

Carlos

Carlos

Grace

"What—" I yelp, finding my lost voice. It's scratchy and weak, but I can speak.

"Oh finally, Ms. Whitlock. It turns out you needed a little motivation before talking to me." The man on the other side laughs again.

Tears well in my eyes but they don't fall. I croak in a quivering voice, "who...who...are you?"

"That's not the right question, Ms. Whitlock." He says, sounding all happy and calm. "You should ask what do I want from you?"

The fist in my hair tightens, breaking a few of my strands. Tears leak out of my eyes at last, as the pain increases in my scalp.

"What...do you...want?" My throat hurts. It's like someone slammed a fist in it and now I can not talk without a pause or without feeling like my throat is bleeding.

"It's simple, Ms. Whitlock. I just want you to convince your boyfriend to call off the shareholder meeting." His voice becomes sharp in the speaker.

Boyfriend? I want to shake my head, but I can't dare to.

"I...have...no..."

"I am talking about Tristin Roberto. Surely, you can not forget your

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boyfriend?" He interrupts and blood drains from my face.

I don't recognize this voice, but I can tell who he is. Goosebumps rise over my skin when the whole scenario suddenly makes sense to me.

"Carlos." I whisper quietly.

Silence meets me on the other end. The hand in my hair loosens, and then the masked man retreats two steps back.

"So you know who I am." He says, in a strange voice. It's not relief that he is feeling for sure. It's anger.

I have tanked my chance at survival. The masks don't mean anything if I know their identity and if I know that they work for Carlos Roberto.

"You...want to use me to blackmail Tristin, Carlos?" My heart twists at the thought.

"You took me by surprise, Ms. Whitlock. I was not expecting you to catch up so fast." He chuckles, but it sounds fake now. There is no amusement in his tone.

I look down at my bleeding wrists again. The deep gashes will leave permanent marks on my skin and if I survive, somehow, this incident will haunt me for the rest of my life. That's the price I must pay for getting involved with Tristin Roberto.

"Now that you understand the situation you are in, it will make things easy for me." Carlos murmurs and the masked man steps closer to me again, pushing the phone in my face.

"I don't have anything personal against you, Ms. Whitlock. All I want

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you to do is to let your boyfriend hear your sweet voice. Tell him how terrified and hurt you are..." He trails off.

I watch as the masked man brings out a switchblade from his pocket and twists it open. The blade gleams under the dim lightning, the sharp tip ready to plunge into my skin and draw blood.

"Tell him that you are going to get your skin ripped, and your body cut into tiny cute pieces if he doesn't do as you say." He threatens.

"And...what is it that...he must do?" I whisper hoarsely while keeping my eyes on the knife.

They will make it hurt till the end, right?

"Nothing much. He just has to admit that the video is not fake and hand over the reigns to me. A man who can not even handle a scandal shouldn't lead such a big empire, don't you think? For that task, I am more suitable than he will ever be. That's what you have to make him realize." He suggests dryly.

Such a stupid man. He really thinks Tristin will give up his power, money, and position for what? Me?

I can't help the sardonic smile that pulls at my lips. "You are...a powerful man yourself. How can you believe there is...anything between Tristin and me? And even if there is...why would he give up so much...for me?"

Carlos remains silent for a moment. I take my eyes off the blade, and glance at my wrists, twisting them under the rope, watching it dig deeper into my skin.

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I am bound again, forced to be helpless. But...they can only bind me physically. They can not break inside my head and make me yield.

"Are you really asking me that question?" Carlos huffs. "It turns out you are not that smart, Ms. Whitlock. Did you not understand Tristin until now?"

"I...understand powerful men. They are...all the same. If they have to choose between anything in this world and power...they will stick to power, Carlos. That's all that matters to them." I mutter, trying to muster energy in my limbs.

Carlos chuckles again. This time, it sounds like genuine laughter, as if he is making fun of me and my thoughts.

"You are interesting, Ms. Whitlock." He says. "I take it that you believe Tristin won't listen to your pleas so you will not cooperate with us?"

"Of course not." I whisper and halt my tries. "Why...do you even need me to...talk to him? If you want—"

"That's what the bastard wants. He won't give in until he talks to you." Carlos snaps, and the masked man places the knife against the back of my hand.

My breath hitches, waiting for him to cut my skin but he doesn't attempt anything. It's a threat. If I continue to infuriate the Boss, I will face consequences.

"Good..." I nod my hurting head. "Then I...won't talk to him at all."

Carlos

Tristin's face flashes before my eyes. After he barged into my life and showed me a different side of him, something changed between us. The thought of making him lose anything over me, because of me, sounds worse than death.

And the worst fact is that...if I talk to him, and he doesn't give me any importance now...

If he tells these people to do with me as they please...

I don't think I will be able to fight back at all.

I am scared that he will choose his power over me even if that's what I want for him. I am terrified that he will not care whether I die or live and the little spark in my heart will die forever.

These emotions are strange, but at this moment, they act as my only source of strength.

"Perhaps, you will change your mind once you see my present. "
Carlos muses, his voice taking on a different, chirpy note.

"What—" 1

My words die on my tongue as another masked man drags a half-conscious girl on the floor and dumps her in the corner. In the dark, I can not make out her features but I can recognize those wavy blonde locks anywhere.

"Ce...Celine. " A violent shudder rolls down my body.

"Bingo! Now I can hear the fear in your voice, Ms. Whitlock. "

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Laughter fills my ears and my blood turns cold in my veins.

As long as you are alone in this world, you can stand tall, and plunge to the depths of hell if that's what you must do. Because you know you are alone. There is no one you care about, no one to hold you back, no one to weaken your heart.

But the moment someone you care about turns up on the threshold of your hell, on the verge of getting burned in the fire meant for you...

It feels like the pain has broken the skin, and seeped into a deeper part of your soul. You can face it if you are burning alone, but if your loved ones are burning because of you...it's a fate worse than death.

And then you realize...that you have no will to fight.

"I—I will...do...whatever you want." I whisper, staring at her as she stirs and meets my gaze.

"G—Grace." Her nose is bleeding, and her eyes are out of focus.

"Everything will be fine." Suddenly, I find it easier to talk, easier to start twisting my wrists again.

Even if Tristin doesn't come, I can't give up and let Celine die with me.

"That's what you should have done from the start, Ms. Whitlock." Carlos laughs again as if enjoying his power over me.