



Be a bad girl for daddy

THE *Dirty Heroes* COLLECTION

The BLACK FOX

BRIANNA HALE

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CONTENTS

[The Dirty Heroes Collection](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Finding His Strength - Sneak Peek](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Also by Brianna Hale](#)

[About Brianna](#)

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THE *Dirty Heroes* COLLECTION

THE BLACK FOX, BY BRIANNA HALE

FINDING HIS STRENGTH, BY MEASHA STONE

WHILE SHE SLEEPS, BY DANI RENÉ

BOUND BY SACRIFICE, BY MURPHY WALLACE

NEVER LOST, BY TL MAYHEW

THE CURSE BEHIND THE MASK, BY HOLLY J. GILL

CLOCKWORK STALKER, BY CARI SILVERWOOD

KISS AND TELL, BY JO-ANNE JOSEPH

SKELETON KING, BY CHARITY B.

MAKE ME REAL, BY PETRA J. KNOX

CRUEL WATER, BY DEE PALMER

THE MASKED PRINCE, BY FAITH RYAN

I HUNTED, BY CASSANDRA FAYE

THE LADY, BY GOLDEN ANGEL

Once upon a time, a scorned Queen opened a box, unleashing
horrible evil on the world's heroes.

Instead of gallantry and chivalry, they now possessed much more
perverse traits. They've fallen victim to their darkest and most
deviant desires.

This is one of their stories...

BLURB

For fifteen years I was the Black Fox, the hero of Spain, the good-luck devil. I made my enemies dance to my tune and fall to my sword.

The day must come when every hero hangs up his cape, and for me, it was the day I outsmarted the curse. I would not die for love, because I didn't love the woman I married. Valeria Hernandez didn't love me.

Then I met her. Lolita. Fresh from boarding school, as beautiful as a rose's thorn and poised to pierce my heart. Little Lo is as dangerous as sin and twice as forbidden. She hates me, but she loves her Black Fox. Her savior. Her devil in black.

How she loves to call him daddy.

Author's note: The Black Fox is a novella of 25,000 words. All characters are over eighteen. Zacarias is married.

PROLOGUE

ZACARIAS

I DIG A KNEE INTO MY PRISONER'S THROAT AS THE CLOCK IN THE CHURCH tower starts to chime midnight. Beneath me, he growls and thrashes about, but his efforts are futile. I tighten the ropes binding his chest and arms, and then hold up a finger.

"You hear that?"

The man stops struggling. Each of the deep chimes sound through the still night air. I wait for them to end, and then say, "It's my birthday. Today I'm forty years old."

"Happy fucking birthday," chokes my prisoner, and goes back to thrashing about.

"That *is* kind of you." I leap to my feet and haul the man's dead weight over my shoulder. As if out on nothing more than a midnight stroll, I whistle under my breath. The steep streets of the village of Atienza are deserted at this hour. Up ahead, a skinny cat slinks along the laneway, its tail caressing the ancient stone wall.

"I find I'm in a very good mood tonight," I tell my prisoner, giving him a friendly pat on the rump. "Not only is it my birthday, but I'm going to be married. Fifteen whole years as the Black Fox, but it's time to hang up my cape."

"*Felicitades*," my prisoner spits. "You couldn't have retired last night?"

I ignore that. "I never thought I'd be married, because of the..." I swallow and swerve the conversation in a different direction. "I never thought I'd be married, but I saw her, and I knew."

People say this often, that they fell in love at first sight. For me, it wasn't quite like that. I met Valeria Hernandez, and I was

overwhelmed by a sense of confidence. I was thirty-nine. Falling victim to a curse was a young man's folly. I would marry Valeria and simply outsmart it.

"Valeria is my destiny. I feel that in my soul."

"Good for you," snarls my prisoner.

"But do I love her?" I muse aloud, as if my prisoner has asked me. "Oh, not exactly. What is love, when you respect each other? She likes me as I am, and she doesn't need to change anything for me. I will find a new hobby. Golf, perhaps."

I grimace. All right, not golf. But it's time for me to step out of the shadows and my life as Zacarias to begin.

"As you're hanging up your cape, *Señor*, maybe we could come to some sort of arrangement?"

The man's wheedling tone makes me slow to a stop, and I cock my ear. "An arrangement?"

He tenses on my shoulder, and I sense his excitement. "Think of it as a birthday present. No, a wedding present, for you and your good lady. Something for you to retire on and live out your days in comfort."

I study the church across the square, black and faceless against the night sky. "What did you have in mind?" He names an obscene amount of money, and I shift on my feet. "That is...very generous of you."

"No more than the Black Fox deserves," simpers my prisoner. "For keeping Spain safe all these years. Your exploits have been fine, and many."

That sort of money could buy a yacht for my wife and me to sail around the Mediterranean in, before returning to her hilltop castillo. I jostle my prisoner on my shoulder. "And you? What will you do if I let you go?"

The man's voice is syrupy with contrition. "*Señor*, I have learned the error of my ways. I will live a life beyond reproach from now on."

I rub my free hand over my jaw. "I was going to hand you into the chief of police. He lives at this address, I believe?" I indicate the nearby white stucco house, all its lights extinguished and shutters drawn.

"You can put me down here," the man says in an eager whisper. "I'll make my own way home. Tomorrow, a messenger will come to

your house with a suitcase full of money. Used notes. The least I can do for you on your birthday and for your impending nuptials."

"The very least," I agree. I drop the man on the cobbles at my feet, and then hoist him up and slam him against a post. "But still not good enough."

"Wha—what are you doing?" he wheezes, the breath knocked out of him.

Instead of answering, I tie him to the post, and then yank down his pants and underwear. His privates shrink up in the cool air. From behind my mask, I grin at him, my hand drifting to the hilt of my sword.

The man's eyes widen in horror. "You wouldn't!"

I draw my sword, and he all but sobs with fear. With the tip of my blade, I tickle the end of his floppy privates. How pathetic they look in this state, like the wattles of an old chicken.

He gasps and twists, trying to escape. "No, please!"

I sheath my sword with a theatrical sigh. "Well, all right then. But I was just starting to have a little fun." I dig something out of my pocket. A small cardboard sign, which I tie around his dick and balls, yanking the string tight. Maybe they'll drop off by morning.

I draw my sword once more and hold the tip against his throat, not a trace of humor in my expression now. The man's Adam's apple bobs against the blade.

"*Bastardo*. Fucking asshole. I'll kill you for this."

His threats might have more impact if he wasn't whispering. He still thinks he's going to get out of this without any consequences. "Why are you not screaming for help? Afraid to shout and wake the chief of police?"

The man just glares at me, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the moonlight.

"Or are you worried about drawing the neighbors to their windows?" I press the blade against his throat, drawing a thin line of blood. "Because they'll recognize you, won't they, Police Chief Martínez?"

Martínez's face goes slack with shock.

"Photographs. Stained clothing. Ropes. They're all on their way to police headquarters in Madrid," I tell him. "To an officer who can't be bribed." I lean close and whisper, "Like I can't be bribed."

Above his head, I carve a mark into the post, as fast as lightning. Then I salute him ironically and saunter away. Come morning, the townspeople will find their chief of police tied to a post outside his own home, a sign dangling from his cold, pathetic genitals that reads *VIOLADOR. RAPIST.* Above his head will be three slashes. The letter Z.

I melt into the shadows for the very last time, and the Black Fox, as Spain has known him these past fifteen years, is no more.

ZACARIAS

TWO MONTHS LATER

"TO US, *MI AMOR*."

Valeria holds out her wine glass to me, and the ruby red liquid flashes in the midday sun. I smile broadly, toast her, and take a mouthful of wine.

"To us," I agree warmly. I cast my eyes over my new wife. She's forty-three, a divorcée, and a handsome woman with a crown of thick chestnut hair. Her cheekbones are high and angular and her wide mouth proud. We met at the opera in Madrid; or rather, I was passing by and saw her in a gold, floor-length gown. Framed in the doorway, she dripped elegance and beauty, but that's not what had me following her inside.

I knew that this was the woman I had to marry.

I felt...nothing for her. I've held women in my arms, going through the motions and saying all the right things in the hopes that love will spring forth. Always, my heart remains empty. It's been many years since I sought out or pretended to feel love. It causes too much pain for everyone.

With Valeria, I don't have to pretend, and the relief that she doesn't mind almost feels like happiness. I watch her as she lifts her toy poodle, Blanca, into her lap and makes kissy noises on top of her head. She's more affectionate with her dog than she is with me.

A moment later, Valeria checks the slim gold watch on her wrist, and her expression hardens. "She's late."

We're waiting for Valeria's eighteen-year-old daughter to join us. Lolita. She's been tucked away at boarding school in Switzerland these past months and I've never met her. Now she's finished high school and she's coming home. I glance around the square, trying to spot a younger version of my wife. The medieval village of Segova sits among sandstone hills and vineyards. It's peaceful and wealthy. Atop the hill, at the end of three miles of winding road, sits my wife's castillo.

Valeria regards me uncertainly, pursing her perfectly painted red lips. "Are you sure you don't mind that Lolita is coming to live with us?"

"It's a large castillo, and it's more her home than mine. Of course I don't mind."

"You say that now, but..." Valeria hesitates, and then finishes in a rush, "My daughter can cause problems."

"Oh?" I want to smile, imagining the petty sort of problems an eighteen-year-old schoolgirl might cause.

Valeria takes a fortifying sip of wine. Under her breath, as if she's ashamed, she whispers, "Lolita is a liar. She makes things up. Harmless little things, usually, but as she's grown older, the lies have become more dangerous."

I feel a prickle of unease travel down my spine. "What sort of lies?"

"We wrote to each other weekly. Lolita kept me updated with her progress at school and she told me how well she was doing this year and that her marks were excellent. When I got her report card, I found a very different story. She failed most of her classes. I don't know what she'll be fit for, now. And she—" Valeria breaks off, clenching her hands in her lap. "She tried to seduce two of her professors."

My confidence of a few moments ago evaporates. I wanted a peaceful life, and now it sounds as if I'll have a little troublemaker on my hands.

"I don't know where I went wrong with her," Valeria confesses. "I failed her somehow. She barely knew her father before he died, so it must be all my fault."

I reach out, and Valeria puts her hand into mine. The diamond ring I gave her sparkles in the sunlight. "I'm sure it's no one's fault. Some teenagers are troubled, but she'll grow out of it."

"Perhaps you're right." Valeria doesn't sound like she believes me. She glances over my shoulder and sits up. "Ah, here she is."

I turn and look. A slender young woman with long, long dark hair is coming across the square toward us. She picks her way over the cobbles in high-heeled espadrilles. A spaghetti strap on her sundress slips down over one olive-toned shoulder, and she raises a hand to slide it back up. I swear I can feel the way it slides against her delicate flesh; hear her soft intake of breath.

The church clock starts to chime midday. Each peal gets further and further apart as the world slows down.

Down.

Down.

Distantly, I hear a woman's maniacal laugh. A cruel laugh, one I've heard only in my nightmares.

Lolita. Lola. Little Lo.

The lines of her body are graceful and curvy, and her breasts are full and bounce as she walks. It's not even that she's a beauty that's making my heart pound and my mouth go dry.

It's that she's mine.

I know it with more certainty than I know my own name. This girl is *mine*.

Time has become molten as I get to my feet. I reach for her hand, the milliseconds ticking past like centuries. Her cool fingers touch mine, and in that moment I know I will kill for this girl. I'll slay anyone who keeps me from her.

"Darling, this is Zacarias. Your new stepfather."

Her brown eyes gaze into mine. Whole universes are held within those warm depths and I want to tip forward and fall into them, floating in bliss forever.

The last hour chimes.

My world shatters.

Stepfather.

"*Hola*," my angel murmurs, a shy expression in her eyes as she looks at me through her lashes. She comes up to my chin. Her waist is perfectly proportioned to be encircled by my arm. The way she sings in the shower makes flower blossoms patter against my heart. Watching her talk with her hands when she's excited by an idea is a balm to my tired soul. I know all this as if I've already witnessed it. How do I know all this?

The laugh goes on and on, ringing in my ears like the peals of doomsday.

"How did you go in your exams, darling?" Valeria asks.

I blink, and realize we're all sitting down and a waiter in a white shirt and black apron is handing us menus.

"Three As and two Bs, Mama," Lolita murmurs, looking down the list of dishes.

Valeria shoots me a pained look. Lolita's barely said hello and she's already lying. As I watch, Lolita leans down to her handbag and her dress rides up her thigh. Plump, soft flesh that my fingers could dig into as she pants my name.

I snap my head to the side and glare across the square. Stepdaughter. *Stepdaughter*.

"I want to move tables."

Distractedly, I turn back to my wife. The petulance in her voice makes irritation prickle down my spine. "Why, *mi amor*?"

Valeria shivers a little in her seat, though the day is warm. "That ridiculous statue. I'm sitting in its shadow."

The sun moved while we waited for Lolita, and a large shadow has fallen over her. The nine-foot statue dominates the square. It's of a man, fists pressed proudly into his hips and his cape sculpted to look as if it's fluttering in a breeze. On his head is a broad-brimmed hat and his eyes are concealed by a mask.

Lolita gasps in shock. "Mama! The Black Fox is a hero."

She gazes up at the statue with reverence in her eyes. The town erected this statue to me ten years ago, when I saved the residents from a series of burglaries that were damaging local businesses. I was just starting to gather a following and the residents of forgotten, corrupt towns were grateful to me. I didn't do it for a statue, though. I grew up in a forgotten, corrupt town.

"They should tear it down," Valeria says, taking a sip of her wine. "Carrying on like he's some sort of hero when he only caught a few embezzlers and petty thieves—something the police should have done themselves—makes this a monument to our national shame."

Two spots of color burn in Lolita's cheeks. "He never asked for this statue. He never asked for any reward or acknowledgment at all. The people did this for him and he gives them hope. He gives me hope, too."

Valeria casts her eyes to the heavens. "Hope for what?"

"That there's still justice in the world."

I sit back, enjoying the sight of Lolita quivering in righteous anger on my behalf. How I'd like to pat my knee and invite her to have a cuddle in my lap. Maybe slide those straps down her shoulders and tell her that daddy wants to suck her nipples.

"Or he did," she adds miserably. "No one's heard of him for months."

I clear my throat to distract myself. "Whomever he is, the Black Fox must have a bigger head than all Spain by now."

"You think he's still around then?" Lolita asks, a hopeful note in her voice.

I smile sleekly at her. "Oh, certainly. He's still prowling the streets at night, looking for young women to snatch up and ravish with kisses." I say this with relish, imagining pulling Lolita's squirming body against mine in the dark and whispering that it is I, the Black Fox, I'm not going to hurt her, I'm just going to taste her a little.

Lolita swallows, and says hoarsely, "The Black Fox would never do that."

Wouldn't he.

"Do shut up about that idiot," Valeria drawls. "He's long gone, whoever he was. Sometimes I wonder if he ever existed."

A taut silence stretches, and then Lolita says defiantly, "He did. I met him once."

"Oh, don't lie," Valeria snaps.

I agree with my wife. I would remember her.

Lolita leans forward, and the cleft between her breasts deepens. "I did! I saw him. I was coming home from—from church in the dark."

The way her cheeks turn pink makes me certain she was coming home from anywhere but church. Where was she really returning from? A boy's house? My hands clench angrily in my lap, but I make my tone relaxed as I ask, "What did you see, Lolita?"

Her eyes meet mine, and they're filled with gentle wonder. "It was winter, and not very late. I was hurrying, and I dropped my... my prayer book. When I turned around, he was there."

Valeria scoffs and takes another sip of her wine.

Lolita's expression turns dreamy. "He was standing in the middle of the street, which had been empty just a moment ago. I could only see the silhouette of his cape and hat. He was so tall. So broad, and he had an aura about him, like you can't help but feel safe just because he's near. He's a dangerous man, but he meant me no harm. I knew that without a doubt."

I watch her, transfixed by the recollection flickering over her lovely face. Her hand is on the tabletop. I imagine picking it up and pressing a burning kiss to her palm.

I remember.

It wasn't winter, like she said. It was very warm, actually, and past midnight. I suppose she changed her story to winter to make it seem more proper that she was out alone after dark. I picked up her book and handed it to her. I didn't get a good look at her face, but as I slipped back into the shadows, my lungs suddenly burned as if I was drowning. A voice in my head told me I had to go back to her, and for some reason, I obeyed. I hurried and looked for her. I ran this way and that down the deserted streets, listening for her light footsteps, peering hard through the dark for a glimpse of her skirt. But I was too late. She was gone.

"When was this?" Valeria asks suspiciously.

Lolita blinks, and comes back into herself. "Oh, years and years ago."

It wasn't years and years ago. It was just one year ago. I open my mouth to scold her for telling such lies, but catch myself just in time. She really will lie about anything. My hands itch to pull her over my knee and spank the truth out of her. I want her confession in gulping sobs with her luscious ass blazing beneath my hands and her slit wet with need. That it was hot and late. That she wanted me, and that she's sorry, so very sorry, that she slipped away into the darkness out of my reach, when she could have been mine, then, now and always.

Because now it's too late. I married her mother.

I lift my glass of wine to my lips and toss it down in one huge swallow to prevent a roar of anger and despair from escaping my chest. I was wrong. I never outran the curse. It gave me just enough rope to hang myself with.

LOLITA

THE HILLTOP CASTILLO RISES BEFORE US AS ZACARIAS DRIVES US OUT OF the town, all sheer sandstone walls and impressive battlements. It's been in the family for generations. Our ancestors used to receive rents from all the people who lived hereabouts and take a cut of everything they farmed. I think Mama regrets the end of feudalism and the spread of democracy. She would have enjoyed being treated like a queen by the townsfolk.

I sit behind the driver's seat. My new stepfather's broad shoulders fill my vision. I watch the way his muscles bunch beneath his shirt as he makes a left-hand turn, and then glare out the window.

This summer is going to be hell. My stomach sinks even further as I remember that I won't be returning to school come the fall. Mama has already made it clear that university is out of the question, and I'm to be married instead. She's promised to find me a husband who will "curb my unruly ways." Whatever that means. Probably lock me up and never let me do anything I want to do.

Zacarias turns the car smoothly through the castillo gates and draws up beside the water fountain that dominates the front entrance. The taxi driver who collected me from Madrid Airport will have already dropped off my luggage. Everything I own is now within the castillo, and it owns every inch of me.

I look up at the ornate stone carvings that decorate the sheer walls. Over the years as I've grown and Mama's become stricter, I learned to hate this place. A beautiful prison. Maybe if I was allowed

to be happy here then I could have grown to love it, but to me, it's no more enticing than a jail cell.

Mama and Zacarias are talking and don't notice as I head up the marble staircase to my room. I push open my bedroom door and step onto the cream carpet, taking in the four-poster bed and the gleaming en suite through the door. The balcony doors are open and I walk out onto the terrace, which is the only thing I like about this room that my mother decorated for me. I take deep breaths of the country air and gaze around at the hills, the olive groves, the winding streets of the medieval village below. The clouds spotting the azure sky. Everything about this place is heavenly, but it's the devils who make hell, not the flames.

I play with my necklace, remembering Zacarias' face as he spoke such vulgar things about the Black Fox. There's another devil for me to contend with now—until Mama grows bored with him, at least. She grew bored with my father and cast him out when I was eleven. He never tried to see me again, and then he died when I was fourteen. I can barely remember him.

With a sigh, I go inside and collapse onto my bed. It can't be true that the Black Fox has disappeared. He's been protecting this area of the country almost as long as I've been alive. This countryside used to be filled with corrupt officials, murderers and rapists, and the Black Fox took them all down, one by one. He didn't kill anyone or hurt them if he didn't have to. He didn't even dispense punishment. He just brought criminals into the light of day and handed them over to police whom he trusted, often in creative ways. A man who defrauded a charity was found tied to the statue he'd erected to himself with a list of stolen transactions pinned to his clothing. A mayor who groped his staff and blackmailed them into silence was handcuffed naked in the town square with I AM A PERVERT written over and over on his body in red paint. I think I love his sense of irony the best.

Did love.

My eyes fill with tears. Please, *Señor*, don't be gone. We need you. I need you. I need to believe there's at least a flicker of goodness in this corrupt and greedy world.

I listen to the clock down in the town strike two, and my eyes drift closed.

I wake several hours later, get myself out of bed and go downstairs. I might not be allowed to go to university, but there are some distance education courses on environmental law and human rights that I've enrolled in. I need to tell my mother, because if my textbooks arrive without notice then she'll throw them in the trash and tell me I'm a sneak for going behind her back.

As I walk along the corridor to the living room, I hear voices.

"...don't know what I'm going to do about her."

It's Mama's voice. She must be talking about me. I don't like eavesdropping, but I have to know what she's telling Zacarias about me, and how much of a foe she's turning him into.

"If we don't have her married quickly, she'll spend her days whoring around the town. I used to catch her with the village boys, and they were trying to get their hands under her dress. Disgusting."

My face floods with color. I never whored, and I didn't let boys put their hands up my dresses, either. I was kissed, once, and of course Mama saw and assumed the worst, calling me a slut and that I was no better than filth if I let the poor local boys touch me. I tried telling her that it was just a kiss and to stop being so obsessed with class like it's four hundred years ago, but she wouldn't listen to me.

I peer around the door in time to see Zacarias' eyes narrow. "She's not a virgin?"

Mama has a glass of white wine in her hand and she's changed into a flowing dress. There are heavy gold bangles on her wrists. "I can't be sure. I wish I knew."

My mouth falls open in shock. You can mind your own business!

Zacarias glares out the window, his jaw tight. "I'll keep a close eye on her. I won't stand for that sort of behavior under my roof."

His roof. He only just met me and he thinks he can dictate what I do? I'm a grown woman, not a child.

Mama simpers at her husband. "*Mi amor*, I knew I could count on you. Be as strict and forceful as you need with her. Her father was weak, and I've always thought she needed a real man to teach her how to behave."

Zacarias smiles and takes her hand. "With pleasure, my dear wife."

I think I'm going to be sick, but at least I know now. Mama's married a man who's just as horrible as she can be.

I back up a few paces, and then walk with purposeful, noisy steps through the doorway, as if I've only just come downstairs. Blanca, Mama's toy poodle, jumps up from the sofa and gambols around my feet, yapping gaily.

"I'm going down into town to see Sofía," I announce, naming one of my old friends from when I was small. Sofía's mother used to be employed here as a cleaner. Mama hated that I befriended her daughter, saying that it wasn't proper.

Mama takes a sip of her wine and grimaces. "Must you? I don't want you catching fleas and bringing them home."

My fists clench at my sides, but I fight to keep my voice gracious. "Can I get you anything while I'm in town?"

I glance at Zacarias and find that he's gazing at me speculatively. His dark hair is swept back and there's a short, dark beard on his jaw. His brown eyes are nearly black, and though he seems relaxed, I sense a storm going on behind those eyes.

A storm that rages because he's looking at me.

I look away quickly, telling myself not to be so fanciful. My mind's playing tricks on me because I don't like him.

"No," Mama says with a sigh. "You can go. If you must."

"Back by eleven," Zacarias calls after me, as if it's his business what time I come home. I go back upstairs to get my things. Telling Mama about my coursework can wait for another day.

I let myself out the back door and hurry down the winding gravel footpath into the town. As the castillo disappears behind me, I find I can breathe again.

HOURS LATER, NIGHT FALLS, AND I HAVEN'T GONE TO SEE SOFÍA. Solitude is what I crave right now, and space to think. At nine, the restaurants around the square start to fill with people, and my belly rumbles when I catch the scent of roasting beef. I buy a *bocadillo* from a street vendor, a sandwich filled with sliced meats and mustard, and eat it walking around and gazing at the people. Simple pleasures. Small freedoms. I enjoy them. At the boarding school our days were strictly regimented and we were never allowed to go anywhere alone. There were no men, either, apart from a few crusty old professors.

My gaze lingers on the tanned, strong men in crisp white shirts sitting outside restaurants. Men at café tables playing cards and drinking coffee, their tight T-shirts showing off their muscular backs. Any one of them might be the Black Fox. Would I know him, if our eyes met? I feel that I would, somehow.

Sometime later I see that it's five minutes to eleven, and I'm on the far side of town. Reluctantly, I turn my feet towards home. The streets are dark and I walk quickly. A thin sliver of moon hangs in the sky, providing just enough light to show me the way up to the castillo.

At twenty minutes past eleven I open the door at the rear of the castillo and step into the long, cool corridor. There are angry voices echoing from one of the rooms ahead. I creep forward, curious to know what the fight is about; hoping that it's not about me.

I peer through a crack in the open door and see that Zacarias is pacing up and down, looking like he's ready to do murder. Mama is sitting on the sofa in her dressing gown, her hands clenched in her lap.

"Zacarias, I hate that she's been here less than a day and she's already making you worry and lose sleep. Please go to bed."

He growls, and the sound is like the warning snarl of a wild beast. Fear plunges through my body.

"No. Lolita is going to be punished for this."

ZACARIAS

"IF SHE'S NOT BACK IN TEN MORE MINUTES, I'LL GO AND LOOK FOR HER myself." I'll tear her from the arms of whatever horny teenage disaster has his sweaty mitts all over her. Or she might be hurt, lying bleeding somewhere, attacked—

A figure steps into the room, her eyes blazing. "For heaven's sake. I'm only twenty minutes late."

The relief I feel that Lolita's safe is quickly overtaken by all-consuming rage.

Valeria leaps to her feet. "There you are! Lolita, it's after curf—"

I hold out my arm, preventing her from going to her daughter. "Go to bed. I'll deal with her myself."

My wife gazes up at me with doe-eyes, and then meekly does what I say. Lolita watches in shock as her mother walks quickly out of the room without even looking at her.

"Mama's never done what a man has told her to do her whole life," Lolita says.

I believe it. I've never given Valeria a direct order before, because I haven't wanted to and she'd probably laugh at me. But something more powerful than any of us in charge tonight and it's lending its power to me. I feel it thrumming through me as I slowly approach my stepdaughter.

"You're late."

Lolita backs up toward the door, her terrified eyes never leaving my face. I put out my hand and shove the door closed, crowding her against it. "Who were you with?"

Lolita swallows and stares up at me with huge eyes. She can sense it, too, this power crackling through me. It's like a hit of adrenalin and a shot of whisky, making me invincible.

"No one."

I slam my fist against the door, and she jumps. "Don't lie to me." The scent from her body is of the warm summer night and fragrant flowers. I'd know, wouldn't I, if she's had some man pressed against her? I grasp her chin and turn her head in the light, examining her lips and throat. Her mouth isn't swollen with kisses. There are no red bite-marks on her creamy neck. The tight band around my heart eases a little.

She yanks her chin from my hand and glares at me. "Get your hands off me."

"In this house, you will obey my rules," I seethe.

"Go to hell."

So that's how it's going to be. That's how she thinks it will be, anyway. I'm glad she's misbehaved on her very first night. We can get things straight from the beginning. "Say you're sorry for breaking the rules."

Lolita forces a laugh. There's defiance in her eyes, but fear, too. She isn't sure how far I'm willing to take this.

All the way.

I reach down and slowly unbuckle my belt, the black leather sliding through the silver buckle. "Last chance, Lolita. Say, I'm sorry, daddy."

Her voice is a horrified whisper. "You wouldn't dare."

There's nothing I wouldn't dare do right now. There's a voice whispering in the back of my mind, showing me the way forward. I loop the belt around her neck and draw her to me. "Tell daddy you're sorry, and I'll let you off just this once."

Her eyes flicker with panic but she doesn't say anything. I tighten the belt around her throat until she struggles to breathe. "I've got all night. You've got about a minute till you pass out."

"I'm sorry," she finally chokes out.

"I'm sorry, *daddy*," I prompt.

Her face creases with revulsion. I smile a slow, smoldering smile, anticipating how sweet it will sound from her pretty pink mouth.

"I'm sorry, daddy."

Her lips are so close to mine that I could drop a kiss onto them. Her breasts are pressed against my chest. I can smell her innocence, just begging to be consumed.

A delicacy like Lolita is meant to be savored. Slowly, I loosen my hold on the belt, slide it free from her neck and step back. "Daddy forgives you."

Lolita takes great, heaving breaths. "I'll tell Mama what you just did. What you made me call you, you pervert."

I chuckle, threading my belt back through my pants. "Go ahead. It's not as if she'll believe you, you filthy little liar."

Lolita bursts into tears, yanks the door open, and runs from the room. I watch her disappear down the hall, still grinning.

Then the smile dies on my face.

I stagger and clutch the door frame as horror crashes over me. What the fuck was I just doing to my stepdaughter? The righteous anger that sustained me all evening and told me that terrorizing Lolita was the right thing to do has evaporated, and I'm left cold and empty. I hear a snatch of malicious laughter, and whip around.

"Who's there?"

The castillo is empty around me. The chirping cicadas cut through the night air. I look down at my hands, the ones that so recently held my belt tight around Lolita's throat, and see that they're shaking.

Who am I? What am I becoming? I don't recognize myself from the man I was this morning. The man I was before I met Lolita.

I charge upstairs, passing the door to Valeria's bedroom and Lolita's. I keep going until I reach a storage room where my things are packed away. There's a large wooden chest, and I fall to my knees before it and dig a key out of my pocket.

I don't want to be Zacarias anymore.

I unlock the chest and throw back the lid. The empty holes in the mask stare up at me. I kept it out of affection. I never intended to wear it again, but then I never imagined I would need the Black Fox as much as I need him now.

It's the work of just a few minutes to change. As I dress, I feel my heart-rate steadying. The mask and hat go on, and I can think straight once more. I slip through the darkened house and step out onto the terrace. When I draw my sword, a sliver of moonlight catches the razor sharp edge.

"Hello, old friend," I murmur, a smile on my face.

Below, lights twinkle here and there in the town. I sheath my sword, and in silent, booted feet I slip into the shadows. There's a path leading down to the cobbled streets. I'm moving so fast that I don't hear her, don't see her, until I'm right on top of her.

Lolita is standing in the middle of the path, hands over her face and sobbing. The path is narrow and my body thuds into hers. Out of reflex, I scoop her up in my arms to prevent her from being knocked to the ground.

Her tear-filled eyes grow very large in the thin, silvery light as she gazes up at me. "It's you."

She lifts a shaking hand to touch my mask. I tense, ready to pull away, but she doesn't try to lift it and discover my identity. Her trembling finger traces the mask, then my jaw, and then finally my lips. Her soft touch makes my heart turn over.

"Black Fox. I thought you'd disappeared. You haven't been heard of for months, and I feared that..."

I reach up and brush the backs of my fingers across her wet cheek, searching my soul for some trace of the cruel beast that made me hurt her so mercilessly not ten minutes ago. "I was never gone. I've always been close by."

Lolita's eyes fill with grateful tears. "I knew it."

"Don't cry. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

My words seem to have the opposite effect, because she bursts into sobs and buries her face against my chest, her slender shoulders heaving with sobs. There's a large, flat rock behind me and I sit down with her on my lap, pulling her close.

Lolita cries brokenly for several minutes, giving into her misery and fear. I wrap my arms tightly around her, furious that anyone could do this to her; wracked with guilt that it was me. There's no trace of that beast anywhere in my heart now. I'm the Black Fox, and only the Black Fox.

Finally, Lolita begins to hiccup her way back to composure. She lifts her face to mine, and her gaze lands on my mouth. I'm hypnotized by the sight of her beautiful, tear-streaked face in the silvery light. She reaches for my mask once more, but I grasp her hand and press it to my thundering heart.

"I met you once before," she whispers. "Do you remember me?"

Hoarsely, I say, "Down in the town. A summer's night a year ago. You dropped a book."

She cries out and throws her arms around my neck. "You remember, you remember."

"I went back for you." I stroke my hand through her long, silky hair, wretchedness expanding through my chest. How different things might have been if I'd only found her. "I searched the streets all night, but I couldn't find you."

She lifts her head. "You did? Oh, that makes my heart feel so full. Perhaps it was a good thing you didn't find me, though, because I was only seventeen and I would have covered you with kisses and made you angry with me."

I find myself smiling down at her. Her body is a warm bundle in my arms. "Never. I could never be angry with you."

Lolita gives a shaky, tear-stained laugh. "Everyone's always angry with me."

"Not me. Never, *mi dulce*."

She tilts her mouth up to mine, inviting me to do what I most crave in the world; lower my lips to hers and kiss her. I turn my face quickly away.

"But I'm eighteen now. I love you. I've always loved you."

She doesn't know me. I don't know me. I don't recognize the man I became tonight, and I could revert into that fiend at any moment. One kiss could be all it takes to push me over the edge. I could hurt her.

"It's not possible," I say through clenched teeth. "We can't."

Lolita smooths her hands up my chest, and nestles closer in my lap. Her plump behind rubs deliciously against my thighs and thickening cock.

"You don't have to tell me who you are," she whispers. "I'll never ask you to remove that mask. Only love me, and I'll be happy."

I imagine how it might be. She could give herself to the Black Fox, body and soul, and I could take what I want, over and over every night. I can have her, but never her love.

It's true. I really am cursed.

Carefully, I get to my feet, my hands on Lolita's waist to steady her.

"I wish it could be so, *mi dulce*." I take her hand and press a kiss to her palm, looking into her luminous eyes. "I really wish it could."

I disappear swiftly into the darkness. Away from temptation, and the brief hours of happiness I might have known with her.

"My name's Lolita!" she calls after me, her voice fading in the air like a sad cry.

LOLITA

I OPEN MY EYES TO THE MORNING SUN, AND A HUGE SMILE BREAKS OVER my face. He's back. He's *here*.

I stretch luxuriously in the sheets, and then turn my face to the balcony door. I left the curtains ajar and sunlight is streaming in through the gap. He could be living in the town, or somewhere close by. I could pass him on the streets. I'll find him, and convince him we can be together. I know we can.

So that's what it feels like to have a man's arms around you. To feel his strength and smell his masculine scent. To want to give yourself to him, and know that he's the only one for you for the rest of your life. That he says he can't love me back or be with me has only made me more determined.

The Black Fox deserves to be happy, and I'm the woman to make it so.

My eyes land on the clock on my bedside table and I see it's nearly eight o'clock. Though I want to lie in bed all morning and daydream about my Black Fox, I sigh and sit up. Mama likes a proper breakfast to be served and for everyone in the house to be neatly dressed and sit together. No robes or oversized nightshirts and bare legs at *her* breakfast table. Not that I'm likely to go wandering around in my underwear with a man like Zacarias in the house.

After I've splashed cold water on my face, I pull on some jeans and a white T-shirt, tucking it in, and put my hair up into a ponytail. With some sandals on my feet and a pair of small gold hoops in my ears, I should look presentable enough for her.

Mama and Zacarias are already at the breakfast table when I enter the dining room. Mama doesn't look up from reading her tablet, and I feel rather than see Zacarias' eyes track me across the room. Though I keep my face averted, I feel it flood with color.

Say you're sorry. Say, I'm sorry daddy.

A shudder passes down my spine. To make myself feel better, I imagine what the Black Fox would do to him for being such a pervert. Stand on his throat, perhaps. Tickle his balls with the end of his sword.

I make myself quash my smile as I sit down. The table is set with white linen, porcelain, silver and plates of ornately cut fruit. I reach for the gleaming coffee pot, but Zacarias gets there first and pours me a steaming cupful. I look in the other direction and don't say thank you. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice that Zacarias puts the coffee pot down and his hand remains clenched around the handle. He can be as annoyed as he likes. I'm ignoring him from now on.

Mama's long, manicured nails clack softly against the glass screen of her tablet. Finally, she looks up me.

"There's a ball in Madrid tomorrow night. We're all going."

"Good morning to you, too," I mutter under my breath as I lift my coffee cup to my lips. A ball. I don't want to go to a ball, I want to get out of here and go to university.

"Be civil to your mother, Lolita," Zacarias snaps.

I glance at Zacarias and find him regarding me sternly, without a trace of the predatory gleam I saw in his eyes last night. I suppose he daren't demand I call him daddy or try to choke me in front of Mama.

"Gracias, but I don't want to go to a ball," I tell her. It will be a boring, stuffy affair. Mama loves official events and important people. I've sat through dozens of dinners with foreign dignitaries, businessmen in toupées and wives who make small talk about their beauty treatments.

Mama is scrolling through her tablet again. *"I wasn't asking if you wanted to go, Lolita. I'm telling you that we are all going."*

One of the staff brings dishes with silver covers to the table. As she sets them out, I wonder how Zacarias is enjoying being ordered about by Mama as if he's a dog. Perhaps he's happy to put up with it for the sake of her money.

I help myself to potato omelet as well as slices of ham and cheese. Mama looks up from her fruit and glances at my plate.

"Lolita. Don't be so greedy."

I put another slice of potato omelet on my plate.

Zacarias chuckles, buttering a roll. "It's all right, Valeria. She needs fattening up. You want her to be married, and men don't like a woman to be all skin and bones."

His eyes rake my figure, and I see a flash of the same hunger I saw last night. It's gone the moment he turns back to his food.

Mama starts reading aloud from her tablet. "The Vizconde of Barola. The French ambassador's son. The French ambassador himself. He was widowed just over a year ago..."

I feel a horrified shiver run down my spine. "Is that the guest list?"

"Si. The men whom you might marry."

I drop my fork onto my plate with a clatter. "You want me to marry the French ambassador? Mama, he's ancient."

"He's not ancient. He's sixty-two."

I glance at Zacarias to see what he makes of all of this. To my surprise, he's glaring down at his plate and holding his fork so tightly he seems ready to use it as a weapon. Perhaps I only imagined this, though, because a moment later he goes on eating his breakfast as if the conversation is very dull to him and he's not even listening.

Mama shoots me a look. "That means he's old enough to keep a disobedient girl like you in check."

Zacarias suddenly stands up and throws his napkin onto the table. After muttering something about needing to check his emails, he strides from the room. We watch him go, me with suspicion and Mama with thinly veiled irritation. She hasn't finished her breakfast yet, which means no one should be leaving the table. I wonder if Zacarias knows he's going to be scolded for that later. I almost smile at the thought, imagining her treating him like her toy poodle.

Bad Zacarias. Naughty Zacarias. No treats for you.

Now that I'm finally alone with Mama I can talk to her about him. In a whisper, I lean forward and ask, "Who is this man you married? What do you really know about him?"

Mama hoists Blanca into her lap and feeds her the bacon from Zacarias' plate. "I told you in a letter weeks ago. Do you not read my

letters?"

I received one page in her elegant scrawl saying she was going to be married to a man she met at the opera. "You said he worked for the *policía* as a contractor before he retired. That doesn't sound like a real job to me, and isn't he a little young to retire?" Zacarias looks about forty, a few years younger than Mama.

"I hope you won't be asking tedious questions like this at the ball tomorrow night. You should be practicing your conversation skills on me. How lovely the weather is we've been having. That sort of thing." She drops a kiss onto Blanca's head and makes baby noises at the little dog.

I grit my teeth in annoyance. She's not listening to me. "Hasn't it occurred to you that he's only after your money? How can you trust him when you've only known him a few months?"

"We have a pre-nup. Your inheritance is quite safe."

I wasn't thinking about me. Not about the money, anyway, though I am worried about living under the same roof as an utter creep. I take a deep breath and get to what I really want to say. "How can you be sure he can be trusted around me?"

Mama's brow creases with distaste. "I beg your pardon?"

I fumble with my napkin in my lap, wondering how to phrase it. "He might mistreat me."

"Oh, for heaven's sake. Aren't you a little old to be indulging in poor-little-step-daughter fantasies? Cinderella didn't get to go to the ball. You do, and I expect you to look your best."

I sit back in my seat and sigh. All she wants to think about is this ridiculous ball. "I don't want to go. I don't even have anything to wear."

"Yes, you do. Take a look in your wardrobe. I bought you several gowns while you were in Switzerland, and you have new shoes and jewelry, as well. No more excuses."

I sit in silence for the rest of the meal, waiting for Mama to finish so I can be dismissed and go back to my room.

Several hours later I'm wandering disconsolately through the downstairs rooms when I hear the doorbell ring. I hurry to the door, but Zacarias gets there first. His big frame blocks the doorway and I can't see who it is. When he turns around there's a package in his hands. He notices me standing in the hall and smiles. It's not a nice smile.

"Well, well, well. What have we here? A package for Señorita Lolita Hernandez."

I step forward and try to snatch it from him. He holds it up out of my reach and makes a tutting noise. "Not so fast, *mi niñita*."

His little girl. Revulsion slips down my spine as I glare at him. The power he has over me is a palpable, vindictive force.

"Why are you being sent packages? Does your mother know about this?"

I shrug as nonchalantly as I can. "Can't a girl do a little shopping?"

He weighs the package in his hands. "It doesn't feel like clothes or shoes. What have you been ordering? Could it be...books?"

"I like to read. So sue me."

Zacarias nods in mock-understanding. "Of course. Books. In that case, let's take this to your mother and see if she shares your taste in reading material." He turns towards the door.

"Wait!" I chase after Zacarias. He halts in the doorway, his back to mine, one ear cocked. "It's textbooks. I'm taking an online course this summer. Something to keep my mind busy and keep me out from underneath your feet. I won't make any noise if I'm studying."

If I frame this in terms entirely for his benefit, maybe he'll hand the box over. I remember the textbooks it contains. *Principals of Environmental Law. Human Rights: Law and Practice. Freedom of Information In Context*. I glance nervously from the box to his broad back. Something tells me if he opens it and sees these books, they'll end up in the trash. Zacarias doesn't seem big on human rights.

He turns slowly toward me, frowning deeply. "Your mother wants you to focus on getting a husband."

"I can do both." I hate the wheedling tone in my voice. I'm eighteen and I shouldn't have to beg for my own things like I'm living under a totalitarian regime. "There's only so much nail buffing and hair curling I need to do for an evening out. If I don't have hobbies to fill my days, I'm going to be such a pain to live with."

Zacarias' eyes narrow. "Are you threatening me, Lolita?"

I force a laugh and it comes out high-pitched and nervous. "No! Of course not. I was just pointing out that idle hands... I mean, you must have noticed by now that if Mama doesn't have anything to occupy herself with she starts sighing about the house and sulking. I take after her like that."

It's risky, criticizing Mama to her overzealous new husband, but it seems to work. Zacarias' eyes flash in momentary agreement. He starts to pass the box over and I reach for it with both hands.

Then he draws it back again. "Wait."

Biting down on the inside of my cheek, I force myself to express nothing but neutral patience.

"Perhaps we can come to an agreement, Lolita."

That predatory smile of his is back. My stomach sinks through the floor. I relive in vivid detail the feel of his belt tight around my throat as he demanded I call him daddy. There wasn't anything remotely fatherly about what he was doing to me.

"We're going to a ball tomorrow night," he reminds me.

"Yes, and I promise to dance with as many eligible men as possible," I recite with a sigh. "I'll smile and act interested and appealing. I know you want to get rid of me, too."

"No." His voice is as hard as granite. "I don't want you dancing with anyone. I don't want you smiling at *anyone*."

I stare at him, confused. "I don't understand."

Zacarias steps closer and I feel the heat radiating from his body. "If you so much as look in another man's direction, I will see to it that he dies a slow and bloody death."

My eyes widen. "Don't—don't you want me married and gone from here as soon as possible?"

His gaze glitters like obsidian. "Gone, *mi niñita*? Why would I want such a pretty treasure as you gone?"

Cold dread runs down my spine. I can feel his eyes all over me. How could my mother marry such a fiend and bring him into our home? "Mama will be so angry with me. She's made me promise to meet as many men as possible."

Zacarias finally places the box into my hands. "Who would you rather be angry with you? Me, or her?"

He smiles into my stunned face, and then strolls out of the room.

I stare at the box in my hands. The books I won from him, but at such a dear price. Maybe it wouldn't be such a terrible thing to be married as soon as possible. At least it would get me out of this horrible house.

ZACARIAS

A TENSE MORNING GIVES WAY TO A LONG, SCORCHING AFTERNOON. Valeria is shut up in our bedroom preparing for tomorrow night's ball. I left her lying on the sofa in our suite with slices of cucumber over her eyes.

I prowl the long corridors of the castillo like a trapped animal. I don't know who I am anymore. I don't know why I never noticed before how cold my wife is. She's the same with Lolita, barely looking at her daughter as she arranges her life for her without a please or thank you. I should leave this place.

I walk out through the French windows onto the terrace. The turquoise surface of the swimming pool sparkles in the sunlight. Sitting cross-legged on a sunbed beneath a huge umbrella is Lolita. She's bent over her books and making notes, wearing a loose, see-through white kaftan over her bikini.

I clench my hands into brutally tight fists. Here is the number one reason I should leave. I can't trust myself around Lolita. I've already acted despicably, using what I know about her lies and her powerlessness to manipulate her into situations in which she has to do as I say.

She shifts on the sunbed, and I catch sight of her smooth inner thighs. I should leave, and yet here I am, hungering for what's forbidden.

With all the strength in my body, I turn and head back into the castillo. The lounge isn't safe; Lolita might come inside at any moment. I retreat to the kitchen, empty now while the staff take their afternoon siesta. I sit at the kitchen counter with my head in my

hands, trying to come up with a way to free myself from this mess. As the Black Fox, I want to cherish Lolita and keep her safe. Love her. Be with her. As Zacarias, I feel dark compulsions toward the girl. I want to hurt her. Torment her.

Sandals click on tiles. I lift my head and see Lolita. She stares at me for a few seconds, frozen in the doorway. Then she turns and goes to the refrigerator, ignoring me.

I wish it was that easy for me, but I am painfully, achingly aware of the soft curves of her body, her gentle breath, her pulse that thrums beneath the fragile skin of her throat. As she reaches for a cold drink, the hem of her kaftan rides up, revealing the peachy curve of her ass. I could grab her. Bend her over this counter and rub my forefinger back and forth along the length of her slit. Hook a finger into the fabric of her bikini and draw it aside, baring her pussy to me, and plunge into her tight, wet heat.

I leap to my feet, and the stool I'm sitting on topples to the ground with a clatter. Lolita whips around, her eyes round and frightened. I clench my fists either side of my head as if it's about to split open. The pain that sears me is blinding. I let out an animal groan and double over.

"Zacarias? Are you...okay?"

I hear a hesitant footfall in my direction, and the scent of flowers fills my nostrils.

"Get out of here. *Get out!*" I roar at the top of my lungs like a cornered beast. I can't control it much longer, and if she comes any closer I'll snatch her up and do terrible, unforgiveable things to her.

There's a gasp, and then the sound of running feet fading into the distance. Slowly, I straighten, my chest heaving. The black spots dancing in front of my eyes settle as I get my breath back.

I look around. I didn't hurt Lolita. I didn't chase her down. I can resist these horrible impulses. I'm the Black Fox, and I'm stronger than lust. I'm master of myself.

I can beat this curse.

Lolita spends the rest of the day out by the pool. I watch her from one of the castillo's high windows, telling myself that it's for her own safety; that I have to know the instant she comes back inside the house so I can keep out of her way. I end up sitting in the window for hours and hours, ignoring all discomfort, hunger and thirst,

drinking in the sight of her bent over her books, her hand moving across the page as she writes.

My sweet girl, I think, watching her sweep her long hair from one shoulder to the other. *Mi niñita*.

Mealtimes are under strict control and everyone must dress neatly and come to the table at eight—except when Valeria feels unwell. Apparently she has a headache tonight, and lies on the sofa in our bedroom with a scarf over her eyes and a hand to her brow.

“Can I bring you anything, *mi amor*?” I ask from the doorway.

“No. Just go away.”

Blanca, the little dog, jumps into her mistress’s arms and is greeted with affection.

I head downstairs alone. Just two for dinner, then.

The housekeeper has set out cold meats and salad in the kitchen. I sit on the rear stairs, out of sight, waiting for Lolita to make up her plate and disappear to her room before finally daring to get some food myself. I tong lettuce leaves onto my plate, my insides feeling twisted and shaky as if I’m recovering from a long illness.

I take my dinner out by the pool and watch the swallows diving for insects in the dusky light. The garden is fragrant and peaceful. Olive groves and grape vines sweep the valley below, and in the distance the hills roll beneath an open sky. This place is paradise on earth, exactly the retirement I wanted for myself, and yet I feel trapped. Trapped and alone.

An hour later, night has fallen, and I walk with heavy steps up to the master bedroom. The door is open and I can hear Valeria splashing about in the en suite. Blanca blocks my entrance, her lip curling as she growls at me.

My wife comes out of the bathroom and pads toward the bed, one hand across her brow. “*Mi amor*, I still have such a headache. I’ll keep you awake with my restlessness. Go and sleep in the spare room, won’t you?”

It’s not the first time I’ve been banished to a different bedroom because Valeria claims to have a headache, but it’s the first time I haven’t minded one bit. My own head is splitting. I cast a final glower at the dog, who seems triumphant now that her mistress has ordered me out, and head down the hall to the guest bedroom without a word.

Sleep eludes me for a long time. I lie awake in the canopied bed, images of Lolita dancing through my mind, her body drenched in sunshine and her silky hair cascading down her back. My dick is rock hard at the memory of her sobbing so sweetly in my arms. Clinging to me. Needing me.

She's no more than a few breaths away, her naked body lying tangled in sheets.

One breath for me to leave this room.

Another breath to walk silently down the hall and open her door.

A third to get up on the bed with her and wake her gently with a kiss.

Would she scream if she opened her eyes to see her masked hero in bed with her? Or would she wrap her arms around his neck and pull him down to her, offering up her soft breasts and tender thighs to his kisses, and her slippery, tight sex for the plunder of his cock?

I groan and cover my face with a pillow, willing this night to end.

When I finally sleep, it's in fits and starts, with unsettling dreams that have me waking in a cold sweat. The next day only brings even more torment.

I manage to avoid Lolita all morning and afternoon. Valeria is shut up in our bedroom and has her maid hurrying in and out with herbal teas and hot and cold compresses for her brow. I hear her moaning and crying dramatically over how her head is splitting and she's going to look dreadful for the ball.

Lolita remains closeted in her own room, and there's silence from within. I'm dreading tonight. I begin to fantasize that our attendance at this ball is going to be canceled, because no one seems to be in the spirits for it. Valeria's maid finds me at four in the afternoon in the lounge and bows a curtsy before my chair.

"*Señor*, the mistress asks if you'll be ready to leave for Madrid in an hour."

I throw my newspaper aside and get to my feet, growling my assent. So much for our attendance being canceled. The maid calls after me that my tuxedo has been laid out in the spare room, and she's packed my overnight bag. The ball is to be held in one of the city's grand old hotels, and we'll be sleeping there rather than driving back tonight.

I shower and shave and dress in my tuxedo, and then check my overnight bag to see what the maid has packed for me. There's some

space inside. I stand over it, thinking. The last few days have been a torment with only one moment of respite. When I became the Black Fox, I was able to do the right thing. Press a kiss to Lolita's palm and walk away from her. I need the Black Fox tonight. I need him to remind me that I'm a good man. To become him if I feel myself falling to temptation.

I take my overnight bag into the storage room and pack my vigilante attire. Cape. Mask. Sword. Then I head downstairs and reverse the black Mercedes Valeria gave me as a wedding present out of the garage. Once my things are packed into the trunk, along with Valeria and Lolita's bags, I wait, leaning against the hood, hands deep in the pockets of my pants.

Valeria emerges through the front door in a floor-length red lace gown, heavy gold jewelry around her neck and wrists and her hair swept up into an elaborate knot. She pauses, framed in the doorway, to adjust the red silk stole around her shoulders. With plump, self-satisfied lips, she descends the stairs toward me, no trace of pain lines or any puffiness to her face. You would think that she never had a headache.

I hold open the front passenger door for her and drop a quick kiss onto her cheek. "You look beautiful, Valeria."

She settles herself into the seat without a word, and we wait for her daughter.

And wait.

Ten minutes later, Valeria leans over and presses the car horn, the sound reverberating through my skull. A minute passes, and then Lolita appears on the top step. My heart gives one hard pound, and then seems to stop altogether.

Lolita wears a gown that sparkles like champagne and clings to every curve of her body. Her dark hair has been lightly curled and cascades over her shoulders. I don't think I've ever seen her with makeup on, but today her natural beauty has been highlighted with darkened lashes and a brush of pink lipstick on her lush mouth.

She comes slowly down the steps toward me. I find myself drifting toward her, aching to take this angel in my arms. It's a moment before I realize she's gazing at me with loathing in her jewel-bright eyes.

Faced with her loveliness, I forgot that she hates me.

If you so much as look in another man's direction, I will see to it that he dies a slow and bloody death.

I hold out my hand to her to help her into the car, but she swerves around me. Or tries to. I step in front of her on the pretense of reaching for the door handle.

"How lovely you look tonight," I murmur. She's so close that I don't need to raise my voice. Behind me, her mother is shut up in the car, the windows closed. "I hope you haven't forgotten my request, *mi niñita*."

"You mean your threat," she says through her clenched, pearly teeth.

I raise an eyebrow at her. "Shall I open the door so you can repeat that for your mother?"

Lolita snaps her eyes away, an angry red flush creeping into her cheeks. I chuckle and open the car door, and she gets inside. The skirt of her gown is full and I lean down to scoop some of the tulle into the car.

"I can do that." She tries to brush my hand away. Our fingers touch, and a bolt of electricity goes through me. Her eyes meet mine, and shock has driven all hatred from her face. We stare at each other for several long moments. Lolita doesn't move, her lower lip softening and her breasts rising and falling in short, soft breaths. I reach out to her lovely face, wanting to cup her cheek and draw her lips to mine.

A horn sounds, and for a moment I wonder if it's the clarion of doomsday. Then I realize that Valeria has grown impatient and sounded the horn again. I snatch my hand away and straighten.

"Hurry up with your dress, Lolita, or we're going to be late," I snap. I wait with one hand on the door while she scrambles to pull all the tulle safely inside, and then slam it closed. I pretend that my turmoil is irritation as I stalk around to the driver's side, get in, and start the engine.

My eyes catch Lolita's in the rearview mirror several times on the drive to Madrid. I don't know what I'll do if I see her near another man tonight. There could be blood on the dancefloor before midnight.

The ball is being held at the Carossa Grand Hotel in the center of Madrid. Valeria sweeps down the royal blue carpet to the entrance

on my arm like a Hollywood movie star, her smile white and blinding.

The inside of the ballroom is lit by enormous crystal chandeliers, reflected in ornate gold mirrors. Flower arrangements cascade over side tables and potted palms dominate the alcoves and corners of the room. There are so many glittering diamonds and white-toothed smiles that my eyes are dazzled.

My wife introduces me to this dignitary and that aristocrat. I'm hyper-aware of Lolita trailing behind us, unimportant to Valeria until she spots a tuxedoed man who isn't wearing a wedding ring. Then she drags her daughter forward and is all tender smiles and kind words about Lolita, as I stand off to one side, my whole body rigid with fury as I watch some cur looking at what's mine.

Coveting what's mine.

Undressing with their unworthy eyes what's mine. Mine. *Mine*.

"Shall we dance, *mi amor*?"

"Hmm?" It seems Valeria has run out of men for the moment and has turned to me to show her off on the dancefloor. "Fine."

I draw my wife into the waltzing couples, and immediately lose sight of Lolita in the crowd. Valeria is too busy cataloguing the guest list in a steady monologue to notice that my attention isn't on her. As she discusses the merits of this dignitary over that for her daughter, I'm scanning the crowd for Lolita herself.

Valeria gasps in pain. "Zacarias! Must you grip my hand so tightly?"

I realize I'm clenching her in anger, and loosen my grip. As soon as the music ends, I deposit Valeria on the edge of the dancefloor with a friend of hers, mutter an excuse she doesn't hear, and head off in search of my stepdaughter. If she's dared disobey me...

I finally run her to ground by the refreshments table. She's reaching for some punch, and another man is making a bee-line for her, his arm outstretched to put a cup into her hand. I get there first and step in front of him.

"Dance with me." I hold out my hand to Lolita. It's not a request.

She glances around for a friend. Her mother. But there's only me, and I'm going to get what I want.

Reluctantly, she places her hand in mine. We're on the edge of the dancefloor, and I step back and draw her into my arms. My arm slides around her waist as if it has done so every night for a hundred

years. Lolita's scent blooms in my nostrils, and I close my eyes briefly as she settles one slim hand on my shoulder. Euphoria fills me, and it's all I can do not to bend down and nuzzle her neck through her hair and nip her throat with my teeth.

Lolita gaze up at me through her lashes. "You're very strange, Zacarias. I don't like you at all."

I take a deep breath and remind myself of my intentions. I'm only doing this so I won't have to see her with other men. In a few hours' time, she'll be locked in a bedroom upstairs, and come morning I'll drive her back to the castillo where there are no other male eyes but my own.

Where no man can look upon what's mine. Mine. *Mine*.

"Yet you're dancing with me," I point out.

"We're in public. There are a hundred people in this room. Do I have to fear you even now?"

Especially now. I'm learning your scent, Lolita. I'm imprinting the curves of your body on my mind. I lean close to her lips and murmur, "Tell me, did you really try to seduce two of your professors?"

Her cheeks turn pink. What a little minx she is. I let my gaze slide down her body, wondering how far those papery old fools got with my Lolita. If I find out they touched her before they reported her, their lives won't be worth living.

Lolita gazes past my shoulder, craning her neck this way and that as I sweep her around the dancefloor. "Are you looking for someone?"

"I thought perhaps..." She trails off.

"You thought perhaps the Black Fox might make an appearance?"

She starts, and her cheeks turn an even deeper shade of crimson. For a moment she's flustered, but then becomes defiant. "Everyone thinks he's disappeared, but he hasn't. Criminals in Spain should watch themselves."

Her eyes flick disdainfully over my face, and I find myself smiling broadly. I lean down to whisper in her ear, "But I have you to watch me, *mi niñita*. I'd much rather have you than a ridiculous masked man."

Now that my lips are against her ear, I can't wrench myself away. I wrap my arm tighter around Lolita's waist, feeling her breasts

crush against my chest. I can't let her go. Not ever.

LOLITA

HIS MOUTH AGAINST MY EAR MAKES A SHIVER RUN DOWN MY SPINE. NOT a cold shiver, either. A hot, forbidden one. Slowly, Zacarias moves his lips against my earlobe, and then down to my throat. Surrounded by strangers and under the dim, shimmering light of the chandeliers, he kisses the tender spot behind my ear.

I hear myself gasp. I'm reminded of how it felt to be in *his* arms. It isn't right that my stepfather makes me feel like the Black Fox did. My eyes drift closed and I whisper, "Please let me go."

Zacarias' lips move back to my ear and his hands tighten on me possessively as he breathes, "But we haven't finished dancing."

I try desperately to imagine that I'm in my hero's arms, and that's why heat is sparkling low in my belly. It's the Black Fox's large hand splayed on my back. The Black Fox's chest that my over-sensitized nipples are rubbing against. The Black Fox who is making me pant and my core quiver with need as his hand dips further down my lower back until his touch is almost indecent.

The waltz ends, and I wrench myself out of Zacarias' arms. I stare up at him, breathing hard, willing my feet to carry me far, far away from him. He's gazing down at me with a hollow expression, almost like he's in pain. I could bear his cruelty because it made me hate him, but seeing that the ache in my chest is mirrored in his eyes makes panic flood through me.

"*Mi niñita.*" His voice is roughened and low with emotion, and he reaches for my hand. He's forgotten everyone around us. He's forgotten he's my stepfather. That my mother could be watching us at this very moment. He's a man reaching for the woman he craves,

and nothing else matters. For one long, terrible heartbeat, I want to go to him, too.

So I run.

I lift my skirts in both hands and force my way through the crush of bodies. Behind me, Zacarias shouts my name. I duck under a man's arm and swerve around a woman's frothy skirt, plunging deeper and deeper into the crowd.

There's a potted palm on the edge of the dancefloor, and I force myself into the alcove with it, my chest heaving and my heart thundering. A moment of privacy, that's all I need. As soon as I've calmed down, I'm going straight upstairs to my room and locking the door. To hell with the ball. Mama can yell at me in the morning if she wants, but I'm not risking that man coming near me again.

Finally, my breathing slows and I can stand up and look around. There's no sign of Zacarias among the whirling bodies. Chin up, I step out from between the palm fronds and make my way around the edge of the dancefloor, carefully not meeting anyone's eyes.

"Señorita. Señorita!"

I walk faster. If they're talking to me, they can go away and leave me alone. A waiter steps in front of me, a glass of champagne on a tray. There's a napkin lying next to it.

The man smiles and gives me a little bow. "From a gentleman who didn't give me his name, with his compliments."

I glance at it warily. There's something on the paper napkin, and when I looks closer I see that it's a sketch of a fox in black ink. My heart races, and I snatch up the napkin and open it, certain that there will be a message within.

Meet me on the mezzanine in ten minutes.

I sob with relief and hurry toward the stairs, leaving the bewildered waiter behind me, the paper napkin crumpled in my fist. There's a mezzanine above the ballroom, and the music and laughter fades away behind me. It's cool and quiet up here. There's a large, dim room full of sofas, tables and bookshelves, and a corridor at the far end. I pick up my skirts and run, determined to search everywhere, hoping that I didn't conceal myself so long behind the potted palm that he gave up and left.

As I pass an alcove, a hand reaches out and grasps mine. I see the flick of a black cape. A broad brimmed hat. Two dark eyes sparkling behind a mask.

The Black Fox scoops me against his hard body. Then his mouth is on mine and he's kissing me like he's as desperate for me as I am for him. I open my lips to him and his tongue caresses mine with the passion of a long lost lover. I moan against his mouth and wrap my arms around his neck. He's here. He's here.

He pulls away, panting against my lips, and I cling to the folds of his cape. I need him to obliterate what just happened. As I search his blazing eyes behind his mask, I feel love for him fill me from head to toe. He's the one I crave.

I press my mouth against his once more. "Thank all the stars in the sky. You're here."

The Black Fox braces his hand against the wall behind my head and gazes down at me, his thumb rubbing over my lower lip. What I can see of his face is filled with so much tenderness. "You don't even know who I am."

I trace the bristles of his short, black beard with my fingertips. "Yes, I do. All I want is you. I've never begged a man for anything in my life, but I need you, Black Fox."

"My sweet Lolita." He groans and kisses me again. His hat is knocked to the ground and my fingers tangle in his thick, dark hair. Everyone feels very far away as our mouths crash against each other's in the dim light.

"Why are you here?" I whisper, sliding my hands up his broad chest. "Are there criminals at the ball?"

"No. I'm here protecting someone."

"Who?"

He brushes his lips over mine. "You."

He kisses me again, a bold, searing kiss, one that takes my breath away. His hands slide possessively around me and I want to cry out for everyone to hear that I'm his. His, and no one else's. It's the Black Fox who my body craves.

"I have to taste you," he says roughly. He lifts me up onto a table and draws handfuls of my skirt up. I lean back on my palms, watching him caress my legs as if I'm made of the softest silk. His fingers slip beneath the delicate elastic of my underwear and draw them down my thighs.

I bite my lip, knowing that my mother and Zacarias would think it's wrong, even disgusting, to let a stranger touch me like this. I'm

tired of other people dictating my life. I'm making my own choices, and tonight I choose the Black Fox.

I lift my knees for him and open before him, baring my naked sex to his eyes and touch. He stands between my thighs, and his thick, tanned fingers trail over my belly and then down over my pussy, my heart-rate accelerating as my nerve endings fire. He grazes my soft, slick folds, and then strokes my hard, sensitized nub.

"Yes," I whisper, my head falling back. "Yes, please, more."

I wish my stepfather could see me now, spread wide for another man as he coats his fingers in my wetness and slides them into my pussy.

No. What am I thinking? I shove all thoughts of Zacarias away as the Black Fox gives a groan of approval, his fingers pumping in and out of me.

"Buena niñita."

I clasp the back of one thigh and pull it up toward my chest, offering him more. He dips his head and tastes me, and as the heavenly sensations overtake me I know I'll let this man do anything he wants to me. His two fingers push deeper.

"Are you a virgin, my sweet girl?"

"Yes," I confess, hoping that it won't mean he stops. The Black Fox goes on licking me. I thread my hands through his hair. I can tell he's older even though I can't see all of his face. Late thirties, or perhaps forty. His jaw is strong and his eyes sparkle darkly, and his naked body must be a sight to behold.

"Can I have your sweet little cherry, Lolita? Can I take it now?"

The slow swipes of his tongue have me lying back on the table, my arms flung above my head, lost in pleasure. "Yes, daddy."

I feel his mouth curve into a smile. "You want me to be your daddy, *niñita*?"

I bite my lip and nod. I want him to put strong hands on me and take his pleasure in my body while telling me I'm such a good girl for him. When I look up, the desire sparking in the depths of his eyes is intoxicating.

He gives my pussy a spank with his fingers, and my whole body jumps as I gasp in shock. "Ow!"

He smiles at me. "No tears. No whimpering. You'll be a brave girl, won't you?"

He unzips his fly, and to show him just how brave I can be, I reach in past the waistband of his briefs to curl my fingers around his member. My eyes widen as I feel his girth, as hard as iron and so hot in my hand. I explore his length, the tracings of veins and the ridge at the tip. The Black Fox pushes down his underwear and his cock springs free.

My mouth falls open as I take in the sight of him. He's shaved down to black bristles, and I don't know whether that's why he looks enormous, or if he just is enormous. Both, I think.

"Scared?"

I realize I'm staring at him, and close my mouth and shake my head. "No, daddy."

He rubs the thick, slippery head of his cock against my clit. "I love it when you call me that. Good girl."

I sit up on my elbows, transfixed by the sight of him. He grasps my thigh with one hand and pushes my legs wider. With delicious slowness, he invades my tight heat. His girth stretches me with fierce pleasure-pain, and I pant hard watching him push deeper and deeper. With short, demanding thrusts he makes me open before him, and soon the sting is replaced by a friction so sweet that my whole body feels filled with champagne.

I gaze up at him through heavy lidded eyes as he pounds me. The Black Fox. My Black Fox.

"Can you choke me a little?" I whisper softly, ashamed for asking for it.

I've got all night. You've got about a minute till you pass out.

The Black Fox meets my eyes behind his mask. I can't tell what he's thinking, and for a moment I'm worried he's going to tell me I'm disgusting. Then he tugs his belt free and wraps it around my neck. I whimper and flick needful eyes up him, enjoying the sensation of my life in this dangerous man's hands. It's like he knows I was craving the feel of leather around my neck.

He smiles and clenches the belt tighter. "Are you going to be a good girl for me?"

It's hard to speak around the tight leather. "Yes, daddy."

His eyes are glittering as he stares into mine, his cock pounding my pussy. "Sweet Lo, fucked in an alcove by a strange man while Mama is dancing downstairs."

I swallow with some difficulty and gasp, "Not a stranger. You're my Black Fox."

"Oh, yes, *niñita*. Your Black Fox. Just—" he thrusts hard "—yours." He thrusts again, choking off my cries with a vicious clench on the belt. I can't breathe, and the pleasure rushing through me suddenly effervesces and explodes, cascading in warm waves through my body.

He goes on pounding me hard, letting go of the belt in favor of holding both my hips steady in his grip. "Just your Black Fox. Just yours, Little Lo."

His strokes are selfish and deep now, slaking his desperate need with my body. I feel another orgasm building on the tail of the last, and it bursts through me as he groans deep and low and his rhythm stutters.

ZACARIAS

I LEAN OVER HER, BREATHING HARD, MY HANDS BRACED AGAINST THE table either side of her head. How beautifully disheveled she looks, her hair laid out in messy curls across the dark wood.

I've taken what doesn't belong to me, and even in this guise I can't summon a scrap of regret. The choking was a little rougher than I would like to treat my beautiful girl, but I can't refuse her when she begs me so sweetly. I withdraw carefully and thread my belt back through my pants as she sits up. Her dress pools around her thighs, and I take her once again in my arms and kiss her.

"Is it true?" she whispers, reaching up to wrap her arms around my neck, so innocent, so trusting.

"Is what true, *mi ángel*?"

"Am I in danger from someone?"

I take her face between my hands, squeezing my eyes closed. Lolita mistakes my shame for worry. She reaches up and draws my chin up so my eyes meet hers. "It's all right. I already know who it is. My stepfather, Zacarias."

I seize her arms. "He means you harm and he'll stop at nothing to get what he wants. You must stay away from him."

"I will try, but when we live in the same—"

"Promise me you will stay out of his sight. It's more important than you can know. *Promise me.*"

Lolita licks her lips, and whispers, "Yes, daddy."

Immediately, her cheeks color up, like she isn't sure whether she should call me that. It sends angel song thrumming through my blood. My sweet little girl trusts me. Needs me. Only me.

"Yes. Good. Do as you're told and stay out of his way. Let me handle the rest, *mi niñita*."

"I like it when you call me that," she says, wrapping her arms around my neck.

The emphasis is on you. When *you* call me that. Not him. I kiss her one last time, a hard, bruising kiss. I mean her to feel me after I'm gone from her side. "Be safe, *mi niñita*," I whisper, and then I'm slipping away into the shadows.

She calls after me, "When will I see you again?"

But I'm already out of sight.

I change in mine and Valeria's room after making sure the coast is clear, and then slips back downstairs to the ball. I don't pass Lolita in the corridors. I wonder if she's come back down to watch the dancing or gone to her own room. I have to grip the bannister hard for a second to prevent myself from going to look for her. She'll be covered with my scent. Filled with my seed. My mouth curls in a triumphant smile. *He* might have Lolita's heart, but I have tasted her body.

And I'll taste it again.

Valeria hasn't even noticed that I've been gone when I return to her side. She's flirting like crazy with the French ambassador, the man she was supposedly hoping would become her son-in-law. I wait silently a few feet away, pretending to watch the dancers but reliving the last half hour with my Little Lo. Her cries as I lapped at her clit. Her virgin pussy clamped tight around my cock. I've never known anything like it.

I have to have her again. As Zacarias, as the Black Fox, I don't care. But soon. I lose myself in schemes, ways to trick my pretty little stepdaughter into taking my cock and coming hard on it again. I feel myself smiling a nasty smile as I imagine it.

Beware the wicked stepfather. That's something the fairytales leave out.

Finally, after Valeria has danced twice with the ambassador and once with a lesser Spanish aristocrat, the ball ends and we make our way upstairs. Valeria's drank too much champagne and wobbles on her high heels, but I'm thankful as it means she doesn't notice my silence and admonish me for boring her. She takes off her dress and falls into bed in her makeup and jewelry. A few minutes later she's snoring.

I go out onto the moonlit balcony and look at the clear, starry sky. So, this is my life now. The deepest unhappiness and the cruelest bliss. I should walk away, but I feel it keenly as the silver light washes over me: I'm trapped by my need for her. Unto death.

Lolita and I are both silent over breakfast and the drive home. Lolita and I. Lolita and I. How I love the way that sounds. Valeria is quiet at first as well, nursing her hangover. Then the coffee kicks in and she rouses herself, and chatters ceaselessly about the ball. My sweet Lo has put on a pair of large, dark sunglasses and gazes out the passenger side window, sunk in thought. Every now and then she runs her thumbnail over her plump lower lip. Her swollen, thoroughly kissed lips that I can still feel moving against my own.

Is she remembering how it felt to kiss me? Is her tender pussy sore this morning from the pounding I gave her? Every time her eyes meet mine, she looks hastily away. I want to laugh. She's being a good girl for her daddy and trying to avoid me. When she shifts in her seat she winces slightly, and I smile broadly at the road ahead. What I wouldn't give to get her home and coax her legs open for me again.

Daddy knows you're sore, he'll be gentle sweetheart. Look how wet you are for me already. That's it, take daddy's cock...

I almost drive off the road thinking about it.

When we reach the castillo, Valeria gets out of the car and saunters up the steps, her hips swaying and her chin held high, as if an evening of male attention has recharged her batteries. I pull our bags out of the trunk while Lo stretches and rakes her fingers through her long hair.

By the front door, Valeria pauses and turns around, a puzzled expression in her dark eyes. "Lolita, I didn't see you much in the ballroom last night. Where were you?"

Lolita freezes, her fingers stilling in her silken strands. Behind her, I stay where I am, my hands clenched on the luggage.

She licks her lips. "I was dancing, and then I talked to a friend. After that I got the most splitting headache and I...I thought I should go straight to bed. I was going to say goodnight to you, but you seemed to be having such a good time that I didn't want to interrupt."

Valeria's eyes narrow with irritation. I can see that she dearly wants to scold her daughter for not meeting enough men, but as she

coopted the most eligible bachelors all night, she seems to think better of it.

My wife disappears to the castillo, and I follow Lolita up the stairs. Just inside the door, I drop our bags, catch my stepdaughter by the wrist and pull her around to face me. "Lie to your Mama if you want to, but not to me."

She glares at my hand on her wrist and then up at me. "Go to hell."

Anger smolders deep in my chest. How dare she talk to me this way? "One of these days, a man is going to take his belt to that tender ass of yours, and you're going to be better off for it."

Her pretty mouth parts in shock. "One of these days I'm going to tell Mama that you're touching me like no stepfather should, and she's going to kick you out so fast your head will spin."

"Just try it, and you'll see where your lies get you."

"Did you enjoy getting your hands all over me last night?" she hisses. "Your mouth in places it shouldn't be?"

She's talking about the kiss I pressed against her throat, but I can't help but remember the luscious taste of her pussy and how she squirmed against my tongue. I draw her closer, murmuring softly, "If I sucked on your plump little clit and made you burst on my tongue, would you still run to your mother and tell on me? Or would you start running to daddy, instead?"

Lolita's face suffuses with outrage and shock. I turn away and pick up the bags, laughing.

Her whisper follows me down the hall and pierces me like a dart. "I hate you."

Pain explodes in my chest. I manage to turn a corner before I double over, gasping for breath. I can feel it like a physical thing, her hatred, and it makes me jubilant but the Black Fox despair.

THERE ARE OLD VINES ON THE EAST OF THE CASTILLO, AND I NEED A hobby. Something to keep my hands busy. I'll learn to make wine.

Can one just do that, learn how to make wine? I have no idea, but with vines to hand and all the time in the world, there's no reason not to try. It keeps me away from Lolita. Even as Zacarias, I'm wary of being too close to her. When I lay eyes on her the urge to be cruel,

to take hold of her, to slide my hand beneath her skirt as she begs me to stop threatens to overwhelm me. I must be clever around Valeria. I must be deceptive.

I manage to avoid my stepdaughter for nearly two weeks. Two whole weeks of burying my face in textbooks and learning about earth and fertilizer and drainage. Two weeks of walking up and down the vines, examining leaves and stems and bunches of grapes. I spend every night in the spare room, telling Valeria that I don't wish to wake her when I come to bed after long hours of study. She accepts this without comment, and doesn't seem to notice that I can't stand the sight of my wife. I detest the smell of her. Her voice is someone scraping a bow over an untuned violin. Her vapid conversation makes me want to scream at her that I don't care what she thinks or says. I never cared. I never wanted her. Only the curse wanted her.

I spend every night alone, and I barely sleep. Does Lolita miss her Black Fox? Is she wondering where he is, if he's discarded her after their moment of passion? Is she breaking her heart over him? I rub the heel of my hand over my own aching heart in the darkness, needing as much as wanting my Little Lo. On the fifteenth night after the ball, I work myself up into such a frenzy that I'm pacing up and down the bedroom at one in the morning, breathing hard and growling under my breath. She's so close. *So close*. I ache from head to toe for her. My sweet Lolita with her luscious mouth and her pink velvet pussy. I remember the way she clung to me, her fingers digging into my shoulders. She needs her Black Fox, too. The memory of her trusting eyes as I choked her with my belt breaks me.

I run to the wardrobe and yank out the carefully concealed bag. It's the work of a moment to change into him, and then I'm swinging out the window into the night.

The ramparts of the castillo are crumbling, but I feel my way in the darkness around to Lolita's balcony. There's a sheer drop below into the vines. I wonder what would happen if I fell and Lolita and Valeria found my body in the morning. Would Lolita scream as the mask came off and she realized who her darling Black Fox was all this time? Or would she sob over my body, broken and battered by this curse?

Her room is silent and dark when I reach it. The night is warm and her balcony door is open. I steal inside, my booted footfalls soft

on the carpet. The breeze lifts the gossamer hangings of her canopied bed, and I see her, a dark-haired princess amid a cloud of pillows and white sheets.

How lovely she is. How much I want to care for her, my Little Lo. As the Black Fox, my heart is filled with tenderness. I slip up onto the bed and gather her into my arms. Even my lust is tender, and I coax her awake with soft kisses. As her eyelashes flutter, I wonder if I will need to clamp a hand over mouth to prevent a startled scream, but she's not afraid of the stranger in the shadows. She smiles up at him.

"Black Fox," she whispers, arching her back and pressing her breasts up toward me. Her nipples are tight little buds beneath her thin nightgown. "Black Fox, I knew you'd come."

"I couldn't stay away," I say in a low voice, and press my mouth against hers. Her lips are like cherries, bursting with sweetness. "I've done nothing but think of you, *mi niñita*."

"Have you, daddy?" she moans, wrapping her silken thighs around me. "Will you touch me?"

"Everywhere," I murmur against her mouth between kisses.

"Will you love me?"

"With all my heart."

"Will you..." She hesitates for a moment, her eyes filled with uncertainty. Even fear. She needn't be afraid of me. I would never hurt her.

"Will you...punish me?" Her hands slide down my chest and stroke the leather belt at my hips. "Will you hurt me, Black Fox? Will you tell me I'm your filthy little girl, and stripe my skin with thick red marks?"

I watch her pale fingers undo my belt, the buckle clinking gently. I seize her hands and plant them above her head. "Lolita, no. Why do you want that?"

She bites her lip, and whispers, "Someone told me I deserve it, and I think he's right."

How vulnerable she is, pinned beneath me, her arms above her head. How easy it would be for me to do anything I want to her.

Anything at all.

I leap from the bed, horror plunging through me. She wants him. She craves *him*. If I unleash him now, what if I can't reel him back in?

What if he takes over everything, and I can never find sanctity as the Black Fox ever again?

What if she learns to loves him more than she loves me? I look down at her soft, prone body, so fresh and unmarked, her eyes filled with need for someone I was so sure that she hated.

Lolita sits up, bewildered. "Black Fox?"

Without another word, I run from the room. Not out through the balcony doors, the way I came in.

Through her bedroom door.

I don't realize my mistake until I'm back in the guest bedroom, my back pressed against the door and my chest heaving. I wait, unable to move, waiting for Lolita's scream to pierce the night. For her to wake the whole castle with shouts that Zacarias is the Black Fox; Zacarias has been taking advantage of her; Zacarias is a foul beast who must be roused from the castillo; Zacarias must die.

The silence endures. I tear off my mask and cape and sag against the door, my head in my hands. How did this happen? This curse is overtaking everything in my life, even my beloved, the one thing that I thought would be safe from him. I look at the mask lying discarded on the floor. From me.

Lolita is a dozen or so meters away, alone in that big bed, restless and aroused. In need. In need of me. Of my belt. Of the discipline she craves that I can mete out on her delicate flesh.

My teeth are gritted so tight that they might shatter in my head. Without the cape and mask I'm just a man, and powerful lust overtakes me. As I rip open the door and pound down the corridor, I think I hear evil, gloating laughter.

Lolita has her head under the pillows when I charge back into her room. She starts to sit up, but I push her face back down. It's me now, Zacarias, and unlike him, I'm not gentle.

"Black Fox," she moans, and her back arches.

I quickly take off my black shirt and use it as a mask to tie over her eyes. Her short, silky nightgown with its thin straps is slipping from over her shoulders, and I pull it down her body and use it to tie her wrists behind her back. She whimpers as I pull the knots tight and regard her naked body, blindfolded and tied, and ready for me to misuse. She wriggles her knees wider, so eager for me to get started.

I slide my belt beneath her hips and hoist her ass into the air so I can get a good look at her gleaming wet, pink pussy. So this is what she is for her Black Fox. A horny little thing who wants a big man to hit her and a big cock to pummel her into submission.

I take a hold of her ass and give it a vicious squeeze. "That's it, *mi niñita*. Be a bad girl for daddy."

LOLITA

HIS BREATH IS HOT AND MENACING IN MY EAR. I COULDN'T MOVE IF I tried as he has my wrists tied behind my back so tightly. The leather of his belt caresses my bare ass and thighs. My cheek and shoulders are against the bed while my ass is propped up in the air. I can feel the Black Fox kneeling on the bed beside me. He slips a hand beneath me and palms my breasts, squeezing my flesh hungrily.

My breath comes short and fast. Now that I'm waiting for the first blow, I almost want to beg him not to do it.

He leans down and speaks in a murmur. "I'll give you what you're craving, Little Lo. But if you scream, I will gag you and strap you even harder."

My body ripples at the threat in his voice.

He takes a fistful of my hair and gives me a shake. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, daddy," I whimper. "Please, please, just do it. I'll die if you keep drawing it out." I'm nearly crying the tension is so thick.

He gives my hair a vicious tug. "Are you telling me what to do?"

"No, daddy," I sob.

"You better not be."

He takes his time arranging me, so that the agony of waiting mounts and mounts. No one's ever hit me before and I don't know if it will be a glow of heat or a burn of pain.

When the first strike comes, I'm not ready for it. It's a white hot blaze of unbearable pain. I'm about to scream but the Black Fox pushes my face into the blankets and holds it there.

"What did I say?"

I cry silently, my shoulders shaking, not daring to make a move or a sound. My left ass cheek is throbbing.

I feel his arm lift, and then he straps me again, this time on the right side. I press my face harder and harder into the blankets, screaming noiselessly. The pain is unlike anything I've known before. The sting of the leather is sharp, and the welts burn and burn, and then burn afresh as he strikes me again.

I move past pain into an entirely other place. The Black Fox strips me bare and breaks me down. It feels good to finally be treated like I deserve to be.

Little liar Lo.

Unwanted schoolgirl.

Nuisance.

I deserve this. *I deserve this.*

The Black Fox finally stops. I know it's truly over when he takes my ass in his hands and squeezes, admiring his work. "You needed that, didn't you, Little Lo?"

I nod, shuddering with exhaustion. He strokes my body with long, slow caresses, telling me how good I am. That I took my punishment like a brave girl and he's proud of me. I hear the pleasure in his voice. He flips me over. My face is wet with tears behind the blindfold.

"What do you say?"

I lick my lips. "Thank you, daddy."

The Black Fox grasps both my ankles and pulls me down the bed toward him. He pulls me so I'm sitting up, my feet dangling off the edge of the bed. I feel the brush of his thighs against my own.

"Suck me."

Something hot and blunt presses against my lips. I open my mouth and his cock pushes over my tongue. I suck him eagerly, imagining that it's my pussy he's pounding as he rhythmically moves his hips.

He fists his hand in my hair. "Are you daddy's pretty little girl?"

I moan and nod, eager to do anything for him, hoping he'll take pity on my neediness and fill me with his cock. I'm aching between my legs with the desire to be touched, to be fucked so hard that I'll feel it for a week.

He pulls his cock from my lips, leaving me gasping. His fingers caress my face, feeling my tears, and then he pulls my legs apart to

feel my sex. I'm so wet that my thighs are coated. "Little girls who cry with a wet pussy are perfect little girls. Will you always be so good for me, Lolita?"

He pumps his fingers in and out of me. "If you'll always be my daddy."

I wish I could see him, but he hasn't removed the blindfold and my hands are still tight behind my back. I wriggle forward and rest my cheek against his muscular belly as he finger fucks me. As the sensations build, intensified by the heat and pain in my ass, I rub my cheek against him, like a cat. His other hand caresses my hair, telling me that I'm a good, sweet girl, that I'm going to get my reward.

I come in a great rush of pleasure, leaning into his fingers and body. The orgasm goes on and on, fueled by the heat already radiating through me. I take a gasping breath, and he flips me over onto my stomach. I feel the thick intrusion of his cock, sliding deep and true right to my core.

"Yes," he hisses, drawing back and sheathing himself inside me again. "How perfect you feel after you've been punished."

"Pound me hard, daddy," I moan into the bedclothes. "Punish me more."

The Black Fox takes a vicious hold my hair and rams his cock into me, over and over, a brutal rhythm that has me flying high. He growls in my ear and then sinks his teeth into my shoulder as he comes.

For a moment he stays where he is, his weight on his arms and his cock lodged deep inside me. Then he slowly withdraws.

"If I untie your arms, do you promise not to take the blindfold off?"

I don't know why it matters. But then I realize—he's removed his mask. I long to see what he looks like, and whether he's as handsome as I know he must be, but I nod. "I promise."

The first thing I do when my hands are released is reach up and touch his face. I'm right, he's not wearing the mask. He tenses beneath my fingers as if he's afraid of something. As if I might discover some fatal flaw. I explore him carefully and his skin is smooth and warm. His short beard rasps against my fingers. I smile, reveling in the sensation of touching my lover. His brow is stern and his nose is long and straight. When my fingers touch his lips, he kisses them.

"What made you change your mind?" I whisper. I thought once he charged out of my room he'd never come back.

He nips at my fingers with his teeth. "My much worse half kept hearing you begging me to punish you, and I had to make *mi niñita* happy."

His much worse half. Just because he likes to strap me with his belt and fuck me hard doesn't make him a bad man. I love that he can work so hard to protect Spain, and be so sweetly cruel to me as well.

I reach up and lock my arms around his neck. "Please let's run away together. I hate it here."

He takes a deep breath and I know before he speaks that he's going to say no. I cover his mouth with my hand. "Don't tell me no. We can leave here together. Now, tonight. I'll live a life as a runaway. I can be a vigilante, too."

He draws my hand away from his mouth. "You want to live with me, wherever that might be?"

"Of course."

He chuckles softly, and I frown behind my blindfold. "Is that funny?"

"No, *mi niñita*. It's not funny. Only a little ironic that you're asking me this now. There's nothing I want more than to live freely with you, out in the open, but it's too dangerous."

"You'll overcome your enemies."

"Too dangerous for *you*."

I sit in darkness, not understanding. I reach up to tear the blindfold off, but his hands catch mine.

"*Niñita*, you promised."

"But why would it be dangerous for me?"

He sighs regretfully and pulls me into his arms, cuddling me on his lap as he sits on the edge of the bed. The warm night air caresses our naked bodies. "Because I'm cursed."

I stare at the place I think his eyes must be. "What curse? Don't be ridiculous! There's no such thing as curses."

"I used to think the same thing, but I know it to be true now. Ever since I...laid eyes on something precious. The most precious thing in the world to me."

He sounds so sad. So bleak. "Black Fox, I don't understand."

He strokes my hair back from my face, and I know he's gazing down at me. "When I was a very young man, a fortune teller called out to me in the street saying that I must hear what she had to tell me. My friends thought it was funny, and made me sit down while she gazed into her crystal ball. If I hoped to hear that my future would be filled with riches and happiness, I was sorely disappointed. She told me that I'm cursed, and that if I ever fell in love, I would die for love."

I listen carefully to his voice, because it's all I have to gauge his emotions. He speaks with utmost gravity. "And you believed her?"

"I think I must have. I became the Black Fox, and left everyone behind. I never felt one stirring of love, and I was glad. Until now."

I bite my lip, wondering if he means that he's felt the stirrings of love at last. "But, Black Fox. There's no such thing as—"

He kisses me softly, halting my protests. For a moment I become lost in his kiss and the feel of his arms around me. My heart beats hard despite his strange words. Is this his way of telling me he's falling in love with me, despite everything that divides us? He lives in the night, in the shadows, and I live in the day, in this cruel, unfeeling castillo.

"I want what is good and right, Black Fox," I whisper, when my lips break from his. "I want you."

His fingertip runs down my nose. "I know you do, *mi niñita*. Your heart is pure and good, and it beats so sweetly against mine, which is rotten with corruption."

I open my mouth to protest, but he castigates me. "*Listen* to me, Lolita. I am telling the truth. I am cursed. It was a wicked queen with strange powers who did it. She was jilted a long ago by her hero, and ever since then she has been cursing men down the ages, and they must pay the ultimate price for love. I don't need you to believe me, but you must understand that I believe this." He takes a horrified, shuddering breath. "I can feel her close to me when I am happiest. Right now, she's whispering hateful things into my ear because you're in my arms. I dream about the queen. An evil, green-eyed witch, and she's laughing at me. She's wildly jealous of you. If I take you with me, we will both perish. Even this is dangerous, but for the moment I'm able to...for the moment you are safe."

I think rapidly, trying to understand. "She cursed you because you're a hero, like the man she thought she was going to marry? But

you didn't do anything! How unfair that is."

When I touch his face, I feel that there's a sweet, sad smile touching his lips. "I've never told anyone this before. I've been alone for so long that I've forgotten what it's like when someone truly sees you."

He says that even though I'm blindfolded. But it's true. I do see him. "Black Fox, I will break your curse."

He goes on smiling that sad smile. "Lolita, will you sleep in my arms? I want to hold you tonight."

We lay down together on the bed and he wraps his arms tightly around me. My mind races with everything he's told me. If he allows himself to fall deeply in love with me, he'll die. My eyes fill with tears behind the blindfold again. What a cruel paradox. The more I hold him and kiss him, the closer death will creep. If I look upon his face and tell him I love him, I'll seal his death warrant.

There must be a way to break the curse, but if there is, it eludes me. Exhaustion and despair overtake me, and I fall asleep.

When I awake I feel around the bed, but I'm alone. I rip the mask off, half hoping, half afraid that I'll see his face. I blink away the blurriness, and see only sunshine, cream carpet, and my empty room.

I'm all alone. I always will be, because the man I love can't love me back.

When I've lain upon the bed for an hour feeling thoroughly sorry for myself, I get up and pad naked through to the bathroom to turn on the shower. Mama will be angry if I'm late to the breakfast table, and if she yells at me I'm likely to burst into tears in front of her and Zacarias.

While I wait for the water to run hot, I stand naked in front of the mirror, admiring the thick red marks on my ass and thigh. I count ten all together, though at the time it felt like he broke the leather over my behind a hundred times. I start to grow wet again imagining asking him to double the number next time; that I can take it for him. It was such a wonderful rush coming through his punishment to the other side.

My heart sinks as I realize that I probably won't ever get the chance to ask him to do that again. He'll protect me from the shadows. I wonder if I'll catch glimpses of him from time to time,

always out of reach. Tears slip down my face, and I walk into the shower where they mingle with the hot water.

Twenty minutes later I'm down at the breakfast table. Zacarias is already there, but I ignore him as I enter the room. When I sit down, I wince with pain. I've forgotten my thoroughly punished behind.

Zacarias looks up, and his eyes narrow. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say innocently, reaching for the coffee pot. Zacarias gets there before me and pours a hot stream of coffee into my cup. I tell myself over and over to keep my eyes lowered, to ignore him, but I can't help myself.

I look up, and our eyes lock.

I stare into those dark brown depths, flecked with gold, and a strange feeling overwhelms me. Strange and hot. My heart races for reasons that make no sense.

Coffee spills over the rim of the cup and onto the table. Zacarias swears and puts the pot down, and I'm finally able to look away. I busy myself with a fresh cup and pouring my own coffee as Zacarias uses his napkin to mop up the spill.

My heart aches with so much longing that even Zacarias is starting to seem like a human being. Maybe any husband would be a good idea right now, but I don't want anyone but the Black Fox.

ZACARIAS

AFTER BREAKFAST, I HEAD OUT AMONG THE VINES TO CHECK THEIR growth. I can't concentrate. I can only think about Lolita. The tears she wept for me. Her pussy gripping my cock as I pounded her into the mattress last night. Her eyes, large and vulnerable, watching me over the breakfast table.

I held her for hours last night, wide awake, telling myself that it must be the first and only time. It must never happen again. She bears marks from my belt. Maybe I'll be safe from the impulse to pin her down and make her whimper beneath me until the welts fade. And after that? I'll just have to have some fucking self-control.

It's a scorching hot day, and I lift the hem of my T-shirt and use it to wipe my face as I come up from the vines. I see that Lolita is out by the pool again and she's zeroed in on my bare stomach. As I catch her eye she looks hastily away.

The following days are tense and pass in near-silence. Lolita pores over her textbooks, and I pore over my studies. We both lose ourselves in work while Valeria sighs around the house, complaining that she's bored out of her mind living with two bluestockings. I remind her that the vineyard could bring in a tidy profit if the *terroir*, the land, is as good as I think it is, but she just rolls her eyes.

Two weeks pass. Two whole weeks since I tasted my angel's lips. My little girl must be getting needy again. I know I fucking am. I sleep in the spare room every night, and Valeria never complains. We don't even talk about it. Sometimes I wonder why she married me.

At dinner one evening, Valeria enters the room and does a strange thing. She pauses and sniffs the air above Lolita's head, as if there's a scent coming off her. A disagreeable scent. She wrinkles her nose and draws back. So many things she does are silly affectations, designed to wound or make her displeasure known without speaking. This time, though, she seems troubled, and quashes the expression as soon as she sees me looking at her.

Lolita glances up and realizes her mother is standing behind her chair. "Mama? What did you just do?"

"Oh—nothing, darling," Valeria says haltingly, and sits down, sweeping her chiffon kimono out of the way. She gazes critically at her daughter. "I wish you'd keep out of the sun. You're starting to freckle."

Lolita's concerned expression hardens into irritation. I grit my teeth. Valeria is Valeria once more.

One of the staff brings the first course, soft white cheese and crusty bread. Lolita helps herself, and I watch her fingers as she lifts a knife. Just to brush my knuckles over hers in this moment would be enough to make me happy. With my wife present, I keep my hands firmly on the tabletop.

Valeria's still eyeing her daughter critically, hunting for something else to reproach her with. "What do you do all day? I see you out by the pool, scribbling away."

"You know what I'm doing, Mama. I'm studying," Lolita mutters, spreading the fresh cheese on a slice of bread.

"Tch, study. If you overeducate yourself you'll be a bore to your husband."

Lolita's eyes flash and two spots of color burn in her cheeks. "I hardly think an education is going to make me boring. And I don't believe it's possible to be *overeducated*."

"You would say—" Valeria begins.

"Leave her alone," I rap out, placing bread on Valeria's plate and my own, and cutting a portion of cheese with more vigor than is necessary. "Let the girl do a little study if that's what she wants."

Valeria glares at me. "I suppose you're the one who let her have those textbooks. I don't remember a delivery."

"Yes. I did." I raise my eyes briefly to Lolita's and find she's gazing back at me. A moment of affinity seems to crackle between us, but it's so fleeting that I wonder if I imagine it. More likely she

was remembering how I threatened to murder any man she danced with at the ball.

The rest of the meal passes in silence. Valeria is cold and haughty, but Lolita seems flustered as her gaze lifts occasionally from the tablecloth to my face, only to drop hastily again. When we're finally finished eating, she grabs a stack of plates and hurries into the kitchen. She never helps to clear the table. She doesn't have to. Valeria has hired people for that.

On the pretense of being angry she's broken protocol, I stalk through to the kitchen and find Lolita stacking the dishwasher with one of the staff. She's bent over and the short hem of her dress has ridden up her bare thighs.

I glance at the other woman. "Out."

Her eyes widen, and she hurries from the room as Lolita whips round, panic flashing over her face as she realizes we're alone. Her fear is an aphrodisiac. She should stand up to me. If she shrinks before me, then my desire only grows.

I glance at her bare legs as I approach her. "Someone's been coming to your room at night, *mi niñita*."

"What are you talking about?" She tries for outrage, but only manages a horrified whisper.

"There are marks on your skin."

She clutches her thigh. "There aren't! They've faded."

I chuckle as she realizes her mistake.

"I hurt myself," she whimpers.

"Did you?" I lean close, trapping her against the counter with my arms. I breathe in her ear, "Or did someone do it for you? You entered this house a virgin, but you're not a virgin anymore, are you? Someone's been slaking his need in that tight pussy of yours, and you've been coming like a little harlot all over his dick."

"Shut up," she whispers, tears swimming in her eyes.

She should have known better than to cry. How I love to see her cry. I trace the path of one tear down her cheek with my forefinger. "Do you let him do whatever he wants to you, as long as he gives you the fucking you crave? Does he enjoy marking you and humiliating you and seeing how depraved you'll be for him?"

My finger travels down her throat and over her collarbone. I hook my finger into the stretchy fabric of her top and pull it down. She's not wearing a bra, and her breasts spring free.

Growling at the sight, I push her harder against the counter with my hips, not caring that I'm playing with fire. I'm going insane with lust for her.

"Did he touch you here?" I pluck the rosy tips of her nipples, then raise my fingers to my lips and lick my thumbs and forefingers. I apply them to her nipples again, twisting them with my slippery saliva.

Her breath comes in a soft pant. "You shouldn't be doing that. I'll tell. I'll scream."

"No one will believe you. Where else did he touch you?"

"Nowhere," she says quickly.

"That's a lie, isn't it, Little Lo? Did he touch your pussy? Did he fuck you in your bed with his hand over your mouth so you wouldn't wake anyone as you came?" I take her hand and press it against my erection, nearly groaning when her slim hand cups my thick rod. "Can daddy fuck you too, baby? I won't tell a soul. I'll treat you better than he could."

I slip my hand beneath her skirt and rub my finger back and forth over her slit through her underwear.

Lolita's eyes close involuntarily, and her head tips back. "You don't...make me feel like he does."

I hook a finger beneath her underwear and slide it through her soaking wet pussy. I find her core, and drive myself two knuckles deep inside of her. Her mouth opens silently. So much for screaming for help.

"Spread your legs, *mi niñita*."

And to my delight, Lolita does what daddy tells her to do and walks her feet open. I slip another finger into her pussy and finger fuck her hard while she grips the edge of the counter with both hands, her lips parted and eyes hazy with shocked lust. She's looking upon my face. *My* face. No mask. No blindfold over her eyes. She's letting her stepdaddy pound his fingers into her sex while Mama's out there drinking wine. What a filthy little girl I have. How I adore her.

Then Lolita does a very odd thing. She lifts her hand and holds it up before my eyes. She stays that way for several long moments. Then she drops her hand with a gasp and shoves me away.

"Lolita?"

She covers her breasts and pulls her skirt down, and runs away down the corridor as fast as she can.

"TO US, ZACARIAS." VALERIA HOLDS OUT HER WINE TO ME, AS DARK AS blood in the crystal glass. Her nails are blood red, too, and sharpened to points.

I stare at the raised glass a moment, and then tap my glass against hers and put it down again without bothering to take a sip. I've lost my appetite for everything.

I glance at Lolita's empty place at the dinner table, and the hand in my lap clenches on my napkin. I haven't seen her since the incident in the kitchen last night. I want to punish her for this. My cock thickens in my pants as I wonder, belt or bare hand? I imagine catching her in some quiet corner of the castillo and tanning her ass until till she's sobbing. Later, her sweet Black Fox could kiss it all better while she weeps on his chest.

Valeria lifts her knife and fork and cuts into her steak. The meat is pink. My wife likes it bloody. "You're not drinking your wine, *mi amor*. Is everything all right?"

I take a long look around the dining room as if it might be my last. The large mahogany table gleams with antique porcelain and is set with silver cutlery and candlesticks.

"Everything's fine, Valeria." In a few hours time, she'll be fast asleep and I plan on being nine inches deep in her daughter's tight little pussy. Fuck being careful. I'm done being careful. I just need her.

Valeria flicks her gaze up to mine as she continues to cut her steak. There's something hard and suspicious in her eyes. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"A little tired. Too many late nights." I can't pound Lolita too hard right away. *Mi niñita* is small and fragile, and completely at my mercy. I have to grit my teeth and breathe hard through those first shallow thrusts. It's torture having to hold back, but I'm so much bigger and stronger than she is. It's not long until she stretches around me. She loves to take her daddy's dick.

I can feel Valeria's eyes on me still and she slides the morsel of steak from her fork into her mouth with her teeth, and I realize I

have to say something. "I will find Lolita after dinner, and punish her for her rudeness. She will obey the rules while living in this house."

My wife smiles indulgently at me. "You're so protective of what we have. I've never felt so safe."

What we have. I wonder what it is that she thinks we have, her and me.

"Isn't this cozy?"

We both glance up and see her. Lolita, framed in the doorway at the stairs. She's wearing nothing but a sheer white dressing gown, open down the front so we can see her smooth belly and tiny briefs. Through the fabric, the dusky tips of her full breasts are visible. It's an outfit that covers nothing and reveals everything. My mouth starts to water.

"Lolita!" Valeria is outraged. "That's not how we dress for dinner. Go and put some clothes on at once."

Lolita keeps her eyes trained on me. "But he likes it, Mama. Don't you, Zacarias?" She slowly moves toward us with something heavy and silver in her hand.

My sword.

She holds it lazily, the tip scraping across the floor in a way that makes me wince. That's no way to treat an expensive and very cherished blade. When she reaches me, she lifts the sword and presses the tip against my throat.

"Don't you, daddy?"

Even as she threatens me, it makes my cock throb to hear her call me that. She's got the sweetest, throatiest little-girl voice, and all I can think of suddenly is bursting deep inside her. I would bloody my knuckles and fight in the street like a wolf alpha protecting his mate if I had to.

"Don't you know who he is, Mama? Have you figured it out?"

I start to laugh. I can deny everything I've done to her. She's the one who dressed in a provocative outfit and is indulging in a tantrum. Valeria is on my side and she always has been.

My wife passes an exasperated hand across her brow. "Lolita, you're embarrassing me and your stepfather. Go to your room."

"You're going to die," Lolita whispers, looking right into my eyes.

I raise my glass to take a sip, rather enjoying myself. The more of a fuss she makes, the easier she's making things for me, and the more fun I'll have upstairs tonight.

Faster than I can follow, she knocks the wine out of my hand with the blade. The glass shatters across the floor and red wine splatters everywhere.

Valeria jumps to her feet. "That's enough. Apologize to your father."

"He's not my father!" Lolita shouts, and closes her eyes. "I hate you. I've always hated you."

Lolita opens her eyes, and places the tip of the sword against my throat again. Her hand starts to shake and the blade makes tiny cuts in my flesh. Blood trickles down my collarbone. I'm cursed, cold, and ruthless. I deserve nothing more than to be killed by my own sword.

"Go on, *mi niñita*," I whisper. "I know you want to."

Tears shimmer in her eyes. Either she ends this now, or I'm never going to stop. Never.

LOLITA

I STARE INTO ZACARIAS' EYES. WHEN THE BLACK FOX KISSED ME, IT WAS him. When the Black Fox claimed he was protecting me from Zacarias, it was him. I begged him, blindfolded, to strap me with his belt. I craved his cock, over and over. I sucked him so eagerly with my mouth and came on his fingers.

"Why are you such a liar?" I ask.

Though there's tension in his shoulders and his wary eyes never leave my face, Zacarias shrugs elegantly. "I didn't lie. I just never told you my name."

I hear a lapping sound behind me, and my heart plummets. If I hadn't been so focused on Zacarias and the sword in my hands I would have realized what was going to happen.

He's right.

But I wasn't talking to him.

"Not you, Zacarias." I turn to Mama, who's gazing wide-eyed at the sword in my hands. "Why are *you* such a liar?"

"Excuse me, darling?" She grows almost cross-eyed watching the sword approaching her throat. "Get that thing out of my face."

"You made sure no one at the school believed a word I said. Those horrible men were able to touch me, and there was nothing I could do to protect myself. When I went to the headmistress, she told me to stop making up stories."

It still makes me burn with indignation and shame remembering what she said. *Your mother warned me that you like to make up tales about men lusting after you. Why don't you concentrate on your studies*

instead of trying to seduce my staff? If this happens again, you will be expelled.

"Whenever I showed you my excellent grades, you said they were forged. I never forged anything. I never lied about anything, but you wouldn't believe a word out of my mouth."

Mama's beautiful face is tight and cold with outrage. Sometimes I wonder why she even had a child. She's never been like a mother to me.

"When I finally found someone I truly love, he's kept from me through lies, as well."

"Someone you *love*?" sneers Mama. "There's no one you love. There's no one you even know, you disgusting little liar."

"I'm not a liar!" I shriek.

"Where did they touch you?" Zacarias growls behind me. "What are their names?"

"It doesn't matter anymore. I stopped them on my own by recording their gross heavy breathing and threatening to send it to the police."

I glance at Zacarias. His hands are clenching the arms of his chair and his expression is alive with fury, a stark contrast to Mama's indifference.

"Yes, it does matter."

I give a hollow laugh. "Don't worry, Zacarias. I was still a virgin when you came to me. I didn't let them have *that*. I fought to keep myself pure for an honorable man. Say thank you, Zacarias."

"What for, *mi niñita*?"

The lapping sound stopped several minutes ago. There was nothing I could do to save her. I take a deep breath and step aside, showing them what's lying on the floor, dead and still. Blanca, my mother's toy poodle.

A blood-curdling scream pierces the air. Mama throws herself to her knees before the little dog.

"I saw her adding something to your glass before you came downstairs," I tell Zacarias. He stares between the wine splattered on the ground and the dead dog. The poison would have finished him in an instant.

"Your husband tricked me into having sex with him, Mama." I say the words dispassionately, watching her rock the poodle in her arms and sob into her fur. "He took my virginity the night of the ball

in Madrid. He comes into my room, straps me with his belt and makes me call him daddy."

Predictably, Mama doesn't show one ounce of shock at the news, or sympathy for me.

"He's not been fucking you. He *loves* you." Mama screams like love is disgusting. Like I'm disgusting. "I can smell it all over you. You're carrying his bastard child."

Zacarias leaps to his feet.

Valeria turns to him, still rocking and sobbing. "I cursed you. *I cursed you*. Why aren't you dead?"

Her eyes flash with preternatural greenish light and her face is transformed by a suffusion of black veins. She's something terrifying. Something unearthly. Then, a split second later, she's Valeria again, sobbing over her dog. Zacarias takes a step toward her, but she leaps up and runs from the room, Blanca in her arms. We hear her pitiful cries all the way down the corridor.

Zacarias and I stare at each other. The sword drops from my nerveless fingers and clatters to the ground.

I'm pregnant?

My hand goes to my belly and presses against my flesh. I seek inwardly for the truth. We had sex twice without protection. I wasn't thinking about it in the moment or afterward because it was impossible that I was even with my Black Fox, let alone becoming pregnant by him.

Our eyes meet, and Zacarias is staring with naked longing at me. He was supposed to die, but I discovered the truth before the evil queen could kill him. I was supposed to hate him, but instead I'm carrying his child.

It's all gone horribly wrong.

But not for us. For the queen.

Tears spill down my cheeks as I walk toward him. I wrap my arms around his neck and press my lips to his. My Black Fox. My Zacarias. Two halves of the same man.

He stares down at me, his brown eyes bewildered. "*Mi niñita*? What's happening? The curse..."

"Is broken," I whisper through my tears. "The queen tricked you into becoming two men. I think she was the fortune teller, or possessed her like she seems to have possessed my mother. No

woman can love a man who is not whole. I found out, though, and I fell in love with both of you. Do you love me, too, Zacarias?"

Zacarias caresses my cheek, his face filled with pain. "But how can you love me after the things I've done?"

I smile up at him, remembering how he fled my room when I asked to be punished, but came back and gave me what I wanted. He ran as the Black Fox, but returned as Zacarias. "Because even blindfolded, I can see the man behind the mask."

My lips touch his. For a moment he resists, still lost in confusion and doubt. Then his arms wrap around me and he crushes me to him as he realizes the curse really has broken, and the queen has fled.

"My Lolita. I love you, too."

He lifts me up in his arms and carries me from the room, and then upstairs to my bedroom. He throws me on the bed and takes handfuls of my breasts through the see-through fabric, and then pinches my nipples. I can see the lust in his eyes, but there's a spark of fear, too, and he hesitates, as if afraid that I don't want this.

Wrapping my legs around his hips, I draw him closer to me. "Daddy, will you punish me?" I whisper, looking up at him through my lashes. "Will you take your belt to me and tell me I'm your filthy little girl? Will you cherish me in your arms and call me your angel?"

"Lolita, I can't—"

I take a fistful of his shirt and pull him down on top of me. "I want *all* of you. I want the Black Fox. And I want Zacarias, too."

Zacarias smiles, and then grasps my hip and flips me over onto my belly. He draws the gossamer fabric of my dressing gown up to reveal my behind. "I can't strap the woman who is carrying my child, but I can spank her till her ass glows red."

He squeezes my ass, first one cheek, and then the other; hungry, greedy squeezes. "I get to have *mi niñita* every night like this?" He lifts his hand and spansks my flesh, and I squeal. "I can love her and punish her and do all the sweet and nasty things I want to her?"

I wriggle my legs open on his lap and feel myself smile against the blankets. "Yes, daddy. All yours."

He spansks me again and again, making my flesh glow hot and sensitive. When he pulls my underwear off and plunges his fingers into me I arch my back and moan. The man I love, and I'm going to have his baby. The castillo is filled with so much love at last, and I

cry out loudly as he makes me come over and over again on his fingers.

Zacarias turns me onto my back and sheaths his cock deep inside me. I look up for the first time into my beloved's face as he thrusts into me. My beloved's handsome face. Smiling, I reach up and twine my arms around him as he climaxes deep inside me.

Zacarias groans and wraps his arms and legs tight around me. "My Little Lo. *Te quiero. Te amo con todo mi corazón.*"

"I love you with all my heart, too, Zacarias. All of you, with all of me."

A while later I get up and wrap my robe around my body once more and head out onto the balcony. I gaze around at the moonlit night. The vines are still. The sloping hill down to the village is silent. Not a creature stirs in the silver light. Zacarias joins me.

"Do you think Mama was possessed by the evil queen all these years, or just recently?" I ask him.

"I don't know. Your mother wasn't an evil person, though she could be cold and jealous, and so perhaps she was susceptible to be used for the queen's purposes."

I remember all the times she was cruel to me over the years and my heart feels wretched. The way she convinced others I would lie about anything. I think maybe he's right. "But why was she jealous?"

My love smooths my hair back and kisses my forehead. "Because you are clever and beautiful, two things that she should have been proud you inherited from her. But instead of being proud, she resented you."

I take a deep breath. "Did you...ever love her?"

He shakes his head. "No, *mi niñita*. I never loved her. I'm ashamed to say I thought of her as an opportunity. If I didn't love the woman I married, I couldn't fall prey to the curse. I didn't realize that the curse was steering me toward you all along."

What a cruel curse it is. I wonder how many other good men have spent their lives in torment because of it. I think about how my mother's eyes flashed green and her face became terrible and mottled for a moment. I think that will haunt my dreams forever.

"What should we do now?" I ask him, gnawing worriedly at my nail. "Where shall we go?"

Zacarias wraps his arms around me and turns me toward him.
“We shall stay here.”

“But are we safe here?”

He smiles, and the fear in my heart finally melts as I gaze into his warm brown eyes. “The curse is broken, and we have nothing to fear from her. We shall make this place our home.”

“Just you and me?”

Zacarias kisses me. “Yes. You and me. The Black Fox, his woman, and all our little foxes.”

EPILOGUE

ZACARIAS

A COOL RAIN HAS FRESHENED THE VINES, AND THE SCENT OF CLEAN earth wafts through the open windows. Lolita is sitting in a rocking chair by the open terrace doors, smiling down at the baby in her arms. Little Izabella's chubby hands wave in the air.

I come forward and hold out my hands for the child, and Lolita places her into my arms. She's so small, just two days old. My Lolita looks tired, but happy, as she gazes up at us.

"Papa loves his beautiful girls," I tell her, kissing the baby and then Lolita.

"And we love daddy," she tells me with a smile. It fades slowly as she studies my face. "You've had news. I know you have."

I can't hide anything from Lolita. Sometimes I wish I could still wear a mask, to protect her. "Yes, I've had news."

"About Mama?"

I nod, and sit down on the sofa with the baby in my arms. I look down at this perfect little rosebud, and know that I would fight to the death to protect her and Lolita from all the evil in the world. "The private investigator sent me a report last night. He hasn't found Valeria, but he did dig up some information about her marriage."

"To my father? He died a long time ago."

I shake my head. "Not to your father. Another man, five years ago. Did she never mention him?" The expression of shock on her face tells me everything I need to know.

"But why would she get married and not tell me? I suppose I was at school, but even when she married you she wrote and told me

about it.”

“I don’t know, *mi niñita*. It seems like it was impulsive wedding, and the two of them separated almost immediately. The investigator couldn’t find any record of the divorce, and that man is still very much alive, so...”

Lolita’s eyes open wide as she realizes what this means. “So you were never legally married to my mother.”

“No. I never was.” I stand up and go to her, crouching down beside her chair with our baby in my arms. “Is it too soon?”

Her beautiful eyes search my face. “Too soon for what?”

“To ask you to marry me. I’ve never loved anyone but you, Lolita, and I never will. Except our little fox, and all the little foxes who will come after her.”

A slow, delighted smile spreads over her face. “Well, you won’t know until you ask me, will you?”

I reach up and tweak her nose. “Cheeky girl. All right. Will you marry me, *mi niñita*, and make me the happiest man whoever lived?”

Lolita smiles wider and wraps her arms around my neck. She gazes at me with love. “I thought you’d never ask.”

We both want a simple ceremony, and we’re married in the local church the following week. We delay our honeymoon for the time being. Even though we don’t go away, it feels like a honeymoon. The housekeeper helps Lolita with the baby, and my wife studies in snatches. She didn’t, of course, get terrible grades in school. That was one of Valeria’s lies. Lolita is doing brilliantly in her coursework and I have no doubt that she will continue to do brilliant things.

When I’m not looking after Izabella I’m down among the vines. The first harvest is a success, and the Rioja is put into oak barrels to age. It’s a slow business, wine-making, but I’m in no hurry. This time next year we’ll taste our first vintage. Meanwhile, I learn to prune the vines and how to put them to bed for the coming winter.

I hear from the investigator one more time. Valeria has changed her name and remarried yet again. When he asks me if he should report her to the police for bigamy, I tell him to let sleeping dogs lie. I don’t hate my ex-wife. She wasn’t the woman I wish she had been, but she’s been ill-used by the curse, as well. Now that it’s broken, I hope she can find peace.

Lolita and I take our honeymoon when Izabella is ten months old, and of course our daughter comes with us. We hire a sailboat

and sail it all the way to Greece on the calm, warm Mediterranean Sea, and island hop all summer.

On Mykonos we eat at a tiny taverna, gazing upon the old stone windmills with their huge sails. Izabella sits in my lap and babbles away as I eat marinated octopus with one hand. Lolita takes a photograph of us with her phone, and then smiles down at the screen.

"You both just look so happy," she murmurs. When she looks up, she smiles even wider. "Look at you both. It barely feels real that I'm this happy."

I take her fingers and kiss them, and then nip at them playfully. The setting sun and her white cotton dress make her look radiant. "How could I not be happy when I'm the luckiest man who ever lived?"

Her face clouds for a moment. "You can say that, even after being cursed?"

"I can say that because the curse was broken. Because my beloved broke it for me. How lucky I was the day you walked across the square toward me, and the bell tolled and time nearly stopped." I can remember it as clearly as if it were yesterday, the day I fell for Lolita. I didn't feel lucky at the time. I felt like the world was ending. But I know better now. It was only just beginning.

Back on the boat later that evening, we put a sleeping Izabella into her cot below decks and close the door to her tiny bedroom. The master bedroom isn't large, either, but there's room for two.

Lolita undresses, smiling at me, and then kneels on the bed, her long hair tumbling over her shoulders. "Am I a good girl, daddy?"

"The best girl," I tell her with a purr, shrugging out of my shirt. I push her back onto the bed and pin her arms above her head. "But how about you be a bad girl for daddy right now?"

She kisses me and sinks her teeth into my lower lip, growling like a kitten. "As long as he's bad for me. I love it when my daddy's good, but I love it when he's very, very bad, too."

I turn her over and wrap my belt around her throat, forcing her to look up at me. Her eyes grow dark and liquid with desire. "And tonight you want him bad?"

Lolita smiles sleekly, and wriggles her legs open. "Oh, yes. Tonight I want him very bad indeed."

I slide two fingers along her wet slit, and then plunge them into her pussy, tightening the belt so she can't cry out. "Anything for my sweet Lolita."

FINDING HIS STRENGTH - SNEAK PEEK

BLURB

Captured and forced to marry Henrik, Megara vows never to forget his monstrous behavior... but her hatred for her husband doesn't weaken her attraction to him.

Henrik chases his legacy with the ferocity and strength worthy of a God. He will not be deterred, and he will not fail. Nothing will stand in his way. Not even a wife.

But Henrik's strength can not keep Megara's beautiful soul from seeping into his heart. A choice is coming, between everything he ever wanted and the one thing he didn't know he needed.

CHAPTER ONE

HER NECK SNAPPED AS HE THRUST ONCE MORE; THE LAST RIPPLES OF HIS orgasm fading in time with the life draining from her body.

Henrik pulled out of her warm body and, using the crumpled-up bedding, wiped himself clean of her remnant. Tossing the blood-stained linen onto her lifeless body, he went in search of his pants.

He twisted his torso to stretch the tight muscles of his back. It had been a long fucking day, and he still had unfinished business that would keep him away from his bed for hours.

After buckling his belt, he gave the woman on the bed another glance. Smooth skin kissed sweetly by the summer sun, round ass, and legs that could probably wrap around him twice. Such a waste.

He went about gathering his phone and his gun, tucking it at his waist before shoving himself into his jacket.

Oliver stood outside the door waiting for him in the hallway.

"Shit." Henrik glared at him. "You didn't need to stay right at the fucking door." He pulled the door to the bedroom closed and began walking down the long corridor to the winding staircase.

"He's already downstairs," Oliver said.

"Good." Henrik tugged the sleeve of his shirt beneath his jacket. He jogged down the staircase easily, the same as he'd done his entire life. "My father?" he asked.

"On his way. The plane took off half an hour ago." Oliver hesitated. "Your mother is with him."

Henrik stopped several feet from his office door, where two of his men stood. "My step-mother," he clarified as he turned around to

face Oliver, his first in command. "Why is she coming with him? I thought she was spending the summer overseas."

"I don't know, and I wasn't about to ask. Your step-mother goes where she wants." Oliver spoke plainly. Henrik had known him since they were both two young boys taking peeks into the girls' locker room after gym class. Not a practice either of them needed to continue as they grew older. Woman needed no coaxing to enter his bed.

"If they took off half an hour ago, we have maybe another hour and a half before they storm through my front doors. Best to have this situation finished with before he gets here." His father disliked dealings with the Creon family and left the matter at Henrik's door.

Henrik entered his office.

"Gentleman." Henrik's voice boomed into the room. Christian Creon may be the head of his family, and several decades older than him, but Henrik was still man of this house. He would not cower to their supposed power.

A firm handshake handed out to Christian and a curt nod to his two men standing in the background. Henrik waved Christian into his chair as he rounded the large mahogany desk to his own seat. As a child he used the hulking piece of furniture in his games of hide and seek. His father would always keep his silence as Henrik, hid at his feet while the other children searched the house for him. None of them would dare enter Jackson Olympus' office without being granted permission.

But this wasn't childhood. This was no longer his father's desk. This was Henrik's office, his home, his business.

"Matthew McKinley will no longer be a problem for you," Henrik says confidently.

Christian's tense expression softens. "You are sure?"

"Saw to it myself." Henrik confirmed. "His body has been delivered to his wife this afternoon with instructions on what she should do. My men tell me, she's already packed herself and the children up and left the city."

"The men loyal to him-"

"Men can be bought." Henrik said plainly. "And without the head of their family, they're lost. Easy pickings."

Christian relaxed in his seat, unbuttoning his jacket. He could relax now. Wars between the families had to be dealt with delicate

hands. Even with Jackson's permission to take out the newest family to the Network, it was best the Creon's didn't handle it themselves. Sending Henrik to deal with it assured no backlash from any of McKinley's allies. Not that there were many. McKinley was a backstabbing cheap steak. Families within the Network didn't look kindly on that.

Now with McKinley handled, Christian would be gifted the abandoned territory and he could peddle his whores and his drugs without competition.

A commotion outside the office drew Christian's attention. The door flew open and a man rushed through. Henrik's men followed, hunger for a fight written all over their faces.

Henrik waved them back. "It's okay. Let him in."

"What is it?" Christian demanded, getting up from his chair. "You don't just barge in when I'm in a meeting." He chastised the man, whose lips curled inward at the sight of Henrik sitting so casually at his desk.

"Henrietta." He spat out the name of the woman upstairs. "She's dead." He pointed a finger at Henrik. "He killed her."

Christian's eyes were wild when he spun back around. His cheeks reddened as words attempted to form on his lips.

"She's up there naked. Looks like he raped her too." Anger shook his words.

Henrik lifted his shoulder. "Rape suggests she wasn't willing. Which she was, even more than I was to get in her pants."

He sighed. Obviously, his humor was lost on them.

"Henrietta was fucking McKinley. She was giving him information. That's how your shipments were being messed with." Henrik hadn't cleared the kill with Christian. When he agreed to take care of the McKinley situation, he took the matter seriously. Both the original target, and the traitor had been dealt with.

Christian's shoulders slumped, and he waved his men out of the room. "Get the car, I'll be right out." He ordered them when they hesitated. "Go!"

The three men filed out, and Henrik's men shut the door, leaving them alone.

Christian helped himself to the bourbon, pouring himself a healthy glass. Henrik declined joining him. In one quick swallow,

Christian downed the liquor, pulling his lips back and sucking in a long breath as it made its way down his throat.

"Henrietta was my niece." Christian's gaze settled on the hard wood flooring. "My sister's only daughter."

Henrik folded his hands on his desk. A choice was made and carried out; regret played no part in the future. A traitor was found and dealt with.

After a long pause Christian dragged his gaze up to Henrik. "Did she suffer?"

She'd been in the throes of an orgasm when he twisted his hand into her hair and yanked her head back. A simple tug was all it took for him to snap her neck.

"It was a quick end." And better than she deserved. While he'd had his way with her, she'd spilled all of Creon's secrets. Admitted to helping McKinley end her uncle's reign because he'd been mean to her, wouldn't shower her with the riches she thought she'd deserved.

Christian huffed. "She was a spoiled bitch. I'm not surprised she would sell out her family." He put up a hand. "My sister passed away last winter, breast cancer." He sighed. "At least she won't have to suffer the pain of her daughter's betrayal."

"Henrietta has brothers." Henrik didn't need fallout from this, and assurances would have to be made.

"I will handle my nephews." He agreed. Christian picked up his hat from the desk, holding it front of him. "They may want reparations," Christian said cautiously. "Although I can't say I disagree with your actions, you did move without consulting me."

Always looking for another bite of the pie. Not that he was completely wrong, but Henrik didn't owe this asshole anything.

"I'm sure my father will have something you'll find beneficial. He's due here tonight," Henrik assured him. Let the old men work out payment amongst themselves. Henrik didn't play the diplomat between the families. His father, being the majority owner of the Network, dealt with all that. Henrik was simply the muscle.

"Would you like Henrietta's body brought?"

"Burn it." Christian waved a hand in the air. Even as a traitor, the niece of one the most powerful men in the Network could still be given a proper burial. Her family could still mourn her. But as one of

the most powerful men in the city, Christian Creon needed to send a message. Traitors are not family.

"It will be taken care of," Henrik promised. Christian took the betrayal and death of his niece better than expected. It could be a cloud of smoke, or it could be true relief that the woman is gone.

"Thank you." Christian inclined his head then took his leave. The door closed softly behind him, sending Henrik's office into full silence. A sound he hadn't enjoyed since his morning run.

It's short lived, however. Olivier steps inside, curiosity wrinkling his brow. "So?"

"So." Henrik claps his hands. "It's done. Did his shipment move through yet?"

"Yeah. The women have been moved into the barracks on the east side of the property. The handlers are due to arrive in the morning. They'll be gone by the afternoon." Oliver assured him.

The Network was made up of over twenty different families. Some moved drugs, some cleaned cash, but they all dealt in flesh. Every family was afforded the protection of the Network, mostly provided by Henrik and his men, for a small fee paid to the owners. Jackson and his brother Haden. The men all made their millions, Henrik kept the law at bay and squashed the skirmishes between the families. It was an easy set up, and fucking hell the pay was good.

"And the girl upstairs?" Oliver asked.

"Get the room cleaned. Her body can go in the incinerator, he doesn't want her." Henrik looked at his watch. "My father should be here soon. I'm going to change."

"What do you suppose your step mother wants? She never comes without an agenda." Oliver follows behind Hendrik.

Hera will have a task for him, of that Henrik is positive. And whatever it is, it's going to set his anger ablaze. Just looking at the woman soured his mood. But for the love of his father, he will keep himself in check.

"Whatever she wants will be dealt with. As always." Henrik stopped at the foot of the stairs. "Creon took the death of niece easily. Even with knowing I fucked her before I snapped that little neck of hers."

Oliver's eyes widened. "You just can't keep away from the fire, can you?"

Henrik slapped him on the back. "The deal was McKinley. Fucking Henrietta was payment for dealing with her."

"I hope you're right about him taking it well."

"I didn't say he took it well. I said he took it easily. Just to be sure he's not secretly mourning the loss; I want a guard at the gates tonight. Another in the security room here at the house."

"I'll get it done." Oliver, Henrik's top man, and closest friend never let him down.

Henrik made his way up the staircase. A few more hours then he could get his ass into bed. It would be a short night, but the headaches of today would be in the past.

"Henrik. They just pulled up." Olivier's voice carried up the stairs, smacking Henrik in the back. Fuck.

He was going to have to greet his father and step mother with the aroma of pussy still lingering in his beard.

ONE CLICK

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COME TO DADDY
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ABOUT BRIANNA

There's nothing Brianna Hale likes more than a large, stern alpha male with a super-protective and caring streak, and when she's not writing about them she can usually be found with a book, a cocktail, planning her next trip to a beautiful location or attending the theatre. She believes that pink and empowerment aren't mutually exclusive, and everyday adventures are possible. Brianna lives in London.

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