girl has to have a little insurance, don’t you think?”

I stare at the explosives, then back at her.

“Commander, this isn’t you. You joined Helios for the same reason I did, to save lives. Whatever this is, you can stop it right here before anyone else gets hurt.”

Her laughter fills the room. “Still trying to save everyone. That’s adorable. Unfortunately, I’d rather not take moral advice from the man who’s been fucking the enemy.”

She takes another step and smiles. “Although, I am sorry about ruining your dinner plans.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Dinner with the family.” She taps the phone in her pocket. “You two really should’ve been more careful about what you sent through this thing.”

“You were reading my messages?”

“Tracking them, reading them. I had access to everything.” She shrugs. “When I saw you were finally meeting the family, I decided it was the perfect night for Remi to learn who she was bringing home.” Her eyes drop to my abdomen. “I take it that didn’t go over too well, huh?”

“You fucking bitch.” My hands ball into fists behind the chair. “You planned every goddamn part of this.”

Elena grins. “You have no idea.”

I open my mouth to demand what else she’s done, but another burst of gunfire rips through the building, closer than the last.

“Any moment now.” Elena draws her sidearm and circles behind me. “Isn’t this exciting?” she singsongs as the barrel presses against my temple. “We’re about to find out who’s behind door number one.”

I barely recognize her anymore. Commander Elena has always been calculated and disciplined, and every decision she made had a purpose. The woman standing behind me is neither of those things. Whatever she's after goes far beyond Helios.

The door explodes inward.

My heart climbs to my throat as I stare through the haze, praying I was right and that Remi stayed away.

“Go on,” Elena murmurs near my ear. “Call out.”

“Fuck you.”

She fires into my thigh.

The impact jerks my body against the restraints as white-hot pain tears through my leg. I clamp my jaw against the shout threatening to escape and look down at the wound.

Blood pours out, but it isn’t pulsing.

She missed the artery.

“Show yourself now, or the next one will paint the ground with his brain.”

I draw in a breath and lift my head toward the doorway as a figure moves through the dust.

My heart drops when Remi steps into view, her Glock raised, moving cautiously as she searches the room. Her eyes find Elena first, then the weapon at my head, the explosives strapped across her chest, and finally me.

The second she sees me, she stops, taking in the blood covering my face, the restraints, my shirt soaked through at the abdomen, and the fresh bullet wound in my thigh.

“Remi.” Her name scrapes out of me as disbelief gives way to fear. “Fuck. What are you doing here? You weren’t supposed to come.”

Her eyes meet mine for only a second, then return to Elena.

“We should’ve placed bets,” Elena says. “I bet you didn’t expect her, did you?”

I don’t answer. My attention is on Remi as hers shifts to Elena with the same focus I’ve seen at the range, assessing the gun, her position, and every inch of the vest.

“Careful.” Elena steps beside me far enough to give her a better view of the explosives. “I know exactly what you’re thinking. You’re looking for the shot. One clean pull of the trigger before I can put a round through his skull.”

The barrel digs harder into my temple.

“But there’s one problem.”

Elena raises her wrist, revealing a biometric monitor attached to the vest.

“This continuously monitors my heart. If it stops, the vest detonates.”

“Why are you doing this?” Remi asks.

“Because I can. Because some debts are paid in blood.” Elena leans close, her breath against my ear, then slides the barrel of her gun beneath my chin. “And because I’ve been waiting a very long time for this.”

I look at Remi. Her expression tells me she heard it too. Whatever she expected to find when she came here, it wasn’t this.

“What are you talking about?”

“I know you didn’t come alone,” Elena says. “And I’d rather not explain myself twice, so we’ll give them another second.”

More gunfire echoes from the corridor. Footsteps follow, and Kai, Amalia, and Matteo rush through the doorway, weapons drawn.

“Don’t shoot!” Remi warns them. “She’s wearing explosives with a biometric trigger.”

“Well, that didn’t take long.” Elena presses the muzzle harder against my jaw, forcing my head back.

“Remi, get them out of here,” I say. “All of you need to leave while you still can.”

Elena rips the gun away from my chin and drives it across my face. My head snaps sideways, reopening old wounds and spilling fresh blood down my cheek.

“Stop!” Remi moves toward us, but Kai catches her arm.

“Now, Thiago,” Elena says. “You seem to have forgotten something. I’m your superior, so I make the rules.”

“This isn’t going to end well for anyone,” Kai says as he steps in front of his daughter. “So what’s the point?”

Remi pushes around him, refusing to stay behind his back. “Touch him again, and I’ll fucking kill you.”

The words hit somewhere Elena’s gun never could. After everything, some part of my girl still cares what happens to me. I don’t deserve the hope that puts in my chest, but I can’t stop it from taking hold.

Elena grins, her attention turning to Kai.

“Kai Cain. Feisty little girl you’ve got there.” The playful edge disappears from her voice. “I was hoping you’d show up.”

Kai watches her, his eyebrows knitting together as if there’s something familiar about her he can’t quite place.

The gunfire outside grows more distant, leaving Elena’s voice clear amid the commotion in the building.

“You probably don’t recognize me. It’s been a long time.”

Kai keeps his weapon trained on her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course. How rude of me.” She smiles. “I’m Elena Duvall, though you might know me better as Hannah.”

Kai says nothing.

“Getting there?” she asks.

“Kai?” Amalia keeps her gun raised. “Who is she?”

“Did you ever tell your little wife about my mother?”

“Kai,” Amalia says again.

He shakes his head. “I don’t know you.”

Elena’s amusement fades. “Maybe you’ll remember Gloria Elena Duvall.”

Kai freezes, the name landing differently.

Amalia notices it too. “What the hell is she talking about?”

“Papá?” Remi asks.

“Tell them!” Elena shouts. “Tell them how you killed her. Tell them how you drowned my mother in that fountain while I stood there and watched.”

Kai remains silent.

“I had just made my birthday wish.” Elena’s voice breaks despite her attempt to control it. “Do you remember me now?”

Amalia turns toward her husband. “Gloria?”

Kai closes his eyes briefly, then looks at Elena again. “I do. I remember.”

“But that was a long time ago…I didn’t know you were there,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” Elena repeats with a bitter laugh. “That’s exactly what you said to me the day you found me.”

Kai’s expression tightens.

“You crouched in front of me afterward like that was supposed to mean something. Like saying you were sorry could erase what I’d just watched you do.” Her breathing grows uneven, but she keeps the gun firmly under my chin. “I spent years in therapy because of you. Years waking to her screams. I couldn’t close my eyes without seeing her fighting to keep her head above that water while you held her under.”

No one interrupts her.

Even Kai has nothing to say.

“I watched my mother die on my birthday, and then I grew up knowing the man who killed her walked away and built himself a beautiful fucking life.” Her attention moves to Amalia and then Remi. “A wife. Children. A family who loves you.”

Kai lowers his weapon slightly. “You were a child, and you never should’ve witnessed what happened that day.”

“But I did. You took everything from me.”

“I’m sorry.”

Elena’s eyes shine with tears, but the hatred in them never wavers.

“So I decided to return the favor.”

“That’s what all of this was?” I ask. “You used Helios, sent me after Remi, and put her entire family in danger because of what Kai did to your mother decades ago?”

Elena looks at me, her grin back in place. “This could’ve gone so many ways. I thought having one of my operatives infiltrate his daughter’s life would be satisfying enough.” Her gaze shifts to Remi. “Then you two fell in love.”

Understanding hits me.

“You knew what would happen when she found out.”

“I hoped.” Elena gives a slight shrug. “Watching Kai Cain’s daughter fall in love with the man sent to betray her was far better than anything I could’ve planned.”

“Jesus,” Matteo mutters. “You wanted to destroy her to punish him.”

“No.” Elena looks directly at Remi. “She did that all by herself.”

Remi’s mouth parts, but no words come.

“How sure are we that vest is real?” Matteo asks, keeping his weapon aimed at Elena.

“Please.” Elena presses the gun beneath my chin. “You’re welcome to test that theory.”

Kai raises his weapon again. “This is between you and me. Let everyone else walk out of here.”

Elena tilts her head, staring at him. “You still don’t understand.”

The gun leaves my chin and swings toward Amalia.

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Seventy-Three

THIAGO



The shot goes off.

Amalia jerks backward as blood blooms across her shirt. For a fraction of a second, Remi doesn't move as her mother crumples toward the concrete.

"Mamá!" Her scream tears through the room as she runs toward her, but Kai gets there first, catching Amalia's before her head hits the floor.

"No! Look at me." He presses both hands against the wound, red seeping between his fingers. "Stay with me, vicious."

Matteo drops beside them and reaches for Amalia, while Remi stares down at her mother, then turns toward Elena. The horror disappears from her face, replaced by pure rage, and I know exactly what's coming.

"Remi, don't!"

She lunges.

Elena fires again, but Remi is already moving. The shot misses and Remi slams into Elena, both women hitting the concrete hard, sending Elena's gun skidding away.

I wrench against the cuffs until the chair tips beneath me. "Remi!"

It crashes onto its side with me still attached to it. By the time I lift my head, Remi is on top of Elena.

Her fist strikes Elena's face once, then again before Elena catches her wrist. They struggle across the floor as Elena reaches for the gun lying several feet away, and Remi fights to keep her from getting to it.

"Thiago, hold still." Matteo's voice comes from behind me.

A gunshot blasts beside my head, and one of the cuffs breaks free from the chair. I tear my other hand free and try to stand, but the bullet wound in my thigh nearly sends me back to the floor.

Across the room, Remi rips the knife from the sheath at her leg and drives it beneath Elena's ribs. Elena cries out as Remi yanks the blade free and scrambles away.

"Remi!" I force my injured leg beneath me. "We have to go."

Elena lies on the concrete, struggling for air as blood spreads beneath her.

Remi gets to her feet and turns toward me, tears streaking through the blood on her face as she takes in my injuries. "Thiago," she whispers.

I start toward her, but something behind her moves. Elena reaches across the concrete for her pistol and manages to wrap her fingers around the grip.

"Remi, watch out!"

But Elena aims at me this time. Remi spins and fires twice, both bullets striking Elena in the head and knocking her backward.

Remi spits blood beside Elena's body. "Bitch."

My gaze falls to the biometric monitor, still strapped around Elena's wrist.

Fuck. Remi just stopped her heart.

"Run!" I grab Remi's hand and pull her toward the door, ignoring the pain ripping through my thigh as I force my injured leg to keep up. Matteo is several feet ahead of us, while Kai has Amalia in his arms and is already carrying her through the doorway.

"Faster!" Matteo shouts.

We're almost there when the explosion hits.

The force tears Remi's hand from mine and hurls us across the room. I hit the concrete hard enough to lose track of where I am as part of the ceiling collapses between us and the doorway.

A high-pitched ringing drowns out everything around me. Dust fills my mouth and nose, and I cover my face as debris continues falling from above.

Then the heat reaches me. Flames spread across the collapsed section of ceiling, cutting us off from the doorway and everyone on the other side.

"Remi, where are you?" I shout, spotting her a few feet away and dragging myself closer. She's already pushing herself upright by the time I

get there. I pull her against me, checking her face and arms for injuries. “Baby, are you hurt?”

“I’m okay.” She touches the side of her head and looks at the blood on her fingers before her gaze snaps toward the collapsed doorway. “Mamá.”

She tries to get up, but I catch her before she can move toward the flames. “Did they make it out? Did you see them get out?”

“Your dad had her. They were ahead of us.”

“That doesn’t mean they made it.”

“I know.” I stare at the wreckage, but there’s no way to see what’s on the other side. “Matteo was with them. We have to trust that they got her out.”

Her eyes stay on the flames for another second before returning to me, and whatever she sees has her expression crumbling. “Thiago, you’re bleeding everywhere.”

“I’ve seen better days.”

“Don’t joke right now.”

“I’m trying not to scare you.”

“You think I’m scared because of the blood?”

I look past her instead of answering.

Fire has consumed the debris blocking the doorway, and smoke is already spreading across the ceiling. I scan the room for an exit, a window, anything we can use, but this part of the building is completely sealed.

“There has to be another way out.”

“We'll find one.”

We both know I’m lying.

She gets to her feet anyway and joins me, running her hands along the walls before trying the only other door within reach. It doesn’t budge. I slam my weight against it with her, but my leg gives beneath me and sends me down to one knee.

“Thiago, stop. You'll make it worse.”

“I’m fine.”

“No, you’re fucking not.” She catches my arm and helps me back up, but another section of ceiling crashes down behind us, forcing us into a corner.

“Fuck!”

The flames climb higher along the wall, and the smoke thickens enough that Remi starts coughing. I pull her away and lower us both to the floor,

where the air is clearer.

“There’s no way out, is there?”

I can’t lie to her again.

“I don’t think so.”

Tears fill her eyes, and seeing them nearly fucking destroys me.

“I need you to hear me, *chama*.”

“Thiago, no...” she cries, shaking her head.

“Please. I need to say this while I still can.” I cup her face and wipe the soot and tears from her cheeks. “Meeting you started as a mission. I won’t insult you by pretending it didn’t. I came into your life because I was ordered to, and I lied to you every day I kept the truth from you.”

Her mouth trembles, but she lets me continue.

“What I didn’t plan for was you. I didn’t plan on looking forward to every argument or finding excuses to stay another hour because I wasn’t ready to leave you yet. I didn’t plan on falling in love with how fucking brilliant you are, or how you can take anything apart and somehow know exactly how to put it back together. Turns out, that includes me." I reach for her hand and interlace our fingers. “Remi, baby, you’re funny and stubborn and so fucking beautiful, but you’re also one of the strongest women I’ve ever known. I love you, and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Stop.” She presses her forehead against mine. “Please stop talking like you’re saying goodbye.”

“I have to.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Remi, listen—”

“No.” Her fingers rip from mine and clench around the front of my shirt. “You don’t get to tell me all this and then die on me.”

A broken laugh escapes me. “I’m not exactly planning on it.”

“I mean it.” Her tears flow freely down her cheeks. “I spent two days trying to hate you, Thiago. I shot your fucking truck.”

“You shot at me too.”

“I stabbed you.”

“You did.”

A laugh catches between her tears, and fuck me, even here, I love that sound.

“I wanted to hate you so badly,” she says. “I thought that if I hated you enough, none of it would hurt anymore. But it didn’t work.”

My hand slides around the back of her neck. “Chama, I'm so sorry.”

“I still love you.” Her voice shakes, but she doesn’t look away. “I fucking hate what you did to me, and I don’t know how to forgive you yet. Maybe I’ll be angry for a long time, but I still love you, Thiago.”

I close my eyes as her words hit every broken part of me at once. “If we get out of here, I’ll spend however long it takes earning back everything I destroyed.”

“When we get out.” She leans into me, and I wrap both arms around her as the fire closes in around us.

“I love you, Remi Cain.”

Her face presses into my neck. “I love you too.”

I hold her tighter, knowing there’s still so much I need her to know, but there’s no time.

The fire is spreading, leaving only a few feet between us and the flames. Heat scorches my back, and I turn until my body is between Remi and the worst of it.

She feels me move and tries to pull away. “What are you doing?”

Before I can answer, burning debris falls behind me, and pain sears across my back as a small patch of my shirt ignites.

Her hands fly toward me. “Oh, my God. Thiago, you’re burning.”

I catch her wrists before she can reach around me. “Don’t touch it.”

“Then let me put it out!”

“With what?”

The question stops her because there’s nothing left around us but concrete, smoke, and fire.

“No.” She grabs my shirt and tries to pull me away from the flames. “We’ll move. We’ll find somewhere else.”

“There is nowhere else.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Remi.”

“No.” She shakes her head harder. “I’m not sitting here and waiting to fucking die.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Then move with me. Do something!” Her desperation nearly breaks what little control I have left. I pull her back against my chest and turn farther away from the flames, taking as much of the heat as I can.

“There's nowhere to go.”

Her arms lock around me. “I’m scared,” she cries, her words so small against my chest that I almost don’t hear them. “I don’t want to die.”

“I don’t either. I need more time with you.” My voice wobbles. “I wanted mornings with you, baby. I wanted to cook dinner with you, bicker over music in the truck with stock tires, grow old beside you, and spend the rest of my life finding new reasons to make you laugh.”

She’s openly weeping now, and the sound tears me apart.

“I’m sorry,” I say, kissing her hair.

Another wave of heat rolls over my back, and I curl myself around her as much as my battered body allows.

“It’s so hot.”

“I won’t let the flames touch you.”

Her sobs shake against my chest as she clings to me with everything she has.

“Focus on my voice, baby.” Smoke burns my throat, making every word harder to get out. “Don’t look at the fire. Just listen to me.”

She buries her face against me.

“That’s it. Stay right here with me.”

“I don’t want this to be the end.”

I close my eyes and rest my cheek against the top of her head. “It’ll be over soon.”

“Thiago...” She pulls back just enough to look at me, and I brush my thumb across her cheek.

“I’ll find you again, *chama*. I promise.”

“You better,” she says with a watery smile.

I pull her back against me as the building shudders around us.

“I love you so much,” she whispers.

“I love you too.”

A violent crash shakes the walls, and fresh cracks splinter across the ceiling. I cover her with my body as dust and pieces of concrete rain down around us again.

The roar grows louder.

At first, I think the rest of the building is finally coming down. Then metal grinds against concrete, and the section beside us begins to buckle inward.

“Oh, shit!”

The wall fractures as an armored vehicle plows through it, ripping away enough of it to leave a gaping hole.

“Remi!” Matteo appears through the dust. “Call out!”

I almost don’t trust what I’m seeing. After believing I was about to die with Remi in my arms, his arrival fills me with hope that she might actually make it out of here.

She jerks upright. “Matteo!”

“Fuck.” His shoulders drop the second he sees her. “Thank God.”

“Matteo, where’s my mom? Did they make it out?”

“She's out. She's okay. Kai’s with her.” He waves frantically toward the opening. “Come on! We need to move!”

Remi grabs my hand, and I push to my feet with her help. My wounded leg nearly folds beneath me, but she catches my arm and helps me toward the breach, where a section of the collapsed ceiling hangs over the opening, leaving barely enough room to crawl underneath.

She drops to her knees, but when she looks back at me, the panic is gone from her face. In its place is a resolve that sends a wave of fear through me before she even says a word.

“Remi, what are you doing?”

“You won’t fit through there.”

“I will.”

She shakes her head, her cheeks wet with tears as she looks at the opening again. “No, Thiago. It’s too small.”

I cup her face and bring her eyes back to mine. “I need you to go. Crawl through first.”

Grabbing the front of my shirt, she clings to me tighter. “Not without you. I won’t leave you!”

“I’ll be right behind you,” I tell her, praying she can’t hear the uncertainty in my voice. “I promise.”

The building groans around us, and more concrete crashes to the floor, sending sparks and burning debris across the room.

“Please, baby. I need you to trust me.”

Her eyes hold mine. “I do. I do trust you. But I don’t want to lose you again.”

After everything I did to break that trust, I don’t know if I deserve those words.

She nods reluctantly, clutching my wrists and kissing my palms, then crawls toward the opening. I stay right behind her as we make our way through the smoke and broken concrete. Every movement sends a fresh burn through my thigh and ribs, but I keep going. I can’t stop while she’s still trapped in here with me.

I need her safe.

The moment Remi reaches the opening, hands grab her beneath the arms and pull her through.

“No!” she cries, twisting toward me as they drag her away from the breach.

“It’s okay. I’m right here.”

She reaches back for me, and our fingertips brush before another pair of hands comes through the opening and grips my forearms. They haul me forward, but my shoulders catch on the jagged concrete.

Remi’s face crumples with panic. “Thiago!”

I try to force myself forward, but my body has nothing left to give.

“Get him out!” she screams. “Matteo, get him out!”

Their grip tightens, dragging me against the opening again as my vision blurs at the edges. Remi is still screaming my name, fighting to get back to me as darkness closes in.

She’s the last thing I see.

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Seventy-Four

Remi



Through the narrow window in Mamá's hospital room door, I watch her sleep.

The bullet missed her heart and the major vessels around it, but it still did enough damage to require surgery. The doctors expect her to make a full recovery, and I've heard those words enough over the last three days that I should believe them by now.

But it's hard when I can see the monitors surrounding her bed and the IV disappearing beneath the hospital gown covering her arm.

Papá stands beside me, his hands tucked in his pockets. He hasn't left her side for more than a few minutes at a time since she came out of surgery, and even now, his attention never strays far from the woman on the other side of the glass.

The absolute love of his life.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He turns to me, his brow furrowed. "For what?"

My eyes stay fixed on the window. "Thiago knew about our family because of me. I told him everything, and Elena used it against us."

"No."

"Papá, you don't have to pretend—"

"No. You don't get to carry this one, *princesa*."

"And you don't get to decide that."

"No, but I can tell you when you're wrong."

I finally look at him.

“Elena came after you because of something I did long before you were born. Thiago gave her a way into your life, but if it hadn’t been him, she would’ve found someone else.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that I trusted him.”

“Maybe not.”

“Or that I gave him information that could’ve gotten all of you killed.”

“You told the man you loved the truth about who you are.”

“And he lied to me about who he was.”

“He did,” Papá says with a sigh.

There’s no attempt to defend him, and I’m grateful for that as I turn my attention back to Mamá’s room.

“I saw Elena’s face when she was talking about Gloria.”

He doesn’t respond for a moment.

“I did too.”

“She watched you kill her mother.”

His jaw flexes, but he doesn’t look away from the window.

“Yes. I killed Gloria for money, Remi, and countless others after her. I didn’t know her daughter was there until after it was done, but that doesn’t change what she saw or what I took from her that day.”

I think about the little girl, Elena or Hannah, described standing beside that fountain after making a birthday wish. It’s hard to reconcile that child with the woman who put a bullet in my mother, yet part of me understands the hatred that grew from it. I’d kill for mine, too.

“Elena had decades to decide what to do with that pain, and she chose to come after my family. She chose to use Thiago and to shoot your mother.” His gaze returns to me. “Those choices belong to her.”

“And Thiago’s?”

“Belong to him.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “Papi, I still love him.”

“I know.”

“But I’m still so fucking angry.”

“I know that too.”

When I look at him again, a small smile touches his mouth.

“I don’t know what that says about me after everything he did.”

“Loving someone doesn’t mean you have to excuse the ways they hurt you. Don’t let his mistake be another reason to punish yourself.”

I rest my head against his shoulder, and his arm wraps around me.

“You really think she’s going to be okay?” I ask, needing to talk about anything else.

“She’s going to be a pain in my ass for another fifty years.”

I can’t help but laugh.

“Don’t tell her I said that.”

“I’m absolutely telling her.”

He kisses the top of my head then motions down the hall. “Go see Thiago.”

I glance toward his room. I’ve spent the last three days going back and forth between them, sitting with Mamá when she’s awake and holding Thiago’s hand as he sleeps. I’m so exhausted that I sometimes forget which room I’m walking toward until I reach the door.

“He’s still not awake.”

“He will be.”

I look through the window at Mamá once more before nodding. “I hope you’re right.”

“You know I usually am.”

That earns him an eye roll before I push out of his arms and head down the hall.

The steady rhythm of Thiago’s monitor greets me when I return to his room, and each beep reminds me how close I came to never seeing him again. It might be my favorite sound now.

I try not to think about all the nights I fell asleep with my head on his chest, listening to him breathe beneath my ear. Those memories hurt too much when I don’t know what happens to us after this.

I sit beside his bed, my fingers laced through his, tracing slow circles across his knuckles as afternoon sunlight spills through the window. His bruises have already begun to fade to yellow and purple, but the bandages wrapped around his shoulder and ribs tell me how much healing he still has ahead of him.

Since the chaos at the warehouse, I’ve spent most of that time here, trying to untangle loving him from everything he did to hurt me. I still don’t know what forgiveness looks like for us.

But I know I want the chance to find out.

I lift his hand to my lips and press a kiss to his knuckles, unsure whether he can hear me or even knows I’m here. The doctors have assured me he’ll

wake up soon. He’s been heavily sedated since surgery to treat the burns on his back and other injuries, while they continue to monitor his concussion.

“You know,” I murmur, “this is getting kind of old.”

Silence.

“You just really enjoy me taking care of you, huh?” I smile, stroking the back of his hand. “No shower for you this time, though.”

A watery laugh escapes me, then catches in my throat.

“But I brought you a lollipop.” I comb my fingers through his curls. “You know...for morale.”

The slightest pressure on my hand makes me freeze.

“Thiago?”

His fingers move again, barely squeezing mine, and a tear slips from the corner of his eye, trailing down his temple.

I’m on my feet in an instant.

“Baby, can you hear me?”

He gives the faintest nod and wets his lips. His throat works through a painful swallow before he tries to speak

“*Ch...chama*...” he croaks.

His eyes flutter open for only a second, then squeeze shut against the light, but hearing my nickname from his lips after three days nearly brings me to my knees.

“I’m here.” I cup his face, tears already distorting my vision. “I’m right here. Tell me what you need. Does anything hurt? Do you want me to get the doctor?”

His hand lifts unsteadily from the bed, searching until his fingertips find my cheek. He swallows again, gathering enough strength to speak.

“Don’t...” His lips twitch. “Don’t eat my lollipop.”

For a second, all I can do is stare at him before relieved laughter spills through my tears.

“It’s all yours,” I whisper and press a kiss to his forehead. “I promise.”

His tired smile fades almost as quickly as it appeared, and his attention settles on me. “Are you okay?”

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Of course, that’s the first thing he asks.

“I’m okay,” I assure him.

He studies me another second, as if he needs proof before he can believe it. “Helios?”

“It’s over. For now. Elena’s dead. The agents at the warehouse who survived were taken into custody, and everything she’d been running outside Helios started coming apart. The building was raided, but not before every database inside was wiped clean.”

That part doesn’t surprise me. Organizations like Helios don’t wait around for someone else to clean up their messes. They erase what they can, disappear, and rebuild somewhere no one knows to look. Whatever name they use next, I doubt we’ve seen the last of them.

I wonder if Elena had something to do with what Rafe knew. With her dead and every record erased, I may never know.

“Everything?”

“Everything. Whatever they had on my family is gone too. They figured out what Elena was doing at the warehouse. The distress call brought SWAT. Helios was already coming after you, and she sent me that picture, knowing my family would follow.”

He glances down at our joined hands. “How did you get past SWAT?”

No more secrets.

“My family still has people they can call when things go bad. Someone got to your unit before they opened fire and made it clear we weren’t the enemy, Helios was. By the time the order not to engage us came through, I was already inside, and my family came after me.”

His eyes close for a moment. “She brought everyone there.”

“Looks that way.”

“Hoping we’d kill each other.”

“Would’ve saved her a lot of trouble.”

His fingers tighten around mine. “You’re safe?”

“Today we are. Whatever Elena built around my family died with her, and Helios has no reason to come after us. But you know how that goes. Cut off one head…”

“Two more grow back.”

“Exactly. So I’m not stupid enough to believe they’re gone for good.”

Thiago releases a long breath before looking at me again. “Your mom, Remi?”

“She’s okay.” My voice trembles, even after I’ve repeated those words so many times over the past three days. “She needed surgery, but the bullet missed anything vital. The doctors expect her to make a full recovery.”

“And everyone else?”

“Everyone made it out.”

Relief softens his expression as his eyes close. “Thank God.”

“You got the warning to Matteo in time,” I tell him. “My family was already getting out when we received the picture of you.”

He smiles. “Then you came for me.”

“Of course I came for you.”

“After what I did to you?”

“I was hurt and angry, Thiago. I still am.”

“That’s what I was counting on. You still being angry, still hating me.”

I frown. “What?”

“When Elena showed me the picture she sent you, I kept telling myself you wouldn’t come because you hated me enough to let me die there.” His fingers clamp more firmly around mine. “I wanted you to because I thought it would keep you away from that building.”

“You really thought I’d leave you there?”

“I hoped you would.”

“You should know me better than that by now.”

“I do.” His thumb moves across my hand. “That’s why I was fucking terrified you’d show up.

The thought of him sitting in that chair, hoping I hated him enough to stay away fucking hurts.

“Well, that didn’t work out so well for you.”

“No, it didn’t.” He swallows. “Remi, I’m so sorry for what I put you through. It kills me to know…”

I shake my head before he can finish. “I know.”

“No, *chama*. What I did to you was fucked up, and saving your family doesn’t erase that.”

“I know it doesn’t.”

“If you give me the chance, I meant what I said in that building. I’ll spend as long as it takes to earn back what I broke.”

“You already started.”

He goes still, watching me closely.

“I’m still trying to make peace with what you did, and I don’t know how long it will take, but I want to try. I want us to try.”

His eyes shine with unshed tears, full of love and regret.

“I won’t break your trust again.”

“You better not, because next time, I won't miss,” I say with a wink.

Thiago chuckles as he presses a hand to his abdomen. “I love you, Remi.”

The door swings open, and Zara races into the room, with Matteo close behind.

“Zara!” he calls out after her. “You’re not supposed to be in here.”

“Uncle Thiago!” she squeals, ignoring him completely. “I came to see you.”

She stops so abruptly that her sneakers squeak on the floor as her wide brown eyes take in the bandages, bruises, and the sling supporting his arm, and her smile slowly slips.

“Come here, baby.” I open my arms, and she climbs onto my lap without a word, still staring at Thiago.

“Your Uncle Thiago looks a little banged up right now, but he’s going to heal up soon, just like Aunt Amalia.”

Zara nods solemnly before looking back at him.

Matteo comes to stand beside me and squeezes my shoulder. “It’s good to see you awake.”

Thiago inclines his head. “It’s good to be awake.”

They stare at each other until Thiago finally speaks again.

“Thank you for answering the phone.”

“I almost didn’t.”

“And I wouldn’t have blamed you.”

“You’re still a bastard for what you did to her.”

“I know.”

“But you warned us when you could’ve saved your own ass and disappeared.”

“I wasn’t leaving any of you behind.”

Matteo holds his gaze for a moment, understanding between them that neither of them needs to put into words. Thiago gives him a small nod, and Matteo returns it.

Zara looks between them with a frown. “Are you done?”

“Yeah, we’re done,” Matteo says with a laugh.

Her face brightens as she holds up the picture she’s been clutching against her chest.

“I made something for you.”

The corner of Thiago’s mouth lifts into a smile. “I think that’s exactly what I need to feel better. It’s beautiful.”

She flashes a cheeky grin. “Uncle Thiago, did you save Remi...just like me?”

His eyes find mine before returning to her. “She saved me.”

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Seventy-Five

Thiago



One Year Later

"Relax. She's going to win."

Matteo nudges my shoulder when I don't answer.

"I know she is."

My attention stays on Remi's GT-R as it rolls toward the starting grid.

"You don't look like you know," he mutters.

He isn't wrong.

It doesn't matter how many times I've watched her race; I still hold my breath when she's on the track, wanting the win as badly as she does, if only to see that smile as she climbs out of her car.

Remi doesn't race on the streets anymore. These days, she spends two Saturdays a month at Speedway Blue, doing what she loves. I'm usually down in the pit, waiting for my girl when it's over, but today, the family is all here, cheering her on from the bleachers.

Kai sits to my right, focused on the starting lights.

"All she has to do is hook on the launch, and she's got that Mustang beat. He's been sleeping off the line all afternoon."

"She knows what to do," I say.

Kai looks at me, a grin tugging at his mouth. "Of course she does. Who do you think taught her everything she knows?"

I laugh.

Going back to work wasn’t immediate. I spent nearly two months on administrative leave while Internal Affairs and a federal investigation picked through what Elena had done. As far as the department was concerned, I’d been pulled into an unauthorized operation without knowing its true purpose, then abducted when I tried to stop it.

Ryan backed me where he could. And Grey ended up under investigation for his part in Elena’s off-book orders at Remi’s range, then transferred out of the precinct before I returned. By early spring, I had my place back on SWAT. I was on the same unit, same badge, only now there isn’t another covert job hiding underneath it.

Getting back to normal with Remi took a little longer. Surviving everything, loving her, didn’t erase what I’d done, and neither of us pretended it did. There were times when my phone would ring and I’d see something shift in her face, or I’d tell her plans had changed and know exactly where her mind went. But I never made her drag an explanation out of me, and she never had to wonder where I was going, who I was talking to, or whether there was another part of my life she didn’t know about.

Eventually, she stopped waiting for another secret and hesitating before asking me about work. Until one day, being with me no longer carried the weight of my betrayal. We started feeling like us again.

Her family needed their own time. I understood that. Kai was civil but watched everything I did. And Matteo made it clear that loving me again was Remi’s choice, not his. Amalia never treated me badly, but trust from her wasn’t something I expected to be handed. I went to the dinners, I spent afternoons at the garage, showed up at the track, and let them decide what to do with me. And here we are.

Amalia leans forward from Kai’s other side. “Remi tells me your aunt will be in town tomorrow. You should bring her by.”

“She’d like that.”

“Good. I’ll make dinner.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t.” She smiles. “I want to.”

The ease with which she says it still gets to me. A year ago, I couldn’t have imagined my aunt sitting around a table with Remi’s family. Now Amalia is already planning what to feed her.

“I’ll ask her.”

“Don’t ask. Tell her she’s coming.”

I laugh. “Yes, ma’am.”

Amalia gives me a satisfied nod, then sits back beside Kai.

Remi didn’t just show me what it means to love someone enough to give up everything for them. She gave me something I never thought I’d have again.

She gave me a family.

“Uncle Thiago!” Zara leans over from her father’s lap, a few seats down, her ears covered by oversized orange noise-canceling headphones.

“Mommy says we can get ice cream when Remi wins. Will you come with us?”

“Of course, *princesinha*. As long as you’re buying,” I shout back with a wink.

She giggles and gives me an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

“You might be her favorite uncle.” Matteo’s smile fades into something more thoughtful. “Makes me feel a little better about things.”

“About what?”

Before he can answer, Remi blips the throttle, and the engine growls through the grandstands.

Matteo turns toward the track. “She’s up.”

The announcer’s voice carries across the speedway as the two finalists roll toward the starting line. Remi eases into the left lane as the Mustang pulls alongside her.

“Come on, baby girl. You got this,” Kai says beside me.

I’ve watched her race enough to know exactly what she’s capable of. She’s patient behind the wheel and trusts herself as much as she trusts the car beneath her.

The engines climb through the RPMs until the bleachers vibrate beneath us.

Matteo elbows me. “Breathe.”

I laugh. “I’m trying.”

The amber lights count down before the green flashes, and both cars launch. The Mustang stays with her for only a heartbeat before the GT-R hooks exactly as Kai predicted.

“There it is,” Kai says, pride filling his voice.

Remi edges ahead before the sixty-foot mark and never looks back. The Mustang hangs on through first, but by the top of second, she’s already pulling away, widening the gap with every clean shift.

“He’s done,” Matteo says.

“He never had a chance,” Kai replies.

I’m smiling as she crosses the finish line, and a beat later, the scoreboard lights up.

LANE 1

WINNER

The grandstands erupt in cheers, but I’m already watching the return road because I know exactly where she’ll look.

I make my way down the bleachers, taking the steps two at a time until I reach the chain-link fence at the edge of the track. She accepts the trophy with a smile, but the moment she turns and spots me, it shifts into the one I’ll never get enough of because that smile is mine.

She breaks into a run, and I don’t wait for her to reach me. I meet her halfway. She laughs as she throws herself into my arms, and I catch her effortlessly, one hand cradling the back of her thigh and the other beneath her ass as I lift her off the ground.

Her legs wrap around my waist, and she buries her face against my neck before pulling back.

“My prize,” she murmurs, brushing a soft kiss across my lips.

I grin. “You were amazing out there.”

“I know.” Remi smiles against my mouth as I kiss her again, lingering until I finally pull back and rest my forehead against hers.

“I need you, baby.”

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Seventy-Six

THIAGO



A mischievous smile curves her lips.

"I'm right here." She steals another quick kiss. "What's stopping you?"

"I have an ice cream date."

She blinks before throwing her head back in laughter.

"Zara has you wrapped around that little finger of hers, doesn't she?"

"Guilty."

"That's okay. I owe her."

I pull back. "Owe her?"

She nods. "Zara is part of the reason you eventually won me over."

"How's that?" I ask, kissing along her jaw.

"Watching you with her. You were so good with her and so patient. She adores you, baby."

"I love her too."

"And you let her put ten ponytails in your hair. I still have those pictures, by the way."

"For legal reasons, right?"

"For legal reasons," she says with a smile.

Her fingers slide into the curls at the nape of my neck. "And you saved her, Thiago. I'll never stop being grateful for that."

I kiss the center of her palm. "I'd do it again."

"I know."

"I have something for you," I say, reaching into my back pocket.

Her eyebrows lift when I pull out a watermelon lollipop. She takes it from me with a laugh, then unwraps it.

“I was just craving something sweet too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she breathes, slipping the candy into her mouth, then slowly pulling it free and brushing it against my lips. She glides it back and forth before giving it another teasing lick.

“Your family is watching,” I whisper, tightening my grip on her.

Remi glances toward the bleachers.

Zara has both hands pressed to her mouth, blowing exaggerated kisses our way. The second Matteo realizes what she’s doing, he covers her eyes with one hand and turns her toward him.

Remi bursts out laughing.

“Then take me somewhere they’re not.”

“I love Zara, but I might have to take a rain check on that ice cream.”

“But you promised her.”

“She’ll forgive me.”

“Only if you buy her extra sprinkles.”

“I’ll buy the entire damn shop if it means getting you to myself.”

I set her down, keeping one arm around her waist until her feet are steady. She slips the lollipop back between her lips, takes my hand, and pulls me toward the parking lot before I can decide whether leaving our entire family behind is a terrible idea.

Looking back, I catch Matteo staring at me, shaking his head, and I grin before continuing after her.

“What?” Remi asks.

“Nothing.”

She leads me between the rows of parked cars, and my attention drops to the sway of her hips beneath her racing suit. She’s already unzipped it halfway, revealing the fitted black tank underneath. Every step makes it harder to remember that I promised a seven-year-old ice cream.

The moment we reach the truck, Remi turns and backs me against the driver’s door.

“You’re moving too slowly, Braga.”

I wince. “Ouch. Haven’t heard that one in a while.”

“You can earn the upgrade after you fuck me in your stock truck.”

“Don’t hate on the truck.”

Remi laughs, fists the front of my shirt, and pulls me down, brushing the watermelon candy against my lips before kissing me. The taste of sugar lingers on her tongue as I grip her waist and turn us, gently pinning her against the driver's side door.

Her trophy falls to the ground beside our feet.

"Careful," I murmur. "You worked hard for that."

"I already have the prize I wanted."

My hands go still, and my smile turns wistful before I can stop it. Her teasing expression fades.

"What is it?" she asks.

I shake my head and kiss her again.

It feels like another lifetime since I stood on a rooftop, watching everything between us break apart, believing I had destroyed the only thing in my life that had ever meant a damn.

Now she's here with our family, only a few hundred feet away, and we have an entire future ahead of us, with no lies or a voice in my ear telling me who I'm supposed to be anymore. I finally get to be the man I choose to be, and I choose her.

"Hey," I whisper, meeting her eyes. "I love you."

"I know."

I squint at her, and she laughs.

"I love you too."

"That's better."

Sliding a hand over her ass, I scoop her up, then open the door and climb inside with my girl wrapped around me. The door barely shuts before she grabs my shirt and slams her mouth against mine.

"I see I'm not the only one who's a little needy."

"You complaining?" she asks as she drags my shirt up over my head.

"Not even a little."

My seat is already pushed as far back as it'll go, but with my height, there isn't a fucking car on earth built for what she's apparently decided we're about to do.

"Good. Then shut up and put that monster dick inside my body."

"You don't need to ask me twice."

She laughs, and I swallow the sound with another kiss, closing my hands around her hips as I grind her against me. Within seconds, we're both breathing too hard for a couple who hasn't even gotten past kissing.

Remi pulls away long enough to catch her breath before coming right back for me, just as fucking impatient.

“Your mom invited us over for dinner,” I say against her mouth as I tug her shirt over her head.

“Yeah?” Her teeth come down on my bottom lip.

I hiss and grip her throat.

She grins, admiring the mark she left before looking at me again.

“Yeah. Told me to bring my aunt.”

“She’ll like her.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Remi laughs. “All of us giving you a little hell for the weekend. Sounds perfect.”

I drag her closer and kiss the grin off her face, my free hand sliding beneath her breast and pushing her bra up until those pretty little piercings come into view. I flick my thumb over them, then dip for a taste. She rewards me with a soft moan, her hips pressing against my painfully hard dick.

For all the time we’ve spent in her car, in mine, on her car or mine, this is the first time we’re going to fuck inside one. It’s never been a practical option considering my size and the things I like to do with my girl, but right now, I couldn’t give less of a fuck about practicality.

“Take this off before I rip it,” I say, hooking my fingers into the racing suit bunched around her hips.

“Don’t you dare.”

“Don’t test me, *fera*. I’ve been thinking about fucking you since we left this morning.”

Remi drags her tongue slowly over my lips, a wicked little grin pulling at hers. “I’m supposed to be the bossy one.”

“Then start acting like it.”

She slides over the center console and does exactly as she’s told, only she doesn’t come back to me. Instead, she leans against the passenger door with a look that tells me she has something else in mind.

“So you’ve been thinking about fucking me all day? And what exactly were you imagining, Braga?” she asks, hiking one leg onto the seat, her pussy on display for me.

I take in the view and curse under my breath. “Mmm, my mind suddenly went blank, baby. Maybe I need a reminder.”

She bites the corner of her lip, sliding two fingers down her slit, already glistening for me. “Yeah? And maybe I need a little motivation.”

I follow her gaze to the obvious strain against my pants and waste no time giving her what she wants to see.

“There he is.”

I laugh. “That enough motivation for you?”

“I don’t know.” She looks entirely too pleased with herself. “I was expecting a little more enthusiasm.”

“Keep talking shit, *fera*.”

“What are you going to do about it from all the way over there?”

Two of her fingers slowly pump in and out of her as her eyes lock on mine.

I draw a heavy breath. “You really want to find out?”

“I’m counting on it.”

I lean over, keeping one hand on my cock as the other closes around her throat again. Tugging her across the center console, I claim her mouth.

She comes willingly, melting into the kiss as it deepens.

“Sit. Time is ticking.”

“This is a bad idea,” she whispers, doing just that.

Her eyes close as she takes me inch by inch, gasping when my piercing hits at just the right angle.

“Nothing wrong from where I’m sitting,” I say as my girl finds her rhythm.

I catch her wrist and bring the two fingers she had inside herself to my mouth, sucking them clean.

“Fuck, that’s hot.”

“Can’t be wasteful," I say, giving them one last lick and making her grin.

“These windows are blacked out, Braga.”

Remi throws her head back when my hands find her hips, and I catch one of her barbells between my teeth.

“Again, not seeing the negative.”

“Because your suspension is shit, and it won’t matter when the whole fucking truck starts rocking.”

I pause and laugh before slamming her down on my cock. “Getting shy on me now?”

“Please. I’m only worried about traumatizing my family.”

As she rises and falls over me, I run my tongue along her neck. “Too late. We’re in too deep.”

“Literally,” she breathes.

I laugh, guiding her faster and harder until even that isn’t enough.

My fingers tangle in her hair as I meet her thrust for thrust. She cries out, her nails digging into my shoulders.

“Should I slow down?”

“Only if you want to die.”

The humor between us fades as I kiss her hard, replaced by something more desperate. She meets me with the same intensity, gripping my shoulders as the truck begins to rock beneath us.

I guess she was right about the fucking suspension.

Her forehead falls against mine as we struggle to catch our breath, and I barely get her name out before she kisses me again.

“Thiago…”

Hearing my name fall from her lips like that, breathless and broken, nearly undoes me. I’ll never get tired of the sounds she makes only for me or the way she stops holding herself back when we’re like this, giving me access to the parts of her she protects from everyone else. I know what that trust costs her and exactly what it means that she gave it back to me.

“Look at me, *chama*.”

She does. Her fingers dig into my shoulders as I hold her gaze.

“God, I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I kiss her slowly, letting myself feel her instead of rushing toward the end. She holds me just as tightly while the engines rumble in the distance, muffled through the closed windows.

There’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here, buried inside my girl where I belong.

“You’re mine,” I tell her.

Her fingers tighten in my hair. “Always.”

That one word hits me square in the fucking chest.

I pull her mouth back to mine, and she clings to me. The tenderness lasts all of a few seconds before need takes over again.

“Say it again.”

“I’m yours, Thiago.”

I drag her closer, and she meets me harder, her body pressing against mine.

“Climb in the back,” I rasp, already lifting her off my aching cock.

“So you do have a death wish.”

She starts to twist toward the back seat, bracing one hand against the steering wheel for leverage and accidentally laying on the horn in the process.

The loud blast makes us both freeze, and she slowly turns toward me with wide eyes.

“Did you just fucking honk?”

“Shut up.”

I burst out laughing as she scrambles into the back seat. “Really helping with that whole traumatizing-your-family thing, baby.”

She shoots me a look over her shoulder. “Get back here and fuck me, Braga.”

The comeback I had dies in my throat when I see my girl on her knees, ass up and glistening cunt dripping, waiting for me.

My mouth waters at the thought of sliding back inside her, but when I try to follow, I run into a snag.

“Thiago,” she says, looking back at me. “What the hell?”

“I’m trying.”

I duck my head and twist sideways, maneuvering one leg over the center console before my shoulder slams into the roof.

Maybe Remi is right about this truck because I might actually need a fucking van.

She laughs. “Need some help, big guy?”

I can’t help but join her because if it weren’t for the tints and windshield cover, the whole track would have a perfect view of my bare ass.

“Not a word, *chama*,” I say, finally making it all the way over.

I kiss my way up her back, fingers sliding between her legs, circling her clit to get her to shut the fuck up. My mouth brushes her ass cheek, and I resist the urge to bite down or taste her.

“Thiago, please.”

The impatience in my name makes me smile against her skin.

“Much better.”

I set the heel of my hand against her shoulder and push her farther down. Her laughter fades as she looks back at me, the heat in her eyes

bringing us right back to where we were.

“Goddamn, all this is mine.”

“Then stop making me wait.”

I grin, brace one hand against the glass, and sink inside her. Her head drops forward with a broken sound.

“Fuck, fuck.”

“I’ve got you, baby.”

Her palm covers mine against the window, our fingers threading together as the glass fogs around them.

I bend over her until my chest meets her back and kiss the side of her neck.

“Look at me, *chama*.”

She turns her head, and I catch her mouth, swallowing her whimper as her fingers tighten around mine.

“Thiago.”

I know my girl well enough to hear what she needs from the way she moans my name.

“Sing for me, baby.”

I pick up the pace, and she moves with me, her hips meeting mine again and again. Everything between us becomes faster and more desperate as I bury my face against her shoulder and hold her as close as the cramped back seat allows.

“Come with me, *chama*.”

“Don’t stop, Thiago. Don’t let go.”

“Never.”

Her whole body tenses against mine, and hearing her come apart with my name on her lips sends me over the edge right behind her.

Our hands stay linked on the window while we catch our breath, and I kiss my way to her neck.

Remi eventually looks back at me. “Still think the truck was a bad idea?”

I laugh against her skin. “Ask me when I can feel my legs again.”

By the time we manage to get dressed, the windows are still fogged, and we’re in no hurry to leave the back seat. Remi stretches her legs across mine while I lean against the door, enjoying a few more minutes alone with her before our family inevitably comes looking for us.

I think about Amalia talking about my aunt sitting around their table and how natural it sounded. A year ago, our lives were divided by secrets and everything I kept from Remi. Now her family and mine are becoming part of the same life.

There's something I've been thinking about giving her for a while. For a long time, I couldn't decide whether letting her read it would finally put that part of our story behind us or drag her back through something she'd already worked so hard to forgive. But sitting here with her now, after everything we've rebuilt, I don't want to keep this part of me from her anymore.

"Remi, I want to show you something." I reach across the front seats and into the glove compartment. I'm barely up for two seconds when Remi's hand cracks against my ass.

She laughs, and I look back at her with a quirked eyebrow. "Really?"

"You do it to me all the time. Plus, how could I resist?"

I shake my head and settle beside her again with my father's notebook.

She looks down at it. "What's that?"

"Something I want you to see," I say, holding it out to her. "I've spent a long time debating whether to give it to you or just burn it, but I think I need to do this so I can finally put that part of our lives behind me."

She takes it but doesn't open it yet. "It's a notebook."

"It's about you."

Her eyebrows lift. "You have a notebook about me?"

"That sounds significantly creepier when you say it like that."

"Is there another way to say it that doesn't sound creepy?"

"Probably not."

Laughing lightly, she runs her fingers over the cover. "So what exactly did you write?"

"Read it."

She opens to the first page, and I watch the amusement slowly disappear from her face as she realizes what she's holding.

The earliest pages are filled with my father's handwriting.

Remi looks up at me. "These were your dad's case notes."

"Keep turning the pages."

She drops her gaze to the notebook and reads on. I know when she reaches the parts that no longer belong to my father because she slows down, taking more time with each page.

The entries were never really about the mission. They were about her. The way she talks to herself when she works, the watermelon lollipops, how fucking happy she looks behind the wheel of a car, and how much I love the sound of her laughter.

She turns another page and another, finding everything I couldn't admit to her then and barely knew how to admit to myself. So I wrote it to the one man I knew would understand me and would forgive me. I wrote about every time I told myself I needed to put distance between us, only to find another reason to see her, and about how much harder it became to ignore the guilt of knowing she trusted me while I was still lying to her.

Remi grows more serious the farther she gets. "You were falling in love with me."

"Yeah. Long before I was willing to admit it."

She turns to me, lingering there for a beat, then returns to the notebook. She knew how our story started, but she never got to see this part of it, never knew how quickly the lines between the assignment and what I felt for her started disappearing or how hard I fought against something that had already happened.

When she reaches the entries from after everything fell apart, her brow creases.

"You kept writing."

"I did. For a while."

"Why?"

"Because I wasn't ready to let you go."

She looks back down at the page.

"I wrote about you. About all the ways I loved you before I knew if you'd ever let me back into your life. The things I missed. The things I noticed once I wasn't around you every day. I wrote about how different everything felt without you in it."

Her fingers slow against the edge of the paper.

"I wrote about the first time you laughed with me again. The first night you fell asleep beside me without waking up tense. The first family dinner where your dad stopped looking at me like he was deciding where to bury my body. And the day we finally made love again."

A small laugh escapes her, but her eyes are already filling with tears.

"I wrote about everything you changed for me, Remi. You made me want a life outside the job. You gave me people to come home to. And I'll

spend the rest of my life trying to give back even half of what you've given me."

Remi turns another page, her thumb brushing over my handwriting before looking back at me.

"You wrote all of that to him?"

"Yeah."

Her mouth trembles. "Thiago..."

"I didn't know what else to do with it at the time. He was the one person I could say all of it to without having to explain myself."

She closes the notebook and holds it against her chest.

"You should've shown me this sooner."

"I know."

"No." She shakes her head gently. "I mean...I wish I'd known you were carrying all of this."

I take her hand. "I wasn't ready to give it to you then. But I wrote in it again recently."

"You did?"

I nod toward the notebook. "There was one more thing I needed to tell him. Turn to the last page."

She wipes a traitorous tear from beneath my eye, smiles at me, then turns to the final entry.

Pai,

Eu vou me casar com ela.*

I don't know when I'll ask yet, but I know she's the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I love her in a way I didn't know I was capable of loving anyone. She gave me a family before I even knew I was looking for one and a home in the last place I ever expected to find it.

You would have loved her too. She would have given you endless shit about your taste in cars, stolen your records, and somehow convinced you that you were the lucky one for letting her do it.

A watery laugh slips from Remi, but she doesn't stop reading.

I wish you could meet her. I wish you could see the life I have now. I think you'd look at me and know I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

I'm going to ask her to be my wife.

Remi goes completely still.

Her fingers grip the edge of the page. She doesn't say a word, and when she finally looks at me, her beautiful blue eyes shine.

“Yes!”

Before I can say anything, she sets the notebook aside and launches herself at me. I catch her as her arms loop around my neck, and she kisses me, laughing through the tears that wet both our faces.

“Yes,” she says again. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

“Baby,” I manage when she finally lets me breathe. “I haven’t even asked you yet.”

“You did.”

I pull back enough to look at her.

She glances at the notebook beside us before meeting my eyes again. “You just took the long way to get there.”

“I actually had a plan. I talked to your parents earlier this week.”

“They knew?”

“They knew I was going to ask. They just didn’t know you’d answer before I got the chance.”

Her smile grows.

I lift her hand to my mouth and kiss her knuckles. “I believe you once told me there was only one circumstance where I was allowed to use your full government name.”

She bites her lip to keep it from trembling. I tug it free with my thumb.

“And I’d get on one knee, but I’m pretty sure I’d have to dislocate something to make that happen back here.”

She chuckles and wipes the tears from her cheeks as I keep hold of her hand and pull out the black diamond I slipped from the glove compartment with the notebook.

“Remi Isabel Cain, will you be my wife?”

“Yes,” she murmurs.

I slide the ring onto her finger, and fuck if it doesn’t look like it was always meant to be there.

Of all the ways I could have asked her, this was the only one that ever felt right. The notebook began as an assignment, but it ends with Remi.

And her answer is yes.

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* I’m going to marry her.

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EPILOGUE

REMI



ONE YEAR LATER

Daylight

"I'm not asleep, and I see you."

Thiago's groggy voice comes from beside me, catching me trying to sneak a peek out the window. We've been in the air for a couple of hours, and it should be dark by now, but then again, that depends on where we're going.

After a beautiful and intimate reception, my new husband informed me that we'd be boarding a private jet, our destination was a surprise, and my only instructions were to pack light and not ask questions. I trust this man with my whole heart. I'd go anywhere he asked me to. But trusting him and minding my own business are apparently two very different things.

I turn toward him, adjusting my skirt as I uncross and recross my legs for the hundredth time. Ten hours in a wedding dress has a way of making even the most beautiful thing you've ever worn start to feel like a personal attack.

"I was just trying to see if we were flying over water or land. And it's not like I'm going to spot any street signs from up here."

He opens his eyes and chuckles, reaching for me and pulling me onto his lap. “My wife is very curious, isn’t she?”

I don’t think I’ll ever get tired of hearing him call me that. Even after we said our vows, there’s still something almost unreal about knowing I’m his wife and he’s my husband.

Gripping his loosened shirt collar, I trace the tip of my nose along his cheek. “You rushed me out of my own wedding reception and whisked me away to some mysterious destination. It’s been hours, baby. You know I don’t have this kind of self-restraint.”

Thiago cups my face gently, his expression turning serious. “You trust me, right?”

“With everything,” I whisper, covering his hand with mine.

“I promise you’ll love it. I won’t even have to tell you. The moment we get there, you’ll know.”

I nod and settle into his touch. “Okay. But in the meantime, call me your wife again.”

That grin I love so much spreads across his face before he leans in and kisses me slowly.

“Have I told you how drop-dead gorgeous you looked today, wife?”

“Not in the last ten minutes,” I murmur against his lips.

“The most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.” His hand slides over the fabric at my waist. “And this dress… *Fuck*, this dress.”

It was the first one I tried on, and I didn’t need to see any others. The moment they laced it up and I stood in front of the mirror, I knew it was the one I wanted to wear down the aisle to the love of my life.

Black lace, just like mom’s.

The way Thiago looks at me now tells me he’s a lot less interested in how good I look in it than how quickly he can get his wife out of it.

“Don’t even think about ripping it.”

His grin turns downright sinful. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I know that look.”

He only looks more pleased with himself before he catches my mouth in another kiss, distracting me from the way he’s been staring at my dress like he’s already planning its demise.

A few hours later, the change in pressure has me looking toward the window again. This time, Thiago doesn’t stop me. The plane dips lower,

and lights stretch across the ground beneath us as we make our descent. I glance at the time on my phone, then back outside.

Just over four hours in the air, and my brain immediately starts doing the math.

Depending on our speed and how much time we spent climbing and descending, we've traveled somewhere around fifteen hundred miles. We're also an hour behind Philadelphia, which narrows things down.

"We're somewhere in Texas."

Thiago's mouth curves. "That a question?"

"No." I point at him. "And don't look so impressed. You married a woman who calculates quarter-mile times for fun."

"I married a woman who was supposed to stop asking questions."

"Yeah, that was never going to happen." I lean closer to the glass when something brushes against my hand. I turn to find Thiago holding a black silk blindfold.

"No."

He laughs. "Again, I haven't said a word."

"You're holding a blindfold. I don't need a full briefing to know where this is going."

"Turn around, *chama*."

"Absolutely not. I just spent four hours narrowing down an entire country, and now you want to take away my last chance to figure this out?"

He shifts closer, clearly enjoying himself far too much. "You said you trust me."

"That doesn't mean I'm making this easy for you."

"Humor your husband, Remi Isabel Braga."

I give him a look. "You're already abusing the husband privileges."

"I'm testing the limits." He lifts the blindfold between us. "Now, turn around, wife."

There he goes with that word again. I sigh dramatically, send him a wink, then gather my hair over one shoulder as I turn my back to him.

"If you mess up my hair, I'm taking it off."

"I wouldn't dare."

The silk slides carefully over my eyes, and whatever chance I had of solving his little mystery disappears into darkness.

When the plane lands, I let him escort me down the stairs and into a waiting car. The humidity hits me almost immediately, which only makes

my Texas theory more plausible. It would make sense. This is where Thiago grew up, and where his aunt still lives.

At first, the rush of freeway traffic surrounds us, but after a while, it fades until all I can hear is the steady hum of tires against pavement. We've left the city behind, and judging by how little else I hear outside the car, we're probably somewhere more rural now.

"Can I look yet?"

His lips brush my cheek. "So impatient. We're almost there. I promise."

Just as I'm about to fire back, the car eases into a turn, and the smooth asphalt changes beneath the tires. A steady pattern of bumps and vibrations now travels through the cabin, almost like we're driving over stone.

I sit up a little straighter because whatever he planned, we're close now. And I can't stop the smile spreading across my face. "Are we there yet?"

"Just a little more."

"You know I'm armed, right?"

He laughs. "I'm banking on you loving this surprise, so I'm not expecting to get shot today."

A few minutes later, Thiago leans in close, his breath brushing my ear.

"It's time."

My heart starts beating faster as he loosens the knot and the handkerchief slips away. I blink as my eyes adjust.

A pair of wrought-iron gates stands in front of us, framed by stone pillars and glowing beneath the warm lights lining the drive. My attention moves higher, following the ironwork until I see the words stretched across the top.

VILLA DORADA

I stop breathing.

My hand flies to my mouth as I try to process what I'm seeing.

"Thiago…" I whisper.

"You told me that you wanted to see this place for yourself." His hand finds mine. "And I told you there isn't a damn thing in this world you could ask of me that I wouldn't do."

"Baby, I don't know what to say."

Shit, I'm crying.

"You don't have to say anything. Just take it all in."

I nod, giving him a watery smile.

We pull onto the drive, and the second the car comes to a stop, I'm out the door.

All I can do is stare.

Villa Dorada is even more beautiful than I imagined from my mom's stories and the photos I've seen over the years. Warm golden light spills across the pale stone exterior, illuminating arched windows and balconies lined with intricate ironwork. Smaller lights tucked throughout the landscaping cast a soft glow over beds of lush greenery that border the long cobblestone.

Everything looks golden beneath the night sky.

I walk toward the house slowly, trying to take in every detail at once. This is where she grew up. And somewhere on this property, my parents met and fell in love, beginning the story that eventually led to Gio and me. And now I'm standing here on my wedding night with my husband.

My eyes burn all over again.

The front steps lead to a pair of tall, dark metal doors. I stop in front of them and run my fingertips lightly over the ornate scrollwork on their surface.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Thiago says from behind me.

Whipping around, I throw myself into his arms. "Thank you. This is incredible." I pull back to look at him. "You're the best husband ever."

"First day on the job and I'm already setting the bar pretty fucking high."

We laugh, and I hook my arm around his neck, hauling him down to me for a kiss.

"Are you ready to go inside?" he whispers against my mouth.

I gasp softly and turn toward the doors again. I've spent my entire life hearing stories about what's on the other side of them, and now I'm actually about to see it for myself.

"More than ready. But…can we? What about—?"

"It's vacant."

Thiago grips the large iron handles and pushes the doors open.

I can barely breathe as I step inside, staring in awe at the grand foyer with its gleaming marble floors and a sweeping staircase that curves toward the second floor. Blinking back tears, I imagine the space furnished and the Montesinos family, my family, moving through it.

"She stood right here. They both did."

Before Thiago can say anything, excitement spills out of me in a laugh, and I take off toward the staircase, gathering my dress as I climb.

"*Chama*, where are you going?"

With a huge smile, I glance back at him. "Everywhere!"

I hurry down the hall until I come to a stop in front of a pair of tall double doors left slightly ajar, and push them open, stepping into a massive bedroom. I know this room. I've seen it in old photographs. The tall windows, the carved fireplace, the balcony doors overlooking the grounds.

This was Mamá's room.

I walk farther inside, turning slowly as I try to picture her as the girl she was then, before my father, before Gio and me, and long before she became the woman I've always known.

"She slept here," I whisper.

Thiago appears in the doorway behind me. "Yeah."

I smile at him, even as my vision blurs again.

"This window," I say, trailing my fingertips along the ledge. "She snapped a photo from here."

I look out across the courtyard and spot something that makes my heart stutter. "And over there—"

"Her art studio," he finishes.

I nod, lacing my fingers with his. "Come on!"

I drag him out of the room. We're both running now, our laughter echoing off the empty walls and following us into the courtyard.

"Faster!" I shout, letting go of his hand and sprinting toward the studio.

Reaching the door, I grip the handle, hoping it isn't locked. It turns easily, and I let out a breath as it creaks open. I step inside, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. Maybe it's crazy, but I swear I can still smell the faint traces of oil paint and linseed oil lingering in the room.

Despite the decades that have passed, it feels as if I can reach back through time and find her here, where so much history lives within the walls, so much loss and love that somehow survived long after everyone left.

Thiago's arms wrap around me from behind, and his lips brush my neck. I cover his arms with mine and lean against him.

"*Minha chama*, are you happy here?"

More tears roll down my cheeks.

"Yes."

“It’s yours.”

THREE MONTHS LATER

I never thought I’d get used to waking up at Villa Dorada. It turns out, I was right.

Every morning, I still find something that makes me stop and stare, whether it’s the early sunlight stretching across the courtyard, the old stone walls turning gold at sunrise, or the view my parents used to sit together and watch all those years ago.

And every evening, when the sky burns orange and pink over the property, I finally understand why Thiago would post pictures of Texas sunsets.

I used to wonder what he saw in them.

Now I know.

When that faction of Helios fell apart, Thiago discovered years of untouched field bonuses and hazard pay had accumulated in an account he never knew existed. He used most of it to buy out the owners of the estate.

The house isn’t empty anymore, and neither is the art studio.

ME: I’m on the south side, by the flower stand.

Best Husband Ever: I’ll be there in five.

I slip my phone back into my pocket and claim an empty bench beneath the shade while I wait, watching people weave between the rows of vendors scattered throughout the outdoor market.

Texas has given me plenty of things to get used to over the last three months, but the goddamn sun might be the hardest. I bring my water bottle to my lips as my attention catches on a flash of fiery red hair across the way. It falls in waves down a woman’s back, and just as I’m about to look away, she sweeps it over one shoulder, revealing a large, intricate tattoo spanning her back.

The second I see it, the bottle freezes against my lips.

A scorpion stretches across her skin, and above it are the three words I’ve spent nearly seven years searching for.

Sub umbra venimus.

We come from the shadows.

It feels like every bit of air in Texas disappears all at once. My legs are moving before I can think, my blade already in my hand.

As if she senses me coming, the woman whips around when I'm barely a few feet away. She doesn't have time to reach for a weapon, but the way her body shifts into a ready stance tells me everything I need to know.

She isn't just some innocent shopper with a familiar tattoo.

I lunge, and she does the same.

Her shoulder drives into my middle, and we crash to the ground, knocking the breath from my lungs. Shouts erupt around us as people scramble out of the way, but I barely register any of it.

I swing the blade toward her side, but she traps my wrist and drives a fist into my ribs. Pain shoots through me, but I twist free and slam my elbow into her jaw, making her head snap sideways before she comes back with a punch that catches me across the mouth.

Tasting blood, I hit her back.

We scramble to our feet, trading punches as the crowd around us grows. She's fast. Really fucking fast. But I stay with her, meeting her blow for blow.

She throws a hard right at my head. I duck beneath it and slash toward her stomach, but she jerks back before the blade can connect. Her hand clamps around my forearm when I pull it back, and her knee drives into my abdomen, folding me forward as she wrenches my wrist sideways, knocking my knife to the pavement.

"Fuck."

I throw my weight into her before she can reach it, and we slam into the side of a vendor's table. Something crashes behind us as she grabs a fistful of my hair and tries to drive me down. But I hook my leg behind hers and take us both to the ground.

She lands first, and I barely get one punch in before she bucks me off.

Jesus, she's a fucking beast.

Rolling onto my back, I kick at her as she comes for me again, driving my foot into her stomach. She stumbles, but instead of buying me time, it only seems to piss her off.

She grabs my ankle and yanks, dragging me across the pavement before she drops on top of me.

I drive my fist into her ribs once, then again, but she absorbs both hits and pins me with a forearm across my chest. Her other hand disappears beneath her shirt, and metal flashes in the Texas sun as she pulls out a gun and presses the barrel to my forehead.

Well, shit.

Her finger tightens on the trigger, but all I hear is a useless click. She glances at the stalled weapon, then immediately tries the trigger again.

“REMI!” Thiago’s voice booms from across the market, and the woman’s head snaps toward him. Whatever she sees has her throwing herself sideways.

A gunshot cracks through the market, the bullet striking the pavement where her head had been a split second earlier. She keeps her attention on Thiago, and it’s the opening I need. I reach for the knife and swing.

Again, this bitch is faster, jerking away before the blade can reach her throat, but not fast enough to avoid it completely. The edge slices across her face, and a sharp hiss tears from between her teeth as blood pours from the cut, splashing across me. She recoils, and I shove her off, scrambling to my feet with the blade still clenched in my hand. I start to lunge for her again, but blood runs into my eyes and blurs everything. I wipe at my face with the back of my wrist.

When I can see again, she’s gone.

Spinning toward the crowd, I search through the bodies moving in every direction, but there’s no sign of the red hair or the scorpion.

She just disappeared as if she was never fucking here.

THE END

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Extended Epilogue

Odette Drakos



Gilded Sin
The Severed Heirloom
Book Three

Nocturne Dominus - Princeps Caeli

The man sitting across from me keeps checking the gun beneath his jacket as if it's going to save him.

It won't.

Men like him are all the same, wearing power and invincibility like armor. That arrogance is what makes them careless. They spend so much time looking over their shoulders that they fail to recognize the real threat even when she's directly in front of them.

My black wig brushes my shoulders when I tilt my head, studying him over the rim of my wineglass.

"How about we go back to my hotel room?" he says, leaning against the booth, a cigar pinched between the corner of his mouth.

"What's the rush, Mr. Bianchi? We just got here. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

His gaze travels over me again, lingering where the neckline of my dress dips low across my chest. He thinks I'm exactly what I told him I am. A woman looking to make money, someone pretty enough to be invited to

his table and disposable enough that no one will ask questions when she leaves it.

He makes this all so easy.

“I like you. And I think you and I will have a great time.” He takes a slow draw from his cigar, smoke curling into the air beneath the lamp. “But I will say, you’re different. Almost a little too calm.”

There are those pesky survival instincts, finally starting to stir.

“Should I be nervous?”

The edge of his mouth tips up into a smug smile. “Most women are around me.”

I take another sip of wine. “Maybe you spend time with the wrong women.”

The mask slips from his face.

Around us, the restaurant hums with conversation, crystal glasses catching candlelight and silverware tapping against porcelain as a couple laughs at a table near the windows, completely unaware of the men positioned near both exits.

They’re his men. Mine are nowhere to be seen, but that’s how I prefer it.

Bianchi leans forward. “You have a smart mouth.”

“It’s the same one you’ve been staring at all night.”

Jaw clenching, his expression darkens, as if he still doesn’t know what to make of me. His pride is at war with his need to sink his pathetic cock into something tonight, not that he’d bother playing nice just to take what he already feels entitled to.

I lower my glass and cross one leg over the other beneath the table. A lioness doesn’t need to bare her teeth every time something strays too close. Sometimes it’s more entertaining to let the prey think it’s safe.

He suddenly reaches across the table and wraps his fingers around my wrist. I glance down, then slowly lift my gaze back to his.

“I’ll ask you once, and only once, to remove your hand.”

The bastard laughs at the warning and tightens his grip. “You came here because I paid for your time.”

“No, I came here because you were stupid enough to invite me.”

Confusion crosses his face until his attention shifts downward, but it’s too late. My blade is already beneath his ribs before he can make a sound.

His lips part, and I keep my voice low so no one beyond our booth can hear me.

“You really should have paid more attention, Mr. Bianchi.”

His brow furrows as he searches my face, trying to understand how badly he misjudged me.

“W-Who the fuck are you?”

I lean closer. “Odette Drakos.”

His eyes widen with recognition, and the fear he’s spent all night concealing surfaces as I twist the knife.

Whatever he tries to say becomes nothing more than a wet gurgle as blood fills his mouth and spills over his bottom lip. Only then does he release me, and I watch the last of his manufactured confidence fade from his face.

“My father sends his regards. Consider your debt settled.”

Pulling the blade free, I wipe it on the inside of his jacket, then rise from the table. To anyone looking from across the restaurant, Bianchi could almost be drunk, slumped against the seat with his chin dropping toward his chest.

Almost.

I smooth a hand over my dress and head for the exit, everything having gone exactly according to plan.

Of course that lasts about ten seconds.

One of his men near the door looks toward the booth, and his body stiffens.

“Boss?”

I keep walking, and I can almost sense the moment his attention shifts to me, then to the blood spreading across the white tablecloth.

“Hey!”

So much for a clean exit.

He starts to raise his rifle just as I move in, but he isn’t fast enough. I drive my blade into the side of his neck. His hand clamps over the wound as I wrench the rifle from his grasp before he can recover. He collapses beside me, and the first scream tears through the restaurant. Every head turns our way, and Bianchi’s men immediately go for their weapons.

So do I.

Gunfire fills the dining room as patrons abandon their tables and rush for the exits, obstructing my view of Bianchi’s men.

“Get out of the way,” I shout, bringing the automatic rifle to my shoulder and holding down the trigger. The weapon unleashes a vicious

burst against the advancing men. Four of them drop before they make it halfway across the room, and another crumples beside the bar. One dives behind an overturned table while a second manages to fire back, sending bullets tearing through the wall beside my head.

More rounds whip past me, forcing me behind a stone column.

The screams grow louder as people crawl beneath tables, sprint through the kitchen, and shove past one another toward any door they can find.

I lean out and fire again, hitting one asshole while someone else charges me from the side. But I pivot before he can get close and slam the rifle into his face. Blood bursts from his nose as he staggers back, giving me the opening to put him down.

A bullet grazes my upper arm, leaving a hot line of pain across my bare skin. I glance at the red already trailing toward my elbow.

“That’s fucking rude.”

Shots drive me deeper into the hallway near the kitchen. I fire once more before turning and dashing through the narrow corridor, footsteps pounding behind me as Bianchi’s remaining men follow, but I already know where the rear exit is.

I always know my exits.

The door crashes open, and cool night air hits my face as I step outside. Another round cracks behind me, but I keep moving, my heels striking the pavement in a steady rhythm as I cross the alley toward the waiting car.

Only when I’ve put enough distance between myself and the building do I slip a hand into the neckline of my dress and retrieve the small device tucked securely between my breasts. My thumb settles on the button as I look back toward the restaurant windows, where shadows move frantically behind broken glass.

I smile, then I press it.

The explosion roars through the night, heat surging across the alley as the blast rips into the building, shattering what remains of the windows and igniting the interior. Flames climb toward the roof while thick black smoke rolls into the sky.

“I’d call that effective.”

The wig itches against my scalp, so I peel it off and toss it onto the passenger seat, shaking out my platinum hair around my shoulders.

I pull away from the curb just as the first sirens wail from somewhere behind me.

The city fades from view as I head home, the streetlights thinning until the road narrows and winds through the hills. Eventually, the trees part to reveal my family's estate in the distance.

Warm light glows from dozens of windows across the sprawling stone mansion, illuminating columns, balconies, and the manicured grounds surrounding it. The iron gates at the end of the drive are already opening when I approach, the Drakos family crest splitting down the middle to let me through. It's beautiful and imposing. And mine, whether I want it to be or not.

People look at places like this and see only wealth, power, and legacy, but I see a gilded cage.

Every generation of my family has added to this property, another wing, another garden, another piece of themselves meant to outlast them. One day, all of it will belong to me, along with every obligation attached to the Drakos name, from alliances to enemies. The throne my father has spent my entire life preparing me to inherit has always been my future, decided before I ever took my first breath.

When I pull into the courtyard and cut the engine, the silence that follows is almost jarring. I step out, closing the door behind me, but only make it a few feet before something rustles in the darkness.

My hand goes to the knife strapped beneath my dress when another noise comes from the trees. I turn toward it, lowering my center of gravity as I scan the shadows. A dark shape sweeps across the night, and I draw the blade just as a familiar raven glides beneath the courtyard lights and lands on the stone railing a few feet away.

"Moira," I say, shoulders relaxing.

She ruffles her black feathers and fixes me with a stare.

"You could announce yourself instead of creeping around in the dark."

Moira lets out a sharp croak.

I slide the knife away. "Don't give me that. You know exactly what you're doing"

She hops along the railing before spreading her wings and taking flight again, circling once above me. I watch her disappear toward the dark horizon beyond the estate walls.

My father keeps talking about a war that's coming as though it hasn't been taking lives for generations, men and women buried on both sides. Tonight only added more bodies to a graveyard already overflowing. They

can call it a feud and pretend there's still some line left to cross before it becomes something worse, but there isn't.

War was never coming.

It's already here.

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Afterword

To every reader who preordered, joined the ARC team, shared a teaser, messaged me about these two, or simply picked up this book and gave them a chance, THANK YOU.

The excitement surrounding Remi and Thiago has meant more to me than I can put into words.

Thank you for loving this universe and this family alongside me.

While we might be leaving Remi and Thiago here, the Severed Heirloom isn't finished yet.

There's a certain Greek mafia queen waiting to take her throne and steal the heart of a man she was never meant to love.

And Odette Drakos has absolutely no intention of behaving.

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Also by Elle Maldonado

The Severed Heirloom

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Gilded Sin

Book Three

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