

Power always comes at a cost...

SERVING

Mr. Serrano

War of Britu Series

Ndosi M

They say to never mix business with pleasure.

But what if my business is pleasure?

The arrangement was simple enough.

Twenty thousand cromas for one night with the most dangerous man in the territory. For me, this was business as usual, and Mr. Serrano was more than happy to pay twice my usual rate for what would undoubtedly be a memorable night.

Except... There's just something about Eden that makes me want to see her again. Maybe it's her courage, that mischievous glint in her eye. Or perhaps it's the way she looks at me as if she sees all my demons and isn't afraid to tangle with them. But getting involved with her would put my entire family's legacy at risk and I stand to lose everything my family has worked so hard for.

Dominic Serrano adds more complications to my life than I need at the moment. And if he ever found out the truth, he would surely kill me. I should be running in the opposite direction and yet each time I find myself kneeling before him, ready to serve...

Like every country, The Kingdom of Britu is no stranger to corruption and greed. The power belongs not to the people, but to a group of wealthy men who control almost every aspect from the shadows. Cunning, ruthless monsters whose only pursuit in life is power and money, and will stop at absolutely nothing to get it.

Ours is a world riddled with deceit and murder, stained with blood and lies. The strong devour the weak, and take what little power there is for themselves while they can. It's a shark pit, where everyone is constantly vigilant, because betrayal is always looming.

While we all revel in the depravity, we still have rules.

Rules set in place to ensure civility among everyone who forms part of our world. It's a code of conduct that we all have to live by, and strictly enforce, in all our operations to prevent problematic disputes with law enforcement officials and agencies.

These rules are in place to prevent a war between the separate criminal organisations, aptly named, The Seven Syndicates. But with immorality coursing through our veins, none of us can ever truly be content with what we have.

And just when things have finally settled amongst us, a sinister mastermind is revealed to be pulling the strings. Their influence stretches far and wide, and they threaten to destroy the peace between us and the law, and possibly bring us all down. Battle lines are drawn, sides are chosen and a war the likes of which the country has never seen before is looming on the horizon.

How unfortunate that when I have the most to lose, I finally meet the woman I've been waiting a lifetime for. She not only understands me and the role I've been tasked with playing, but doesn't shy away from doing what's necessary to protect those she loves. While the world outside is at war, with her tangled safely around me, I have the one thing I have always wanted.

Peace.

1. Prologue

27 February 2021

Red Ridge

The wind howled as it blew over the rundown safe house, rattling the old windows and shaking the steel slate roof. Thunder rumbled in the far distance, lightning flashing so close it lit up the interior of the house. The dingy house reeked of mold and dust, the walls stained with the past and frequent splatters of decades-old blood.

A bulb flicked above me, struggling some before it finally illuminated the whole room in a fluorescent light. I managed to look up at it with my one good eye, the other so swollen I couldn't even open it. I lowered my gaze to my bare feet, filthy and bruised from running on gravel and through thorny bushes. My shirt and shorts hung in wet tatters on my body, but I kept them on because this was all I had to cover myself.

I wiped the tears from my cheeks with trembling, muddy hands and winced at the pain that shot through me when I touched my swollen cheek.

In the other room, I could hear the arguing.

She was saying one thing while he argued differently, but I couldn't hear what they were saying because they fought in harsh whispers. I pulled the blanket over my body and waited for them to finish so they could tell me what to do.

The door crashed open suddenly, and I flinched in shock.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," she said softly, approaching me. She knelt down in front of me with a first aid kit and slowly opened it.

"Is it just your face and feet that hurt?"

I sat up, removing the arm around my waist. My voice was hoarse as I spoke. "I think I may have a fractured rib."

"Explains your breathing," she remarked, pulling on a pair of gloves. "Does he know about us?"

I nodded. "That's why I stayed as long as I did. He said he would come after you both and kill you. But after tonight..."

He joined us then, walking into the room with three duffel bags. He casually tossed the other two bags by the door and carried one over to where I sat.

"You did the right thing. He could've killed you."

He pulled the blanket off my shoulders and assessed the damage, his brown eyes scanning my injuries and committing them to memory.

"I still think we should fucking kill him."

I shook my head, wincing when she dabbed a damp cotton ball on my split lip. "Not yet. It's better if we disappear for a second. I managed to steal some cash from him before I got away. I stashed it in that untraceable account we've been using over the years."

He knelt down too, peeling away the torn t-shirt to reveal a massive purple bruise on my left side. I sobbed when he touched it, tears of pain, frustration and humiliation running down my cheeks.

"He's going to come after you," he said.

"He might kill you," she added.

I shook my head. "He won't kill me. I belong to him. I'm his property. He's invested too much in me to just kill me."

I didn't tell them that he was insanely obsessed with me and that the reason he'd kept me in isolation for so long was due to his fear of abandonment. He would lose his mind once he realised I'd left him, and he would hunt me down before dragging me back to that house.

"But he will come after me. I know that for a fact."

They shared a worried look, then turned to face me. The younger of the two leaned in close, rubbing my shoulders in a comforting motion.

"Then we need to hide you where he won't find you. At least for a while."

"And maybe we need to contact our—"

I whirled around to face her. "No. Not him. If he found out, he'd never let me live it down, and I don't want him holding that against me for the rest of my life."

Another glance passed between the two of them, this one with arched brows, but they didn't argue my point. So she cleaned me up while he rubbed my back in comforting circles. They did their best to get me cleaned up and dressed, then we all sat at a rickety table to eat some deli stew and dried buns.

While we ate, they gave me my instructions in as detailed a manner as they could. I listened and nodded my understanding.

"But where exactly am I going?"

"You're going to Nito," he said.

I frowned. "That's Serrano's territory. He's an ally of his."

They both nodded. "Exactly. He won't think to look for you there. As soon as you get to Nito, you need to call the number saved on this phone," she explained, sliding a burner phone my way.

"She'll help you. I've already spoken to her and told her what I need."

I took the phone, slid it into the pocket of my new sweatpants.

"Repeat your instructions."

"I'm to wait here until three in the morning, then take a cab to the bus station. The ticket I'm holding is for the bus to Nito which leaves at three-thirty, my seat is in the back. I'll walk straight there and not cause a scene."

I lifted the newly-printed identification card on the table and frowned at it.

"My name is Eden Conteh?"

"Changing your entire name will just confuse things and using a surname that's familiar will make it easier to remember," the younger one explained. "Now, continue."

"I'll call the number when I'm an hour away from arriving, so she can arrange transportation. Her name is Mona Gould. She has blonde hair, grey eyes and has a French accent. I'm not to trust anyone else."

He rose, taking all the empty food containers to toss into a plastic bag. She wiped the crumbs off the table with the serviettes, and balled everything together to hand to him.

"Avoid cameras or any incidents and events that could expose you. This may be a temporary solution, but we'll need time to get things together so we can kill him. Try your best to stay off his radar."

I nodded. "As soon as I have access to the right equipment, I'll erase everything about us. Nobody will know anything. It'll be as if we don't exist."

"We'll keep tabs on each other. We'll call every Sunday for the first month, then make contact on the first Sunday of each month once things have settled, so we know we're all still alive."

A system that we put in place long ago so we could check in with one another as best we could under the circumstances.

We all nodded, silent as we took the next few minutes to appreciate one another's presence before we had to split up again. She was the first one up, marking the end of our reprieve.

He followed, and they both took their bags. A brief pause then, while they prepared to leave.

"Thank you," I said, emotion choking me.

I hugged them both, afraid to squeeze too tightly in case I hurt myself. They hugged me in return, placing warm kisses to my cheeks before they stepped away.

"Be safe, peanut. We love you."

They didn't wait for me to say it back. But I whispered it to them anyway, because I wasn't sure I would ever see them again.

"I love you too."

2. A Serrano Celebration



The air crackled with anticipation, with the low hum of excitement that preceded the annual spectacle they called the party of the year.

For the past two decades, my birthday has been celebrated throughout the territory with more pomp and circumstance than was necessary. What began as a discreet gathering of allies had morphed into an extravagant display of wealth and power. A testament to the exclusivity of the event itself that had become its defining characteristic. In this world of shadows and secrets, privacy was paramount. Tonight, I needed this seclusion, this impenetrable bubble, to conduct my business.

Law enforcement knew exactly what I was up to, but greasing the right palms and operating discreetly went a long way in staying out of jail.

I'd invited the commissioner of police, Anthony Bezabeh, as well as a few of the Supreme Court Justices currently seated on the bench. The Solicitor General of Britu and other law enforcement authorities of the country had received invitations as well. Even the chiefs of the various Britu tribes would be present. Prominent members of some of the political parties with seats in parliament. The prime minister herself was required to make an appearance, since I was a very supportive, very generous donor.

After I discovered the lengths people would go to for power, getting them to bend to my whims was easy.

Everyone had a price.

For most, it was money. That it came with strings attached didn't matter, because the cash they received in payment for their souls gave them something they desperately wanted.

Power.

Freedom.

Possessions.

My name guaranteed a worthy sum for their sins, and I was more than happy to dole it out as long as they did as ordered and kept their mouths shut.

My grandfather had come to Britu decades ago, hoping to make a new life for himself. He tried his hand at being a model citizen for a time, then returned to crime when he realised how difficult being good actually was. He was so talented at being bad that by the time he turned forty, he had amassed millions. All the people he bribed were only too happy to look the other way while he went about his business.

My father had been given this territory when my grandfather passed on, and he'd taken up the mantle as the new don of the Serrano family. And after both my father's and brother's untimely passing, I was forced to take over at the very tender age of fifteen.

If it hadn't been for the guidance of Percy Garcia, my father's right-hand and second-in-command, my family and I would have been killed years ago. We'd been vulnerable at the time, left gutted and bleeding while the predators took what they could from us.

But we had managed to reclaim our seat of power a few years later and I'd been ruling Tunyi since. Since then, we've built a conglomerate known all over the world and grown an empire worth several billion cromas. Most of our wealth, however, came from several illegal operations spanning dozens of countries and over fifty years. My brother often joked that we had so much money, he was surprised we didn't shit hundred cromas bills.

We were very privileged.

I didn't pretend to hate that.

Money afforded my family lots of things, and we gladly reaped the benefits daily. I had the best residences, the best cars. I spared no expense when it came to the things I wanted. Whether it be security, furnishings, staff or clothes.

Tonight was no different.

I had commissioned an all-black, three-piece, custom design suit from a well-renowned designer who shall remain unnamed. The only splash of colour was the gold serpent pin on the velvet lapel of my jacket, and a matching custom RM 69 watch on my wrist. I adjusted my signature gold cuff-links and straightened my left sleeve as my brother entered my bedroom suite.

His midnight blue gaze swept over me once before he announced, "You're looking... dark."

"It is my birthday after all," I replied, glancing at his reflection in the full-length mirror in my closet.

As expected, Tomás was also dressed to the nines. His suit had a more modern cut, with a mandarin and subtle gold embroidery along the cuffs of his sleeves. His serpent pin sat proudly on the collar.

Like me, my brother's dark hair was combed away from his face, revealing high cheekbones and a jaw outline that could rival a statue - traits inherited from my mother and father, respectively.

"Happy birthday, Nic. Are you ready?" he asked, coming to a stop beside me, so both our reflections filled the mirror. We were roughly the same height, though Tomás had at least two inches on me. Where he was lean, I had more bulk to my frame, due to the many hours spent in the gym, trying to wrangle my demons.

"Almost. Is security in place? Every year someone finds a way up here, hoping to steal some shit."

Tomás waved his free hand dismissively. "I doubt that'll happen again. Percy has this place locked up tighter than a virgin's—"

I held up my left hand. "Don't start. It's much too early for your vulgarity, Tomás."

"I don't suppose it's too early for a drink, though?" he queried, turning on his heel to the bar.

"It's never too early for a drink. Especially with your mother roaming these already haunted halls," I said, dusting off a microscopic piece of lint that clung to the lapel of my tuxedo.

The sound he made was between a sigh and a groan. He pulled one hand from his pockets to rub his left temple, as if fighting off a headache. For all her many flaws, though, I didn't believe our mother was the reason behind Tomás's impending migraine.

"She hasn't complained of a headache tonight, has she?" I asked, walking out into the sitting room of the master suite.

Tomás sighed, following closely behind me. "Unfortunately not. She's excited this year. She had Doc check her out before the party, so I'm certain she'll be the gracious host she always is. I just hope she won't interfere with the plans set for tonight."

As if sensing that we were discussing her, our mother called out from the hallway, her voice carrying into the suite. Tomás threw a pointed look in my direction as he walked over to the bar to pour us both some much-needed bourbon. "Speak of the devil..."

Tomás tossed down his drink, then poured another generous measure into his glass. We looked up as she poked her head inside my private suite, smiling affectionately at both of us. My mother glided into the room with an elegance learned from years of experience as a don's wife. She twirled around in her lavish black velvet gown, adorned from neck to toe with gold gems and sequins. It's elegant and beautiful, befitting the matriarch of the Serrano Family.

Her dark hair - normally at shoulder-length - was tied up in an elegant chignon at the nape of her neck. Atop her head sat the serpent diamond tiara my father had gifted her, marking her as the head Serrano wife. If I ever married, the tiara would be passed on to my wife.

"Anything to say?" she asked, twirling once before striking a regal pose.

"You look radiant, as always, mother," I said, granting her outfit a nod of approval.

"Thank you, Nic. This is why you're the good son."

Tomás hid his amusement by sipping from his glass, draining the glass in one swallow. If he didn't stop tossing back my expensive bourbon like that, he'd be drunk before the celebrations started.

Despite my mother's comment, we all knew Tomás was her favourite. She had made means to hide it over the years, but I knew she favoured him more.

I didn't blame her. Unlike my brother, who spoiled our mother with gifts and shopping trips and lunches, I wasn't the most affectionate son. I made no effort to spend time with her, and when she extended an invitation, I was ready with an excuse.

My mother was the best person I knew, and if it ever came down to it, I know she would readily take a bullet for me. The love was there, a deep, unspoken current beneath the surface, but it was often buried beneath years of unspoken resentments and the weight of the past.

"Most sons greet their mothers with a kiss on the cheek, you know?" she teased, interrupting my train of thought. She was watching my brother with a spark of mischief in her brown eyes.

"Most mothers wish their sons a happy birthday on the day they are born," I threw in.

She frowned, I think. It was a little hard to tell with all the foundation on her face. Which I really wish she hadn't worn, because she was so much more beautiful without it.

"Have I not wished you a happy birthday yet? Goodness, I'm sorry. Happy birthday, dear."

She smiled suddenly, and leaned forward to ask, "So where's Percival? We need to get started."

I gave my brother a wary look, and he replied,

"He's busy downstairs. He said to start without him while he sets up the tables downstairs."

Mother nodded, and she waved both of us closer impatiently.

"We may as well get started then. It's almost time," she said, pulling her rosary out from the neckline of her dress, and holding it out in her hand.

After my father's passing, my mother had turned to religion for comfort. She had rekindled her relationship with the Catholic church, and her faith had been running strong for nearly twenty years. She prayed, attended mass, spent most of her time and money on charities and helping others. She believed in doing as much good as possible, I think, to cancel out our sins. It wasn't that she was ashamed of our operations - she used to help my father run his business, after all - she just preferred not to be involved anymore. Every now and then, she would offer her advice when solicited, but she preferred to let me run my syndicate how I wanted.

Neither Tomás nor I had a problem with her religious beliefs. The only thing that annoyed us both was when she insisted on these annual prayers on each of our birthdays. My brother and I agreed to keep her happy, because we knew how much it meant to her, but we could do without them.

Our mother grabbed each of our wrists, pulling us closer, so we formed a circle. She bowed her head, closed her eyes and, with the crucifix in her hand, made the sign of the cross while we watched. As always, she started with the Apostles' Creed, before moving on to say the "Our Father" prayer.

My brother was respectful enough to close both his eyes and bow his head, but I was more comfortable with my eyes open. I was far too paranoid to let my guard down while my house was swarming with strangers.

When she was done, we muttered an "Amen" and Tomás immediately stepped away. He always joked that he was scared to stand too close to me in case I suddenly caught on fire during the prayers.

"As much as we'd love to stay here and enjoy the effects of whatever medication you're on tonight, there's plenty to do before the guests arrive."

She arched both brows, looking at me with disapproval. My mother was the only person in the world capable of making me feel even a shred of shame, so I mumbled an apology and pressed an affectionate kiss to her forehead.

"Tomás," she began, holding out her cheek.

"Mother, please. Let's not start this again," Tomás begged.

"Start what? All I'm asking for is a simple kiss on the cheek before the two of you go on your merry way."

His chuckle was affectionate. My gaze darted between the two before I tossed the contents of my glass down my throat and slammed the crystal on the polished bar top. "I think I'll join Percy downstairs..."

"Tomás."

"Alright! Fuck. You're so persistent," he snapped, leaning over to press a gentle kiss on her cheek.

Beaming, my mother held out her hands, regarding us both. "There. Was that so hard?"

"I should have known you would be the reason for their tardiness."

We all turned towards the door as Percy entered, both hands in his pockets, his gaze sweeping over my mother with a concentrated disinterest.

"Katerina."

"Percival."

Tension loomed, until it was thick enough to cut through with a knife. It had always been like this between them, though my brother and I could never understand why. They loved one another like family, but I wondered if there were some underlying issues that have never been resolved.

"You look lovely."

She tried to hide her blush and failed. "Thank you, Percival. You are quite handsome tonight as well."

Tomás and I processed the scene in silence. We exchanged glances as the two of them stared at each other. Frowning, I turned to Percival and asked, "I assume you're here to get us for the count downstairs?"

After peeling his gaze off my mother, Percy glanced at me and shook his head. "We're done. Everything's been divided accordingly," he explained, accepting the glass of bourbon I offered.

He sniffed at the contents and then placed the glass on the bar with a frown in my direction.

All eyes turned to my mother, and the message was clear enough that she sighed softly.

"Enjoy your night. Don't get killed," she said, then paused with a thoughtful expression. "Even you, Percival."

We watched her glide out of the room, her small shoulders squared.

"Is the money with the security team?" Tomás asked.

"The trusted ones, yes. They've already distributed them to the tables your associates know to approach."

I nodded, even though I was already aware of this information. "We might as well have a look."

"No time for that, unfortunately," Percy said, two fingers pressed to the hearing piece in his right ear. "Our guests are here."

3. All That Glitters

Of the five hundred invitations that had been sent out to 'the elite' of the country, four hundred and eighty had RSVP'd. Every guest was expected to present their invitation to security and authenticate their identity with a fingerprint, at which point, they would be allowed entry. Once inside, phones, cameras or any device that could take photos or videos were seized by security. This was for everyone's safety and privacy, to prevent any scandals from making the morning papers or the rush-hour news.

The theme for this year's party was simply, "All That Glitters...", leaving the guests to interpret that however they wanted.

The majority, of course, had stuck to the usual gold. They must have thought I'd see it as a sign of respect for me and mine, since the Serrano colours have always been gold and black. But I thought it tedious and boring, and the idea that they were only dressed that way for my benefit left me unimpressed.

There were some who had gone for more vibrant costumes, with actual glitter and sparkles that blinded. Some were tastefully done, while others were much too tacky for my liking.

Then, of course, there were those who thought that nudity was the best way to get the attention they wanted. Barely-there dresses, see-through sequins... One woman walked in with nothing but a string of white pearls draped all over her body. She stole the show for all of five seconds before the crowd grew bored. I barely spared her a glance, beautiful as she was.

None of them appealed to me. None of them interested me. It was all so dull, and I wished once again that I'd cancelled this year's party. I'd much rather spend the week with Tomás in Reggio Calabria, visiting my mother's many aunts. Or take a weekend off at my paternal grandfather's childhood home in Viñales.

As always, my family and I stood in the expansive entryway, ready to greet the guests. My mother, as the matriarch and widow of the previous Don, was first. As my right-hand and advisor, Percival had the honour of standing beside my mother. Tomás was my heir, and therefore had his place alongside me. I was last in line as the oldest living son and head of the Serrano Family.

We watched as our honoured guests steadily poured into the house, all of them marvelling at the decorations. And I had to give credit to Giffords, because he had truly outdone himself this year.

Everything from the food to the lights, the decor and the entertainment, had been carefully selected to fit my exorbitant tastes. Even the staff were dressed to compliment the setting, their dapper dress likely the most expensive thing any of them have ever worn.

The rest of my family shook the hands of each guest while I offered a curt nod. Those who had attended my birthday celebration before knew of my aversion to human contact and respectfully kept their distance, returning my nod with one of their own.

I waited until the most “esteemed” of my guests had been greeted before I excused myself from my family. Tomás nodded, understanding that my social battery had at last reached its end.

I normally used this time to do my rounds, ensuring that everything was in place. I began my inspection at the casino tables, where one of my associates was approaching with a date half her age. The minister of trade and industry placed her bet of fifty thousand and took her seat while the dealer expertly pulled a card from the deck.

As instructed, that was where she would be paid her year's fee for services rendered. She would, of course, be expected to lose a hand every now and then, but would eventually walk away with five million Cromas in cash.

A gambling license had been obtained, making the transaction legal, so none of them could be charged with accepting bribery or any illegal dealings. It helped me launder my money as well, so everyone won in the end.

I turned my attention to the blackjack table, where Bezabeh was now winning round after round as expected. He still celebrated every win, though, as if genuinely surprised that his bets were paying off.

Satisfied that my staff had things well in hand down here, I walked through the thickening crowd of guests to the stairway leading to the second floor.

My more exclusive guests were invited up here, where their outlandish and freakish tastes were tended to by my faithful staff. Drugs and psychedelics were served like liquor on golden trays polished to perfection and presented in crystal bowls and plates.

Everyone indulged in their narcotic of choice, sniffing and swallowing and injecting whatever was on offer. Security watched them cautiously, keeping a careful eye on the ones I'd picked for my next venture and monitoring the rest so they wouldn't overdose.

The third floor was only to be accessed by exactly twenty people. Hand-picked and chosen by myself, they were the only ones allowed to sample the other most coveted of all my enterprises; my escorts.

My customers paid tens of thousands to merely be in the same room as some of my girls, and even hundreds for a single night with them. I had no hand in choosing them, but I had set strict enough rules to ensure the standards were never lacking and their skill was always on par.

People travelled far and wide to get a taste, and they were never disappointed.

Despite the stellar reviews from my clients, I had never touched any of my staff. I believed that one's pleasure should never be mixed with one's business, for a number of reasons.

I have been tempted, especially on nights when my demons were at their worst. It would be easier than going out into the world and seducing a stranger into my bed.

Beautiful, rich, talented strangers who only held my interest for a night. Strangers who, by morning, were not as lovely or intriguing anymore. It seemed most of them were desperate to be Mrs. Dominic Serrano.

I finally settled on my usual perch on the third floor and observed the festivities with a glass of bourbon in one hand and a cigar in the other. Hours went by, and I watched my guests get drunker and higher, more reckless and less inhibited, throwing caution and control to the wind.

It was always interesting to watch the usually prim and proper members of society forget who they were and give in to temptation like everyone else. To see them unravel and let loose. To observe while they immersed themselves in merriment with their peers. To watch them enjoy their freedom.

No matter how short-lived the moment was.

Tomorrow they would wake up with regrets and try to put themselves back together, hoping that nobody would remember how wild and disgusting they truly were beneath their polished facades.

But I would remember.

And I would never let them forget.

I sifted through the crowd in search of the newly-appointed Solicitor General, who was standing by the bar drinking my expensive liquor and laughing like he didn't have a care in the world. I glared from the shadows while he chatted with the underground's elite, jokes being tossed aside like he wasn't the enemy and the reason for the ISA sniffing around me and my family.

I took a small sip of bourbon and thought in earnest about what I would need to do with him.

The first thing that came to mind was luring him onto the third floor and having one of the guards put a bullet in his head.

But no.

Getting the body out would be a problem. And if he died here, the ISA would turn my home inside out looking for clues. They'd demand the guestlist, thereby ruining the party and the level of confidentiality it afforded them.

The Solicitor General was a loose end, a threat that needed to be neutralized. But a direct hit would be too messy, too risky. I needed a cleaner solution, that would keep the blame off me once his body was discovered.

But perhaps one of the other members of The Seven would mark him. Mr. Liam Summers had already made an enemy of Gabriel Mammen by coming after his latest shipment and confiscating it for the state. The media had been abuzz for weeks about it, giving the public the false hope that crime would dwindle.

Amari Rolle was not a fan either. Summers had been trashing his name in public for the few months that he was awarded the position, costing the younger man millions in business deals and staining his reputation considerably.

One of them would make a move soon. I just prayed it wasn't tonight. But knowing those assholes, they'd rather pin the hit on me than be investigated.

That's why I had several men watching over Summers, some of them masquerading as serving staff to stop an attack that may occur at random. It would be enough to keep him alive, at least for tonight.

He stepped away from the group he'd been talking to and hurriedly began to make his way through the crowd. He moved with purpose, pushing aside those who were too rude to make way. He ignored the grunts of complaint and the moans of annoyance, and when he finally reached his destination, I understood why.

A woman.

A stunning woman.

With the most beautiful, most captivating green eyes I'd ever seen on a human being. Eyes that sparkled with delight and amusement as she took in the room. I saw her brightness dim just a

little when Summers's hand touched the small of her back. The gesture was intimate and possessive, a subtle claim of ownership. His palm pressed just at the small of her back, where her spine curved to an ass that any man would be lucky to get his hands on. And when she smiled, turning her face up to look at him, I found I was curious if she was always this radiant. I caught myself following their path through the ballroom with a curiosity I wasn't acquainted with. I watched her as she walked, as she spoke, mesmerised by the feigned admiration for a man whose touch made her tense at each stroke.

I didn't like it either. I didn't like him touching her.

So when he leaned close to whisper something in her ear, I made the decision to break my own rules. My feet led me down the stairs and back into the thick of the party. As I made my way down the last flight of stairs, the murmurs grew louder and eyes turned to watch me.

I was close enough to hear her laugh and note that the dress she wore was actually pale gold rather than beige. If I reached out, my hand would brush along the length of her arm.

But I would never get the chance.

Ben suddenly stepped in my path, his enormous head blocking out my view of the woman I'd been about to approach. He was out of breath and uncharacteristically concerned, if the crazed look in his blue eyes was any indication.

As my closest friend and personal guard, he was one of the few people in the entire world who was allowed to do what he'd just done.

"We have a situation."

"Get Percy on it," I growled, annoyed that they ran to me with every single problem.

"You said to inform you if anything strange happened, and I think this qualifies."

The guests around us were watching with interest, and I noticed that Summers was inching closer toward us as we spoke, clearly intent on catching something incriminating. The woman with him also glanced our way, her expression betraying her curiosity.

I nudged my head sideways, a gesture meant only for Ben to see. He followed closely as I turned on my heel and walked towards a more discreet location, with fewer people and less curious ears.

"What is it?" I hissed.

"Your uncles and señor Álvarez are here," he said, taking a breath. "And they brought your fiancé."