



A LOVER'S MERCY

FIONA ZEDDE

CHAPTER 1

“I WANT YOU TO MEET my family,” Mai says in the quiet of our bedroom.

Her dark-gold eyes are cautious, a pink-tinged lower lip caught between her teeth. The warm weight of her, draped over mine, feels almost too light.

She’s nervous.

Because I’m not a complete ass, I bite back my automatic refusal. “Why? Do you want me to kill them, too?”

It’s a bit of a sore spot between us that I murdered her uncle a few months ago.

A wince tics across her beautiful face, and she turns away to give me the curled C of her back. But it’s only to reach for the water on the bedside table. She drinks and looks over her shoulder at me with her soul in her eyes. The thick cloud of hair around her face, an angel’s corona, bounces with her movements and exhales the scent of rose-infused shea butter.

“Sometimes you can be cruel.” Her look tells me she doesn’t know whether or not she thinks that’s a good thing.

“I know.”

Mai returns the water glass to the table and settles herself next to me instead of on top as we both prefer. Iridescent scales ripple across her throat, a brief loss of control of her newly realized powers. Seconds later, the scales disappear into her skin like they were never there.

So beautiful.

I caress the line of skin, following its softness under the open collar of the pale yellow sleep shirt she wears.

My love is a chameleon and shape-shifter, who can change her body into whatever she pleases. She can give herself claws that shred, a long tail to pick up a glass from the countertop, a rippled tongue to fuck me until I scream.

Barely three months ago, Mai's long-dormant Meta powers came bursting to the surface. It was only then that her power-rich family started to pay more attention to her.

Mai sees through them. It's obvious why they're suddenly interested in her being a real part of the family, but knowing their motives doesn't make her want her family any less.

Although she's strong, they make her think she's weak.

Her back is delicate as steel under my hands. I trace its curve through the soft cotton of her shirt. "They don't deserve you and you know it. If you ever change your mind about me killing your mommy dearest, or any of them, I am completely at your service. One trained enforcer assassin to do whatever you want." My voice drops to a low purr. "Whenever you want." She can take that however she likes.

Rising up from her pillow, Mai squirms, delicious and conflicted. She's so sweet I could just drink her all up.

"No, thank you. I told you, I don't want them dead." A frown marks her forehead. With a hand hooked around the back of my neck and tangled in the ends of my short hair, she drags my mouth to hers. "You're so horrible," she says against my lips.

I know she doesn't mean it as foreplay but *Christ*, the way she says, it makes me ache.

"All this sweet talk will get you nowhere with me." Smiling and leaning close, I unbutton her sleep shirt, just to make sure she knows what direction my thoughts are heading. "I'm not going to your mother's house with you so you can just give that up right now." My hands drift down her clenching belly to the mound between her thighs. I grip her gently, teasing the delicate flesh. "And I'd dearly love for you to give this up, too."

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A soft whine of protest leaves her lovely throat. “Stop trying to distract me.” Her whine turns into a low moan from the movement of my fingers. “God, that feels so good...”

My mouth presses into hers and smothers her gasp. I play between her legs, distracting her from how much I love this sensuous mouth of hers. Kissing is a soft thing, not meant for people like me. With Mai, it's a guilty pleasure I can't get enough of.

Her lips are absolutely perfect. A more luscious shape, texture, or flavor has never existed, at least not as far as I'm concerned. When in my arms, she always smells of desire, the thick and salty aroma rising from between her legs like smoke from home fires. Even when she's angry with me.

But her lips... They call to me like the softness denied to me over the years of my life. Hard training with the enforcers left me merciless. When Mai's cousin killed my only sister, Ixchel, just a baby and mine to protect, I lost my mind for a few years and did things I should be ashamed of. And until very recently, all I had was my job as an enforcer and the games I played to get revenge on the monster who took her away from me.

Now though, I have Mai. And her incredible lips.

Soft and tender and loving. They welcome mine with a sigh, parting and tilting up to receive me. The top and bottom lips mirror each other, identical. I've stared at them and visually measured enough to be convinced of this. There's a small dimple just below them. Mai denies it exists, but it's true. When she's tired, it's there. When she just barely stops herself from confessing how much she loves me, it appears. A telltale sign of her feelings. I press my lips briefly to it.

“Stop playing with me.” She gasps and moves impatiently against the bed.

My tongue flicks a line from her top to bottom lip, almost a dry stroke. Her breath hitches. Impatient fingers grab the edge of the oversized T-shirt I wear to bed and pull it off me, briefly interrupting our kiss.

“Hm. That’s better.” Mai strokes my naked back and lower, pulling me closer and demanding more. Her long body maneuvers its way under me, and she grips my short hair in a fist, intoxicatingly ready for a long night enclosed in the warmth of our bedroom with me.

My body melts. The breath trips in my throat.

It’s incredible that this is the very same bed I trapped her against when I broke into her apartment a few months ago, intending to warn her from investigating the murders I committed. Now, this is the place where she welcomes me. Makes love to me. Challenges me to be better.

I’m nothing special. Powerful, yes, but Mai doesn’t care about that. Without my power, I’m just an ordinary woman. Short, black curls in a pixie cut that shows off my pointed ears, a usefully slender body, and eyes that deceive. But she wants me just the same.

With my breathing not quite so steady, I pull back from her lips, but only a little. “What about the dinner with your family?” I ask. A shallow probe at her slick entrance provokes a moan, and I laugh softly, the wickedness she likes in me coming out to play. “Don’t you want to talk more about it?” A little deeper and she cries out, digging her fingers into my back.

“Xóchitl, are—are you trying to drive me out of my m-mind?”

“Never. I want you sane and with me for a very long time to come.” But I move my fingers inside her again, kissing her incredible lips, savoring the pleasure that her pleasure brings me.

The sound of her passion rings through the room, loud and heady, and I feel her beginning to fumble between my thighs, but I pull her hand away and trap it above her head. That’s not what I want right now.

“I need more. Xóchitl, please...” How she begs me. The way she calls my name. Doesn’t try to shorten it to something her American tongue is already used to. This is an aphrodisiac in itself.

“More of what, Mai?” My fingers tease her shallowly.

“Just fuck me already!”

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Her profanity makes me laugh. Chuckling into the thickness of her hair, I gladly give her what she wants. The liquid drive of my fingers inside her wanting center wrings a cry from us both.

A low sound bursts out into the room. Her telephone.

Beneath me, Mai stiffens. Her eyes fly open and she moans for an entirely different reason. "No, no, no..." But her hips keep moving, thrusting up to greedily take everything I give her. That moment of self-indulgence doesn't last long. Growling in frustration, she pushes my hands away from between her thighs then dives across the bed to grab the cell phone.

"Mercy," she answers with barely a tremor in her voice.

Fighting back a curse, I roll onto my back and drop a hand over my eyes. Now that we're not kissing, I become aware of just how turned on I am. My thighs are soaked and the most urgent of tingles vibrate in my belly. If we'd kept going for any longer, my orgasm would've snuck up on me. Nothing I'd complain about, obviously.

But damn human cops.

"I hope I wasn't interrupting anything," a male voice says through the phone. It's not loud but my hearing easily catches everything he's saying.

"You actually are," I mutter, making no effort to keep my voice down.

The imbecile doesn't hear me. Mai gives me a shushing glance to which I only reply with a widening of my thighs to show her how desperately aroused I am. She bites her lip and turns away.

"Don't worry about it," she says into the phone. "What can I do for you?"

"I know you haven't heard from us in a while, but this current situation requires your particular skills." The idiot on the other end of the line sounds satisfied with himself. Like he's doling out compliments to someone starved for them. Maybe he is.

"Tell me more." She climbs out of the bed, already in superhero mode.

While I vaguely entertain the thought of taking care of my own orgasm while she's on the phone, the whole sad story comes pouring

out. Apparently, there's a hostage situation. A group of criminals broke into a politician's house and have his entire family prisoner. Husband, kids, dog, everything. This politician is unexpectedly away at some sort of impromptu meeting, which is a happy coincidence for him.

The criminals have lots of guns and demands only the politician can fulfill. Some strange kind of political blackmail. Do those humans think they can actually get away with this?

The cop finishes up by asking, "Can you help?"

"Of course." Mai doesn't hesitate. "Where is all this happening?"

He quickly gives her the address and gets her agreement to be there in return before he ends the call.

"Why do I get the feeling I'm about to get left high and wet?" I watch as she shrugs off what little clothes she has on.

Already in mid-change, her soft skin transforming into hard, burgundy leather—a true transformation this time instead of the mere illusions she was capable in the past—Mai turns to frown at me. "We're not done talking about this."

"Talking about what? You abandoning your girlfriend's very urgent sexual needs to go play with a bunch of humans in uniform?"

A balled-up shirt narrowly misses my face. But only because I catch it mid-air.

"No—dinner with my family. Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm talking about."

"Well, darling, your sweet lips made me forget everything but the way you taste. Can you blame me?"

"Yes, I actually can." Fully changed, she is Mercy now. She wears skin-tight, dark red leather, complete with a mask only showing her intense and long-lashed eyes. It looks like she's been skiing in blood. The wet place between my thighs gives a hard and powerful throb.

All I want to do is wrestle her to bed and make love to her until she forgets she even got a phone call. Those cops of hers wouldn't see her for days. To hell with the stupid politician who can't keep his own family safe.

But I can't do that.

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"See you right here when you get back," I murmur with an airy wave. The silk sheets shift under me as I adjust myself against the pillows, and a hint of moonlight pours through the window to fall like liquid silver over my naked breasts. Mai stares because she can't help herself. "Be safe while you're out there saving the world." I hide my smile when she tears her eyes away from me with visible effort.

"Right. Okay." A shiver runs through her body. Then she shakes her head, the tiniest of smiles shaping her mouth. "Why are you such a terrible person?"

"Because you wouldn't want me any other way?"

A sound of exasperation leaves her lips, then she is at the bedroom's wide window, sliding it open. "I'll be back before you fall asleep." She slips out into the night.

I take a breath. Then two.

With Mai gone, the apartment is quiet. Just the sounds of the various appliances carrying on with their business. The quiet hum of the central air conditioning. The fridge that never has enough food for her, let alone the two of us. The computer she left on after she finished grading papers for the night.

A few more breaths pass while I lay in bed, watching the empty window and listening to Mai's quiet steps along the side of the building, then up to the roof. She's gone to save the world while I lay here, saving nothing. My chance at making a change, at saving something precious, came and went with my sister, Ixchel. She died alone, in terror.

And I became...this.

Usually, I allow introspection to pass me by, but there's something about this moment. It feels like nighttime crept into the room with me as Mai crept out, bringing with it its shadows that mirror mine.

I have too many secrets to count. They've accumulated like dirt under fingernails while grasping in desperation at a life lived on the surface of violence. That's why I like Mai Redstone so much. This foolish, beautiful creature with a family of vipers and a heart big enough for all of Atlanta to live in. She's as naked to me as a newborn sliding from their mother's bloodied crease, and that makes

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me cherish her even more. That's what makes me want to keep her safe.

And that's the only reason I can think of why I get up from the nest of comfortable silk sheets, get dressed, and follow the path she took out of the apartment and into the night. She's too important for me to lose her now.

CHAPTER 2

THE POLITICIAN LIVES IN A nice part of town. Wide streets. A coffee shop on every corner. Dog groomers and mayonnaise shops all over the place. But that didn't stop the guys with guns from breaking in and demanding whatever it is that these types always seem to want. The police officer on the phone seemed to think it's more than that. Of course, he would know more about human motivations than me.

So would Mai, actually.

Following her is as easy as it's always been. She may be able to change her shape and camouflage her body to blend into the surroundings, but she's always visible to me now. Easily found.

The reason for it is part of my power, which is why the enforcers came knocking on my mother's door when I was a child. Each Meta sends out a particular kind of energy on the spectrum I'm able to see. Not only is my power strong, it's also one that few Metas can protect themselves against. Although Mai thinks I can read every mind I encounter, my power is not that. Not with other Metas who I can only sense but never read, unless I pull them into my heart and love them more than myself.

The way I love Mai.

All human minds, though, are completely transparent to me. Not necessarily their motives but their every thought is laid open for me to read and to see—if I'm interested enough to take a look. Living among humans and having that kind of ability would be agony if I weren't able to control it. But I can, and I do. Most times, I don't care enough what's going on in a human's mind to bother looking.

My thoughts about what I can and can't do slip away when Mai arrives at the house.

Oh. The humans have a lot of guns.

From high in a tall tree, I take in all the action in the two-story family home a few hundred yards away. I can see why the cops called Mai. This is what they'd call a lose-lose situation. Six humans with very large guns hold hostage the oversized cottage of a pair of four-year-old twins, a tiny beige dog, and a very pissed-off spouse.

The husband is big. He either lifts weights or injects growth hormones in his spare time. In an ideal situation (for him), he could've taken out one or two of those guys in the house by himself. But as it is, there are six men of various sizes. Not to mention if he so much as twitches any of those large muscles the wrong way, I have no doubt the hostage takers would happily mow down one of the girls to teach him a lesson.

Two of the armed men have their semi-automatic weapons trained on the wide-eyed children and obliviously playful dog while another set threatens the husband, demanding to know where his other half is. The conversation sounds like it's on its third or fourth go-round. One of the men is on the phone, apparently trying to reach the politician husband. No obvious police cars lurk in the area. The confrontation looks very private.

With barely any effort, I sweep their minds, slipping in to rifle through their thoughts.

Oh, so the cop was right. This isn't a matter of a simple smash and grab: They want the politician to withhold his vote on something that matters to a lot of people in the city but means more to the corporations paying them. Didn't they stop doing this kind of obvious intimidation in the thirties?

Where is the man's husband, anyway?

Not that I actually care about where he is. The only person I care about is just about to do something stupid. Or, in her mind, "heroic." She's already talked to the people in charge. There's some kind of plan in place.

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I hear her heartbeat. Her thoughts are focused. Through her eyes, I see everything: The house she crouches on top of. The cops waiting in darkness to do their part of the rescue mission. Her hands flex as power for her change floods her body with adrenaline that is like pain and pleasure both.

Now.

In a shower of multicolored glass, Mai bursts through the skylight with a snarl on her face and claws where fingers were moments before. Pieces of glass glitter around her as she lands in a crouch in front of the children, pulls them both to her, and throws her arms around them.

Not the safest approach.

With a rush of air, bat-like wings spring along her long arms and up her sides. The wings are a deep red and leatherlike, a match to her new skin, and are harder than steel. Without looking into her mind, I know she hasn't tested them before, not against bullets. Stupid woman.

Fear for her grips my throat tight.

With this terror pushing me on, I'm out of the tree and leaping onto the front porch when I hear the bullets spit from the guns, aimed right at Mai and the children. Semi-automatic weapons. Armor-piercing rounds. My heart nearly stops.

But the bullets bounce right off her skin like they're made of rubber and shower around the room, some flying back into the idiots who fired them in the first place. Mai grunts in satisfaction, whirls around still with the children in her arms, lifts them, even heavy as they are, and sprints toward an adjoining room.

As quickly as I got to the porch, I draw back, hiding again. Easily climbing up the roof, I crouch low to watch Mai's rescue come together.

Mai's appearance and very impressive distraction give the cops lurking at the back door just enough of an opening to burst in. Five officers, all in black, with their guns out, shout for the men to surrender or die. Their radios are squawking with all kinds of chatter as they swarm the gunmen, armed with their shields, bulletproof

vests, and pistols. Not bad. But Meta enforcers could have done much better. When we go in, we are silent as death, and with a threat like this, we leave death in our wake as well.

None of these fools with guns would've survived to lie about who sent them. A roar breaks through the other noises in the house. The husband.

"You assholes!" With the police there and the criminals distracted, he rises up, a volcanic mountain spitting fire, and rushes toward one of his armed attackers. One of the men spins with his gun ready and fires blindly, eyes narrowed with anger and adrenaline at the sudden futility of his position. Oh, it's a woman. *Her* position, then.

She's bad enough at desperation to miss that massive target and hits the floor with a grunt, with a giant on top of her intent on murder.

"You tried to kill my kids, I'm going to fucking *murder* you!"

Gloved hands drag him off the woman before he can do more than shake her. "Who put you up to this?" Muscle Husband screams. "Who's doing this to us?" Then he suddenly remembers something more important. "Where are my girls? Where are the kids?"

The cops try to subdue him, and I'm impressed by how much effort it takes. Hopefully, the politician knows how lucky he is to have a partner like this. Or unlucky, if he's the one behind this foolish move.

Damn, why do I even care about this? Mai is the reason why I'm here, not to be amused by these people and their petty politics.

To be fair, Meta politics isn't too far removed from this. Only usually with more dead bodies and none of it ending up on the news.

Okay, enough. Mai is somewhere around here. Ah, there she is.

Safe. She hasn't done anything more stupid than usual. Breath flows easily through my body, and although I'm fairly certain nothing else will happen tonight, I don't lower my guard.

In the dark, where no one can see, she heads toward her human cops. She has both girls in her arms, one on each hip. Her bat wings are gone. Her face is still masked, but she's done something to it that makes her seem less frightening somehow. With a tenderness that's

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completely like her, she hands over the girls to two of the human police she works with in secret. The girls are sobbing, tears striping their faces as they call for their father.

Mai cups the cheek of each girl, one after the other, and leans in to say something to them. Miraculously, whatever she says works. They stop sobbing and fall into hiccups, staring at her with wide eyes and nodding like she's Disneyland opened up to them all at once.

I don't care enough to eavesdrop on the conversation. Her body is whole and unharmed. No bullets pierced her precious skin. No knife slashed into her stubborn hide. That's enough for me.

With her new and stronger abilities, Mai thinks she's nearly indestructible, but I know better than anyone how far from the truth that is. But she's mine to protect, whether she knows about it or not, whether she likes it or not. A smile from Mai, and the girls both lean in to try and fall into her arms again. But she stills them both and tips her head toward the house where Muscle Papa is having a coronary about his missing children.

The girls need to go back into the arms of the one they love. And Mai does, too.

I watch while she finishes up with her police. Lurking, listening. Making sure the way she moves isn't hiding an injury she doesn't want anyone to notice.

"Time for me to go back home," she tells the detective with the scar above his eye and a look on his face that says he'd love to see her off the clock sometime.

He's not even worth the effort of being jealous.

"Well, thank you for coming out on such notice. I know this isn't your usual thing—"

"My only usual thing is just helping people who aren't able to help themselves. I'm glad I could be of assistance."

It looks like he's going to say something else, but Mai's attention is already elsewhere, wondering if I'm already asleep and if I am, how mad will I be if she wakes me up. The need on her face makes me want to be very awake when she gets back to the condo.

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“All right, take care of yourself now.” He’s obviously not taking his own advice since he allows his gaze to roam over Mai’s body. It’s a quick look, one she doesn’t catch.

“All right, until next time.” Already, she’s walking away, her skin automatically changing to blend into the shadows.

That’s my cue to leave.

The roof tiles hold firm under my boots as I climb down, then silently drop to the ground two floors below to follow and then pass Mai on her path back home. If I’m lucky, the adrenaline will still be flowing hot and strong through her when she gets into the apartment, powerful enough to drain her reason and memory.

If.

If that’s the case, then she’ll want me as soon as she climbs back through the window, her skin aching for hard contact and the exhaustion a few hours of rough love-making can bring. Only then will she allow me to distract her some more from that ridiculous dinner with her family that will never happen. Ever.

CHAPTER 3

“I TOLD THEM I’M SEEING someone.” Mai nibbles on the edge of a wheat biscuit, ignoring the crumbs that drop into her lap and all over her white linen pants. Why my woman chose to wear white to a breakfast picnic in the park, I have no idea.

The sun blazes cool and gold over our morning picnic. A crisp October 10 a.m. with biscuits, red-pepper jelly, sausage made from spa-massaged turkeys, and gourmet coffee. My gift to her. Well, maybe it’s a gift to both of us. Mai sometimes pretends she has no patience for romance, but I’ve seen into her dreams.

“You’re an adult who also happens to like sex,” I say from my place propped up against a pillow and on top of the thick blanket protecting us from the grass and its creepy-crawlies. “I hope that didn’t surprise any of them.” And by ‘them,’ I mean her mother.

Mai ignores my usual snark. “They want to know if you’re human or Meta or...whatever.”

Something about the way she’s not looking my way makes me suspicious. I pause with the cup of coffee halfway to my mouth. “But you didn’t tell them, did you?” My love is trying to keep secrets from her family, and it’s kind of adorable. “You’re hiding that I’m a Meta from them.” Unlike most Metas, I can disguise who I am. It’s part of my ability to hunt that the enforcers find useful.

“They don’t have to know every little thing about me,” Mai says, defensive.

The hot coffee floods over my tongue when I sip. Potent caffeine. Dark roasted and scalding. I swallow, then put aside the cup to stand on its own in the grass. “So you’re just going to pretend they don’t

have eyes on just about everything you do?” Her family probably knows when we had sex for the first time. Not that our public parking lot sexcapade was that hard to miss, or catch on camera, by anyone passing by.

“They may be watching me but that doesn’t mean they’re in every part of my life.” Her words are flippant, but the pain behind them squeezes my insides in a fist. Mai may have pulled away from her poisonous family to save herself, but she still loves them. Still wants those reptiles in her life.

The last of the biscuit disappears between her teeth in a final rain of crumbs. “Not the way I want them to be, at least.” She looks wistful but angry with herself, too.

With my fingers linked with hers, I tug her down to the blanket with me. The autumn day is cool. Dying leaves fall from the tall trees and drift all around us. I lay back on the pillow with Mai draped over me and pull another thick blanket over us. The coolness of the day doesn’t bother me, but there’s something indescribably good about the intimacy of being under the covers together, even if it’s in the middle of a city park.

Light as feathers, her bare toes brush back and forth over the top of my feet. “I’m sorry. I know you didn’t plan this entire wonderful morning just for me to talk endlessly about my family.” Her butter-scented breath brushes over my lips, and she rolls her eyes.

“I planned this so you can talk about whatever you want and to do whatever you want.” As always, I can’t keep my hands to myself. They wander over the curve of her hip and down to her thigh. “I won’t lie and say I’m not tired of the subject though.”

“Ha! I can always count on you to be honest with me, Xóchitl.” She slides off me to land gently on her back but with her arm pressed against mine. Pushing away the blankets, she leaves herself bare to the chilled morning. Mai blinks up at the sky, smiling.

“I try to be honest with you, unless I can’t.” I carefully watch her face for the answer to my question. “Do you want me to start lying to you?”

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“No, no! Please don't. I rely on you for that. Don't let my grouchiness convince you otherwise.”

Her lips dip down at the corners, the smile quietly dying. I give in to the ever-present urge to kiss her. Lightly this time. A tease for now and a promise to get more later. “Grouchy doesn't suit you.” This sadness popping up like a jack-in-the-box at unexpected moments has got to go, and for good. “That's more my MO.”

I may be a bit of an ass, but part of what makes me so good at my real job is that I'm a natural protector. Sheltering the people I love from the things that hurt them, no matter how small, gives my life purpose. My mind skitters away from my little sister and just how much I failed to keep her safe.

“I don't think you're so much grouchy as have no time for anyone's shit,” Mai says. “Even mine.”

Instead of answering, I brush the soft line of her throat with my lips. The motion is so delicate that it tickles. She laughs again, trying to hide her vulnerable skin from me. I stop teasing before she can really get too far with that.

“Come on, eat some more.” I steal one last kiss. “Your sister is going to drag you all over that museum, and you won't have time to eat before.”

“I already ate half the food in that basket!”

I dip into the basket and produce a crisp slice of pear. “Eat the other half.” A hum of satisfaction vibrates my chest when her lips part to accept the fruit. “You get any skinnier and I'll have to find a new girlfriend. You know I prefer my women thick and juicy.”

“You ass!” She laughs, covering her mouth to stop pieces of chewed pear from flying everywhere.

“Don't worry, you're still juicy, so you still have that at least going for you.” A piece of pear disappears into my mouth and I slowly chew, enjoying the strange mix of fruit and coffee on my tongue. Hm. What would pear-flavored coffee taste like? Hell, Starbucks will probably have that flavor next year as a special summer blend.

I love it when she laughs. When that smile of hers comes out, it pops instant gladness inside my chest. My happy by proxy. And

in return for gifting me with some of the best days I've had so far, I want to give Mai Redstone everything.

I'm such a sap about Mai most days that I make myself sick.

Moments later, a butterfly lands on the back of her hand in a flutter of gold-dusted wings.

"Wow! Look!" Her thick lashes quiver in surprise, but other than that she stays perfectly still. "Xóchitl...isn't it beautiful?" Her voice comes out in a whisper like she's afraid that speaking too loudly will make the butterfly rush away. But it's not going anywhere. I've made sure of it.

The butterfly is a pretty thing. Its wings are like gauze. They wave back and forth through the air, filtering sunlight over Mai's skin. She stretches out her fingers to get a better look at the pretty creature on the back of her hand. Just then, another lands on her pinkie, then another on her arm. A gold-and-black monarch butterfly makes a landing strip of her shoulder. A heartbeat later, nearly a dozen of them, tiny and as white as her ridiculous pants, drift from a nearby tree and settle on her chest.

Mai's smile grows wider, and she stares at the butterflies using her as a perch like they are pure magic. More and more of them arrive. They flit across her skin, across her clothes, passing each other, but coming back to land on her like she's the most perfect flower they've found in the park.

Her eyes dart up to look me. "How are you not—Oh! You're doing this."

"Doing what, Mai darling?" But I'm smiling, and a dozen more butterflies flutter over to our blanket, landing in her hair, on her nose, on her smiling cheek.

They're in different patterns and colors: blue, green, yellow, a silken black with dots on its wings that look like eyes. I hear a gasp of surprise—someone passing by our mostly secluded spot. Then low conversations that sounds like strangers talking. But since it doesn't seem like anything dangerous, I only have eyes for Mai.

Soon, she's covered in butterflies, only with room to breathe and giggle about their tiny feet tickling her. Before her amazement can

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turn into a panic that she's covered in dozens of glorified bugs, I release the butterflies with a thought.

Like a rippling ribbon made up of a hundred colors, they rise from her skin, wings fluttering. They float up and up, undulating briefly above Mai like a flock of tiny birds, moving in a semi-solid mass, back and forth, showing off, before scattering in different directions.

Soon, it's just us and the bright blue sky and Mai's gentle amazement.

"That was a little incredible, and a lot sexy." She crouches over me, fingers clutching the loose fold of my cream-colored dress. "I'm saying this as someone who's seen some amazing things. You basically just guaranteed you'll be getting some tonight."

"I was already guaranteed a piece before all this," I tell her with a smug smile.

Although I've been semi-paying attention, I become aware of more eyes on us. Then a cell phone camera or five. The lenses of the phones are turned up toward the sky now and away from us. The few who'd been watching the butterfly show have already wandered away.

An annoyance. Why couldn't I have the power to harness lightning so I can fry these intrusive phones?

But then Mai presses me down into the blanket with more-than-PG-13 kisses, her mouth open and ravenous. It takes no more than that to make me forget all about the people watching us. My senses scatter like a thousand enchanted butterflies.

When she lifts her head a long time later, her lips are damp and swollen and her eyelids heavy from thoughts of sex. I brush my thumb along her lush lower lip and allow her thoughts to tug me along to that sweet and hot place. I squirm against the blanket. At least we don't have anything important to do later. We can take this picnic back to the bedroom and keep it going for the rest of the day and into the night.

What I want to eat right now I can't in public.

“So.” She brushes her lips along my jaw. “What else can you do? You’ve never really told me.”

Without my permission, my head tilts back, allowing Mai access to whatever part of me she wants. Traitorous body.

“Ah...” I swallow hard and dig my fingers into her hair when she finds that spot between my collarbones. She ghosts her tongue lightly over it, which basically acts like the key to opening my legs. I smell myself and I know she does, too.

My tongue tries to wipe away the dryness of my lips. “I’m a woman of many talents.” A low moan breaks my reply in two. “I can’t give away all my secrets to you so soon.”

“Hm. So your powers are secret.” Her gaze meets mine as she continues to tease.

From the spark in her eyes, I know she’s joking. Mai doesn’t want to measure my power and use that as a way to judge my worth. That’s something her mother does. But she’s also right that the things I can do are more secret than they are known.

The enforcers are powerful, and most of us have more than one skill. We usually keep at least one hidden from everyone but our enforcer team. This secrecy is a habit that’s very hard to break. Even with the people we love.

“Very soon,” I whisper against her lips like a vow. “I won’t have a single secret that doesn’t belong to you.”

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A LOVER'S MERCY

BY FIONA ZEDDE

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