

# **THE TAMING OF THE BEAST**

(Book 2 in the Gringa Series)

By

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**Table of Contents**

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[CHAPTER NINE](#)

[CHAPTER TEN](#)

[CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SIXTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN](#)

[CHAPTER NINETEEN](#)

[Also By Eve Rabi:](#)

## 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.’

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