

THE TAMING OF THE BEAST

(Book 2 in the Gringa Series)

By

Eve Rabi

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## CHAPTER ONE

I'm lying in bed staring at the ceiling when Rosa enters my room. 'Senorita, Marcus, he here to take you - see your family.'

Marcus is the ranch hand assigned to drive me to Siempre. Since I can drive myself, I suspect he's there to keep an eye on me.

I can't seem to get out of bed. My head throbs, my eyes are burning and I just don't have the energy to stand up. 'Tell him, I'm not going.'

She takes in my swollen eyelids and blotchy face and strokes my forehead gently. Since she doesn't ask why I'm crying, I assume she heard my screams last night.

Without a word she leaves my room. I hear voices outside my door – hers and Diablo's.

Five minutes later she re-enters my room. Before she shuts the door, I catch a glimpse of Diablo standing outside my room, craning his neck to look at me.

Our eyes meet for a moment before I turn my face away.

Rosa sits on the edge of my bed and says, 'Your family, they will be worried about you, Diablo say.'

I stare silently at the ceiling. I don't even want to hear his name right now.

'I bring you coffee, you feel better,' she says, stroking my arm. 'Coffee and shower always make me feel better, 'member?'

I shake my head from side-to-side.

'You must go. Maybe Diablo change his mind then ...'

She's right. It might be the only chance I have of seeing my family.

'Come.' She takes my hand and leads me to the shower.

I do feel a little better after the shower. Just a little. The coffee helps too. I look at myself in the mirror - my face is puffy, my eyes are swollen but mere slits, my nose is bulbous and my head is pounding from all the crying. The last thing I want to do right now is to see anyone. But I force myself to dress, brush my hair, look presentable.

Before long, we are heading to Siempre.

We drive in silence and I psych myself into appearing cheerful and together for my visit. No-one really cares how I feel, so what's the use of crying in front of them. Crying will only blow my cover. I'm supposed to be fearless, angry, bad-ass Payton, remember? Not, shattered, depressed, suicidal Payton.

Marcus gives me two hours with my family while he hovers around waiting for me.

I see my family and fake it – I smile, laugh, crack jokes. Comes easy to me. I'm a big fat

liar, remember?

Austin stares silently at me and I get the feeling he knows something is wrong.

The villagers hear about my visit and swarm in to see Diablo's obsession. They bring gifts and are relentless with their questions - how come I'm still alive? Has anyone bitten a chunk out of me as yet? Is Diablo half-man half-beast?

I tell them about life at Tana-Mera - Christa is evil, Diablo seldom speaks more than two words at a time, Tongue is really a troll, Maria and Rosa are great ladies and that I'm okay, just bored.

'They eat people?'

'He's not half-man half-beast and they're definitely not cannibals,' I say.

Sighs of relief from some – looks of disappointment from others.

'I haven't been fed human flesh and they haven't bitten a chunk out of me.' I run my hands lightly over my body. See? But if they come to eat me; I'd suggest my *nalgas* first,' I chuckle and pat my butt.

They nod, but do not laugh.

Two hours fly, it's time to leave and my façade slips - I fight back tears. I don't want to go back to the ranch and Diablo's unwanted visits. I guess it's obvious because the villagers are speaking words of comfort and trying to reassure me.

I desperately summon a smile, but fail miserably and a tear escapes. Fuck! Why the hell can't I get my shit together?

People around me are aghast at my tears. What happened to sassy, smart-alecky, provocative Payton? Payton the prankster.

'Dad, you need to go back to America,' I say.

'Why? I'm happy here Payton. Especially since you're okay.'

I'm *okay*? He's my father; how could he miss my despair?

'Dad, Diablo – Christa is evil, dad. Diablo and Christa and everyone else there.'

'Relax Payton. I leave when I'm ready to. Besides, how can I leave when there are so many lovely Senorita's around, huh?'

I sigh and look at Elaine.

'I tell him that all the time,' Elaine complains, 'but he insists on staying here. Austin won't leave so Paris won't leave and I guess, well, I have to stay too.'

Saying goodbye to my family leaves me unhinged and depressed. Austin gives me a long hug and squeezes my waist really hard.

I cry all the way home. Marcus watches me though the rear view mirror but says nothing.

When we arrive at the ranch, I walk straight to my room and crawl under the covers and cry into my pillow.

Through the depths of my despair, I decide to kill myself.

First, I need to write a letter to the only person I love – the only person who loves me - Austin. In spite of everything, in spite of him dumping me and marrying my beautiful stepsister, I'm certain he cares. My father cares because he is genetically programmed to love me. But Austin, he didn't have to, but he does. I see how he looks at me – the tenderness in his eyes, the way he cocks his beautiful head to one side when he smiles at me, the way he squeezes my waist. I feel his secret love. I really do.

23 July 2002

Dear Austin, I'm sorry I have to say goodbye. In spite of everything, I still love you. For a while you made me feel beautiful and wanted. I can't help but wonder how things would have turned out if I hadn't left to Europe for that two month holiday. Elaine's gift to me. Actually, it was a gift to Paris, really. The only way they could get to you was to have me taken out of the picture, leave the way clear so they could work on you. Pity they succeeded.

Well, now that I'm gonna die, here's my confession:

Whenever Diablo fucks me, I think of you. I picture you above me and sometimes I even feel like responding. It's fucked up, I know, but it's how it is.

Take care, keep my memory alive (somehow) and remember - you're worthy. Don't ever let Elaine and Paris tell you otherwise.

Sounds corny, but you're my one and only love. Nobody in this whole fucked up world can replace you. Forever, Payton.

I don't plan on joining them for dinner tonight. I plan to make my move, kill myself while they're seated at the dinner table. But there's a knock at my door and Diablo enters. I stiffen - he never knocks and he never comes to my room except for his midnight visits.

Now he stands at the door and looks at me. 'Come eat, Payton' he says, his voice humble and unfamiliar to me.

What the hell? Personally asking me to join him for dinner instead of yelling "Gringaaa!" from the dining room? Using my *real* name?

Maybe Marcus filled him in on my state of misery at Siempre today and he's worried. That coupled with the fact that he witnessed my breakdown last night. He's never seen me cry before. Certainly not the way I cried last night. And let's not forget that I look terrible

today – deranged.

I want to say “No” but I have no fight left in me, so I nod and meekly follow him. As for dinner, I don’t even bother to eat. I just wish everyone wouldn’t stare so much - must be something to do with my tear-stained face and swollen eyes. Most of the men have concerned expressions on their faces, though.

Christa and Santana’s eyes dart between Diablo’s face and mine, curious to know what’s going on.

I don’t look at Diablo, but I feel his eyes boring into me.

‘Diablo!’ Christa snaps.

Diablo tears his eyes from me to look at her.

‘What is the matter Diablo?’ she demands. ‘You not listening to me, to any of us.’

‘I am listening,’ he says and to her ire, looks at me again.

‘Naha!’ Christa’s nostrils are flaring. ‘You ... you look at Gringa all night and you ... you ignore me Diablo. *No me gusta!* This is important.’

He’s doing it again – looking at me.

‘Diaaablo!’

‘What is it?’ he asks, turning to Christa, his voice weary.

Happy that she has his full attention, Christa whines away in Spanish.

While they talk, my mind drifts. I should have said no to Diablo in the very beginning. I mean, the villagers continue their lives as normal with their loved ones while I wither away in this torment chamber. How dare they go on with their lives when I’m being violated by the beast of Mexico every night? Why weren’t they mourning with me? Time to end the pain. Euthanize myself. Nobody else gives a damn. No use waiting for God; we all saw how she shortchanged me. I’m on my own.

Dinner ends and I quietly head for the cliff. The cliff is a sheer drop and considering my current mental state, jumping off will be easy.

I stand at the edge and remove my shoes. Why, I have no idea - I guess right now, my mind is devoid of all logic.

Taking a deep breath, I step onto the precipice and look down at the drop and ...get such a fright!

What the hell am I doing? What the hell am I thinking? Imagine plummeting down this cliff – I might ... die. Christ!

I can’t do this. Maybe I’m not psyched enough or maybe I’m too much of a coward, but I just can’t do it. How the hell do suicide bombers do it? What am I going to do with seventy

virgins anyway? Just more fucking mouths to feed.

I'll go back to the ranch and talk to Diablo, demand some changes. He seems concerned and afraid to lose me, so maybe I can convince him that...

'Gringa!!' Someone shouts my name. 'Gringa!' It's Troy, racing towards me. 'Don't do it! Don't jump!'

'What? Jump? Oh no, I'm ...'

Suddenly, someone wrestles me to the floor.

'What the fuck ...?'

It's Diablo, pinning me down. He shakes his head from side-to-side, a frantic look in his eye.

Um ... how do I tell him I wasn't going to like, you know - I changed my mind about killing myself? This is most embarrassing. 'Eh ... um ... leave me alone!' I say, needing to say *something*.

He shakes his head again.

Troy runs up to me, panting. 'Gringa, this is so stupid. Why you do that? Huh?'

'Eh ... because ...'

Diablo and Troy exchange puzzled looks.

Diablo mutters to Troy and Troy reluctantly leaves the cliff side.

It's just me and Diablo now and he's looking at me with all his eyebrow rings raised.

'Well, I don't like ...' Fuck! How do I say this? 'Like, I'm not happy here ...'

'*Si.*' His manner, his voice - all humble right now.

'I don't like you touching me ...'

'But you are my woman. I am your man. I must touch you. How I not touch you, eh?'

'No, no, it's not that simple. I'm *not* your woman. I *don't* want you to touch me.'

'*Si. Si.* I no touch you anymore. You ask me, I touch you. You no ask me, I no touch you.'

What? Is that it? Is this all it takes? He won't touch me unless I *ask* him? It's too easy - he's lying.

'You're lying. You're just saying that.'

'No ... true. I leave you 'lone.'

Really? Well, maybe he can be trusted. I mean I'm never going to ask him to touch me, so I'm safe then. I quickly recover from my surprise and fire a few more rounds. 'I wanna go home.'

Silence.

Okay, so I was pushing it. 'Well, I eh ... I wanna see my family. Often.'

'Si.'

For a few moments I glare at him, then I get up and without a word, walk back to the ranch. Diablo follows at a distance.

A couple of things happen after that – Diablo stops his midnight visits, I'm put on an informal suicide watch - Troy and Diablo hover around me all the time to ensure I don't revisit the cliff.

Knowing that I'm not going to endure any more nightly visits from Diablo, relaxes me and my spirit slowly returns over the next few weeks.

28 July 02

Bastido doesn't visit anymore. Hooray! Don't ever wanna see his grotesque face over mine again. Rather kiss a lizard. A big, fat, slimy, swamp lizard. Big swamp lizard and Loch Ness Monster. Big swamp lizard, Loch Ness Monster and Nevada rattlesnake.

Christa hates me. Not sure why but I know I'm gonna get my ass kicked by her one of these days. Have to be careful.



## CHAPTER TWO

A week has gone by and we're having dinner, when we hear a commotion outside. The men hurry towards the action, while I saunter outside, curious to see what is going on.

They've captured another man. His face is bloodied and he's on his knees while Christa interrogates him.

Diablo observes quietly but keeps glancing at me.

I feel sorry for the man as I know how it's gonna end tonight – Diablo will probably cut his throat under Christa's goading.

Christa cracks her whip on the cobblestones of the courtyard and I flinch.

I'm wondering if I can do anything to save the man, when I hear him say my name.

Surprised, I look carefully – it's Austin!

'Ohmigod!' I shout and race towards him.

But Christa cracks her whip in my path, forcing me back.

I love Austin and to see him like this - at Christa's mercy, infuriates me and my rage takes over. I slam into Christa, knock her over and grab her whip. 'Leave him alone!' I snarl.

She lies stunned on the ground. I don't think she ever believed I would do something like this. I regret it immediately of course, but I'm not going to let her know that so I glare at her or at least fake it.

There's a hush all around I never thought possible with these drunken men.

Christa, with the aid of Digger, slowly gets to her feet and smiles at me. A cold, granite smile which tells me I'm fucked.

Suddenly, she lunges at me, screaming like a banshee. But the skill of two self-defense classes, coupled with the experience I had playing football with Austin in the past, comes in handy – I sidestep her and follow it with a bitch of a backhand.

That stuns her even more. That's right bitch, I'm full of surprises. (Just ask Paris. I knocked her out once when we were teenagers. Got fed up with her bullying and socked her in the eye. Gave her a real shiner.)

The men are roaring with excitement. Two women circling each other, wanting to scratch each other's eyes out – it's soft porn to them.

'Fight! Fight! Fight!' they holler. Some send for more whisky, while others fish out their wallets to wager. A dream come true for some.

Actually, I'm nervous. Christa has so many people on her side. I glance at Diablo. He's leaning back on a wall watching us. He too seems amused and does nothing to stop the fight.

Christa swings at me. I duck and slam into her. She falls and I hover over her but I don't hit her again because I'm scared one of her sons might intervene and kick the crap out of me. Luckily, Troy steps in and holds me back, shielding me in the process.

Christa curses at me, vowing all sorts of things. 'I will cut you. I will feed you to the dogs. I will shoot you.'

Knowing Troy has everything under control, I kneel before Austin. 'What the hell are you doing here, Austin?' I whisper, horrified at the sight of his battered face.

'Payton,' he rasps, 'I came to check up on you – see if you're okay.'

'What? Why?'

'You looked so upset the other day, I was worried, okay?'

I'm so touched. Such valour, such gallantry, such bravery, such ... a dumb idea. Was he out of his friggin' mind? He's unarmed and outnumbered and as for his ability to fight – Christa can probably topple him. But it's the thought that really counts and my heart soars at his foolishness.

'Austin, I ...' I stop and glance at Diablo dragging on his cigarette, watching us through slanted eyes. 'Eh, come with me.' As I help him to his feet, I curse myself for crying in front of him the other day. My misery may cause his death. I try to untie his hands but the knots are too tight.

'Payton, what kind of a man would I be if I did nothing, huh? I wanna talk to him, tell him to take *me* instead.'

Wow! Even my own father didn't care enough to do something like this. I thought about the things I wrote about him in my diary – He'd better not read them. I only wrote that stuff expecting to die.

'Austin, honey,' I whisper, squeezing his hand, 'that's so brave and I'm like, so grateful for you risking your life for me, but ... I'm okay. Really.'

'Bullshit!'

'I am,' I insist, even though I sound unconvincing even to myself. I glance at Troy. He meets my gaze, his face inscrutable. After what happened on the cliff the other day, I'm sure he will not vouch for me. He probably thinks I'm one helluva fruitcake.

I glance at Diablo - he's pacing and his drags on his cigarette are growing longer. Crap! I need to get Austin out of there. Christa is cracking her whip on the ground.

She turns to Diablo and says, 'This man, he not respect you or your home, Diablo. All the other men 'round you, they see and they too will not respect you. You must punish the gringo for daring to come here. You must make him pay for the dishonour he bring to Diablo

name, Diablo's home, Diablo country, eh?'

Riled by Christa's poignant words, Diablo bristles.

'Take this,' she says handing him the whip.

To my horror, Diablo accepts the whip and the crowd frissons.

Christa smiles. 'At least three lashes, eh?'

Diablo nods.

Three lashes. Fuck! I need to act quickly.

'Stay here,' I say to Austin and stride up to Diablo. 'Don't do it, Diablo,' I say. 'Don't!'

Diablo shakes his head and thumps his chest with his fist. 'He come here, he challenge me ...'

'No he doesn't. He's just ... he's like, worried about ...?'

'Diablo, there is something going on between Gringa and this man,' Christa interrupts, her voice filled with excitement. 'There is. I see it.'

Diablo's head snap to look at me. 'Who is he to you, eh? Your man? Your boyfriend? Eh? Who is he?' He throws down the whip and draws out a gun.

'No! He's ... he's family. They all care, okay? But they don't know how to handle this. He's doing what any brother will do for his sister.'

A load of crap, but I'm desperate to save Austin. No other man has done something like this for me before and I'm touched. I mean, I've never believed I was important enough or beautiful enough or worthy enough to be rescued by a man, let alone a man as handsome as Austin. If I wasn't so afraid, I'd probably feel a little like Helen of Troy.

'You shouldn't be upset, Diablo,' I say, looking directly at him. 'I'm here. 'You wanted me here and here I am. So just let him go. Call off Christa and our 12 dogs right now. I don't want him hurt.'

'No !' Christa say. 'Diablo, there *is* something between Gringa and this man. I tell you there is. I am a woman, I know it.'

'You're fucking crazy,' I say.

Diablo's piercing stare and silence unnerves me even more and I feel a wave of panic.

'Diablo, it hasn't been easy for me. Like, you've seen for yourself, huh? My family has seen it too. Austin's not challenging you – he's here to ... negotiate with you.'

'Negotiate?'

'Yeah. He wants to ... to ask that you ... you like, take him ... and ... you know - let me go.'

He cocks his head to one side and looks at me mouth agape. 'Take *him*? I not gay!'

‘No, no, no, he didn’t say ... ’

He snorts and I see a twinkle in his eye.

Thank God he’s amused, not angry.

‘Cut him loose, Diablo.’

He shakes his head. ‘No.’

Christa is thrilled with Diablo’s answer and claps her hands, her eyes glazing over. ‘Kill him, Diablo! Don’t whip him, just kill the Gringo who challenge you. Kill him!’

Diablo takes a step towards Austin.

‘Diablo! Diablo! Diablo!’ she chants.

I grab his sleeve. He spins around and glares at me.

I stare right back, sucking in my panic for Austin’s sake. ‘You touch him, I walk. Okay? Then you can shoot me, throw me off a cliff – whatever – I give a fuck after that. You’ll be doing me a favour. Hurt him, and you’ll have to say *adios* to me. I mean it. I really do.’

I’m taking a huge gamble here, talking real big. He could call my bluff and kill both of us right now. I have no choice *but* to gamble. I resist the urge to wipe off the beads of sweat on my forehead.

‘Kill him Diablo,’ Christa urges as she circles Austin like a lion eyeing a deer.

Diablo looks at me and we enter into a staring contest.

In desperation, I do something I never thought I would ever do - I reach out and touch Diablo’s hand. ‘You don’t always have to do what your mother tells you to do,’ I say in my softest voice. ‘How can I respect you if you don’t think for yourself, mmm? If you’re gonna be my man, you have to think for yourself, cos that’s what I like.’

He stares at my hand on his for a moment, then says, ‘*Corte le suelta!*’

‘Diablo no!’ Christa snarls.

Troy is already hacking at Austin’s ropes.

Weak with relief I give Diablo a genuine smile. Why does he want me so badly? Okay, so he’s a thug and a killer and a bastard and he fucks his sister – but he still wants me. *Me*. Superfluous, discarded Payton, whose own father couldn’t love her enough to care. It’s confusing but I have to admit, it’s salve for my ego. I’m feeling ... powerful. I challenge any women in my position not to.

‘Thank you,’ I finally say and walk back to my bloodied knight whose heroics almost got us both killed. My handsome knight with no armor. Tall, broad shoulders, beautiful smile, beautiful eyes, kind and gentle. Perfect. All my girlfriends thought he was gorgeous. Compared to Austin, Diablo looks like a grizzly bear.

‘What’s he saying?’ Austin asks, jerking his head in Diablo’s direction.

‘Forget it Austin. He’s not going for that. We need to get you home.’

I mutter my thanks at Troy and lead Austin to my villa, but Diablo grabs my arm and jerks me back.

‘What?’ I ask. Please don’t tell me he’s changed his mind.

He says nothing but the look in his eyes – well, I get the message. ‘Fine, I won’t take him to my room.’ I look at Austin. ‘Come Austin,’ I say and lead him aside to sit on a chair.

‘Austin, look, what you did today – it’s like, awesome. I mean, it makes me feel good to know you care so much. But ...’ I shake my head.

He lifts and drops his shoulders and my heart gushes with love for him.

Finally, under the vigilant eye of Diablo, we hug briefly and Austin leaves Tana-Mera.

Only when Austin drives off does Diablo leave the courtyard.

As I watch his car’s taillights disappear, I promise myself that I will never cry in front of my family again or let them know how bad things are in my life. I have to suffer in silence. And oh, I make a mental note to destroy the letter I wrote to Austin.

### CHAPTER THREE

I hear a soft knock at my door. I open it to see my entire family standing there.

‘Wha ...?’

My father, Elaine, Paris and Austin hurry into my room and quickly shut the door.

‘What happened?’ My father whispers. ‘Why we here?’

‘Nothing,’ I say, sneaking a glance at Austin. ‘How did you guy ...?’

‘Your driver just rocked up and demanded we come with him,’ Paris says. ‘Hey this place is cool.’

‘My driver did what?’ What the hell is Diablo up to? Why did he send for them? From what I know of Diablo, he’s too arrogant to have a hidden agenda – unlike Christa who’s artfully underhanded. It’s unheard of for anyone to visit the ranch other than fellow drug dealers and crooked business people. What if he’s planning something sinister for the whole lot of us?

A knock on the door and we all jump. But it’s just Rosa with drinks and snacks for everyone.

‘Eh, guys, say hello to my good friend, Rosa.’

My father and Austin shake hands with her, while Elaine and Paris ignore her.

‘Snacks - how nice,’ Elaine says, helping herself to a pastry. ‘Leave the tray over there.’

No “Please” and no “Thank you”. That’s how she treats everyone – like they’re all her servants. Rosa doesn’t seem to notice, thank God.

I drag Rosa aside. ‘Rosa, what’s going on? Why are they here?’

She shrugs. ‘You say you miss you family, you say is hard for them, for you, so Diablo, he bring them here. Maybe he don’t want you to miss them. Maybe he don’t want you to be out of his sight, eh? Maybe ...’ She drops her voice, ‘maybe, he worry about Him.’ She jerks her head towards Austin and wiggles her eyebrows at me, a knowing smile on her cherubic face. ‘Eh, Senorita?’ Her face turns crimson and her nose becomes shiny and bulbous.

‘Mmm.’

‘Payton!’ Paris screeches.

‘Huh?’

‘I said: this place is awesome. Modern. Loads more comfortable than our shack. Why you fussing so much? *I’ll* trade with you.’

‘Yes, but the devil wants *Payton*, not you,’ Elaine mocks as she peers out my window.

‘My God! You conveniently forgot to tell us about the beautiful views you have.’

Elaine would be so much happier if I was living in the hovel she imagined.

My father walks over to Elaine, puts his arm around her waist and looks outside the window. I don’t ever remember him holding me like that. I only got one-arm hugs, followed by a pat on the back. But he always hugged and touched her differently – like she was precious to him, like he loved her.

Will I ever be held and cherished like that by any man?

Maybe it has something to do with the fact that she looks so young and hip. Today, she’s clad in white, skinny jeans and silver platforms. (Very Spice Girls to Paris’s embarrassment.) Her blouse is low cut, tightfitting; her jacket is white and cropped. A silver choker adorns her neck and she has about seven or eight silver bracelets jiggling around her slim wrists. She looks great.

Yeah, I admit - I’m jealous of her, jealous of the way my father loves her. She doesn’t deserve it, the bitch. She treats him like crap.

As for Paris - she mirrors Elaine’s dressing – skinny, white jeans, white top, short, cropped jacket. But she’s wearing satin pumps and simple jewellery. People often mistook them for sisters and Elaine couldn’t get enough of that mistake. I always felt like the odd one out especially since I dressed so different from them – tomboyish – blue jeans and whatever top that didn’t need ironing.

But even though Elaine looks great, I wouldn’t be happy if my mother wears the same clothes I’m wearing. It’s sorta freaky, creepy.

As for my father – he really could do with a makeover - his tweed jacket, suede, brown loafers and gabardine pants – so 1968. He looks sixty-five when he’s only fifty-two. Elaine is always nagging him to be more hip.

‘How you doing, Payton?’ Austin whispers, the moment Paris turns her back.

He’s sporting a black eye and a Band-Aid on his forehead.

‘Cut yourself while shaving?’ I whisper back, pointing to his Band-Aid.

He flashes me a sheepish smile.

‘Austin had a little accident,’ Paris says, opening my closet.

How the hell did she hear what we’re saying? I guess when it comes to Austin and me, Paris misses nothing.

‘Wow! Are these yours?’ She jerks her head to look at me, her eyes flashing with greed. ‘They can’t be yours. Did he buy them for you? Does he give you money? Does he? Austin never gives me money. I have to beg for it.’

‘What accident?’ I ask.

‘Man these are so ... so sexy.’ Paris yanks off one of my sweaters and slips it over her top. ‘I’m keeping this,’ she says, twirling around in the mirror. ‘Fucking sexy!’

‘Now Paris,’ Elaine chides. ‘We do not talk like that, dear. It does not mean because you are here, you have to speak like *them*. Paid a lot of money for your private school education, remember?’

All I can do is flash Rosa an apologetic look.

When Rosa rolls her eyes, her whole head lifts.

I turn to Austin. ‘What accident?’

He points to the band aid on his forehead.

Oh that.

I smile wryly. ‘You okay?’

He nods and mumbles something inaudible.

I pick up Liam and cuddle him. ‘You’re so gorgeous.’

To my delight he gurgles at me.

‘Ohmigod! he gurgled at me. Did you see th ...?’

Suddenly the music blares and the place comes alive, as it does every evening.

Paris rushes to the window and gasps. ‘Ohmigod they’re having a party! This place is soooo cool. Oooh! I love it!’ She spins around and places her hands on both my shoulders. ‘Please, ask him to let us live here. Tell him ... tell him you need your sister and ... and he must allow Austin and me to live here. We’ll be so nice, we’ll support you ...’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Austin snaps. ‘This is not Vegas. You’ve a goddamn baby. Act like a mother.’

‘Aww shaddup!’ Paris says. ‘You’re such a fucking killjoy!’

‘And you’re such a ...’

‘Hey, hey!’ I cry. ‘Knock it off you two.’ I look at Paris. ‘You don’t wanna live here, trust me.’

She jerks her hands away. ‘You’re lying. You just don’t wanna share. What you scared of? Huh? He’ll want me and your ass will be history? Huh?’

I moan and hang my head. ‘Paris, you’re so fucked up.’

‘Yeah!’ Austin hisses.

Paris spins around to look at him. ‘Fuck you, you boring dick! Don’t know why I even married your broke ass.’

‘Ditto and ditto,’ he says.



“Broke ass”? Was Austin broke? Anyway, I’m stunned to hear them talk like this to each other.

‘Guys!’ I cry, putting my hand over Liam’s ears. ‘I don’t know what the hell’s going on, but knock it off, okay?’

‘What’s going on? I’ll tell you. Something called “bankruptcy” that’s what’s going on,’ Paris says, her voice dripping with scorn.

‘Aww Paris!’ Austin says. ‘You’re such a bitch. You just can’t keep your trap shut, can you? Have to publicly degrade me.’

They glare at each other.

‘Bankruptcy?’ That’s ... that’s terrible,’ I say. I don’t know what bankruptcy *really* means but I’m guessing it’s bad.

‘Come, let me show you the kitchen. There are knives of all sizes you might find handy,’ I mutter under my breath.

I open my room door and look into Diablo’s face. He’s sitting directly across my room. He looks at me with Liam in my arms and raises his eyebrows as if he is surprised at the picture of me with a baby. I smile, embarrassed and shy.

He looks really pleased at my smile and gives me the briefest of smiles. *His* first smile at *me*. Well, he is responsible for my current happiness, so I guess I should thank him.

‘Thank you,’ I mouth and quickly avert my eyes.

He nods then suddenly stiffens.

Confused, I turn around and look at Austin, whose hand is on my shoulder. Quickly, I grab Paris’s arm and yank her towards the kitchen and everyone follows.

‘You two need marriage counselling,’ I say.

‘You telling me,’ my father murmurs. ‘They do this all the ... ouch!’ Elaine’s elbow has found its way into my father’s ribs, it seems.

All the time? Wow. I had no idea they were having marital troubles. Although I must admit, I feel a deep thrill knowing they are not living happily after. After all, she did steal the love of my life. But I look at the beautiful bundle in my arms and frown. It’s not good for him. Once again I kiss his cheek and wish he was all mine.

I would love to have a baby of my own - my very own human being. I would be the best mom ever and make sure my kids have both parents at all times.

We step into the kitchen. ‘Maria, Rosa, this is baby Liam I always talk about.’ I don’t bother introducing Maria to my family as I fear they will ignore her anyway.

Maria looks at Liam and clucks. ‘She is so beautiful, Senorita. She looks like her daddy.’

'It's a *him!*' Paris snaps.

“‘*Its*’?” Austin sneers. ‘That how you refer to your *child*?’

Paris glares at him. ‘Fuck off!’

‘Guys! Jeez, maybe it’s time you guys went back to LA,’ I say.

‘To what?’ Paris sneers. ‘Food stamps?’

‘I would like to see the fridge,’ Elaine says, trying to change the subject.

‘Yeah,’ Paris says. ‘Bet they keep cool stuff like human skulls and cat there.’

‘Why? You planning on eating that too?’ Austin mocks. ‘You have to stop sometimes, you know.’

Paris’s bottom lip quivers.

‘Austin!’ I chide. ‘What the fuck?’

‘She won’t stop eating,’ he grumbles. ‘Look at her – she’s put on so much ...’

I swing around to him. ‘Having your baby. Duh!’

He shrugs and walks away. I don’t know this side of Austin and I don’t like it. It’s ugly, mean.

I look at Paris and pat her back. ‘He doesn’t mean it.’

Elaine steps forwards and says, ‘It’s probably just nerves – the stress of things.’

“‘Things?’” What “things”?’

‘Never mind, Payton’ Elaine says, her voice dismissive. Loosely interpreted – ‘None of your business, Payton.’

Rosa walks up to Austin. ‘Are you okay, gringo?’

He nods and touches the Band-Aid, a sheepish look on his face.

‘That is very good, gringo,’ she says. ‘You from America, gringo?’

‘Yes ...’

‘Do you know my cousin Syyyyylvia. *She* live in America?’

I chuckle at the expression on gringo’s face and follow Elaine to the fridge.

‘There’s just food here,’ Elaine reports.

‘Really?’ Paris sounds even more disenchanted. ‘Cannibals? Bah! The villagers don’t know shit about these people.’

‘Language Paris,’ Elaine rebukes.

Hours pass before they leave. I walk them to the car and usher them off. Austin gives me a two-arm hug while Paris glares at him for giving me so much attention. I’ve never seen Paris insecure before and deep down, I’m thrilled to know *I* make her so insecure. I never thought it’s possible for anyone to make her feel insecure, let alone plain ol’ me.

It's a relief to see them leave - can't handle the bickering and tension between Austin and Paris anymore. Austin has changed and frankly, I'm disappointed that he can be so nasty to Paris. She's his wife, mother of his child for Christ's sakes!

The party at the ranch has died and the place is quiet.

Deep in thought, I trudge slowly back to my room. In the dark I spot the burning end of a cigarette. Diablo? As I get closer, I get a whiff of tobacco - it's him. I stop in front of him. He can see me, but I can barely see his face in the dark. I think about him rescuing me on the cliff, sparing Austin, arranging a home visit from my family and sparing me his nightly visits, and feel the need to say something.

'Thank you,' I say. 'For everything.'

He does not reply.

'Goodnight.'

## CHAPTER FOUR

I never thanked Troy for his kindness, for having the courage to stand up for me on many occasions, mainly because I never see him alone. But today he's alone so I smile and say, 'Troy, thanks for ...*everything*.'

He grunts and looks down, reminding me of Diablo. Troy is the only man here who resembles Diablo – same facial structure, hazel eyes, long hair.

Tongue walks in and catches me smiling at Troy. He sneaks up behind me and circles my waist. 'I like your tits,' he whispers.

I shove him off and dart out of the kitchen, revolted by his touch.

He laughs. 'My room is at the top, bebe. Come visit me. Anytime! I leave my door open for you.'

Troy starts to bristle and puts his face in Tongue's and they start to argue. I prefer not to have any encounters with Tongue because I know he and Christa are close, and right now, Christa is really pissed at me.

\* \* \*

I'm almost asleep when I hear a woman scream. I jump out of bed and race to the window. Tongue is struggling with a young lady I've never seen before. She has to be from one of the villages and judging from her sheer nightdress, I think she's been abducted from her bed and dragged here for Tongue's sexual enjoyment.

I know exactly how she feels - the terror, the feelings of helplessness. But what can I do? I'm in exactly the same position, except I'm screaming *inside*.

Christa steps out of her room and puffs on a cigarette as she watches Tongue wrestle with the young girl.

The girl sees Christa and says, 'Senora, please help me!'

Christa's smile is cynical as she throws down her cigarette, crushes it with her shoe and walks back into her room.

How could she do that? This is a young girl, for Christ's sakes.

Tongue drags the girl inside and shuts the door.

Being part of Diablo's gang affords his men a number of perks – they never paid for anything, they just took whatever they wanted. Nobody stopped them because nobody dared. One of their perks - women of all ages from the surrounding villages and tonight, Tongue was cashing in on his perk. Fucking pervert.

I can no longer sleep, so I just sit at the window and watch his room and wait. I wish I was brave enough to march up to Tongue's door and yank the girl out of there but I'm ashamed to admit that I'm too chicken to do that.

Hours later, she's running away from Tongue's villa. Without thinking, I race outside and try to stop her. She turns, looks at me, then runs on, probably distrusting me after her encounter with Christa.

'Wait!' I hiss, but she continues running. It's dark and I worry she will be snatched by one of the other men patrolling the ranch. I sprint after her and eventually catch up with her.

'Let me help you, please!' I beg. 'English? You speak English?'

'Si, Senorita,' she says.

'Thank God! Come with me.'

'Exhausted and crying, she allows me to lead her to my room. I lock the door and offer her a shower, which she accepts. But she is terrified of Tongue finding her again, so we turn off the lights and creep around like clumsy burglars in the dark. Finally, she crawls into my bed and falls asleep.

When I wake up the next morning, she is wide awake, her eyes the size of saucers.

Her name is Anna and she is fourteen. Fourteen! Tongue the Motherfucker – he really deserves to die.

As soon as the men leave the ranch, I, with Maria and Rosa's help, make plans to get Anna back home. I suggest she reports the rape to the police, but Maria and Rosa tells me that it's not a good idea as the police are friendly with Diablo and Christa and, well, Tongue may exact revenge by hurting her family, maybe even killing them all to set an example.

I look helplessly at my ward, then give her a hug. But she gently pushes me away. At first I'm taken aback but then I think maybe she doesn't want to be touched right now. I get it.

Anna speaks rapidly to me in Spanish.

I look to Maria for interpretation.

'Eh, she say ... she eh, is grateful that I saved her and if ever I ever need help ...'

I smile grimly at Anna. 'I'll remember that. *Gracias.*'

Over time, I see Tongue bring in a few more young girls, but I'm unable to help them. Anna was one who managed to get away. The others, he just kept until he grew tired of them then cut them loose.

Tongue deserves to die a horrific death. I hope one day I will be the one who kills him.

## CHAPTER FIVE

It's obvious Christa is seething – she gives me dirty looks and hisses threats whenever she sees me. Clearly she hasn't forgiven me for disrespecting her during the Austin incident. Her insults and cursing grows in intensity and I know it's only a matter of time before she avenges herself, so I'm wary. And scared.

To add to her frustration, she probably realises she is losing control over Diablo these days. He seems eager to hold onto me and her jealousy and insecurity surfaces randomly.

Today, Christa is yelling at everyone about *something*. Diablo is out for the day, so I tread carefully and avoid her. I'm in the courtyard when Tongue suddenly walks up to me and presses against me.

'Can you feel my hard on? We go to my room? Now? Whachusay, eh?'

The men laugh at Tongue's antics, but Troy yells at him to leave me alone. Tongue and Troy engage in another heated argument. To my horror, Tongue draws his gun and fires into the air.

Troy immediately backs away.

Christa arrives on the on horseback and demands an explanation. She listens to both guys and yells at Troy to holster his weapon. Then she looks pointedly at me and I flinch.

'Maria,' she yells, 'bring my whiiip.'

Now Tongue's going to really get it. Good.

Maria hesitates and glances at me.

Christa turns really slowly and gives Maria a cold, hard stare.

Maria quickly runs into the villa and returns with Christa's whip.

Christa takes the whip, smiles and trots towards Tongue. But suddenly, she turns and lashes at me, tearing my dress of my back.

I scream in agony and even try to run, but she's on horseback and has an advantage over me - she whips me again.

Troy, who I believe is my saviour by now, runs after Christa and tries to grab the whip off her, but he's not fast enough. I get a third lash before he manages to yank the whip out of Christa's hands.

I lie on the ground whimpering and in agony. My clothes are in tatters, the skin on my back is in shreds and I'm going into shock.

Troy kneels next to me. 'Gringa ... Gringa ...' The distress in his voice tells me I must

be in worse shape than I thought.

Maria and Rosa are holding each other and crying but they do not help. I realise by now that they dare not or they will suffer the same fate as me.

‘Gringa ... Gringa ...’ Troy chants.

‘Diablo ...’ I whisper, still expecting Christa to whip me, ‘get ... Dia ... blo ...’

Then I hear the thunder of hooves and turn my head slowly to the side. There he is - my big, terrifying beast on a black horse, galloping at me at an incredible speed, looking as terrifying as he did when I first encountered him. At that time, I was petrified of him, thinking of him as a monster. It’s a different story today - he’s my rescuer today and he’s going to save me from the vindictive witch with the whip.

At the sight of me lying on the ground, bloodied and in tatters, Diablo suddenly slows down and trots towards me.

‘Gringa ...’ I see him mouth.

‘Diablo!’ Christa says. ‘How nice to see you. I think you cooome home tomorrow, eh?’

Diablo does not answer, his eyes are fixed on me. He looks at Troy for an explanation.

Troy explodes in Spanish and points to Tongue and Christa. Diablo listens silently, his eyes hooding up and his jaws starting to jut. Then he nods, takes the whip off Troy and rides up to Christa.

‘No Diablo!’ Christa screams. ‘I’m your mooother! Pleeeeease!’

Diablo lashes out at her. She falls off her horse and we hear a snap – like the sound of a bone breaking.

I had no idea Diablo would turn on his own mother because of me!

Next, Diablo turns to Tongue.

‘No, no, no Diablo!’ Tongue pleads. ‘Is a misunderstanding, that’s all, *amigo*.’

The closer Diablo trots, the more desperate Tongue’s voice becomes.

Diablo lashes out at him. Tongue screams in agony and sinks to his knees. Diablo whips him again and again. Three lashes.

Not finished with Christa, Diablo turns and looks at her.

She drags herself into one of the villas and bolts the door. Everyone knows that Diablo killed his father at the tender age of thirteen. Obviously, Christa remembers that as well.

Diablo rides back to me, gets off his horse and kneels besides me.

‘Diablo ... help ...’ I croak.

He shakes his head from side-to-side and gently scoops me into his arms. Even though he is careful, I scream in agony as he carries me to my room. With great care, he places me

on my belly on my bed.

Rosa and Maria rush in and start snipping at whatever's left of my dress so they can administer treatment. Some of the men hurry in and start helping – getting hot water, sending for a doctor, while others shake their heads and tsk.

A doctor is brought in. He administers intramuscular sedation and I sink into a deep sleep.

A couple of times during my deep slumber, my eyes flicker and I see Diablo sleeping on a chair nearby. I'm glad - I feel safer with him around.

In the morning, I feel someone stroke my hair. I open my eyes and look straight into Diablo's. Slowly I turn my face so that my cheek connects with his hand that is stroking my hair. Now why did I do that?

When I open my eyes again, he's asleep next to me, fully clothed. And snoring really loudly.



## CHAPTER SIX

It's been three weeks since the whipping and I'm wide awake and healing nicely with Rosa and Maria's constant nursing.

Diablo sits at the edge of my bed and cocks his head to one side. 'You need anything?' He's been thoughtful lately and I appreciate it.

'Mmm.' I reach over for an empty chocolate box and flip it around. 'Nother one of these.'

'Of thiiiiis?'

'Yeah.' I open and close the empty box.

He nods and leaves.

Hours later, a box of chocolates is delivered. Happy to have more chocolate, Maria and Rosa dive for it only to find the box is empty.

I look at their crestfallen faces. 'What?'

Slowly, as if it is a hand grenade, they pass the empty box to me. It really is empty.

You don't mess with a patient's chocolate. 'Go call him,' I say in a controlled but icy voice, 'I need to ...'

As if on cue, he enters my room, a huge smirk on his face.

I lift up the box. 'Explain.'

He shrugs. 'You say you need 'nother one of thiiiiis so I give you what you ask for. Empty box.'

Maria and Rosa fall about laughing at his cheekiness.

'Did you want chocolate *too*?'

I chuckle. 'Very funny Diablo. Hand it over.'

He steps out of the room and returns with three huge boxes of chocolates and hands one to each of us.

'Aaaah! That's better,' I say, pleased the two ladies won't need to steal my chocolates.

I cram two into my mouth. 'Pank wu.'

He leaves with a huge grin on his face.

18 August 02

Up and about now. Diablo's back to his obnoxious self now that I'm okay. But he still doesn't visit at night. Great.

He was nice to me though. Bought me chocolates, magazines in English and DVDs. Had Troy install a Television and DVD player in my room. Watched Spanish movies with no subtitles. Couldn't understand a fuck they said, so Maria and Rose took turns translating to me while eating up all my chocolate and hogging the TV remote.

Diablo now works from the ranch so I get to see more of him these days.

Q: What's worse than being shot three times, thrown off a cliff and being fucked in the ass by Diablo?

A: Being whipped by Christa.

PS: Thank God for Troy boys.

PPS: Christa broke her leg when she fell off her horse. Yay! Neigh

\* \* \*

The whipping incident confirms that my life depends on Diablo being alive. He doesn't want anyone hurting me. He can violate me, slap me, cut off my clothes with a knife and grab me by the hair, but nobody else can touch me.

Now that I'm on my feet, I'm expected to join him at the dinner table again. Soon my injuries are forgotten and he's back to being his old self again - offish in front of his men. Knowing he's capable of extreme tenderness and that he doesn't want me hurt, gives me a different perspective on things and I overlook a lot of his bad behaviour.

Concerned about scars on my back, I'm swimming again in the rock pool, hoping the salt water will aid healing. Maybe even reduce the scarring. I swim every day from 2 to 3 PM.

Maria and Rosa assist by applying some foul smelling potion daily - supposed to help minimize the scars.

\* \* \*

There is great excitement at the entrance of the ranch. Men scurrying off to the entrance. Even the gardeners are hastily making their way to the front. Maria, Rosa and I follow them to see what the commotion is all about.

We spy three sexy señoritas, dressed in the shortest of shorts and skimpy halter tops talking to the men. The men stare with mouths open as the Señoritas explain that they are exotic dancers who have lost their way.

'*Putas*,' Maria says.

Rosa nods.

I shake my head at the sight of the men fighting each other to direct the Senoritas. Some of the men offer refreshments and the senoritas accept and walk into the ranch where the men shove each other out of the way to fawn over the ladies.

‘Well, I’m off to the rock-pool,’ I say.

The ladies wave me off and continue their disparaging remarks about the sexy ladies.

The water is lovely and as I float on my back in the pool, I think about Christa – she’s left her mark on me for life. I really despise her. She’s evil and she gave birth to evil.

Suddenly, to my absolute horror, men, at least fifteen of them, are pointing guns at me, shattering the stillness of the day with their screams. ‘FBI! Put your hands up!’ they chorus, moving towards me, flashing badges and guns.

American accents!

For a moment, I freeze, unable to comprehend any of this. What the hell have I done now?

I have a few unpaid parking tickets in Los Angeles that I’ve been meaning to take care of.

A female agent inches closer weapon in hand. ‘C’mon on out, ma’am,’ she coaches. She has a profound Southern accent.

Relieved that they’re American, I relax a little and reach down to adjust my bikini bottom. They go nuts. ‘Keep your hands where we can see them!’

Fuck! All I want to do is adjust my bikini so that I don’t walk towards a village full of men with half my ass showing.

‘Okay! Okay!’ I cry. ‘I’m coming out. Jeez!’

Terrified, I hold up my hands and wade out of the water, feeling terribly self-conscious that I’m so scantily clad in front of so many men. Worse, my scars are so visible - I must look like a red and white zebra from the back. Even worse, I’m swimming topless!

‘Can I at least get my bra and towel?’

I have never had – let’s count – one, two, three ... thirteen! Thirteen guns pointing at me before and I’m scared. Whatever crime I committed must have been really heinous if they’re sending *thirteen* FBI agents with amazing larynxes like these after me.

The female agent brings me both.

‘Thank you,’ I say and drape the towel around me.

‘What ... what’s this all about?’ I finally ask, squeezing water out of my hair. ‘I’m an American citizen ...’

One of the men steps forwards and introduces himself. 'I'm Special Agent Blake Depp,' he drawls.

Depp's tall, lanky, with sandy coloured hair and cornflower blue eyes. His voice is gentle and apologetic.

Maybe they heard about me being taken *prisoner* by Diablo and maybe they're here to rescue me from him. Hope ignites in me.

'We need to talk to you about Diablo.'

'Ha! Diablo ... he took me ... eh ... like, I didn't want to come here ...'

Depp nods and explains. 'We're aware of your situation, Payton. Your father filled us in. Diablo, well, he's facing a number of charges, including murder. Two policemen and intelligence tells us that he's targeting a third. Not to mention a prominent businessman - Jimmy Gomez - killed him too.'

'Wow! Policemen ...' I shouldn't be this surprised.

'Our biggest problem,' Depp continues, 'witnesses to testify against Diablo. See, one visit from Diablo's men visits and they vanish like magic. That's why we need you to help with his arrest and trial.'

'His arrest? Okay ...' The thought of Diago being arrested and everyone being free of him appeals to me. 'Okay ...' I'm a little disappointed that they're not here solely to save my ass. 'But do you know what would happen if like, Diablo like, finds out that I'm talking to you - the FBI?' I run my index finger across my neck. 'Seriously, he will.'

'If you do as we say, he won't find out. We can assure you of that.'

'Really?' I'm happy to hear he is so confident. 'So, like, what's the FBI doing in Mexico?'

'When there's drugs, cop killings, the US sends us to help and Mexico - let's say, they're, that is Mexico is grateful.'

'Ah. So, like, how did you guys get here without being spotted? There's so many of you and ...'

'Three decoys - exotic dancers. Saw them?'

'The dancers? Oh the ones ...?'

He nods. 'We will find a way to get what we want.'

'Wow.'

'We can meet here,' Depp says as he hands me a business card. 'It's a spa, sort of massage parlour. We can talk there without raising suspicion. You know, you'll be like having a massage meanwhile ...'

‘Okay.’

‘Meet us there tomorrow, say ten? Our agents – they’ll have everything covered so don’t worry about anything. Just be there.’

It’s a lot to digest but I’m happy to hear that Diablo will soon be facing jail time, because that’s what he deserves. Then everyone, including myself will be free. The mere thought of that lightens the load on my scarred shoulders. Although nervous and anxious, I agree to meet them tomorrow before walking away. When I turn back to look at them, they have disappeared into the bushes. By the time I reach the ranch the dancers have left.

I’m jittery all afternoon and avoid eye contact with Diablo, something he does not miss because he’s peering at me. Although I desperately want to help with his imprisonment, I’m having second thoughts about ... everything. What if someone saw me talking to the FBI and has told Diablo about it? What if Diablo set me up? What if *Christa* set me up?

Fuck! I wipe away beads of sweat from my forehead and make a decision not to show up tomorrow.

When I awake the following morning, I’m still conflicted. What if I don’t show up and I’m arrested by the FBI for ... whatever? I don’t know much about this. I’m twenty one, remember?

If only I had someone I could talk to. Enfermera! She’s someone I can trust and she’d know the answer. I think about her all the time and wish I knew how to get to her. I tried once or twice to retrace my steps to her but I got lost and gave up.

By morning, my desire for freedom and the villager’s freedom is such that I finally decide to keep my appointment with the FBI.

Before Diablo leaves the ranch, I run up to him. ‘I wanna go to the city to have a massage,’ I say.

After shooting me strange, confused looks, he arranges for Marcus to drive me into town for the massage. I hear him warning Marcus not to let me out of his sight.

Just before he leaves, he hands me a wad of bills.

‘Wow!’ I exclaim and stick the bills in my bra.

He chuckles and walks away.

‘Let’s go Marcus,’ I say. ‘I got me a heap of money and the town needs painting.’

‘Painting?’ Marcus wriggles his eyebrows and strokes his bald head.

I like Marcus. He’s polite and always smiling and not at all as scary as he looks – tattooed, earrings on both ears; scar running down his left cheek – looks like the ruthless Mexican drug lord in *any* movie.

We drive to Maggie's run-down Massage Parlour in the town centre.

Maggie, a charming Senorita with perky breasts and long eyelashes, welcomes me and hands me a white robe. She winks at me and I know she's part of the FBI. She deliberately leaves the room door ajar in case Marcus needs to inspect the room, which he does on cue. He wanders in and noses around, while Maggie bats those lovely eyelashes at him.

Obviously, her aim is to distract him, which she does. Marcus rubs his bald head and turns red, then quickly scurries off to the waiting room where he tries to read a magazine.

Maggie stands by the door and smiles. 'Senorita Payton will be, mmm, say, around ninety minutes. You should get coffee. Down the road, at Nacholand, they make great cappuccinos. You should get some.'

Marcus nods slowly. 'I don't like drinking coffee alone, you know. I wait till you are free to join me, maybe? Now, I read the magazine.'

Maggie lifts and drops her shoulders. 'In that case, it will be easier if you turn the magazine the other way – easier to read when it's not upside down.'

Marcus looks at the magazine, rubs his bald head and says, 'I like to read like this. Workout for the brain. You should try it.'

She grins. 'Maybe I will.'

Maggie shuts the door and pushes away a trolley full of towels and massage equipment from a wall to reveal a secret door, which she lightly knocks on. The door opens to a flight of stairs leading to the basement. A woman, who I assume to be an FBI agent, hurries into the massage room, slathers some green, gooey cream on her face and lies on the massage table. She has the same build and hair colour as me.

I look at Maggie and she answers before I ask. 'In case Marcus decides to check up on you, he'll see her and think it's you.'

'Wow.' The FBI thinks of everything.

Maggie leads me down the stairs to the basement, which consists of two huge rooms. I enter a room with eight FBI agents. Talk about intimidation – now I understand what Monika Lewinsky meant when she talked about being overwhelmed by the FBI's presence.

Even though they smile and indulge in light chit-chat to put me at ease, I'm tense and feeling pressurized. The only person I feel comfortable with is Agent Depp. I met him yesterday at the rock pool and from our brief meeting yesterday, I find him to be an affable character.

They get straight to the point. As mentioned yesterday, they want to lock up Diablo for good and they want me to be their *inside man*, or in my case, their *inside woman*.

‘We’ve talked to your father and stepmother and they’ve filled us in on Diablo shooting you, your miraculous return and how you came to live at his ranch. So we’re sorta up to date on you, essentially,’ Depp says.

Okay ...’

‘We realise you’ve made a phenomenal sacrifice by accepting to live with Diablo just to spare the lives of the villagers and man, we really applaud you for that, Payton.’

I clasp and unclasp my fingers. ‘Uh ...okay ...’

‘See our main problem – witnesses to testify against Diablo and his family. The intimidation, death threats – frightens people away. Then there’s crooked cops - corruption in the ranks of police officials in Mexico – one of the main reasons we’ve come all the way here, left our families, our homes ...’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. But we’re now working with scrupulous Mexican police to bring down criminals like Diablo and ...’

‘So what you want me to do?’

They whip out some photos and place them on the table.

‘Recognise any of them? They’re policemen who frequent your ranch. On Diablo’s payroll.’

I shake my head. ‘Difficult to tell. Haven’t really been paying attention. But hey, I’m like, really eager to get away from Diablo, so I’m in. I’ll definitely pay more attention from now on.’

They exchange glances with each other and show me more photos and fill me in on the men and the roles they play.

‘He slit a man’s throat recently. Don’t know if that was a policeman or whatever ...’

‘They jerk up in their seat and probe for details – describe the man, what happened to his body, who was involved in the slaying.’

But, I don’t have much to offer them so they make a few phone calls to local Mexican authorities enquiring about missing persons fitting that description and come up with nothing.

I feel like a big fat liar. ‘I’ve seen it happen,’ I protest.

‘We believe you,’ Agent Grey says. ‘After all, he tried to murder you remember, and he’s going down for that too.’

Grey’s dark haired, with medium build and green suspicious eyes - says little, watches everything and I’m uncomfortable with him.

‘He killed his father when he was just thirteen,’ Grey continues. ‘Just slit his throat so he

could take charge. Just like that. His mother and brothers – they're scared of him. They'd like him dead but as you know - he's fearless and their enemies in the turf wars know that too, so it pays to keep him alive – sort of protector to all.'

'Yeah. I think that may be true,' I say, 'but his mother – she's quite ruthless too. She whipped me ...' My voice cracks and I have trouble speaking.

'But Diablo, he was nice to me ...broke Christa's leg and ...stayed with me ... bought me chocolates ...'

'...and raped you.' Grey's voice is cold and for some reason, snappy. 'It is rape, Payton.'

I abruptly clam up and sink into my chair. It's not something I want to talk about. In fact, I want a cigarette now. I want to go home – back to Tana-Mera.

Depp flashes Grey an angry look, for his lack of tact, I think. He turns to me, an apologetic look on his face. 'Look Payton, you've had to handle so much ...'

The gentleness in Depp's voice is too much for me - I cover my face with my hands and weep, remembering what I endured with Diablo and feeling sorry for myself.

They back off and let me cry.

A short while later, I'm composed again and reiterate my fears of Diablo finding out that I was talking to the police. 'He'll kill me.'

'Yep. It's kinda dangerous for everybody,' Depp agrees. But you do want to go home, Payton? Home to your apartment, your career, your friends and your life? What about your family and the rest of the villagers for that matter? Don't they deserve their freedom?'

'Absolutely!' The idea that the villagers could be freed forever appeals to me. 'Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it.'

Their excitement at my words is tangible.

'Finally, we have someone to help us,' Grey says. 'I've a good feeling about this.'

We discuss listening devices, winning Diablo over, drawing him out, getting him lower his guard with me and to eventually talk about the murders, the cop killings.

'Um, we barely talk though ...'

Agent Kathryn Ebyss steps forward and introduces herself. 'Look Payton' she says, her voice impatient and to-the-point, 'he's obviously enamoured by you and he wants you around – half your battle won, there. Now use that to your advantage.'

'Kathryn,' Depp interrupts.

She ignores him. 'Your feminine charms – use that to draw him out, make him talk, Payton. He may want to impress you and he's gonna tell you what he's done, what he's capable of and boom! He reveals incriminating stuff we can use against him.'



'Kathryn!' Depp sounds annoyed.

'Especially if you *sound* impressed by ... by who he is, what he says ... what he's don ...'

Depp stand up, a granite look on his face.

Kathryn puts up both her hands in a surrendering motion.

I nod slowly, a million thoughts flitting through my head. 'I guess ...'

'Look Payton, 'Ebyss says, her voice a little less irritable, 'it's simple – look great, be charming, act impressed and wham! Before you know it – he's singing. '

'Like Samson and Delilah,' I muse.

She nods. 'Something like that.'

'I'll be Delilah off course.'

'Yeah,' Ebyss says, 'he'd make a lousy Delilah.'

Everyone laughs. Thank God the place is soundproof.

She glances at my hair. 'Maybe do something to ... eh, make yourself feel better, more alive.'

'Like what?' I ask, touching my hair and wishing I had plucked my eyebrows or worn lip gloss, mascara, a push up bra ...

'Like, maybe have your hair done, have a facial, maybe some make-up - all the things that make you feel special and interesting. And off course, sexy.' She seems to be choosing her words really carefully.

I look at Depp. He averts his eyes. I look at Grey, he too won't meet mine. Somehow I don't think they're really comfortable with the "sexy" bit.

I'm not comfortable with that for sure, but what do I say. 'Okay. I'll have my hair done before I go back,' I say meekly. 'Haven't had that done in ages.'

'Great idea!' Ebyss says, giving me two thumbs up.

I realise I don't like Ebyss after all. She's ruthless, driven and treats me with disdain.

It's time to leave. Armed with a bag of listening devices they've showed me how to install throughout the villas and on the grounds, I walk out of the massage parlour, ignoring the tiny voice inside me that's telling me I'm being used by my new friends.

Marcus looks anything but bored - he's deep in conversation with another young lady behind the counter. She's probably working with the FBI too.

'I really like coffee but I don't like drinking coffee alone. But I like coffee. You like coffee?'

The young lady wrinkles her lips. 'I like hot chocolate.'

Marcus stiffens. 'I like hot chocolate too! I really don't like coffee.'

He sees me and frowns. 'So soon, Senorita?'

'But I'll see you the next time?' the young lady says in a soft voice.

'Sorry Marcus, but I gotta do something about this,' I say, ruffling my hair. 'Hairdresser, please.'

Marcus nods. 'Hairdresser. Let us go.'

He looks at the young lady. 'Hot chocolate. Next time. I buy.'

She smiles and nods.

I have my hair trimmed, streaked, conditioned and straightened. It's shiny and cascades down my back and I'm thrilled with it.

I decide to shop for sexy new clothes. For my mission, of course.

I throw in a Manicure and a pedicure and I'm feeling very Paris right now. Invigorated and heady.

I buy chocolates and candy for Maria and Rosa, a t-shirt with the words, *For sale, enquire within* for Marcus and tons of stuff for myself.

Marcus grins and slips it on immediately.

After a light lunch, Marcus and I head home, the bag of listening devices close by.

I'm scared and excited at the same time - imagine, I'll be the one who brings down a cop killer, a murderer, a barbarian!

What a story for my children and grandchildren. Man, I can hardly wait for grandchildren.

Payton, gringa, liberator of the people of Mexico, of the enslaved.

I'll probably get a plaque or a star ... *somewhere* in Mexico. They might make a movie about me. Wow.

For the first time since I arrived in Mexico, I'm alive and energised.

Maria and Rosa rush out to greet us. 'Lookiyou, Senorita! You look so nice.'

'What did they do to you?'

'You are wearing lipstick, Senorita.'

'Hey guys, I have presents for you.'

They tear through my bags, pull out all my clothes and squeeze into the heels I bought, while eating their chocolates and candy.

As they sample the chocolates, I model my new clothes for them.

'Senorita, you look beautiful,' Rosa says. 'Like a movie star. A model.'

‘Is the massage,’ Maria explains. ‘Takes the blood through the body ...’

‘*Si?*’

‘*Si*. Always make a girl veery beautiful.’

‘Massage is good then,’ Rosa says as she pops another chocolate into her mouth. ‘I have one tomorrow, then I look like you.’

‘Whew! It’s hot today,’ I say, fanning myself with my hand, keen to change the subject considering I never had a massage.

Since the ranch is empty right now, I have full access to all the villas. Perfect time to plant the listening devices.

Luckily, because of modern technology, the bugs look more like watch batteries. To avoid any suspicion from Maria and Rosa, I whine about my missing passport and tell them that I’m sure Christa has it.

‘I’m going to search her villa for it,’ I say and leave.

As I walk I touch the silver neck chain with a heart-shaped locket pendant I’m wearing, given to me by the FBI. It houses a listening device and is to be worn at all times. Easy.

Christa’s apartment is like a love-shack - red satiny cushions, a four-poster bed with red tulle draped over it, tons of candles, a variety of sex toys openly displayed and a huge nude painting of her on the wall. Yuck!

A doll on the mantel piece makes me gasp. It has long blonde hair, blue eyes and vaguely resembles me. The problem - it has about one hundred straight pins stuck into it - voodoo-like and very creepy. If that doll is me, boy, she sure wants me dead.

As I plant the listening devices, I make a mental note to get hold of some sage and keep it under my pillow – Enfermera style.

Once I’m in Christa’s villa, I’m able to slip easily into other villas and plant my devices.

Done. I’m now working for the FBI.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

It's almost dinner time so I get ready. My dress is scarlet, short, strappy and figure-hugging, my heels are sling-back stilettos, my lipstick is porn-star red. I look in the mirror and smile. Then I kiss the mirror and say, 'You're smoking, Delilah!' Finally I'm confident enough to face everyone at the dinner table.

Five minutes later, I yank off my dress, kick off my heels and hurriedly wipe off my lipstick. 'You look like a tart!' I say to myself, my confidence shaky again.

In just my bra and panties I sit on my bed and ruin a good manicure with my teeth. This is so not me. But then I remember the FBI, the freedom of the villagers, my grandchildren and its back to my slutty dress, my hooker heels and my porn-star lip gloss.

I'm late for dinner so I hurry along. They better notice. *Diablo* better notice – these stilettos are pinching my toes. How the hell does Paris walk in six inch heels with such ease?

The moment I enter the dining room, conversation ceases. *Diablo* slowly rises to his feet, mouth agape.

Easier than I thought. Suppressing a smile, I take my seat.

Everyone is staring. I'm somewhat pleased. Embarrassed, but secretly thrilled. I've never been able to bring conversation to a halt before.

Christa eyes me, a fixed smile to her garnet lips. 'Gringa is looking very ... *different* today,' she scoffs, her eyes sweeping over me.

Bitchface is talking to me? I didn't know we are on speaking terms again after she whipped my ass and incapacitated me for three weeks. And how come *Diablo* has just forgiven her like that? I got a good mind to break her other leg with my stilettos.

'Why? You going to a ball or something, eh gringa?'

Lots of laughter around the table. Santana's laugh dominates.

Suddenly, I feel like an idiot and I resist the urge to run back to my room.

Using my middle finger (A move I learnt from Paris) I slowly move my hair aside from my heavily made up face and smile sweetly. Usually, I'd use my middle finger differently.

'I sure am,' I say, in what I hope is a Marilyn Monroe voice – you know – soft, breathy. 'And ...' I look at *Diablo* from under my lashes, 'I'm taking *Diablo* with me, so don't wait up, 'cos we may be late.'

'Ooooooh!' the men chorus, while Christa slams back in her chair, a granite look in her eyes. Bet that's not the response she expected?

Santana picks at the table with her steak knife.

Diablo raises both his bushy eyebrows but does not smile or join in the chorus.

I hold his gaze and tilt my head to one side. He gives me the slightest of nods and spends the rest of the evening ogling me, pissing off Santana and Christa.

I ignore their barbs and focus on my target.

After dinner, in a sweet voice I say, 'Diablo, may I be excused? Please?'

He nods and is unable to mask the appreciation in his eyes.

'Thank you,' I mouth and reward him with a coy smile.

I leave the table and sashay away. Halfway through the room, I turn back to see if he is looking. Everyone, including him is leaning over their chairs, watching my ass. Self-conscious and scared of toppling over in these heels, I carefully walk away.

I lie in bed thinking about the power and attention I commanded simply because I looked hot. No wonder Paris gets away with everything. Being beautiful and sexy makes a woman instantly powerful. I like it. I could easily get addicted to it.

From now on, I tell myself, I'll be dressing like that every day. It'll take time and effort but what else have I got to do?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

‘But Diablo, you said I could go. Why you changing your mind now, huh?’

‘I say no, *now*.’

‘Just like that, huh?’ I say, fury getting the better of me. ‘You own me now, huh? So you can change your mind just like that, huh Diablo?’

His eyes start to narrow at my obstinacy.

‘They’re expecting me, you know.’

‘I tell Marcus to bring them here.’

‘I don’t want them to come here Diablo. I wanna go there! I need to get away ...’

‘You want to see *him*!’ he shouts. ‘That’s why you dress like that.’

He’s jealous? ‘No!’ I protest, ‘I wanna see my family. I’ll change this fucking dress.’

He glares at me, then turns and walks away.

My disappointment morphs into fury. ‘Come back here! I haven’t finished with you.’

‘*You* haven’t finished with *me*?’

I’m handling this wrong. Damn! If only I attended anger management classes like everyone suggested I did.

He walks away.

I pace. Everything was going so well for the past couple of weeks. He appeared taken in with my makeover and said ‘yes’ to everything. Even agreed for me to visit my family today. Then all of a sudden, he changes his mind because of the way I’m dressed. I look at my dress in the mirror. It’s simple but clingy, maybe even a little sexy. Ok, a lot sexy, but what the fuck?

Here I was planning to show off my new look to Elaine and Paris. I was so in the mood to be entertained by their jealousy. It would have been the ultimate compliment.

Besides, I wanted Austin to see the new and improved me and die of disappointment – how could he have made such an enormous mistake and married the wrong sister?

Pacing in heels is not a good idea but I continue.

My family really is expecting me. I sent word with Marcus that I’ll be seeing them today.

‘Gringaaa!’ Diablo yells.

I slam the door on his hollering. Bastard can go to hell.

‘Gringaaa!’ he yells again, and again, I ignore him.

Finally, Maria quietly enters my room, a worried look on her face. ‘Senorita please ...’

‘Maria, you tell him ...’ I draw a long breath, ‘tell him my name is Payton, and not

fucking “Gringaaa! Gringaaa! Gringaaa!”

Before she can respond, Diablo storms into my room and of course, hears what I said.

‘Come to lunch,’ he says in a strained, but controlled voice.

I look him in the eye. ‘No!’

He stiffens. ‘Come to lunch.’

‘No! I don’t wanna eat with you.’

He grabs me by the scruff of my neck and drags me out of the room to the lunch table.

‘Leave me the fuck alone!’

He shoves me into the dining room. It’s Saturday so that entire gang is there, in the mood to party and to be entertained. Watching Diablo drag me to the table gets them excited.

Humiliated and seething, I sit down and drum my nails on the table. I don’t eat or look at him.

‘Eat!’ he orders.

I ignore him and drum louder, furiously.

A man named Norman, seated next to me, leans over and says, ‘Senorita gringa want Whisky?’

‘Yes please, Norman.’

Norman pours the whisky and places the glass in front of me.

‘Thank you Norman,’ I say, bypassing the glass and reaching for the bottle.

Norman’s eyes grow huge when he sees me taking giant swigs from the bottle.

It’s awful. I hate whisky. Tastes like gasoline to me.

‘Damn!’ I say, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. ‘This sure is mighty fine whisky, Norman.’

‘Eh, Senorita gringa, my name ...’

‘Lemme pour you one, Norman.’ I top his glass to the brim and hand it to him. ‘Knock yourself out,’ I chuckle.

Diablo’s not smiling.

Yeah, I’m supposed to be nice to him now that the FBI is involved. Well, fuck the FBI and Fuck him.

As lunch progresses, I’m feeling a little more relaxed now. Warm in my toes and even a little confident. Well, they’re eating lunch and I’m drinking mine – whisky, Tequila and some other shit on the table.

After a few more swigs from the bottles, I cross my arms over my head and whistle *Hit me Baby One More Time* by Brittany bitch. Totally out of tune, but hey, who gives a fuck

right now.

Diablo's hairy face reveals little, but somehow I don't think he's comfortable with my drinking. Hell, *I'm* not comfortable with my drinking, but screw him.

They're passing around pictures. Pornographic pictures and the conversation becomes steamy.

Usually, I pass on the pictures, but today, I snatch them out of Norman's hand. 'Lemme see that!'

I peer at the picture then burst out laughing. 'That's the fuglies flower I have ever come across,' I say.

'Eh, *Senorita gringa*, iiis not a flower, iiis a, how you say it...?' He snaps his fingers.

'Vagina,' some other fucker calls out.

I peer at him. 'What?!' I snatch it out of his hands again. 'Gimmee that.' I stare at the picture. 'Mm. Can't be a woman's vagina. It's too fugly. Has to be a man's.' I hand him back the picture and go back to my neglected bottle.

'So many *Gringas*,' Antonio says, perving over the pictures. At the mention of the word '*Gringa*', all eyes zero in on me.

Am I embarrassed? Hell no!

'Hey, don't look at me,' I say and down another Tequila, whisky – whatever – I've lost track of what I'm drinking. 'I don't roll that way. Why don't you ask the fugly asshole at the end of the table?'

There is a collective gasp in the room and all eyes dart towards Diablo, including mine. Now he's gonna be really pissed. Great.

But his amused response in Spanish brings on some guffawing.

'What? What did he say, Norman?'

Norman is pissed enough to explain. 'Diablo say, is like a fucking a *colchon* sometimes. He say, is a big let down. And, *Senorita Gringa*, and my name is not ...'

'*Colchon* ... mattress? He said that, did he?' I let out a long, low whistle. 'Well Norm, what the hell does he know, huh?'

I smile at Norman. 'Can I call you "Norm?"' I don't wait for him to answer. 'He don't know jack. Foreplay – hell, he probably thinks it's some kind of sugar-free chewing gum or something to do with his car's steering wheel. Huh, Norm?'

'But *Senorita gringa*, my name is not Norm, it is not Norman, it is Lucas.'

I stare at him for so long, he starts to flinch. 'Lucas?'

He nods.



‘Why didn’t you say something, Norm? Okay, I’ll call you Lucas from now on, Norm.’

‘Eh ...’

Santana almost falls off her chair laughing.

I look at Norm. ‘Now Norm,’ I point to Santana, ‘she’s probably laughing at what I said. Or she’s laughing at what the fuckwit at the end of the table said about me – the mattress – whatever shit ...but, you ever seen a donkey laugh, Norm?’

‘No, Senorita gringa. But my name ...’

‘Never? Well, it’s your lucky day, Norm, cos you’ve seen it now.’ I jerk my head towards Santana.

Well, that magically erases the smile of donkey’s face.

‘You biiitch!’ Santana screeches. ‘I fargin’ kiiiill you!’

I smile and raise my bottle at her. ‘Take a “fargin” number and get in “fargin” line.’

Troy comes up to me. ‘Gringa,’ he whispers, ‘come, let me take you to bed so you can sleep it ...’

My eyebrows shoot up. ‘Take me to bed? Are you better in bed than your brother? Christ, I hope so, Troy!’

Troy turns scarlet and shrinks back, all the while glancing nervously at Diablo.

Diablo looks at everyone around him falling out of their chairs with laughter and his breathing becomes like that of an emphysema patient – raspy and labored.

‘He really is lousy in bed Troy. And you know what? I don’t like him. He’s hairy and yuuuuck! He won’t let me visit my ...’

Diablo slams his fist onto the table, rattling the table and animating plates, cutlery, glasses.

‘Fuck! Look what you did Satan - you nearly made me spill my ...’ I jerk back and peer at the label on the bottle in my hand. ‘What the fuck is this shit? Anyhoo, you’ve made me lose count of how many drinks I had. Have to start all over again. In case I have to drive.’

Diablo suddenly whips out his knife and flings it ninja-style at me. I duck and it hits the wooden beam behind me.

‘Ooooh!’ I cry shaking both my hands mockingly. ‘I’m in trooouble now! Biiiiga trooouble.’

‘Go gringa, go!’ some of the men cheer.

‘Whookay!’ I say.

Diago stands up.

I stand up too and look him in the eye, my eyebrows disappearing behind my spiky

fringe.

Breathing heavily, he creeps slowly to me, but I'm ready for him. I kick back my chair and sidle around, using the table as a barrier between us.

'Watch him move, like a ... eh, what you say for walrus in Spanish?'

The men laugh harder. Even Christa laughs.

'You will farkin' die!' Diablo roars.

'And who's gonna farkin kill me, huh?' I ask, dancing on the spot. 'You?' I throw my head back and laugh.

More laughter around me.

Diablo runs to his knife, grabs it off the beam and runs towards me.

But I'm already out of the villa and racing towards the cliff.

'I'm going to kiiiiill you!' he yells as he chases me.

'Fuck you, motherfucker!' I scream over my shoulder and sprint ahead. I don't care if he kills me, I just don't want to be assaulted by him. He's super strong and I stand no chance against him if he does. I've never seen him run before and I'm hoping he's out of shape and slow. Well, the big lunch should make him sluggish.

But to my dismay, I can actually hear his breathing. I'm surprised at my slowness. Must be something to do with the booze. I have to admit, I didn't realize how drunk I was until I started running. Too late now.

I run up the hill and through the dense foliage, passing startled villagers tending the cannabis crops. They stop and stare when they see Diablo chasing a gringa with a knife in his hand. Behind Diablo are his men, some on horseback and some on foot, not wanting to miss the moment Diablo finally kills the insolent Gringa.

'Go, gringa go!' I hear.

I run faster than I ever did in my life.

'You will die!' Diablo threatens behind me, still brandishing the knife. His breathing is getting louder and I know I have to do something.

The rock pool! I know for sure that Diablo is no match for me in the water. Very few people are. I head for the pool.

Changing route confuses Diablo and for a few moments, the gap between us increases, allowing me some respite.

I'm desperate to reach the rock pool so that I can shake the enraged animal behind me.

But to my dismay and my surprise, he catches me.

'Let go of me, you fucking freak!'

We grapple for a few moments, but somehow, I manage to break free. Minus my dress.

He's holding it in his hands and I'm running in just my bra and panties. I don't give a fuck though – too drunk to care.

I've never been so relieved to see the rock pool and I dive in and swim frantically. I don't stop until I'm in the middle of the pool, then only do I turn to look back, expecting to see him close by.

To my surprise, he's standing on the banks of the rock pool, with his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. Behind him a group of villagers laugh and point at me.

I do what anyone would do – I give him the finger.

He doesn't react.

I play an air guitar and start to sing. 'I win! I win! I win! Yeah! Yeah!'

He glowers at me and waves his knife threateningly.

I'm confused as to why he isn't trying to get me, though.

Then I hear jeers from some of the crowd. Something about Diablo being scared of water. So that's it - this brutal slayer, this nightmare of a monster feared by all, is scared of *water*? How bizarre is that?

'What, Diablo, you scared of *water*, eh? You fucking baboon! Yes, you're a monkey.' I tap the top of my head. 'Hee, hee, hoo, hoo!'

Diablo's mouth twists.

'You wear clothes and you walk upright, but that is the extent of your evolution – you're still a fucking baboon. Get it? A baboon that allows men to do drugs in his home. You're nothing but a pathetic murderer. You kill women - how tough does that make you, huh? What about children? You kill them too? Huh? I wouldn't be surprised, 'cos you're such a fucking coward!'

Nobody is laughing now.

Two of the men, start wading into the water to get to me, but Diablo stops them.

Someone hands him a lit cigarette and he puffs away, never taking his eyes off me.

The crowd hums.

'*Usted es un pesimo laicos, Diablo.* How's my Spanish, El Bastido?' I ask proudly. 'I learned that from the Spanish Dictionary of Dirty Words I brought in LA. Means you're a lousy lay. Funny eh?'

'Two minutes then it's all over. Two minutes, then it's finiiiito!'

His drags on his cigarette are longer now.

'You should stick to her,' I say, pointing at Santana. 'She thinks you're great. She'll

always tell you how fabulous you are in bed and how you're the greatest lover she's ever had in her whole life. You like that, right? Egotistical bastard!'

Santana is fuming. 'Shoot her Diablo,' she hisses, circling him. '*Pegarle un tiro!*'

'Me? I've had better,' I jeer. 'Ten times over. My boyfriends were soooo much better than you, *El Monstero*. You just take what you want, you fucking low-life. As for killing me – whose gonna kill me? You? Ha! You shot me, but guess what? I'm still here, motherfucker!'

I look at the crowd. 'Eh, how do you say in "You're a lousy shot" in Spanish? Anybody ...?'

Of course, none of the fuckers have my balls right now, which emanates from the copious amounts of alcohol I consumed.

'You shot me because I was a spy? What spy? Some intelligence you have there.'

To my utter amazement, he smiles. For a moment, I'm not sure if I'm imagining it. But upon closer examination, by way of an intense stare on my part, I see that he is indeed smiling - an undisguised, genuinely amused smile.

He looks at the others. They appeared to be just as surprised to see him smile and they too smile. Some of them chuckle. A few of them even laugh.

But not Santana and Christa. They are not smiling.

'What d'ya want me here for, Diablo?' I ask, feeling a little tired by now. 'I don't fit in here and I'm like, so not impressed by you or your crew or your tequila or your Ponderosa. Okay, maybe your tequila. But I'm never gonna like, marry you and be your wife and have your children. Lord no! I have plans for myself. I gonna like, fight bad guys one day.'

He raises his eyebrows.

'Keep her instead of me.' I say and point again at Santana. 'She's *mucho impresso* with you and your ... your ability to burn down a village of defenseless old men and women and children with the strike of just one match.'

He glances at Santana as if seeing her for the first time.

Santana's smirk disappears. 'What? Don't listen to her, Diablo.'

'The only time you will ever get anything out of me El Stupido, is if you steal it from me like you did. Other than that, you have a hope in hell!'

Somebody hands him another lit cigarette and he smokes, looking blankly at me.

'I hate piercings and you're like a fucking tea-strainer. I dislike tattoos and look like a badly sketched road map. I hate hairy men and you have dreadlocks *and* a beard. Ughh! You need an extreme makeover, Amigo. Oh, and some serious exfoliation.'

‘And *you* ... you need to put on some clothes,’ he growls.

I look down at myself. Crap! I become especially conscious of Tongue’s leering smile and quickly drop below water level.

Diablo picks up my dress and holds it to the skies.

I shake my head from side-to-side. ‘I’m gonna stay here forever now that I know you’re scared of water.’

‘My men, they are not scared,’ he reminds me. ‘They can bring you to me.’ Then he looks over his shoulder and rattles off in Spanish to the people behind him. I grow nervous. The bastard’s actually going to send his men after me?

But, to my surprise, the crowd starts to slowly thin. I stare, confused. What the hell’s he up to now? He turns and looks at me, and I realize he’s messing with me. He’s not sending them after me. I giggle, then float on my back, while he watches. I’m in no hurry to leave the water. I just wish *he* would leave, but remember to leave my dress behind or I’d have to walk back to the villa almost naked. Not a pleasant thought since the alcohol is wearing off and I’m developing a mother of a headache.

When I look back at him, he’s smiling at my antics.

‘You have *cojones*,’ he says. ‘No one talk to me like that.’

‘Yeah?’

He nods.

‘Yeah, cos you’ll probably shoot them for telling you like it is?’

He thinks before he answers, ‘*Si*.’

‘Gosh, you’re such an arrogant prick,’ I say more to myself. I raise my hands in a surrendering motion. ‘Go ahead. Shoot. But please – I’d like to die with the first bullet, not the thirty first.’

He grins. Then his smile disappears. ‘You don’t like me?’

‘Duh.’

‘You like *Him*.’

‘Him? You mean Austin? Eh ...’

His nostrils flare at my response. ‘Why?’

‘Cos he’s nice. He’s a good man - pleasant, intelligent, educated ... a gentleman.’

‘He must be gay.’

‘He’s not gay! He just ... dresses nice.’

‘He is your sister’s husband. How you do this?’

I drop my gaze.

'He got a baby.' His voice is edged with reproach.

'You getting all moral on me? You?'

Cords appear in his neck.

'What? You gonna kill him now?'

'Si.'

'Don't you dare. Be nice for once.'

'Nice?'

'Yeah, good, nice. You know ...?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know?'

He shakes his head. 'Teach me.'

'Me?'

'Si. Teach me how to be good, nice.'

I stare at him. 'Why? Why do you want to be nice now?'

He drops to his haunches and stares at the ground. Then he looks up at me. 'Imatired.'

'Of what?'

He shrugs. 'This life. I want to be good. Teach me how to be *nice* Payton,' he says softly.

'I want to learn how to be good.'

His words surprise me. 'Teach you how - that'll take decades. I don't think you're teachable.'

'Si?' His disappointment is visible.

I nod but then I feel really bad. 'You *really* wanna learn how to be nice?'

'Si.'

'Why?'

He looks me in the eye. 'For you.'

He suddenly looks so vulnerable and sincere and even human, that I feel a little sorry for him. I don't know why I'm feeling this way considering he's such an asshole, but I do.

'You swim good.'

'Swam for University of California, Los Angeles two years in a row,' I brag, treading water.

He nods and raises his busy eyebrows. 'Time to go now,' he says softly.

This is the first time we're actually having a conversation and I realize I'm no longer afraid of him. If he wanted to kill me, he would have done it already. Frankly, if he kills me, he'll be doing me a favor.

I slowly emerge from the water and accept my dress from him. '*Gracias.*'

He helps me into it and steadies me when I stagger.

I giggle and accept his help.

We walk back to our villa in silence. He walks me into my bedroom. I stand in front of my bed and look at it.

The bed rises and hits me in the face.

When I awake, I have trouble remembering, like very drunk people usually do. But I remember him saying something about wanting to be good. Did I hear correctly or was it a figment of my inebriated imagination?

## CHAPTER NINE

It's morning. I stagger into the kitchen to find Maria and Rosa are giggling. Strange. They're usually grumpy in the mornings.

'Wassup? Someone's birthday?'

'Is Christa,' Maria says in a sing-song voice. 'She go for five days to her sista!'

I squint at her. 'And ...?'

Maria sighs impatiently. 'Is *one week* wirrouther, Seniorita. We must celebrate, Seniorita.'

I yawn and accept the cup of coffee from Rosa. 'Yeah, celebrate ... maybe we should put some whisky in the coffee, huh?'

They are suddenly so quiet, my head snaps to look at them. Although both women look at the floor, I spot the smirk on their faces. I glance at the wall clock – 9 AM. Their eyes are shining, but not from joy. I nod several times. 'You're drunk! I'm gonna breathalyse ... '

'*Si!*' the ladies chorus, giggling like two overweight schoolgirls.

'Go bring us a bottle,' Rosa urges and shoves me out of the kitchen.

'Hey stop!' I protest.

Maria nods vigorously, reaches into the grocery cupboard and brings out an almost empty bottle of Vodka. 'This Seniorita,' she says. 'Go bring us one of this.'

I look at Maria, then at Rosa and finally sigh. 'What the hell – let's do it.' With that, I hurry off to steal booze for my already tipsy servants.

At the sight of the bottle of Vodka in my hands, the ladies rip off their aprons, throw down their dishtowels and bring out three large drinking glasses. Shot glasses don't seem to exist here.

We sit on the patio, basking in the morning sun and drinking Vodka. Well, the bithces sit back and enjoy the morning sun while I'm made to do all the fetching and pouring.

'Not too much Seniorita,' Maria says, her eyes lighting up like a sign on an all night liquor store at the sight of me refilling their glasses. 'You are not a big drinker.'

Yeah right. '*I* am not a big drinker,' I correct.

Rosa doesn't bother with discretion. 'Is too little, Seniorita. Pull some more. Pull some more.'

'Okay, okay,' I say and top her glass. 'But if you guys fall on your faces and hurt yourselves, then Diablo's mother is gonna kick ... '

'She not his mother!' Maria snaps. 'Don't call her that.'



I pause with my pouring and look at her. ‘Wh ... what do say?’

Maria’s glare and the pursing of her lips confuses me. When Rosa and her exchange secret glances, I sense some juicy gossip here.

Strategically, I top their glasses before they ask for it. What do you know – Vodka is a mighty muscle relaxant – their tongues get really loose and start wagging – stuff that makes my jaws drop and I’m pretty sure my FBI friends listening in are equally shocked at what they learn.

‘Christa, she adopt Diablo,’ Rosa says.

Shocked? There’s more – I learn that Troy and Diablo are blood brothers while Pedro, Rocky and Digger are Christa’s biological children.

‘Diablo, Troy, Lucas, Santana – Christa adopt them all when they were children,’ Rosa says. My jaws drop. ‘So ... Santana ... I mean ... so Diablo, he’s not incestuous, then? I mean he’s not having sex with his sister?’

Rosa flashes me a reproachful look.

‘Wow,’ I mutter. ‘How wrong was I?’

‘But Santana, she do everything Christa asks her to do, Senorita, because she got no place to go. And Christa make Santana evil. Very evil sometimes and I no like Santana for that.’

‘Gosh, I had no idea ....wow!’

Maria explains: when Diablo was six, arsonists burnt down his village and killed his parents. He was found wandering around with two year old Troy on his back. Christa, a drug dealer from another village, who was always on the lookout for kids she could ‘adopt’ with the sole purpose of using them as cheap labour on her cannabis plantation, heard about the village being destroyed and decided to do some pillaging herself.

She and her husband Jimo, rode into the village, rounded up a whole lot of orphaned kids, including Troy, Diablo and Santana and took them to her home. She promised Diablo that if he stayed and helped in her plantation, she would prevent the authorities from placing him and Troy in different foster homes.

Since Diablo was terrified of losing his only brother, he agreed. Diablo looked a lot older than six, so he was made to work longer and harder in the Christa’s plantation.

But he was smart and strong and challenged Jimo’s abusive, unfair rules and regulations. To keep him in line, Jimo beat him on a daily basis. Jimo’s favourite punishment – hold little Diablo’s his head underwater until he passed out. Then get someone to administer mouth-to-mouth until Diablo recovered. Christa stood by and laughed while it happened.

‘So that’s why he’s afraid of water! Not because he’s a pussy.’

‘No Senorita,’ Rosa says. Diablo not a pussy, Senorita.’

‘Christa – gosh, how could she allow this when she herself had kids?’

They tell me that some nights, Diablo was chained to a dog kennel, while the others slept inside the house.

Jimo also extinguished cigarettes on Diablo’s palms and later progressed to Diablo’s body.

Some weekends Jimo held an open day where he invited everyone, including people from his neighbouring villages to view the animal called “Diablo” who was chained to a fence.

Children were allowed to throw stones, poke and humiliate Diablo while he was paraded in chains. Over time, Diablo became reclusive and even when he was released from his chains, he chose to hide in the dark shed away from people.

‘Jimo is such an asshole!’

‘He biiiig asshole Senorita,’ Maria says, tears filling her eyes, ‘very biiiig asshole. Diablo put tattoos all over his body to hide the cigarette scars.’

‘So that explains the tattoos. Ohmigod!’ I put both my hands on my head, ‘I got Diablo wrong.’

‘Everybody get Diablo wrong,’ Rosa says.

I put down my glass. Suddenly, I no longer wanted to drink and party. I’m really sober now and ...there’s that word again – sad. Why the hell did they have to tell me all this? Upset my status quo? I was happy with the way things were – Diablo was a brutal thug who killed for fun and I was going to let him hang for his sins.

Now I have this feeling inside me – the same feeling I felt when I realise that my mom had gone to a *better place* without me.

Rosa looks at the bottle and gawks. ‘Maria you finish it all!’

‘No, I do not finish it. You finish it. So shut up!’

‘You shut up!’ Rosa replies.

‘No, you shut up!’

‘No, you shut up!’ Rosa rises to her feet and moves slowly towards Maria, her eyes wild and fiery.

‘Wait!’ I cry.

‘You a bitch!’ Rosa says.

‘You mother a bitch!’

‘Wait, what happened after ...?’

‘You talk about my mother?’ Rosa hisses.

‘Ladies!’ I shout.

Rosa turns her head slowly to look at me, her eyes slanted. ‘Go bring us ’nother bottle, then we tell you more.’

‘Tell me first then I’ll bring you ...’

‘No!’ Maria intervenes, ‘You bring us cheese too. Cut it into small blocks, put on a plate, bring it here then ...’

For fucks sake! The bitches are taking advantage of my good nature. They are *my* servants and I am *their* boss, master – whatever and I need to remind them of that.

I glare at them. ‘Eh, Vodka or Tequila?’

‘Vodka,’ they chorus.

Pissed off, I hurry away. How dare they treat me like a hired hand? I’m *Mujer de Diablo*. Diablo’s woman, remember? Lady of the Manor. I will not stand for ...

‘Make quick,’ Rosa yells. ‘Go! Go!’ Go!’

‘*Si*,’ I say meekly and fetch Vodka and a platter of cheese for my drunken servants so that they will divulge more about Diablo. Maria said she was not a big drinker – my ass!

As they polish another bottle, they fight over each other to tell me more.

‘Diablo is thirteen, Jimo hit him with a whip over here,’ Rosa says, pointing to her forehead. ‘Then Diablo, he turn around and he grab Jimo and cut his neck. Front of everybody. Some people clap.’

‘Omigod!’

‘Then everyone be scared of Diablo, Gringa. They call him a mad dog and they call him devil. Diablo, he put tattoos over here.’ She points to her forehead.

So that’s why he’s got three green lines over his forehead; to cover the scars left by Jimo’s whip.

Maria explains that all the men in his gang followed suit and tattooed three green lines across their forehead – an emblem that identified them as Diablo’s men.

They tell me that Diablo used to paint his face black, probably to scare and intimidate anyone wanting to take Jimo’s place. In time, his beard covered his face and the black paint was no longer necessary.

Christa was not happy with Diablo as their leader and called in her brother Tony, known as “Tongue” to take Jimo’s place. Tongue was older, ruthless and strong and Christa was sure he could handle Diablo. But Diablo rejected Tongue’s leadership and almost killed him in a

fist fight. Defeated, Tongue backed off and accepted Diablo's leadership.

Terrified of his mental state, Christa had no choice but to accept Diablo as their leader even though he was only thirteen. She was smart enough to realise that one of Diablo's strength was his fearlessness and having Diablo around kept them all safe from other bandits and drug lords.

'So that's what they mean when they say he killed his own father,' I murmur, remembering the FBI's words. They too had it wrong. Hope they're listening.

'Diablo not trust anyone Senorita,' Rosa says. 'He not allow anyone to get close to him. Only Troy. But we take care of them – Diablo and Troy. Maria and me, we like Troy. We like Diablo. They are our boys. Where they go, Rosa and me, we go too. But Christa she make Diablo do bad things. She put bad stuff in his head and she make him bad.'

'Si,' Maria says, 'Diablo don't sleep. See his eyes? Red, eh? Can't sleep. He smoke all night. Bad dreams. He too scared to close his eyes.'

Wow. The monster, the beast, the monster that filled my nightmares has trouble sleeping because of bad dreams. Unbelievable!

When the second bottle of Vodka is finished, I bring up the subject of housework.

Both women look at me with arched eyebrows.

'*You* do it today,' Rosa slurs.

'*Si, you* do it today,' Maria echoes.

'You have a hope in hell!' I snarl and before they get physical with me, I stagger to my room and collapse on my bed, shell-shocked by all I've heard. I mean Diablo was a six year old boy and yet he was tortured and treated worse than an animal. How does anyone get past that?

## CHAPTER TEN

Things change after that - I can no longer look at Diablo the same way after learning about his terrible, abusive and horrendous childhood. Now, so many things fall into place, like his rage, his reclusiveness.

The world has him wrong. If they knew what motivates Diablo, they too would look at him differently – not as a beast or devil they make him out to be, but as a wounded creature, terrified of being hurt by anyone.

Diablo was not born evil, he was moulded into evil.

As for Troy – no wonder he was always protecting me, I am his brother's property and he has Diablo's back.

Frankly, I have absolutely no sympathy for Jimo. The fucker deserved to die.

Christa – God I hate her – what she did to Diablo. But she is smart enough know how to handle Diablo; keeping him angry, guarded and paranoid.

As for Santana – now I really feel sorry for her. Christa must have put so much pressure on her to help control Diablo – keep him on a leash to ensure he never strays, yet he has – he wants *me* now. Santana must hate me because I came between her and Diablo and now she's almost obsolete. Knowing what I know now I would like to tell her that I have no intention of taking her place. But would she believe me?

\* \* \*

The FBI – gotta keep my eyes opened, peeled, so I can report to them, remember?

I see a man frequenting the ranch – spending umpteen hours locked away with Diablo. Senor Vito. He's dapper, 60ish and seems to be giving Christa a peptic ulcer as she's always threatening to kill the poor bastard.

Who is he? Why's he stressing Christa? How come he's Diablo's new best friend? Diablo seems to lose interest in me these days – has Senor Vito anything to do with it? Imagine me reporting back to the FBI:

'Sorry to disappoint you, but Diablo is no longer interested in me and spends all his time with an older man these days.'

'You mean he's gay? Big scary beast prefers older men, Payton?'

'I don't think so.'

'Maybe you need more hi-lites. Some teeth whitening?'

'If it'll help.'

‘Maybe, it’s time to send someone pretty in place of you. Like Paris.’

Maria and Rosa appear to know what role Senor Vito plays but are mum about it, piquing my curiosity further.

I make mental notes about Senor Vito for the FBI – white hair, shiny shoes, gleaming buttons, a mole on his chin ... probably a big drug dealer – cocaine, crystal meth, crack – who knows?

\* \* \*

About two weeks later, Maria accosts me. ‘Diablo, he want you to get dressed nicely. He taking you somewhere tonight, Senorita.’

‘Taking me whe...? Maria, listen to your English. You finally got it!’

She beams. ‘Of course Senorita. I teach you English all the time.’

Premature celebration on my part. Still progress, if you know what I mean.

‘Finally, I get to go somewhere, huh?’ I’m really bored most days and *boring*, I suppose. Diablo hasn’t been at the ranch for the last three days – gone with Senor Vito somewhere. Frankly, I’m wondering why he bothers to even have me here. I’m just sitting on his shelf like a trophy. I prefer to liken myself to an Oscar or a Golden Globe. ‘Where’s he taking me?’

‘I don’t know Senorita, but you will see, eh?’ She opens my closet and scans it. ‘He say you must look veeerrry nice.’

‘Oh he did, did he?’

She’s doing it again – she’s getting it right.

Remembering my mission, (because I chose to accept it) I start to stress over my dress and make-up. Tonight, I want to look breathtaking, fantastic, jaw-dropping. I want him to just stare and be at a loss for words the moment his bloodshot eyes rests on me.

Me – I’ll be cool, nonchalant, appear not to notice his ... his enthrallment. The more I think about it, the more I like the idea and the tighter my sweater becomes. My top is snug and sexy, my skirt is short, flared, allowing glimpses of thigh as I move.

I spend hours doing my hair and make-up and when I feel everything is almost perfect, I back away from the mirror and listen out for Diablo.

At around six, the men, as usual gather in my villa for dinner. But tonight they are edgy and keep looking out the window. They hover in the entrance instead of making their way to the dining-room, arousing my curiosity further.

Even Maria and Rosa are behaving oddly – giggling and talking in whispers. What the hell’s going on?

At the sound of a car, everyone rushes to the window. Two men alight from the Jeep and walk slowly towards our villa - Senor Vito and another gentleman, a well-dressed one at that, whose swagger happens to be vaguely familiar.

I glance at my watch and frown. Where's Diablo? Any more waiting and I'm gonna have to re-apply my lipgloss.

The men enter our villa and the room erupts.

It's Senor Vito and ... Diablo!

The dashing stranger is none other than my Devil himself, Diablo.

'Ohmigod!' I cry, my jaw dropping and ruining the cool, composed look I practised in front of the mirror.

He flashes me a long, cool look. 'Payton,' he says.

'Your beard ...' I touch my chin, 'it's like, gone. Your face ... you look like Troy.'

Actually he looks more handsome than Troy – fuller, more manly, rugged.

He lifts and drops his shoulders.

I wrinkle my nose. 'Aftershave! You're wearing aftershave?'

More shrugging.

I touch my eyebrows. 'The rings ... your eyebrows ... they're gone!'

More shrugging with a little shifting.

My eyes dart over his clothes. Immaculately dressed - navy pants, powder blue striped shirt, dark blue casual, but tailored jacket - expensive.

'Wow!' I whisper, openly checking him out.

Awkward under my scrutiny, he continues shifting in his expensive shoes and self-consciously touches his face. His dreadlocks are sleeked back into a neat ponytail, and I don't see any of his tattoos right now. Even his eyebrows are groomed.

'Wow! All *my* plans for a dramatic entrance disintegrate when I see Diablo's transformation. His entrance cannot be topped. Never in a quadrillion years did I expect to see him looking like this – like he just stepped out of a men's fashion magazine.

Everyone's complimenting him.

Even Santana – she stares and shakes her head. 'Diablo ... is really you, Diablo? You look nice.'

Diablo smiles and strokes his chin several times.

Some of the men get over the shock of seeing Diablo and start heckling.

I shake my head and smile. 'Diablo you do ...'

Suddenly we hear, 'No! No! No!' It's Christa threatening to need a bypass sometime

soon.

‘What you do Diablo?’ she screams. ‘No! no!’

Diablo’s face falls at her chastising.

‘Why you do thiiis? Huh? Why you shave and you ... you ... I am your mooother. You talk to me before you do thiiis. You look terrible! What you do to me? You send me to my grave! You kill me!’ She turns to Senor Vito. ‘You! Youuuu!’

Senor Vito quickly moves behind Diablo.

Diablo’s shoulder droops and I see confusion in his eyes.

I quickly step forward and tug at his sleeve. ‘I think you look ...’ I bat my eyelashes several times at him and smile, ‘handsome, Senor Diablo.’

His eyes crinkle and he blushes.

Thankfully, Pedro and Rocky lead a protesting Christa away.

The men resume their heckling and cackling adding to Diablo’s discomfort. Although he’s trying hard to ignore them, he’s distracted by their comments. Suddenly, he whips out his gun and points it randomly at the men and the laughter abruptly ceases.

‘Diablo!’ Senor Vito chides. ‘What are you doing? Put that gun away.’

I expect Diablo to shoot Senor Vito for chastising him but instead, he says, ‘*Lastimoso* ,’ and hastily holsters his weapon.

Looks of disbelief are exchanged between everybody - Diablo actually apologizing? Unheard of.

Seeing the gun in his hand reminds me that beneath the smart clothes and extreme makeover lies the bad-boy Diablo.

When my smile waivers, Diablo quickly moves towards me. ‘Shall we?’ he says in perfect English. I suspect he may be showing off. I like it.

‘Um ...eh ...y ...yeah!’ I allow him to usher me into his Jeep, which *he* is driving today. I’ve never been in a car with Diablo before so I wonder about his driving. In fact, I didn’t even know he could drive since he’s always on horseback. Wherever we’re going must be really important for him to take such pains with his dress and grooming.

Senor Vito shouts out to Diablo and to my astonishment, Diablo rushes to open my door for me.

I smile my thanks. What a gentleman. Even if prompted.

Still in shock, I climb into the passenger seat. The Jeep is spotless and smells of leather polish – masculine. We drive in silence while I steal glances at him. I steel myself not to stare and fail miserably - I’m simply mesmerized by the stranger next to me. Actually, it’s like



staring at Troy now - with dreadlocks. If I had my own way, I'd stop the car under some bright street light, lower my seat and just ogle him.

We arrive at the city centre and he parks outside a restaurant. I glance around for signs of a party or a wedding, but see nothing. He alights from the car, opens my door and leads me into a plush restaurant and immediately, we get a table. Still no sign of a function - where are the others?

Then I get it – it's just him and me.

Diablo is taking me out on a date.

I'm stunned. Why? I think about all the horrible things I said to him at the rock pool – I didn't like hairy men, I hated piercings, he was a lousy lay – cringe-worthy stuff, but obviously poignant enough to elicit an extreme makeover.

All this to impress *me*? *Me* – someone whose own father can't love her enough? Impossible.

It must have taken hours in front of the mirror to achieve this look – hours being groomed and fitted and I know he must have hated every minute of it. Hell the man doesn't even own a mirror.

The villagers are so wrong about him – he's neither half-man-half-beast, nor is he a devil and stripped off all his camouflages and disguises, the hair on his face, the eyebrow rings – he's just a shy, simple, ordinary guy. A vulnerable man with a past so horrific, he's unable to sleep at night.

From the corner of my eye I notice people staring at Diablo and whispering. I guess they suspect it's him but they're unsure. I feel a tinge of dismay when I see the fear in people's eyes. Diablo sees it too. He stiffens and glares at them.

'Hey Diablo,' I whisper, 'stop looking around at all the pretty ladies.'

He smiles and shifts in his seat.

The waiters gush and proffer and Diablo starts fidgeting with his collar.

Some of the patrons are quietly sneaking out, I see. Seems like nobody wants to be in the same room with Diablo. Nobody dares, I suppose. I force myself not to let it bother me and focus on the wine list.

'What wine would you like, Diablo?' I've never seen him drink wine before.

'Eh, wine?'

'Yeah wine?'

He fumbles in his pocket and sneaks out a piece of paper which he holds under the table. He scans the paper, scratches the back of his neck, flicks his chin and quickly stuffs it back

into his pocket. In a resigned voice he says, 'You order.'

I smile at his nervousness and order some sparkling white wine. Within minutes we're sipping the wine. Well, I'm sipping and he's nervously gulping his and screwing up his face.

From time-to-time I catch him studying the piece of paper in his pocket under the table.

'So ... like, this is a ... um ... a date, then?'

He looks to the side, the ceiling, to the side again, then smiles at me and shrugs.

'Well, I'll take that as a "Yes" and I like it.'

He's smile widens.

To put him at ease, I try to make conversation. 'Soooo ... tell me about yourse ....'

'You tell me 'bout *yourself*.'

'Um, okay, how 'bout – um ... how 'bout a question-for-a-question? You ask one and I ask one, huh?'

'*Si*. You first.'

'kay ... lemmesee ... what's your real name?'

He hesitates.

'You gotta answer all questions and you gotta answer truthfully,' I warn, circling the rim of my wineglass with my middle finger. 'Rules of the game.'

'Okay, Okay. 'Diago,' he says in a soft voice, 'Diago Cruz.'

'Diaaaago,' I mull. 'That's a nice name.'

'My turn,' he says, sitting forward. 'Who is Him to you? He your boyfriend before he marry your sista?'

""Him""? Austin?" Not the kind of question I'm expecting. 'No, come on! That's ... '

'You have to answer tru'fully - rules of the game.' He's got me there.

'Okay, but ... I mean, *that* question?'

'Answer ... answer.'

I sigh. 'Okay. Yes, he *was* my boyfriend *before* he married my sister - stepsister.'

He narrows his eyes. 'You have feelings for ...?'

I take my time before I answer. 'Well, sort off, yeah. Hey! My turn – are you a cannibal?'

'What?'

'Cannibal – means you eat ... '

'I know what that is. Noooo. I not a cannibal. Where you hear that?'

'Eh ... um ... Facebook ...?'

He frowns. 'What book?'

'Your turn.'

'*Si*. You go to university?'

'Yeah.' Thank God he's off the "Him" topic.

'What you study?'

'Behavioral sciences.'

'Mmm. What you going to do when ... you ... you grow up?'

I smile. 'Hey, you're speaking sentences. I'm like, impressed. Back to your question: Catch bad guys - like you.'

'Like me?'

'*Exactly* like you. Maybe even *you*.'

He slaps his wrists together and shoves them towards me.

I chuckle. 'Don't tempt me.'

'I make it easy for you.'

'Yeah?' I take a napkin and bind his hands together with it. 'You asked for it. Without the possibility of parole, too.'

We dissolve into fits of giggles as he breaks free of the napkin.

'My turn – who is Senor Vito?'

He looks away, runs his hand over his mouth several times before he finally answers.

'How you say it ...? He my ... eh ... coach, no?'

'Coach? Like football ...?'

'Football, no. Coach like, he teach me stuff ... how to English ... well, better ... '

'Oh, you mean like an etiquette coach? Teaching you manners ...?'

He nods several times. 'Be a gentleman. How to ...' he drops his voice, 'how to treat women riiiiight.'

'Ah, that kind of coach. So, he gave you the notes you've been referring to all evening?'

A look of panic on his face. He takes a deep breath and hangs his head. Then he looks up at me and grins.

'You're busted, Senor.'

He smiles and brings the notes up to the table and crumples it in full view of me. 'Too hard,' he confesses and we laugh.

'An etiquette coach, a makeover, notes to refer to - why? I mean, why now ... when ...?'

He sits forwards on his chair. 'You teach me how to be good *here*,' He slaps his chest, 'and Senor Vito teach me how to be gentleman. Then I be ... perfect and you want me so much; you chase me all over Mexico, take me to dinner, beg me to stay with you forever.'

I burst out laughing. ‘You aim high. Really high.’

His eyes crinkle. ‘Why not?’

I’m having so much fun right now. More fun than I’ve had in months and I’m laughing out loud.

But yet, I still see the facial mutilations, the barbaric ways, the little lost six year old boy who has just witnessed both parents being killed and who’s suffering terrible abuse in the hands of his guardian. I see pain, torment, anguish and helplessness etched all over his face. All the things I myself suffered after my father brought home a new mother for me. But unlike him, I didn’t suffer any physical abuse, just mental.

We’re similar – both damaged goods. I’ve always tried to act tough, angry, bad in order to survive. He did too. Although his act was radical, extreme and deadly. It was all about the terrain – his was more sinister.

But the pain was the same. I remember wanting to die some days because I hurt so much. But Diablo – he probably didn’t have the luxury of that thought since he was responsible for Troy. He must have been desperate to survive and live so that he could keep Troy safe.

He’s my abuser, my tormentor, my rapist, yet I feel the hatred inside me subsiding.

‘What? Why you sad now?’

‘I’m not ...’ I clear the bubble in my throat, ‘I’m not sad. I’m just ...thinking.’

‘Then think loud, Payton.’

‘Okay, I’m thinking – that sure was a lot of exfoliation you had.’

‘Exfol ...’

‘But you look nice tonight. Very handsome. I wouldn’t have recognised you if I saw you on the street.’

He sits back and scratches his ear.

‘I would have looked twice at you and thought you were fly, but I wouldn’t have recognised you. Had it not been for ...’ I point to his forehead, ‘those lines ...’

He gingerly touches the lines.

We sit in silence for a while, taking turns to sneak glances at each other. But every time I look up, I catch him staring. I remember my mission, but tonight I’m a little tongue tied and frankly in awe of the handsome gentleman in front of me, even though he’s nervous and unsure of himself. But strangely, seeing him this nervous makes me a little protective over him and I wish I was not wearing my necklace with the listening device. But I can’t help thinking that he didn’t compliment me once, yet I too took great pains when dressing.

He downs another glass of wine, sits back and drums on the table.

We grin a little more at each other. Then we study the menus and grin at each other over them.

I order a steak, medium, while he flounders over his choice.

‘Order for me,’ he finally says, slapping the menu onto the table and eliciting frightened looks from the wait staff.

I suspect he’s having problems reading the menu – something to do with his lack of formal education. That makes me even more protective over him.

‘What does your etiquette notes tell you to order?’

‘Eh, chicken.’

‘Chicken? Why chicken? ’Cos you like it?’

‘Nah. Easy to cut. Fish – you need different knife ... fork. Meat – rare, medium ... too much trouble. But chicken - is ... *foolish*? That’s the word?’

‘Foolproof, you mean?’

‘*Si*. Yes.’

‘Really? Wow.’

I order him a steak with prawns. ‘That’s my second choice,’ I say. ‘I ordered steak as well. Medium, same as mine. Should be okay. If it’s not, you can always kill the chef and take his apron and hat. Or walk over and just steal another patron’s food. That’ll add to tonight’s entertainment.’

He smiles. ‘No. Tonight Imagood. A gentleman.’

‘Oh yeah, I forgot about that.’

‘Watch this, Diablo,’ I whisper and shut the menu hard.

The wait staff jump. We giggle. Then we sit back and resume our gazing at each other until our food arrives.

The moment we finish eating and I put down my fork, he wants to leave – run out of here. I want to linger and spoon but I guess he’s fed up with the stares he’s getting. Well, not *spoon* – use a spoon.

We do not receive a bill and he makes no attempt to ask for one. I’m unhappy about that. I want to teach him about paying for things, doing the right thing and stuff like that. I’m supposed to teach him how to be good, remember?

I lean forward and whisper, ‘Diago,’ I’m using his real name.

He leans forward. ‘*Si*?’

‘Can I call you *Diago*?’

He frowns. ‘Call me Diablo.’

‘I like “Diago” better.’

His eyes dance, his jaws set and his breathing gets raspy. ‘Diago is dead. Diablo lives,’ he says in a curt voice.

I shake my head slowly. ‘No, Diago is very much alive.’ I cock my head to one side and smile at him. ‘Sides, I really like the name “Diago”. It’s so cute.’

‘You like it?’

‘Yes!’

He smiles, drops his shoulders and nods ‘Okay. *Si*.’

‘Thank you,’ I whisper.

‘Um ... you um ... welcome, Payton.’

‘Wow Diago, your etiquette classes – they’re like, paying off – big time. But Diago, you have to pay the bill,’ I say and jerk my head towards the waiters.

He looks up at the waiters eavesdropping on our conversation. They give themselves away by shaking their heads from side-to-side, terrified to accept money from the infamous Diablo.

Diablo looks at me again, a confused look on his face. Then he turns to them and rattles off in Spanish and the waiters fall over each other drawing up a bill.

‘That’s good. Now don’t forget to leave a tip.’

He sticks his face close to mine and whispers, “‘Tip’?”

For the first time, I’m actually seeing his eyes. They’re hazel, pretty and not in the least bit bloodshot tonight. Cucumber slices or teabags – whatever - they’re bright tonight.

‘Yeah. Years ago, I worked as a waitress and I relied on them for essentials like booze and weed ...’

He smiles.

The bill arrives and I think it’s the first time he’s ever been given a bill. He peers at it, fishes out his wallet, peels of a couple of notes and leaves it on the table, ignoring the protests from the wait staff. He’s about to put away his wallet, when he pauses and throws a few more notes to the pile on the table.

I make a show of thanking the wait staff for their services tonight. ‘I’ll definitely be back,’ I say. ‘My compliments to the chef.’

Diablo watches me silently, a fascinated look on his face.

‘And I’ll bring Diablo with. I’ll be sure to tell all my frie ...’

Diablo suddenly yanks my arm and almost drags me out of there. ‘That’s ’nuff thanking,’ he grumbles.

As we walk back to the Jeep, our fingers brush a couple of times. He holds my hand, then quickly releases it.

I don't react and eventually, he takes my hand in his and we walk hand-in-hand to his jeep. It's nice holding his hand – it's large and coarse, but warm, roomy. The same hand he used to strangle me. And shoot me. And throw me off the cliff. And rape me. Why didn't I mind? How could I not? I know – I'm really fucked up. Surely you know me by now?

As we walk, his hand eventually progresses to my waist. I don't mind. It makes me feel secure and almost contented. Realising I'm not rejecting him, he holds me tighter and slows down. We drive back to the ranch in silence but he hangs onto my hand while he drives, making me smile. Sweet.

We're outside our villa. Diablo helps me out of the jeep and walks me to the main door. The night is over and I'm sure he is relieved - he can now relax and go back to his unrestrained self.

'You tell Senor Vito that I said, he's done a great job and that you were like, a perfect gentleman. Everything about the evening was great, special and I like, really appreciate the effort you put into it.'

He shifts in his shoes, then scratches the back of his neck, then his chin, then jerks his neck from side-to-side. His discomfort amuses me.

I lean over, kiss his cheek lightly and stand back. We stare silently at each in the dark.

Suddenly I'm nervous – does he expect to spend the night with me? If he is, how do I handle it?

He reaches up and gently tucks strands of hair around my ears and finally cups my face with his large coarse hands. As his hands reach my face I spot little round scars on his palms – Jimo's cigarette burns!

My eyes well up with tears and I quickly look at the ground.

Gently, he raises my face to see my eyes. With a smile, he plants the lightest of kisses on my forehead. So light, I can barely feel it.

I scratch my brain for something to smart-alecy to say. Probably for the first time in my life - Zilch. My mind has deserted me. Must be something to do with his closeness.

We just smile at each other in the wavering moonlight.

Suddenly, we are startled by thunderous applause. Like two kids busted, we jerk apart.

We have a hidden audience hiding in the shadows, waiting to see how our date went. Kissing each other goodnight is apparently a good sign.

'*Cállate!*' Diablo roars into the dark and the applause abruptly ceases.

I giggle into my hand, while he gives me a sheepish smile. Now that we have an audience, I want to run into my room and shut the door.

‘Goodnight Diablo,’ I whisper as I open my door.

‘Goodnight, Payton,’ he whispers.

I shut the door on him and hear his footsteps recede.

Moments later, I hear voices outside. I peep through the blinds and see Santana talking to Diablo. After a few moments they disappear inside his room.

Somewhere inside me, I feel a strange flutter - a feeling I have difficulty explaining. If I really try hard, I’d probably call it, disappointment. And that confuses me. I hastily brush my teeth, rip of my clothes and slip under the covers wanting to fall asleep immediately.

But I lie in bed wide awake and post-mortem the evening, step-by-step. I think about how Diablo cleaned up for me, looking so dapper and handsome, his shyness over dinner, his kiss brief kiss goodnight, Santana.

This barbed feeling in my chest – it will not go away. I mean, he goes through such lengths for me, then spends the night with Santana. How is that possible?

It’s like the evening was just a show. Like he was trying to prove a point - he could be better than I thought he was, as good as Austin. My eyes are misting up again so I thump my pillow imagining it’s Santana’s head. How could I lower my guard? How could I allow myself to become so soft and vulnerable?



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

It's morning. I'm awakened by Maria and Rosa in my bedroom doing, well, *something* in my room.

I force my eyes open and squint at them. 'Why you banging ...?'

'We bring you coffee,' Maria says, while Rosa throws open my blinds then pretends to dust.

I peer at the wall clock – nine am. Fuck! They don't usually do this at this time of the morning, so why today?

I struggle to think and then I remember my date. They want details about my date with Diablo. I spent most of the night awake and analysing the evening so I barely got any sleep. The wine didn't help either.

I sigh and prop myself on my elbows. 'Okay, well thanks for the coffee, I guess.' I yawn loudly. 'I'll come to the kitchen in a few minutes, okay?'

'Sure,' Maria says. 'Rosa let us go now. We don't want to ... to ... let us give Senorita her privacy.'

Yeah right.

A short while later, I stumble into the kitchen and sink into a chair. 'Suppose you want details of my date with Diablo?'

Maria descends on me, places both her hands on my shoulders and looks into my eyes.

'Senorita,' she says in a voice usually heard in church, 'it is not our business to know such ... such personal matters and we, Senorita, we should *never* be talking about such things with you. We are your serrrrrvants. We must know our place, Senorita.' She removes her hands from my shoulders, stands back and looks at me with a feigned air of piety.

Rosa gawks at her. 'Maria! Why you say that?'

I sigh and look at Rosa. 'You wanna hear?'

'*Si gringa*, tell us everything.'

That's what I like about Rosa – way to nosey to even try and fake nonchalance.

She moves quickly towards a nearby chair.

But Maria is faster – she swipes the chair and plonks herself on it.

'Maria!' Rosa screeches. They glare at each other. Here we go again.

But Rosa's curiosity appears to be getting the better of her. She grabs another chair and sits down. 'Tell us, Senorita, tell us, tell us.'

'Well, we went to a ...'

The ladies shift to the edge of their seats.

‘You sure you want to hear ...?’

‘*Si*, Senorita Payton,’ Maria says. ‘What happened eh? What did he do?’

Rosa drags her chair closer to me. ‘Did you kiss, Senorita? Tell, tell.’

‘Okay, we go to this like, restaurant ...’

‘A restaurant!’ Maria slams back on her chair. ‘Diablo, he *never* go to a restaurant before, I think.’

‘*Si*,’ Rosa says, her voice mounting with excitement, ‘Diablo, he never go to restaurant.’

I nod. ‘He asked me to order the food *and* the wine.’

‘Aaah!’ Maria’s head is bobbing. ‘Diablo, he don’t know how to read too good. That’s why ...’

‘*Si*, Diablo no read too good,’ Rosa echoes.

‘I asked him his name and he told me it was, Diago.’

‘That’s his name!’ Maria cries. ‘That’s his birth name!’

‘*S,i si, si,*’ Rosa says, on the edge of her seat again, ‘that’s his birth name. ‘Did you kiss?’

‘Well, we didn’t, but the food was so good. We talked, laughed ...’

They look at each other, take turns arching and knitting their eyebrows then prompt me to continue.

‘We held hands ...’

They clasp their hands to their breasts. ‘Ooooh Senorita ...’

‘Did you kiss?’ Rosa persists.

‘Eh, y ... yes.’ No need to mention it was on my forehead.

The room erupts with cheers and for a few minutes I sit and smile as they discuss the kiss between themselves.

‘Didn’t you guys see us kiss last ...?’

‘Na, ha.’

‘Oh. Hey, did you know Senor Vito ...?’

‘*Si*,’ Rosa says, ‘he come every day. Teach Diablo to be a good husband, good man so gringa will ...’

‘Yeah? But you guys never told me ...’

‘And *then* Senorita ...’ Maria interrupts.

Okay, I guess she’s waiting for the grand finale or maybe she wants to know why Diablo was not in my room this morning.

I shake my head from side-to-side and purse my lips. ‘He eh, he spent the night with ... Santana.’

For a few moments, you can hear the refrigerator running. Their shoulders sag, their jaws slacken and I feel I have let them down.

‘Well, I think ... I think ... well, I saw her ...’

‘But ... but ... How could you let that happen, *Senorita*?’ Rosa snaps.

Maria glares, her eyes reproachful eyes, her lips now a thin line.

‘I did not *let* ...’

Luckily, Christa appears. ‘What are you doing talking to the *gringa*?’ she yells. ‘Why you not cleaning?’

‘It’s the *Gringa*,’ Maria says. ‘She make us sit and ...’

‘*Si*,’ Rosa says standing behind Maria. ‘The *Gringa* – is all her fault.’

Both women scurry away. Sellouts!

Christa turns her head slowly to look at me, her eyes cold and hard. ‘So ... you are taming *beastia* eh?’ Her voice is low and dangerous. ‘Very clever *Gringa*. Very clever. You and *Senor Vito*, very clever *peopool*.’

I get up, grab an apple and walk out of the kitchen. Damned if I’m discussing my date with her. I just hope she doesn’t attack *Senor Vito*. He’s doing such a good job on *Diago*.

As I walk I find myself craning my neck to look around. It’s not like I’m looking for *Diablo* or something – I’m just looking. But where the hell is he today?

Then I see him, standing at a window of a villa high on the ranch, looking down at me. I smile and raise my apple at him. He smiles back. Then I pretend to throw the apple at him. His smile waivers for a moment and I laugh. He shakes his head at me. *Senor Vito* appears behind him and I quickly lower the apple. *Diablo* nods and reluctantly moves away from the window.

So the lessons continue, then.

Later in the day, Maria and Rosa tell me about the conversation they overheard last night. ‘Christa and Santana they not happy, *Senorita*,’ Maria says. ‘Christa say, *Diablo*, he is becoming too soft. She say he dress like a *Gringo* and he forget who he is.’

‘*Si*,’ Rosa says. ‘Christa say the other gangs, they see *Diablo* dress like a *Gringo* and they think *Diablo* is not strong anymore and they come take our land away. The men, they get frightened and they say maybe they talk to *Diablo* – tell him to stop.’

‘Really!’

Well, Christa sure knows how to incite uproar among *Diablo*’s men – I mean *Diago*’s

men.

His name is really Diago. Diago. I like the name Diago. So much better than ...

'You be careful of Christa,' Rosa warns.

'Huh? Okay.'

I see Diablo at dinner looking casual and handsome. Okay, very handsome.

We smile and sneak glances at each other throughout dinner. I'm barely eating and I notice he's barely touching his food.

But, he stays away from me at night. Confusing.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The next evening, I see the men moving the large dining table out of our villa.

‘Hey Maria. Wassup? Our furniture being repossessed or something?’

‘We don’t serve dinner here no more,’ she replies.

‘You don’t serve - why?’

She shrugs. ‘That’s what Diablo wants.’

‘Oh.’ A tiny thrill shoots through me. I didn’t like them drinking and doing drugs where I sleep. It was one of my gripes at the rock pool.

‘Is all about you, Seniorita,’ Rosa says, winking at me. ‘Diablo, he want to make you veeery happy.’

I smile inwardly at her words.

\* \*\*

As soon as Senor Vito leaves the ranch I seek out Diablo. I knock on his door and wait. Santana opens the door and bristles with hostility. ‘Aaaan? What do you want now, *puta*?’

‘Hey Santana,’ I say, ignoring her foul mood. After I learned how hard her life is under Christa, she too has my sympathy.

A shirtless Diablo appears behind her.

‘Oh ... hi...’ I murmur. ‘Um ... I’ll maybe come back later, cos it’s not import ... ’

‘No, stay!’ He looks pointedly at Santana.

‘Biiitch!’ Santana mutters as she storms out.

I look at Diablo in the natural light and see the scars on his forehead, the red eyes, and since he’s shirtless – the tattoos on his chest and an urge to hug him overcomes me. Right there, I vow never to call him Diablo again - never to refer to him as a devil, a beast, a monster. He’s Diago, brother to Troy.

I study the tattoos as if I’m admiring them, but I actually want to see the scars from the cigarette burns. Despite my distress, I manage a small smile. ‘How are you Diago?’ I ask, emphasising his name, a tacit reminder of our lovely date.

He shrugs, never one for words. But his lit up face tells me he’s happy to see me.

I point at one shoulder. ‘I’ll take that shrug as a, “Very well, thank you and how are you?”’

He grins and scratches the back of his neck.

‘Look Diago,’ I say, getting serious, ‘it’s my nephews Christening - eh, Naming

Ceremony and I wanna attend. Please? I adore Liam and since he's my only nephew, I'm excited about the Christening. 'Sides, it gives me something to do, cos I get really bored here.'

His smile suddenly vanishes.

'What? It's just for the baby, not Austin, really.'

After taking a deep breath, he shrugs and then nods slowly.

I exhale. 'Thank you. And Marcus ...?'

He nods. 'Marucs, he take you, he stay with you, he brung you back.'

'*Bring*,' I correct, barely able to contain my excitement. 'Um ... you're not going to change your mind like the last time, are you?' My voice is pleading.

He shakes his head slowly.

'Great! It'll save you heaps of abuse from me.'

He smiles.

'Now ... I need pesos. Lots of it.' I was kidding about the "lots of it" part.

He reaches into his closet, draws out a shoe box and hands it to me.

'T...hanks,' I say, opening the box. 'I suppose I can sell these shoes on Ebay and use the mo ... Ohmigod!' The shoe box is filled with banknotes. My eyes fly to his. 'This much?'

More shrugging as he shuts the closet, a smug look on his face.

'Wow! I wasn't ... I ... wow! Thank you, Diago.'

I think he's showing off, but hey, I don't mind. 'This will like, come in handy,' I say, clutching the box to my chest.

He scratches the back of his head, his chin and finally jerks his neck from side-to-side, his signature response to shyness.

We stare at each other for a few moments and smile, memories of our dinner date flooding our mind.

'Well, I'll eh, say goodnight then and like, leave you to ...' I jerk my head in Santana's direction.

He grunts again and I exit clutching my box of money.

Paris and I are not the best of friends, but I really adore Liam and since I have tons of money, my plans for the christening now include a tiered Christening cake, a tiny white satin suit for baby, a new dress for Paris and of course, a new dress for me. I plan to take them shopping today and splurge on them. And me - all courtesy of Diago.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Almost skipping up to Paris's door, I breeze in and kiss my nephew.

'Wow Payton,' my dad says, giving me a one arm hug, 'you look great!'

'Yes ... you look different,' Elaine remarks, her voice accusing. 'What's got into you?'

'A little chunky,' Paris says, her eyes sweeping over me. 'Why you all glammed up? Spit it out.'

*She* has put on a lot of weight, but I'm not in the mood to hurt her.

'Yesh,' I say, pinching Liam's cheeks affectionately. My bootiful nephew is being christened and I'm stoked, big time.'

There is an unusual silence in the room today. I look around and for the first time notice the anxious faces. 'Hey, what's wrong?'

'Payton,' Elaine says, 'we eh, we think it's not a good idea for you to ... to attend the christening.'

My eyes grow huge. 'Wha ...?'

I look at Paris. She shrugs.

I look at my father - he looks away.

'But ... why?'

No answer.

I turn to Paris again.

Paris wrinkles her nose. 'It's like, complicated. The Devil's men - they follow you around and like, shadow you and stare at everyone ... not something I want on Liam's big day.'

'"Men"? It's only Marcus, Paris.' I look at Marcus who is frowning. He quickly looks away, his face turning red.

'Yeah, but we can do without that,' she says.

For a moment, I can't think of anything to say. Then I look at my dad.

'Payton, I'm sorry,' he says and moves towards me.

I take a step back. How can he let them do this to me? I'm his daughter - he's supposed to protect me. How can he allow people to hurt his child and do nothing about it?

'Payton, I tried to talk them out of it, but they ... '

Paris shakes her head. 'Diablo ... '

'It's Diago Paris! Diago. Diago!'

She shrinks back.

I shake my head. 'I don't understand. I've like, sacrificed so much, suffered so much - so, everyone can be safe. Yet you guys can like, so casually cut me out because of a "shadow" I have no control over?'

My father nods in agreement. 'I told them that Payton. Trust me, I did. But the villagers also agree so I stood no chance.'

'The villagers ...' I turn and glower at some village women cleaning the place. They can obviously hear the entire conversation.

'The injustice of this - really pisses me off. I was plucked from my family, taken prisoner and repeatedly ra ... forced to do things I didn't want to. Now everyone forgets what I did for them? How could they? How *dare* they?'

'My God Payton!' my father cries, reaching out to me.

I step back again. 'Dad, you - grow a spine. You've never protected me from them,' I say, jerking my head towards Paris and Elaine.

'Now don't you say that,' Elaine says. 'There was *nothing* to protect you from.'

'Yes, there was! There always was.' I was beyond caring what I said.

'Oh stop playing *that* card Payton,' Paris says. 'Stop looking for sympathy.'

I ignore her and turn to look at the village women. They quickly look away. 'You guys seem to have forgotten who saved your asses. I saved your children, your grandchildren, your family, your friends, your fucking village and you treat me like *this*? This is my *only* nephew and I love him!'

'Payton, calm down,' Elaine says. 'It's not a big deal.'

'You're right, it's not a big deal.'

It is a damned big deal to me. What about the box of money I have? What about the pretty white satin suit? What about the lovely dress I was going to buy Paris? Disappointment coils around my heart and I have to steel myself not to cry. An hour ago I was so happy, now I feel rejected, humiliated.

The village women are whispering between themselves.

I look at them and narrow my eyes. 'You have the power to exclude me, to hurt me, huh? Guess what? I got power too. You've no idea how easily I can get Diago to burn down this whole fucking village!'

'Payton!' Elaine cries. 'What's got into you? You sounding like them,' she says, jerking her head towards Marcus.

'Yeah,' I sneer. 'I sound like them cos I'm treated like this. Chain *you* like a dog and you



*too* will bite,' I ramble.

Elaine frowns. 'What are you talking about? We never chained you like a dog.'

I look at Paris. 'What does Austin have to say about this?'

'He ... he wishes ...'

'Ahhhh! So he *doesn't* know.'

'He doesn't have a choice,' she snaps.

'You know what – go fuck yourselves! I'm done with you guys. Have your Christening, have your party, forget about me.' I reach for the box of money, pick it up and began to leave. Then as an afterthought, I open the box and flash it in front of Paris. 'This was for the Christening, courtesy of Diago.'

'Holy cow! That's American dollars,' she cries her eyes shining with greed. Money always moved her. She spins around to look at Elaine. 'Mom?'

Elaine's eyebrows shoot up. 'Well, I suppose ...'

'Go fuck yourselves!' I say and storm off.

'Mom!' Paris screams.

Marcus runs after me. 'Senorita Payton! Senorita Payton!

I stop, but do not turn around.

He walks up to me and stands in front of me. 'Senorita, please, they are ...' He digs into his pocket and fishes out a white handkerchief which he hands to me.

I mumble my thanks and dab my eyes.

He shakes his head slowly. 'I get hot choco ...?'

'N ...no ...' I whimper and crawl into the car.

Marcus drives silently, glancing at me in the rear view mirror throughout the journey, his forehead a constant furrow.

I look at him in the mirror, my lip trembling. 'She ...she used to leave to leave me at home while they - my dad, Paris - they went off on holidays, shows ... society events. They left me with babysitters. I waited and waited and waited for them to return. I was so lonely.'

Marcus shakes his head again, a sympathetic look in his eye.

I sit forward and hold his eyes in the rear mirror. 'Paris would come home and brag about how much fun they had. Know what Elaine used to say? The reason she had to leave me behind? I was untidy, too fidgety, too ill-mannered. Said I was easily bored. My father – he bought it. He never ...'

'Senorita ... I don't know ...'

'Once, they went off on a seven day holiday without me. Seven days, Marcus. I cried

myself to sleep every night.’

Marcus frowns. ‘Your father, Senorita ...’

I slam back into my seat. ‘When I was little, I always wished him dead.’

‘Senorita, that’s your father ...’

‘Then I would have been an orphan, Marcus. You see, people hurt orphans all the times. But it’s acceptable to be hurt that way – sort of expected. When your own flesh and blood hurts you, it’s deep. Really deep. You never get over it. That sense of helplessness ... abandonment ... it stays and lives with you forever.’

‘We’re home Senorita,’ Marcus says. ‘*This* is home now.’

I look out the window and see Diago and Senor Vito standing in the courtyard. Nearby are Maria and Rosa.

‘Damn! I don’t want to see them,’ I say, but Marcus is already opening the door for me.

Diago’s eyes lights up when he sees me. ‘Finish shopping so quickly?’ he asks in perfect English, eliciting a pleased nod from Senor Vito.

I try to smile, but I’m unable to carry it off.

When they notice my tear stained face they turn to Marcus, their eyes demanding, accusing.

‘No!’ Marcus says. ‘I do nothing to her.’

I turn and walk to my room while they corner Marcus for an explanation.

I crawl under my bedcovers and weep. Nobody in this world cares about me, not even my own father. Now that everyone in the village of Siempre is safe, they gave a crap about me. I hate them all for making me feel so superfluous, so unwanted, so insignificant - the story of my life. I hate Elaine and I hate Paris for their success in making me feel this way. But most of all, I hate my father for not caring enough, for making me feel unworthy.

Diago is better off than me. Strangers hurt him because his parents *weren’t* around to stop them. My father was around but his obsession with Elaine prevented him from caring. So I was stuck inside a nightmare of a life for so long. I lived in Paris’s shadow. Nobody saw me, nobody heard me, nobody cared. It was so hard being young, carefree - hard being me. Had to become someone else to cope.

Now, they were doing it again and I’m mad. Mad at myself mainly. How could I allow myself to feel this this pain, this sadness again? Damn! What about the promise I made to myself that I would never to allow anyone to hurt me again? The promise I made to myself when I was nine?

My head hurts and I free my hair from the tight ponytail. My hair is long now but it

wasn't always. Elaine always had my hair cut, saying it was too unruly or it made me too hot and eventually she told everyone I preferred short hair.

Paris on the other hand had beautiful, blond, waist-length, shining hair. I envied her and her porcelain-doll looks.

Now, I no longer cut my hair. It's almost waist-length and sort of shiny, like Paris's. I will not cut it as a silent protest against Elaine refusal to let me be a normal little girl with bangs and braids and curls – all the stuff little girls do to their hair.

I seldom delve on my past – too much pain. But now, I feel sorry for the little girl in me. How I wish I could protect her then.

Time to cut out the poison, end the hurt. So what if I loved Liam? He's not *my* child. I can forget him. I'm strong, capable, a tough chick.

Then why the hell is it hurting so much?

I toy with the idea of just running away, leaving the ranch. Then everybody will have to face Diago and Christa. The thought of that is so unpleasant; I quickly abandon the idea. There's no way I can do something like that, no matter how mad I'm with them.

It's dinner time and I'm already at the dinner table. I didn't wait to be called today. Diago's last to arrive as he's just said goodbye to Senor Vito. On his way to his chair, he stops next to me and squeezes my shoulder.

I grimace a smile.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

After dinner, I walk to the cliff to watch the molasses and lavender sky. Most evenings, the sun only sets around nine at night. Tonight, I sit on a large rock and resume my pity party.

I hear a sound and look up. Diago is looking down at me, his eyes brimming with questions, a shawl in his hand. A shawl - his thoughtfulness bring a lump to my throat. I move up and he accepts my nonverbal invitation to sit next to me. Without a word, he drapes the shawl around my shoulders and draws me to him.

Under normal circumstances I might stiffen at his touch, but right now, I have a need to be held and without a thought, I nestle into him. There's this familiar smell of tobacco, coupled with the scent of his aftershave, which he now wears everyday – that's comforting today.

Feeling warm and safe, I rest my head on his chest. We sit like this for about an hour in silence, watching the sunset. The beast, the animal, the devil who shot me three times and threw me over the cliff is comforting me, while my so called family and friends, who I sacrificed my life for, are planning an enormous party for my only nephew without me. Irony can be so, well, ironical.

Finally, it's time to go. He stands up and holds out his arm to me. I silently take it and we walk hand-in-hand to the ranch. After a while, I hold his arm with both of mine.

'*Gracias,*' I whisper outside my door.

He smiles, tips my nose with his index finger and leaves. I'm thankful that he's not taking advantage of my vulnerability and asking to come in.

\* \* \*

To forget my family and to avoid thinking of the upcoming Christening, I busy myself by learning a myriad of things. Dabbling, more like it.

First: how to ride a horse. Not just riding, but kick-ass riding. Like Santana - after watching her skilfully handle a horse and how amazing she looks when she rides, I secretly want to ride like her and perhaps eventually outshine her as a rider. Fat chance of that, but a girl can dream, right?

Diablo approaches me. 'So, you want to ride?'

'Yeah ... well, I'm kinda learn ...'

'Ride then. What is stopping you?'

'Eh, like, I'm a bit scared of horses?'

He snorts. 'Scared? You? I show you then.'

A short while later, our lesson begins. It doesn't go down too well, because he's an expert rider, having ridden since he was six and an impatient teacher, refusing to accept my self-imposed limitations.

'Is easy, see?'

'Wait Diago!' I shout when he shoves me onto the horse. 'I'm scared, remember?'

He pushes me harder. 'Pretend you have a glass of Vodka iiiin your hands and you don't want to spiiiill it, *si?* That's how you hold the reins, *si?*'

That gets me. I don't want to spill *any* vodka whatsoever, so I perfect the holding of the reins in no time.

He slaps his chest and says, 'Puuush this forward, *si?*'

I thrust my breasts forward and elicit a chuckle out of him. 'I can do that, see?'

And just like that, I'm riding and loving it. But I'm nowhere as good as Santana. And when Santana sees me learning how to ride, she get on her horse and begins showing off. I don't want to look stupid so I immediately quit whenever she's around.

\* \* \*

Shooting fascinates me. I'm going to work in Law Enforcement one day, so that fascination comes in handy. I'm watching the men shoot clay pigeons. The men are good, but Diago is excellent and when he sees me watching, he shows of and hits more targets. When he catches my eye, I raise my eyebrows and nod. He smiles and flicks his index finger at me.

I shake my head, but he insists, so I amble over.

'Try,' he says, handing me the shotgun.

'I don't ...'

'Do it!!'

I sigh and aim the rifle. 'I've never fired a gun ...'

'Pull!!' Diago shouts and a clay pigeon is released.

I fire and miss my target. Everyone laughs. Then Diago stands behind me, holds my arms and guides me. By my third attempt, I hit my target and scream with joy. 'Did you see that Diago? Did you see that?'

'Pull!' he yells.

I had no idea I could be so energised by this sport and under Diago's supervision, I become fairly good at it.

'When I'm happy, I shoot,' Diago says, pushing away the shotgun I'm pointing at his face. 'When I'm sad, I shoot.'

‘Christ Diago, you’d better be talking about clay pigeons,’ I say, handing him the gun.

He grins and squeezes my waist. ‘Walk with me.’

‘Okay,’ I say, ‘let’s go swimming. I feel like some company.’

‘No.’

‘Why not? You taught me to ride *and* shoot, so I’ll teach you how to swim.’

He shakes his head but continues walking with me towards the rock pool.

When we get to the pool, I wade in and test the water. ‘It’s lovely. Come on in Diago.’

‘No.’

I swim on for a while then stop. ‘Come on in.’

‘No.’

‘Come on, you big baby.’

Muttering under his breath, he finally wades in.

I notice he can swim, but he appears uncomfortable in water.

‘See?’ I say, splashing him a little. ‘Isn’t so bad.’

I’m happy that he’s in and I give him a few pointers on safety in the water. Then I show of a little and when I was sure he’s impressed, we goof around then talk.

‘Tell me ’bout Payton,’ he says.

‘Eh ...okay ... what you wanna know? Tell you what – let’s play the question-for-a-question game again, okay? You first.’

He nods. ‘Where’s your mother?’ he asks, locking eyes with me.

So Marcus has told him everything.

‘She died when I was six. The same age you were when your mother died, right?’

He nods slowly. ‘You know a lot about me eh?’

‘Sure do. My turn – what’s your mother’s name?’

‘Selina,’ he says in a malleable voice. ‘She was preeetty,’ he adds, a melancholy look in his eyes. Then he looks up. ‘My turn?’

I nod. ‘Your turn.’

‘Why do you like Him?’

‘Diago! You asked me that before. You always ask me that. What’s with this ... this obsession, huh?’

‘How long you go out with Him?’

I sigh. ‘’bout a year. My turn.’

‘Uh huh. Do you miss him? Do you luuuve his baby because is his baby? Why you like him so much? Why your voice is soft when you talk about him?’

‘Diago, that’s ...’ I pause to count, ‘that’s five questions. And my answers are: Yes, No, I don’t know, No, that’s not true.’

My answer baffles him and I laugh and splash him again.

‘How old are you, Diago?’

‘Thirty.’

‘Thirty! Man you’re old. Ancient!’ He looks and acts a lot older. I thought he was about fifty.

‘How old are *you*?’

‘Twenty one.’

‘Twenty one?’

I nod.

We stay in the water and talk and answer questions for about an hour and during this time, I find out a lot about him, even venturing into some of the things Maria and Rosa talked about. Our candid conversation makes me feel closer and connected to him and I suspect he feels the same.

‘But now, you’re in the water,’ I say, ‘so that means you’ve conquered your fear of water.’

He looks around, sees how far we are in the water and frowns. ‘*Si ...*’

‘That’s fantastic, right?’

‘*Si*. But that’s nuff and I want to get out.’ He jerks his head towards the ranch.

‘Okay, but I’ll race you out the water.’

‘Ah, a game,’ he says, his eyes lighting up. ‘You know I don’t swim like you, but okay. Now, the winner ...?’

‘Well ... if I win ... you take the day off tomorrow and spend it with me – a picnic.’ I can’t believe I’m asking for that, but I’m having such a nice time with him, I want it to continue tomorrow.

‘I can’t do that. *Imaverbusyman*.’

‘Aw come on. You need some fun in your life.’

He appears thoughtful. Then he looks directly at me. ‘If I win ... if I win ...’ His eyes are sparkling, ‘You ... you ... come to my ... bed.’

Whoa! High stakes here. If I wasn’t a good swimmer, this indecent proposal would make me uneasy. But I’m confident I can win. I’m not ready for what he was asking for and frankly, I don’t know if I’ll ever be, so I’ll make sure I win the race.

‘Okay,’ I say, in my cockiest voice. ‘I’m *really* looking forward to that picnic.’

'Siiii?'

'*Siiii*,' I mimic.

'No rules,' he says.

'None.'

'Good,' he says, his eyes twinkling.

'Excellent!'

I clear my throat and say, 'On your marks, get set ...g ...'

Suddenly, Diago grabs me, lifts me into the air and throws me behind him.

I'm like a beach ball in his hand and I land about twenty feet away. While I struggle to surface and catch my breath, he cruises to the finish line.

'I wiiin!'

'Diago! That was ... how do you ...? That's not fair, Diago.'

'No rules,' he reminds me.

'Aaaagh! You ... but ...that's not how ...shit! You're such a cheat.'

I frown – the stakes are way too high.

'What? What you thinking?'

I stare at the ground a moment, then look up. 'When?'

He takes his time answering. 'Soon,' he finally whispers.

I leave it at that.

'Come,' he says, taking my hand. 'I sure I can beat you at running too.'

Normally, I would say, 'Game on!' But today, I don't dare.

'If you shoot both my knee caps during the race – duh!'

He chuckles.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It's morning. I saunter into the kitchen and am surprised to see Diago drinking coffee and laughing with Maria and Rosa, who are busy packing a basket.

'Morning Rosa! Morning Maria!'

I look at Diago and shut one eye. 'Morning, Senor. Overslept? Don't you have a village to burn down or something?'

He grunts, his eyes lighting up at the sight of me. 'Today I take you to ...?' He falters and looks to Maria for help with the word.

'Picnic!' Rosa yells.

'I know that, Rosa!' Maria screeches. 'He ask *me*! Because I good for English. Better than you!'

That'll teach Rosa to steal Maria's chance to shine at English.

'Sorry,' Rosa says, looking anything but *sorry*.

Diago and I exchange amused looks. Don't mess with Maria at this time of the morning.

'A picnic? But Diago, you *won* the bet and I lost. What about Senor Vito?'

He lifts and drops his shoulders and gives me a strange look. Is that naked adoration in his eyes?

I'm suddenly shy and look away. 'Okay, in that case I'd better change my clothes.' I exit the kitchen, thrilled to have someone to spend the day with other than Maria and Rosa.

'Maria, Rosa!' I holler over my shoulder, 'make sure there's champagne in that basket!'

'*Si*, Senorita,' they chorus.

We picnic on a grassy spot overlooking the water. What a day – the sun is shining, the birds are chirping, the views are breathtaking and Diago has taken the day off to spend it with me. What more could a girl ask for?

Over the next couple of hours, we talk about everything and anything. He tells me about his life, the drugs, the killings. I think he trusts me. I like that.

Luckily, I forgot to wear the FBI listening device pendant today. I don't want the Feds to hear all of this, anyway. I'm not ready to hand over Diablo right now. I'm having too much fun.

'Is the way it is round here,' he explains. 'Is *our* way.'

'Your way? But you must admit, you sometimes kill when it's not necessary, right?'

'Like the time you shot me - that was so not necessary. That was like, overkill.'

‘I think you spy.’

‘Spy, mff! Poor intelligence there, *Amigo*. And you should be sorry.’

‘I am sorry, he says, lifting my hand to his lips then clutching it against his chest. ‘Very sorry.

‘What about the other men you killed? The policemen ...?’

‘*Si!* I kiiiill them.’ He shrugs. ‘So?’

‘Diablo, they were old, they were *policemen*. That’s like, a big deal, you know.

‘No, not a big deal. They kill my mother and father. That’s a big deal. I watch them burn my village for what? To get our land. I remember their faces. I remember the policeman standing and watching as our village burned. I see their faces every night before I close my eyes and every night I promise my mother and father I kill them one day. And one day, I do it. I tell them who I am first before I ...’ He runs his finger across his throat.

‘Christ Diago!’ I hastily put down the bunch of red grapes I was eating.

‘My mother ... they shoot her in the back. Back. She run with Troy but they shoot her. In the back. My father, he push me under the house to save me. Tell me to hide. But is hot, the village is burning and I can’t stay under the house. Then I see them shoot him.’ He closes his eyes and falls silent for a moment.

I gently touch his face. He opens his eyes and stares into mine.

‘That’s all, Payton. Is fair. They police, but they bad police They must die. No place for them on earth, here.’

‘What about Jimmy Gomez?’

He squints at me. ‘You know *everything*. Too much.’

I shrug. People talk you know and I’m lucky I have ears. Two of them. Did you really kill him and take his home?’

‘*Si*. The police work for him. He pay them. He ask my grandfather to sell him the land, my grandfather say no. He arrange to kill my family, all of them, then he take it. The police, they his friends. Hepay them to look the other way. I look at Jimmy and say, ‘One day ... one day!’

‘Christ! What land you talking about?’

‘Tana Mera.’

‘Tana Mera? You *stole* Tana Mera?’

‘*He* stole, not me. I take my family’s land back.’

“Wow!”

If the FBI heard this conversation, Diago would be spending the night behind bars. This

is what they're waiting for and I have it now. But it's not recorded.

'You wanted to burn Siempre,' I remind him. 'That was bad, uncalled for. Why did you want to do that?'

'Cos I was stupid. Mad. I don't know how to be good, Payton. I was born into this and this is my life. I kill or they kill me. You treat me bad, I kill you or you kill me. Is like that here. People say be good, be good - how? They no show me. Nobody show me.'

'Yeah, but Diago, I am showing you how to be good, right?'

'Si, you show me and I like that. I want be good for you,' he says, taking my palm and placing it against his cheek.

A warm, heady sensation oozes through me. As I look into his hazel eyes, the feeling mutates into an urge to reach out and draw his head to my breasts.

But I don't. Instead, I whisper, 'Yeah, I like it when ...when you are good.'

When we return to the ranch, I look at him and smile. 'Thanks for the lovely picnic.'

He stares at me.

I step forward and give him a brief hug.

He returns the hug, crushing me to him. We stay in each other's arms for a few moments, basking in the warmth and tenderness we're both feeling.

Then he lightly pecks me on the cheek and quickly releases me.

The cheek. How unusual. I'm used to fighting off my dates who try to stick their tongue down my throat.

I lie in bed thinking about the hug and the kiss trying to figure out why he released me so quickly. I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Diago thunders into the ranch on his horse. ‘Gringaaaa! Payton! Payton, come here!’

I dash outside to see what all the fuss is about. He’s holding the reins to a most beautiful filly I’ve ever seen. She’s young, white and reminds me of a unicorn I used to read about.

‘This is your horse Gringa,’ he says. ‘Is for you. You must give her a name.’

‘For me? Gosh! I’ve never owned a horse before and she is so...so gorgeous.’ Most of all, she isn’t intimidating. ‘Wow Diago, this is great!’

‘Give her a name,’ he urges.

Mmm, young, white, nervous and out of place ...’ I look up at him. ‘Gringa Two,’ I say. ‘That’s her name.’

He looks at me and pulls a face. ‘Gringa too?’

‘Two. Diago, she’s young, white and edgy, just like me. So I’m Gringa and she’s like, Gringa Two.’

For the first time since I met him, he guffaws – just throws his head back and laughs. Everyone stares at him in surprise and I find his laughter very appealing.

‘You call that a horse?’ Santana sniggers. ‘Is a donkey.’

Everyone starts to make hee-haw sounds.

‘You’re all wrong,’ I say, lovingly stroking my horse, ‘She’s not a donkey - she’s a beautiful horse and she’s going to take me places.’

As you can imagine, Gringa Two and I are kindred spirits, so we get on famously. Although she is a little bit of a prima donna and sometimes can be a little too demanding – wants a treat before she will let me ride her, won’t go out if it’s cold ...

‘Ride the horse,’ Diago says, ‘Don’t trot.’

‘I’m still scared Diago,’ I protest.

‘Ride!’

‘Diago, I ...’

‘Ride!’

‘Diago stop!’

‘Okay, you ride my horse and I sit with you and help you,’ he says and hoists me onto his horse. He whacks his horse and we ride for about five minutes passing beautiful clearings.

‘We’re going too fast Diago,’ I cry over my shoulder.

‘Relax and enjoy the wind in your hair,’ he says and squeezes my waist.

‘Okay.’ With him next to me, I feel really safe.

‘What’s your horse’s name, Diago?’

‘Taxi.’

‘No, what’s your horse’s *name*?’

‘Taxi. Is my horse name.’

“‘Taxi’?” I laugh. ‘That’s an funny name.’

He grins. ‘He my taxi,’ he says, patting his horse.

Finally, we reach the top of a hill just in time to see another colourful sunset. We climb off the horse, sit on the grass and I oooh and aaah at the changing lavender and champagne sky.

‘Diago,’ this is really beautiful,’ I whisper. ‘I’ve never seen such breathtaking sunsets like this back home.’

‘Si?’ He reaches for me and draws me in front of him. His strong arms circle my waist as he nuzzles my neck.

‘Yeah,’ I say, and angle my neck to accommodate his seeking lips. I close my eyes and bask in the intimacy of his touch. I like being nuzzled by him and I like being held by him. I shouldn’t, but I do. Go figure. I’m trying to.

‘This is beyond beautiful – it’s spectacular.’

‘I know what you mean, *Mi Carazon*,’ he says, his voice soft and meaningful. ‘Very spectacular. Like you.’

I smile. Nobody has ever called me or referred to me as *spectacular* before. Slowly, I turn my head to look at him and for a moment, our cheeks rest against each other – my smooth against his stubble.

I’m certain he’s going to kiss me.

I want him to kiss me.

But he draws back.

I smile away my disappointment.

We chat as we watch the sunset.

I’m ashamed of the sudden deep longing that’s looming inside of me. I’m not in any way confused - I really *want* him to kiss me.

I know what it is – too much time with Diago. Got to know him on a deeper level and I like him. With him, I feel cared for and protected. And anyway, he’s the only person in the world that gives a damn about me. How can I not gravitate towards him?

But why won’t he kiss me? It’s like he wants this barrier that prevents intimacy between

us. I'm feeling rejected, sad.

I understand he's maybe afraid to let down his guard and all that – something to do with being used as a punching bag by a tyrant, being used as an ashtray by a man he trusted, but still ...

Today, I don't want him to be afraid. I want him to trust me. I want to turn around, hold him and kiss him on the mouth and break down the barriers that keep me out.

'What you thinking, baby?' he whispers.

'Eh ... how lovely this is,' I lie and gently touch his cheek.

'Si? Is lovely,' his says, his breath fanning my ear. 'Very lovely.' His kisses on my neck intensify. I want to kiss him.

Fuck it! I can't wait anymore - I jerk my neck around and draw his mouth to mine. He resists and tries to *cheek* me, but I hold onto his neck.

'Don't!' I whisper and kiss him hard, sliding my tongue sensuously into his mouth. After a nanosecond of hesitation, he angles his head eagerly to accommodate mine and allows me my way and I steal a really deep kiss. Finally I stop and smile at him. 'That's what all the fuss is about,' I say breathlessly.

With a groan, he swoops down and kisses me.

Okay, he is the worst kisser I've ever came across, but it's still lovely, warm and I don't want him to stop. I'll have lots of fun teaching him later, I'm sure.

When he draws away, I struggle to hide my disappointment.

'Let us go home to eat,' he says, cupping my face with both his hands.

'Yeah ... dinner ... starving ... we should go.'

What else do I say: 'Are you blind? Can't you see I want you?'

Our ride home is punctuated by mini stops solely for canoodling and judging by the length and intensity of his kisses, I can tell he enjoys kissing me as much as I enjoy kissing him.

We ride on and from time-to-time he squeezes my waist or draws me back to him, enveloping me with his burly frame.

When we reach the ranch, Christa and some of the men are waiting outside for Diablo and they stare at us with narrow eyes. Maybe it's something to do with our red faces.

'We have been waiting for you to have dinner, Diablo,' Christa chides, frowning at the sight of us riding together.

Bitch is probably frustrated –Diablo's far too soft these days, too mellow. He seems to have lost that killer instinct she fought so hard to maintain. Since I arrived on the scene, he's

distracted and not interested in hurting anyone. The only way to stoke his rage these days is to wage battle or war against someone or something, reviving the beast in him.

‘Sorry. You should eat.’ Diago’s voice is laden with guilt and embarrassment.

Christa’s eyes grow wide. ‘Without you? We don’t that here Diago. We family, remember?’

Diago nods and alights, then helps me down. As he does, he squeezes my waist and places me on the floor really close to him, forcing us to brush intimately against each other.

‘I *see* you after dinner,’ he whispers, his eyes bright and alive.

I smile. I know exactly what he means.

He squeezes my waist harder. ‘*Si?*’ His voice is pleading. ‘I won the bet.’

So he wants to cash his prize. My smile widens and I nod slowly.

He grins.

Christa hones in on our tête-à-tête. ‘Diago, ever since you met Gringa, you have become soft like ... like a girl, eh?’ Her eyes suddenly widen. ‘Santa Maria! You are in love Diago? Everybody -’

‘No!’ Diago roars. Only a fool falls in love.’

‘Ah, that is good, Diabolo,’ she says, flinging me a triumphant look. ‘Because love is a roaring fire Diago, but after a fire, there is smoke and the smoke, it burns your eyes. Remember that Diago.’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ he says in a cocky voice.

Disappointment rips through my soul at his words, his arrogance. I don’t know what I expected him to say under the circumstances, but I know I didn’t want him to utter *those* words.

Christa twists to look at Santana. ‘Santana, see, we have nothing to worry about.’

I look up and see Santana glaring at me, a murderous gleam in her eye. Maybe she senses something happened between Diago and me today.

Diago glances uneasily at Santana, then at me. ‘Eh ...’ He clams up, at a loss for words.

Disenchanted by his words, I slowly make my way to the dinner table. To cope with my disillusionment, I convince myself that he needs to maintain a certain façade with his men and that’s why he acted so brash, so nonchalant about me.

But I’m too smitten to stay mad at him. Throughout dinner, we steal glances at each other and exchange secret smiles.

Tonight.

Tonight.

Tonight.

To my embarrassment, the men pick up the tension between the two of us and pass lewd comments and I find it hard to ignore them.

I suspect Diago finds it hard too because I notice him frowning.

I hurriedly finish dinner and flee the table, while Diago lingers.

About an hour later, he barges into my room pushes me onto the bed and kisses me and immediately, I forgive all his earlier remarks because, well, I melt like chocolate in his arms.

‘Imasorry,’ he whispers, between kisses.

‘Christa makes you bad,’ I say.

He kisses my nose. ‘That is my mother,’ he chastises.

‘No she isn’t,’ I want to shout, but I don’t. Maybe he has a need to call someone mother. Leave him to his delusions. For now.

Suddenly we hear unfamiliar voices outside. Diago lets go of me and peeps through the blinds.

We have visitors – six men, probably drug dealers. Diago’s brow creases and his eyes turn hard.

He looks at me, a flicker of annoyance on his face. ‘I have to go to them,’ he says, his voice an admixture of irritation and disappointment. ‘Business ...’

Damn Christa! Anything to diffuse this flourishing of emotions between us, I suppose.

I bite my lip, shrug then say, ‘Okay.’

Later, eh?’

‘Um ...’ I place both my hands on his chest. ‘How do you say ‘maybe’ in Spanish?’

‘Maybe? Eh, Quizás?’

I nod. “ ‘Quizás’, ” I echo.

He chuckles and smacks my butt. He walks to the door, pauses and turns around. I blow him a kiss expecting him to leave, but he strides over and shakes his head from side-to-side.

He places both hands on my shoulders. ‘Say *absolutamente*.’

‘Sounds like a brand of Vodka. What does it mean?’

‘Um ... definitely ...’ he says, his hands sliding down my back and cupping my butt.

‘I see,’ I sigh, quivering at his intimate touch. ‘I was going to say that, but I didn’t know the Spanish word for it. But now I know – “*absolutamente*”.’

‘Good girl,’ he says, kissing me one last time.

Hours pass and he does not return. I spend hours looking at the door. Fuck him! I’m going to bed. I thump my pillows several times and snap off the light.



I'm awakened from my sleep when I hear him whisper my name.

'Diago,' I moan.

He plants kisses all over my face before he quietly leaves.

Christa won after all.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I laze in bed and think of Diago and the intimate kisses we shared last night and I hug my pillow. Then I remember the FBI. Fuck! I jump out of bed and stare at the spot housing the listening device. They must have heard all our conversations - about 'Maybe' and 'Definitely' and that I hated Christa because she made Diago do bad things. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

With both hands on my head, I contemplate my quandary. It's my fault; I planted those devices for them. I should have just said 'No'. As much as I want to remove the bug from my room, I know one thing - you don't cross the Feds. That's what it'll tantamount to. They'll make you sorry you did. The bugs stay, unfortunately.

Around lunch time, Diago barges into my room.

'Hey Diago!'

He scoops me off the floor, swings me around and we collapse onto the bed laughing.

'Whoa!'

He cradles my head like you would a baby and plants little kisses all over my face. 'I think of you all the time,' he confesses.

'Yeah? But last night ...?'

'They don't leave! I'm sorry.'

I believe him. He's doesn't lie - he's too arrogant to do that.

'I keep looking at your room last night. I see the light is on. I don't want you to turn it off because then I know you sleep. But then I see it go off and I get angry with them, with Christa. But what can I do? So ... today ... I bring you a present.'

'A present? For me?' I scramble to sit up, shut my eyes and put out my hand.

He sits up, removes a box from his pocket and hands it to me. 'Open it.'

'Ooooookay.' I open the box and gasp. 'Ohmigod! It's gorgeous.' It's a gold necklace with a diamond pendant in the shape of two tiny cupid angels with arrows pointed at each other. It's heavy and looks really expensive.

'This is soooo beautiful Diago,' I say, caressing the pendant. 'I've never seen anything like this before.' I fling my arms around him. 'Thank you!'

'Is a "Sorry" gift,' he says.

I jerk back and look at him. 'Sorry?'

'For eh ...' he averts his eyes, 'for ... hurting you ... make you ... cry.'

I look away, uncomfortable with the reminder that he was my tormentor at one time.

‘Payton?’

‘I ... um ...’ I look at him and grimace a smile.

‘Lemme put it on for you,’ he says, taking the necklace from my hands. Then he reaches for the FBI’s chain around my neck and in true Diago fashion, rips it off my neck and flings it on the table. It lands in a glass of water.

The listening device! Fuck! I look at it but do nothing to retrieve it.

He steps behind me, puts his chain around my neck and runs his hands slowly over my breasts, my stomach, my thighs. ‘Do not take it out, ever,’ he whispers.

‘Okay,’ I say, fingering the pendant.’

‘Now I have to go.’

‘So soon?’

‘Senor Vito, he wait for me.’

‘Senor Vito? Still? What are you learning *now*?’

He averts his eyes.

‘What? What?’

He rubs his chin and jerks his neck around.

‘What? Tell me. Come on, tell me.’

He takes a deep breath. ‘Sex.’

‘Sex?’

He nods and wriggles his eyebrows.

‘What ...? How ...?’

He teach me how ... what to do with women. How to ...to please them?’

Really? I didn’t know your syllabus covered sex-education? And “*Women*”? What “*Women*”?’

‘You tell me ... I lousy lay, remember?’

I cover my mouth with both hands as I remember my conversation at the rock pool. ‘I ... um ... Christ!’ My face turns beet.

He chuckles at my embarrassment.

‘Well ... then ... ’

He laughs and hugs me. He has a really nice laugh - deep, manly, throaty and I like the way his eyes crinkle when he laughs. ‘I see you later, eh?’

I nod. ‘Are there going to be any practical lessons?’ I tease, trying to picture Senor Vito touching Diago, showing him erotic spots, teaching him how to kiss. Maybe Senor Vito is

gay?

‘*Si.*’

‘“*Si*”?’

He nods.

‘Senor Vito ... he’s gonna give you *practical* lessons?’

‘*Si.*’ His adamant tone confuses me.

‘Diago, how the hell ...?’

With a gleam in his eye, he opens the door and jerks his head towards the courtyard.

I look outside and turn moss green when I see the sexy Senorita standing next to Senor Vito. ‘She?’

He wiggles his eyebrows at me. ‘*She* my teacher today, *si*?’

‘She ... She? That’s not a skirt, that’s a bloody belt she’s wearing as a skirt. And who wears stilettos *that* high in the middle of the day?’

More wiggling of his eyebrows.

‘Mff!’

The senorita spots Diago, sensuously hitches up her bra strap then blows him a kiss.

Diago grins like a fool and waves back.

‘Diago!’ I snap.

His tries to stop grinning and fails.

‘Mff!’

‘You jealous?’

‘No! Off course not! No.’

He chuckles like a naughty schoolboy. ‘*Hasta la Vista,*’ he says and steps out of my room.

I almost slam the door on his smug, clean-shaven face as his laughter rings in my ears.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

While he's touching and hugging his skanky teacher who is, I'm in the kitchen eating ice-cream with homemade chocolate sauce and a generous sprinkle of nuts. Oh and there's two wafers and some glacier cherries.

Calories? Who gives a fuck about calories?

But I'm wondering – is Diablo going to *kiss* his teacher during his lesson? Will she strip down for the lesson? She seemed so familiar and so happy to see him – do they know each other on another level? How come he's not so reclusive anymore? I stab at my ice-cream. 'Fuck!'

'What is it?' Rosa asks, shocked at my outburst.

I didn't realise I cursed out loud. 'Nothing ...' I say and glance sulkily at the villa Diago's in.

'Aaaahhhh! You are jealous, Maria says and nods. 'Good.'

'No! Absolutely not. No, no no ...'

The two ladies gossip about me in Spanish.

'I'm still in the room. Hello!' I grab the carton of ice-cream and storm out of the kitchen. Damn! I forgot the chocolate sauce. I turn around, grab it and head to my room where I sulk between spoons of ice-cream.

Then I reach under my bed, remove the listening device and fling it out of the window. 'I don't give a rat's ass - I'll face the consequences later,' I shout through the open window.

A few hours later, Diago returns.

I scan his face for – whatever – signs he has enjoyed his lesson, wants to have another lesson anytime soon, in love with his fucking tutor ...

'How was your lesson?' I ask feigning nonchalance.

'Good,' he says. 'Let's go to dinner.'

That's it? That's all I get after stressing for hours? Doesn't he realise just how much of ice-cream and chocolate sauce I've consumed in his absence?

The calories – all adds up, you know.

\* \*\*

I'm loitering in the courtyard after dinner when Diago rocks up behind me and grabs me. I chuckle and turn my face to look at him.

He kisses me slowly, deeply causing my knees to buckle. His sex education lessons with Senor Vito have really paid off and I'm benefiting big time.

We neck and Canoodle as his hands disappear under my sweater to gently knead my breasts. Unable to stop him, I sigh and lean my head back onto his chest. Encouraged by this, his hands travel slowly down my stomach and towards my thighs, disappearing between them briefly. Then he stops.

I want more, lots more. Why did he have to stop?

He wants more too, I can tell by his quick breaths and his erection pressing against me.

When we hear voices we quickly jerk apart.

He looks at me with glazed eyes. 'Ask me.'

I look at him and close one eye.

'Ask me! Ask me!'

Smiling, I take his hand. 'Let's go to my place,' I whisper as I walk backwards.

He beams and I cha-cha to my room.

After a while, turn and sprint to my room and collapse on the bed where we resume our foreplay.

Slowly, he removes my top and tosses it aside. I smile. He caresses my shoulders before he unhooks my bra and my breasts spill into his gigantic hands.

Our foreplay really began a week ago and our bodies' reaction to each other is feral. I rip off his shirt and kiss his tattooed chest.

He tugs off my skirt as I help him out of his pants.

We lie on the bed for a moment, noses touching. Then he kisses my lips, my neck, which is already angling. His lips are travelling towards my erect nipples. Gently he takes one in his mouth and sucks on it and I sigh. Then the other. My sighs get louder as his lips move away and kisses the insides of my thighs. 'Diago,' I whisper.

His face disappears between my thighs. Suddenly I'm writhing and clutching his head. I've never done that before. Such loss of control – that's not me.

His tongue hieroglyphs my core so intensely that my body threatens to combust.

'Diago, I want you inside me,' I plead.

But he ignores my pleas and increases the intensity of my delightful torture.

When I can bear it no more, he sweeps towards me and in one amazing motion, kisses me hard, at the same time, thrusting his rock-hard erection into me with a force that only deep passion permits.

We rock hard and long, but I don't want him to stop, to end things. I want Diago to exist

inside me, to live as one.

‘Payton,’ he murmurs, ‘Payton ... Senor Vito ... is going to be angry at me, but I can’t ... wait.’

Before I can respond, my clammy body shudders over and over again and I cling to him, my nails digging into his back.

Then I hear his deep growl and I feel his explosion too.

Outside me.

Lucky he did that, I tell myself. We’re practicing unsafe sex. Totally irresponsible.

As we lie in the afterglow of our lovemaking, he kisses my nose, my cheeks, my forehead, then my lips. I’m contented and I don’t ever want to leave his arms. I’ve never felt like this before – so wanted, so loved, so cherished and for the first time in my life, I feel whole. Yet, at the same time, I also feel out of control, unhinged, drugged.

He’s deep in thought. I turn to look up at him. ‘Think out aloud.’ I whisper.

He stares at me for a while. ‘*Te amo,*’ he finally says and places my hand across his heart. ‘With all of this.’

I’m taken aback with this. Didn’t expect him to say those words and I just don’t know how to react. Do I love him? But then, what about Austin? I love *him*, don’t I? Suddenly, I’m so confused.

He’s kisses me and I get the impression he doesn’t expect an answer. Thank God!

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Our happiness is noticeable and we have trouble hiding it. Especially me, I'm ashamed that I like Diago and that I want him. I'm supposed to find him repulsive but I don't anymore. I want to be with him all the time. I feel his love in his touch – even long after he has removed his hand from mine - like a residual jolt. I feel it in his kiss, the way he looks at me, the way his eyes light up when I enter a room, the way his voice changes when he talks to me – it's always softer, caressing.

I'm may be falling in love with him, but it doesn't feel like *falling*. It feels more like lifting, floating, right.

I walk around smiling and thinking about him all the time, my head in the clouds.

\* \* \*

Christa is eyeballing me, making me flinch under her penetrating gaze. I avoid her eyes and try to focus on my task at hand, but I can't. Her stare unnerves me. Why is she looking at me like that? Like she knows something.

It's our feelings for each other; Diago and I can't keep our eyes off each other even though we try, and it looks like everyone around us has noticed.

At night, we make love again and this time it's unhurried and beautiful. Senor Vito is a master; he took a ruthless barbarian and turned him into a suave, generous lover who makes me gasp his name over and over again, while that handful of glitter cascades over me.

The next evening, we're at the dinner table when Christa zooms in on me. 'Why you call him "Diago" Gringa?' Her tone is mocking, but it holds a thread of anger in it.

'That's his real name,' I reply, flashing Diago a coy smile. 'And I like it.'

He cocks his head to one side and looks at me with that gaga look he sports these days.

'Really?' Christa snaps. 'That's not what you say here, Gringa.'

I tear my eyes away from Diago to look at the book she's waving in the air and gasp.

'My diary!' I cry.

Oh God! It has stuff about Diago and Austin and how much I hate Diago and how much I love ... Oh God! Bad stuff - destructive. Diago will die if he reads from it. Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!

Christa smiles when she sees my mortification.

'Christa!' I cry, bolting out of my seat. 'Give that back to me, now!'

She laughs and flips through the pages. The smug look on her face scares me – it's knowing, determined, as if she's won a lottery.



I look at Diago, a feeling of panic overwhelming me. ‘Diago,’ I rasp, ‘make her give it back. That’s my diary. It’s private ...’

Christa laughs. ‘*Si*, is very private from what I read. Diablo, you want to know *who* she is writing about in her diary, eh? It might be you or ... it might be *another* man. You *should* know Diablo. It is your right, eh?’

Diablo’s fork is suspended in mid-air. He glances at Christa, then me, then at Christa again. Slowly, he lowers his fork.

When his expectant gaze rests on Christa, I groan inwardly and sink into my chair.

I’m fucked.

Christa beams and runs the tip of her tongue over her lips. Bitch!

There’s nothing I can do expect brace myself for the wreckage hurtling my way.

I really don’t want to hurt Diago now. I care about him and the thought of him hearing my private, innermost and morbid thoughts during my darkest hours makes me ill.

Christa begins to read from my diary with so much expression, it tells me she has read and re-read my diary.

‘Diablo is a monster. Wait! Make that an ugly, hideous, disgusting, revolting mother of a monster. Hate him! Hate his guts. Hate his stupid, barbaric, ruthless family. Especially his miserable alcoholic mother.’

She stops and stares at me, slack-jawed ‘That me, Gringa? *Ay yay yay!*’

Laughter all round.

My eyes are fixed on Diago’s face. ‘Diago, that was a long ti ...’

‘Want to slash off his dick and let him die. Bleed to death. Hate this place. It’s evil and dark. Want to burn it down with Diablo in it. I think about Austin all the time. Handsome, loving, kind. My first love. My Ken doll. I forgive him for dumping me and marrying Paris. I forgive him for falling under her spell. He’s human – he did what most men would do. The relationship we had was too good to be true. Beautiful people like him don’t happen to girls like me. But I still hanker after him. Still. That’s ’cause I’m a dumb fuck. Here’s another confession: I love his son and whenever I hold him, I pretend he’s mine. Mine and Austin’s.’

Diago lowers his fork really slowly. It’s as if I’m watching a recording of him play in slow motion. The back of his hand moves slowly across his chin, his eyes turning like granite.

I leap out of my chair and attempt to snatch the diary from Christa, prepared to wrestle her for it. ‘Give it back!’

Santana scrambles up and yanks me off Christa. I slam my elbow into Santana’s solar

plexuses and stomp hard on her foot. But she is strong and grabs a fistful of my long hair and hangs onto it, giving Christa her air time.

Christa reads randomly from different parts of my diary. “‘Whenever Diablo fucks me, I think of you and I fantasize about us making love.’

She stops and looks at Diago. ‘I feel really sorry for you Diago,’ she says in a solemn voice.

Diablo squeezes his eyes shut for a moment then blinks rapidly.

‘You see Diablo, I tell you there is something going on with the gringo and gringa here, ’member? But you don’t believe me. You have to trust me from now on because I am your mother - I know everything. Everything!’

Santana laughs as she releases me.

Christa shakes her head, tsks! and continues reading.

“‘I picture you above me and sometimes I even feel like responding. It’s fucked up, I know and ... ’”

A murmur ripples through the room as Diago deadpans.

‘No, no, no, Diago,’ I protest, ‘it’s not like that now. Please!’

‘Dreamed of Austin again ... ’

Adrenalin takes over - I crash into Christa and rip the diary out of her hands. But Santana grabs me from behind and holds me down while Christa punches me in the face.

Under normal circumstances I would retaliate, but now I fear I will lose my grip on the diary if I do. Luckily Troy steps in and breaks up the fight. I lie on the ground, my nose bloodied, but diary firmly in hand. Christa kicks me in the ribs and stands back. Someone shoves Kleenex at me probably for my bloodied nose.

Diago is on his feet looking down at me. ‘How, Payton? Why? I think you and me ...?’ His voice is wavering, his shoulders slumped. Then he quickly straightens up, turns and strides off.

‘Diago wait!’

He keeps walking.

‘That was a long time ago Diago! Please, don’t be mad.’ I get up and run after him, Christa’s mocking laughter ringing in my ears.

‘Please ... I don’t feel the same way now – anymore. Please Diago, understand.’

He suddenly swings around and glares at me. I shrink back when I see the fury in his eyes. ‘You ... I ... you stay away from me, Payton,’ he snarls moving toward me and backing me up against a wall.

‘But Diago, you ... ’

‘No!’ he roars, his fist raised, his nostrils flaring. ‘Don’t ever come near me again. Never!’”

I stand mesmerized by his enormous and tightly clenched fist, poised above me, ready to strike, terrified he’s going to assault me. But he doesn’t; he slams his fist into a painting next to my head, shattering it and sending a spray of glass and wood into the air.

Diablo is back.

I squeeze my eyes shut and stand rigid with fear, only opening them when I hear the sound of his boots thudding against the floor. When I look through the window, I see him riding out of the ranch on Taxi.

Crushed, I drag myself to my room and literally run into Troy. He looks at me with clenched jaws. He’s probably mad at me for humiliating his brother in public, for letting him down, for breaking his heart. How can I blame him?

‘I don’t feel that way anymore, Troy,’ I croak. ‘I ...I really care about him.’

He silently steps aside, giving me way, his eyes lowered to the floor.

‘Please, Troy, say something.’

He doesn’t.

In my room, I sit on my bed with shoulders hunched and think about Diago. Why the hell didn’t I destroy that diary? The moment my feelings towards Diago changed, I should have burnt that fucking book.

I look out the window? Where can he be? I humiliated him in front of his men. Well, Christa the bitch did, the fucking ... fucking ... uuughh! I thump my pillow in frustration.

My diary was hidden deep between my linen so it couldn’t be discovered. Yet she found it. Obviously she had been searching my room looking for stuff she could use against me. Bitch!

\* \* \*

It’s been a week since the diary incident and Diago still ignores me. He won’t even look at me. I’d like a chance to explain things but he’s not interested.

I stare at him, hoping he will feel my gaze and look my way, but he doesn’t. It’s as if I don’t exist anymore.

I hear him snapping at the men. He’s done that all week. The tension at the dinner table is thick and everyone is subdued and even polite. Except Christa and Santana – they’re in high spirits and have been this way since the diary incident.

But that soon changes. Something Christa says pisses Diago off and he yells at her,

eliciting a profuse apology from her. I can gloat, but I don't. I'm more concerned about Diago hurting inside. Because I know he's hurting almost as much as I am and only I can fix it.

Before I can do anything, Diago scrapes back his chair and strides out of the dining room, his dinner unfinished. Shortly after that, I hear him riding off on Taxi.

When I awake the following morning, Diago is not in his bed. Seems like he didn't come home last night. I lie on his bed, hold his pillow to my nose and inhale his scent.

*I know I've lost you, Diago.*

My sense of loss is so great, a tidal wave of despair overcomes me.

*End of*

**GRINGA**

Book 2

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