



*Tainted*  
**BLOOD**

*USA Today Bestselling Author*

**CORA KENBORN**

*International Bestselling Author*

**CATHERINE WILTCHER**

Tainted  
**BLOOD**

*Tainted Blood*  
**Copyright © 2021**  
**by Cora Kenborn and Catherine Wiltcher**

Cover design by Maria at Steamy Designs

Editing by Saints and Sinners Editing and Proofreading

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.

The following story contains mature themes, strong language, and sexual situations. It is intended for adult readers.

This e-book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you are reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your e-book retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of various products referenced in the work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owner.

 Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

[Tainted Blood](#)

[Author Note](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue](#)

[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](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Corrupt Gods World](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About Cora Kenborn](#)

[About Catherine Wiltcher](#)

[Also By Cora Kenborn](#)

[Also By Catherine Wiltcher](#)

[Follow Cora Kenborn](#)

[Follow Catherine Wiltcher](#)

*“Goonies never say die...”*

## TAINTED BLOOD



*A Carrera is a master of deception.  
A Santiago never forgets.*

Santi Carrera is the war I never saw coming.  
A beautiful liar.  
Ruthless.  
Captivating...  
The architect of my own undoing.

He twisted my loyalty into an ultimatum.  
He chained me to his side with a vow of deceit.  
I should despise him for all he's done to me...  
But behind those dark eyes, I see his pain.  
I recognize his conflict because it's ours to share.

Now, I'm a pawn in a new war.  
Stolen by a stranger, I've been taken to a foreign land.  
My fate rests in the fragile truce between our families.  
They will tear this world apart to find me.  
*But he's the only man who can save me.*

## AUTHOR NOTE



Dear Reader,

Tainted Blood is Book 2 of Corrupt Gods, a dark mafia romance duet. ***It is not a standalone novel.*** Knowledge of Book 1, [Bad Blood](#), is required to understand characters and events.

*“My only love sprung from my only hate...”*  
—William Shakespeare

xoxo,

Cora and Catherine

# PLAYLIST



*In no particular order...*

If We Never Met - John K., Kelsea Ballerini  
Black Sea - Natasha Blume  
Dirty Mind - Boy Epic  
Umbrella (Epic Trailer Version) - J2, JVZEL  
Fight For My Survival - The Phantoms  
Dead Man Walking - WAR\*HALL  
Like That - Bea Miller  
Black Widow - Iggy Azalea, Rita Ora  
Sucker For Pain - Lil Wayne, Wiz Khali  
Heathens - Twenty-One Pilots  
Gangsta - Kehlani  
Devil Eyes - Hippie Sabotage  
You Should See Me In a Crown - Billie Eilish  
Prisoner - Raphael Lake, Aaron Levy  
Give Em Hell - Everyone Loves An Outlaw  
Finish Line - SATV Music  
The Hunted - The Rigs  
Do It For Me - Rosenfeld  
Drink Me - Michele Morrone  
Feeling Good - Michale Bubl 

[Listen to the Tainted Blood Playlist](#)

## **PROLOGUE**

SANTI



## TEN YEARS AGO

THE SNOW IS FALLING HARDER NOW.

It's settling on the windshield. Fading the whole world to white.

I check my phone again, my pulse kicking into overdrive when I see RJ's text.

**Got it. Call you in five.**

*I knew it.*

I'm already stepping out of the SUV by the time Tito, my cartel-appointed babysitter, shakes his fist at me across the console. "¡Maldito niño estúpido! Get back in the fucking car, kid!"

"I'll only be a minute."

"Where the hell are you going?"

I shift my gaze toward the old church. "To prove a point."

Slamming the door, I make my way across the street, a thick blanket of snow climbing up to my calves and soaking my jeans.

I can hear my father's voice with every step.

*Choices have consequences, Santi.*

Even as a reckless thirteen-year-old, I understand the meaning of the phrase, and the warning that comes with it. He's drilled it into me so many times it's become like second nature.

Today, I've made three choices, but the consequences are still a mystery. The first was crossing the Mexican border into America. The second was

my decision to join this war. And the third? That happened ten seconds ago, when I chose to ignore a direct order.

The snow is up to my knees. I decide I'm not a fan as I trudge a path through it, adrenaline rushing through my veins.

I can't screw this up.

*I won't screw this up.*

I glance down at my phone.

*Three minutes to go.*

I slow my stride as I reach my destination, the muted yellow street lights above me casting a wide glow. With its menacing stone gargoyles, Sacred Heart Church looks out of place on the quiet street in Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey. It's a little town right outside Hackensack, coated in Americana and family values. Mom and Pop shops line one side of the narrow streets, while parks and little league fields dominate the other.

Simple.

But that's another thing I've learned. The simplest solutions are often the smartest, like hiding in plain sight, for instance.

While I wait for RJ's call, my gaze strays toward the jagged New York City skyline. Something stirs inside me. Something I can't explain. Those bright lights might as well be spelling out my name. One day, I'll rule the entire East Coast. Not just New Jersey. I'll take New York too, and the Carreras will rule it all.

My breath comes hot and heavy at the thought, billowing out in front of me like a cloud of smoke. The gun shoved in the waistband of my jeans feels even heavier, pressed against the small of my back. I want it in my hand. I want to feel the grip. To curl my finger around the trigger... *To know the power of deciding someone's fate.*

Just as I reach for it, my phone rings.

"Well?"

"Definitely stolen," he confirms.

I rake an icy hand through my hair. "Damn it."

As soon as I saw that dark sedan park down the street, my suspicion shot off like a bottle rocket. Once I had the license plate, I texted RJ.

My cousin lives for this shit. If you want a database hacked or record unsealed, RJ's your guy. At fourteen, the kid is already a menace to society. In a few more years, he'll be a national threat.

Cops are the last thing we need. "Has it been reported?"

“About twenty minutes ago. Which gives you about forty before your quiet little suburban neighborhood turns into a SWAT team party.”

“I’ll get back to you.” Ending the call, I type out a quick text to my father.

**Surprise blue light show in forty.**

Hitting send, I shove my phone in my back pocket.

Packed snow crunches under my feet as I brace against the bitter wind, all the while keeping a steady gaze on the dark sedan.

*Fucking stolen.*

Stolen means things are about to get really messy.

Cupping my hands around my mouth, I exhale a few hard breaths, trying to coax the feeling back in my fingers. *Can’t pull the trigger if my hand is numb.*

Whoever is inside that car isn’t here to pray for their sins. They’re here to dance with two devils. But until they make the first move, all I can do is watch and wait, which is the story of my life.

*You’re not ready, Santi...*

*Watch and learn, Santi...*

*Wait until you’re eighteen, Santi...*

Well, screw that. I’m not a little kid anymore, and I’m tired of waiting.

I kick at the piles of snow in frustration. Now that I’ve been given the chance to prove myself, I’ve been regulated to “falcon”—*a fucking watchdog...*

*Dios mio*, I’m Santi Carrera—the kingpin’s son. I shouldn’t be hiding out, reduced to surveillance like a low-ranking soldier. I belong inside where the action is. Seated next to my father, Valentin Carrera. Staring into the black eyes of our enemy, Dante Santiago.

The snow keeps falling. It’s like Mother Nature is trying to counteract all the darkness seeping from the church. It could bury us, neck deep, and it still wouldn’t matter. Light never triumphs over dark.

Inside, a muffled string of heated Spanish fights for dominance.

I check my watch.

*Eleven minutes.*

I’m surprised they lasted that long. My father and Santiago haven’t been in the same room together—hell, in the same country—in eleven years.

Not since *La Boda Roja*.

Leave it to Gianni Marchesi, head of the New Jersey Syndicate to mediate a sit-down between the Devil and the Reaper. When your family deals on the wrong side of the law, even a thirteen-year-old knows egos and grudges take a backseat when it comes to the DEA. Handcuffs and prison bars don't discriminate, and Feds don't come for one—they come for all.

Which is why they're all inside, and I'm out here freezing my nuts off.

Santiago and my father would rather spend the rest of their lives behind bars than align again, but both men will do anything to protect their families. Even if it means being inside the same room.

From what I gather, an agent flipped a couple of dockhands on both sides of the river, putting not only Santiago's and my father's asses on the line, but Gianni's too. The Italian mob boss is the one who carved the path for the Carrera Cartel into New Jersey eleven years ago. It's never a smart move to owe a favor to a man like my father—the trade-off is never equitable.

Out of nowhere, a brutal gust of wind hurls a sheet of wet snow at my face. Blinking the flakes from my eyes, I turn toward the dark sedan again in time to see the rear passenger's side door swing open.

"Fuck." I fumble for my gun.

"Bug!" I hear a deep voice hiss from the driver's side. "Come back!"

A red, wooly toboggan breaks through the wall of white. It's a girl. A *young girl*. She's kicking up waves of snow as she runs toward me.

*Shit!*

"Shoot her," a voice in my head says. "*Shoot her now.*"

"But she's just a kid," I whisper.

"*Enemies come in all forms,*" it growls back. "*The sweetest faces are often the most deceiving.*"

My throat tightens.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she calls out. "Do you want to come sit with us?"

"*Do it.*" the silent voice commands. "*Prove yourself.*"

She can't be more than nine or ten years old. *Innocent*. What the hell is she doing in the backseat of a stolen car?

Reluctantly, I release the trigger. *No, I can't. My first kill won't be her.*

I want to tell her to get back in the car, but I can't find my voice. I'm too wrapped up in those rosy, wind-bitten cheeks. She looks like an angel lost inside the walls of a white jungle. I want to look away. Instead, I watch,

mesmerized as she draws closer, snowflakes dotting her long dark hair like a domino.

The shouts from the church are escalating. This time, it's more than a clash of egos. Something doesn't feel right. *Blood instinct*, my father calls it.

Still holding my gun, I grab my phone from my back pocket. Something bad is about to happen. I can feel it in my bones. And despite what my father thinks, I'm ready to take charge. I'm going to lead a *sicario* ambush inside that church. I have to get my father out of there.

I glance back at the girl.

*I have to get her out of here, too.*

She tilts her chin. "Did you hear what I—?"

"Go," I snarl, eating up the distance between us in a couple of strides and shoving her backward. "Get out of here. It's not safe!"

She stumbles, those soft brown eyes widening in shock. She doesn't understand.

"Leave her alone!" the older boy shouts.

That's when all hell breaks loose.

Out of nowhere, engines rev—plowing at full speed through the dense white curtain, just as gunfire erupts inside the church. My heart slams against my chest. Loyalty tells me to run inside.

*But this girl...*

Unfamiliar men pour from the cars as more shots ring out. Before I know it, I'm barreling straight toward her. Gripping her waist, I shove her to the ground, her small frame sinking deep into the snow as I shelter her with my body.

*Choices have consequences.*

I'll face mine.

*If I live that long.*

More squealing tires. More bullets fly but I refuse to move. I won't let this little girl die.

Not tonight.

Not ever.

"Bug!" I look up to find the older boy swinging the sedan alongside the sidewalk we're lying on. A spray of bullets hits the trunk. "Shit!"

The back door opens, and another boy about my age leaps out, frantically digging in the snow until he finds the girl's hand. Glaring at me,

he tugs her toward the car.

I'm wrapped around her so tightly he's dragging me with her. Then logic kicks in, and I roll to the side, releasing her.

*She came here with them.*

*They're taking her out of here.*

To safety.

*Away from me.*

I'm not prepared for the knot those three words twist inside my chest. My head knows she's better off with them, but there's something ingrained which hates them for it. It hates them for being her heroes instead of me.

The second boy pauses before he lifts her inside. She locks eyes with me again, an unspoken question on her face.

"Go," I repeat. "You don't belong here, *muñequita*... Go!"

The boy yells something at her, but their argument is muffled by another vicious blast of wind. As it clears, I watch him turn toward me.

"He's a Carrera," I hear him say. "He's their look-out. He gave the signal. Don't you see? This whole meeting was a trap. He deserves to die like a dog for that."

The hatred in his words gives him away. Many fear my family. A few loathe us. But only one lives to see us suffer.

*Santiago.*

"¡Hijo de tu puta madre!" I curse at him. He's a lying son of a bitch. Whoever they are in Santiago's organization, they live in a bubble. That *pendejo* knows nothing of my world. Nothing of what I just sacrificed. Tonight, I chose a stranger over my own family.

Surprisingly, the boy's lies don't seem to affect her. Instead, she reaches out her hand to me. "Come with us!"

*Innocent and brave.*

In that moment, I know I've made the right choice. I may be a boy, but I'm also a Carrera. There will never be a place in Heaven for me, so when an angel falls at my feet, I have two choices: clip her wings, or help her fly.

In another time, in another place, maybe I'll be selfish, but not tonight.

Shaking my head, I offer her a parting gift—*the truth*. "I can't. I won't... This isn't our war yet. But it will be soon."

She doesn't get the chance to answer. The door slams shut, the sedan speeds away, and I watch as it's swallowed up by the storm.

Everything feels colder suddenly. Heavier. Darker... For the first time since landing in New Jersey earlier, I shiver.

Gathering every thought of her together, I lock them in a box at the back of my mind.

It's time to be a Carrera. It's time to prove I *am* my father's son.

Coolly and methodically, I rise from the sidewalk and walk, stone-faced, straight into the line of fire.



“You did well tonight, Santi,” my father says, lifting his glass.

He looks so blasé and unaffected sitting there, sipping tequila at forty-one thousand feet, as if nothing has happened.

As if he doesn't have eleven new stitches holding his right side together.

As if we didn't lose four of our best *sicarios* tonight.

As if a bullet didn't graze my shoulder.

As if his thirteen-year-old son didn't just take his first life tonight—he took five.

In the end, the lit match was dropped from Irish fingers. Sean Mahoney, boss of the New Haven Irish Mob, was tipped off about the meeting and wasn't too thrilled with his lack of an invitation. He crashed the party and, as a result, not one damn Mahoney made it back to Connecticut.

“Thanks,” I say, tonelessly, anticlimax choking out the last of my adrenaline.

“I never meant to bring you into the cartel this soon. You're thirteen, Santi. That's too young to understand the consequences of this life.”

I think of the locked box tucked safely away in the back of my mind. *That's what he thinks.*

“Then why did you bring me with you?” *Why did you give me this choice?*

It's a question that's been eating at me since we left Mexico.

“I've made no secret of my intentions. I expect you to take over one day.”

“And I've made no secret of mine. That's what I want.”

His hand tightens around his glass. “Eventually, everything *will* be yours—the cartel, the Carrera name, our legacy, and the responsibility that accompanies all three.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Responsibility?”

“*La Boda Roja*.” The three words roll off his tongue in a twisted mix of reverence and disgust.

He doesn’t have to explain. *La Boda Roja* has been drilled into my head since I was a toddler.

“*Nuestra lucha no tiene fin*. Our fight has no end, Santi. It’s a vicious circle that will be handed down for generations to come. So to answer your question, I brought you to New Jersey to show you what lies ahead. To bring you face to face with Santiago, so that circle will burn just as brightly for you as it does for me.

“I hate him.”

Hate isn’t a strong enough word for what I feel for the Colombian. We locked eyes the moment I stormed through the doors of that church and he looked right through me. Bullets flew past his head like torpedoes as he dismissed me like I was nothing more than a kid in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Like I wasn’t even a Carrera.

My father pins me with a lethal stare. “Remember that hate, Santi. Feed it. Build upon it. Use it to your advantage. But whatever you do, never underestimate the same hate that burns for *you*.”

“So, who will be joining me in this ring of fire?”

His lips twitch. “It remains to be seen. The universe has seen fit to deny Santiago an heir.” The twitch becomes a smirk. “Still, a rebel can’t escape his destiny.”

I have no idea what he means. *Pápa* has never been one for directness. He enjoys pulling people’s strings and making them dance for his own entertainment—until he’s bored enough to cut them and get to the point.

I usually don’t take the bait... But this has my attention.

“Who would anyone try to run from power?”

“You’d be surprised. Not everyone is like you, Santi.” The pride in his voice makes my chest swell. “But there are some who refuse to see the value in our way of life.”

Then those people are as blind as they are short-sighted. Respect is everything in this world. When I grow up, I’ll have everyone’s, one way or

another.

“Who are these *idiotas*?” I scoff.

“The sons of Santiago’s second-in-command and a close business associate. They’ll form the next generation of the Santiago Cartel, despite their present distaste for it.”

“Does this ‘dream team’ have names?” My sarcasm is pushing boundaries, but he doesn’t look pissed about it. Instead, he seems amused by my newly-inflated balls.

“Edier Grayson and Sam Sanders.”

I test them out in my head, deciding I don’t care much for either one.

He glances at me out of the corner of his eye, his stare turning deadly. “Grayson is the older of the two.”

That must be who was driving the sedan. Which, by default, makes the jackass with the big mouth Sanders. I grit my teeth, his words cemented in my head.

*“He’s a Carrera. He’s their look-out. He gave the signal. Don’t you see? This whole meeting was a trap. He deserves to die like a dog for that.”*

No, *he* deserves to die for being a lying shit. It’s just like *pápa* has always told me—a *Santiago* doesn’t deal in truth, he plays whatever narrative fits his needs.

I could’ve died right there in the goddamn snow, protecting the girl, and it wouldn’t have mattered. To them, I’ll never be more than that dog who should’ve stained the snow red.

I hope *pápa* is right. I hope someday those two boys accept their destiny. Then, when I’m in charge, I’ll show them exactly who deserves to die.

But that still leaves one unanswered question... *Who is the girl in the red toboggan?*

“*Muñequita*,” I murmur.

“What was that?”

I shake my head quickly. “Nothing.”

I’ve already told my father about the stolen sedan parked outside the church, but I’ve said nothing about who was inside it. And I sure as hell don’t tell him about *her*.

*Choices have consequences.*

There’s a stretch of silence as *pápa* drains what’s left in his glass, then clears his throat. “How’s your shoulder?”

“Hurts. How’s your side?”

“Filletted.”

I laugh at the absurdity of the conversation. Sometimes I wonder what it would’ve been like to have been born into a normal family. One that watches *America’s Most Wanted* instead of starring in it.

“Get some sleep, son,” he says, rising slowly from his seat. “We have about four hours until we land in Mexico City.” He motions toward my swollen eye. “We’ll both need our strength to deal with your mother once she sees your face.” With that, he disappears into the small bedroom at the back of the jet.

Left alone with a million questions, I recline my chair, allowing a single word to stain my lips once more.

Someday, I’ll return.

To rule.

To reign.

To blur the sky with bullets.

Someday, I’ll see my *muñequita* again. And when I do, I’ll tell her about the night I chose her innocence over my loyalty.

# CHAPTER ONE

SANTI



### PRESENT DAY

I'M STANDING ON THE MARBLE STEPS OUTSIDE LEGADO CASINO. UNABLE TO move. Unable to breathe. Unable to right everything that's just been wronged. Watching as Grayson's taillights disappear into the darkness, like a thief in the night.

*A thief who just stole my wife.*

The Colombian's revelation spins in my head until every word hums a sinister melody. "You know, all this could have been avoided if I'd just shot you that night outside the church. You're lucky I'd never aim a bullet near her."

Her.

The angel I chose to let fly, rather than clip her wings.

The signs had been there all along, dancing in the shadows. They'd watched and taunted, waiting for me to look past my own blind revenge and see the truth.

The girl in the red toboggan. The innocence I chose above honor.

*Muñequita.*

*Thalia.*

Everything has always been red.

Red Wedding.

Red toboggan.

Red dresses.

"Santi?"

I glance over my shoulder to find a gathered crowd of *sicarios* waiting for a command, anticipating a volatile reaction to the grenades Grayson just tossed out the window of his piece of shit car.

This wasn't so much a truce as a diversion. That Colombian bastard lured me outside so he could drive his way in. He dangled a Bardi-shaped carrot in front of my face, distracting me with warnings of princess rings and trafficking auctions, allowing Sanders enough time to turn my wife against me.

*With the truth.*

I grit my teeth. "I want this place surrounded," I say, forcing a calm I don't feel. "No one leaves the vicinity."

They all look at each other. One finally clears his throat. "What about the invited guests, boss? What if they're already leaving?"

"Then fire bullets into their tires until they're not." I don't wait for any more questions. Turning, I take two steps at a time, with RJ and Rocco falling in behind me as I barrel through the doors of my casino.

Curious eyes turn our way, but no one speaks.

"Have two guards stationed at every exit and the rest searching every inch of this place for Thalia like their lives depend on it." Pausing, I hold Rocco's stare. "Because they do."

My threat doesn't fall on deaf ears. As it shouldn't. I'm dead serious. Nodding, he slips out from behind us, his phone already to his ear, barking out orders.

RJ doesn't question where I'm going as I continue my path. He silently shadows my heavy footsteps as I weave through the layers of smiling patrons and make my way toward the Platinum Bar Lounge.

I don't hold out much hope, but it's the last place I saw her.

I scan the sea of faces, finding nothing but old money and ambitious socialites laughing as they turn a blind eye to Legado's bloody foundations. Six days ago, I looked at them and saw dollar signs. Now I just see my own fallibility.

*But no red...*

She's not here.

*Fucking Grayson.*

All I needed was a few more hours. I was going to tell her everything tonight—about Bardi, about finding the tape, about there being no debt to pay off...

About my decision to let my *muñequita* fly away. Again.

“What happened?”

I’m straddling the line between control and chaos as my father steps in front of me, a glass of *Añejo* tequila in his hand. It’s not a question. It’s a demand, delivered with the casual bite of a snake. Calm and controlled. *Almost fucking pleasant.* Valentin Carrera doesn’t shout. Men like him wield much more power in a steady tone than a deafening roar. The danger lies in the delivery.

Despite all that, I don’t bother to answer. The explanation of tonight’s events would take too long, and frankly, I’m not in the mood to watch my father’s head explode when he finds out I’ve ignored everything he ever taught me. Instead, I focus on more pressing issues.

“Have you seen Thalia?” I grit my teeth, adding, “Or Sam Sanders?”

At the mention of Sanders’s name, he stiffens—his fingers clenching so tightly around the glass I’m surprised it doesn’t shatter. “Why would a Santiago *pinche cabrón* be in this casino, Santi?”

*That’s a no, then.*

Sanders is a reckless son of a bitch, but he’s not stupid. You don’t violate a man’s daughter and then dance at his party. If Grayson sent him in here for Thalia, he’d stay out of sight until she stepped into view.

The irritating sound of spinning slot machines chisel down into my brain as I stand locked in a battle of wills with *El Muerte* himself.

*I have to get out of this damn place.*

Just as I turn to leave, my father’s firm grip clamps down on my shoulder. “I repeat... Why would that *pinche cabrón* dare step foot in New Jersey, much less on Carrera ground?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“You’ll explain now.”

“I’ll explain when I have something to say,” I appease with a low growl, shrugging him off. I’m not doing this with him. *Not here. Especially not now.* “In the meantime if you happen to see my wife, please escort her to my office.”



They say when you find yourself standing at the end, return to the beginning.

So that's where I am—at the beginning. More specifically, the desk I was leaning against as she walked through my door that night.

I glance at the floor where she stood, head held high, lying to my face as her knees shook with fear, then at the wall I shoved her against seconds before putting a gun to her head... My office is a battlefield of scattered landmines, all of them filled with reminders of *her*.

*I can't think straight when she's invading my head like this.*

Knocking the top off the crystal decanter sitting on my desk, I lift it, and take a long hard drink, not bothering with a glass. Strangling the neck of the bottle with one hand, I shove the other in my hair, tugging at the roots as I pace the length of my office.

RJ remains uncharacteristically quiet as I come undone.

"She can't just leave like that," I say, swiping the back of my hand across my chin. "We're fucking married. I don't care what shit Grayson convinces her to pull, I won't give her a divorce. She's a Carrera for as long as I say she is, goddamn it!" The decanter shatters against the wall as I hurl it across the room. Staring at the jagged pieces of glass strewn across the floor, my tone lowers. "The only way Santiago is going to cut that tie is by cutting my throat."

I'm spiraling. Half an hour ago, I had every intention of telling Thalia the truth and letting her go. But now... Now, I'm irritated, concerned, and pissed the fuck off—a dangerous cocktail with a hairpin trigger.

As I pass my desk for the fourth time, I stop to check my phone.

Nothing.

"Have you heard from Rocco?"

When all I get in return is an incoherent mumble, I glance up from my screen, narrowing a suspicious glare at my second-in-command. He's perched on the edge of the couch, an elbow braced on each knee, his phone tucked protectively in his hands. Now that I think about it, he hasn't taken his eyes off it since we caught the finale of Grayson's orchestrated shitshow.

"I asked you a question, RJ."

His thick eyebrows knot. "In a minute."

No. That's not how this works. Especially tonight. "Put the damn phone away, or I'll shove it somewhere you won't like."

Holding my stare, he presses another button, flipping his middle finger as he lifts it to his ear. “Go to hell, Santi.”

*Too late. I’m already there.*

In two strides, I have his phone in my hand. In response, RJ catapults off the couch, his fists clenching by his side. He wants to take a swing at me. I can see it in his eyes. But we both know he won’t.

“Give me my fucking phone,” he bites out between clenched teeth.

This kind of volatile reaction isn’t like him. He’s the still waters to my raging tempest. But those lines darting across his forehead are new. This distraction he’s had since Grayson’s visit is out of character.

I don’t like it. And if he’s not going to give me an answer as to why, then I’ll find it myself.

Illuminating the screen, I stare down at the contact name, and the nine unanswered calls. “Rachel Marlow?” I spit the name out, my anger cranking up about ten notches. “What the hell, RJ? My whole operation just went up in flames, and you’re worried about getting your dick sucked?”

“It’s not like that.”

“No? Then explain it to me?”

“Why don’t you worry about finding your wife?” he bites back, snatching the phone out of my hand.

It’s the wrong thing to say.

Red mist clouds my eyes and uncertainty clouds my judgement as I shove him up against the wall. The dam breaks, and RJ pushes back, causing the lid to blow off what little restraint I have left. Drawing my fist back, I aim for his nose.

“I’d go for the throat myself.”

I freeze mid-swing, releasing my grip on RJ’s neck. Turning, I find my father leaning casually against the doorframe to my office, his arms crossed, wearing a look of amused boredom.

“Collapses the larynx,” he adds. “Then you get the pleasure of watching them suffocate.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demand.

“You said you’d explain later.” He shrugs. “It’s later.”

Forgetting about RJ, I shove another hand through my hair. I’m irritated yet unsurprised. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“And you know I’m not accustomed to waiting.”

And *I'm* not accustomed to answering to anyone. *Dios mio*, I need time to plan. To find Thalia and somehow get her back under my roof.

"You left *máma* alone at a party?" I accuse, dealing my father a low blow. When he cocks a dark eyebrow, I add, "Do I have to remind you what happened last time you did that?"

A chilling smile spreads across his face. "No, that won't be necessary... I never make the same mistake twice."

He pushes away from the doorframe to reveal my mother standing right behind him. She's staring at me just as intently, maybe even more so. But what I notice most is the determined lift of her chin, as if she's stepping into old, but familiar skin.

"*Mijo*," she says, baiting me with a name she hasn't called me since I left Mexico. "Let us help you."

I glare at my father. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing in bringing her here.

I shake my head. "Not this time—"

The crack from a single gunshot swallows the rest of my protest. It's a stab of adrenaline straight to the chest. When the second blast sounds, we all have our guns out.

"Grayson." RJ hurls his large frame off the wall, our fight already forgotten, but there's another name in my head as I lead the charge.

*Thalia.*

My father falls into line as we cross into the lobby. When I turn to stop him from coming any further, it's not a power play, it's a plea. "Don't tempt fate." I draw his volatile stare to my mother. "Lightning *can* strike twice."

His scowl hardens, but he steps back. The man may be a killer, but the mind is an unforgiving sadist. All my father's demons are carved into three jagged words:

*La Boda Roja.*

I can't run fast enough. *I'll burn this city to the ground if she's hurt.* Throwing the stairwell door open, I run straight into the heavily armed chest of Rocco. Before I can demand answers, he's jerking his chin over his shoulder.

"Shots came from the rear parking lot."

With my gun drawn and finger wrapped tight around the trigger, I storm ahead, giving zero fucks about protocol or protection.

The rhythmic click of boots scatter across the asphalt as swarms of *sicarios* pour in from every direction. The ones I commanded to secure the perimeter have already arrived, forming a half-circle around a black sports car.

They're silent.

Unmoving.

Guns lowered.

No.

Time slows, each second stretching long into the next. My throat tightens. My heart stutters.

"Move," I order. My men glance up, their unreadable stares feeding the monster inside me. "I said 'move'!"

As soon as they part, I take a step forward. Then another. I don't stop until the soles of my Santoni dress shoes are submerged in the spreading pool of blood. I take in the crumpled body lying motionless on the asphalt—the two gunshot wounds turning his white shirt an angry red.

*Thank God.*

The pile of bricks crushing my chest lifts as RJ lets out a staggered breath.

"What the fuck? Is that *Sam Sanders*?"

"What's left of him," I say, not bothering to hide the elation in my voice. "Point blank range. Nice work, men."

Grayson's invasion never made it past the parking lot, although my men's aim leaves a lot to be desired. One bullet tore through his abdomen, but the other barely hit his shoulder. I've trained them better than that. There's no second-guessing a bullet aimed at the head. *Always go for the kill shot.*

"Boss, we didn't do this."

My head snaps up. "What do you mean?"

I don't like the look in my *sicario's* eyes. It's one of caution. Like he's tiptoeing around a hungry lion.

"Most of us were on the east side when the first shot rang out. By the time we got here, he was already down."

"Did you do a sweep?"

He nods. "Every inch within a hundred-foot radius. The snipers at the front moved position to try and get a visual, but found nothing."

"My wife?"

“Negative. Sanders was alone when he was hit.”

The relief flooding through me could drown out an ocean. But this is war, so a brief moment of solace is all I allow myself.

“Santiago wouldn’t take out one of his own, Santi.”

Bending down on his haunches, I watch RJ press two fingers against Sanders’s neck. “Well?”

“He’s only got two, maybe three minutes before *Santa Muerte* comes for him.” He rises to his feet. “Someone’s already fired the first two shots. It’s your call. What do you want to do?”

I glance down as the American starts gurgling incoherent nonsense, blood streaming from the corners of his mouth, and leaving red track marks down the sides of his face. Those smug dark eyes are barely open, but we still lock gazes. Even in his final moments, after all he’s done to my family, he doesn’t look away.

As for me?

*I don’t have a damn thing to prove.*

Lifting my arm, I aim my gun at his head. “Fire the last,” I say coolly.

As I prepare to pull the trigger and send the East Coast up in flames, Rocco crashes into me from behind, knocking my aim sideways—his hurried movements sending a spray of crimson down the front of my tux.

“Wait!” he hisses.

“For what?” I roar.

“He’s talking!”

“He always talks. Bastard never shuts up.” I aim again, only this time he steps into the line of fire.

“Santi, listen! *Listen!* He’s saying her name.”

Glancing down, I watch as Sanders’s pale lips mouth a name that, in six days, has branded itself across my heart. Right away, I’m dropping to my knees, my face so close to him I can smell the death on his breath. “Where is she?” I snarl. “Where’s my wife?”

His voice is faint, strangled by blood and weakened by the bullets of an unknown enemy. “Run,” he rasps. “Run, Thalia. Fucking run...”

“Where is she, you son of a bitch?” I yell, grabbing handfuls of his crimson-stained shirt. “What happened to her?”

“Santi...”

I turn to find RJ on his knee beside me, holding out a diamond engagement ring and a gold band.

Both abandoned.

Both stained with blood.

“They were under the car,” he says, with a grim expression.

*Mi amada.*

Steeling my jaw, I tear my gaze away from my broken wedding vows and back to the dying man in front of me. I’d love to send the asshole who branded his name on my sister to his grave, but as long as his heart still beats, then so does mine.

Rising to my feet, I shove my gun back in its holster. “Take him downstairs.”

Without another word, I head back inside. Thalia is out there somewhere, and I’ll stop at nothing to find her.

And when I do...?

God help the motherfucker who took her from me.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

THALIA



THE LARK IS BACK AGAIN.

It must be nearly dusk.

I watch as the little brown bird hops his usual path along the alabaster stone ledge outside our prison cell. With no clocks in this room, he's all we have to stop time sliding into a black hole.

He's here at daybreak.

He's here at the end of the day when it's our hope that is breaking.

The lark pauses suddenly, cocking his head to listen to the blood-curdling screams rising up from the castle's grounds below us. It's an ugly sound that not even his sweet lullaby can remedy—a sound that has haunted me, ever since we arrived at this hellhole yesterday.

For a while, the bird remains a twitching silhouette against the bars at our window. I hate those bars, not so much for what they represent as for the perfect vista they crisscross with black metal. Closed shutters and total darkness would have been less cruel. I don't want to see paradise. I don't want to see the wildflowers and the sweeping lines of poplar and cypress trees that border the sun-soaked hills—a view that, no doubt, graces a billion holiday postcards from Florence to Rome.

We're in Italy: a beautiful country with a hidden dark corner that's reserved just for us.

We've yet to face the evil that orchestrated our capture, but I sense him all the time. He hangs like a thick fog over everything—even thicker than the white mist that smothers those hilltops every morning before the hot Tuscan sun burns it away.

Eventually, the lark starts hopping again, taunting us with his frantic movements. Only one of us has their freedom, and it isn't me.

Or Lola.

She's lying on the bed next to me, curled up in a ball to protect herself. She tells me she's always slept that way. Her father calls it *autodefensa mental*. I call it preemptive, and it frightens me more than anything. It's like her subconscious knows what's lurking around the corner for us.

She coughs in her sleep—her slim body rattling with the violence of it. I hold my breath as I wait for hers to even out again. She's been throwing up all day. She finally passed out from exhaustion around an hour ago.

My gaze switches to the locked door, and I utter a silent prayer for it to stay shut. So far, the men with empty eyes have left us alone, but their absence is nothing more than a stay of execution. The screams below us are never at the same pitch.

Different girls.

Different hours.

*Soon, those screams will be ours.*

I dared myself to look outside earlier. That's when I saw the lines and lines of neat, green, yaupon holly hedges for the first time—as sinisterly uniformed as they were terrifying. The garden maze was a myriad of brutal twists that turned my stomach into knots, and every instinct I had, *every instinct my father's world has forced me to nurture*, told me that this was a place I needed to fear.

The screams were coming from the center of it. The pleading went on and on...

Lola coughs again. She needs to be stronger before they attempt to destroy us with whatever sick perversion they have planned. *I need to figure a way to get us out of here before they do.*

Since we were taken, it's been one inescapable cage after another—from the dirty shipping container to the private plane, to the black van that wound spirals out of the narrow roads up to this creepy-as-fuck hilltop town, with the thick stone perimeter wall. Presently, we're in a shitty room with bars on the window and bolts on the door.

I dread to think how many women must have been held captive here before us. Our mattress was threadbare with desperation when we arrived. The pillowcases were still damp with another's tears...

“Larks can only sing when they’re in flight,” comes a weak voice as Lola rolls over to face me, her eyelids fluttering open. “Did you know that?”

*Firebirds can only sing when their wings haven’t been pulled off.*

Tonight, in the fading light, she looks so much like Santi it stings my eyes.

I try not to think about him here, despite the constant reminder. It makes me weaker and more vulnerable. When he finally manages to hijack my thoughts, I tell myself I hate everything about him to toughen up what’s left of my heart.

I hate the power he wields over me, his viciousness, his filthy mouth... I hate how his kisses are like the sweetest lie and his fucking, as hard as the truth. He knew how worried I was about Ella. He knew how sick she was. He could have set my fears to rest at any time by telling me he had the tape.

But I also know why he didn’t. Because it’s the same reason why I can’t bring myself to hate him as much as I desperately want to.

It’s a reason I refuse to acknowledge, and one I refuse to accept.

“I’m amazed anything can sing around here,” I say, pulling her arm around my waist, welcoming the extra heat, even though the humidity in the air is crushing my lungs.

I remember reading about a derelict Second World War concentration camp in Poland once. There was never any birdsong in the trees surrounding it. Some wickedness was built to endure.

We lie like statues until the little lark flies off into a world that we don’t belong to anymore. Lola’s silence is agony. The pieces of her broken heart are even more jagged than mine. When I told her about Sam getting shot in Legado’s parking lot, something about the way her face crumpled tore their year and a half deception to pieces.

The truth fell like dominoes after that.

The man she loves is dead.

*The man she loves will never hold their child.*

She hasn’t confirmed her pregnancy to me yet, but it’s obvious from the way her hand hovers over her stomach, and from her never-ending bouts of sickness. There’s no bump, but it’s only a matter of time.

It makes me so full of fear for her.

We hardly know each other, but I feel a fierce, almost violent protectiveness toward her and her baby. I’m stepping up to fulfill Santi’s

role. We're sisters now. We're family. I'm quickly learning that a Santiago and a Carrera are so much stronger together than when they're ripping each other apart.

Maybe if Santi and I hadn't been fighting like cats and dogs all the time, we might have seen this hell coming.

"Shit, what's that?"

Lola sits up in a rush, and I scramble to follow. There are loud male voices in the hallway outside, speaking a language that neither of us understand. The bolts groan in protest. The lock in the heavy wooden door turns. A beat later, a young woman with matted dark curls is being pushed into our room.

With a muffled cry, she lands on the cold flagstones as the door slams shut again.

At first, she doesn't move. She's dressed in a dirty white slip dress like us, but every inch of her bare skin is covered in cuts and bruises. She's shaking like a leaf, the strands of black hair slithering free across her shoulders to reveal six jagged welts. They're all around ten inches in length, interlacing a crimson pattern into her tan skin.

My blood turns cold.

*Whip lashes.*

"Who did this to you?" I whisper in horror, sliding from the bed.

She raises her face to us, and I stop dead. One cheek is swollen purple, and her lower lip is split and bleeding. There's still a flame of defiance in her dark eyes, though... A burning hate for the men who did this to her. They may have crushed her body, but her soul is still fighting.

"Them." It's a single accusation spoken in perfect English, her accent cutting its teeth on New Jersey glass. Her gaze darts from me to Lola, who is sitting rooted to the mattress in shock. I watch her eyes widen slightly. "When did they bring you here?"

"Yesterday."

She waves away my attempts to help her up. "Then tomorrow is your first auction."

"Auction?" Lola pounces on the word as the woman slowly rises to her feet.

"It's Sunday," she states, wincing as she straightens up, as if that's all the explanation we need. "It's time for them to bid on the new girls to enter *Il Labirinto*."

My stomach lurches. “What the hell is *Il Labirinto*?”

But I already know the answer. It’s the place I can see from our window, where your mind gets twisted up and your screams are made.

“One of you will be chosen,” she says regretfully. “It’s inevitable.”

“Why?”

“Because *you* are a Santiago, and *you* are a Carrera.” She swings her bruised gaze between us again. “That means you’re the ultimate game, and the ultimate prize... Tomorrow night, you will run in *Il Labirinto*, and if you’re lucky, like me, then maybe you’ll survive it.”

## **CHAPTER THREE**

SANTI



DEATH IS AS UNIQUE AS A FINGERPRINT.

No two people exit this world the same way. Some are shoved into the next life courtesy of a bullet between the eyes, while others are cursed with a slower, more painful crawl. I've watched hundreds of men die, some intentionally, some by circumstance. The end comes with a set of snapping jaws, and an iron grip. It's a sight that you either pray to forget or crave to watch again and again.

I shift my weight, another rough patch of the concrete wall digging into my spine. It might as well be a razor blade, because tonight that craving is absent. Instead, it's being overpowered by fear.

Fear of death claiming a man I hate.

Fear for *her*.

It's an unfamiliar feeling that has every muscle in my shoulders twisted up in knots.

Tilting my head from side to side, I tap the barrel of my gun against my bicep while keeping a steady gaze on the other side of the room. *The basement*. Legado's dark underbelly. A place where debts are silenced by four blood stained walls. A place where, tonight, I've gone against every instinct to rise and ruin.

After bringing Sanders downstairs as ordered, Rocco managed to control the bleeding, using gravity, tape, and a piece of plastic. Thanks to six months of paramedic training, my head of security has kept my enemy on this side of death's door.

That was an hour ago. An hour since I called in a favor to save my enemy. An hour since Atlantic City's most heralded chief of medicine quietly pulled a "borrowed" EMS truck around to the back, only to have swarms of Carrera *sicarios* strip it clean of supplies. An hour since RJ escorted him down four floors, before I pointed a gun in his face and warned him that his fate depended on Sanders's.

An hour since Santiago-affiliated blood started staining the floor of my sanctuary.

*I'm done waiting.*

As I push off the wall, RJ grabs my arm, jerking his head across the room to where Elias Baxter is ripping off his bloody gloves and tossing them onto the stained table beside him. His shoulders round in fatigue as the pretty blonde nurse standing beside him casts her eyes to the floor.

"Well?" I demand. "Is he dead?"

*Fucker better not be dead. If he's dead, I'll kill him.*

The surgeon turns to me, sweat beading along his upper lip. *Good. Fear is the best motivator.* "No, Mr. Carrera, he's not dead," he says solemnly. "He came close a couple times, though." He motions to where Sanders is lying on an eight foot banquet table, then to a smaller one scattered with supplies from the EMS truck, along with an array of switchblades, kitchen knives, and a half empty bottle of vodka. "This isn't exactly a sterile working environment..."

"*Lo siento, señor.* My apologies," I say sharply. "How inconsiderate of me to be so ill-prepared for the emergency surgery I had no idea would be performed in my casino tonight."

He swallows hard, but wisely chooses to keep his mouth shut. My tone may be calm, but inside I'm an avalanche of emotions. *Rolling faster. Growing deadlier. Minutes away from taking out everything in its path.*

Avoiding my stare, he runs his palm along the ring of thinning white hair at the back of his head. "The young man was lucky."

"You call that lucky?" I ask, waving my gun in Sanders's direction.

"Yes, I do. Your friend should be dead. The first bullet passed clean through his shoulder, miraculously missing the brachial plexus *and* subclavian artery..."

*I don't have time for this shit.*

His breath hitches as I center my Glock on his bloodstained lab coat. "*Muy bien.* Now try it again. In English."

At the nurse's gasp, he turns toward her, giving her a small shake of his head in warning. *Naive girl. Smart man.* Focusing his attention back on me, he tries to regain whatever authority that title embroidered on his lab coat gives him, but it's too late for that. His breathing is as rattled as Sanders's is.

"I-I just meant that no main artery was hit. I've stitched the wound, and—barring infection—I don't foresee any blood vessel damage, loss of motor skills, or worse, risk of amputation."

*Shame.* Maybe in losing a limb, he'd gain some humility.

"And the second bullet?"

Baxter glances back at Sanders, the corners of his mouth turning down. "That one is more serious, I'm afraid. Whoever shot him, shot to kill. I can only assume they were aiming for his heart. From the angle of the bullet entry, he moved at the last moment, catching it in the upper abdomen."

"Any organ damage? Liver? Kidneys? Spleen?" RJ asks, his tone almost as clinical as Baxter's.

If the situation wasn't so fucked up, I'd laugh. Blood and bullets are an occupational hazard in our line of work. Getting shot is just part of the job, a rite of passage every *sicario* wears as a badge of honor. We've both watched many men fall. We know what's survivable and what's fatal.

"I managed to repair the bowel and place a tube in to drain any excess fluid. That tends to happen when there's inflammation and traumatic injury, but..." He stares down at the front of his own stained shirt. "It was a mess. There was a lot of blood... A lot of blood."

*No shit.* Legado's tarp lined floors are flooded with it.

"He's stable for now," he continues, gathering up the salvageable supplies. "But I urge you to let me take him to the hospital, and fast. I may have stopped the bleeding, but I can't fight sepsis."

"No hospitals."

Ignoring me, RJ clears his throat. "When will he regain consciousness?"

"If he even does?" Baxter mutters, and it's all I can do not to put a few bullet holes in *him*. "Could be hours, could be days. When he does, he's going to be groggy and weak. Best not to get him worked up if you want him to recover."

"Fuck that," I say with a growl. "I didn't have you save him so he could *recover*. I want answers and then what happens, happens."

The wave of horror washing across Elias Baxter's face never gets old. He's both disgusted and terrified at my lack of regard for human life, but I bankroll his gambling habit, so the good doctor knows to keep his opinions to himself.

Without another word, he motions toward the nurse. Both of them slip past me, a soft breath exiting his chest when I don't stop him. *Why would I?* He's of no use to me anymore. He'll go home, crawl in bed, and cry himself to sleep over the loss of his precious morality.

*Fuck morality.*

Then again...

"Baxter?" I call out over my shoulder.

He stiffens, his fingers curled around the door handle.

"Get some rest and be back here in a few hours with whatever you need to turn this basement into a state of the art hospital room."

"But...but, I have a job, Carrera," he stutters. "Responsibilities..."

"Correct. And that job is doing exactly what I say, and your only 'responsibility' is keeping that son of a bitch alive." I swing my gun toward Sanders.

He whips his head around, his eyes wide. "You can't do that."

"That fifty-thousand-dollar tab pinned to my blackjack table says I can do whatever the fuck I want, Dr. Baxter."

This time, his shoulders slump. He drops his head, a harsh breath spilling from his mouth. "Fine. Come, Gina." The doe-eyed nurse follows him out, her pale face tipped in shock.

"Gina..." I say her name slowly, causing her to stumble into Baxter's back. Once I catch her glazed stare, I give her a chilling smile. "Gina Pruitt from Ridgefield. I believe your parents still live there, am I right?"

All the color drains from her face, her slight frame trembling with fear.

"Tell me, Gina, do you know what separates smart women from dead ones?"

At that, the tears filling her eyes spill down her cheeks as she shakes her head.

"The ability to keep their mouths shut. Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-yes, sir," she whispers, crowding against Baxter again. As a guard opens the door, she hastily pushes her way out of the room.

RJ gives me a side-eye. "Was that necessary?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

Tucking his gun back into its holster, he moves toward Sanders, rubbing his chin. There's something on his mind, something besides the half-dead Santiago bleeding all over the floor.

"What's up with you?"

"We should take him to the hospital."

I groan. "*Dios mío*, not you too."

"You heard the man... That hit to the stomach isn't just a nick a few stitches can solve. You're only going to get answers from Sanders if he's alive to tell them. I know you hate him, Santi, but if he dies, so do our chances of finding Thalia."

"Our chances?"

"She's your wife. I'm your cousin. That makes us all one big fucked-up family."

Scowling, I tuck my own gun away, flipping him my middle finger as I cross the room. *Family...* The word doesn't even make sense anymore. Six days ago, 'family' was a word reserved for those with Carrera blood flowing through their veins. Then Thalia showed up, smearing her color all across my dark world. I'd planned to use her. Degrade her. Destroy her. Then throw her away. Now, all I want to do is find her and take it all back.

Swiping what's left of the vodka bottle off the table, I tip it up, inhaling the burn...welcoming it. *If it can cleanse Sanders's wounds, maybe it can cleanse mine.*

"You can't let go, can you?" he says, gesturing at my clenched hand.

"Find your own damn bottle."

"Not the vodka. I mean what's in your other hand. You've held onto those things ever since leaving the parking lot."

I glance down, surprised to find my fingers wrapped in a death grip around Thalia's wedding rings.

As the seconds tick away, my eye twitches under the weight of RJ's stare. I should throw them on the floor, just like she did. *But I can't.* Because they're hers—and right now, they're all I have left.

I flip the focus back on him. "No more than you've held onto that thing," I say, nodding to where his hand is coiled around his cell phone. "Care to tell me about Rachel Marlow?"

That wipes the confident smirk off his face. "Some woman. Not important."

I don't believe him, but who he fucks is his own business, as long as he does it on his own time. And until we find Thalia? All his time is my time.

The moment stagnates, filling the damp room with tension and something I can't put a name to. But it's heavy and filled with a darkness ten times more potent than the one lurking inside these four walls. The same darkness hit me when I watched that Italian motherfucker free Marco Bardi on the security feed.

My head snaps up.

*The security feed.*

"Check the cameras. We run surveillance in the rear lot."

RJ shakes his head. "Already made the call. Nothing."

"What about the backup? You said something before about Legado's previous owner installing backup surveillance."

"That's just wired for the inside."

Then Sanders really is my only hope in finding Thalia.

*Damn it.*

I own a casino. I know bad odds when I see them. I had no intention of betting Thalia's life on the slim-to-none chance that Sanders would live long enough to make it to the basement, much less talk. So, once again, I went against every instinct and had every patron questioned and interrogated.

No one left the premises without clearance.

Was it financial suicide? *Probably.*

Like it matters.

Tonight was the second shooting at Legado in six days. There's no way it can withstand this kind of bad publicity. Keeping it out of the press and off police records once was a feat in itself. This time, I'll be lucky to avoid jail, much less keep his casino operational.

"Think he's gonna make it?"

Following RJ's gaze, I stare down at Sanders' face. The fucker looks gone. If it wasn't for the shallow rise of his chest, I'd call the time of death, and pull the sheet over his head.

"If he doesn't, the news is going to travel fast." I catch his eye. "After that, a scorpion shitstorm is going to blow hard across state lines and land right on our doorstep."

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

SANTI



THE LAST OF THE VODKA IS LONG GONE. NOW I'M PASSING THE TIME BY counting Sanders's shallow breaths.

Twelve hundred in twenty minutes equals ten breaths per minute.

*Not great odds.*

I'm about to send out one of the guards for another bottle when I hear muffled arguing outside the door. RJ and I lock gazes, both of us drawing our guns, moments before the basement door swings open and stone-faced *sicarios* spill into the room with clenched fists and darting eyes.

"Sorry, boss," one says, his chin snapping toward the intimidating man a few steps in front of him. "We told him we had Carrera orders, but..." He grits his teeth. "He pulled rank."

A slow smile tips the corners of my mouth. "Is that right?"

Glancing over his shoulder, my father pins him with a stare that could melt steel. "I'm *the* Carrera, you *pendejo*." Straightening his suit jacket, he offers a passing glance at Sanders's bloodstained body, then centers his attention back on me. "What the hell is going on?"

I look behind him, not bothering to stand. "Where's *máma*?"

He scowls. "Surrounded by *sicarios*. Now, answer my question."

RJ catches my eye again. I can read his expression. He wants me to tell my father the truth, so he can step in and take control. So he can unfuck the mess I've made, proving he was right—that I acted irrationally in marrying Thalia. That I let lust and ambition cloud my judgment. That I became short-sighted and impatient instead of continuing to play a strategic chess game.

“It’s an East Coast problem,” I say calmly.

“It’s a Carrera problem,” he explodes, crossing the rest of the room in three wide strides, his icy stare snapping to Sanders’s motionless body again. “What happened to him?”

“He tripped on his way out,” I say dryly. “What do you think happened? You heard the shots.”

“Why is he here?” he demands, ignoring my jab.

I motion at the IV stand and bloodied surgical instruments. “Again, I’m going to defer to the obvious.”

A chill sweeps through the room. “You seem to have misplaced your respect. Do you need a reminder of who still runs this cartel, *chico*?”

My spine stiffens at the condescending nickname. I meet his furious gaze, mirrored eyes battling for power. “No. But it seems you need a reminder of which side of the border you’re on.”

He steps forward, only inches separating us. “I own New Jersey.”

“No, *I* own New Jersey,” I correct. “You gave it to me, remember? If I’m to take over this cartel one day, you have to back off, and let me do things my way.”

As we glare at each other, I can’t help wondering how it’s come to this. How I’ve found myself fighting for my rival while waging war with my own father.

“I wasn’t aware that *your way* included marrying the enemy.”

The fire in my veins turns to ice. “Go back to Mexico, *pápa*,” I say, enunciating each word, my tone deceptively calm.

“I don’t take orders from anyone, Santi. Especially not from my own son.”

“My wife is missing. Did you know that?” Curling my lip, I deliver a lethal smile. “Of course you do, you’re Valentin Carrera. So, why do you want to stay? Because you want to help me find her and bring her home? Or because you want to make sure she never makes it back?”

Behind me, I hear RJ suck in a sharp breath through his teeth.

“Choose your next words very carefully,” my father warns, staring at me with the look he reserves for those who stand against him. “A Carrera doesn’t betray his own blood.”

“No? So my *Abuelo* Alejandro welcomed *máma* with open arms, then?”

He flinches. It's the second low blow I've dealt him in less than twelve hours, but he keeps forcing my hand.

"That's not the same."

"Isn't it? You've told me the story enough times."

I hear RJ murmuring my name in warning, but I'm too worked up to stop.

"Your father hated *máma*," I press. "He considered her American blood to be poison to his cartel. He didn't give a shit about what you wanted, or had to say. To him, *she* was the enemy."

"That was different."

"Right." Shaking my head, I turn away, only to have his fingers clamp around my bicep in a vise-like grip. *Fuck, the man could crush steel.* Gritting my teeth, I force myself not to react as I slowly turn to meet his unrelenting stare.

"I am *nothing* like him," he grits out. "My father was a sadistic son of a bitch who didn't give a shit about my mother or his children. He wanted an heir, not a son."

*Sins of the father.*

I lift an eyebrow.

"You've never been just an heir to me, Santi," he says, his nostrils flaring as his anger escalates. "You're my flesh and blood." Releasing his hold on me, he slams his fist against his chest. "*Mi maldito corazon!*"

*My fucking heart.*

"Then prove it." I gesture toward Sanders. "Either help me save two Santiagos, or go back to Mexico, and I'll do it on my own."

We stare at each other in a rare moment of silence, the only sound between us being the steady *drip drip drip* of the IV machine.

Seconds feel like minutes, before he finally heaves out a rough breath and rakes a bronzed hand down his stubbled face. "*Dios mío.* You love this girl."

It's a hit I don't see coming.

Shoving my hands in the pockets of my crumpled tuxedo pants, I glance toward Sanders with a condescending laugh. "I'd prefer her alive rather than dead. That hardly constitutes love. Besides, it's only been six goddamn days."

"That's true," he states. "Two days longer than it took for me to fall for your mother."

*Jesus.* He's angry, then he's calm. One minute he's telling me I've disgraced his name, the next he's telling me that I love her... Is this what Thalia has to deal with? A volatile pendulum swinging from one unpredictable extreme to the next?

*No wonder she hates me.*

"Thalia and I are nothing like you and *máma*," I insist. The vehemence in my tone falters as I add, "Especially after tonight."

As my father and I stand there observing our fallen enemy, something shifts between us. The power struggle we've been fighting since he landed on American soil fades away as he, too, tucks his hands into his pockets, the tension easing from his shoulders.

"Tell me everything, Santi."

My pride is a crumbling wall. For twenty-two years, I've been taught a man is nothing without power and strength. *Control fear and you'll control the world.* I've lived by those words. I've justified every decision and choice by them.

The world was all I ever wanted, until Thalia became the center of it. Now my world is gone, and the man who raised me—the one who taught me how to hate, while warning me to keep love trapped inside our tightly guarded circle—is the only one who can help me get her back.

I start from when Thalia stumbled into my office and I end with how I blackmailed the chief of medicine into performing surgery in the basement of my casino. He doesn't interrupt. He listens quietly, taking it all in, until the very last word.

"She won't forgive me, and why the fuck should she?" My chest is hollow from expelling six days of truth. "If she's even still alive..."

*Fuck, I can't go there. I won't.*

He rubs his chin. "I was indirectly responsible for your uncle Nash's death... I didn't think your mother could ever forgive me for that, but she did."

I turn to face him. My guard down. My bloody, black heart in my hands. "How'd you get her to listen?"

"I let her go."

His solution pisses me off. It's not the answer I want. Besides, I've already let her go—twice—and look where it's gotten us.

I hear him chuckle. "Santi, we're Carrera men... Patience isn't one of our strongest traits. However, a wounded bird can't fly with clipped wings.

You have to give them time to heal for it to fly back to you.”

*Clipped wings.*

I’m immediately transported back to a snowy street in Hasbrouck Heights. To a little girl in a red toboggan who was worried I was cold.

Ten years ago, I almost made her my first kill. Instead, I let her fly. Now, someone else holds that choice in the palm of his hands.

“I need to find her before they clip her wings.”

“You’re right. You’re in charge here, not me.” When I glance up, I find a determined look on his face. “I’ll back off, but I won’t return to Mexico. This family sticks together. We’re powerful men, but we’re not invincible.” Giving RJ a conciliatory nod, he turns and walks out.

RJ stares after him, his eyebrows drawn together in confusion. “What the hell was that?”

For the first time since Thalia left my side, I smile.

“Respect.”

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

SANTI



GIVE A MAN ENOUGH INCENTIVE, AND HE'LL EXCEED YOUR EXPECTATIONS.

I told Baxter to return in a few hours with more supplies. Instead, he showed up fifty minutes later, bleary-eyed, with damn near a whole operating room in tow.

He said nothing as he and his protégé, Gina, worked like an over-caffeinated machine, replacing the earlier eight-proof antiseptic with a sterile version, along with medical grade instruments, multiple IV drips and drainage tubes, and one highly-contested epidural to deliver a steady stream of pain-killing narcotics into the main wound site.

I conceded to saving Sanders's life. I never said anything about not wanting him to suffer. Now, my dark basement is an obscenely bright hospital room, and there are enough wires and tubes protruding from him to power all of Atlantic City.

RJ and I stand, side by side, our arms folded across our chests, neither of us saying a word as we stare at a still-unconscious Sanders. It's a familiar scene, one that keeps circling around to repeat itself.

*Bleed.*

*Watch.*

*Wait.*

Eventually, RJ breaks the silence. "They need to know, Santi."

Jesus, he's starting to sound like a broken record. "Don't start that shit again. I've already told you this is—"

"This *isn't* a Carrera problem," he argues in a tone I don't particularly care for. "In case you haven't noticed, none of our men took a bullet. They

wanted Sanders dead and Thalia taken.”

He doesn't have to remind me. It's all I can think about.

“Santiagos were targeted,” he adds, loosening his bowtie. “They need to know what happened to their own. No one will bathe the world in blood to find Thalia like Santiago will.”

“Wrong.”

“She's his daughter, Santi.”

“And she's my wife.” I can hear the defiant passion in my tone. My father's accusation is still lingering in the room. Strangling me... Haunting me...

“*Dios mío. You love this girl.*”

“I have an obligation,” I add, gritting my teeth.

He huffs out a dry laugh. “Right.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

He stares at me for a moment, thumbs tucked in his pockets and lips pressed together as if weighing his options. I'm not sure which I'm hoping to provoke—his honesty or his silence. Both come with risks.

Honesty takes the win. RJ lifts his chin, his stance unapologetic. “You think I'm blind? I see it—hell, everyone sees it—except you. Or maybe you do, and you just refuse to admit how much she slipped through your defenses while you were busy plotting world domination.”

*Son of a bitch.*

He watches me clench my fists, then his earlier hesitation vanishes, a smug smile tugging at his mouth. “Despite all your efforts, the great Santi Carrera has been brought to his knees by a Santiago.”

His words burrow deep, then detonate. I let an unnerving silence hang in the air before turning to face him. “I kneel for no one,” I say darkly, each word edged with sharp intent. “You got that?”

“Santi, I—”

The pained groan from a few feet away claims our attention. Both of us turn, not daring to breathe as, five hours after undergoing a risky and illegal operation, Sanders's lips part, and he lets out a rattled hiss.

“No... *Hmmphh...* Run...”

*Shit, he's in bad shape.* Baxter warned us that his chances of survival were still slim. Hell, I almost feel sorry for the bastard as we listen to him wheezing and coughing his way around to consciousness. His face is the color of chalk mixed with dirty dishwater. It reminds me of the grimy snow

coating a dark street, ten years ago. The night I first met the cocky American.

The moment I see his eyelids flicker, I stride forward, only to have RJ slam his arm across my chest. “Give him a minute. You can’t force answers from a dead man.”

A minute turns into twelve.

I rub my thumb across the back of my wedding ring, spinning it like a Roulette wheel just to keep my mind occupied. To keep from peeling that bastard’s eyelids back myself and shaking him until some fucking answers fall out.

Lucky for us both, they finally open on their own. Squinting against the harsh lights, it takes him a few minutes to focus, and then he’s darting his eyes around the room, absorbing every detail as the cartel underboss in him takes over.

I say nothing, continuing to spin my ring.

Until his gaze lands on me.

I anticipate the moment his confusion morphs into rage. I wait for it... Salivate for it. Instead, his lips flatten into a grimace.

“Great party, Carrera,” he croaks, his gaze lowering to all the tubes protruding from his chest. “Your hospitality skills could use a little work, though.”

I pause my relentless spinning. “Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“No. That was sarcasm.” He coughs again, his brittle voice getting lost in his fight to breathe. “Then again, I wouldn’t expect a Carrera to know the difference.”

I lunge toward him. “You motherfucking—”

“Do you know where you are, Sanders?” RJ asks, blocking me from strangling him with another swing of his arm across my chest.

He’s overstepping, and it’s about to cause me to redirect my rage.

“I assume”—Sanders clenches his teeth as his chest rattles again—“Carrera took a cheap shot at me.”

*¡Hijo de su puta madre!* Granted, I had him carved up in the basement of a casino, but you’d think the asshole could show a little gratitude for not leaving him to bleed to death.

“It wasn’t me, you *idiota*. You’d remember my fucking smile when I pulled that trigger.”

“Then why go to all this trouble?” He narrows his eyes at me in suspicion. “I don’t play games, Carrera. Especially ones that end with my guts on display.”

“You seem to be under the impression you have a choice.”

RJ steps in front of me to diffuse the tension. “We heard shots, then found you in the back parking lot with two rounds in you.”

“And I’m supposed to believe a bunch of Carreras have been standing vigil over my bedside?” he hisses. “Give me a fucking break.”

*I’ve had enough of this.* Pushing RJ aside, I lean over him, slamming both my hands on either side of the gurney. “I don’t give a shit what you believe, Sanders. I didn’t fix you so you could live a long, happy life, *pendejo*. You got that? You walked, uninvited, into my party and then walked Thalia into a goddamn trap!” I roar out the final two words, the gurney shaking as I smack my palms against the edge.

I’d prefer to be smacking eight inches north, but I need him conscious.

I watch the wheels spinning in his head as the clouds thin. I sense the conflict as his loyalty fights a winless battle against the reality that’s slowly taking hold of him... I feel the moment truth grabs him by the throat.

Sam’s icy facade is swallowed by blunt fear. “Thalia. Is she...?”

“If I knew the answer to that, do you think you’d still have air in your lungs?” Pushing away from the gurney, I cross the room in a couple of strides, shoving my hand into my pocket and clenching it around Thalia’s rings. “This is all that’s left of her,” I roar, shoving them in his face. “Now, where is she?”

“Where did you find those?” His voice is starting to slur. “I told her...told her to wait and toss them in the Hudson.”

A bloom of warmth spreads inside my chest. *She didn’t take them off herself.* Then the gravity of his words take root in my chest, turning a bloom of warmth into molten lava.

*She didn’t take them off.*

That means someone else did.

“Santi, he’s going back under,” RJ notes.

*The fuck he is.*

I give his cheek a firm smack, causing his eyes to flutter back open. “Focus Sanders. When we found you, you said, ‘*Run. Run, Thalia. Fucking run.*’ You saw someone. You saw them coming. Who was it?”

“I don’t know,” he repeats.

I smack his other cheek. “Don’t lie to me!”

This time, his eyes don’t just flutter—they snap wide open, the fire from before reigniting to a full blaze. “Hit me again, and I’ll cut your fucking hand off. If I knew where she was, don’t you think...?” He heaves out a ragged breath. “Don’t you think I’d tell you?”

*Typical Santiago. Talking bullshit, even when on death’s door.*

“Then do it,” I say with a growl. “Because if she shows up in a shipping container next week, her blood is on your hands.”

“Care to rephrase that? You know damn well her blood will be staining the both of us.”

“What the fuck did you say?”

He exhales with a cough and a grimace. “She should never have been in that parking lot in the first place... She should never have been in New Jersey.”

I bite down on my tongue so hard I taste metal. My head knows what he says is true, but my Thalia-torn heart, that traitorous piece of shit, has a mind and a mouth of its own.

For once, I don’t combat RJ’s look of warning. I heed it. Locking my fingers around the back of my neck, I walk away, pacing the back of the room as Sanders floats in and out of consciousness. It takes every ounce of restraint I have to maintain distance between us when all I want to do is reach inside his head and drag his memories out myself.

Finally, after fifteen more minutes of babbling and silence, he lets out three clear words.

“They took her.”

His revelation is like a shot to my heart. Still, I remain silent, waiting for him to continue. *Waiting to know Thalia’s fate.*

Sanders holds RJ’s stare, and then slowly slides his gaze to me. The moment we lock eyes again, my stomach churns.

“I found her in one of your private gambling rooms.” He tosses me a look of derision. “Your security is for shit, by the way.”

“Fuck you.”

He shifts his weight, and pain blankets his face. “Grayson wanted her to know everything. Said she’d come home easier once she knew you’d lied to her. That Ella was fine. That she’d betrayed her family for nothing.”

The hatred in his voice is palpable.

RJ mumbles out a hushed, “Don’t,” under his breath, but it’s unnecessary. While I don’t appreciate his tone, I can’t argue with the truth.

“It worked. She wanted to be back in New York that night,” he rasps, twisting the knife in even deeper. “We were walking back to my car. I remember opening the door for her, and that’s when they hit me with the first shot... That’s when I told her to run—”

“And did she?” I demand.

He levels me with a stare. “What do you think?”

Of course she didn’t. *She’s a fearless firebird, remember?*

“Then they hit me with the second.”

I run my fingers across my mouth and into my thickening stubble. “Do you remember seeing Thalia after that?”

Sam wheezes through a scowl. “No, I was too busy bleeding all over your goddamn parking lot.” I’m about to tell him where he can shove his attitude when his eyes darken. “Wait... She was swimming.”

I pause, certain I’ve misheard. “I’m sorry, *swimming?*”

“Like treading water, but in the air.” His scowl returns. “Fuck, I don’t know. I was halfway to hell by then.”

“Treading water.” RJ shoots me a look. “As in kicking... That’s when they grabbed her.”

I fight the image in my head—of Thalia fighting for her life. Begging for help. Pleading for mercy.

*Dios mío, did she scream my name?*

The thought calls to all my demons.

“Did you see who shot you?”

“They had masks. Black fatigues....” Determination creases his face. “Carrera, you need to call Grayson.”

I smile at him coldly. “You don’t get to call the shots with two holes in you.”

“Don’t do it for me. Do it for Thalia,” he gasps out, his brief burst of energy fading. “This is bigger than all the shit between our cartels. She’s family.”

“She’s *my* wife.”

“We need that truce, Carrera. At least until we figure out who’s behind this.”

When I don’t answer, he clenches his fist by his side, “What if it were Lola?”

Pulling my gun from its holster, I'm shoving the muzzle under his chin before RJ can stop me. "Don't you dare say her name, you piece of shit. Not only did you steal her innocence, but she ended up taking a bullet too because of your *affiliations*."

To his credit, he doesn't flinch. "Those are some big fucking stones you're throwing. Your glass house is about to shatter, too."

"Are we reduced to talking in riddles now?"

"Thalia," he says, slurring her name. "You used her. You tried to turn her against Santiago, and for what? Some stupid revenge that isn't even ours?"

"This is different."

"How?"

I hesitate, the words resting on my tongue. Admitting it weakens me, but denying it weakens *her*.

Stepping back, I lower my gun. "Because I give a damn about her."

"And I give a damn about—"

"Where is she?" The door flies open, and for the second time tonight my father storms in, trailed by an army of *sicarios*. "Where is she, you *pinche cabrón*?" he roars again, shoving his gun right between Sanders's eyes.

Both RJ and I try to pull him back, only to get an elbow to the throat for our efforts.

Sanders gazes up at him with mild disinterest, as if it's normal to have a gun shoved in his face every five minutes. "You must be Daddy Carrera."

"Where's my daughter, *maricón*? Where's Lola?"

His facade slips, his foundations shaking. There's an unfiltered look in his eyes, as if every truth he's ever held sacred just turned to dust. That rawness... It's a strong current that drags a man under. I know, because I'm drowning in it, too.

"She's upstairs," I say, answering for him. "Where she should be."

My father explodes at this. "She's not. She's nowhere. While you've been fixated on keeping this *idiota* alive, our men have torn this entire place to hell. All they found was this..." He hurls a silver bracelet onto the bed.

It's Lola's. I remember sitting next to her in the Platinum Bar the day she showed up unannounced, watching her spin it around her wrist. She never took the damn thing off.

“What makes you think he’d know?” I motion to Sanders’s hacked-up body. “He’s been a little incapacitated this evening.”

But as I say it, there’s a gnawing in the pit of my stomach. Something that doesn’t feel right. *Something I’m missing.*

Picking up the bracelet, my father reads the words engraved on the inside as if he’s spitting out a mouthful of nails. “My only love sprung from my only hate—SS.”

“Romeo and Juliet,” I drawl, recognizing the quote. “How fatalistic of you, Sanders.”

But he isn’t looking at either of us anymore. His eyes are glued to the bracelet. “It was a gift,” he says flatly.

My father either doesn’t hear him, or he doesn’t care. The pressure of the gun on his forehead increases. “I warned you to leave my daughter alone, but you fucking Santiagos... You have to destroy everything good and pure in this world, don’t you?”

That particular bullet strays a little too close to home.

The gnawing sensation in my chest chews its way up my chest, sinking its teeth into the dark place I keep it caged. I let it feed on the realization, slowly bleeding its way into clarity.

Two stray bullets. Two criminals who can’t see beyond their own hate. Two innocent targets.

That’s when I know.

“She’s with Thalia. They were taken together.”

My father swings around to face me. “What makes you think that?”

“This mafia princess trafficking ring... Whoever took Thalia wouldn’t just settle for her. They’d make the effort worth their while.”

His eyes close. “*Dios ayude a mi cielito.*”

“God can’t help them. But we can.” My heart pounds against my ribcage, a disjointed rhythm of fury and hope as I focus on the dying American. “We can’t find them without him. We need him alive.”

Glancing at my father, I see the fury straining his neck muscles. Seconds tick, and then he’s sliding his Glock back in its holster.

“Make it fast.”

I turn to Sanders. “We need more. Think hard.”

Nodding, he closes his eyes, and I count every second of silence.

*One. Two. Three.*

Dark images slither into my head.

*Four. Five. Six.*

Thalia and Lola, trapped in some hellhole with no escape.

*Seven. Eight. Nine.*

Thalia and Lola, covered in blood.

At ten, I'm at breaking point, and reaching for my own gun when his eyes suddenly pop open.

"*I Vecchi...*" He shakes his head, his fingers taking hold of the sheet. "*I Vecchi pecca...* Shit, what did I hear them say..."

*"I vecchi peccati hanno le ombre lunghe."*

Every eye swings to where my father stands, one hand gripping his gun, the other clenching Lola's bracelet.

Sanders glares at him, daring him to explain. "I heard a voice saying those words. Like he was mocking me."

"Italian," I spit in frustration. "We need a fucking translator in here."

"Old sins have long shadows" my father murmurs, surprising us all. "I haven't heard that phrase in over twenty years. I thought it was dead and buried."

"What the hell does it mean?"

"It's the creed of *La Societá Villefort*," he says heavily. "An elite underground criminal organization with roots all over the world." He takes my arm in a vise-like grip again. "Call Edier Grayson," he orders, turning back to the gurney. "Set up a meeting right away."

"What the *fuck*?" I roar, shoving a hand through my hair. This night is exposing more than a few skeletons.

There's a distant look in my father's eyes, accompanied by a faint film of resignation. "There's one man who knows more about this organization than anyone... The same man who brought it crashing down two decades ago, and he happens to be a close business associate of Santiago's."

Sanders murmurs something in agreement, then lifts his arm. "Hand me a phone. I'll make the call."

I shoot him a blistering look. "I thought I'd made it clear who gives the orders around here. If anyone's going to make that call, it's me."

My father's grip on my arm tightens. "Then do it. My daughter's life is on the line. *Your sister's life*. It's time for the Carreras to put our pride aside and make a concession. Tell Grayson we'll cross the river and come to him this time." Grinding his teeth, he slides Lola's bracelet back into his pocket. "I refuse to let *La Boda Roja* become my daughter's *Funeral Rojo*. If

there's the slightest chance this associate knows where Lola and Thalia are, the walls between New Jersey and New York need to come crashing down... Starting tonight."

## **CHAPTER SIX**

THALIA



I WAS BORN WITH A PRICE ON MY HEAD.

Not the FBI one, but another that's whispered about in dark corners of the underworld. It promises revenge over dollars... Innocence for blood.

My father has many enemies.

Enemies have a habit of laying low.

Enemies bite when you least expect it, and it's usually those closest who end up hurting the most.

Today, those enemies are here to collect, and I'm his collateral... Or rather, I'm his and Santi's. I bear two cartel names now, which means I'm twice as valuable to those who seek to profit from whatever this horror show is.

They come for us in the afternoon, just like Rosalia—the girl who was shoved into our room yesterday—said they would.

With their guns pointing in our faces, we're made to shower and put on clean, white slip dresses, without being allowed to dry ourselves first.

The flimsy material is still clinging to our bodies as we're forced down the winding stone steps to the ground floor. I do as they demand, but I'm counting everything... The guard with his eyes glued to my breasts? He has two missing fingers on his right hand. The crimson key insignia pin badge that they wear on their lapels? It matches the insignia on the twenty-three doors we pass. There are five security cameras in total above the lines of faded frescos, and exactly forty-five steps from the bottom of the staircase to the steel front door.

If there's a chink in the armory of this place, I'm going to find it.

We're pushed through a double doorway, down another flight of stone steps, and out into a small courtyard. The sight that greets me makes my steps falter. More young women—all dressed in the same stupid white dresses and invisible chains.

No one speaks as we're herded together like sheep, ring-fenced by a pack of snarling guards.

There are sixty-three of them in total.

There are only thirty-one of us.

"Don't make eye contact," Rosalia whispers, her soft plea melting into all the whimpers going on around us. "Whatever you do, don't catch their attention."

I jerk out a nod as I'm sucked deeper into the group, allowing dread and uncertainty to seep further into my bones. There's a shadow forming inside me, a bullet wrapped up in barbed wire that's dragging along the walls of my soul—ripping and tearing—freeing emotions I've never dared allowed myself to entertain.

Hate.

Hurt.

*Anger.*

These feelings terrify me. I've fought them all my life. Reviled them. Shoved them in a lost and found box for my father to claim, not me. Despised him because of it. Despised my husband for embracing them, too.

I see a fancy dining table.

I hear my own words echoing in my head.

*"I want to help the world, not make it spin for me..."*

My naivety makes me want to puke. Right now, that same woman wants nothing more than to make the whole world burn for her.

Lola slips her hand into mine, as if she can sense the shock and chaos going on beneath my frozen expression.

My tainted blood has been there all along, flowing through my veins. Lying dormant. Waiting for a dark awakening to finally set it free...

*Breathe, Thalia. Breathe.*

I need a sliver of Ella's happiness to bring me back. A chink of my mother's light... Desperately, I cling to a Pinterest collage of sepia tone memories in my head. I see the cerulean borders of my father's island. I see Ella waving to me from the shoreline, wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat

two sizes too big for her. I hear my husband's laugh... The rarest of rough diamonds, yet somehow the most precious.

"Stay strong. We'll get through this, Thalia," I hear her whisper.

*I wonder if she knows that her tainted blood is slowly poisoning her too.*

They make us stand in the courtyard for an hour, spotlighted by the blazing sunshine—sweating and shivering, and bracing ourselves for the next blow.

Finally, there's movement in the doorway. An uneasy hush descends over the courtyard as a tall man emerges from the castle. He pauses on the top step, casting a long shadow that divides us like a blade. His expensive black suit flatters a cruel expression. His eyes are the dead calm of a bitter-blue ocean.

I wince as Lola's grip starts crushing my bones. We've been around bad men all our lives, but pure evil has a face, and this man is wearing it.

"*Le mie puttane vestite di bianco,*" he declares, his thick accent ripe with disdain. "My whores in white... Today is another glorious day to cry and kneel and submit." He laughs, and then gestures at his men. "Begin."

I feel a rough shove between my shoulder blades.

"Move, *puttana.*"

Rosalia grabs my other hand and tugs us toward a stone archway. "Stay close to me. They make us walk all the way to the town square. This is where the auction is."

Auction.

The word swirls around my head like hot sauce, burning every thought it touches. Rosalia didn't say much about it last night, other than to expect hell today. We begged and pleaded, but she only gave us crumbs. It's like she wanted us to have one last night of ignorance.

That night is over, and ignorance is about to be damned to the same place we're all headed.

"Who are these girls?" I hear Lola whisper.

"They're like us... Camorra. Bratva. Cartel. Born into leading underworld families—"

"Wait. I swear I know you from somewhere." I can see the dots connecting in her head, but they're not moving fast enough. Not here. Not now. Not with the devil breathing down our necks. "I thought you looked familiar last night—"

“My father is Gianni Marchesi. The New Jersey don.” Rosalia’s eyes dart to the side before she adds, “Italian mafia.”

“*Silenzio!*” the guards snarl, and Rosalia draws us tighter into the group again.

“Whatever happens, don’t react,” she warns. “They want to see your fear. They get fucking loaded off of it. This place is like a bad virus, and everyone is infected.”

“What do you mean...?” I trail off as we enter a narrow cobblestone street. That’s when I see them all waiting for us. Lines and lines—two, sometimes three-locals deep.

Our degradation is to be a public spectacle here in Creepsville, Italy.

The next few minutes are the worst of my life. I count off every torturous meter as old men jeer at us from the doorways and women shout vile foreign words and slap and pinch our skin as we stumble past them. Their hate for us is tangible, but there’s not much of ‘us’ to warrant such animosity. Stripped of our underwear, our shoes, our families’ protection, we’re about as threatening as the lark from our window ledge.

“Why the fuck are they doing this?” Lola gasps, her face white with fear.

“We’re our father’s atonement,” Rosalia mutters. “Our families disgust them. We’re the reason why their harvests fail, or why their kids never make it into the right college... That’s what *he* tells them, anyway, and they revere him like a fucking god. He turns us into mafia scapegoats to justify what really goes on around here.”

“Are you talking about the guy in the courtyard?”

Before she can answer, she’s ducking to avoid a thrown bottle. It smashes next to us, and another girl cries out in pain as the broken pieces cut her feet to ribbons.

“They call him *Il Re Nero*, *The Black King*. But others call him by his birth name—Lorenzo Zaccaria. He sells our bodies to the highest bidder to fund his secret criminal organization. The men who pay the most get to take us into *Il Labirinto* and do whatever the hell they want with us.”

Holy shit.

“You mean—?”

“*Silenzio,*” growls a nearby guard again, giving me another rough shove that pitches me forward into the girl in front.

This time when I glance at my fellow captives, I do so with fresh eyes. Rosalia isn't the only one here sporting whip marks and bruises, smashed up souls and burned-out courage. *This is so much worse than being sold to one cruel bastard.* We're about to be trapped in a cycle of hell. We're going to be used and abused until death is a mercy.

*Find us Santi. Hurry.*

*Kill them all, pápa. Violently.*

The grim procession continues into the next street.

Something wet and warm hits my bare shoulder. *Did someone just spit at me?* I stagger sideways in shock and, once again, Lola is there to steady me.

We didn't need Rosalia's warning. We're smart enough not to react to the abuse. We swallow down our humiliation like it's a bad meal, knowing we can puke it up later, but others in our group aren't so restrained. One girl tries to break formation and she's dragged back by her hair and beaten right in front of us, her screams and pleas prompting a round of applause.

*What is this place?*

Something unlocks inside me again as I watch the cobblestones run red with her blood.

With each new punch and kick, I feel that same shadow unfurling in the pit of my stomach. By the time we reach *la piazza cittadina, the town square*, I'm shaking from my efforts to contain it.

There's a new crowd waiting for us here, one that reeks of a refined brutality that promises to crush us even more. No women. Just men, dressed like *Il Re Nero*—their black suits accessorized with black masquerade masks to conceal their own evil. There are more crimson key symbols on their lapels. Every house we passed had that same motif carved in stone above the doorways.

We're led like cattle onto a wooden platform in the center of the square. Right away, I move to stand in front of Lola.

"What the hell are you doing?" she hisses, trying to pull me back.

"If anyone's being chosen today, it's me."

"Bullshit!"

"Think of the baby, Lola," I mutter, and her breath hitches sharply.

Before she can respond, *Il Re Nero* steps into the square. He's not alone. There's a man walking next to him, so short in comparison he's barely a footnote, wearing a crumpled blue suit, black-rimmed glasses, and the same

punchable, rat-like face that, once upon a time, I joked to my husband about.

*No. It can't be...*

Lola's seen him too, judging by all the angry Spanish going on behind me.

Monroe Spader.

Santi's ex-business partner.

*But when...? How...?*

Our eyes meet, and his smirk widens.

As I watch in muted shock, he turns to say something to *Il Re Nero* whose dark gaze seeks out my face as well. His chilly smile turns my insides to ice, before he nods at Spader. The exchange is a dirty agreement. It's a reward for a job well done.

That's when I know this "auction" is nothing more than a shitshow.

I've already been bought and sold by the ultimate deception.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

## SANTI



THE STORM THAT BLEW IN FROM THE NORTHEAST TWELVE HOURS AGO IS nothing compared to the one breezing in from the south, late morning, in two Black SUVs and an Aston Martin with a shattered windshield.

In the end, I made the call. Sanders had passed out shortly before, mumbling my sister's name like it was a goddamn prayer, proving he still gives a fuck about her.

It pissed me off enough to demand that his painkillers be halved for the next few hours. This meeting may be a concession, but bad blood doesn't dilute like oil. There's never a clean separation, and he'd do well to remember that.

I kept the conversation with Grayson as brief as possible. We needed to talk, and we needed to do it before every McDonald's up and down the East Coast started serving a new "lunchtime special."

Thalia's whereabouts wasn't something to be casually dropped over a phone-line. The gravity of what we'd learned deserved a face-to-face delivery.

In turn, I decided the truth about Sanders would be held over their heads like an insurance policy. If Grayson and Santiago played nice for the next few hours and agreed to cooperate, Rick Sanders would get his stepson back in one piece, minus eight inches of damaged colon.

Edier Grayson was his usual monosyllabic self, but knowing what was at stake, he agreed right away. Sixty seconds later, a text message arrived containing one location and two assurances.

No bullets allowed, and The Devil himself would be in attendance.

It's eleven a.m. by the time we arrive at an address in downtown Brooklyn. It's a red brick building, with broken windows, located on a quiet street with a dozen other empty warehouses on either side. Four stories high of *nothing-going-on-here-officer*. The kind of place I'd choose myself.

As we pull up to the curb, I see a beast of a man lurking just inside the doorway. The minute I step out of the Aston Martin, he emerges from the building.

"*Señor Carrera*," he says, directing his greeting at me, not my father, which amuses only one of us. "Our lookout notified us of your arrival. Santiago and Grayson have already been informed. Keep your guns out of sight and follow me."

He leads us into a large open space with a network of rusted metal beams latticing the high ceiling, but I'm not here to admire the architecture. There's a line of thirty-five armed *sicarios* blocking our access.

"Wait here."

The beast moves toward a side door as I give the order for our men to fan out either side of us, their air of "no fucks given" turning their ten into the threat of twenty. It's still not enough. I left Rocco in charge of Sanders, and I'm starting to miss the moody bastard already.

RJ scans a calculated eye down the line of heavily armed *sicarios*. "Have we been led to a meeting or a slaughter?"

I slide my hands into the pockets of my clean black slacks, grateful to be rid of Sanders's blood. Now I can focus without smelling the stench of his and my sister's lies.

*Hypocrite*, a voice in my head whispers.

That voice can fuck off.

"It's a strategic move." I meet his side-eye with a shrug. "Basic checks and balances. Numbers keep the odds in Grayson's favor. It's a truce, not a tea party."

My father straightens his tie, his focus never straying from Santiago's ninja army. "Remember to keep it in check, Santi."

At first, I'm more intrigued by the fact that he's finally speaking, rather than what he's saying. The whole trip from Atlantic City to Brooklyn has been a lesson in silence. Not that RJ and I had a whole lot to say, but in growing up under my father's command we learned a valuable truth early in life:

*A man is most dangerous when he's calm.*

And Valentin Carrera has had two and a half hours of raw tranquility.

“Keep what in check?” I ask.

He stands like a statue, giving nothing away. “Your temper. Your reactions. Your expressions. All of the above. Santiago has built an empire on his ability to mindfuck the soulless. Don’t let him feed you a spark and let it draw you into an inferno.”

*Dios mío*, not him too. I’m so sick of hearing about “Stone Cold Dante” and his blindsides. He didn’t seem so covert when he was pulling a Lee Harvey Oswald out the window of Thalia’s high-rise last week.

“He’s not God, for fuck’s sake. He’s just a man. Cut him, and he still bleeds like everyone else.”

He nods. “True. Contrary to popular belief, even Dante Santiago isn’t immortal. But arrogance is a thin shield, son. This will be the first time he lays eyes on the man who blackmailed his daughter into marriage. Don’t expect anything but six days-worth of resentment.”

“This also isn’t Colombia, or some off-the-grid Pacific island,” I argue. “This is New York. Isn’t Grayson the boss around here? Or is he just an extension of Santiago’s overinflated ego?”

The words are barely out of my mouth before he’s spinning around and jabbing a finger in my face. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about. You’re projecting your anger, and that’s what’s going to end this meeting before it begins.”

It pisses me off how well he reads me sometimes. All I can think about is my sister and my wife and what could be happening to them. *Who could be hurting them*. What cuts the deepest is I’m powerless to stop it. I have a reach that stretches across all seven continents, but it’s still not enough.

I have to find a way to bottle that hatred—*self-directed or otherwise*. This paper-thin truce is the only thing preventing the bullets from flying.

“Whose side are you on?” I grit out eventually.

Without warning, my father’s mask drops back into place, and just like that, his break in character is over. *Curtain call. Take a bow*.

“I’m not going to dignify that with an answer. However, if the situation were reversed and Sanders had forced your sister into marriage against her will”—his nostrils flare, the thought filling him with fury—“let’s just say I’m not sure there wouldn’t be a bullet waiting for him in the next room.”

He doesn’t elaborate further, and neither do I. The image hangs in the air—a blunt reminder of why we’re here in the first place.

The beast returns, and motions for us to enter the side room. Our men follow in our wake, the sound of marching footsteps filling the tense beats of silence.

This warehouse is smaller than the last, with that same latticework of rusted brown beams. Once again, I couldn't give a fuck about the architecture, not when I see the long, low mahogany table set in the center, and the two men sitting behind it.

Of all the things to focus on, I can't take my eyes off a half-drunk bottle of bourbon on the table. It makes me think of Thalia crawling across my desk and into my heart.

As Grayson's men move to stand behind their boss, my own men position themselves behind us. Everyone is watching and waiting for history to repeat itself as I force my gaze from the bourbon to a couple of dangerously still expressions. *Not that I can blame them...* After all, the definition of insanity is doing the same thing, over and over, and expecting a different result.

Good thing we're all a little mad here.

Grayson is the first to acknowledge our presence. Rising to his feet, he slowly makes his way around the table to where we're standing. He's wearing the same all-black attire again—as is every other member of his unwelcome party. It tells me Santiagos are creatures of habit. Either that, or they have a severely stunted imagination.

“Carrera.” My name rolls off Grayson's tongue like a sharpened dart as his gaze slides to where my father stands stoically to my right. “Carrera...” Shifting down the line to RJ, he arches an eyebrow in disinterest. “*Not Carrera...*”

“Your powers of observation astound me,” I say dryly.

My sarcasm is lost on him. Instead, he offers a curt nod. “My second-in-command is bleeding all over your casino. We'd like him back. I assume the only reason you're here is to arrange his safe return.”

“Fuck his return. I'm more concerned with who shot him twice at close range, and why.”

His cool facade slips a notch. I may be holding the details of Thalia's kidnapping close to my chest, but during our call, I had no problem giving this bastard a detailed, play-by-play of his right-hand-man's near demise in the parking lot of my casino—swiftly followed by hours of agonizingly primitive surgery.

RJ called it reckless.

My father called it *infantil*.

I call it payback.

Grayson quickly tempers his expression. “How is he?”

“Alive...” At his almost imperceptible exhale, I add, “For now. How long that continues is up to you.”

Tired of dancing around the volatile elephant in the room, I turn to Santiago. He’s leaning forward, forearms on the table—his posture deceptively calm.

*A man is most dangerous when he’s calm, remember?*

“Dante Santiago, I presume.” Lifting my chin, I meet his glacial glare with one of my own, my bottled-up anger spilling all over the floor like Anthrax. “Or would you prefer it if I called you, *pápa*?”

*Well, that didn’t take long.*

To his credit, my father doesn’t react, even though I just pissed all over his warning.

There’s no mistaking RJ’s exhaled, “*Fuck*,” though. He’s already reaching for his gun. In response, five others are aimed at the back of our heads.

Santiago’s gaze never waivers as he lifts his hand. A beat later, his men’s bullets are back aiming at the floor.

“*I’d prefer* it if you didn’t address me at all, Carrera.” The temperature in the room drops sharply as he rises to his feet, his voice a deep, mocking drawl. “Most of all, *I’d prefer* it if you left my daughter alone.”

“I could say the same to you, *amigo*.” Three deadly syllables roll into six as my father turns camaraderie into a thrown gauntlet.

I guess his own advice to “not let Santiago draw you into an inferno” becomes null and void when Lola’s the one trapped in the middle of it.

At this, his rival slams his palms to the table. “Then I suggest you check your fucking sources. Grayson and I control where our men aim their guns, not their dicks. Whatever Sanders did with your precious *cielito* was of his own doing—and with her consent, I might add. It seems that neither of us know our daughters as well as we thought we did.” He shifts his gaze back to me again. “And where exactly was Thalia when these bullets were making a mess of Sanders? Safely locked in her ivory tower, I hope?”

“She’s gone.”

Those dark eyes gleam in amusement. “Six days of marriage, and you’ve lost her already, Carrera? How careless.”

I take a step toward the table and slam my palms down to mimic his stance. “They came for her.”

He pauses. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“They hit them in the parking lot. First, they took Thalia, then they came for my sister. Sanders was caught in the crossfire.”

“They have my daughter?” He spits it out like he’s chewing glass.

“Yes.” I hold his gaze, refusing to look away.

In a flash of movement, I’m staring down the barrel of his gun.

“I should decorate the walls of this warehouse with your blood for allowing my daughter to be kidnapped.”

“And then I’ll paint a fucking Picasso with yours.” Pulling his own gun, my father aims it at Santiago’s head, and then at the line of cocked guns behind us. “And so on and so on. No one in this room would walk out alive. So, go ahead...take your revenge on the one Carrera who’ll walk through hell to find your daughter.”

*What the fuck is he doing?*

“I repeat, it was *your* bastard son who let my daughter fall into enemy hands,” Santiago clips, barely containing his rage.

But my father hasn’t garnered his reputation by backing down to anyone. *Especially not Dante Santiago.* Taking three calculated steps, now it’s his turn to mock his adversary’s stance, his low growl engulfing the room like rolling thunder. “Just like your bastard godson did with mine? If Sanders had stayed away from Lola, she wouldn’t have been in New Jersey.”

“This is going exactly how I imagined it would,” I hear RJ mutter.

As The Reaper and The Devil square off against one another, a sense of anarchy builds in the warehouse like the final notes of an off-key concerto. Grayson and I exchange looks. He’s still wearing that arrogant pretense, but there’s no mistaking the flash of warning in his eyes.

It mirrors the one I know is reflected in mine.

We’re proud men—princes who have the world at our feet. But even proud men can count the seconds of a ticking time bomb. There’s too much bad blood between my father and Santiago for them to lead this charge. Thalia and Lola may be their daughters, but twenty years of animosity is going to get them killed.

There needs to be a mediator.

Someone with a vested interest in both women.

Someone who'd lay down his life for either one.

"Enough!" I roar, the passion in my voice causing both men to turn their heads. "Put your fucking guns down." When they continue glaring at each other, I raise my voice again. "I said, 'guns down'! In case you two have forgotten where you are, let me remind you... This is a warehouse in Brooklyn, New York—Santiago-owned territory governed by Edier Grayson's hand." I look to where the younger Colombian is watching me like a hawk. "And everyone within these state lines answers to him. Am I right?"

"Santi—"

"In turn, everyone within New Jersey's borders answers to me," I say, ignoring my father. "That makes *us* in charge here. Not you."

There's a long pause as my words hit home.

Taking a deep breath, I continue. "Last night, before everything went to hell, New York and New Jersey bridged a temporary alliance. It means that whatever bullshit happened before Sanders and Thalia walked out the doors of my casino and into enemy hands is irrelevant. It ends *now*... The sins of the fathers just got a fucking absolution by the next generation. Do you hear me?"

"He's right," Grayson says, earning himself one of Santiago's death glares. "We're not saying there aren't debts that need to be repaid." He flicks his dark eyes back to me. "And, trust me, the interest for those is still rising... But fighting amongst ourselves is hurting the women we're fighting over. Furthermore, I'd like to bring Sanders home before Carrera's bargain basement stitchwork finishes the job these bastards started."

I slide him a "fuck you" for that. I could've just as easily let him bleed to death.

"I'll allow it," Santiago affirms, through gritted teeth. "For now... For Thalia..."

"*No estaba pidiendo tu aprobación, cabrón,*" my father mutters

The Colombian pins him with a sharp gaze. "I don't give a fuck if he was asking for my approval, or not. When it comes to the Carreras, I have the final word."

My father's lips twitch. "Actually, I believe that was your daughter, when she said, 'I do' to my son."

Another line of dominoes takes aim.

“I suggest we all take a seat and calm down,” Grayson says evenly. “Did your security cameras catch anything?”

“Nothing.” With a grimace, I pull out the nearest chair.

Santiago says nothing as he sinks back down into his own chair and drags the bottle of bourbon toward him. Moving swiftly, Grayson intercepts. He pours out five glasses and pushes each one in our direction.

My father stares at his glass as if he’s just been handed a liquid heart attack. “I’m amenable, not stupid,” he intones, pushing it away with the back of his hand.

I agree. However, I’ve also had enough stress and bullshit thrown at me in the last twelve hours to risk it. Slamming my bourbon, I slide his glass toward me for a second hit. “Problem solved.”

Santiago watches the exchange in silence as he knocks his own drink back. His grip on the glass is a white-knuckle ride. Hell is about to be unleashed, but right now he's still picking at the locks.

“After two failed alliances, what makes you think this one will be any different?”

Picking up my father’s glass, I toss it back in one. “Third time’s the charm. I take it the bourbon is an apology for taking a shot at me last week?”

He frowns. “She didn’t tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Not my order, Carrera.”

“How the fuck would Thalia know...?” I trail off with a curse. “You had an insider.”

Santiago’s smile never reaches his eyes. “You think I’d leave my daughter swimming with sharks without a weapon of mass destruction? She was being watched the moment she stepped foot in your apartment. If you’d raised a hand to her, they would have shot it clean off.”

“I’d never raise a hand to her,” I say mildly. “Not in that sense, anyway...”

The cold smile disappears.

“I’ll give you marks for creativity.” I gesture to the bottle and refill my glass. “Bribing my illegal alien housekeeper with a fake green card was inventive.”

Boom.

*I already knew the score there, asshole.*

“It seems the Russian needs a lesson in holding her tongue.” Santiago pours himself another drink, barely flickering. “I may have underestimated you.”

“More than you know.” At his raised eyebrow, I add, “Tell me, Santiago, how’s that new pilot of yours working out?”

I expected hellfire and brimstone. What I get is something far more unexpected. There’s a faint flicker of respect in his black eyes, before it’s suffocated by indifference.

I watch him exchange looks with Grayson. “Not well,” he answers eventually. “Benito just had himself a tragic accident.”

“How unfortunate. Almost as unfortunate as Svetlana’s will be.”

How unfortunate indeed. However, I need to veer this meeting back on track.

“This alliance won’t fail because it goes beyond business. This is about blood. About family...”

Grayson scrapes a hand across his jaw. “Did you manage to get anything out of Sanders?”

“I did...” comes a low, controlled voice.

Heads turn to where my father sits, deep in thought. “*I vecchi peccati hanno le ombre lunghe.*”

“Old sins have long shadows,” Santiago translates, his expression darkening. “He heard them say this?”

My father nods. “There are some things you never forget. The moment he said it, I knew what we were up against.” His gaze locks across the table. “I knew we couldn’t do this alone.”

“Anyone care to enlighten the rest of us?” I say, losing my temper.

My father grits his teeth. “Your *Abuelo* Alejandro, was a sick son a bitch who trafficked women. He enjoyed the hunt more than the kill. As such, it wasn’t long before *La Societá Villefort* came calling.”

“Like fucking poison.” Santiago’s grip tightens around his glass again.

“Their organization was mostly funded by trafficking. They controlled most of the networks, except the ones in and out of Mexico. In exchange for a huge cut, they offered him something money can’t buy.”

“Does that mean...?”

“No,” my father snaps at my insinuation. “After that bastard died, *Villefort* came to me offering membership. They left with three less men.

Still, they didn't take the rejection lightly, and I've kept a vigilant eye on my borders ever since." Letting out a curse, he finally reaches for the bourbon. "My knowledge of their inner workings is limited at best. However, *he* can tell us all we need to know."

I follow his line of sight to where Santiago sits.

"Actually, this is Knight's area of expertise," I hear Grayson say.

"And who the fuck is Knight?" I say sharply, bringing my fist down hard on the table. "I'm done with the coded bullshit. We need to lay everything out, right now. There are two women out there who are counting on it."

*They're counting on us.*

The Colombian narrows his eyes, either to shield his contempt, or his respect. For the second time tonight, I'm suspecting the latter.

"Aiden Knight," he clarifies, leaning back in his chair. "He's a business associate of mine, going back twenty years. He launders money for me through his casinos on the French Riviera. He was knee-deep in *Villefort* until he cut himself free. In doing so, he brought the whole organization down. We believed it was dead and buried..."

There are emotions moving below his surface. Emotions he can't contain. My stomach lurches. *He's thinking about Thalia*. He knows she's in big trouble.

"Who's it affiliated with?" I demand, bringing my fist down on the table again. "Mafia? The Russians?"

"It's more complex than that. Back in the day, it offered an exclusive protection unit for billionaires, heads of state, royalty... They cleaned up their mess for a hefty price, and an even heftier sacrifice. They infiltrated governments. They were behind every decision on the world stage—"

"Illuminati bastard child?"

"Something like that. They had stakes in every organized crime cell. Except mine and your father's, and a couple of others..." He shifts his gaze to the man sitting next to me. "We have no interest in politics, other than when it suits us. We play in a very different league... As do you," he adds, gifting me another concession. "Our reputations alone get us where we want to go."

*Damn right they do.*

"We find the ax, we find the key."

"I told you no more cryptic bullshit."

“*Villefort* has a crimson key insignia,” Grayson interrupts. “They used to vomit that shit over everything. It's their calling card. Was there anything like that left behind in the parking lot?”

“I'll get my men to take another look.” I pull out my phone to call Rocco. At the same time, Grayson turns to one of his black-clad ninjas.

“Get down to Canal Street with fifty others. Round up every Italian mafia cunt you come across. Anyone with an ax tattoo gets brought back here. You have two hours... Go.”

“We're not dealing with chancers and petty criminals here,” Santiago warns, a muscle working in his jaw. “Every major political assassination... Every conflict... Tommaso Zaccaria had a hand in it all.”

“He's their leader?”

“Was. He and his five sons are long dead, save one. He has an Italian grandson...” He glances at Grayson, who's already tapping out a message on his phone.

*Damn, this asshole's efficient.*

“What else can you tell us?” With every passing second, I'm growing more impatient. I need Thalia back in my arms. I need her to understand why I did what I did... I just fucking *need* her.

“Not much, other than death was a kindness if you fell foul of their company. They were a bunch of depraved lunatics with a God complex. Their organization thrived on degradation and exploitation.”

Fuck.

“And vengeance,” Santiago finishes darkly. “Twenty years ago, we gave Interpol the keys to their house of cards and pissed all over their play time. Now, it seems, they're back to piss all over ours.”

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

SANTI



SANTIAGO'S LAST WORDS HANG IN THE AIR LIKE A RUSTY HOOK, ONE THAT'S worn with time, and stained with sacrifice. The five of us sit in silence for a moment, absorbing the bleak portrait he just painted. Hearing the grim details of *La Société Villefort's* depravity, and realizing that whatever time we thought we had...

*We don't.*

I hear their screams in my head. I fucking hear them. *My sister... My wife...*

Somehow, I force their faces from my memory. If I let them take over, I'll lose focus. Their lives hinge on my ability to compartmentalize. To be analytical and strategic... My pulse slows to a steady hum as I slide back into the familiar skin of the cartel boss.

*A man is most dangerous when he's calm.*

"What were their last known whereabouts?" my father asks.

"South of France." Grayson reaches out to top off everyone's glass again. "There was a headquarters somewhere around Cannes. I'll get Knight to check it out. See if there's any movement at the estate."

*A beginning...* But if that's not enough. I'll raze every town and village in Europe, if I have to. I won't stop until I find them.

An incoming text from Rocco diverts my attention. I glance down at my phone, and his response has me reaching for the bourbon.

**Nothing.**

"Enjoying my hospitality, Carrera?"

I look up to find Santiago eyeing the near-empty bottle, as if I've stolen his favorite toy. Just for that, I pour myself another double.

"My head of security," I say, tapping the screen on my phone. "He swept the parking lot again—no crimson keys found."

"Interesting."

"Or telling..." I counter. "Why are you so convinced Ricci's ax and *Villefort's* key are in bed together? The man who freed Marco Bardi didn't wear a crimson key. He wore Ricci's insignia...an ax tattoo."

"Because they're operating as one unit," Grayson says, staring at his phone. All conversation ceases as four pairs of eyes follow his hand as he turns the screen around. "A preview of our incoming Canal Street delivery. My men work fast."

It's a close up of a man's bloody neck. Just like the one in the surveillance video, it bears an ax tattoo. *Unlike* the one in the video, a crimson key pin has been lodged deep in the center of it.

It's true. It's all fucking true. Ricci and *Villefort* have been a unified shadow darkening both our cities. All planned... All calculated...

"What about the timeline correlation?"

Every eye swings to where RJ has been sitting mute the whole meeting, taking everything in. Watching it unfold. It doesn't surprise me. His silence is by design. While everyone around him wages war, he strategizes the counterattack.

"Who the fuck are you again?" Santiago drawls.

RJ returns his stony stare across the table. "A long-term casualty of *La Boda Roja*."

The Colombian regards him with mild curiosity, as if he's an irritating fly buzzing in and out of the conversation. But I know better. Behind RJ's arctic stare lies two decades of hatred. Twenty years of scars. Twenty years of silence.

After all, the man sitting across the table made him an orphan at three years old...

That's when the heart of his question hits me.

"Holy shit," I breathe. "*La Boda Roja*."

Santiago growls. "Not this shit again."

"*La Boda Roja*," I repeat again, this time through clenched teeth. "It happened around the same time as—"

"The fall of *Villefort*," my father says thoughtfully, his jaw tightening.

“Despite what you both claim, there was a third party involved at the wedding from hell.” I swing my gaze from him to the Colombian. “They were Ricci’s men, were they not?”

No one answers. Not that I expected them to. Besides, it was a rhetorical question. I’m playing Connect the Dots, not Truth or Dare.

*Black*

*Crimson*

*Ax*

*Key*

All four lines intersect, forming a perfect square.

“It was a power play. *Villefort* was sinking. Tommaso Zaccaria was behind bars. Don Ricci was at the bottom of the Hudson. What better way to carve inroads through American, Mexican, and Colombian borders?”

“Pit the two greatest cartels against one another and watch them destroy themselves for twenty years, extracting the ultimate revenge,” my father adds flatly, as years of bloodshed and torment unravel on his face.

“*Corazones sengrates*,” I stiffen, my words soaked in blasphemy.

“*Sí*, bleeding hearts,” he confirms, commanding everyone’s attention. “Steal their beloved daughters and make them suffer a fate worse than death.”

“We could’ve been a step ahead of this if *you* hadn’t kept Bardi tied up in your basement,” Santiago roars, turning on me.

“You think Bardi is part of *Villefort*?” I scoff. “Come on, even sociopaths have standards.”

“The fact remains that if you hadn’t chained her to your side of the river with lies, she would have been under our protection. Instead, you were too busy trying to climb to the top of the Carrera mountain, you didn’t bother to look behind you.”

I grip the edge of the table, ready to flip it in his face when my father’s words come back to me.

“*Santiago has built an empire on his ability to mindfuck the soulless. Don’t let him feed you a spark and let it draw you into an inferno.*”

He’s trying to provoke me, so instead of giving him the reaction he wants, I give him the one he deserves.

“This all started in a New York nightclub, not New Jersey,” I say, delivering the accusation with a sharper edge. “They would have taken

Thalia regardless. Maybe you should be more worried about your own goddamn *mountain*.”

RJ leans back in his chair. He’s still turning pieces of information around in his head, trying to make them all fit. A deep line sinks between his eyebrows as he runs his hands across his mouth. “Where did the shipping containers originate?”

“No idea,” I snap, the harsh memory of the dead women lingering. “Why?”

He motions between Grayson and me. “You both had one land on your doorstep. Same white dresses. Same execution style... If you trace the origin of both shipping containers, we’ll have a starting point, if not a location.”

Before he’s finished, Grayson and I are messaging the dockhands on our payroll at our respective port terminals. For fifteen minutes, no one speaks. No one touches another glass of bourbon. Each passing moment fades into the next as we wait for the confirmation, all of us primed and ready to paint the streets red.

Mine is the first phone to ring.

All eyes are on me as I answer. “Carrera.”

“Bad time?” my contact asks, reading my tone.

“Just get on with it.”

“I had to do some digging. ‘Special shipments’ like that one aren’t exactly scanned and recorded, ya know.”

“Then why are you wasting my time?”

He has the nerve to sound offended. “I wasn’t able to track where those ‘contents came from, but I can tell you the location of that particular container’s last official log, six days prior.”

*Six days.*

My mind wanders back to a night of tantalizing banter and stark honesty.

A night of submission and spaghetti...

“Carrera... You still there?”

I blink away the memory. “What’s the location?”

“New Haven.”

I freeze. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Jesus, you think I’d call Santi Carrera with some half-cocked—?”

The line goes dead as I end the call and slide my phone back into my pocket. I'm about ten seconds away from losing my shit, when I look up and find myself in the twin firing line of both Valentin Carrera and Dante Santiago.

"Well?" Santiago demands.

Meanwhile, Grayson is staring down at his phone with the same grim look on his face.

"Santi," my father says sharply.

"The containers came from New Haven."

His static expression shifts. "Connecticut?"

The word is barely out of his mouth when Grayson slams his phone onto the table, his cool composure shot to shit. "Ours too. Port of New Haven. That's not even a cartel owned."

"It's Irish," I grit out. "Green, white and orange have had a lock on the Port of New Haven for over thirty years."

*But why there? Why the diversion?*

A criminal's actions are never without purpose. They're planned. Calculated. Timed...

Then I remember RJ's words about the timeline correlation.

Twenty years ago, two cartel kings met at a wedding in Mexico City. It ended in gunfire and bloodshed. Ten years ago, they met again at an old church on a suburban street in Hasbrouck Heights. Again, it ended in gunfire and bloodshed. Seven days ago, a Mexican heir and a Colombian *princesa* met in a casino in Atlantic City. This time, I'm going to make damn sure it's only the beginning.

"You two aren't the only ones who can hold a grudge," I say flatly. "Mahoney doesn't have daughters. He had four sons." I turn to my father. "Until ten years ago, when we killed them all in New Jersey."

"Sacred Heart," he mutters, and I watch the years peeling back in his mind. I also see the moment they come to a screeching halt. *¡Hijo de su puta madre!* He didn't give the order to attack the church. He was following one."

Whoever controlled Ricci's crew twenty years ago, controlled him ten years ago.

*Just like they control him and the Irish now.*

"The minute I knew Thalia was gone, I had every main road in New Jersey on lockdown, and all private flights grounded. They would have

sailed to New Haven and boarded a jet there.”

The rage I feel in that moment isn't just vicious. It's primal. It surpasses the need to kill.

I'll make them all suffer.

I'll make them beg for mercy, as my wife and my sister did.

Santiago rises to his feet. “We need to find our daughters, Carrera,” he says, addressing his adversary directly.

Something unspoken passes between them. This is bigger than decades of warfare. It's about choosing lifelines over bloodlines. It's about putting aside our differences for two women who have managed to navigate the wasteland between our two cartels, without the need to fire bullets.

For Thalia and Lola, we stand as one.

Starting now.

“If we do this, we do it properly,” I say, jabbing my finger into the lacquered mahogany. “No surprises. No backhands. We fight together, until there's no longer a reason to do so...”

*Until we either rescue Thalia and Lola, or we bury them.*

“Agreed.” All eyes turn toward my father as he rises from his chair to join us. “My daughter was born the night of *La Boda Roja*. My *cielito* came into this world cursed by a cloud of vengeance. And now, that's who holds her life in his hands. Lola is the only thing from twenty years ago that matters now. Anything else is insignificant.” The gold flecks in his eyes blaze with intent as he extends a steady hand across the table. “Our children have suffered enough.”

Reaching across the table, Santiago takes his outstretched hand in a fierce hold. “I do this for my own.”

It's as if the sun and moon have flipped inside out and upside down. Even if I lived a hundred lifetimes, I never thought I'd see Valentin Carrera and Dante Santiago make peace.

When kings pass judgment, there's no room for misinterpretation.

*Fall in line.*

A beat later, Grayson and I are cementing our own truce with a similar handshake.

New lines are drawn.

Torches are passed.

*The East Coast alliance is sealed.*

Slicing through the tension, Grayson gives a curt nod at the phone in my other hand. “Now that’s settled, I want Sanders back in New York immediately. I’d prefer it if he isn’t DOA when he gets here.”

*That makes one of us.*

I dip my chin in acknowledgement and tap out a short text to Rocco.

**Deal is sealed. Let Grayson’s men inside.**

The last thing I want to do is to keep that son of a bitch alive for a second longer, but releasing Sanders isn’t the only concession I’ll make in the fight to find my family. The Carreras and Santiagos will never be allies. Still, the only way to end a war isn’t to fight my enemy...it’s to fight beside him.

Grayson nods at the wall of armed men behind us, sending them scattering into formation. “This meeting is adjourned. We’ll cover more ground by following up on separate leads. I’ll head down to Canal Street and pay our Italian friends a visit.”

“We’ll keep tracking the containers,” I affirm, but even as I say it, I know it’s not enough. My soul craves blood. “Better still, a trip to New Haven is in order. Since Mahoney is so fond of showing up uninvited to places, I’ll be happy to return the favor.”

“We keep each other informed, and then meet back here in six hours.”

“Make it five.” At his raised eyebrow, I add, “There’s no time to play games with this Irish fuck. He talks, or he doesn’t. Either way he gets a bullet between his eyes.”

*The first of many to come.*

The same beast of a *sicario* who met us at the door reappears. “This way, *Señor* Carrera. Time to escort you to your vehicles.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“I’m afraid *Señor* Grayson insists.”

I glance over to find a hint of amusement on the Colombian’s face.

*Bastard.*

I’m preparing to get the fuck out of this shithole when every phone in the vicinity goes off.

RJ answers immediately, while Grayson scowls down at his device. Rolling my neck, I check my caller ID before answering.

“What’s wrong, Rocco? Sanders demanding an exit parade?”

“Elizabeth Terminal just went up in smoke.”

All the noise in my head goes quiet. It's the kind of silence that spreads serenity like a balm before advancing with a knife. At the same time, I hear Grayson lose his cool on the other side of the warehouse.

Swinging around, we catch each other's eye.

"Our Newark port is in flames," I accuse.

"So is Red Hook Terminal," he snarls.

A dark thought enters my head. It's all I can do not to voice it without ramming my fist through the wall.

"What part of the terminal was hit?" I ask Rocco.

"The south office. The one housing our contact."

*"¡Hijo de su puta madre!"*

Losing all self-control, my fist collides with a nearby concrete support, sending shards of pain all the way up my shoulder—appearing to rattle the rafters. It's not until a second blast takes out the wall behind Santiago, pitching us in all directions like bowling pins, that the truth hits me as hard as losing Thalia did.

This meeting isn't ending with bullets.

It's ending with bombs.

## **CHAPTER NINE**

THALIA



“LEAVE HER ALONE, *PINCHE CABRÓNES! FUCKING ASSHOLES!*”

“Lola, stop!” I grab her flailing arms and tug her away from the four guards who have come to escort me to *Il Labirinto*.

“Fight them, Thalia!” she says angrily, turning her frustrations onto me. “Why the fuck aren’t you fighting them? What’s wrong with you? You’re not a pussy, you’re a goddamn tiger.”

“It’s going to be okay... *I’m* going to be okay.” I catch her face between my hands and force her to look at me. Attempting to convey a thousand comforts with my calm. Pleading with her to trust me.

She doesn’t need to know that I’m selling her paper-thin assurances.

Not yet.

Truth is, I’m a nineteen-year-old woman who’s scared to death—displaced, confused and drowning. But I’m also a daughter born into violence, and a wife married to sin.

I was a fool to think I could hold off those influences forever.

Tonight, I need to run headfirst at them. Embrace them. Turn them into a weapon of my own. Whatever shadows are lurking inside me need to come out to play. Whatever tainted blood fills my veins needs to bleed its truth. It’s the only way I’m going to be able to survive this hell.

I was right. The whole auction was a farce, and there’s been a change to protocol. Monroe Spader has me for the next five days to torture to his rotting heart’s content. The only screams coming from that maze this week will be mine.

He won't be kind to me. Liars inflict pain to Band-aid their black souls. He plans to hit, beat, brand, rape...

"Get a move on, *puttana*," snaps one of the guards.

"My brother will destroy you for this." Lola rips her face away from my hands. "If you *hijos de sus putas madres* think your Black King is scary, you have no idea what Santi Carrera is capable—"

Her threats are cut off by disbelieving laughter.

"You live and die in this place, *señorita*. You're ghosts now. *Fantasmí*. No one will ever find you here."

"I *will* come back to this room, Lola," I say, grabbing her arm, forcing her attention back to me. "I won't leave you alone. I promise."

"I know." She flings her arms around my neck. She knows I have no choice. "You're a Carrera now," she whispers. "Strength and sacrifice bonds a family tighter than blood. Loyalty runs through your veins, Thalia. Just like it does ours."

Her words echo around my head as I'm dragged into the hallway.

*I'm a Carrera and a Santiago, Lola. Tonight, I'm part El Muerte, part scorpion.*

There's no one coming to rescue me. Lola's locked away. My father's influence can't reach me here. Even my prince of darkness won't be able to storm this castle in time.

I think of Edier's mother as I count the thirty-one winding steps to the ground floor. I think about what she overcame after being trafficked by the worst kind of sadist in her twenties. How even after everything she went through, she still managed to put all of her pieces back together again.

That's what fearless firebirds do. They shed their burning feathers and rise from the ashes. They're reborn from their tragedy...

I'll find my true strength in the flames. I'll fight. I'll claw. I'll sting. For every hurt Monroe Spader gives me, I'll be returning it, two-fold.

Tonight, I am my father's daughter.

Tonight, I am my husband's wife.

He's waiting for me at the gaping green entrance to the maze. Up close, the yaupon holly hedgerows are at least ten feet tall—a perfectly manicured screen for whatever he has planned for me. The sweet scent of summer heat is in the air, intermingled with red anticipation. Alice is about to tumble down a rabbit hole that's spiked with broken glass.

He's not wearing his cheap blue suit anymore. He's swapped it for some nerdy-looking khaki military fatigues.

*All the better to hunt me with.*

With his short stature, he looks like a short fat kid playing dress-up. But my derision is short-lived when I glance at the lacquered antique table next to him. It's strewn with cruel-looking implements and devices—some sexual, some medieval... *Some still bloody.*

"Mrs. Carrera," he greets expansively, his beady gaze oozing over my body like the toxic gunk at the bottom of a trash can.

"Spader, you lying piece of shit." My next words are lost to the stillness as my left cheek explodes in pain.

"*Silenzio!*" the guard growls. "You keep your mouth for screaming and sucking, *puttana*. Anything else is a disrespectful waste."

"Thank you for the lesson, Franco," Spader murmurs. "Manners maketh the cartel whore."

I press my palm against my skin to ease the sting. There's metal in my mouth. My vision is shooting stars and flashing lights. "How long have you been planning to kidnap Ella and me?"

*How long have you been wanting to hurt us?*

He reaches out to smooth a strand of dark hair away from my face. His touch seems to linger on and on. When I try to move away, I get shoved back to him by Franco.

"The moment your sweet sister stepped into a bar in Manhattan and allowed my associate to violate her."

"Bardi," I gasp out. "He works for you?"

His thin lips quirk. "They all do, Mrs. Carrera. The Irish, Don Ricci, Bardi... I, in turn, work for an organization who provides these... *services*. Amongst other things. You'd be surprised how much men will pay to taste the fear of a mafia or cartel princess, particularly if they've been wronged by their family. And there are so many who have been wronged by Dante Santiago, dear child." His voice drops to an obscene-like purr. "Not to mention, by your hot-headed new husband, who is making quite the name for himself these days."

I watch in horror as he raises his hand to his mouth to lick the fingers that just violated my skin. Still, I force myself to keep eye contact, even when my stomach starts roiling.

“How many pieces of silver did you cross the devil’s palm for me?” I whisper.

“More than you think.” He laughs and picks up a small hunting knife from the table. “You were my incentive, Thalia,” he says, tilting his head with that toxic trash can expression again. “Well, initially I wanted your sister after seeing the tape Bardi made for us,” he admits. “But from the moment I saw you, it was only a matter of time before we entered *Il Labirinto* together.”

“You’re sick!”

“Franco.”

This time it’s my right cheek that receives a savage reprimand. I stagger backward, gasping frantically, trying to fill my body with anything other than pain.

“Temper, temper, Thalia,” he tuts. “You don’t mind if I call you by your first name, do you? I think it’s best we strip away the formalities, considering I’ll be finding out just how loud you cry before dawn.”

“This is bullshit,” I rasp. “You were working for Santi long before Ella even met Bardi. You’ve been in his pocket for over a year. What else are you hiding?”

The guard advances on me again with a raised hand, but Spader waves him away.

“I have other skills, more intricate than procuring whores for Mr. Zaccaria’s cash venture. I was tasked with escalating the destabilization on the East Coast, between your father’s cartel and your husband’s... And then you walked into Legado like a sacrificial lamb in shimmering red and caught everyone’s attention.” I freeze as he runs the tip of his blade along the curve of my shoulder, hovering over the strap of my dress. “I never dreamed Carrera would marry you. I never dreamed he’d fall so hard... A fool in love is a fool ripe for exploitation.”

“My husband is no fool, Spader.”

With a flick of his wrist, he slices through the delicate strap of my white slip dress, and I grab at the material to stop it from fluttering to the ground.

“Only a fool allows himself to be distracted. And *you* distracted him,” he accuses, now focusing on the rise and fall of my chest. “It made you and Lola such easy targets. Once we found out about your sister’s condition, she was no good to us. But you...you were a much more inviting proposition.”

“You killed Sam,” I whisper, the sickening twin blasts of the double gunshots ringing out in my head.

“On Legado’s property, no less.” He laughs again, before shifting the knife to my opposite shoulder, letting his threat rest on my skin next to my one remaining dress strap. “Now, who do you think Edier Grayson is going to blame for that?”

He takes off his glasses with his other hand and places them neatly in his front pocket. Moments later, there’s the sound of angry barking behind me.

“We’re not just here to line Zaccaria’s pockets, are we?” I say in a rush. “There’s something else he wants from this.”

He hums in agreement but doesn’t elaborate.

“The crimson keys,” I blurt out, clutching at straws. “What do they represent?”

“When your father joins you in hell, be sure to ask him about it.”

“Not if you’re going there first.” I flinch as his blade nicks my shoulder in punishment for my disrespect. “I want answers before you and your hellhounds chase me through this maze, Spader.”

“Enough!” His expression turns feral as he leans forward, poisoning every inch of my eyeline—beads of sweat coating his top lip, his whole body reeking sour with nerves and excitement. “No more talking. Tonight we fight and fuck. Without your consent.”

“You’re a monster,” I whisper.

“No, I’m a wolf, and now it’s time for you to run, little lamb.” With this, he slices through my last dress strap, tearing the ruined dress away from my hands. With a vicious shove he propels me, naked and faltering, toward the entrance to the maze. “Run, run, as fast as you can... It’s time to begin your slaughter.”

## **CHAPTER TEN**

SANTI



MY VISIT TO NEW JERSEY TEN YEARS AGO WASN'T MY FIRST TRIP TO America.

Until that day, my version of America stopped at the Texas state line. Houston, to be exact. Base camp for all US cartel operations, and home to the other half of the Carrera bloodline:

The Harcourts.

I remember RJ's dad having a whole room at his house just for watching movies. It was all state of the art, with ninety-two decibels of surround sound that you could feel more than hear. A scream during a horror flick would burst an eardrum as fast as an explosion from an action movie would rattle your teeth.

That's why the explosion and flames don't feel real at first. For a split second, it's like I'm sitting on the outside, watching everything happen to someone else—like a movie.

But it's not.

Pressing my palms against the concrete floor, I lift my head to anarchy. *Fire. Smoke. Destruction.* It's the escalation of a fucking nightmare.

Slowly, I drag myself to my knees, and survey the damage. What used to be the south wall of the warehouse is now engulfed in a ball of multicolored flames. Dark smoke snakes around the jagged edges, inviting itself inside to consume what's left—a skeleton of twisted metal and crumbled brick.

*What the hell just happened?*

There's a muffled groan behind me. I turn to find RJ kneeling on one leg, his elbow braced against the other. He's holding his upper arm, a rare, rabid expression on his face.

"Shit!" I'm on my feet in half a second, and by his side in even less. "Are you hurt?"

Gritting his teeth, he slides a narrowed gaze up at me. "No, I'm thinking *real* hard. Hell, yes, I'm hurt." He moves his hand, and blood pours from a wide gash in his bicep. "Piece of glass took out a chunk of my arm."

I catch another glimpse of the raging fire that's consuming one side of the warehouse. *We need to get the hell out of here.*

"Can you move?" A pointless question since I'm already dragging him to his feet.

Once vertical, he jerks his arm away. "Someone just tried to take us out, Santi... I can do more than move. I can kill the motherfucker with my bare hands, if I have to."

"*Muy bien.* Let's find the others and put that to the test."

We turn in opposite directions, and it doesn't take me long to find my father. Despite the gash slicing open his forehead, he's already on his feet with his gun drawn.

"Santi," he says, a mumbled *gracias a Dios* framing the edges of my name. "*¿Estás bien?*"

"Sí," I tell him. "I'm fine. RJ's fine. Where are Grayson and Santiago?"

At the mention of their names, his brief repose snaps like a brittle bone. "Already outside," he says, gesturing to his right. "Observing a mass cremation."

I turn to find six of Santiago's men lying motionless on the floor. Some are missing limbs, while others... Well, there's not much left to check for a pulse.

Santiago is waiting for us on the remains of the sidewalk outside. His dark skin is a criss-cross of bloody streaks and gore.

"Bombs, Carrera?" he roars when he sees us. "That's a coward's move."

My father lets out a hollow laugh. "You think we did this? If we came here to blow you to hell, do you think we'd stick around to hitch a ride? We're reckless, not suicidal."

We're neither. We're strategic executioners who do nothing without purpose. *Just like the fuckers who are lighting up the East Coast like the Fourth of July.*

I step in between them to diffuse the rising tension. “Let’s think about this for one goddamn minute. Two cartel ports just went up in flames. The building hit on our side happened to be the terminal’s south office, which is now a pile of fire and ash, along with the dockhand who tracked the container.” I glance at Grayson who’s joined us, his face looking all kinds of fucked up. “You?”

“My insider went up in flames too.”

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Jesus Christ,” RJ mutters. “We were being watched the whole time.”

The chime of a text message diverts my attention. It’s not mine. I have no idea where my phone ended up, after being blown to fuck and back. Everyone turns to where my father’s head is bowed at the lit screen in his hand.

“*Díos mio*. What now?”

“The New Haven fire department was just called to Celtic Stone.”

“That’s Mahoney’s place.”

“Not anymore.” Lifting his chin, he catches my eye. “Mahoney was inside.”

I’m beginning to understand the power *Villefort* wields. Its dirty reach extends into all four corners of the world. There’s no place to hide from them. Nothing our two cartels have done has ever gone unnoticed. Thalia and Lola were always living on borrowed time.

“They knew we were coming for Mahoney. They made sure he didn’t talk.”

Sirens and horns wail in the distance, drawing Grayson’s attention toward the street where a crowd of onlookers are starting to gather, their eyes fixed to the orange flames licking the skyline.

“We need to get out of here,” he says, motioning to the vehicles. “Fire department is three minutes out.”

We’re right back where we started, at square one with nothing but a handful of assumptions and theories. I’m not going anywhere until we realign our strategy.

“Mahoney is a pile of ash. How the hell do we get answers now?”

The corners of Grayson’s mouth twitch. If I didn’t know him any better, I’d swear he was smiling. “We offer a little cartel incentive. I’ll deal with the fire department and meet you on Canal Street in an hour. There, we’ll ‘persuade’ our *Villefort* friends to talk together.”

Taking his lead, RJ nods to where our *sicarios* are reconvening. *That sure as hell isn't going to go unnoticed.* “We’ll head back to base, and I’ll fill Rocco in.”

“Good. Go.”

Meanwhile my father hasn’t taken his eyes off his phone. I clasp his shoulder, understanding, now more than ever. “Go to *máma*. There’s no guarantee Legado won’t be next.”



An hour later, I’m being greeted by the scent of copper and rotting meat. It doesn’t take me long to find the source. Two steps into the Canal Street warehouse, and I’m ramming the toe of my shoe into a dead Italian’s face.

He’s not the only one. They’re everywhere—dumped like discarded toys on the floor of a killer’s playground. Twenty...maybe thirty. I stop counting the moment I encounter a line of Santiago guns, all aiming at my head.

“This is getting a little old,” I say mildly.

“Lower your guns, men.” Grayson follows me inside, unfazed by the carnage. “Carreras aren’t the enemy here. Do I make myself clear? Now, fill us in on the preshow.”

One *sicario*, more muscle than man, steps forward and gestures around the room. “Most are Ricci’s men. They were all wearing keys or tattoos. Those amenable to it, were questioned. Those who fired their weapons at us, died.”

“Have they told you anything?”

“Him,” the *sicario* clarifies. He nods behind us at the last remaining Italian. From the shades of his bloody suntan, he’s already been beaten half-to-death. The chair he’s tied to is more red than wood. “This one doesn’t have the same pain threshold as the rest.”

I don’t ask permission, mainly because I don’t give a fuck. Walking straight up to him, I inspect his neck. Someone’s jabbed a key pin in the center of the black ax tattoo.

“That looks unpleasant,” I note, with a grim smile. “Has he started singing yet?”

“He said he’ll only talk to a boss,” the *sicario* mutters.

*Well then, let the games begin.*

Joining me, Grayson, rips the Italian's mouth gag down to his chin. "Name?"

"Vincenzo," he answers pitifully, his voice hoarse from screaming.

"Well, Vincenzo, it's your lucky day. You get two cartel bosses for the price of one. Guests first, Carrera..."

I can't tell if he's being serious or a dick. It doesn't matter either way.

"Knife," I order, holding out my hand. Within seconds, an impressive pocketknife is placed in my palm. "Let me tell you how this is going to work, Vincenzo..." Popping the blade, I watch his eyes widen as I circle him. "Nothing comes for free in this world. We're going to ask questions, and you're going to answer them. If your answer is to our liking, you pay for being a *hijo de tu puta madre* in blood." I tap the blade against his cheek. "That's son of a bitch, for the linguistically impaired." Straightening up, I continue to circle. "If you lie, or piss us off, we'll just slit your throat and call it a day. Got it?"

Not much of a choice, but he nods anyway.

"*Muy bien*. Question number one. Do you know who kidnapped my wife and sister?"

*Think carefully, motherfucker.*

He swallows hard. "No, no I don't know his name."

I frown. "That's a shame." The moment I turn my hand sideways and aim for his throat, Vincenzo starts crying like a little bitch. "No, *per favore!* Please! I may not know his name, but I can describe him!"

Interesting.

"You have thirty seconds."

Red spit bubbles form at the corners of his mouth as frantic words tumble out of it. "American. *Corto*...uh, how do you say this in English? Short? *Sí*, short. With small eyes, like *ratto*...ehhh, rat. And he wore black glasses. Always eating *arachidi*."

*Fucking peanuts.*

There's only one man that fits that description. One man who managed to infiltrate both my inner circle and Grayson's... The same man who was at my fucking wedding.

That's the moment the cage unlocks and twenty-four hours of tension spills out in a rush of wrath and fury. "Spader," I growl between clenched teeth. I glance at Grayson who stands motionless, his jaw clenched.

I've always known betrayal wears many faces. What I never saw coming was the one orchestrated by a man dedicated to my climb to glory.

"You... You like?" the Italian stutters.

*And the demons dance.*

"Yes, Vincenzo, I like your answer. Unfortunately, I don't like looking at your fucking tattoo anymore, so I'm getting rid of it." He barely has a chance to register what I'm saying before I plunge the tip of my knife into the side of his neck. As three *sicarios* move in to hold him still, I flay a layer of his skin. By the end, he's both screaming prayers and cursing me to hell in Italian.

They're both unneeded. It's a superficial wound, and I was cursed to hell long before I was born.

When I'm done, I turn to Grayson. "All yours."

He doesn't waste any time. "Who's behind *La Societá Villefort* these days?"

The Italian hesitates a beat too long, and Grayson breaks his nose in one vicious punch.

Garbled words mix with his pleas for mercy. "He'll kill me if I tell—"

"We'll kill you if you don't."

He passes a look back and forth between Grayson and me before letting out a ragged breath of resignation. "*Il Re Nero*. He calls himself The Black King."

"I need a name, Vincenzo, not an ego trip."

"Lorenzo Zaccaria."

"Fuuuck," Grayson hisses. "Tommaso's grandson. He's been moving in the shadows this whole time."

The Italian shakes in his chair. "Please, no more."

He considers him coldly. "Carrera stated how this was going to go upfront. We don't change the rules in the middle of a game." His gaze flits to the knife in my hand. "Can I borrow that?"

"Be my guest," I say, handing it over.

"Since you like tattoos so much, Vincenzo, let me give you some more." Driving forward, he works quickly, carving an S onto one cheek and a C onto the other. By the time he tosses the knife back, his eyes are dilated with fury. "Make this one count, Carrera. Not sure how much longer he's going to last."

I don't need *long*.

I need one word.

I prowl around him like a lion, the dying man tracking my every move. On the third rotation, I brace my hands on the arms of the chair, my face inches from his. When I speak, my tone is dangerously low—each word enunciated with all the hate that’s boiling up inside me.

“Where did they take them?”

He hangs his head in despair. “Even if I tell you, they’re probably already dead—or begging for death. What they do to women...”

*Don’t go there.*

*Don’t think about it.*

Grabbing a fistful of his hair, I jerk his head back. “Then I’ll make everyone who touches them *beg* for it as well...starting with you.”

He’s been tortured, but he hasn’t suffered. By the bleak look glazing his eyes, he finally understands the difference.

“Italy,” he says weakly.

*Italy... A surge of urgency paints my vision black. So much distance to cover with so little time.*

“There’s a town in the hills of northern Tuscany. It’s where they take them and break them. I don’t know the name of it, but locals call it ‘*Città Fantasma*,’ after all the ghosts that haunt it. Rich men pay to do whatever they want with them there.”

I release his hair, letting his head flop down like a broken doll’s. Taking a step back, I stand shoulder to shoulder with Grayson, as Vincenzo’s words sink into us.

We know exactly where we’re headed next.

*We’re bringing them home together.*

Closing the knife, I tuck it into my pocket. “I’m done here. You?”

“More than done.”

At this, we both reach for our guns, take aim, and fire.

Two bullets.

One less *Villefort* disciple.

Zero margin for error.

*I’m coming for you, Thalia.*

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

THALIA



*“RUN, THALIA! DON’T LET HIM CATCH YOU!”*

*Everything hurts. I’m pushing my body to the limits, but Ella’s war cry spurs me on more. My bare toes dig crescents into the soft sand as I force my legs to run faster... To chase the wind... To cross the finishing line in first place for once, instead of in second.*

*“You know your ponytail looks cute when you’re trying hard to win like this.”*

*Sam’s mocking laughter is right there in my slipstream again. Despite my best efforts, I can’t shake him loose. He’s tucked himself in behind me and he’s cruising. He’s saving his final sprint to the end so he can be a dirty, fat show-off in front of everyone.*

*My lungs are on fire. Unfairness burns harder. I’m eleven, and he’s fifteen, which means the race was rigged from the start. But pápa’s watching alongside Ella today, and this makes me want to drown those stupid odds in the ocean.*

*We’re only twenty feet out. My eyes are blurry. My fingertips are itching to reach out and claim what’s mine. Ella’s screams of encouragement are getting louder. In my head, I can picture my father’s stern expression catching light to a rare smile.*

*Fifteen feet out, and Sam makes his move.*

*“So long, sucker,” he hisses, breezing past me in a blur of black and blue. “Go back to playing ponies and dolls like the little kid you are.”*

*What a shithead!*

*Before I know it, I’m shoulder barging him. Knocking him off balance.*

*It doesn't matter that I'm half a foot shorter. The move is so unexpected he doesn't have time to check himself before he goes down in a crumpled heap of hurt boy pride and outrage.*

*"What the f—?"*

*I falter for the next couple of steps, caught off balance myself—my legs finding nothing but air before I'm hitting my stride again.*

*I can't hear Ella screaming anymore. My only focus is a line in the sand that's more precious to me than the one I just crossed with Sam.*

*In five strides, I'm there.*

*I won.*

*I freaking won.*

*Punching the air in delight, I collect my applause from the sand dunes, my heart thundering with happy beats. Even my father is clapping—though rules never mean much to him anyway.*

*"Cheat," Sam yells, picking himself up from the shoreline and brushing the beach out of his hair. His handsome face is stretched into a grin, and there's a glint of respect in his eyes that wasn't there ten minutes ago.*

*"You're just sore you didn't think of it first." I lift my eyebrows in a taunt. "Gotta be smart when you're playing to win."*

*"You were born to win, Thalia Santiago," he says with another laugh. "That's the kind of shit you'll never be able to trip up or outrun."*

*Does that go for fate too, Sam? I think wildly, remembering our race on the beach eight years ago in hazy snatches as I hit another dead end.*

*Cursing, I throw myself at the wall of yaupon holly hedge in despair—finding comfort in the way the needle-like branches bite and scratch at my skin.*

*I'm still alive... I'm still alive...*

*Just.*

*Tonight, my lungs are burning more than they ever did that day. Fear has added a new fuel to the cage. It's like all my oxygen is being held hostage.*

*Dusk fell hard when I wasn't paying attention. The long shadows have turned *Il Labirinto* into a warren of dark hallways. I've been running for my life for hours. Spader's dogs are still straining at their leashes.*

*"Run, Thalia! Don't let him catch you!"*

*I try a different path, cursing again in frustration when I have to double-back once more. That's when I hear rabid barking from the path running*

directly parallel to mine.

*Too close.*

*He's too close.*

“Come out, little lamb,” he growls, turning my blood to ice. Meanwhile, his dogs are going nuts, sniffing and pawing at the thick hedgerow between us. “Fun fact time. The oldest maze in the world was built as a refuge for rich courtiers in eighteenth century England... Are you still seeking refuge, Thalia, or are you close to defeat?”

*Never.*

I sprint in the opposite direction, spilling out into the dead heart of this emerald-green mausoleum. It's huge, the size of a basketball court, with ten new paths leading off it in every direction. A near-empty space, with nothing to hide behind, other than an old stone table in the center.

I spin around in circles, unsure which path to choose next. Everything looks the same. There are no clubs or hearts to count my way to freedom. The whole maze is a blank deck of cards.

I can hear the snarling dogs close by again.

Panic rises up in my chest like dark magic, tricking me into fear and hopelessness. I glance at the stone table and see splashes of dark crimson staining the dirty gray.

Beat the monster.

Beat this fate.

*But how?*

The shadows are lengthening again. I can feel them creeping across my soul as I spin harder and faster, a sob tearing from my lips. Indecision has no place in this maze. I need to choose a path, and I need to choose it fast.

Darting forward, I nearly reach one when a dull agony is shredding my left calf—dragging my first scream of the night into the open.

“Shit!”

I tumble to the ground, but the movement only produces more pain. Glancing over my shoulder, terrified of what I might find, I stifle another scream when I see a wooden arrow protruding from my lower leg.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

I whimper as the pain ricochets like a pinball around my body. I try to stand up, and only end up lurching back to my knees.

“Fun fact number two, Thalia...” Turning in horror, I see Spader emerging from the opposite path with a silver crossbow in his hands and

another arrow drawn and ready. His guard, Franco, follows closely behind, holding the leashes of two Rottweilers with drool stringing from their open mouths. “Another amusement for bored courtiers and royals was hunting deer.”

I freeze as he raises his crossbow to shoulder height, deliberately aiming for my right thigh, his finger resting on the trigger.

“I thought you said I was a lamb?” I croak, miserably aware of my nakedness. Blocking out my humiliation, as I feel around the throbbing wound with my fingertips, coating them in sticky warmth. *The arrow tip doesn't seem to be in that deep.*

I grit my teeth and prepare to do the unthinkable.

I have to get up.

I have to keep running.

*I can't do either with a fucking arrow sticking out of me.*

Spader shrugs at my question. “Deer...lamb... You're all fair game to me.”

Doing my best to ignore him, I take a firm grip at the base of the arrow shaft as he moves closer.

“But where are your tears, Thalia?” he demands, sounding disappointed. “I thought they'd be making a mess of you by now.”

“They heard your fun fact medieval crap and decided not to stick around,” I mutter, counting down the seconds in my head.

*Three.*

I see Santi's face. Clear as day.

*Two.*

I hear his nickname for me, over and over. As loud as Ella's war cry.

*One.*

I let the shadows inside me finally take over.

Wrenching the arrow free from my calf, I throw myself to the ground, muffling my screams in the scorched earth. At the same time, I feel a soft breeze grace my shoulder blades as Spader's arrow passes right over me, landing a couple of feet from my head.

*“Run, Thalia! Don't let him catch you!”*

I find myself back on my feet again and limping out a fast getaway. Behind me, I can hear Spader cursing my name and issuing angry instructions to Franco.

“Take the dogs back to the castle. I’ll track this bitch myself all night if I have to.”

I don’t wait to hear more as I plunge deeper and deeper into the maze, ignoring the red-hot heat engulfing my leg—cannoning off yaupon holly hedge after yaupon holly hedge as I try to put some distance between me and my hunter.

I run and run, like Ella instructs me too, still clutching the bloody arrow I pulled from my own body—taking wrong turn after wrong turn, and weeping tears of sheer exhaustion because of it. *You can’t have these tears though, Spader. This pain is all mine.*

Finding myself at another dead end, I stop for a moment to catch my breath—sucking in great lungfuls of air that make me dizzy and light-headed.

I can’t stay here.

I have to keep moving.

But when I turn to retrace my steps, my access is blocked in the worst possible way.

“Trapped,” Spader says, cocking his head indulgently at me, like I’m the last child to be found in a really messed-up game of hide and seek.

I stagger backward, pressing myself into the hedgerow—feeling the needle-like branches scratch and bite at my skin again.

*Trapped.*

He’s swapped the crossbow for an old dagger, but the way the blade glints in the fading light is little comfort to me.

*Trapped.*

Before I can stop myself, I’m slithering to the ground like a wounded animal. Making myself as small as I can. Finding my last modicum of safety in the dark corners of this maze.

Above me, the North Star is low on the horizon. The moon is a weak promise. My calf is dripping red. My heart, even more so.

*Help me, Ella. I can’t see the line in the sand anymore.*

“You’ve done well, little lamb,” he praises, moving closer. “Most girls are being dragged unconscious back to the castle by now, but you…” He points the tip of his dagger in my direction. “You just gave me a whole evening’s entertainment before the main event.”

“Why me?” I croak, tightening my fingers around the bloody arrow.

“Ten years ago, your father and his associates destroyed a very profitable trafficking ring of mine in Honduras,” he says, crouching down to my level, tapping the blade against his chin. “I’ve been waiting patiently for my vengeance ever since.”

Without his glasses on, he looks even more rat-like and devious...

*He looks vulnerable.*

“What are you going to do to my body?” I whisper, holding his gaze as I slip the arrow behind my back.

“More English-devised torture, I expect,” he admits with a shrug. “Let’s just say I have a penchant for bestowing pain from all eras.”

Somewhere, there’s another countdown starting in my head.

*Three.*

He lunges forward and hauls me to my feet.

*Two.*

He hurls me up against the hedgerow and holds me prisoner by my throat. “Spread your legs for me, little lamb. I want to hear you bleat for me.” When I refuse to do it, he squeezes and squeezes, until another shadow starts stealing my vision.

*One.*

“I’m going to make every fucking part of you bleed. Starting *here.*” I feel the blunt handle of his dagger pushing between my legs.

*Not in this lifetime.*

With every ounce of strength I have left, I reach down between us and squeeze his cock as hard as I can, twisting it counter-clockwise to an ugly angle.

“You fucking bitch!” he squeals, stumbling away from me, clutching his crotch, his face the blotchy red color of rage and disbelief.

“I know my English history too, Mr. Spader,” I rasp, advancing on him, naked and bloody like some fucking warrior queen. Canceling out his threats and curses with a descent so fast into my own darkness I can’t feel the burn anymore. “I always liked the one about the asshole king who died with an arrow in his eye.”

With that, I swing my arm and drive the sharp tip deep into his left socket.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

THALIA



*ONLY IN THE DARKNESS CAN YOU SEE THE STARS.*

My mother keeps a framed copy of these words on her nightstand, next to photographs of me, Ella and *papá*, our half-sister, Isabella, as well as her childhood friend, Anna. When I was a child, I used to wriggle into her arms at dawn and watch them grow bolder and brighter with the rising sun.

I wanted so desperately to figure out what they meant.

I knew they must be important, just from their pride of place next to all the people she loved most in the world. But at eight years old, you tend not to dig too deep into subtexts. You stay safe on the surface to avoid being bitten by them.

One day, when I was older, I plucked up the courage to ask her, and her answer was as cryptic as the secret smile she reserves for our father. She said that they were like a footpath—like the one that led to our private beach—only this one led her all the way back to the missing pieces of her heart.

I've never forgotten her response.

In time, I learned the true meaning of Martin Luther King's words, but I never found a way to equate it with what she told me that day.

It's only now, as I'm chained to the wall in a pitch-black cellar, choking on agony and neglect, that I finally understand... She was once as desperate as I am, but somehow, in her own darkness, she found a way back to love.

*Like I'll find my way back to him.*

Because in the darkness, even hate has a softer shell.

The infection in my leg is burning me up with fever. I have no idea how long it's been since Zaccaria's men found me kneeling over Monroe Spader's dead body with his medieval dagger in my hand. The moment I finally beat the monster and crossed the line in first place again.

I crossed a ton of other ones too, but I'm past caring about lost morals. It's all about survival now, and if I have to kill again, I will. If I have to murder everyone in this godforsaken town to taste freedom again, *to taste love*, so be it.

This is the internal rhetoric—the drug—that drives my father. It's strange how I see it so clearly now, in a place where I can't actually see anything at all. I'd always assumed he was motivated by hate, but really, it's love—firstly, for our mother, and then for his children... For the first time, I'm seeing how all his pieces slot together to make him the uncompromising, complex, brutal man that he is.

If I ever get out of here alive, I'm going to tell him about my shadow, and he'll tell me about his darkness.

*Please, God, let me get out of here.*

Underneath the warm blanket of fever, everything hurts. Everything is polluted and stained. They dragged me here by my hair, and my scalp is sore. My leg is on fire. There's dried blood all over my hands and face, but it's not mine. I stabbed Spader twenty-three times until he died with my name on his lips, and I'm not sorry.

*I'm not sorry.*

This cellar is my punishment for fighting back, but I'll take it all, just as long as they spare Lola and Rosalia the worst.

Tick.

Tock.

*Is that the sound of my time running out?*

There's no lark down here. There's not even a window... There's just this never-ending night.

Tick.

Tock.

Pressing my spine into the stone wall, I tug listlessly at the restraints that bind my hands above me. My mind is a TV screen, flickering in and out of reality. Half here, half reliving that stupid race with Sam. He doesn't call me a cheat anymore, though. He calls me a murderer, and I smile in agreement.

Tick.

Tock.

I run my tongue along my lips. They're cracked and bleeding. I've had no food or water since I've been down here. If I don't get any soon, dehydration will be beating out infection for death's dark crown.

Tick.

Tock.

I swear I hear footsteps in the distance, but I'm starting to doubt my own thoughts. Next, the locks are turning. Heavy bolts are drawn back. A beat later, bright light is flooding into the cellar, and I'm flinching away like it's corrosive.

"Look at me, *puttana*."

I keep my face turned until rough fingers are digging into my chin and forcing the issue. Reluctantly, I blink away the blackness to find the face of evil himself standing right in front of me.

Lorenzo Zaccaria.

Coldly handsome.

*Chillingly cruel.*

"You don't play by my rules, *Señora* Carrera," he chides—his deep drawling indolence churning my stomach into bile. "A lamb isn't supposed to attack the wolf."

"Good girls aren't supposed to have shadows, either," I croak, wincing as he fists my hair and wrenches my head back to an agonizing angle.

"My dogs were hungry and restless," he murmurs, his dead eyes flickering over my face. "I sent them a Mexican meal..."

*Lola.*

"Please—"

"Now you beg for my mercy?" He sounds amused. "Don't worry, we'll keep her scarred, but alive... Same as you. You're much too valuable to waste so wantonly. The next time you face *Il Labirinto* though, you'll be doing it in chains."

"W-what is this place?" I whisper, forcing myself back from the beach. Forcing myself back to this cellar. *Never stop counting. Never stop seeking a way out.* "Men like you crave power, not money."

Tick.

Tock.

“Payback.” He lets go of my hair, and my head flops forward. I’m too weak to hold it steady anymore. Too weak for pride. I don’t even care that I’m naked. “Monroe Spader wasn’t the only one wronged by your father, *señora*. My father and grandfather both suffered miserably in cages because of him.”

Hysterical laughter bubbles up inside me. “Is that supposed to be ironic?”

This time, I feel his hand wrapping around my throat. A beat later, I’m being slammed up against the stone wall.

“Manners maketh the whore, *Señora Carrera*,” he snarls. “Punishment is always bestowed on those who stray from that particular path of righteousness.”

“Funny... That’s the same thing Spader said, right before I turned your green maze into a bloodbath, *Lorenzo Zaccaria*.”

He chuckles darkly. “So, you know who I am. You have an admirable spirit for a dying woman.”

“I thought you said I was too valuable to waste?”

The grip on my throat tightens. “I might be willing to take a loss, this time around... After all, you just killed one of my best men.”

Spots start dancing in my line of vision. “What do you want from me, an apology?”

There’s a long pause.

“You Santiagos are all the same,” he tuts eventually. “Your mouths are your weakest bullets.”

“My father will be flattered by your efforts,” I gasp out.

“Why’s that?”

“Only a desperate man creates his own hilltop empire of deluded zombies to get even with his enemy.”

“*Resurrecting, señora*,” he corrects silkily, adjusting his grip—driving me so hard into the wall it feels like my skull is splitting. “This town is one of many we control across the world. You have no idea how formidable we really are.”

“I can’t breathe,” I rasp, choking out a cough. Panic has my chest in a vise.

“Valentin Carrera is equally to blame for my family’s misfortune,” he continues, ignoring my plea. “His father, Alejandro, was once a loyal member of our organization—bleeding his influence across Mexico on our

behalf. Then the cartel passed to his son, who inflicted immeasurable harm to our South American infrastructure. The same way immeasurable harm has just been unleashed on the East Coast of America.”

With this, he leans in close and hisses out a sinister word.

“Boom.”

*Bombs. He means bombs. The dirtiest of weapons—sly, secretive and devastating.*

His dark secret curls a clenched fist around my heart. Everyone’s life is in danger now—Santi, Edier, my father...

I’m close to unconsciousness when he finally loosens his grip. Air comes rushing back into my lungs, and I collapse against the wall. As I stand there, gasping and spluttering, he produces a bottle of water and holds it out to me like a beautiful, poisoned chalice.

To drink is to surrender.

To drink is survival.

Before I can make a choice, he’s throwing the whole thing in my face.

After the initial shock settles, my tongue frantically laps at the droplets clinging to my cheeks and mouth. I tug at the chains, whimpering in frustration when I’ve licked myself dry.

“You’re no better than my dogs,” he says in disgust.

“More,” I rasp.

“No.”

“Please—”

“Beg for it, and you’ll be denied. Earn it, and you’ll be rewarded.”

I’m too feverish to decipher his riddles. In my mind, I’m already back on the beach again. I’m ten feet out and winning. I see Ella... I see Sam...

Zaccaria turns to leave, my whole life dripping through his hands like the water that never reached my throat.

When the door slams shut, my last remaining stars extinguish.

My mother never told me there was a whole other level below darkness, and I just slammed, headfirst, into it.

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

## SANTI



GRAYSON'S FLEET OF PRIVATE JETS REACH FLORENCE SHORTLY BEFORE nightfall. RJ and I are ready and waiting. We watch as the Colombian and two dozen of his best *sicarios* exit, their black military fatigues blending into the night; complimenting the thirty men behind us, along with the eight black SUVs.

He descends the airstairs with a phone attached to the side of his head and a scowl on his face. The moment his feet hit the tarmac, he's striding over to us. "*This* is your idea of being covert?" he says, gesturing to the army lining the runway. "Will the Special Ops forces be joining us as well?"

I jerk my head at his fleet of jets and disembarking men. "Just leveling the playing field. This is a joint effort, not a scorpion raid."

He pauses, taking in my black shirt and cargo pants, with that now-familiar condescending look in his eyes. "Nice to know you don't always dress like a stockbroker."

"Says the man who walks around looking like he just fucked up a jewel heist."

Muttering a curse, RJ steps between us. "If you two are finished trading fashion tips, can we get on with it?" Ignoring my hardened stare, he turns toward Grayson. "Any word from the US?"

"If you're referring to the two cartel kingpins keeping our cities from burning to the ground, then no, they haven't killed each other yet. But 'ally' is a word Santiago and Carrera aren't familiar with, Harcourt. The sooner we end Zaccaria and return, the better."

“I couldn’t agree more.” Stepping around RJ, I glance at the phone in his hand. “Do we have a location?”

“I spoke to Knight just before we landed. Zaccaria bought himself a hilltop town in northern Tuscany ten years ago... His very own fortress of stone.”

“What is it? A fucking castle?”

“From what he described, yes—and by design. Zaccaria’s taken every precaution to ensure no one’s getting in...*or out.*”

“Not every precaution. What’s our ETA?”

Grayson jerks his head at the waiting caravan. “Depending on how skilled your men are at handling Italian roads, we’ll either arrive in an hour, or disappear over the side of a fucking motorway bridge.”

Even that wouldn’t stop me. If I have to crawl on my hands and knees to the gates of that fortress, so be it. I promised myself I’d find Thalia and bring her home.

I lied to her once.

I’d rather die before I do it twice.

We’re walking toward the SUVs when Grayson pulls me to one side. “Remember, we’re fighting as one tonight, Carrera.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, our bullets fire *for* each other, not *at* each other. If this shit goes sideways, you’ll have to put your life in the hands of a Santiago.”

“I already have.”

The weight of the words center me as I repeat my silent promise.



There’s not a star in the sky as I lead our caravan of SUVs up the narrow, winding roads toward *Città Fantasma*. It contradicts everything I’ve heard about this part of the world, but it suits the plan. We’re bringing a raging tempest with us. All light needs to be extinguished to disguise our impending slaughter.

We’re about half a mile out, making up time on deserted country lanes, when the trees part and we catch our first glimpse of the town’s imposing gray stone outer walls.

“Jesus Christ,” RJ mutters, sliding forward from the backseat to take a better look. “Did we take a wrong turn into the twelfth century?”

I stare at the miles and miles of unbreachable parapets, hearing Vincenzo’s words in my head.

“*Città Fantasma.*”

“Ghost town,” Grayson echoes. “Sounds like a fucking invitation to create more inhabitants to me.”

The approaching road climbs steeply. We kill the headlights for the last quarter of a mile and travel in total darkness. RJ’s grip tightens around the back of Grayson’s seat as I take another sharp turn.

“How the hell does someone buy up an entire town, no questions asked?”

“That’s the power of *Villefort*... *Città Fantasma* doesn’t need anyone’s permission to exist, and those entrusted to protect its secrets are usually up to their eyes in dirty money.”

My grip tightens on the wheel. We aren’t good men, but we’ve never professed to be anything more than that. Those who wear the face of salvation while hiding their sins deserve to die a slow, painful death.

*Speaking of inhuman bastards...*

“Show me that image of Zaccaria again. I want to know which man to aim for first.”

Grayson hands me his phone.

“Cold-looking fucker,” I murmur, committing his face to memory. “He’ll look even better with my bullets decorating his face.

“And Spader?”

“No one touches him, either.” My fingers are choking the steering wheel now. “No man has ever suffered like that *marícon* will for his betrayal.”

In response to my threat, the moon bows her head again, and more darkness descends.



We pull over five hundred feet before the arched entrance, just shy of the first line of security cameras. I watch as a couple of *sicarios* position themselves close by, ready to cut the feed on Grayson’s signal.

There are no other cars around. No voices. No people.

*Città Fantasma.*

Moving swiftly, we exit the SUV and walk around to the rear. I pop the lift gate and start distributing the extra guns and ammo my contact in Florence arranged for us. Behind us, our men follow our lead.

Grayson glances down at the stash. “A grenade? Am I supposed to be impressed?”

Dropping a bullet into the magazine, I shoot him a side-eyed glare as I slam my palm against the base and shove it into the handgrip. “I’ll be more impressed if you manage to throw it without blowing your own dick off.”

I’m about to close the liftgate when I see RJ shove a small bottle into his rucksack. He’s quick, but I’m quicker, and it’s in my hands before he can snatch it back.

“Vodka?”

He points to his newly stitched bicep. “Pain relief.”

*Bullshit.*

I go to tuck it away in my own rucksack when my head starts swimming, the lack of sleep finally getting to me. Now that we’re here, right on the cusp of rescue, I’m aching. I’m agitated...

*I’m crashing.*

After forty-eight hours of continual motion, this lull feels like a detox—like someone just swung an anvil at my suit of armor. Fortunately, the vibration of my phone is the shot of adrenaline I need.

“What do you see?”

“Twenty scaling the perimeter walls on the northside right now,” my lieutenant reports. “This place is locked down, and there are guards stationed all along, but there *are* weak spots.” There’s a weighted pause. “They definitely have the numbers.”

“Maybe, but we have something they don’t.”

“What’s that?”

“The element of surprise... Zaccaria sent a C4 calling card to anyone who knew of *Villefort’s* resurrection. Until we make our move, we have the advantage.”

“Give the orders, *jefe*.” There’s a new respect in his voice.

*He called me jefe.*

I’ve led men into battle, but never into war. These are my father’s men. Mexican-trained *sicarios*. *Jefe* is what they call my father. It’s a sign of respect and honor. To hear him call me that flips a switch inside me.

I'm *jefe*.

I'm *El Muerte*.

I'm bringing my family home.

"Time to switch to radio. Send another twenty over. On my signal, have the *sicarios* take out as many guards as they can. Use silencers. No fanfare. In the meantime, we'll keep the ones at the gate,"—I train my binoculars on the front archway where there are four men standing guard—"distracted."

"*Sí, jefe*. When it's clear, I'll send a message."

"I assume you have a plan for this 'distraction'?" Grayson asks, taking the binoculars from me to scope out the situation for himself. "Ten minutes, and we can have snipers in place to take them out."

"We don't have ten minutes. Tell your men to cut the outside security feed and follow my lead." I shoot him a look. "I know that's going to make your head explode, Grayson, but try and keep up."

"Cocky bastard," I hear him mutter as we start to climb the rest of the road on foot.

I *am* a cocky bastard. If I was anything else, doubt would be creeping in by now. I can't allow thoughts of what awaits us on the other side of those walls to dilute my focus.

A hundred feet out, I unscrew RJ's vodka bottle. Taking a couple of deep swigs, I tip the rest down the front of my shirt as Grayson grabs my arm.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Thinking outside the box."

*It's risky. It's reckless. But other than going in, guns blazing, it's all I've got.*

His grip tightens as I go to push past. "I run slick operations, Carrera—"

"Hang back in the shadows. When I start firing, don't *fucking* miss."

Wrenching my arm away, I raise the radio, and give my lieutenant the order to start shooting guards from the rear.

Sliding my gun into the waistband of my pants, I make my way up to the guards, holding out my hands in mock surrender, staggering like I'm drunk on the Fourth of July. As predicted, I'm greeted the *Villefort* way—with their M27s aimed at my head, and a fuck load of angry Italian.

"I'm looking for the bar," I slur, throwing out my demand like I'm not two seconds away from being more bullet than bone.

The tallest one glares at me with contempt. "*Chi è questo imbecille?*"

“Did you...?” I pretend to sway again. “Did you just call me an idiot?”

Meanwhile, there’s a faint commotion coming from the other side of the wall. I glance up to find half the parapet guards on this side have already disappeared.

“This is not a tourist stop,” the guard hisses in broken English. “You are trespassing on private property. I will enjoy—”

He’s cut off by an eruption of gunfire on the back side of the wall. Realization lights up his face as our *sicarios* spill out behind them, a spray of bullets announcing the arrival of the tempest. Before he can take aim, I have my finger on the trigger. With one shot, the back of his head is staining the road.

“You won’t be enjoying anything anymore, you piece of shit,” I tell the corpse, as the atmosphere thickens with the steady pulse of urgency.

The other three guards are down, courtesy of Grayson and RJ. But that was just the prelude. The real show begins as more guards come charging at us from every corner.

Grayson quickly reloads his gun, slamming the magazine in place. “Christ, they’re multiplying.”

Taking aim, I fire—sending another man to an early grave. “Go!” I shout, waving my gun toward the front entrance.

They take the lead and I follow behind, covering their asses as a bullet whizzes past, clipping my shoulder. I don’t stop to inspect the damage. I can’t allow anything to slow me down.

Through the archway, we find a network of narrow, cobblestone streets, with the silhouette of a castle looming large in front of us.

As we’re sucked further into this ghost town, with its shuttered windows and boarded-up shops, the sound of fire power starts to dwindle.

“Where the fuck did all the guards go?” RJ says, voicing what we’re all thinking. “It can’t be this easy.”

It’s not.

The first explosion feels like the ground is crumbling beneath us. The walls of nearby buildings shake, setting off a chain reaction. Bomb after bomb detonates, destroying street after street, until the air is thick with smoke and flame.

“Zaccaria’s gone,” Grayson shouts, sprinting toward the castle. “We’re too late.”

Bleeding and frustrated, we sprint after him.

“What the hell is this?” RJ yells.

“It’s a self-destruction plan. Destroy the evidence and everyone inside. We have to reach that castle, before it goes up in smoke too.”

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

SANTI



I THOUGHT WE HAD THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE ON OUR SIDE. THEN ANOTHER explosion goes off, sending stone scattering across the floor of the castle's front portico. That's when I realize stealth never mattered. Three generations have tried to destroy *Villefort*. Whether we coordinated a blitzkrieg or sent Zaccaria a RSVP to his own funeral, the outcome wouldn't have changed.

There was always a protocol for an invasion like ours.

Through the portico, we find ourselves in a courtyard. Grayson stops to reload his gun again. "Time's running out," he stresses, as if I don't feel the same weight pressing down on me.

The doors leading off this courtyard are mocking us. There are at least ten, all heading in ten different directions. *Ten opportunities for success or failure.*

"This place is like a goddamn labyrinth," I hear RJ say. "How the hell are we supposed to find *shit* before the whole thing blows?"

"We split up."

This catches everyone's attention.

Grayson nods. "He's right. Half our *sicarios* are gone and the rest are raining down bullets on any remaining *Villefort* guards. Which doors, Carrera?"

"Zaccaria trades in shadows, but he's a sadistic bastard who lives for the hunt. He wouldn't lead us away from destruction. He'd drive us straight into the heart of it and watch us burn..." I glance around the courtyard

again. “We take the main entrance and the two doors closest. Hit me up on the radio the minute you find them, then you two get the fuck out of here.”

“Don’t you mean the three of us?” RJ says.

I reload my magazine in silence. I need him focused on the mission, not distracted by my choice. If I can’t find Thalia and Lola, I won’t be coming back to New Jersey. *If they burn, I burn.*

I take the center door, Grayson to my left, RJ to my right.

The first room I enter is a wide open space with a long glassless window, overlooking a field of black. I step closer to investigate, and then a strong arm is wrapping around my neck from behind and crushing my windpipe.

*Fuck.*

“You’re here for *her*, aren’t you?” leers a voice, as he tightens his grip around my throat.

I don’t think, I react. Pulling my arm forward, I sink a hard elbow in his ribs—a move that barely causes him to stumble.

“Carrera,” he seethes, spitting out my name like it’s a curse. “She called for you, you know. She begged for you.”

I sink another elbow into his ribs.

“There’s a maze down there, Carrera.” As he says it, he twists me toward the window. “I watched her run it. Right where you’re standing. Spader outbid some very wealthy men for the privilege of degrading your whore wife first. He stripped her naked and chased her. We all watched her bleed.”

I’m fighting to reach my pocket. All I can smell is smoke and rancid breath as the son of a bitch laughs.

“Would you like to hear the best part? I stood right here and jerked my dick raw to her screams, especially when his arrow hit its target.

His taunts sink behind my iron walls, slipping beneath my skin.

“Seeing her chained to the wall like a dog was the highlight of the night.” He trails off, another low laugh rumbling in his throat. “But that honor goes to the *real* dogs when they ripped your sister apart.”

A wave of red crashes over my eyes. I’m a fusion of working parts—a machine hell bent on maximum destruction.

My wife is dead.

My sister is dead.

*And this motherfucker is dead.*

This time, my fingers make contact with my pocket, and I pull out my switchblade. Popping the button, I swing my arm backward and make contact with whatever the hell is there.

The man lets out a tortured hiss, and the pressure around my neck releases. I spin around to find him holding his own neck, attempting to pull my blade out. I'd love nothing more than to mutilate and dismember this *pendejo*, piece by piece, but I'm done with the small talk. With that in mind, I aim my gun at his forehead and pull the trigger.

Leaving him to rot, I continue my search down a cold stone hallway of closed doors. Behind every one is a woman. Some are Thalia's age, some are younger. They're all dead—their lifeless bodies strewn across their bed like broken dolls.

“Thalia?” I roar. “Where the fuck are you, *muñequita*?”

By the fifth room, I'm numb to the carnage. Numb to the waste. When I reach the sixth, a massive explosion rocks the castle, the impact slamming me into a wall so hard I see stars.

Images from that *pinche cabrón*'s taunts seep into my mind as I search for my gun in a haze of dust and debris. I think of her running for her life, hunted like an animal...

*Like a dog.*

Bile rises up in my throat at the thought of my little sister being thrown to a pack of them.

At the end of the hallway is a winding stone staircase that leads down. I'm starting my descent when a voice comes through on my radio.

“Santi. I've got Lola. She's fucked up, but she's breathing.”

His words are like a punch to the chest. “*Gracias a Dios.*” *Forgive me, Lola.*

Drawing air back into my lungs, I refocus and resume my journey.

“What about Grayson?”

“He found some American girl still alive. *Sicarios* have cleared a path, and they're taking them to the SUVs... What's your location?”

I hesitate, then decide there's no point in lying. “I'm headed down into the cellar.”

“You're going *where*?” His shock is clear enough to be heard on every channel. “Santi, this place is about to blow. Grayson's already on his way out.” He heaves out a jagged breath. “Committing suicide isn't going to save her.”

*Dying won't save her. But living without her won't save me.*

"Take care of my sister, RJ."

I switch my radio off after that.

The steps are endless, taking me further and further down into the darkness. There's a dank smell down here that's permeating every sense. The clouds of dust are blinding, but when I hit the bottom, they seem to clear.

That's when I see her.

I always believed I didn't have a heart until Thalia stormed into my life and changed everything. For days, it's been beating to her rhythm. But now, *seeing her in a fucking cellar like this*, it's close to stopping.

She's chained to the far wall, her slim arms reaching high above her bowed head, her toes barely dusting the floor. Her naked body is a dirty canvas of gashes and bruises.

She's just hanging there.

*Waiting for death.*

I'm carving up the distance to reach her before her name leaves my mouth. *I need to touch her. I need to see her.* Cupping her jaw in both hands, I pull her head upright, and take a wrecking ball to the chest when I see the devil's handiwork all over her face.

But she's warm.

*Her skin is fucking warm.*

Keeping her head lifted with one hand, I check her pulse. It's faint...but it's there.

She's alive.

"Thalia, open your eyes. *Mi, amada...*"

Nothing. Meanwhile, in the distance, there's another massive explosion, and more clouds of dust come billowing down into the cellar.

Still cradling her head, I reach up to jerk the chains binding her wrists, but they're made of steel and concreted into the wall.

*Fuck.*

I can't shoot the chains while she's unconscious. She could move at any moment and catch the bullet instead.

I'm debating my next move when there's a dull crack and a section of the cellar's ceiling comes crashing down around us.

They say your life flashes before your eyes right before you die. I've taunted death more times than I can count, but at this moment, all I see is

her...us... A tragically poetic story unfolding in a flurry of snapshots.

*Thalia and I met in a snowstorm, and we're going to die in a fucking firestorm.*

Orange and red start creeping into the far corners of the cellar. In a few moments, the heat and smoke will be punishing. I press my forehead to hers, cursing this world for ripping us apart. I deserve death. She doesn't. I'm destined for a place that no angel fears to tread.

"Fly high, *muñequita*..."

At the sound of my voice, her eyelids flutter, and then she's coughing violently.

"Come back to me, Thalia," I hiss, trying again to rouse her again. "Time to wake up."

"I'm so tired," she whispers.

"I need you to be strong one last time so I can shoot your chains. I need you to brace your fall. Can you do that?"

This time, when her eyelids flutter, I find myself staring into an ocean of pain.

"Thalia?"

"I'm ready," she croaks.

I step back, steadying my hand as I take aim and shoot—once, then twice. As her chains disintegrate, she flings her arms in front of her. Diving forward, I catch her seconds before she hits the ground—her warmth and fragility sinking into my chest.

I tighten a fierce hold around her.

*I'm never letting her fall again.*

Ripping off my shirt, I throw it around her naked body. There's so much I want to say. So much I want to atone for, but all that has to wait. Lifting her into my arms, I fight through the smoke and falling debris to find the staircase again. By the time we reach the hallway, we're both gasping for clean air.

"Santi," she wheezes, curling her arms around my neck. "I can't breathe."

"Stay with me, *muñequita*. Don't you fucking leave me now. Just a few more minutes. Keep your mouth covered."

I feel her press her face into my chest and nod.

*Twist. Turn.*

*Right. Left.*

I take each corner like I'm on fucking rails, but I didn't come this far to lose her now.

We spill out into the courtyard, moments before a final, deafening explosion sends the turrets of the castle caving inward. After that, I don't stop until I reach the front archway.

Through the haze, I see an outline of black fatigues approaching. I feel their footsteps vibrating up from the ground.

"Carrera!" Grayson reaches me first. "Jesus Christ." His face is a rare mask of fury when he sees the state of Thalia. "Give her to me."

"Fuck you."

I know I should hand her over, but something inside me won't let her go. *Can't let her go.*

"What are you going to do?" he snaps. "Crawl back to America?"

"If needs be."

I've walked through fire for Thalia. I can walk a few more steps.

"Get in the back." He guides us toward the nearest SUV. "We've given half of Italy a firework display tonight. I've delayed the emergency departments for as long as I can."

Before I can swing inside the vehicle, RJ comes storming up to me. "Jesus fuck! You crazy, bastard. Don't ever pull that shit again!"

"I don't plan to," I say bleakly. "Where's Lola?"

He nods to the SUV behind us.

"I need to see her."

Thalia's out cold as I lay her down gently on the backseat. Grayson leans over and fixes a portable oxygen mask over her face. "This will have to do until we reach a hospital. Go check on your sister. Do it fast. We need to move."

Following RJ over to the next SUV, he opens the rear driver's side door, and for the second time tonight my heart comes close to stopping. My baby sister is unrecognizable. Her petite body is riddled with bite marks, open wounds, and bruises.

"*Chaparrita?*" I murmur, leaning over her to cup her cheek. "I've come to take you home."

Lola barely opens her eyes. She's mumbling out incoherent words, wheezing as she thrashes her head back and forth. "Rosalia," she rasps, one word breaking through. "Where's Rosalia?"

Beside me, I feel RJ stiffen. "Rosalia, who?"

“Leave her alone, RJ. She doesn’t know what she’s—”

But he’s already pulling me out of the way, his huge arms braced on the doorframe to block me out. “Rosalia *who*, Lola?”

At his sharp tone, Lola’s eyes flutter open. She doesn’t answer, but something passes between them.

White knuckling the doorframe, he turns to an approaching Grayson. “The American girl. What does she look like?”

“Long hair. Dark. Hard to tell much—”

“Which SUV?”

“Last one.”

Grayson slides me a look as RJ sprints off down the line of vehicles. “What the hell was that all about?”

“Smoke’s fucked up his head.” *I’ll deal with his insubordination later.*

My gaze shifts back toward Lola. Once again, my loyalty is being tested. I’m not letting Thalia out of my arms—she’s my wife. But Lola is my sister.

As if reading my thoughts, Grayson slides in next to Lola. Making the decision for me. “Go take care of Thalia.”

“She’s my *familia*.”

He nods at the SUV in front of us. “And she’s mine. That makes us even.”



After a twenty-four-hour detour via a private hospital in Florence for an emergency operation on Thalia’s leg, and a night on oxygen for all of us, we’re finally headed back to the US.

It only took a couple of million-dollar payouts to persuade two doctors to fly back with us. None of us escaped injury, but it’s mostly superficial, with the effects of smoke inhalation and a couple of bullet holes thrown in for good measure.

Thalia’s injuries were the worst. The infection in her leg was bordering on sepsis. Her other wounds weren’t as serious, but just as brutal. She’s yet to regain consciousness.

*Autodefensa.*

I lost count of how many stitches Lola needed to close all the dog bites on her arms.

*And the third girl?*

It took some digging, but a missing American mob princess doesn't go unnoticed in our circles, especially one who's been stolen from our own backyard.

RJ is sitting in the seat beside me, carving craters into the cockpit door.

Lifting my glass, I take a long slow drink. "How long?"

"Don't start," he mutters.

"How long have you been involved with Gianni Marchesi's daughter?" His silence ticks my anger up a notch. "How long have you been fucking the New Jersey Don's—?"

"Since Lola crossed the border."

That's not the answer I expected. "A year and a half?"

His gaze takes a swing in my direction, scorching me with accusation. "Are you really going to lecture me about crossing battle lines, Santi?"

"Yes. Because shit like *this* happens," I motion to the back bedroom where Thalia is resting. "People get hurt when enemies don't play nice."

"The Marchesis and Carrera aren't enemies."

I glare at him over the rim of my glass. "It's a tepid alliance at best. Don't paint a bullet red and call it a rose."

"Do you regret *your* red bullet?"

I clench my teeth, his question taking me off guard.

"That's what I thought," he mutters. "You worry about your choices, and I'll worry about mine." Rising to his feet, he strides toward the front of the jet and disappears into the cockpit.

The seat is empty for all of thirty seconds, and then Edier Grayson is inviting himself into it. "What's his story?"

"Denial. And it's none of your fucking business."

"Your diplomacy skills leave a lot to be desired, Carrera," he says coldly.

"So my wife keeps telling me." I catch him eyeing up the bottle sitting between us. "*Grand Patron Añejo Burdeos* tequila. Carrera special."

I don't wait for him to ask. Pouring him a glass, I push it across the small table separating our seats.

"An improvement," he remarks. "Though I hate tequila."

"Stop being such a pussy."

Gritting his jaw, he slides the glass off the table and tips it back, draining it in one. “We need to talk about Lorenzo—”

“Save it. I’ve heard enough about *Villefort* these last two days. Our cartels fought a twenty-year war. This one will still be here tomorrow.”

Rising from my seat, I make my way toward the back of the plane and into the small bedroom. The Italian doctor looks up from adjusting the IV stand. He nods a respectful greeting before swiftly making his exit.

Thalia is curled up on her side. She’s bruised and weak, but she’s clean and dressed in a red silk nightgown I found for her in Florence. Red reminds me of her. It’s the color that’s shaded every major event in our short marriage.

The color of blood.

Hate.

Passion.

*Love?*

I sit down on the edge of the bed, dusting my finger along the length of her cheek, before reaching into my pocket to retrieve the hope I’ve been holding on to these past few days.

Lifting her left hand, I slip her wedding rings back onto her third finger.

*Where they belong.*

“*Muñequita*,” I murmur, pressing my lips to her forehead. “I’ve waited ten years to tell you a story. It’s about how a thirteen-year-old boy sacrificed his loyalty for your innocence. Wake up, Thalia. I want to hear the one about how a queen sacrificed her innocence for loyalty.”

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

THALIA



### NINE DAYS LATER

HOPE SWIMS.

Loss sinks.

*But survival?*

She's like the stagnant water of the two—a weightless woman who can't move forward with the current, but one who's too afraid to face the stormy oceans of her past.

Right now, she's cocooned in a fortress of white sheets with no desire to go anywhere. With no desire for much of anything anymore.

I don't want to feel.

I don't want to see.

I just want to *be*—floating in this bed that smells of lies and forgotten promises.

It's been nine days since Lola and I were rescued. Since a small hilltop town in northern Italy was decimated by cartel fire and fury. Since the life-saving operation in Florence to save my leg, and then the long, long flight back to America...

Or so I've been told.

I don't remember any of it, of course. I was unconscious the whole time. I learned the details from Ella who lies with me most days and nights, stroking my hair, whispering her warmth and reassurance so tenderly I'd cry from the beauty of it if I had any tears left to shed.

I never acknowledge her. I never react. I keep my eyes shut tight to reject a life I have no interest in living at the moment. I know where I am, though. I can sense it. I'm back in his room. In his bed. The floor-to-ceiling windows tempting me with a view of the New Jersey skyline.

It's not home.

It's not hell.

It's just...*stagnant*.

On the tenth day, the waters ripple. It begins with cigarette smoke wrapping its acrid scent around my senses. It continues with a presence so achingly familiar my eyelids flutter open of their own accord.

It's nighttime. There's the outline of a man standing by the window, a dark slur against the backdrop of neon. I listen to his vicious inhale, followed by a long, slow exhale—watching as the amber light of his cigarette rises and flares like a supernova, before falling back to his side. He repeats the motion several times, balancing his silence with weighted stares and history, before he finally speaks.

"Don't go back there, *muñequita*," he says roughly. "Not yet. Stay with me for a while."

*Muñequita?*

*Where have I heard that name before?*

"Where's Ella?" I rasp. "I want Ella."

He pauses. "Your sister is in New York, as far as I'm aware."

"College," I whisper. "Did she—?"

"No idea. Call her up. Shoot the shit. I hear she's desperate to speak to you, but do it on your own time. I'm only interested in one of Santiago's daughters."

I'm not in the mood to be mocked. I turn my back on him, only to find the mattress dipping right beside me.

"Talk to me, Thalia."

"I don't talk to liars."

"How about the man who's been living in hell since you were taken."

His admission makes me blink. Here, in the dark, I swear I can feel his pain like it's my own. But Santi Carrera doesn't feel pain. He only knows how to give it.

*Only in the darkness, can you see the stars.*

"Did you burn it," I croak, sitting up slowly with the help of a brace of pillows behind me. Wincing from muscle stiffness and a throbbing ache in

my leg. “Did you burn it back to hell?”

“Yes, *muñequita*,” he says, moving closer until his face is a nodding silhouette, barely a foot in front of me. “The men who hurt you paid for it with their own deaths.”

This time, I can feel his anger. It’s a living breathing thing that fits the shape of my shadow perfectly.

“Even Lorenzo Zaccaria?”

There’s another pause. “Soon.”

It feels like a hammer blow to the chest. “He escaped,” I say dully.

“He *will* die, Thalia. As *Santa Muerte* is my fucking witness.”

It’s not good enough. *Can’t he see?* There is no future for us while that man is still alive. *I can’t move forward. I’m too afraid to look back.*

Stagnant.

“Give me your gun. Tomorrow, I’ll find him myself.”

“And shoot your own foot off in the process?”

The trace in amusement in his voice makes me reach out and fist the front of his shirt in the dark. “You have no idea what I’m capable of anymore, Santi Carrera,” I growl softly. “You have no idea what I had to do to survive...” My breath catches, and I release my hold.

“My firebird demands blood,” he states, moving closer, a lingering scent of smoke and whiskey fanning across my face—churning up long-forgotten feelings deep inside me.

“Bardi,” I grit out, causing him to retreat again with a curse.

Truth is, I have no idea what I am anymore. The girl I was before is gone. I lost half of her in a maze, and the other half in a cellar.

*Somehow, I need to rise up from the ashes of this.*

The mattress ripples as he stands. “My doctors are happy with your progress, but you need to rest. We’ll talk more when you’re stronger.”

“Ella told me what happened,” I say, falteringly. “With the raid, my leg... I heard her talking when she thought I was asleep.”

There’s a pause. “Your sister hasn’t set foot in this apartment, Thalia.”

“You’re wrong. I heard her...” I trail off in confusion.

“I’m already straying close enough to your father’s bullets by insisting you stay here. There’s no way he’d allow your sister to cross state lines too.”

“Then who—?”

“I have business to attend to.” Soft light floods into the room as he opens the door. I catch a glimpse of his tall frame as he exits, before he’s plunging me back into darkness again.

I slide under the bedsheets, his words spinning cartwheels in my head. If it wasn’t Ella, then who held me? Comforted me? Bathed me? Made me feel their love when all I felt was numb?

The answer is as simple as it is bewildering.

*My husband did.*

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

THALIA



WHEN I WAKE THE NEXT DAY, THE NEON SKYLINE HAS DULLED TO A uniformed gray. Black clouds hang like dirty white lies over all the high-rises, and Santi's floor-to-ceiling windows are dotted with rain.

I lie there, debating whether to accept this new day or to crawl back inside my mind. Eventually, tolerance wins out, and I'm so thankful when I find a familiar figure perched on the edge of my bed, watching me.

"It's a shitty 'welcome home', am I right?" She gestures to the window with a sigh. "You can always count on New Jersey weather to make a bad situation worse."

"Lola," I whisper, caught between sleep and disbelief. "Oh my God. I never thought I'd see you again!"

"I keep waiting for the stupid lark to show up," she blurts out, her face crumbling like an avalanche. "But he never does."

To anyone else, her words would sound crazy. To me, they're the sanest thing I've ever heard. Lola can't move on, either. She's stuck in her own motionless waters.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," she says, swiping at her tears with the back of her hand. "Ever since I've been home, I've been a mess."

"Don't be. You never, ever have to apologize for anything with me."

We stare at each other, taking in each other's scars, both the obvious ones and the hidden mutilations on the inside. She's wearing a simple black dress with a high neckline, but I can still see the fading red welts slashed into the side of her neck. There are yellowing bruises on both cheekbones, and a couple of wicked-looking gashes on her arms.

She looks haunted and beautiful, but very much *alive*.

“How’s your leg?” she sniffs.

She doesn’t ask what happened to it. She doesn’t want to know, and I don’t blame her. She already has enough nightmare material from that place to last a lifetime.

“Better.”

“Thank God.”

“The baby?” I hesitate, expecting the worst.

“Is fine.”

“*Are you serious?*” There’s a distant thud of joy in my chest as she rises from the bed to shut the door before scooting back to me.

“Sorry, I only have, like, ten minutes before my mother returns to my apartment. I can’t breathe right now without her sticking a monitor on my finger and checking the oxygen levels. Santi’s even worse. If it were up to him, he’d lock me up in a hospital and swallow the key.”

“Are you sure?” I prompt again, greedy for lightness in a world that feels far too heavy right now.

“I’m sure,” she confirms, smiling through her tears.

“Does Santi know?”

“Not yet. Fortunately, my doctor is open to every form of bribery.” She holds up a slim hand to show me her lack of jewelry. “Hey, it’s worth it. Once Sam is out of hospital—”

“Sam?” I pounce on the name in disbelief. “Are you telling me Sam *survived?*”

This time, Lola’s smile isn’t a wilting flower. It’s a sunflower turned toward the blazing sky. *Maybe someday I’ll be able to smile like that again.*

“Santi heard the gunshots and found him in the parking lot. He and RJ saved him. He won’t stop bitching about it, though...” Her face falls again. “Sam was shot in the stomach. He nearly bled out. He nearly died.”

“Have you seen him? Does he know about the baby?” I’m tripping over my words like a drunk person now. Lola’s news has me reeling.

She shakes her head. “Soon. For now, I’m biding my time... Picking my moment. Did Santi tell you about the truce between our families?”

“We haven’t really spoken much about anything yet.” I sink back down into my pillows again. *Whispers in the night aren’t signed confessions.*

There’s so much guilt and recrimination waiting for us.

We stare at each other again, and I know she's thinking the same thing. We're remembering two women chained to the gates of hell, fighting to keep them shut for as long as possible as the devil rattled the bars.

"I heard you screaming," she says, reaching out to take my hand. "That night in the maze? When you didn't come back to the room, I thought... I thought..." She leads her deduction into a sad, terrified silence.

"I can't do this," I whisper, moving my hand away. "Not yet."

"Don't punish yourself, Thalia," she pleads, her keen eyes flickering over my face. "For *anything*. Be kind to yourself. It's going to take a long time to come to terms with everything that happened."

*Or what that night turned me into.*

Reluctantly, she goes to stand. "I better get back. I'll come again soon, or maybe you can come find me? I'm in the apartment right below this one..." She pauses. "You know, *pápa* told me Santi didn't eat or sleep when he was trying to find us. He wouldn't rest until we were safe. The only reason he kept Sam alive was to extract information about our location. You know how much he wanted to kill him after what went down between us at Rutgers. The only reason he went to see Edier Grayson and your father—"

"He went to see my *father*?" I'm stunned. "Are they both still alive?"

"For now..." She shoots me a look before heading for the door. "If Santi doesn't allow him into Legado soon, he'll be mounting his severed head on the wall in the bar." She starts fiddling with the lock on the handle. "Look, I know he lied to you, Thalia... I know about the tape and the real reason he forced you to marry him. I know what he put you through is inexcusable, but sometimes the craziest decisions come from places that aren't overgrown with thorns."

"Like you and Sam," I say, feeling her words settle like soft snow on hard ground. Like a boy and a girl ten years ago, trying to make sense of a raging storm.

*Muñequita.*

"Did he tell you about Z-zaccaria?" I say, stumbling over the name.

As soon as I say it, black images invade my mind...

*Begging for water.*

*Begging for my life.*

"You mean that he escaped?" Her expression tightens. "Let's just say my brother has swapped one obsession for another. He'll find him, Thalia. He *will* make him pay."

She hovers in the doorway again, as if staked in place by a burning question. “I’ll never forget the day they came to take you away to *Il Labirinto*. The look on your face... I don’t think I’d ever have been that strong.”

*You are already, Lola. You just don’t know it yet.*

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

THALIA



THE HOT WATER FEELS LIKE SIN.

The way it trickles down my body is like a long-held confession that's finally being spoken out loud.

I stay in the shower for hours, scrubbing every inch of my skin; attempting to wash the last of a green maze and a black cellar away.

*If only it were that easy.*

At least my leg has healed. After Lola left earlier, a blonde woman showed a doctor into my room to remove the bandages and stitches. When I asked where Svetlana was, she gave me a look as if to say that name was as dirty around here as my father's used to be.

The rest of me is still a fretwork of discolored bruises and welts, but the only real ache I have is in my heart. Everything feels like an off beat, and I don't know how to get myself back in rhythm.

Opening up the closet door, I discover a rail of old clothes from an old life. I choose out a couple of items, but nothing looks right.

I move to the next closet, stepping into Santi's extravagant haven of thousand-dollar dress suits and shirts. Shrugging into a black Brioni, I wander back over to the window, curling up the cuffs to my forearms. It's sundown, and there's still no sign of him.

In the end, I get sick of waiting and take the showdown to him.

My legs feel like cotton candy as I navigate the hallway toward the kitchen. After ten days in bed, each footstep feels like a mile. His black apartment is a scary place to be when you're all alone and haunted, too. I

keep seeing yaupon holly hedges instead of walls. I tell myself beautiful lies to keep me calm.

*You're safe now, Thalia. He can't find you here.*

But I know that's bullshit.

The Black King can find me anywhere. His ghost town was just one of his many estates... He told me so himself.

The kitchen is empty, so I try the spare bedrooms. He's not in his office either, but our history invites me in anyway. I can smell spice and sandalwood, and the restrained violence in his embrace.

I run my finger along the desk surface where the first glass layer of my innocence was shattered. I curl my fingers around a crystal decanter, knowing exactly what it contains, because that's the flavor of his lust.

Everything in here looks and feels exactly like it did before. Except for me. And the opposite wall, which is now covered in photographs of people and places and old newspaper cuttings, with red string connecting them like a spider web of unsolved mysteries.

As I step closer, I start to recognize things, like the discarded shipping container that was our first cage, and Franco—the guard in Italy who beat me—now lying dead on the ground with his throat slit. I see a hilltop medieval town in flames. I see a fancy estate ablaze in the South of France. I see Aiden Knight, my father's business associate in Monaco and the owner of the Black Skies Casino, the place where I first discovered I could count cards at seventeen. Underneath, is a picture of the man I stabbed in the eye and then in the chest twenty-three times without a shred of mercy.

All the red string seems to lead to one black and white photograph in the center. It's a blurry image of a tall man disembarking from a private jet, but I know who it is right away.

My stomach lurches.

*Il Re Nero.*

I reach out to touch it, to prove to myself he's not real—that here, in this room, he's just a 2D image with as much bite as a papercut. One finger turns into two, and before I know it, I'm pointing them at his dark head like I'm aiming the barrel of a gun.

“When his end comes, *muñequita*, he'll face more than imaginary bullets.”

I spin around to find Santi standing in the doorway.

I've never seen him dressed in anything other than a suit before, but tonight, he's wearing black jeans slung low at his hips and a white T-shirt that defines every hard muscle in his chest and abdomen. There's a guarded expression on his handsome face, and more...*so much more*. But they're codes I can't crack and locks I don't have the key to. I used to think my father was the most unreadable man on Earth, but now I'm not so sure.

We stare at each other, the air fizzing with electricity. I don't know much of anything anymore, but I know I still want him.

*Despite the lies.*

*Despite the trauma.*

Still, I feel like I'm back in another maze, one with Santi in the center and me skirting the periphery paths.

*Please let me find a way back to him.*

He steps into the room, kicking the door shut, and then moves to stand beside me.

"You did all this?" I ask, swinging back to the wall collage, feeling his body heat warming up my skin, even though we're not touching.

"Zaccaria made it personal. I'm not resting until he's dead."

Santi's changed. There's a dangerous energy about him—a savageness doused in fury. I need him to hold me like he did when I was unconscious. Instead, he takes a step back and sits on the edge of his desk, reaching around for his decanter and pouring out two shots of *Añejo* tequila.

With the moment in pieces, I turn back to the wall again—my fingers straying to Monroe Spader's photograph.

"I killed him," I blurt out, unable to contain my dirty secret any longer.

"Good. You saved me a job." But there's an edge to his drawl that's all guilt.

"I never wanted to be like you or my father. But this world...this *fucking* world..." I suck in a harsh breath. "It was only a matter of time before it turned me into a murderer, too."

"It's never murder when it's self-defense. Or so my lawyers keep telling me."

"You don't understand," I say, blinking back my tears. "You will *never* understand because killing is a way of life for you. When I kill, I don't just take away their life. I destroy a part of mine as well."

His dark gaze is burning a hole in the back of my head.

“Talk to me, Thalia. I’m not one for heart-to-hearts, but occasionally they’re warranted. This marriage is fucked without one.”

“What did Lola tell you?”

“She said it was your story to share, but only when you felt ready to. Told me if I rushed you, she’d slam my balls in a vise.”

“Did you see the m-maze?” The words get tangled up in my throat.

There’s a pause. “I watched it burn.”

“Thank you.”

*Thank you for rescuing me, for finding me in the darkness, for being so much more than I ever thought you were...*

Heading over to the window, I press my palms and forehead to the glass, as if I’m trying to force some sense into my madness. It’s late. A city of neon is reemerging. The cars down below are carving straight paths with yellow headlights.

*It’s time to jump into nothing.*

*To see if he catches me.*

*To see if we’re strong enough to catch each other...*

“I know why you didn’t tell me about Bardi and the tape.”

There’s another pause at this, followed by clinking glass and pouring liquid.

“I think I knew the last time we were in this office together,” I add, bracing myself when I hear his footsteps approaching.

“Enlighten me,” he murmurs, slamming his large hands over mine—his wedding band gleaming bright in the declining light. A beat, later, he’s pressing his hard body against me and sparking that flame between us, all over again. “What do you think you know, *muñequita*?”

“It’s the same reason why you burned this world to the ground to find me.” Feeling his lips feathering my neck, I tilt my head, daring him to sink his lust into me. “The same reason you saved Sam’s life. The same reason you walked into a room with my father and Edier, knowing they had a bullet carved with your name on it... The same reason you’ve spent nine days holding me, bringing me back to life. The same reason why you saved me ten years ago in the snow, when you had every opportunity to kill me.”

His hands clench briefly.

“Tell me the reason yourself, Santi,” I whisper, enticing a truth from him that he doesn’t want to admit to. “Tell me the word that binds us now. Tell me what you feel for me. Tell me what you’re capable of.”

Refusing to answer, he drops a hand to my shirt. I stand, stock still, as he wrestles with my buttons and his feelings. Pushing the shirt from my shoulders, he buries his face into my neck again.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

“You did, and then you found me.”

“No, Thalia,” he says bitterly. “Not yet... But I will.”

His elbows brush against my back as he rips his T-shirt off. His jeans follow, and then we’re skin on skin again, fighting for purchase in a hailstorm of emotions.

“You need to let me go, Santi,” I whisper. “You need to let me fly away like you did that night. I can’t give you a heart that’s already broken.”

“You want me to admit what we are, only for you to smash it up in the hope we can fix it when your nightmares go away?” He scoffs. “You ask too much.”

“Please, Santi...”

He kicks my feet apart with a growl and pulls my hips back. A beat later, the smooth head of his cock is pushing up against my pussy. “You belong to me, Thalia Carrera. You belong by my side. Somewhere along the way, our deception turned into truth. It’s time you accepted it.”

At this, he drives his cock inside me, stretching my walls around his thick girth, and stealing the breath from my lungs.

“Did they touch you like this, *muñequita*?” he growls, palming the base of my throat. “Did they touch what’s mine?”

“I killed him before he could,” I whisper.

“He deserves to die a thousand deaths for even thinking about it.” He sinks in deeper. “*Dios mío*... You’re fucking perfect.”

I’m nowhere near wet enough, but there’s never been a sweeter pain.

He needs this as much as I do: a beautiful farewell to a future that was never ours to lose.

Withdrawing, he spins me around to wrap my legs around his waist, and then he’s crashing us backward into the glass. “If I told you that word, firebird,” he says fiercely, seeking out my mouth. “Would you stay?”

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him back with a desperation that pushes tenderness into anarchy. At the same time, he lowers me back down onto his cock, and I groan into his mouth as he thrusts in so deeply I’m splitting in two.

Santi doesn't fuck gently, and tonight is no exception. That violence inside him is tainting his touch.

I've changed since Italy, too. I crave that violence now. I don't want a reprieve, so I'm tugging his hair at the roots, sinking my teeth into his lips to taste that metal, begging for harder, faster, *more*, as his cock pistons in and out of me until sweat is dripping down both our shoulder blades.

He's taking me so hard, the whole window frame is shaking, but all I can concentrate on is the surge of pleasure building up inside me.

"Jesus...*fuck*," he curses, as he shifts his hips, slamming the back of my head against the glass.

"God, don't stop!" I'm reaching the tipping point, and I can feel his body straining to compete.

"I love how you come around my cock, Thalia Carrera," he snarls into my hair. "Your cunt worships me like I'm a fucking god."

My back arches, and my nails drag red across his skin. For a second, there's only light and pleasure, as molten heat detonates in my core. Somewhere in the distance, I hear him roaring out my name, and then he's coating the insides of my pussy—coming so hard, and for so long, I can feel it spilling out of me and dripping down our thighs.

Time stops.

Dimensions shift.

When I open my eyes, he's carrying me across the room and laying me down across his desk. Spreading my legs wide, we watch as more of his cum drips out of my pussy and onto the lacquered surface.

"What a fucking waste," he murmurs, gathering it up with a finger and pushing it back inside. "Every part of me belongs to you. The same as every part of you belongs to me." Wrapping his hand around the back of my neck, he pulls my head up to meet his mouth. "Love is a careless bastard who takes without permission, but he's *our* bastard, Thalia," he says huskily, sealing his words with a brief and brutal kiss. "You ripped my heart out ten years ago, and you never gave it back."

"You love me," I whisper.

"I love you," he confirms, dark eyes blazing. "And I'd rather die than see you walk out of that door tomorrow."

"If you love something—"

"Lock it up and throw away the key," he says, lining his cock up with my pussy again, but, this time, *for the first time*, his words are an empty

threat.

When he starts fucking me for the second time, his desperation is just as raw as mine.

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN**

SANTI



SUNRISE SPREADS HER COLORS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC CITY SKYLINE, AND Thalia's decision is still a hollow echo in my mind. There's no more night to hold on to. No more watching the minutes tick away on the clock.

It's a new day, and our end.

*And there's not a fucking thing I can do about it.*

Turning away from the window, I watch her sleeping, her dark hair fanned out across the pillowcase. I brush a stray lock of it away from her face, telling myself that the memory of last night is enough, but it's an empty vow.

I trace my finger across her delicate jawline, skating the edges of her bruises. Every instinct I have is demanding I lock all the doors until I can prove to her that I'm the only one who can heal her.

I can't force her to stay, though. *Not this time.* Not after what she's been through. If I take away her freedom again, not only will I lose her forever, I'll be no better than Zaccaria. I'd rather put a gun to my head than become another monster in her nightmares.

Still, as much as she's changed me, I'm still a selfish man.

I still want, and I still demand.

I still *need*...

Trailing my hand down the length of her neck, I take hold of the white bedsheet and yank it to her waist, exposing her small breasts. Brushing my fingers lightly over one dusky-pink nipple, my cock twitches as she moans and tosses her head from side to side,

Thinking dark thoughts, I tug the rest of the sheet away until she's fully bared to me. This time, I'm not filled with rage at seeing the red and purple marks on her skin. She doesn't know it yet, but there's a beauty in her scars. Each one is a test of survival. Each one a badge of strength.

*She's still sleeping, Santi...*

The man who saved her from that cellar knows what I'm doing right now is wrong, but the man who feeds off our violent connection doesn't give a shit about the rules. He's the one in control now. Before Thalia walks out that door, I'll be taking my fill of her anyway I can.

There's an edge of warning in the air, but I don't listen as I part her thighs.

Even in her sleep, she's wet for me, her lips glistening like a promise of glory. It's a heavy hit straight to my dick, seeing her gorgeous cunt splayed out like this. It's all I can do not to drive in so deep she'll never be free of us.

But this isn't just about my wants and needs. It's about showing her that a bastard like me can still give as well as take.

I lower my head and groan, the scent of her arousal, hypnotic.

The moment the first taste hits my senses, I'm lost—so fucking lost. My wife is like the sweetest sin.

I swirl my tongue in circles, savoring her, teasing her, memorizing her, as Thalia lets out another soft and tortured moan. My cock jerks at the sound. When I glance up, her eyes are still closed, but she's no longer asleep. She's walking a threadbare line between a dream state and reality, and it's one I intend to blur with more fucking pleasure than her body can handle.

I wrap my lips around her clit and suck hard. When she pants my name, I slide two fingers inside her slick heat, pumping in and out—creating a perfect rhythm—as her juices leak out, soaking my skin and the bedsheets beneath her.

Her pants turn to helpless whimpers, as she draws her knees up, toes curling, her fingers seeking out my hair. *Nothing will ever dull this flame.*

“Santi...”

This time when she says my name, there's no hushed lull. It's clear and present. *My firebird is awake.*

I could stop... I should stop.... But I don't. Instead, we hold each other's gazes, as I keep up the fierce tempo, continuing to fuck her with my tongue

and fingers as she tips her head back and clenches the white pillowcase.

“What are you doing?” she rasps out, lust flushing her cheeks like burning embers.

“Enjoying my breakfast.”

“We shouldn’t...” She bites her lip, her head rolling back again. “Last night was—”

“Not enough.” I punctuate my words with a graze of my teeth to her clit, forcing a cry from her throat. “Come for me.” My order is rough and unforgiving. “I want my fucking name on your lips, *muñequita*. I want it to shatter these walls, and brand every single one of your thoughts.”

“I have to leave,” she whimpers.

“Then if I can’t have your time, I’ll take your pussy, right here, right now.” My voice pitches low and savage. “When I let you go, it’s going to be with the taste of you in my mouth.”

In response, she arches her back and widens her legs for me, her fingers threading a tighter grip through my hair.

“I need you.”

“Goddamn right, you do.” Her confession does something raw and primal to me. Two fingers become three as I make a stunning mess of her pussy.

“Shit!”

Her cries are like a sinner’s prayer to my ears. I welcome the pain as she fists my hair and twists, grinding herself against my face, until she’s chasing the sunrise that’s beating down on my back.

I watch her climax cresting, and then mercilessly drive her into it.

“Santi!” she screams, coming so hard around my fingers, I can feel her spasming. When her juices gush, I lap up every drop.

She’s still gasping for air when I climb to my knees, my cock heavy and leaking pre-cum. Those hooded eyes watch as I fist the root, giving it a few savage strokes.

“*Dios mío*, Thalia, do you see what you do to me? Every fucking time.” My groan is almost feral. This craving is too strong. I hold her stare as I work my cock harder...faster... Desperate for relief. Desperate to mark her. “This is all you, *muñequita*. Your scent, your voice, your touch...” The pressure at the base of my spine erupts as my balls tighten. “Fuck!”

A rush of blood blazes beneath my skin. Every vein in my body pulses her name. Thalia catalogues every move, not saying a word, spreading her

pussy lips for me and arching upward to tease me right back.

It's too much. I groan out my release through clenched teeth, pumping thick ropes of cum all over her inner thighs and swollen cunt.

When my vision clears, I find her dragging her finger through my cum and smearing it into the scars on her body.

"In that maze, Spader had a knife."

I pause. She's opening a door for me. I'm afraid a single breath will slam it shut again.

"He cut the straps to my dress," she continues, her gaze lifting, watching warily for my reaction. "He sliced my skin, and then that arrow..."

Her next words catch in a sob, making my chest ache.

I can feel her pain.

*Help me, Santi.*

I can smell her blood.

*Save me, Santi.*

"Monroe is dead, *muñequita*." Caging her with my body, I take her jaw between my fingers to drag her above the surface of those dark waters. "He can't hurt you anymore."

She pulls away sharply. "That's the thing. He can. *He still is*. Every scar I have is because of him. Of both of them."

"Tell me what you need." I say, hearing her plea. "Say the word, and I'll give it to you. If I don't have it, then I'll steal it." *I'll kill and raze the world for you*. "Just tell me."

Her gaze is steady and fierce. "Every scar I have was created from hate. I need one created from something...*more*."

Understanding immediately, I take my knife from the nightstand. Flipping her onto her back, I slide my hand up through the valley of her breasts to her throat. I tighten my hold, her pupils dilating with her escalating pulse rate. I watch her expression carefully for regret or fear, but there's only certainty and lust as I touch the blade to the soft swell of her stomach.

"Like this?"

Something flickers behind her gaze, and my cock is rock-hard again. There's a shadow there, moving...craving...

"Yes."

“Do you want me to hurt you, Thalia? Do you want me to make you bleed so you can hate me more? So you can hold onto it at night, tucking it away under your pillow when the doubts creep in? Your fucking father would love that.”

“I don’t want it, Santi. I *crave* it. What he did—what he made me do—it’s all over me. I need to see something else when I look at my reflection.”

It’s a fucked-up request. I hate it, but the thought of marking her is so fucking tempting. I can already see the blood pooling against her pale skin.

Mine.

*Maybe we both need to bleed...*

Choosing my canvas carefully, I press my knife in harder. She hisses at the blade’s sharp bite, but she never screams.

I work quickly after that, her blood beading with every flick of my wrist, rushing to chase each letter. When I’m done, I sit back, staring with reverence at my promise, as Thalia lowers her gaze to the word I carved into the soft skin above her pubic bone. She traces each letter, swirling her finger through the red rivulets. Never flinching.

“*Siempre.*”

“Always,” I confirm, our heated gazes colliding. “It’s how long I’ll wait for you, Thalia Carrera.” Tossing the knife on the floor, I slip my hand under her neck, and pull her upright, our lips barely a breath apart. “Always. *Forever.* Whether it takes a month, a year, or ten years, I don’t fucking care. I’ll wait for you to come back to me.” With that, I’m pushing her back to the mattress, my cock straining as I press against her opening, my lust heightened by the blood that’s staining both our skin.

“*Siempre,*” I repeat, huskily, driving into her. Taking all she has left to give.

She chants my name with each brutal thrust as I fuck my own pain into her, leaving it so deep inside she’ll never forget it. Her arms coil around my neck, her breath coming out in sharp, brittle pants as I fuck her like an animal. I was already on the edge. Now I’m a man possessed.

*Obsessed.*

The harder we fuck, the stronger the craving.

“More,” she pants, with nothing between us but slick skin, blood, and lust.

“This pussy,” I rasp, catching her mouth in a vicious kiss, forcing her to taste herself, “will only ever come for your husband. You’re mine, Thalia Carrera... *mine.*”

I can’t take her hard enough.

I can’t get deep enough.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

I can feel her squeezing my cock. I slam my mouth against hers again as my last frantic thrusts send me careening over a cliff.

“*Eres mia por siempre!*”

Throwing my head back, I roar as I come harder than I’ve ever come in my goddamn life.

*Jesus Christ.*

When the haze clears, and I can finally think straight, I realize Thalia is lying motionless beneath me.

That’s when I know it’s time.

Slowly, I pull out of her, *hating the break in connection*, and swing my legs out of bed. Thalia is quiet for a moment, drowning me in silence, before she’s moving up behind me and snaking her arms around my chest.

Her touch only seems to hurt.

“Go.”

“Santi...”

“Go.”

Tugging on a pair of jeans, I stalk into my office next door and slam the door behind me. Sinking into my desk chair, I pour myself a large glass of *Añejo*. Maybe a better man would’ve stayed and watched her leave, but as I told her when she first walked into my office...

I’m not a good man, and I never will be.

## **CHAPTER NINETEEN**

SANTI



TIME DOESN'T EXIST AT THE BOTTOM OF A BOTTLE. MINUTES TURN INTO hours, and hours turn into days. Solitude doesn't count the tick of a clock as much as the pour of a drink.

Slumped behind my desk, I abandon my glass long enough to remove my wedding band. Gripping it between my thumb and my forefinger, I balance it on my desk and give it another spin. I watch, unblinking, as it swirls in dizzying circles, only to lose intensity with each revolution.

Tipping my half-empty glass back, I drink while observing its fight against gravity. I hate every off-beat *ping* as it hovers above the black lacquer, until it finally relents to the inevitable and clatters to a stop.

Frowning, I decide to roll the dice and go two-for-two, when my office door creaks open, followed by a familiar voice calling my name.

“Santi?”

I don't bother looking up. “You know what centripetal force is, Lola?”

She chuckles. “I believe we established at our ill-fated family dinner that science isn't my forté.”

The corners of my mouth twitch. It feels foreign—uncomfortable—as if it's more an involuntary reaction than emotion.

Clamping my hand over my ring, I drag it toward the edge of the desk and hold it up. “It's what keeps this spinning in circles, but, like everything else, how long that lasts depends on the force. The tighter the grip, the longer it spins—but at some point, you can't hold on anymore. You have to let it go and watch it fall.”

“Impressive. I guess you just destroyed the brawn versus brains debate.”

I lift my chin to find my sister standing with her palm propped against the doorframe, hip cocked. She's wearing a loose-fitting yellow dress, which I grimly note matches her fading bruises.

"Meaning?" I ask, returning my attention to the gold band.

"Meaning stereotypes are almost always based on ignorance. The bad tough guy with the IQ of a bar of soap... The four-eyed nerd with the mind of a diabolical genius... They're all sweeping generalizations."

My body stiffens, the color red hazing my already-blurred vision. "Maybe more stock should be placed on those sweeping generalizations. Then signs aren't missed. People don't get hurt."

Muttering a curse under her breath, Lola invites herself into my office, standing over my desk like my own personal guilt warden. "Santi, there's no way you could've known about Monroe Spader. None of us did. Hell, the bastard did business right under Edier Grayson's nose too, and he didn't smell a rat..."

I glance up at her. "Not helping."

"Okay, so maybe that wasn't the best analogy, but you know what I mean. The only one who blames you for not seeing through Spader's act is *you*."

*Then maybe everyone should take a few lessons in cause and effect.*

I grit my teeth. "I'm the boss. I'm the husband. I'm the brother—"

"*Ay Dios mío!*" she groans. "You're also human, Santi, despite what you'd like to believe."

*That's debatable.*

Plenty would claim I'm just as much of an inhumane bastard as Spader and Zaccaria.

I lift my glass again, keeping my gaze fixed on my ring. It's a subtle hint for her to exit the same way she came in, but of course, this is Lola. Subtlety isn't a word in her vocabulary. Apparently, neither is distance, because she doesn't ask before offering herself a seat across from me.

Her expression tightens. "You look like hell."

"*Gracias.*"

It's meant to be sarcastic, but there's an off-key note of pride in there somewhere. *Good. Now the outside matches the inside.* I haven't bothered to shave in days, and my slacks and half-buttoned shirt have seen more than a few bottles of *Añejo*.

"How long have you been holed up in this office?"

*Good question.* One I can't be fucked with trying to figure out.

Swirling the amber liquid in my glass, I shrug. "A few hours? A day? Fuck, I don't know."

"Try two," she says sharply. "I've been trying to reach you for two days, Santi."

Forty-eight hours of spinning rings and silence. *And a shit ton of tequila...*

My last coherent memory is of my blood vow to Thalia. After hearing the penthouse door close, all I remember is grabbing the first bottle I could find and drowning in it.

"Nothing personal," I mutter, indulging myself with a slow sip.

"Nothing *personal*?" Leaning forward, she snaps her fingers in my face. "You had me bitch blocked. Your new gatekeeper almost got a foot up her ass for refusing to let me see you."

My new "gatekeeper" was just following orders. Which apparently Lola took as well as being fired as my secretary. A couple of days after returning to New Jersey, my stubborn sister tried to resume her duties. I didn't terminate her internship to be a dick. She needed to stop taking care of everyone else and get some fucking rest for once.

For all the good *that's* done.

"I haven't been in the mood for company."

"Even family?"

"*Especiall*y family."

My father to be exact. I scarcely remember him storming into my penthouse to find me passed out on the couch. With some concerted effort, I probably could've strung a few coherent words together before he and *máma* left for Mexico, but I had no interest in his pity.

Didn't care to twist that knife.

It didn't stop him from imparting a few last words of paternal wisdom, though.

*"Love is not weakness, Santi. It takes a stronger man to let it go than to imprison it. A veces, el final es solo el comienzo."*

"The end is only the beginning," I murmur, repeating his words.

She snorts. "You're starting to sound as cryptic as *pápa*."

I look away, ignoring that jab. "Speaking of cryptic, how long have you known about RJ screwing Rosalia Marchesi?"

Her face blanches. I've caught her off-guard, which was fully intended. I saw that look my sister and cousin shared in Italy. It was private—*secret*.

Exclusive.

Clearing her throat, she hesitates while examining her nails. "Since you had him tailing me at Rutgers."

"A year and a half?" I chuckle darkly, betrayal simmering beneath my splintered smirk. "Seems I was unaware of quite a few conspiracies around here."

She palms the back of her neck, uncomfortable, but cornered. "There was no *conspiracy*. I followed him to a restaurant in North Caldwell one night, and he swore me to secrecy. Seeing as how he knew I was chasing Sam, neither of us was in a place to—"

"He fucking *what*?"

"Santi, no one was trying to undermine your authority or stage a mutiny! You may own New Jersey, but you don't own *people*. You can't control who they care about. You, of all people, should know that," she huffs.

Letting out a hollow laugh, I raise my near-empty glass in a somber toast. "That's unfortunate. The objects of Carrera men's affections don't seem to have the longest life span."

Sighing, Lola reaches across the desk and grabs it out of my hand. "Drinking yourself into an early grave isn't helping Thalia."

"Did she tell you that?"

Now it's my sister's turn to avert her gaze.

"Didn't think so," I mutter. "Maybe a grave wouldn't be such a bad alternative."

She slams the glass down. "That shit isn't funny."

"Wasn't meant to be."

Her gaze lingers on me for a moment. "You love her."

The twitch from earlier is back, this time tipping the corners of my mouth. "Love is a never-ending riddle, don't you think?" Opening a side drawer, I pull out a fresh glass.

As I pour myself a new drink, Lola narrows those icy blue eyes.

"How so?"

I lean back in my chair, fresh *Añejo* poised at my lips. "At first, nothing makes sense, but you keep trying, getting all the wrong answers along the way, but getting closer each time." I motion the glass toward her. "Then,

just when you think you've got shit figured out... When you lay everything on the line... You realize there are parts you skimmed over. Parts you didn't think mattered, when, in fact, they were the key to solving everything."

Picking up a discarded pen, she twirls it between her fingers. "Centripetal force and now metaphorical riddles? That's some deep shit, Santi. When did you get so philosophical?"

I nod to the crystal decanter on the edge of my desk. "About half a bottle ago." At her labored exhale, I frown, unable to ignore how her body is still riddled with bruises and endless stitches. "You're still hurt."

*And water is wet... Way to point out the obvious, asshole.*

Shrugging, she drops the pen. "They're healing."

"Are you? I hear your screams at night, *chaparrita*."

"I know," she says, knotting her fingers.

"When I think about what those sons of bitches did..." I can't say the words out loud. Not when *Añejo* is fueling my anger.

"Santi, don't," she pleads wearily. "I can't move on if I dwell in the past."

I drown the irony of her words at the bottom of my glass. "Thalia said the same thing."

My head understands, but my bastard of a heart once again refuses to see reason. It craves nothing more than to close out the world and dwell in a time when the sun rose and set with Thalia still in my bed.

"Is she okay?" I ask, and at Lola's reluctant expression, I add, "Grayson and I had a meeting earlier, in between bottles. Thalia wasn't exactly a welcome topic of conversation."

"It's not personal."

I huff out a sardonic laugh. "It absolutely *is* personal—and well-deserved. If the tables were turned, I wouldn't tell Sanders shit about you."

She hesitates, her fingers weaving a tangled web.

"Say what's on your mind, *chaparrita*." Tipping back what's left in my glass, I savor the burn. "I probably won't remember it, anyway."

Lifting her clasped hands to her mouth, she rests both thumbnails against her lower lip. "Thank you for saving his life."

*Not like I had a choice.*

"Don't make me your hero. If it wasn't for you and Thalia, I would've left him for dead."

She flinches. "Still, I'm grateful."

For once, I don't refill my glass. Instead, I stare at her, trying to decode her odd behavior. Lola was born with a crown of confidence. All this nervous stalling isn't like her.

"I'm grateful," she repeats, exhaling a harsh breath, "because thanks to you, our baby will have a father."

"I told you I didn't—" Every drop of alcohol evaporates from my system as her words sink in. "What did you just say?"

She lowers her hands. "I'm pregnant, Santi."

My fingers tighten around my empty glass. Slowly, I set it on the table, tempering my clipped tone. "How long have you known?"

"A few weeks... I found out after the Legado shooting. They ran bloodwork, and—"

My feet hit the marble. "You were pregnant when I brought you home from the hospital?" Shoving both hands in my hair, I pace out my frustration. "*Dios mío*, Lola, I fucking drugged you!"

Rising to her feet, she rounds the table and blocks my path. "Santi, calm down. You didn't know. I didn't get the chance to tell anyone because we were..."

*Taken. Kidnapped. Stolen.*

All three are accurate, but like Thalia, she doesn't talk about it. Instead, she wraps it up in something pretty, ignoring the crimson key print ribbon.

"I almost told Thalia that night, but I chickened out. I kept pouring my drinks away when she wasn't looking."

"I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking sorry..."

The apology that spills out shocks me almost as much as it does Lola, judging by the look on her face. Right or wrong, I've always stood by my actions, never offering justification or caring for forgiveness.

Absolution meant weakness.

*Wrong.*

*So fucking wrong.*

When you come close to losing the two most important people in your life, it changes your views.

Weakness isn't about sacrificing pride.

Weakness sacrifices love to uphold it.

She tugs at my wrists. "Santi! Would you listen to me? I don't blame you! You did what you thought was right. We're Carreras—we don't

exactly subscribe to normal ideals and morality. Besides, I've been checked out, and we're both fine."

*Both.*

As in my sister and Sanders's baby.

A permanent link uniting them for life.

Slowly, I sink back into my chair. "You never stopped seeing him."

It's not a question, but she answers anyway. "Only for the six months *pápa* shipped me back to Mexico. Once I sweet-talked my way back to Rhode Island..." She shakes her head, leaving the rest unspoken. "Yeah, ever since."

"Do you love him, Lola?"

The tension in her face melts into a serene smile. "More than anything."

"Does he love you?"

Sighing, she perches on the end of my desk. "I know you don't want to believe it, but yes, he does. There's a side to him no one sees, but me."

*Too much fucking information.*

"Let's keep it that way," I grumble. "When's the wedding?"

"What wedding?"

"That *pinche cab*—" At her biting look, I scrub a hand across my unshaven face. "I mean that *Santiago* knocked up my baby sister. You're telling me he's not even going to marry you?"

She rolls her eyes. "Welcome to the twenty-first century, Santi. Having a baby doesn't require a shotgun wedding."

If Sanders thinks he's going to turn my sister into a single mother, that *shotgun* will be aimed at his dick. "I thought you said you loved him."

"I do, but when we marry, it will be because we want to, not because we're forced to."

I wince. Although unintentional, she just shot a direct hit at a very thin nerve. Judging by how quickly her smile fades, she knows it too.

Biting her lip, she squints her way through a half-assed apology. "Look, I didn't mean that the way it sounded..."

As fucked up as everything is, I can't help but chuckle. Carrera blood may dominate our gene pool, but *this* is pure Lachey. *Máma* has always had a penchant for unfiltered bluntness. *Speak first, think second, apologize when necessary.*

Which, right now, is forcing me to take a good, hard look in the mirror.

Hooking my discarded wedding band around my thumb, I bring it to my face. For days, I've seen it as a promise. *A circle of hope*. Now, I see it for what Thalia saw when I slid hers onto her finger on our wedding day.

*A fucking shackle.*

"Yeah, you did," I say flatly. "But I deserve to hear it because you're right. No one should be forced into a marriage they don't want. It never ends well."

Silence fills my office as she absorbs my admission. "Give her time, Santi. You don't know what we went through. Nobody will ever know. Our bodies are healing, but what we saw, what we survived..." She shudders, a dark expression clouding her face. "It lingers. The memories are like poisonous seeds." Pinning me with a knowing stare, she adds, "Some things can't be uprooted with soothing words or with twenty bodyguards staking out her apartment."

*Shit.*

*She knows I have eyes on New York.*

"Those seeds are embedded in our minds. Given the right environment, they'll take hold. They'll fester black roses with thorns, and eventually that's all that will be left. We'll be their greatest victory." Glancing down, she dusts her fingers over her flat stomach. "Their living victims."

The sadness in her voice is like another dagger to the heart.

"Lola..."

Sliding off the edge of the desk, she rounds the corner to where I'm still reeling from her confession. "That's why she left," she says, laying a gentle hand on my shoulder. "It isn't because she doesn't love you, Santi. It's because she hasn't learned to love who she's become. They stole pieces of us and changed others. Until Thalia can come to terms with that, she doesn't have enough pieces left to give you."

I don't speak. I can't. The image she created has me by the throat.

As much as I fucking hate it, I've accepted Thalia's need for space. But until now, I've never understood it. Every demand of mine shattered the fragile pieces she was trying to rebuild.

As for my sister? I'm starting to understand her, too. She doesn't need my protection anymore. *She's a Carrera.*

Tipping her chin up, I tap her nose just like I did when we were kids. "You're going to make a good mom."

“Does that mean you’re going to stop trying to kill the father?” she asks tentatively, hope flickering in her arctic blue eyes.

*These motherfucking truces are going to be the death of me.*

Sliding my desk drawer open, I pull out the silver bangle I’ve kept safe for her.

“My bracelet!” she says with a gasp.

“My only love sprung from my only hate,” I recite, staring down at the inscription. I’ve analyzed those words to death these past few days. Twisting and turning them in my mind, only to come up with the same conclusion. “Do you ever get the feeling all of this was predestined?” I ask her, placing the bracelet in her waiting hand.

“How so?”

“They say love and hate are just different sides of the same coin. Reflections of each other, separated by a fraction of a degree. All this hate between our two families for all these years... Do you ever consider that it was only a matter of time before the coin flipped?” Bending my index finger, I run it across the ring still anchored to my thumb. “That our only love was always meant to spring from our only hate?”

Tilting her head, Lola slips Sanders’s silver promise back on her arm as she contemplates more of my philosophical bullshit. “I don’t think war fates love, Santi,” she says finally. “I think love is what ends it.” Giving me a knowing smile, she turns toward the door.

*“Chaparrita.”*

Pausing, she glances over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

I grind my teeth, the unfamiliar taste of humility a bitter pill. I’ve always considered it to be a flaw, a pointless trait I’ve never bothered to learn. But for her—for Thalia—I’m willing to try.

*“Felicidades.”*

At my concession of congratulations, my sister’s face lights up. Opening the door, she leaves me with more thought. “Let her pick up her own pieces, Santi. Wait for her.”

As the door quietly closes behind her, I slide my ring off the tip of my thumb, returning it to its rightful place on the third finger on my left hand.

*“Siempre.”*

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

THALIA



“DINNER’S ON ME TONIGHT. GLUTEN FREE SPECIAL. ANY TAKERS?”

I drag my eyes away from a moody New York City skyline to find Ella standing in the living room doorway, brandishing a couple of takeout menus at me.

“*Gio’s* has a crap selection of toppings, but *Little Italy* does a pretty average margarita,” she adds, frowning at them. “Come to think of it, they’re both crap. Next summer, you and I are taking a two-week trip to Rome. We’re going to find a cafe near somewhere cool like the Pantheon and eat the real deal all day long...” She trails off in horror when she realizes what she’s said. “Oh Gosh, Thalia, I didn’t think... Italy is the last place you’d ever want to see again.”

“Stop, please.” Throwing off my silver quilt, I rise from the window seat, where I’ve spent most of the last forty-eight hours, and gently fold my arms around her. “Can’t blame a whole country for one man’s evil.”

“Except for Mussolini... Hey, are we back to that whole dictatorship thing again?”

Her joke falls flat. Just like my mouth that never seems to curve in either direction anymore. It’s taking me back to the night I first met Santi, when I’d rushed out to meet Bardi, leaving her wrestling with deadlines while I wrestled with my conscience.

“Talk to me, Thalia,” she mutters into my hair. “You’re slowly dying on the inside. I can see the shades of blue in your eyes. You said you were lost in New Jersey, but I think you’re more lost here...”

*Without him.*

I catch sight of the wedding rings on my finger, and my heart lurches. “It’s not about Santi, Ella. This is about me.”

She nods, pretending to understand. Hell, I don’t even understand it myself. *I don’t know how to rise from the ashes.*

To compensate, she hugs me tighter, and I commit it all to memory—her softness, her strength... I’ve always taken my lessons on courage from her. My sister has lived a living hell for eleven years, ever since her diagnosis with Lupus. I’ve been living mine for exactly fifteen days, and counting.

*It feels like forever, though.*

“I wish they’d taken me instead,” she mumbles.

“I’d have died a *thousand* times if they had,” I say fiercely.

She pulls back and smooths a strand of hair away from my eyes. “I’ll always blame myself, Thalia. I knew Bardi was a piece of work, but I accepted his stupid drink and attention anyway. If I hadn’t been so low about Edier and that—”

“If it wasn’t that night, it would have been on some other occasion,” I interrupt swiftly. “Our cards were marked from before we were born.” Somehow, I force a smile, and a change of subject. “When do you go back to college again?”

“Next week for the summer session. Have you considered, maybe, starting back with me?” she says hopefully.

*No chance.*

I can just imagine Santi’s reaction if he found out I’d be hanging with a load of frat boys for the foreseeable. We may be separated right now, but the black SUV that’s permanently parked outside my apartment tells me I’m gone, not forgotten. His presence is still tightly wrapped around me, all the way from New Jersey.

“I’m not sure college is for me, Ella. Not *after...*” I trail off with a hapless shrug.

*Isn’t it strange how you divide your life into subsections? Major events have the capacity to carve up your soul into the past and present.*

“Will you at least think about it?”

“Sure,” I lie.

She gives me a look. She knows a blasé concession when she hears it.

“So, pizza’s out. How about gluten free Chinese?” She holds up the takeout brochures again.

“Sounds good,” I say, heading for the door. “I’m going to lie down. Give me a shout when dinner arrives.”

“But you haven’t told me what you want yet!”

“Chow mein. Anything. Not fussy.”

My bedroom is an even worse place to wallow in. Wherever I look, I see his face. Four blank walls seem to offer up the space for extra detail, too... Like the way he rakes his hand through his hair when he’s pissed at me. How the light reflects off his face first thing in the morning. How he looked when he told me he loved me, as if it was a revelation to him that a bad man could feel anything other than bad things.

Sometime later, I hear my door open.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” I mumble.

“Wouldn’t bother, food looks terrible,” comes a deep drawl. “I brought you something else instead.”

“*Pápa?*” I turn so violently all my bedsheets get tangled up in my legs.

Flicking on a side light, he leans against the far wall and crosses his arms, crowding out the space with his massive frame, his thick black hair framed with shadow, his dark eyes fully focused on me.

This time around, our silence is a dance of compassion—spinning words left unsaid into steps that I finally understand. I won’t find comfort in his arms, like I do in Ella’s. Instead, it’s here in his presence. Just like it was there in a warehouse, a couple of weeks ago, when he formed a truce with his enemy in order to rescue me.

“W-what are you doing here?” I stutter, sitting up.

“I heard you were home.”

Home.

*But this isn’t my home, either.*

“How are you feeling, *mija?*” he asks.

Broken.

“Better.”

He grimaces. “Christ. You’re an even worse liar than your mother.”

There’s a second pause—an empty space just begging to be filled with another confession.

“I killed a man.”

As I say it, I hold my breath, expecting the same reaction that I got from Santi. Instead, his head drops, as if the weight of my admission is a heavy crown to bear.

“You seem angry with me,” I whisper.

“Not angry...” His dark gaze seeks out mine again as I draw my knees up to my chest for comfort. “There are two types of killers in this world, *mija*... Those who take without mercy, and those who carry the blood they spill inside their hearts until the only thing left for it to beat to is guilt.”

My breath catches. It’s as if he’s reached inside my chest and seen the damage of my own pain.

“You need to let the guilt go before it consumes you. You need to finally accept who you are, and your place in this world.”

“What if I can’t?” I whisper.

“Then your worst fears about my business infecting you have already been realized.”

“Want to know what the craziest thing about it is, *pápa*?”

“Crazier than you walking into Carrera’s casino to scam fifty thousand out of the man when I have fifty billion in untraceable bank accounts?” he mocks, his black eyes glinting dangerously.

Turning my head, I press my cheek to my knee. “Without your blood in my veins, I would have died in that hellhole. I needed fire to survive, and you gave me an inferno.”

There’s a pause. “How did it feel to take a life?”

“Like a shadow was overwhelming me.”

“Mine feels like a monster consuming me.” Striding over to the bed, he slots his fingers under my chin and lifts my head toward him. “You are so like your mother in many ways, Thalia,” he murmurs, his expression softening a fraction. “When she killed a man for the first time, she had this same conflict inside her.”

I’m shocked. My mother is the model of restraint and fragility. I can’t imagine her holding a gun, let alone firing one.

“She killed for love, not hate,” he adds tersely. “The same as you. A long time ago, I told her to never doubt her decisions, to never apologize, and to never shed a fucking tear for anyone. Now, *again*, I say the same to you.” His expression changes. “Don’t fear the shadows, *mija*. They make you stronger, not weaker.”

“That’s good to know when Zaccaria finds me again.”

“That’s *never* going to happen.” He drops my chin with a scowl. “For all your new husband’s faults... For as much as I’d like to line him up against a wall in his fucking casino and let my bullets thank him for all he’s

done, I have no doubt he'll find Zaccaria and kill him. In the meantime, Edier has a hundred men protecting this apartment." His lips quirk. "Not forgetting the twenty or so unsanctioned Carrera men patrolling this block."

"You saw the black SUV outside?"

"I saw all five. Why buy flowers when protection is just as sweet?" He stops to weigh up his next words carefully. "He wouldn't rest until he'd found you, Thalia. He tripped and fell on the sword of his own deception, and now he's bleeding out for you."

"You sound way too calm about a Carrera falling in love with me, *pápa*."

"Calm on the outside, *mija*," he says dryly. "Best not to look too closely on the inside."

"I don't know how to find my way back to him," I blurt out, as he turns to leave.

"Then buy a fucking map," he says, sounding exasperated. "Matters of the heart are your mother's speciality, not mine."

"Bullshit," I argue, swinging my legs out of bed. "There are three types of killers, *pápa*, not two. The third killed for hate until his soul turned black. *Now*, he kills for love."

His deep, mocking laughter follows him out into the hallway. "I've been tortured, shot, and stabbed more times than I can count, Thalia Santiago, but do you know what the true definition of pain is? Having a daughter as smart as you are."

"Care to guess what the true definition of a father is?" I counter softly, making him stop and turn. "He's a man who does whatever it takes to make and keep his daughter's happiness."

"*Whatever* it takes," he agrees, brushing his fist against the doorframe, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Even if it means accepting a fucking Carrera as a son-in-law."

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE**

THALIA



THAT NIGHT, I TOSS AND TURN FOR HOURS, MY NIGHTMARES MAKING another tangled mess of my bedsheets.

I see mazes and cellars, spliced with a soundtrack of my father's words. I replay the moment I swing my arrow into Monroe Spader's eye, but it's a dark shadow, not blood, that comes pouring out of the wound. Next, I'm back on the beach with Sam. It's not a line in the sand I'm racing toward, however. It's my husband pointing a loaded gun at my head.

I wake to dusty beams of sunshine on my face. I'm damp with sweat and confusion. Still, I wake with the certainty that I'm done with staying motionless now. I don't want the past to catch and consume me before I've had a chance to touch the future.

I shower and wash my hair, running my fingers lightly over the raw skin where Santi carved his promise into me. Inhaling the sting, and relishing it...

*Drawing strength from it.*

It feels good to finally want to fix *me* for a change. For years, I've been the one trying to fix my father from his badness, and my sister from her illness... I don't know how the hell I'm going to achieve it, but I have a pretty good idea of where to start.

Dressing in black jeans, red Chucks, and a vintage music T-shirt, I leave my wet hair loose, with a brush of mascara and blush as my only make-up. Grabbing my purse from the living room, I head for the door.

"Where are you going?" Ella cries, appearing in the kitchen doorway, looking adorably confused by the fact that I look like a normal human being

today instead of a sloth. “I just made pancakes. I even have the syrup.”

“I’m off to buy a map,” I say cryptically, barreling out of the door and straight into a wall of hard muscle.

“Jesus, Thalia, where’s the fire?”

I look up to find my favorite bodyguard bruising up the hallway again.

“Reece!” Dropping my purse, I fling my arms around his huge waist, filling our reunion with apologies. “I’m sorry I ran off to New Jersey. I’m sorry I told you so many lies. I wanted to tell you the truth so many times.” I pull back to look at him, convinced he’s a mirage. “I thought my father was going to kill you after everything I did.”

“It wasn’t pretty, sweetheart, but I’m still alive. We both are,” he finishes roughly, chucking my chin like he used to do when I was a kid. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay.”

He goes to say something else, then changes his mind at the last second. “So, where are we headed?”

“Out.”

“Care to be more specific?” he says, arching an eyebrow at me. “You know you can’t leave this apartment without your security detail. So, what’s the deal? Are you climbing out of a fifty-story window this time, or are you giving me an address so I can arrange men and vehicles?”

“Men and vehicles, please,” I say, giving him a sheepish smile. “I need to see Edier Grayson right away.”



Edier’s office is situated on an ultra-stylish street on the Upper West Side, lined with sycamores, Corinthian columns, and gray stone porches. It’s ruthlessly lavish, and brutally understated, and nothing about it surprises me in the slightest.

It’s just so... *Edier*.

Art and design have a way of splashing color onto everything, including death and destruction. Somehow, my childhood friend will always find a way to combine the two.

Reece opens my car door for me, and I’m escorted through a line of armed guards and into an elegant white lobby with check marble floor tiles.

From there, we take an elevator up to the top floor, where I'm shown into a huge white room with black furniture.

Edier is sitting with his boots up on his desk, drumming his fingers lightly against the surface as he confers with a couple of his men. He looks up as we enter, his usual deadpan expression lifting in surprise when he sees me.

"Leave us," he snaps, indicating to Reece too.

As soon as the door shuts, his boots are slipping from the desk. "Thalia," he says, prowling up to me, looking just as much of a handsome, ruthless cartel king as Santi does. "Thank fuck you're okay."

"Thanks to you," I say, reaching out to touch his arm. "I mean it, Edier. I'll never forget it."

He frowns down at my hand that's now become the focus of the conversation. Edier has a habit of making you feel like the center of the universe, but he'll never let you reciprocate it. Since taking over New York, he keeps everyone at arm's length. Just ask my sister... She knows all about his hot and cold syndrome. Her fingers are covered in scars from trying to get close to his barbed wire fences.

"I'll take half the praise, but credit where it's due," he says, moving away, leaving my hand suspended in thin air. "As much as it pains me to admit it, your husband earned the rest."

At this, I drop my hand like a stone.

"How's Sam?"

"Still breathing. Stick around if you want confirmation. He's due here any minute."

"Three cheers for the epic survival rate among us," I say wearily. "I know what Santi did for me, Edier. I know what he risked."

He studies me for a moment before saying, "fair enough."

"Is this place meant to be modeled on a monochrome war zone?" I glance around his office for a change of subject.

"Would you prefer it if I hung a picture of *Santa Muerte* on the wall, so you'd feel more at home?"

"You've been to Legado," I say quietly.

"I figured I may as well benefit financially from this truce while it's still holding. We've opened up our respective ports for a mutually beneficial trade deal. But something tells me you're not here to discuss the

importation of Mexican and Colombian cocaine,” he adds, catching sight of my face.

“When did you see him?”

“Yesterday.”

“How is he?”

“His usual arrogant self,” he says dryly. “The asshole had the nerve to demand a sixty-forty profit split.”

The corners of my mouth can’t help lifting as I settle into a spare chair. Edier swings into the opposite one, lifting his boots onto the desk again. He was always the older, cooler one when we were kids. Now, he’s an ice man.

“What can I do for you, *Señorita* Santiago?” he says.

“*Señora* Carrera,” I correct.

“Not for much longer, by the sounds of it.”

I drop my gaze first. “He was the boy in the snow, Edier... Ten years ago, outside the church when we stole your bodyguard’s car.”

“I know.”

I jerk my head up in surprise. “You *know*? Then why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugs. “What difference would it have made? Before this truce, I still would have shot to kill. And I will afterward when it comes to a crashing conclusion,” he finishes, flashing his teeth at me.

“But he saved my life. Twice!”

“Bad blood sticks better than past glories.”

Damn stubborn villain. *Think of the map, Thalia.*

“Can I ask you a question?”

His dark eyes narrow to fixed points. “Depends. Is it personal?”

“Not this time, though I’d still like to know why you broke my sister’s heart, and why you threw a scholarship away to that art college in London. Oh, and what did my father really offer you to climb his ranks so fast?”

“Professional it is, then,” he says coldly.

We both know I’m holding my status around his neck like a noose. If I was anyone else, I’d be bleeding out by now.

“It’s about your mom in Colombia...”

“Ah. I see where this is headed.”

That’s the other thing about Edier. He has an uncanny ability of guessing your intentions before you’ve spelled them out for him.

“It’s a good idea,” he continues with a frown. “You should talk to her. She can help you come to terms with everything that’s happened.” He scribbles down a number and hands it out to me.

“Do you know how she managed to move on from her own experiences?” I ask, hesitating a fraction before taking it and folding it into my purse.

“She found a purpose, and a good man.” He narrows his eyes at me again.

“That’s kind of why I’m here,” I say, ignoring the dig. “I’d like to know if Senator Sanders still has links with any NGOs in New York?”

“The ones with projects to help trafficking victims?”

*There he goes again, being all smart.*

“Yes.”

“I see.” He steeples his hands as he considers my request. “Why did you come to me about this, and not Sam? The Senator is *his* stepfather.”

“I figured Sam was still in the hospital. I wanted to test the waters before I brought it up with my father, too. He’s requesting I go back to the island for a while, but I want something—”

“More?” Edier drops his feet from the desk. “I’m seeing the Senator tonight, as it so happens. You looking for a company, or a job?”

“Just a job,” I say with another laugh. “I’m not looking for handouts, just a foot in the door. I’ve decided that counting cards isn’t a fulfilling profession.”

“Not that lucrative either, if you keep getting caught... Okay, leave it with me.” He rises to his feet to show me out, but I stay sitting right where I am.

“Why are you such a monster to my sister?”

“Fuck off,” he snarls, clearly taken aback by my question. “Besides, I *am* a monster.”

Any news on Zaccaria?” I glance at the photographs scattered all over his desk, as dark clouds start to form over my brief glimpse of recovery. Most are identical to the ones in Santi’s office.

“Not yet, but we will,” he reassures me, seeing the look on my face. “We’re already had a sighting in South Africa. Carrera’s had two in Morocco. The minute he hits US soil, we’ll have our guns so far up his ass he’ll be spitting out his last words with lead. After that, you can do the honors.”

My stomach lurches. “My father told you I killed a man, didn’t he?”

“I’m not here to be your conscience, bug.”

“Bug?” I let out a burst of surprised laughter. “I can’t remember the last time you called me that.”

“Probably when he still thought fucking his right hand was a beautiful love affair,” comes a wicked drawl from behind us.

“Sam!” I jump to my feet and rush over to him.

“One foot distance, sweetheart,” he says, flinging his crutch at me like a barrier. “Let this body return to its former glory at its own pace.”

His handsome face is drawn, but his expression is still a smirk away from a kiss and a punch.

“You look like you’ve been to hell and back,” he remarks, looking me over too.

“Takes one to know one.”

His dark eyes gleam. “Did you cry when you thought I was dead?”

“Did you cry at the thought of never having sleep again for the next eighteen years?” I say with a smile.

He freezes. “She told you?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow morning, Thalia,” Edier interrupts. “I’ll let you know what the Senator says... Sam, see her out.”

The elevator doors spring open on the ground floor. There’s a crowd of sharp suits waiting, no doubt here for some meeting with Edier. It only takes me a second to register the sharpest one of all.

*Santi.*

The second our eyes meet, he’s reaching out and slamming his hand across the doors to stop them closing.

“Get out,” he hisses at Sam and Reece who are standing either side of me. “Take the next one. I’d like to speak with my wife in private.”

“You’re still a piece of shit, Carrera,” Sam snarls, taking a threatening step forward. “No matter how many times you saved her life.”

“You can thank me for saving your own life anytime you like,” he snaps back, standing aside to let him exit. “You and I need words too, but I’ll deal with you in a moment.”

“Please, Reece,” I say quietly, turning to my bodyguard. “I’ll come straight back down.”

The Irishman complies with a scowl, shoulder barging Santi on his way out. Santi barely flinches. He’s still devouring me with his dark gaze.

Stepping into the space they left, he lets the doors close behind him. As the carriage starts to rise, he slams his fist against the alarm and the whole thing staggers to a stop. He crowds me against the nearest wall and wraps his fingers around the base of my neck.

“I miss you, *muñequita*.”

“I miss you too,” I whisper, his nearness sending my senses into a tailspin. The pulse between my thighs is a throbbing live wire.

“I told you I love you. I’ll make it enough for us.”

“I need something for myself first, Santi. I need to feel more than just a victim.”

He slams his other fist into the space above my head. “You’re making me hate you.”

“No, Santi,” I argue. “That’s just love gripping her claws even deeper into you.”

“Tell me you feel the same way,” he demands, brushing his lips against my cheek. “Tell me I’m your salvation. Give me a lie to hold on to, because right now, I’m finding too much comfort at the bottom of a bottle of *Añejo*.”

“I feel the same way,” I say, tipping my head back as he moves lower with his mouth, toward my collarbone. “That’s not a lie. I loved you in the darkness, Santi Carrera, and I’ll love you in the light.”

“*Siempre*.”

With a strangled groan, he steps back, and rams his fist against the alarm button.

The carriage continues to rise.

When the doors open, Edier’s already there waiting. He slides a questioning look between us as Santi steps out, without so much as a backward glance at me.

When I make the return journey, it’s with tears of confusion in my eyes.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

SANTI



I'M IN A NEW YORK STATE OF MIND... DRUNK, AGITATED, AND LONELY.

Yet again, RJ and I are parked across the street from Thalia's old apartment, watching a whole lot of nothing, and drinking a whole lot of tequila.

I find perpetual inebriation eases the sting of rejection.

Some people drink to dull their pain. Others drink to wallow in it. Me? I drink to keep the bullets inside my gun and my temper in check. It's why my inner circle doesn't bother with an intervention. The drunker I am, the easier their jobs, and less blood stains Legado's pristine floors.

Which is a good thing considering I'm one lawsuit away from setting fire to the damn thing myself.

Ignoring the side-eye from the driver's seat, I stare up at Thalia's apartment, drinking from the half-empty bottle of tequila until my lungs burn. I have no idea what day it is, or how many bottles I've had... I lost track somewhere around day five and bottle four. Taking onboard Lola's advice, I'd agreed to give her time—to let the seeds scatter, or whatever the analogy my sister used—and I was upholding it... Until I saw her in that elevator again, and all my good intentions went to hell.

Now, I'm back at square one, and drinking more than ever. Not that it's slowing me down. Day after day, I wake up with a hangover and a mission, only to pass out with a dozen false leads and double vision. It's two steps forward, four steps back, because this motherfucker Zaccaria is like a goddamn chameleon.

The moment we track him somewhere, he blends in and disappears.

Between my obsession with my enemy and my concern for my wife, my blood type has gone from AB to *Añejo*.

“New York has open container laws, you know,” RJ mutters, flipping through radio stations.

I pause, the tip of the bottle inches from my lips. “You shot a dealer’s kneecaps off yesterday for missing a coke drop. You’re seriously worried about a class one misdemeanor?”

Since the sober are easily flustered by drunken logic, he just chokes the steering wheel with his hands. “If I knew ‘pervert’ was going to be part of the job description, I would’ve stayed in Houston.”

“The job description is what I say it is,” I correct, swinging the bottle toward him. “Besides, I don’t think you’re in any position to question shit.”

As usual, any mention of his indiscretion ends arguments before they start. We’ve been treading in shallow waters since returning from Italy, moving in opposite circles and dancing around the whole Rosalia Marchesi situation. I haven’t demanded any further explanation, and he sure as hell hasn’t volunteered one.

I’m not too concerned. Just like everything else, the truth will come out eventually.

*No one knows that better than me.*

Releasing his death grip on the wheel, he exhales a frustrated breath and checks his phone again. “I’m not questioning. I’m advising. It’s bad enough you have half our *sicarios* parked outside her apartment, twenty-four-seven, like dirty cops. If she finds out you’re out here stalking her like some fucked up *Dateline* special, she’s gonna have Grayson blow your nuts off.”

“Don’t be stupid,” I scowl, tipping back another drink. “Grayson would go for the kill shot.”

“You mean your ego?” he mutters. “It is the biggest target.”

“I’m going to give you a pass on that one. Judging by the way you keep staring at your phone every five seconds, your attitude is coming from the fact your balls are in a jar at the vet.”

The only rise I get out of him comes from his middle finger.

A flicker of light in Thalia’s window draws my attention beyond the windshield. Seeing no movement, my focus returns to RJ and his incessant scrolling. Porn I could ignore... But this motherfucker is tapping “Rachel Marlow’s” contact page like he’s sending out Morse Code.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Fuck off.”

“You’re my cousin, RJ—a damn good lieutenant. But don’t think I won’t break this bottle over your fucking skull for talking shit to me.”

The rhythmic tic in his jaw is his only response. “No trouble, or paradise. Just silence.”

Instead of being moody about it, the *cabrón* should accept it as a gift and move on. He’s lucky we’ve been too busy driving back and forth across the Hudson for me to call attention to his ever-growing sins of omission. My second-in-command’s actions in Tuscany will eventually be answered for, as well as Lola’s confession concerning their dangerous liaison pact of secrecy.

The latter, I’ve decided to keep in my back pocket for now.

*It’s always good to have a trump card.*

“Gianni Marchesi has her under lock and key, and for good reason. *Dios mío*, RJ, you stupid motherfucker. You know she’s taken. Marchesi promised her hand at birth.”

“Not Gianni,” he bites out between clenched teeth. “Her grandfather. That bastard was as sick and sadistic as yours.”

I shrug. *Not a hill I care to die on.* He’s right. Alejandro Carrera and Marcello Marchesi were a pair of antichrists. Even death can’t stop that kind of evil. They’ve probably overthrown hell by now and set up an underworld trafficking ring on the river Styx. Still, Italian arranged marriages tend to be more solid than a block of ice.

“Not sure Gianni has much of a choice. He can’t break the contract without starting a war.”

“Everyone has a choice.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Never mind.” Shaking his head, he glances up at Thalia’s window then levels his condescending gaze at me. “How long do you plan on playing the shitfaced stalker role tonight? I have things to do.”

Lifting the bottle again, I smirk. “Oh? Like what?”

Cursing, he clasps his hands around the steering wheel again. “I really hate you sometimes.”

“Get in line.”

And it’s a long fucking line, so he’d better bring a chair and some snacks. I’ve managed to alienate three-fourths of my friends and family. At

this point, the entire Santi Carrera fan club could fit into the back of the SUV.

*Dios mío, I need air.*

I'm out of the passenger's seat before the interior light flashes, slamming the door on RJ's string of English and Spanish hybrid curses. With the bottle of *Añejo* still tucked in my hand, I cross the street, my eyes trained on her window.

*Where is she?*

We've been here for three hours. I know because I watched her and her bodyguard walk inside after following them from coffee house to restaurant to, surprisingly, a shooting range. That one, I didn't mind so much. The idea of my *muñequita* with her hands wrapped around the grip of a gun, aiming with intent...

Groaning, I turn the bottle up again, hoping like hell it'll dull my senses and my cock. I'm reaching down to adjust myself and relieve some of the pressure when a shadow flickers across the glass.

*It's her.*

Thalia is standing by the window, the sheer curtains doing nothing to hide her body as she pulls her T-shirt over her head and then reaches behind her to unhook her bra.

*Jesus Christ.*

I've been tortured in many creative ways—cut, burned, shot, one Russian even tried to electrocute me. None of them comes close to the brutal agony of watching Thalia's unintentional striptease, knowing I can't do a goddamn thing about it.

So I watch her like the stalker RJ accuses me of being, until she runs her hands down her breasts, stopping to thumb her nipples...

That's when I lose it.

*I fucking lose it.*

I'm halfway to her apartment when my phone vibrates in my pocket. Too wrapped up in my own lust, I answer without checking the caller ID, assuming I'm getting an invitation to a private show. Instead, I get an irate Mexican with an American accent.

"Santi, as your second, your cousin, and most of all, your only source of common sense these days, I highly advise against what you're about to do."

"Noted," I say, ending the call.

As expected, when I reach her door, I'm greeted by the Irish pussy patrol.

"She doesn't want to see you, Carrera," her bodyguard growls.

"Did she tell you that?"

He scans a stern gaze down to where the bottle swings from my fingers. "You're drunk."

"Accurate, but it still doesn't answer my question."

It's obvious he's not used to being challenged. Clenching his fists, he takes a determined step forward. "Get the fuck out of here!"

"Not until I talk to Thalia." I meet his stride, because I don't fucking back down from anyone. I don't care that we'd take a bullet for the same woman. Right now, he's in my way.

Just as he goes for his gun, the door swings open.

"Geez, Reece! What's going on out here? It sounds like—" Her voice trails off as she notices me standing there. A beat later, an eerily familiar smile is turning downward in my direction.

*Not exactly how I planned for this to go, but here we are.*

"You must be Ella," I say, extending my hand. "I'm—"

"I know who you are," she clips. Folding her arms across her chest, she stares at my outstretched fingers as if they're about to wring her neck.

I know a roadblock when I see one. Lowering my hand, I jump tracks and try again.

"I see my wife has told you all about me."

"My *sister* has explained how you blackmailed her into marriage, yes."

I can see how these two are related. Beyond the striking physical resemblance, Ella Santiago shares her sister's same fierce protective streak. However, something tells me Thalia's big sister is more bark than bite.

*My wife, on the other hand...*

Reece steps in between us, his arms spread wide like a Santiago soccer goalie. "Go back inside, Ella. *Señor* Carrera was just leaving."

I palm the back of my neck, deciding whether or not to shoot this *pinche cabrón* in the head or the stomach for maximum suffering. "Look, if I can just—"

"Hey, Ells, who's at the...?" Thalia's steps falter when she sees me, and her eyes widen. "Santi." The breathy sound of my name on her lips turns my hard dick to granite. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Fuck, she looks beautiful. Fresh faced with no makeup, with her long dark hair tousled around her shoulders as she clutches at a short red robe that barely skims her thighs.

*Perfection.*

“I missed you again,” I tell her honestly.

Reece spins around, the aforementioned gun, now pointing in my face. “Carrera. Out. Now!”

I don’t flinch. If he thinks I’m intimidated by looking down the barrel of a gun, he doesn’t know a damn thing about me. “Five minutes, Thalia,” I say over his shoulder. “Please.”

It’s the “please” that gets to her. I knew it would. Thalia knows I’m not a man who grovels. I don’t say “please” to anyone, except her...

Plus, I’m not above playing dirty.

She sighs. “Five minutes and then you’re leaving. You promised, Santi.”

There’s that word again—promise. I’m starting to hate it, as much as I do space and time. But I’ll take what I can get, so I nod, ignoring her bodyguard’s disapproval as I follow her down a hallway and into a bedroom that screams her name. There’s no fanfare or lace—just shades of color, with pictures of her family littering the walls and furniture.

It’s simple and understated and perfect.

Just like her.

“Nice room,” I say.

She shrugs. “It’s no swanky black penthouse, but I’m free to come and go as I please.” The moment she realizes what she’s said, she sinks her teeth into her top lip and draws out a sigh. “Sorry, knee jerk reaction.”

“Don’t apologize.” Lifting the bottle, I give her a wolfish smile. “It’s true.”

Eyeing the bottle with disdain, she grabs it out of my hand. “Santi, you need to lay off the *Añejo*.”

“Why? Are you worried about my liver again, *muñequita*?” As the word rolls off my tongue, her eyes flash, causing me to step closer. “Besides, it’s not my liver that’s the problem.”

“Look, if this is about what happened in the elevator earlier...”

“I’m not here about that.”

Magnets can’t help but be drawn to one another. Positives and negatives—they clash in the most violent of ways. *That’s us*. And that’s why Thalia’s

gaze lowers to the straining bulge in my pants, whether she wants it to or not.

That little gasp she lets out only fans the flame. Her steps are uneven as she backs into the dresser, the bottle clanging as she slides it across the polished wood.

“I thought you wanted to talk?”

“I did.”

*Step.*

“And we have.”

*Step.*

“Now I want to do other things.”

I’m so fucking close to her I can smell the arousal gathering at the tops of her thighs. All I can think about is chasing it back inside her with my tongue.

“Santi, we can’t.”

“Thalia, it’s been three days, and I’m going out of my mind.” Cupping her face, I pin her against the dresser. “Do you know how often I dream of you? Your scent? Your taste? The way your pussy clenches around my cock when I’m fucking you?”

She shudders. “Don’t—”

“Do you know how often I have to jerk off just to think straight? You’ve fucked up my head, Thalia. My head, my cock, my heart. All of it.”

“Santi, you need to leave. I was just…” Absorbing my taunts, she gives me a soft groan. “I was just about to take a shower.”

“Why get clean when getting dirty is so much more fun?” Taking her hand, I place it over my cock. “I’m not asking for anything, but some goddamn relief for the both of us. And then I’m gone.”

She’s weakening. I can feel it. The scales are about to tip in my favor.

“No strings, Thalia. Just sex. Hard. Rough. Fucking. Then I’ll leave.” Just as I’m reaching for the sash on her robe, she turns away.

“Go home, Santi. You’re drunk.”

Grabbing her neck, I spin her around into my chest. “And you’re *mine!*”

Lifting her up by her hips, I set her down on the dresser. I don’t ask for permission before pulling that fucking sash so hard it rips in two. “Hold your robe open and spread your legs,” I say with a growl. “Offer it up to me, Thalia Carrera, and I’ll take it all.”

Her fingers are shaking as she peels back the red silk, her knees drifting open. At any other time, I'd be pausing to admire her body, but I'm too desperate tonight.

Too overdrawn.

Too denied.

There's no tenderness in my touch as I drag her to the edge of the dresser, and thrust two fingers inside her pussy, pumping viciously.

"Santi!"

Her cries bounce off the walls in tune with the slick sounds of her own desire as I tear at my pants with my other hand. Within seconds, I have them pushed down my hips.

Thalia is still holding her robe open for me, her head tipped back in ecstasy. I pry her fingers away from the silk and wrap them tightly around my swollen cock. With my hand over hers, I guide her in rough, savage strokes. When she finds the rhythm I want, I release her.

"Look at me."

She opens her eyes, never breaking contact as I continue my brutal pace to destroy her cunt. Her touch is better than any high, and it's not long before I'm thrusting into her hand, and her inner muscles are clenching around my fingers.

"Shit! I'm coming!"

The words are barely out of her mouth before she's convulsing, a shattered cry tearing from the heart of her, as a trickle of pussy juice rolls down the inside of my arm.

She's still shaking as I rip my fingers away and push her legs wider, lining my dick up to fuck this madness out of my soul...

Until her palm comes crashing down against my chest.

Jerking my head up, I find her face flushed and her eyes conflicted.

"No, Santi."

"No?"

*Son of a bitch.*

I'm nearly out of my mind with lust. The need to come is greater than the need to breathe. The old Santi would have driven his cock in anyway and taken what's rightfully his. But this new Santi, this husband with a conscience can't fucking do it.

Sober *or* drunk.

Growling out my frustration, I grab the back of her head, my fingers twisting in her hair. “You’re going to be the death of me, *wife*,” I repeat, the words starting to become my own personal creed.

I’m about to pull away and suffer in silence again, when she stops me with a hand on my arm. “Wait.”

The entire room goes up in flames of anticipation as she sinks to her knees.

“Thalia, you don’t have to—”

“Maybe I want to.”

I’ve lusted after those lips around my cock since the moment she fell into my office, but I also know I’ve been her first *everything*—and as wound up as I am, I’m incapable of being gentle.

“*Muñequita*—”

“I’m not asking, Santi. Give me the power for once.”

“I don’t give power, *mi amada*. But for you, I’ll share it.” I give her a dangerous smile. “Open your mouth.”

She takes me in slow and deep, curling her fingers around the base of my cock. In response, I let out a slow hiss, my fingers fisting even tighter around her hair. She’s inexperienced, but I don’t care. Her mouth is wet and warm and feels like heaven.

I guide her movements, my vision blurring. Every time I hit the back of her throat, the craving gets stronger. After that, my restraint evaporates into thin air. I lead her in a brutal rhythm, my hips pistoning into her mouth. She takes it all, anchoring her nails into my ass, until my muscles ache...my balls ache...*everything aches for her*.

My palm slams against the top of the dresser, the tequila bottle rattling again as I come hard, spilling days of pent-up lust into her mouth. When the dark edges of my vision fade, I open my eyes to find her running a hand under her bottom lip, a victorious smile on her face.

*Fuck, I love this woman.*

Tugging her up to her feet, my fingers grip her chin with a touch of warning. “If I find out you’ve sucked any other man’s cock, I’ll slit his throat.” Then I pull her against me and crush our mouths together again.

When we part, I brush my thumb over her lips, watching her smile falter.

“This doesn’t change anything. I still meant what I said before I left.”

“I know you did. I just needed a fix, and you’re the most beautiful of highs.”

Our next kiss is a lingering goodbye. I’ll give her all the space she needs now, but maybe there’s another way of keeping her close while she figures out all the shit she needs to figure out.

“Good luck with the job hunting, *muñequita*.”

“Wait, how did you...?” She sighs in resignation. “Have you been stalking me?”

Smirking, I reach around her and retrieve my bottle before pausing at the door.

“*Siempre...*”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE**

THALIA



### THREE WEEKS LATER

“THALIA? COME QUICK... YOUR HOT STALKER’S BACK AGAIN.”

I glance up from my desk to find my colleague, Bonnie, leaning out of the fourth-floor window to catch a glimpse of the black Aston Martin, or more specifically the hot man standing next to it.

“It’s my new shawl,” I say, in mock exasperation, reaching for the swathe of crimson cashmere that’s draped across the back of my chair, as I shut down my laptop and rise to my feet. “He can’t get enough of it.”

“Is that a kink? Did the generational gap just get wider?” My project manager shoots me a look—forty-five years of doubt, tinged with wonder that she might be missing out on something exciting.

“Only for him,” I say with a laugh, leaning over to catch a glimpse, myself.

I only started at IFDF a couple of weeks ago, but it’s a small company and routines tend to get noticed around here.

Santi sticks to his like clockwork.

At seven p.m. every night he’s downstairs, come rain or shine. Black suit. Stormy vibes. Always leaning against the side panel, smoking one of his cigarettes, the silver trails rising up from his fingers like a prayer that only New York can answer. Ready himself for another half hour of polite small talk as he drives me home—something that’s way way out of Santi Carrera’s comfort zone, but one he’s trying out just for me.

“Does dark and moody have a name?” Bonnie says, leaning out for another peek.

“Why waste time with introductions?” I say casually, watching her eyes widen to saucers at my wicked implication. “Bye, Bonnie, I’ll see you tomorrow at nine a.m. for the project review meeting!”

With that, I grab my purse, and head for the elevator, pausing by the vending machine, and then dropping a chocolate bar on the counter for the receptionist as I pass. Lisa is usually the first in and first out of the office, so she deserves all the calories for that.

Slapping a caller on hold, she mouths me a “thank you”, and blows me a kiss.

Santi looks up as I exit the building. Right away, his gaze drops to my shawl. For weeks, I’ve been wearing nothing but muted tones of gray and black, but when I was out shopping with Ella yesterday, I saw this in the front window of Saks, and I couldn’t resist.

“Good day?” he asks, chucking away his cigarette, and opening up my door for me.

These are the rules to this agreement. We keep it brief. We keep it light. He’s finally giving me the room to breathe, and in return, I’m giving him this precious hour where my safety falls under his protection—on the proviso he stops drinking eighteen bottles of *Añejo* a day.

“It was good, thanks.” I slide my hands into my pockets, trying to ignore the scent of musk and sandalwood. It seems stronger tonight, like a temptation that’s becoming harder and harder to resist. “We finally submitted the proposal for the rehabilitation project in Honduras.”

He nods. “Want to know how mine went?”

“Did you torture anyone?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“Kill anyone?”

The corners of his mouth start to curl. “Surprising no. Although I may have sent Sanders an inappropriate impending fatherhood gift, which may result in him attempting to kill *me*.”

“Oh dear,” I say lightly. “Being a widow at nineteen wasn’t part of my life goals, Santi. And to think I was just starting to wear bright colors again.”

“You ready?” he says, gesturing to the empty passenger’s seat.

“Thanks.”

“Look at you fly,” I hear him mutter.

I stop and turn. “What—?”

But he’s already walking around to his side of the car and gesturing at the two black SUVs parked across the street.

I pause, finding I don’t want an hour of stilted conversation tonight.

*I want to make it tilt.*

“There’s a diner around the corner,” I say in a rush. “Do you, maybe, want to go grab a coffee or something first...?” I trail off as his unblinking stare finds mine across the roof of the Aston Martin.

“Sounds good,” he says, making his way back around to me. “Considering tomorrow may be my last day on this earth, a cup of bad filter coffee sounds like the perfect way to celebrate.”

The first fifty feet are a tutorial in “awkward.” Even small talk seems embarrassed to be in our company.

“How’s Lola?” I mumble, as we reach the corner of the block.

“In a permanent state of nausea.” His phone beeps, and he glances at the message. “Her new best friend is the toilet bowl, closely followed by root ginger and chamomile tea.”

I can’t help smiling at this. “My mom said she was the same when she was pregnant with me. She swears it’s hereditary, so I’m totally screwed.”

He falls silent again. I’m straying into a field that’s loaded with land mines, and he’s bracing himself for shrapnel.

“Do you want kids, Santi?” I ask quietly

“Figured they’d always be a part of my future at some point,” he says, staring straight ahead. “Like erectile dysfunction, bad digestion and retirement homes.”

I burst out laughing.

“You?” he asks.

“Definitely,” I say, surprising myself.

Truth is, I’d never really thought about it before now, but there’s something about this evening’s clear warm night. Even the lights of New York can’t keep the stars from shining, and it’s making me want to break all the rules and talk secrets.

The diner is small and busy, but we find a blue leather booth at the end of the row.

I watch him slide in and stretch his arm out along the back of his seat, dominating the space and my attention at the same time.

Our waitress hands us two sticky menus and disappears.

Santi slaps his onto the table and glances about the diner, constantly checking and assessing until RJ and Rocco enter. They take up position at the counter, beneath a TV showing classic baseball game reruns. When I swing my gaze back to Santi, he's staring right at me.

I blush and drop my eyes to the menu, recognizing a glitch in the whole conversation-in-a-relationship thing. We're not at "small talk" anymore, but, at my instigation, we're nowhere near "dirty talk" either. We're stuck in the middle at a place called familiarity, which has giant black potholes in its roads.

"Are you hungry?"

"Not really."

"Two shit coffees it is, then."

I watch him raise his hand to our waitress. We're sitting right under a spotlight, and I see the dark shadows under his eyes when he turns to give her our order.

"How's Legado?" I ask, as soon as she disappears.

"Going down like a ship in a shitstorm." He rakes his hand through his hair and grimaces. "Anyone who tells you there's no such thing as bad publicity is a fucking liar. They've clearly never had two mass shootings and an abduction on their premises, either... But enough about my business, I want to hear about yours. Tell me about IFDF. I looked up the acronym on the internet and ended up on a porn site."

I can't help laughing again. "It stands for the International Freedom & Dignity Federation. It's a privately owned NGO with projects all over the world. Their head office is here in New York."

"How do they operate?"

"Do you really want to know, or are you just making polite conversation?"

"I'm a cartel boss, Thalia," he says, arching one eyebrow at me. "To me, conversations aren't polite; they're a necessary evil. But with my wife, they're essential, and occasionally enjoyable. Please continue."

"They receive funding from donors like USAID, UN Agencies and other high-net private foundations."

"What kind of stuff do you handle? Who do you help?"

"Mainly victims of anti-sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery. The project we just submitted today focuses

on the rescue and rehabilitation of children and young girls in West Africa..." I stop when I realize he's staring at me again. "Shit, am I boring you?"

"Not in the slightest. I love hearing about what you do. I love hearing you speak about anything other than the fucking weather, if I'm honest. Is this one of the Senator's legitimate side businesses? If so, nice of him to help his boss's daughter out."

"Senator Sanders is one of the founding members, yes, but I only requested a foot in the door," I grit out, hurt at his insinuation. "I still had to go through the whole interview process, and I'm starting as a project coordinator..."

That's when I realize he's smirking at me.

*Bastard.*

"Stop winding me up, Carrera!" I yell.

"But it's so easy to do, *Carrera*," he drawls back.

I go to punch his arm, but somehow our fingers get tangled up and crash back down to the table together as one. At the same time, our waitress arrives with our coffees. She bangs them down next to our hands and gives me a ghost of a wink.

"I'm not going to say, 'I miss you,' because that's against the rules," he says, dragging his coffee cup toward him and spilling half the contents onto the saucer.

"I miss you, too," I say softly, doing it anyway, because I'm being led astray by the warmth of his skin seeping into mine.

He lifts his coffee to his mouth and takes a sip, making me wait on tenterhooks.

"Bad girl," he says eventually, his dark eyes gleaming. "See how I've corrupted you?"

"Corrupted by a corrupt god," I muse thoughtfully. "Is there any hope left for me, do you think?"

"All the hope in the world, *muñequita*."

Soulful. That's how his voice sounds. Like his soul is full of me and my new ambitions, as well as his own, and it's making it fit to burst.

His phone beeps again, lighting up the table. I watch him glance at it, and then at RJ, who climbs down from his bar stool and heads for the exit.

"Is everything okay?"

"It's fine," he soothes.

“Don’t lie to me, Santi. Is it Zaccaria?”

Saying his name out loud causes my stomach to churn. I’m healing well during my daylight hours, but my nights are still *Il Re Nero*’s to terrorize. It doesn’t matter how much Vicodin I take... The Black King still manages to take a sledgehammer to my medicated walls.

Santi’s fingers tighten around mine. “We uncovered a *Villefort* trafficking network in Eastern Europe that led us all the way to the US. Your father and his team shut it down.”

“But that’s good, right?”

“Yes.”

My heart sinks. “From the look on your face, that was just the bad entrée.”

He blows out a heavy breath. “Zaccaria lost a significant money spinner when we destroyed his fortress in Italy. Grayson’s convinced he’s using another of his European estates to resurrect it.”

I stare at him in horror. “Oh my God. Santi, we have to stop him.”

“And we will. Unfortunately, the cunt’s been buying up property all over the world for the past ten years using different pseudonyms and offshore accounts. Locating it is going to take some time... Hey...” Sliding a finger under my chin, he tips my head up to meet his fierce reassurance. “He’s not coming within a thousand feet of you or Lola, *muñequita*... Not as long as there’s still breath in my body. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you,” I whisper. “So, what’s the shitty dessert in all of this?”

“Are you sure you’re not full on information yet?”

I shake my head.

“He’s pissed about the truce,” he says, dropping my chin. “Pissed with the Italians, or what’s left of them. A man like that can’t stew silently. He’s putting on a show by having The Odessa flood our streets with heroin.”

“The Odessa?” I say, frowning.

“Ukrainian mafia. They’ve always had a presence in New York and New Jersey, mostly in Brooklyn, but thanks to *Villefort*’s extensive political connections, they’ve suddenly become the new players on a huge stage. They’re bypassing the ports and flying the heroin in direct to both states. No checks. Zaccaria even has sway over the DEA. It’s the Bad Shit, too. Cut with Fentanyl. Highly addictive. With the hits on our dockside warehouses still hurting us, our profits just took a nosedive.”

*No wonder he looks so exhausted.*

“Is there anything you can do?”

“Grayson’s acting like a fucking diplomat, advising we set up a meet with Artem Lisko, the Don of Odessa here in New York. He wants to try and turn the tide in our favor before we declare an all-out turf war.”

“Santi...”

I’m scared suddenly, even though I learned a long time ago that it’s a redundant emotion to feel for men like him and my father. They live for the kill. They live for the danger. It’s like trying to love a speeding bullet that’s always pointed at someone, all the while praying that the one meant for him goes astray.

He releases my hand to drain the last of his coffee. “Fuck it, what does it matter... I’m dead tomorrow anyway, remember?” He shoots me another look over the rim of his white cup.

“What the *hell* did you buy Sam?” I say, temporarily distracted from my fears.

His lips start curving again. “A consultation with one of the best surgeons in the US.”

I frown. “What for? His scars?”

“No, a vasectomy.”

“A *vasectomy*?” I repeat, struggling to keep a straight face. “You’re right. You really are a dead man walking.”

“Will you come to my funeral?” he says idly, leaning forward, pressing his elbows into the table, bringing his face in so close to mine it’s a fight not to lean in and press my lips against his.

“So long as I can wear red.”

“It’s our fucking color. I’d be pissed if you wore anything else.”

I watch his gaze flicker to my mouth.

“You know, this is the first date we’ve ever had.”

“And I didn’t have to force you into it, either...” He leans back, breaking the spell.

*Leaving me wanting more.*

An easy calm blankets us as he reaches for his wallet and tosses a fifty on to the table.

“That’s a good tip,” I observe.

“Turns out, it was a great coffee.”

Now, it’s my turn to smile. “Are you flirting with me?” I say coyly, as he slides his wallet back into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“Nope. That’s against the rules.”

“When has that ever stopped you?”

He stands up, motioning for me to do the same. “Time to go. I have twenty minutes to get you across town, otherwise your Irish mountain of a bodyguard is going to accuse me of renegeing on the deal and kick me all the way to Dublin.”



We reach my apartment with a minute to spare, thanks to Santi driving like a maniac as usual, weaving in and out of traffic jams like he owns this city instead of the one across the Hudson.

He goes to open up the driver’s door, when I grab his arm to stop him.

“Wait. I need to ask you something.”

“Oh?”

“It’s my birthday tomorrow, and I’m thinking of hitting up a casino to scratch a very bad itch I have for one last time...” I flick him a wicked grin. “You don’t know of any casino owners who’d be okay being scammed out of fifty thousand dollars, do you?”

He doesn’t answer at first. Instead, he leans over the console and runs a slow, leisurely finger down my cheek that makes my thighs clench and my heartbeat quicken.

“*Muñequita*,” he says, his voice rough and low. “That’s going to be the sweetest fucking money I’ve ever been cheated out of in my life. I’ll even throw in dinner to make myself feel better about it.”

“Then it’s a date,” I whisper.

“Our second in two days... Careful, *Señora* Carrera,” he adds huskily. “That’s more than most marriages have in a year.”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

THALIA



IT TAKES ME OVER AN HOUR, BUT I FINALLY FIND IT, CRUMPLED AND creased at the bottom of my overnight bag.

“Damn it.”

“What’s wrong?” Ella looks up from her laptop with a frown on her face. She’s sitting cross-legged on the couch, with course notes and open textbooks scattered all around her like educational confetti. I can tell she’s wrestling with an important assignment. It’s only seven a.m., and she’s been awake for longer than I have.

I hold up the claret-red designer dress to show her the state of it. “I wanted to wear this tonight, but it looks like a herd of elephants slept on it.”

“Leave it on the chair behind you,” she mutters, dropping her eyes back to her screen. “I’ll swing by the dry cleaners on my way to class and beg Mia for a four-hour special.”

“Why don’t I make myself useful and drop it by myself,” comes a soft voice from the doorway.

“*Máma!*” We cry in unison, our shock reverberating around the room like a high-pitched cannonball.

A split second later, we’re throwing our arms around her, making a Santiago family reunion a mess of tears and joy in the middle of the living room, with our mother’s elegant composure cracking just as hard as ours.

“What are you doing here?” Ella gasps.

“Your father has business here and I *insisted* on accompanying him.”

My sister and I share a smile. We talk to our mother every day, but our father rarely allows her to leave his island compound. Most of the time,

she's content to follow *pápa's* orders. Occasionally, like now, she'll drive her stiletto heel through his boot and insist on her freedom.

"Thalia, my beautiful girl," she says, turning to me to cup my cheek with her hand. "I wasn't going to miss your twentieth birthday for anything."

"And I've missed *you*," I mumble, diving into her slim shoulder again, feeling the weight of everything I've been through pushing against the thin barrier of my self-control. I've talked to her more on Skype these past few weeks than I ever before, but there's nothing like being wrapped up in her warmth and reassurance.

"What time do you have to be at work, sweetheart?"

"In an hour," I sob, crumbling already.

"Ella," I hear her say. "It's been a long flight, and I'd love a coffee. Would you mind making me an extra strong espresso and bringing it to Thalia's room?"

"Sure. Where's *pápa*?"

"He's with Edier and Sam."

*All having a crash course on Ukrainian curse words, no doubt.*

"Come," she says, lifting my head from her damp shoulder and wiping away my tears. "I want to talk with you alone."

She leads me into my bedroom and sits me down on the edge of my quilt, still clasping my hand to her chest.

"*Máma*—"

"Shush. I want to say something to you first." She lifts my hand to her lips and kisses it gently. "I used to think that I was brave, Thalia Santiago, but you, my daughter, have the heart of a lioness and a tiger's soul."

"I lost your necklace," I mutter, staring at the floor. "They stole it from me in Italy."

"Objects aren't important," she chides. "It's the memories that live inside the moments that matter."

"But, *pápa*—"

"Will buy me another," she reassures. "Sweetheart, I'm not even going to pretend to understand what you're going through, or what you're overcoming. I'm not going to sit here and patronize and sympathize. But I want you to know that I'll always be here. Whatever you need. Whatever darkness you find yourself in..."

"*Only in darkness can we see the stars*," I whisper.

She lifts her brows in surprise. “You remembered the picture on my nightstand.”

“I always think about that, and what you said to me. About how you found your way back to love when all hope was lost.”

“And so will you,” she muses. “I don’t know much about your new husband, Thalia, but he burned bright when you needed him to, and *that* tells me everything.”

“He thinks he’s a bad man with no hope of redemption.”

“What do *you* think?”

“That he’s a bad man who feels more than he thinks he ought to.”

She laughs. “In my experience, there are varying degrees of badness. Morality is a moving target in our world, but things like love? Family? Those are the true constants... From what I can tell, he’s done what you’ve asked of him, because you *are* those two things to him, sweetheart. He’s given you your space. He set you free. He’s let you breathe and heal, and in doing so, we’ve all been rewarded in watching you soar again.” She nudges me gently, the pride in her voice making my eyes sting. “For stubborn men like Santi Carrera and your father, bowing down to such a request is even harder than taking a bullet.”

There’s a knock at the door, and Ella enters with two steaming espresso cups.

“I brought one for you too, Thals.”

“Time to get dressed,” declares my mother, rising to her feet to take them from her and setting one down on my nightstand. “You don’t want to be late for work. Oh, and I take it from the dress disaster, you’re planning on going out later?”

I nod, giving her the trace of a smile. She returns it with a flick of a wink. “I see. Then we better get it cleaned up.”

“Thanks, *máma*,” I say quietly.

“You’re welcome.” She pauses in the doorway, an elegant vision in a white pant suit with her long, still-dark hair clouding up her shoulders. “Remember, Thalia, even during the day, the stars never really disappear. They’re just waiting to shine for us again when we need them the most.”



The rest of the day passes in a whirlwind of progress report reviews and updating budgets for our trafficking project in Nigeria.

Threading its way through every meeting and long-distance phone call is a ribbon of anticipation about tonight. In seeing Santi again, and returning to the scene of the crime as his wife, not as his enemy.

I'm not the same naïve nineteen-year-old girl who sneaked into his casino a couple of months ago. I've been broken and bruised since then.

I'm more sure of who I am now. Of us. Of our place in this strange life of sin and sacrifice.

Most of all, I'm not afraid of loving him anymore. We're the only two people who can right each other's wrongs.

Bonnie's not in the main office as I grab my things together and power down my laptop. It means I'm not treated to her end-of-the-day hanging out of the window ritual to ogle my husband. When I spill out of the building, however, it's not Santi waiting for me, it's Reece.

"He was called away on business," he says tersely, watching my face fall. "He said he'll meet you at Legado later."

My skin starts prickling with uneasiness as he rushes me into the backseat. My heart sinks like a stone when I see at least ten of my father's men on the sidewalk behind me and five black SUVs parked nearby.

"What's going on, Reece?" I ask him. "This isn't extra security, it's an army."

"Nothing for you to worry about, Thalia," he croons, sliding into the passenger seat and nodding at the driver.

"Is my husband meeting with Edier?"

"I believe so."

"Is this about The Odessa and Lorenzo Zaccaria?"

He doesn't answer. Not that I expected him too. He's under strict instructions to keep me calm, oblivious, and out of harm's way. At the top of that list are orders not to divulge every facet of cartel warfare to me.

My apartment is dark and empty when I arrive home. Ella must still be in class. Flicking on a couple of side lights, I kick off my heels and the rest of my clothes and melt under a long hot shower.

Stepping out of a whirlpool of steam and into my bedroom, I'm distracted from my worries by the sight of the newly cleaned and pressed claret-red dress hanging on the back of my closet door.

*Máma, you life saver.*

I run my hand over the intricate beaded detail, remembering how much I hated it the first time I wore it. Back then, I chose it as the ultimate distraction. Tonight, I want all of his attention on me.

Lying on the center of my bed is a brand new pair of shiny red Louboutins, and a small black jewelry box. I can't help but smile when I open it up to find a beautiful star pendant studded with diamonds on a delicate silver chain. I love my mother more in that moment than I ever thought possible.

I take my time getting ready, straightening my long hair into a shiny dark waterfall, and making my eyes so smoky and sultry that Reece chokes on air when he sees me.

“Well?” I say, giving him a twirl.

“I thought you told Carrera to ditch the tequila,” he accuses, fighting a grin. “The arrogant bastard’s going to drink his own bar dry when he sees that dress.”

*No chance.*

This evening, the only thing my husband is getting drunk on is me.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

THALIA



DESPITE SANTI'S TALK ABOUT LEGADO'S DWINDLING POPULARITY yesterday, the *porte-cochère* is packed with expensive cars as Reece parks up next to a curtain of ivy.

The rose-gold tower of sin is beckoning. I slip out of the vehicle before my bodyguard can stop me, hurrying up the black marble steps and into the glass-fronted lobby.

I weave through the crowds of expensive colognes and perfumes toward the main elevator, under the assumption that Santi will be waiting for me in his office. But as I go to press the call button for a carriage, the large shadow of his second-in-command, RJ, materializes next to me.

"Nice déjà vu," he says, his mouth quirking up when he recognizes my dress. "Should I alert security that there's a card counter on the floor tonight?"

"I have it on good authority that the owner's going to let this one slide," I tell him, fighting a grin.

"Is that right?" He swallows a laugh. "Good to see you back, *Señora* Carrera. And of your own free will... He's waiting for you in one of the private blackjack rooms. Follow me."

Santi has his back turned to us as we enter. One wrist is resting on the bar counter in front of him, next to a cut glass tumbler, while the other is glued to his phone. His suit jacket has been thrown carelessly over the gold velvet bar stool nearby, and when he goes to rake his hand through his hair, the guns in his holster glint menacingly in the soft amber lights.

“I want updates throughout the evening,” I hear him say, while I’m taking in the black velvet couches below the gilt-framed mirrors and the black gaming table in the center of the room. “We’ll speak again before ten.”

Hanging up, he chucks the phone across the bar counter in frustration, raking his hand through his hair again, as a vicious Spanish curse spills from his mouth.

“Santi,” RJ murmurs.

“What is it?” he snaps.

“Your wife has arrived.”

He turns, with his glass in his hand. When he sees me, he goes very still. A beat later, there’s a click behind me as RJ excuses himself from our staring contest.

It lingers on and on, until I feel a giggle rising up inside me.

“Are you practicing your poker face, Santi?” I say slyly. “I thought we were playing a different game tonight.”

That snaps him out of his trance.

“When you look like that, *muñequita*, I’ll play any fucking game you want,” he says huskily, reaching for his jacket.

“Don’t,” I tell him, and something in my voice makes him pause. “There’s no need to hide your weapons from me. I’m done pretending that violence isn’t a part of us. I’m done running from it.”

*I’m done running from you.*

“If you say so.” He tosses his jacket back down on the barstool and prowls up to where I’m standing. He circles me slowly like a hunter stalking his prey, his eyes so dark and penetrating I feel like he’s inside me already.

The atmosphere is an electric storm on the horizon. He leaves my side for a second, and then the lock on the door turns.

“Ready to play?” he says, dropping a chaste kiss on my shoulder that makes the beat between my thighs dance to his tune.

“Who’s dealing?” I say in a raspy voice.

“Birthday girls first.” He gestures toward the gaming table.

I move to stand in the dealer’s position by the loaded shoe, while he diverts to collect a chilled bottle of Dom Perignon and two flutes from the silver bucket on the bar counter.

“What are we playing for?” I ask, watching him pop the cork with ease and distribute the liquid gold between the glasses, his movements so self-assured that the beat between my thighs becomes relentless.

Handing me a glass, he slides his hand into his pocket and tosses a handful of familiar-looking gold and black chips onto the felt. “What do you say to fifty grand a piece?”

I feel that crazy swell of laughter rising up inside me again. “Sounds like a good place to start.”

Taking a sip of my champagne, savoring the wicked fizz of bubbles on my tongue, I deal the first round as he pulls out the black chair opposite.

My heart races as he places ten thousand onto his betting box without even looking at his hand. In turn, I do the same, matching him chip for unknown playing card—throwing everything to chance.

“Why Legado?” he asks, studying my face as I deal us both a second card. “Why that dress? Why now?”

“I felt like going back to the beginning.”

Glancing at his cards, he flips over a total of twenty. A second later, I’m flipping over a total of nineteen.

“Are you hustling me again, *muñequita*?” He shoots me a loaded look as he sweeps my losing chips toward his own stash.

“Never cheat the system in the same place twice,” I say with a smile.

Another round. Another loss. I’m twenty thousand down already.

“It’s a good job you’re married to a rich man,” he says dryly, winning again.

“I make my own money these days, Santi. Just in case you forgot.”

I’m down to my last chip now.

My last bet.

*I’m disappointed.*

I never knew a game of blackjack could be so erotic. It’s all in the slide of hand, the stolen glances, the charged pauses... My panties are so wet it’s embarrassing.

“You need a better incentive to win,” he declares, reaching into his pocket again and laying out the most beautiful diamond engagement ring I’ve ever seen on my betting box.

“What’s that?” I gasp.

“Your birthday present,” he says idly. “I figured it was time to replace a ring I bought for a woman I hated with one for the woman I love.”

My breath catches.

“If you want it, that is,” he adds, leaving his next words hanging.

*If you want me...*

With trembling fingers, I deal us both aces, and then I “draw” my way to a cool twenty-one without hesitation.

He tips his head back and laughs, chucking his seventeen across the table. “I fucking *knew* you were bluffing. *Dios mío*, you’re good!”

“First rule of counting cards,” I tell him, fighting another smile. “When someone accuses you of being a hustler, always distract them with innocence.”

“Give me your hand.”

I do as he asks, my stomach fluttering as he slips off my old ring and replaces it with a diamond that’s so much more than *Hope*.

“Do you like it?” he inquires.

“Very much... What shall we play for next?”

He flicks me a wicked smirk. “Your panties.”

“*What?*” I sputter.

I watch his mocking gaze trail a line of heat all the way down to my pussy. “The way you keep fidgeting, *muñequita*, tells me what’s happening underneath your dress is pretty fucking similar to what’s been happening in my pants since you walked into this room. I want to see if I’m right.”

We’re interrupted by a beep from his phone, still lying discarded on the bar counter.

“Well?” he asks, not even glancing at it. “Do we have a deal, or not?”

“Fine,” I say through gritted teeth, ignoring the fire in my cheeks as I reach for the first card from the shoe. He can toy with me all he likes, but there’s no way I’m taking my panties off and handing them over, just like that. His ego is way too big already.

“Are you flying back to me, firebird?” he murmurs suddenly, putting his hand on mine.

I shoot him a look from underneath my lashes. “Can I still keep my job? If I come back, I don’t want any of this macho, cartel, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen bullshit—”

“Of course, you can still keep your job,” he says, sounding mildly offended that I’d even question it. “I know how important it is to you.”

“And I still want to see Edier and Sam anytime I like without you throwing a shit fit.”

“Is this a fair exchange, or a fucking landslide?” he mutters.

“And I’m redecorating your apartment because it’s not a goddamn lair. Your soul is not as black as you think it is, Santi Carrera.”

His dark eyes gleam. “What color is it, then?”

“Haven’t decided. I’ll let you know in the morning.”

“That implies you’re staying over tonight?”

“Are you going to let me play this card or not?” I say, losing my cool.

“Be my guest,” he says, smirking as he finally releases his hold on my hand.

As predicted, I draw the Ten of Clubs.

As predicted, his second card is the King of Spades. Making his total a good twenty again.

I bite my lip, preparing to revel in his disappointment when I trump him with the Ace of Hearts, as I toss the final card of the game onto the table. But the smile is instantly wiped off my face when I look down to see the Six of Spades.

*Sixteen.*

“What...? How...?” I sputter again, as the deep rich sound of his laughter echoes around the private gaming room.

“First rule of being a criminal, Thalia,” he says, his expression burning up with amusement. “Always fix the odds in your favor.”

“How the hell did you do that?” I cry, launching myself at him across the table. “Tell me right now!”

But I never get my answer because my mouth is suddenly full of him, and then he’s pulling me astride his lap and driving his tongue deep into the heart of my outrage.

Hot. Wet. Passionate and wild... I’m fisting his hair and moaning into our crazy kiss as he rises with me in his arms and sets me down on the edge of the gaming table. Tearing his mouth away, he slides a rough hand up my thigh to hook his finger into the gusset of my panties.

“You owe me a debt, *muñequita*,” he says huskily, slamming a hand down next to my left hip. “And I’m here to collect.”

Just then, there’s a loud thumping on the door.

“Fuck off!” he roars, ripping my panties down my legs.

“Open up, boss,” comes a loud voice. “Edier Grayson’s on the line.”

“Take a fucking message!”

“He says it’s urgent.”

Sliding a warm hand behind my neck he drags us together for one final, lingering, hotter-than-hell kiss. “Don’t move from this room,” he orders. “When I come back, I want your legs spread and waiting. Do you hear?”

I nod, dizzy with longing.

“And if I find out you’ve touched yourself in my absence, I’ll be denying you orgasms for a week.”

There’s more thumping at the door.

“I’m coming!”

“Not yet, you’re not,” I whisper, curling my arms around his neck. “But you will later.” My smile fades. “Please be careful.”

“*Siempre.*” He swipes the pad of his thumb across my lips. “Same goes for you. There are fifty of my men outside, and twenty of Grayson’s, plus Reece who’s still itching to dance an Irish *cèilidh* all over my ass... I’ll be back in an hour.”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

SANTI



IF DEATH IS THE GREAT EQUALIZER, THEN LIFE IS THE BIASED BITCH PAVING its way, and tonight she's tipping the scales against me.

If it wasn't for the name connecting the two anchors of this meeting, I would never have left Thalia. But Grayson cockblocked me with the promise of blood, and after weeks of chasing Zaccaria all over the goddamn globe, even my wife's pussy couldn't keep me away.

*That fucking Colombian better deliver, though.* I'm suffering the worst case of blue balls in history because of him.

Killing the ignition, I stare at the run-down building across the street. Chipped white paint reveals a wooden frame in dire need of repair, and the faded blue awning boasting the name "Kyiv Kitchen" in dirty white block letters is anything but enticing.

From the outside it looks unassuming and forgettable...

Of course, evil never presents itself as a monster. It infiltrates with a shy smile, bowed head, and melodic laugh. It's only when your guard is down that the mask drops.

That's why men like me will always exist. We play the Jekyll and Hyde role to perfection. We flash our handsome faces, wear confidence like a cloak, and keep attention above our surfaces. By the time our own masks drop, it's too late.

That's also why Artem Lisko's Ukrainian restaurant looks like a subsidized shithole. I'd expect nothing less from a man tucked away in Lorenzo Zaccaria's back pocket.

I need to force all thoughts of Thalia out of my mind. Back in that blackjack room, I was a devoted husband. Parked outside the blue awning of Kyiv Kitchen, I'm a cartel boss.

Loading my gun, I slide it back into my holster, and make my way down the street to where Grayson is leaning against the passenger's side of an SUV. It's a deceptive stance. From an outsider's point of view, he's casually observing the scarce activity on a quiet Brighton Beach side street, situated on Brooklyn's coastline.

I know better these days. Behind that icy façade lies a mind in perpetual motion.

Stopping a couple of feet in front of him, I prop my hip against the front panel. "I hope you know what the hell you're doing. Walking into this sit-down without backup is like fucking a whore without a condom."

He cocks a dark eyebrow.

"Fuck you," I grumble, flipping my middle finger. "It's an expression. I meant by leaving Sanders and RJ in the trenches instead of inside with us.. It's an open invitation to these *idiotas*."

"It's a concession, not an oversight." He glances over his shoulder at the restaurant, his murky gaze unreadable. "There were stipulations attached to this meeting. Lisko does his homework, Carrera. He knows who the key players are in every territory. Let him think what he wants."

It's an obvious divide and conquer. Grayson and I can hold our own, but with our seconds behind us as backup, we're an unbeatable force. Denying them access was a strategic move.

"Which means he knows what went down in Italy," I murmur to myself. *And if that's the case, Sanders and RJ are better off where they are.*

"I have a small army with their fingers on the trigger just waiting for my signal," he says. "Only an ignorant man would meet The Odessa without shields. You're a lot of things, Carrera, but ignorant isn't one of them." He nods to where ten of my best *sicarios* lie in wait before he strides toward the edge of the road.

Which is exactly why I brought them.

Grayson is methodical, not reckless. I knew he'd have backup. While I don't anticipate having any of those bullets aimed at me, I don't leave things to chance.

Pushing away from the SUV, I step forward until we're standing face to face. "Careful, Grayson... I think you're starting to like me."

His narrowed gaze slides to the side. “I tolerate you for the sake of Thalia and this truce.”

“Fair enough.”

Falling into silence, we move as one cohesive unit, crossing the street with intent. Just before we reach the ugly blue awning, he stops abruptly, his arm swinging across my chest.

I glance down. “You better have a damn good reason for doing that.”

“I need you to keep that temper of yours in check,” he warns. “I know how badly you want Zaccaria’s head on a plate, but I guarantee he won’t be in there. We’re here to entice Lisko with a more lucrative import deal. He agreed to meet with us but...” He shakes his head.

“You don’t trust him,” I say flatly.

“I don’t trust *anyone*, especially a man who does business with any faction of *Villefort*. Lisko isn’t gullible, Carrera. His favorite color may be green, but it’s closely followed by red. Do you get what I’m saying?”

*And he calls me an arrogant bastard...*

I’m starting to resent his tone. He may have facilitated this meeting, but I’m not part of his armed fan brigade. I have access to just as much intel as he does.

“Yes, I get you. Money opens doors, bullets close them. We’re either walking into negotiations or a trap.”

Either way, no one is keeping me from walking through those glass doors. I’ve spent too many sleepless nights and bottles of tequila chasing this phantom. It’s grown into an obsession I have to see through, or run the risk of Thalia and I spinning in circles for decades.

Neither of us say a word as the chime above the door announces our presence to the empty restaurant. We walk toward the back, and just as we approach the twin steel doors leading to the kitchen, a pungent aroma seeps through the cracks.

I arch an eyebrow. “Borscht?”

“Lisko has a thing about cooking during meetings.” When I arch the other eyebrow, he shakes his head. “Don’t ask.”

With each of us taking a door, we swing them open to find Artem Lisko sitting behind a folding table, elbows propped and fingers steepled like he’s the fucking *Godfather*.

“I was wondering how long you girls were going to dance outside my restaurant.”

His joke obviously amuses him, his chins jiggling in unison as that Slavic accent rolls off his tongue like curdled milk. However, it's his smirk that catches my attention the most—a wide Cheshire Cat-like grin that spans the length of his fleshy face and bald head.

“You like to watch, Lisko?” I taunt, earning myself a sharp look from my left.

However, the Ukrainian Don doesn't seem as offended by the insult as he is entertained. “I like to ‘see,’ *Señor Carrera*,” he says, drumming his fingers together. “Observation is the key to success.”

“Actually, that's perseverance, but, hey, your house, your rules. Mind if we take a seat?” I don't wait for a response before pulling out one of the two folding metal chairs set across from him.

I can feel Grayson's agitation rising as he jerks out a chair, too.

Chuckling again, Lisko wags a stumpy finger across the table. “I like you, Carrera. You have balls. Few men would be so bold.” That irritating smile widens, and he tilts his head at Grayson. “You should lighten up, yes? Take notes from your friend. All business, no fun shuts doors...*and ports*.”

“Is that a threat?” he asks coldly.

“*Observation*,” the Don repeats, his gaze sliding back to me as if the damn word is now our own private joke.

I'm about to tell him to get the fuck on with it, when a kitchen timer goes off.

Pushing away from the table, he rises to his feet. “Dinner is served.” Waddling toward the stove, he dips a ladle into a steel pot and fills three bowls. “Have borscht...” he instructs, setting a bowl in front of both of us before taking his seat.

“Not hungry,” Grayson snarls, biting down on each syllable instead.

Shrugging, Lisko tucks his napkin into his collar before taking a loud slurp.

Out of habit, I scan the room for signs of movement, finding nothing but silence. Lisko may be an irritating son of a bitch, but he didn't claim The Odessa's throne by being careless.

That's when Thalia's confession from earlier floats into my head. “*First rule of counting cards... When someone accuses you of being a hustler, always distract them with innocence.*”

I note his non-answers. His redirects. His hospitality. His cool demeanor.

*Something isn't right.*

“Likso, our offer—”

“Artem,” he tuts, cutting Grayson off with a wave of his hand. “And I never talk business before borscht. ...Is bad luck.” Refilling his spoon, he lifts it with a lethal smile. “You should try. Is my mother’s recipe. Family tradition passed down from generation to generation...” Just as the spoon touches his lips, he glances up at me. “Much like *Villefort*.”

He might as well have tossed a grenade in my lap.

I’m halfway out of my chair, ready to shove that fucking spoon down his throat, when a strong hand clamps down on my shoulder.

“Lisko...” Grayson starts, when a throat clears across the table. Gritting his teeth, he tries again. “Artem, let’s not be coy here. You know our distaste for your business partner. As a man seeped in *family values*, you can understand how *Villefort* isn’t a favored topic.”

The pressure on my shoulder intensifies, and I glare at him while lowering myself back into my chair. *If we were anywhere else, I would have broken his nose for that.*

Lisko drops his spoon, unfazed as it clatters against the table. “This business is not for fool-hearted men, Edier Grayson,” he says, all earlier amusement evaporating into a scowl. “Flash your weaknesses, and they get noticed.”

Anger coils around me like a serpent. It hisses. It rattles. It rises up, fangs bared, ready to strike. I see Thalia waiting for me in that room... I see Lola asleep in her apartment.

Both alone inside Legado.

I see a vicious circle.

*My weaknesses.*

“I have a good deal with Lorenzo,” he continues, tugging the napkin away from his chin. “What can two warring cartels offer to make me change my mind?”

It’s not a question.

It’s a hook.

*He’s baiting us.*

“Our ports are under reconstruction as we speak,” Grayson answers tersely. “You’d have clear access at two points of entry, one in Santiago territory, one in Carrera. Surely, you can see the benefit of having multiple avenues of distribution rather than relying on one channel? If Zaccaria

decides he's no longer interested in doing business, he won't cut ties, Lisko. He'll cut throats."

Instead of answering, Lisko picks up his spoon and returns to his bowl.

*He's stalling.*

The Odessa Don never had any intention of entertaining our offer.

Without taking my eyes off the fat fuck and his red-stained teeth, I slowly reach down, my fingers brushing my gun holster. As if hearing his own snake rattle, Grayson's gaze drops, then shifts back up, holding my stare as his hand slips under the table as well.

He knows, too

*It's a trap.*

There are no words, but the unspoken message we share is clear and distinct.

*We go out fighting.*

I pull my gun from its holster. At the faint click, Lisko glances up, thick red liquid dripping from his lips.

"Gun," he notes with disgust. "How unimaginative. You know why I conduct all business in Kyiv Kitchen, Carrera?"

It's a statement, not a question, so I don't offer an answer.

"It is good place to carve meat." An icy smile peels across his face, and there's an explosion of frenzied motion behind us.

Grayson and I pull our guns simultaneously, aiming them at his head. Seconds later, we're being slammed into from behind, sending them tumbling across the table as two butcher knives are pressed against our throats.

"What are you waiting for, *pendejo*?" I roar, hatred boiling in my veins. "Do it!"

Sighing, the Ukrainian drops his spoon, that sadistic smile turning downward. "I hate cold borscht." He looks up, his expression tightening. "You no longer amuse me, *Señor* Carrera. Fortunately, more stimulating entertainment awaits me in New Jersey."

Another warning rattle.

*Thalia.*

The fangs sink deeper.

*Lola.*

Cold, hard rage simmers beside me. "You never had any intention of doing business."

“Not true, Grayson,” Lisko tuts, wagging that goddamn finger again. “We do have business. It is just not with you. Lorenzo has missed his wayward lambs.”

Fuck.

We both struggle, an effort which only earns us the sharp bite of a blade and a stream of warm red liquid trickling down our necks.

“Not a smart move to leave others to watch over your weaknesses,” he muses.

*I need that fucking gun.*

“Did you know sheep are predictable?” He pauses as if I’m going to answer questions with a fucking butcher’s knife to my jugular. “They have a strong instinct for danger. One that compels them to band together for protection. Is game of…” Glancing up at the ceiling, he snaps his fingers. “What do Americans call it...? Ah yes, Follow The Leader. One sheep moves, the other will follow. Is why so many are slaughtered. Hardwired instinct is stronger than learned intuition. Sad.”

“You son of a bitch!” Grayson roars.

I try to speak, but there’s no longer a separation of man and monster. The images of Thalia and Lola have caused the Jekyll and Hyde parts of me to run full force into one another.

We made them a flashing target. While we swung our dicks around, Zaccaria’s been watching us. He’s been waiting for his moment to strike. Once again, he’s using Legado as a cage—trapping Thalia and Lola in a new nightmare.

“I’ll kill you slowly, Lisko,” I say darkly, holding his smug stare. There’s so much adrenaline pumping through my veins, I barely feel a second swipe of the knife at my throat. “I’ll cut you into pieces and serve you to your own mother.”

The Ukrainian smiles, the sight of his beet-stained teeth fueling me. “Did you know sheep depend on sight to survive, Carrera? Is why they avoid shadows and darkness. What do you think happens to damaged little lambs when the lights go out?”

It’s this image that tips the scale, sending the sliver of self-restraint I have left scattering across the floor. When I lunge, it’s not to save my own life, but to avenge theirs.

Blinding hate sears my vision as I reach for the bowl of borscht in front of me, hurling it over my shoulder into the Ukrainian soldier’s face. Caught

off guard, he stumbles backward, giving me a wide enough breadth to hurl myself across the table. In seconds, my gun is in my hand, and I'm twisting around—the sound of Grayson's heated curses filling my ears as I fire two bullets.

One into the guard holding Grayson.

The other into the motherfucker trying to decapitate me.

As both guards hit the floor, Grayson grips his shoulder, biting out a muffled curse as blood pumps in between his fingers. Before I can survey the damage, Lisko mutters something in Ukrainian, then lumbers out of his chair, his hand going for his gun.

*Not today, motherfucker.*

Leaping over the flimsy card table, I collide into him, the force knocking both of us into the stove and my muzzle to his forehead. Familiar shouts and gunshots narrow into a vortex beyond the steel doors, as I stare into the eyes of the man who lured me away from my wife.

Suddenly, the monster inside me craves more than a bullet. It wants immoral justice.

"Since you like family recipes so much, let me share one of mine," I hiss. "It's a Carrera favorite."

Offering him a rare smile, I drive my knee into his stomach, the blow causing him to tilt forward just enough that I can grab the back of his neck, twist him around and shove him face first into his fucking pot of borscht. His arms flail as he struggles, but I don't relent until he chokes on his *tradition* and drowns a painful death.

When I let go, his body collapses onto the floor, the pot tipping over on top of his lifeless body.

"Carrera."

Snapping out of my murderous rage, I turn to find Grayson, his shoulder soaked in blood, the same murderous glare in his eyes.

We sprint through the restaurant toward our waiting SUVs, our heavy steps sounding like the cadence of a drum pounding out our worst fears. Once we've crossed the street, we split in two different directions.

As I reach the driver's side door, Grayson calls out my name again. Looking up, I find an expression soaked in blood, honor, and determination. "No matter what happens, Zaccaria dies."

The bleak implication hits hard, driving the husband further into the shadows, while arming the monster with twenty years of redirected hate.

“He will,” I promise. “If I have to claw my way up from hell and drag him down myself... He will.”

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN**

THALIA



SANTI CLEARLY DOESN'T TRUST ME TO SAVE MY ORGASMS FOR HIM.

Fifteen minutes after he's gone, while I'm still cursing my husband for pocketing both my panties and my modesty on his way out, Reece steps into the room.

He stands like a sentry by the door as I perch on a gold barstool texting Lola to see if, by some miracle, she wants to drag herself away from her sick bed and come and join me down here. She's not answering any of them, though. She's not even reading them. In the end, I try calling, but it goes straight to voicemail.

I haven't touched a drop of champagne since Santi left. I don't much feel like celebrating anymore, because I know exactly where he's gone. Still, it's my birthday, so I need to be drinking *something* to take the edge off my sexual frustration and fears.

"Come and mix cocktails with me, Reece," I beg, sliding off the barstool and rounding the edge of the counter.

He shakes his head with a grimace. "No drinking on the job. You know your father's rules."

"Will you at least sit with me?"

With a sigh, he lumbers his giant six-foot-four frame over to the bar, running his hand back and forth over his bald head as if he's rubbing away his reluctance.

"Do you know any Tom Cruise tricks?" I joke, waving the cocktail shaker in his face.

When he doesn't answer, I bang the shaker down and start packing it with ice. I go to pour in a couple of shots of vodka when there's a loud thump outside the door, followed swiftly by another.

I glance at Reece to see if he's heard it too, but he just shrugs. "Gamblers getting rowdy. Carrera should be more selective with who he allows in."

"The crowd looked pretty elite and well-behaved tonight," I say doubtfully. "Do you think we should check?"

"Let Carrera's men deal with it," he says, waving it away.

He finds a discreet stereo behind the counter and switches on a chillingly haunting piece of classical music.

"What's this?" I ask, my arms prickling with goosebumps as he turns the volume up louder.

"Debussy."

"Doesn't seem like Santi's style. Something tells me he's more an anti-establishment kind of a guy."

My joke falls flat, so I finish making my Cosmopolitan in silence, convinced I can hear faint yelling above the music. The minor keys are sliding under my skin like rusty nails. I glance at the clock above the bar. Thirty minutes have passed since Santi left.

Reece's phone beeps.

"Who's that?"

"Your husband. He's been detained."

"Damn." I sit down on the stool next to him and take a sip of my cocktail.

With a grunt, he loosens the top button of his black shirt and places his gun down on the counter. It seems we're both settling in for a long night of staring at walls.

The music ends. Another track starts, and thirty minutes slowly trickles into an hour.

More messages come in for Reece, but nothing for me. I'm so bored, I find myself contemplating a game of Candy Crush.

"Do you know how long I've been working for your father?" Reece says suddenly, placing his phone next to his gun.

I shake my head. To me, Reece is a part of the fabric of my family. He's attended every birthday party. He's there in every photograph...

"Twenty-five years," he answers.

This shakes me from my web of inertia. “That’s nearly as long as Edier’s father.”

“I was there in Miami when he met your mother.”

Now, I’m really curious. “What was he like back then?”

There’s a pause.

“Savage.”

It’s an ugly word that’s not in keeping with the elegance of this room.

Uneasiness feathers my stomach as Reece swaps tracks to another piece of classical music, one where the staccato piano notes sound like stabbing knives.

“There’s a kind of beauty in betrayal don’t you think?” he says, making me choke on my drink. “She’s like the perfect movie actress—a woman who you fantasize about for years—until one day you meet her in the street and she’s even more fucking beautiful than you ever imagined.”

“Reece—?”

“Did you know we share a birthday?”

I shake my head, staring back at a man who’s as familiar to me as my own father, yet whose gaze has started flickering to my chest in a way that’s anything but parental.

My uneasiness blooms into thorns.

“I bought myself a present. It’s cost me nearly everything.” Switching off the stereo, he reaches into the pocket of his black jeans and pulls out a small, crimson box. All of a sudden, the silence is more suffocating than the music. “Would you like to see?”

He places the box next to my cocktail. There’s something about the color that chains me up in a cellar again and beats me until I’m begging for mercy.

“Open it.”

“I really don’t want—”

“I asked you to ‘*open it*,’” he says through gritted teeth.

His pretense drops. The thorns multiply. My hand jerks back from the stem of my cocktail glass and Grey Goose vodka and Cointreau go slopping over the sides.

With trembling fingers, I open the box to find an ornate key resting on a black velvet cushion, with an inscription engraved into the stem.

*La Societá Villefort.*

A beat later, I'm springing up from the barstool as every memory I've fought to repress over the last month rips my clothes off and shoves me toward the entrance of a maze again.

"What the hell, Reece?"

But disbelief is a feeble emotion when the truth is handed to me.

"I trusted you! We *all* trusted you!"

"Foolish girl," he sneers. "Never trust an obsession."

*An obsession?*

"Where's Santi?" I whisper.

He tilts his head at me in a way that's so reminiscent of Monroe Spader that I start trembling.

"Dead."

"I don't believe you!"

"Or he will be shortly..." He glances at the clock above the bar. "Allergic reaction to the Ukrainian national dish, I believe."

I stagger backward again, desperate to find purchase as my whole world disintegrates. All the while, Reece sits perched on his barstool, legs outstretched, watching my reaction with dispassion.

*How did I never see the chips of ice in his eyes?*

*How did I never see the lie in his charm?*

"Edier?" I rasp.

"Dead, too." He shrugs. "Borscht can be brutal on the digestion."

My legs give way, and I slither to the ground. "It was a trap. It's always been a trap... You let me slip my security all those times on purpose. You let me fall into Bardi's hands intentionally."

"That was the plan."

"But why?" I feel like I'm looking through a kaleidoscope of my life and all the patterns are changing.

"You."

"Me?" I can't seem to inhale enough air into my lungs, either.

"You," he repeats, rising to his feet. "Dear Thalia, the rage I felt when Spader was allowed to have you first..." He stops to suck in his regret through his teeth as I scramble to get further and further away from him. "I watched you as you ran, as you fell, *as you killed*... This time, you're going to run the maze for me."

Lunging forward, he grabs my wrist and drags me away from the door. Flinging it open, he hurls me out onto the main gaming floor.

It's empty. Disconcertingly so. Every single patron has disappeared, leaving cards and chips strewn across the tables and their chairs overturned. All that's left is a pile of dead *sicarios* in the center of the room.

The ghost town became a ghost casino.

*This can't be happening to me.*

"You might want to start running now," he advises, propping himself up against the doorframe, his gun hanging loosely by his side, a wicked caricature of the man I used to believe would die to protect me. "I don't have a pack of dogs, but I have silver bullets and dark, dark urges that are going to tear your body to shreds."

Nausea burns the back of my throat. His deception is a jammed screwdriver into the mechanism that makes all my muscles work.

I'm trembling with shock.

Shivering with revulsion.

"Run!" he roars, losing his patience. "Or Lola Carrera and the bastard baby growing inside her will pay for your disobedience!" At this, he hits a button on his iPhone, and Lola's screams and pleas explode like a dirty bomb into the casino. He clicks the recording off after a couple of seconds, but it's enough to have me staggering to my feet.

"Where do you want me to run to?" I rasp, a million thoughts colliding inside my head to form a single image of the loaded gun that Santi keeps in his nightstand.

"The whole casino is your maze, tonight, Thalia." A sinister smile stretches across his face. "Forty-two floors to chase you through all night long. There's no way in, and no way out. Every escape route is locked and bolted."

"W-what do you want from me?"

But I already know. *He's already intimated*, and the truth turns my stomach to bile.

"Zaccaria offered me the world, Thalia. "Not money, not power, but *you*." His hungry gaze slips to my breasts again. "This obsession," he says, his voice thickening. "It drives a man to commit madness. The day you turned sixteen, I felt the roots burrow deep. For four years, I've waited for my chance, and now it's time.... You have sixty seconds before the lights go out."

"W-what," I stutter, as he turns the tables so violently, I'm dizzy from the spin.

“You were stolen from the darkness. Now, it’s time to return you to where you belong.”

Backing away fast, my hip collides with a roulette table, and my high heels skid in a pool of crimson. When I encounter the sweeping marble steps leading up to the lobby, I hear another gun going off in my head.

Kicking off my shoes, I turn and run.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

THALIA



HE KILLS THE LIGHTS JUST AS THE STAIRWELL DOOR IS CLOSING BEHIND ME, plunging everything into the kind of darkness where the demon under your childhood bed dwells.

Tonight, my demon is coming out to play, and I have forty-two flights of stairs to climb to have any chance of surviving him.

There's a low whine, and then a fierce buzzing sound as Legado's generators kick in, but the ethereal red glow overhead only lasts for a few seconds, before that's shut off as well.

I have no phone.

No flashlight.

*Nothing.*

Panic comes crashing over me like a wave, catching me in a riptide and dragging me under—scraping my mind against memories I've fought so hard to forget.

Santi's dead.

Edier's dead.

My grief hits me like a second wave, and this time there's no resurfacing from it.

I have to keep going, though. I have to believe it's a lie. I have to find that gun, kill Reece, and try to save Lola... *That's if she's still alive.*

Blinking back the tears, I swipe blindly for a handrail—my fingers connecting with the cool metal. Inching forward, I start to climb, following the rail as it coils around the corner and up to the next flight. Misjudging

the distance in the dark, I stumble, my knees hitting the floor with an agony so sharp and unexpected I can't help crying out.

Blinking back more tears, I pick myself up and keep going, finding a kind of jerky rhythm in my shallow gasps of air. My eyes are beginning to adjust. There's a small skylight up ahead, and the emerging moon is trying hard to cast light into the darkest of places.

When I reach the thirty-first floor, I pause to catch my breath. That's when I hear the soft click of a door a couple of floors below. A beat later, Lola's screams are echoing up the stairwell.

Begging.

Pleading.

The recording shuts off again abruptly, and then I hear another door slam. I take the next couple of flights at a flat run, misjudging again. Falling *again*... In my head, I'm back in that maze, but this time it's made of concrete, not yaupon holly hedges, and I'm bouncing off hard walls instead of sharp twigs that bite and scratch at my skin.

Reaching the penthouse, I stumble through the door and into Santi's lobby, feeling a rush of smooth marble underfoot. Then, I'm tripping over something soft and solid lying on the floor.

Feeling around with my fingertips, I encounter loose hair, a nose, lips... I check for a pulse but there's an ominous chill to Santi's new housekeeper's skin.

*Shit, shit, shit.*

The apartment is a blanket of shadow. The moon has hidden herself in fear again. Following a blueprint in my head, I feel my way down the hallway, past the living room where, once upon a time, I waited for my fiancé on my wedding day.

*A man who is now dead.*

Breathing through another crashing wave of grief, I reach the doorway to his bedroom, and then another spine chilling rendition of Lola's screams are chasing after me again.

Oh, God. No.

*He's in Santi's apartment.*

Wrenching open the nightstand drawer, I sift blindly through all the crap, until my fingers are closing around cold, unforgiving steel.

With no time to lose, I fling myself across the bed and tuck myself into the darkest corner of the room. With shaking hands, I train the muzzle at the

doorway, and then I wait.

And wait.

I hear the tick tock of a distant clock again.

I hear the heavy tread of his boots.

His labored breathing...

Tick.

Tock.

His huge outline finally appears in the doorway.

*You helped kill my husband, you bastard.*

I aim the muzzle at what I imagine is his head.

“I know you’re in here, Thalia... I can smell your perfume, angel. I can smell your fear.”

*No, Reece, that’s the scent of anger and revenge.*

*That’s the scent of my shadows.*

“I switched up the rules... I need to see the object of my obsession as I devour what’s left of her innocence, piece by luscious piece.”

There’s a loud click, and then the room is an ocean of blinding white light.

I act on instinct, firing five punishingly loud rounds in his direction with my eyes shut tight. The result is a cacophony of destruction—grunts, thuds, the sounds of wood splintering, glass shattering. I don’t even realize I’m screaming until I’m all out of breath and rasping Santi’s name.

When I finally open my eyes, Reece is lying in his own puddle of crimson, haloed by splintered wood and plaster; his face a mask of surprise and anger.

Blinking away the last sting of the light, I jump to my feet. “Where’s Lola, you son of bitch?” I say, keeping my gun trained on him.

Reece just smiles that fucking smile again, and then he’s lunging for his own gun. Before he can take aim, I’m firing three more rounds and obliterating what’s left of his head.

And then there’s silence.

*But the clock is still ticking.*

Lola.

I have to find Lola...

The lights are back on. Maybe the phones are working again?

Sliding past Reece’s dead body, I sprint down the hallway toward Santi’s office. Bursting into the room, filling my aching lungs with that

heady smell of history again, I come to a crashing stop when I see a tall figure standing in front of the wall of unsolved *Villefort* mysteries. His back is turned to me. He's wearing a black suit, and with his hands in his pockets he looks so similar to...

"Santi!" I whisper.

"Not today," comes a flat drawl.

It's a voice that beat me. Tortured me. Denied me water. *Denied me air.*

"You."

Without thinking, I squeeze the trigger again, but Lorenzo Zaccaria doesn't even flinch as I fire round after useless round of an empty barrel at him.

"I've missed you, *puttana*," he says, leveling me with the same dead eyes that haunt my nightmares. "I've enjoyed leading your husband in loops and circles this past month."

"Stay the hell away from me!" I'm still pulling the redundant trigger, over and over, praying for a stuck bullet in the magazine to miraculously work itself free.

"Put the gun down," he says in a bored voice. "You'll need to conserve all your energy for where we're going. I take it from the Wild West show down the hallway that you've killed Reece?" He clucks in frustration. "And his obsession with you was making him so much easier to manipulate. You have a nasty habit of taking out my best men, *Señora Carrera*. You'll be punished for that."

"Where's Lola?" I cry, hurling the now useless gun at his head, but he sidesteps it at the last moment, and it goes crashing into the newspaper clippings and photographs, ripping the one of him from the wall.

*All the red strings lead to The Black King.*

He brushes imaginary dust from his lapel and grimaces. "She's not here. She slipped through our fingers, but her time will come."

"She's safe?" I find myself daring to believe him. "But the recordings...?"

"Were taken the night I set my dogs loose on her," he finishes tersely. "I suggested Reece use them to make you more amenable to what he wished to do to you. A confused mind makes for a far more pliable body to degrade. Would you care to guess how much money I made from my maze? Hunting mafia whores is far more lucrative than hunting Big Game."

"You bastard!"

I turn to run and find myself staring down the barrel of a gun as one of his men blocks my exit.

A beat later, Zaccaria is fisting my hair and hurling me backward over Santi's desk. The force is so violent, I go skidding across the surface, landing in a crumpled heap on the other side. Before I can catch my breath, I'm being dragged up by my hair again and punched twice in the face—fire exploding in my left cheek, and then above my left eye socket.

“Personal, just turned *extremely* personal,” he says coldly, barely out of breath, as he drags me up by my hair for a third time. “And, by God, I'm going to make you suffer. Tell my pilot to start the engines,” he snaps at his man in the doorway. “We're coming straight up.”

I'm being dragged along the hallway, through the lobby, past the dead body of Santi's housekeeper, and back into the stairwell. I'm too numb to speak. I'm in too much pain to resist.

“Are you ready for your night flight, *puttana*? New Jersey is far more picturesque from the sky at midnight.”

“My husband—”

“Is *dead*, *señora*... Edier Grayson is *dead*... Your father's private jet is rigged to blow in an hour, so soon your parents and sister will be *dead*...” Each of his vicious statements is elongated with a satisfied hiss. “I've made sure there'll be no one coming to rescue you this time.”

The agony I feel in that moment is indescribable. I'm hauled through another door, and then the brutal cold night air is whipping all the breath from my lungs and pinning my red dress to my aching body. We're at the top of Legado, on the edge of a huge helipad I never even know existed. There's a black helicopter waiting for us a hundred feet away, with spinning blades and a crimson key stamped on the side door.

The noise is so deafening I don't hear the whine of bullets until the man next to Zaccaria drops to the ground. I don't hear the voice of the man I believed to be dead until he's yelling out words that slice the wind to ribbons.

“Stay the fuck where you are, Zaccaria! Let her go, and I'll make it a quick death.”

I'm spun around with force. A merciless arm is crushing my chest, a Beretta APX pressed to the side of my head, but all I see is my whole world pieced back together again.

Santi's standing twenty feet behind us, framed by a backdrop of a million shining stars. There's murder in his eyes, and a gun pointing in our direction. I watch his gaze dip to the state of my face, and his expression hardens.

"What happened to Lisko?" I hear Zaccaria ask.

"He couldn't handle his fucking food," Santi snarls. "Let my wife go, Zaccaria. Last warning."

He laughs, a loud and spiteful sound that rumbles unpleasantly against my back. "She's coming with me, Carrera. I'm having a new maze built especially for her. I'm going to make her run it every day until she's begging me to let her die."

"¡Hijo de tu puta madre!" he roars, adjusting his grip on the gun.

"Shoot him, Santi!" I twist against Zaccaria's arm, but in this position it's like trying to wrestle my way out of an anaconda's death grip. "Don't let him take me back to hell!"

"You're not going anywhere, *muñequita*."

The love and strength in his voice makes me want to fight even harder for him.

For us.

"Remember the snow?" I scream, as a crazy idea filters in through my fear. "Ten years ago, Santi. Do you remember what you did for me?"

"Shut the fuck up, *puttana*," Zaccaria hisses, dragging me backward toward the chopper, his gun still pressed against into the side of my head.

My eyes meet my husband's. Pleading. Trusting. "Do you remember?" I repeat at a whisper, my stomach lurching when I see the faint nod as he finally understands.

This time, there's a silent countdown going on in both of our heads.

*Three*

*Two*

*One*

When I hit the last number, I ram my elbow as hard as I can into Zaccaria's stomach. The moment I feel his grip loosen, I'm throwing myself to the side, and knocking him off balance. A beat later, Santi's bullet is ripping into Zaccaria's chest as the Italian's returning fire is slamming into him.

I scream again as I watch my husband go down.

Wrenching myself free, I half run, half crawl my way to where Santi is lying. There's a red stain spreading out across his white shirt. "Oh my God!" I whimper.

"Thalia," he hisses, sweeping aside my escalating panic as he slams his gun into the palm of my hand. "This is our one chance, *muñequita*. Don't let him get away."

Glancing over, I watch Zaccaria climbing across the back seat as the helicopter's landing skids start to lift from the helipad. In that moment, I see all the women he's hurt. *I see all the women he's going to hurt.*

Gripping the gun, I rise up from the ground.

*I rise up from my ashes.*

"Do it, *muñequita*."

I lift the gun and take aim, firing eight rounds at the tail rotor, and then watching as the helicopter veers violently off to one side, billowing gray smoke and flames. The moment it disappears from view, once gravity has taken her final savage shot, I'm flinging the gun away and turning back to Santi.

He's on his feet again and clutching at his shoulder.

"Don't tell Grayson, but your aim is better than his," he says through gritted teeth.

Five more steps and I'm back in his arms. I'm back in the only place I want to be.

"This birthday sucks," I mumble into his neck.

"Give me a week in a hospital, and I'll make it up to you."

"If I give you a lifetime, will you give me yours?"

He catches my mouth in a rough kiss that tastes of our future.

I kiss him back with one that tastes of shadows and stars.

## **EPILOGUE**

SANTI



## ONE YEAR LATER

THEY SAY WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF STANDING AT THE END, RETURN TO THE beginning.

I remember thinking those exact words the night my world darkened, and my greatest sin became my ultimate salvation. With that in mind, it seems only fitting to bind our hearts in the same place that first breathed life into them.

*A place where a snow angel showed me the meaning of courage.*

The small vestibule at the back of Sacred Heart Church is draped in silence, and for the first time since Thalia entered my life, I chase it instead of running from it.

My request for solitude isn't a regression. It's a leap forward, stemming from a need to embrace the peace it offers rather than the loneliness.

Unbuttoning my tuxedo jacket, I lean back in my chair and slowly flip a quarter between my fingers, watching as fate is decided with the turn of a coin.

I'm so focused I barely register the door opening. Even then, I don't have to look up to know who's there. My father's presence can suffocate a room, just as quickly as command it.

"What are you doing?" he asks, coming to stand beside me.

"Thinking about something Lola said last year."

"Dangerous waters," he notes dryly, but I hear the amusement in his voice as he slides his hands in the pockets of his tuxedo pants.

I chuckle, my gaze still on the quarter. “Last year, when Thalia asked for distance...” I clarify, my brief smile fading as I glance up at him. “But men like us aren’t wired to back away as much as smother.” Exhaling a rough breath, I close my fist around the coin. “Letting go tested my strength more than any bullet. Remembering the talk I had with Lola back then got me thinking about everything.”

“Everything?” he repeats. “That’s quite an extensive topic.”

“*La Boda Roja*,” I clarify. “The war with the Santiagos, my ambition, crossing paths with Thalia... I asked Lola if she’d ever considered if all of it was somehow predetermined. That it was only a matter of time before the two sides blurred and it stopped being heads or tails”—looking up, I meet his intrigued gaze—“and just became one coin.”

He leans back against an antique desk to consider this, and once again, I note how similar we are. It’s not just our matching tuxedos—simple, understated, and very un-Carrera-like. It’s in the stubborn set of our jaws. The mirrored mannerisms. The slicked back dark hair, forced into submission to present an air of authority.

His choice not to sit down next to me isn’t a power play, and for once in our relationship, I don’t bristle at it. After forging a truce with our enemy, we forged our own. I’m no longer the heir fighting for his name. I’m the son who shares it with a willing king.

“What did she say?” he asks eventually.

“She said she didn’t think war fated love. She believed love ended it.”

Twenty years of hate and vengeance condensed in a piece of sage wisdom I’ve never forgotten. Priceless in its simplicity.

Frowning, I toss the quarter onto the desk beside him. “Which makes me wonder why it took decades of death and destruction to uncover such a simple truth. Why—”

“Why the sins of the fathers rested at the feet of the children to cleanse and rebuild,” he finishes, without hesitation.

Today is meant for love and celebration, not for exorcising demons, so instead of expanding on all the “what-ifs” clouding my head, I nod.

“Something like that.”

My father falls quiet again, the words hanging heavy between us. Removing his hands from his pockets, he clasps them at his chest and presses the pads of his thumbs together. “I’ve always taught you to never question what *is*, Santi—but to mold it into what you want. However, you

and your sister aren't just Carreras. You're Lacheys, and Lacheys question everything."

Now it's my turn to slide my hands in my pockets, the subtle humor in his tone when speaking about my mother curving my lips.

"Lacheys *challenge* what is, in order to create 'what can be'. Hate fights for dominance, but only love can share it." Rising to his feet, he claps a hand on my shoulder. "I didn't teach you that, Santi. You've taught me."

It's a concession I never expected to hear. Valentin Carrera doesn't graciously accept defeat, and he rarely admits fault.

My chest swells with honor. "*Gracias, pápa.*"

"They're about to start," he says, nodding toward the closed door. "Take a moment, reflect, and then get your ass to the altar. You have a bride to remarry."

Where he'll be standing beside me, this time around.

"You know, originally, a groom's best man was tasked with kidnapping the bride from her home." A devilish smile spreads across his face. "A mission you accomplished all on your own. You don't need my help doing anything, Santi. You've built your own legacy."

I smile to myself, counting his footsteps as they cross the room, only to stop at the door.

"Oh, and Santi?"

Glancing over my shoulder, I collide with that familiar, proud gaze.

"Thalia's heart may bear the Carrera name, but her soul will always be a Santiago." At the strain on my face, his perpetual stony expression softens. "A combination befitting a future queen. I look forward to getting to know both sides."

As he closes the door behind him, I pick up the coin and toss it in the air.

*Heads.*

Five minutes later, I'm still thinking about the impact of his words.

Thalia walked into my casino looking for a way to cheat darkness, only to find me—a man firmly entrenched in his own, framed by a hate I held so sacred. We've overcome obstacles that not many could survive. But the night she was ripped from my arms, we turned the tide, forcing vows into sworn ones.

Eleven years ago, I sacrificed my loyalty for her innocence.

A year ago, she sacrificed her innocence for my loyalty.

Today, we sacrifice the past for the promise of our future.



The sanctuary of Sacred Heart Church is nowhere near capacity. After everything that's happened in the last year, Thalia and I both wanted our second wedding to be intimate and more importantly, *contained*. Outside, the perimeter of the church is fortified by a double wall of armed Carrera and Santiago *sicarios*.

We're starting a new chapter, not trying to flip back to the prologue.

The interior has changed since the last time I was here. Today, it's bowing to a new era—pristine and unblemished by the violence inflicted on it by two warring families.

My father stands silent but proudly by my side at the altar, with RJ positioned on his left. As I wait for the back doors to open, I glance across to where Ella Santiago stands in her simple red silk maid of honor gown, with a soft smile and wise eyes. Just behind her stands my sister in a matching dress, but with a different kind of a smile. She's also fucking telepathic, judging by the way she's staring at me.

I don't know what possesses me, but I hold her gaze and mouth, "*Thank you.*"

Lola's smile brightens as she mouths back, "*You're welcome.*"

A wet gurgle from the front row causes a ripple of soft laughter, cutting the tension. Shifting my gaze, my own smile tugs my lips as I watch my niece reach up with both hands, grab her father's lower lip, and twist the fuck out of them. Unfazed, he pretends to bite down on her tiny fingers, earning himself another giggle.

Sam Sanders will never be my favorite person, but the bastard is one hell of a father. Beside him, Edier Grayson sits with one eye on the future, and his heart in the past, from what Thalia's intimated.

When the organ plays the first notes of the bridal march, everyone stands, eyes turned toward the back of the church.

I thought I was ready.

I was wrong.

When the double doors open, and Thalia takes her first step inside the sanctuary, it's like I'm seeing her for the first time, all over again. The same

pressure squeezes my chest. The same punch hits my gut. When she walked into my office a year ago, she was a beautiful woman. Tonight, she's a goddess.

Her gown is white, but it's a concession I had no problem in making. Some traditions have their value, but it's the red roses woven into her veil that hold my attention the most.

*Mi reina roja.*

My red queen.

When her eyes meet mine, I see the same fire that captivated me the moment we first met. Taking her father's arm, they walk in perfect sync up the aisle, before coming to a stop three steps below the altar.

Santiago's face is unreadable as he turns to me. "Don't fuck it up, Carrera," he says dryly. "I still have a bullet with your name on it."

"*Pápa,*" Thalia hisses.

Giving him a curt nod, I fight back a smirk. That's as close to an approval by Dante Santiago as it gets.

Turning to his daughter, he kisses her lightly on the cheek. "Beautiful, *mija.*" Then, placing her hand in mine, he takes his seat in the front pew beside his wife, Eve.

"Been waiting for someone, Carrera?" Thalia teases me softly.

"*Are you waiting for someone?*"

They're the same words she spoke to me eleven years ago, standing knee-deep in snow outside these church walls. Back then, I thought she was innocent and brave—two qualities I still see in her—only now there's a third: *strength.*

"Only you, *muñequita,*" I murmur. "I've only ever waited for you."



Receptions aren't for the bride and groom.

If it were up to Thalia and me, we'd already be locked inside our penthouse having our kind of fun on every redecorated surface. But to appease both our families, I had Legado's grand ballroom turned into a display of extravagance and excess.

I agreed to a simplistic wedding, not to a subdued celebration.

"We're magicians," says Thalia with a sigh, surveying the room.

“How do you figure that, *Señora* Carrera?” I ask, my fingers tracing the delicate dip between her shoulder blades.

I feel her shiver with longing as she motions with her champagne flute. “This is the first time in twenty years that all these people have been in the same room. It’s either magic, or the power of alcohol.”

I laugh, moving my fingers lower. “Maybe it’s a little of both.”

She’s right. Family members from both cartels crowd around tables as if two vows just evaporated twenty years of bad blood. Grayson’s parents sit at a table talking to Senator Sanders and his wife, Nina, while RJ’s parents, my *Tío* Brody and *Tía* Adriana hover by the bar with my father’s second in command, Mateo and his wife Leighton, and my cousin, Stella.

As I down my fourth glass of champagne, my mother and father stride toward us, their pace hurried. Before I can brace myself, my mother throws herself into my arms, tears brimming her eyes.

“I’m so proud of you *mijo*,” she whispers in my ear. I always knew no matter what happened, no matter how deep the waters were where you fell, you’d always keep swimming.”

They’re the parting words she left me with when I left Mexico at eighteen to take over the world.

Ones I never forgot.

“*Gracias, mamá.*”

Pulling away, she dabs at her eyes before turning to Thalia. “Welcome to the family, again, Thalia. We’re proud to *officially* have you as a part of it.” Holding her smile in place, she elbows my father, who darts an amused gaze at her before facing my wife.

“*Sí*,” he echoes, a new respect in those hardened eyes. “*Tu eres familia, Thalia.*”

*You are family.*

Three words weighed with meaning. The last time we were all together, he treated her as the enemy. In his way, it’s an unspoken apology.

Thalia blushes, the impact of the moment hitting her just as heavily.

The sound of forks clanging in unison against dozens of glasses breaks the moment.

My mother gives me a knowing smile. “I believe it’s time for your first dance, *Señor* and *Señora* Carrera.”

*And not a moment too soon.*

Guiding my wife to the lowly lit dance floor, I take her in my arms, her nails lightly grazing my cheek in warning when I catch sight of Rosalia Marchesi out of the corner of my eye.

“What the fuck is *she* doing here?”

“I invited her.”

“I thought you didn’t want bloodshed?”

“Considering she’s the reason, Lola and I didn’t shed more than we did in Italy, I didn’t think it’d be a problem.” When I stiffen at the memory, she sighs. “Relax, Santi. Rosalia’s here with her family.” Arching an eyebrow, she directs my attention to a table of silent Marchesis. “As of right now, they’re still our allies.”

“The night is young, *mi amada*,” I warn. “And RJ is still sober.”

“This tension between you two needs to stop.”

“It will, when he remembers the oath he made to this family, instead of making new ones...” I say, referring to Rosalia’s own impending nuptials—an event that has sent my cousin into a spiral of strained silence and solitude. He’s not talking to anyone these days, which in my line of work is a red flag. One that’s about to get a bullet shot through it.

“Tread carefully, Santi...”

“If you insist.” I spin her around, until all I see is her. “I just ended one fucking war. I don’t feel like starting another one.”

“That war is over. We’re bound. Julieta ties us.” Her serene smile directs to the edge of the dance floor, where *máma* and Sanders’s stepmother are cooing over my niece.

“I love Julieta, but she doesn’t tie us, Thalia,” I say, bending my head to brush my lips across her jaw. “She’s a Sanders, not a Santiago. A permanent link needs Carrera and Santiago blood.”

I feel her smile before I see it. “Then I guess we have some work to do.”

The heat in her eyes causes mine to combust. “I’ll have you pregnant tonight,” I promise darkly, dipping her low. “I thought you wanted to wait?”

“Big words, Carrera... And maybe I’m open to persuasion these days.”

“You should know by now, *muñequita*. I always get what I want.”

Thalia throws her head back with a husky laugh, and I start counting down the minutes until I can make good on my promise and have her begging for mercy.

An hour later, only the dying embers of the reception remain. Most guests have departed, and I’m done waiting. I’m done with all the fucking

goodbyes. Sweeping my wife off her feet, I carry her and her giggling protestations off toward the elevator. The moment the doors close, I'm taking her mouth in a violent kiss that shuts her up in the best possible way.

Stepping into our penthouse, I carry her across the lobby and into the living room where I finally lower her to the floor, just so I can trap her up against the window. Up here, looking out at the world with the woman I love in my arms, I feel like a god—one who stacked the odds, and beat his own destiny.

Some say that life is a game of chance, where the deck is shuffled from birth and a single card is dealt that decides our fate. My father says that a man makes his own luck, though how far we push for that elusive “twenty-one” depends on how much is at stake, and how much we're willing to risk in order to win.

For Thalia, I risked it all, and in the end love won.

THE END

**Want more Corrupt Gods?**

Keep reading for preorders links to two new standalones, *Rush & Ruin* and *Bullets and Thorns*.

# CORRUPT GODS WORLD



*The legacy continues...*

Introducing the Corrupt Gods World,  
A collection of interconnected standalone novels based on the Corrupt Gods Duet.

**RUSH & RUIN**  
**BULLETS AND THORNS**  
NOW AVAILABLE FOR PREORDER ON AMAZON!



**RUSH & RUIN**  
*by Catherine Wiltcher*  
*Coming May 20, 2022*  
Preorder [Rush & Ruin](#) on Amazon now!

**Edier Grayson & Ella Santiago's story...**

At sixteen, he was a stolen moment in the darkness.  
An illicit touch.  
Breath-stealing kisses...  
The storm to my calm, before the world made him a killer and a monster.



**BULLETS AND THORNS**  
*By Cora Kenborn*  
*Coming June 23, 2022*

Preorder [Bullets and Thorns](#) on Amazon now!

**RJ Harcourt & Rosalia Marchesi's story...**

*Our families were allies...*

Then Rosalia came crawling to my cousin for protection... Only to find *me*.

The fixer. The level head.

The loyal shadow everyone sees, but no one hears.

*Until it's too late.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



## CORA'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Catherine, what a wild, caffeine-infused, no-sleep having, when-did-I-last-shower, oh-I-forgot-to-eat, how-is-that-only-five-hundred-words, what-time-zone-are-we-in ride it's been. I'm pretty sure we've both aged about five years in the last four months, but we did it... *We f'ing did it.* Thanks for taking this journey with me.

Ronda, thank you for keeping my head above water. Thank you for telling me to stop listening to my head and listen to my heart. Thank you for your daily morning messages of encouragement and support. Just...thank you for being *you*.

Crystal, thanks for your unwavering support and for giving me a much needed dose of reality when deadlines got close, and I checked out.

Murphy, thank you for always listening when I needed an ear. You are one of the most genuine people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing.

Ginger, what can I say that I haven't said in seven books now? Thank you for correcting all my Spanish *oopsies* and for making sure my Carrera men always sound authentic. Maybe in five more books, I won't ask you fifty times to differentiate between the expression and the insult when I'm bilingual-cursing.

Lots of love to my reader group, Cora's Twisted Alpha Addicts for being my fam and to my AMAZING street team, Cora's Twisted Capos for your unyielding support.

Huge thanks to my publicist, Danielle Sanchez, and the amazing team at Wildfire Marketing Solutions. You are, simply put, the best.

Thank you to the bloggers, bookstagrammers, and especially readers for your constant support and love, and for supporting this crazy Carrera world I've created. It means more than you'll ever know. Without you, I'm just a chick with a laptop.

A special heartfelt thank you to my family for getting out of my house. No, seriously, thank you for packing up and getting the hell out of Dodge when I sprouted horns and a tail and hissed at everyone after I hadn't slept for four days. Thank you for giving me space and silence and for understanding that sometimes being an author isn't glamorous.

Thank every single reader for your support of our "hey, you know what would be cool..." project and for loving these second generation cartel families.

Now, I'm going to finally shower...

And maybe lay off the coffee for a while.

Eh, probably not.

## CATHERINE'S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my husband and my two beautiful girls. I'm running out of adjectives *again*... Let's just say that I love how you bring me cups of tea and hugs when I'm writing. I love that I've inspired you to write yourselves. I just...*love you*.

Cora, my author guru. I would be hopelessly lost and clueless without you. Somehow we did it. Not sure how... Thank you from the bottom of my green tea.

Sammy, Kathi, Sally, and Julia. Thank you for cheering me on from the sidelines. You've been there from the beginning, and you're more priceless than gold.

To my wonderful PA, Siobhan. Thank you for hopping aboard the Santiago show and for keeping my life in order. And to my amazing Street Team for promoting me every day! — Joy, Jayne, Joanne, Ashley, Piia, Chelle, Janie, Isidora, Sarah, Tracey, Sierra, Sandra and Laura...

To all the book bloggers and bookstagrammers who are still taking a chance on a sort-of rookie. Thank you. Thank you. *Thank you*.

To Maria at Steamy Designs. Thank you for taking on all our demands, not disowning us, and for weaving your magic.

And finally to the readers. You make every invasive scan, test and operation worth it. I'll be writing these stories for you until they pry my laptop away from my lifeless fingers. Thank you for making all my dreams come true.

xx

#fuckcancer

## ABOUT CORA KENBORN



Cora Kenborn is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of over twenty-five multi-genre novels, including the Carrera Cartel Trilogy.

She loves a brooding antihero who falls hard for the feisty heroine who stands beside him, not behind him. While best known for her dark and gritty romances, Cora always infuses sharp banter and a shocking blindside in every story she writes.

Although a native North Carolinian, Cora claims the domestic Southern Belle gene skipped a generation, forcing her to spend any free time convincing her family that Hot Pockets are a delicacy.

Oh, and autocorrect thinks she's obsessed with ducks.

Sign up for her [newsletter](#) for updates and get **FREE** ebook.

## ABOUT CATHERINE WILTCHER



Catherine Wiltcher is an international bestselling author of fifteen dark romance novels, including the Santiago Trilogy. A stage 4 cancer thriver and a self-confessed alpha addict, she writes flawed characters who always fall hard and deep for one another.

She lives in the UK with her husband and two young daughters. If she ever found herself stranded on a desert island, she'd like a large pink gin to keep her company... Cillian Murphy wouldn't be a bad shout, either.

**Sign up to her newsletter for book updates and exclusives!**

[www.catherinewiltcher.com/newsletter](http://www.catherinewiltcher.com/newsletter)

## ALSO BY CORA KENBORN



### CARRERA CARTEL TRILOGY

*(Dark Mafia)*

Carrera Cartel: The Collection (w/bonus novel)

Blurred Red Lines

Faded Gray Lines

Drawn Blue Lines

### CORRUPT GODS

*(Dark Mafia - Spinoff of Carrera Cartel)*

Born Sinner

Bad Blood

Tainted Blood

Bullets and Thorns

### LES CAVALIERS DE L'OMBRE DUET

*(Dark Mafia)*

Darkest Deeds

### MIAMI BRATVA DUET

*(Dark Mafia - Spinoff of Les Cavaliers de l'ombre)*

Illicit Acts (coming 2021)

Wicked Ways (coming 2021)

### LORDS OF LYRE SERIES

*(Rockstar Suspense)*

Fame and Obsession

Fame and Secrets

Fame and Lies

### STANDALONES

*(Dark/Romantic Suspense)*

Sixth Sin

Cast Stones

**STANDALONES**

*(Contemporary/Sports)*

Shallow

Playboy Pitcher

Adrenaline (*coming in 2021*)

**STANDALONES**

*(Romcom)*

Unsupervised

Swamp Happens: The Complete Collection

**STANDALONES**

*(Paranormal Romance)*

Cursed In Love

Want to stay up to date on all of Cora's new releases and receive insider information?  
Sign up for her [newsletter](#).

**ALSO BY CATHERINE WILTCHER**



**THE SANTIAGO TRILOGY**

*(Dark Mafia)*

The Santiago Trilogy

Hearts of Darkness

Hearts Divine

Hearts On Fire

**THE GRAYSON DUET**

*(Dark Mafia)*

Shadow Man

Reckless Woman

**CORRUPT GODS**

*(Dark Mafia)*

Born Sinner

Bad Blood

Tainted Blood

Rush & Ruin

**STANDALONES**

Devils & Dust

Black Skies Riviera

Unwrapping the Billionaire

Hot Nights In Morocco

Cast Stones

## FOLLOW CORA KENBORN



Get a **FREE** ebook for joining Cora's [Newsletter!](#)

**For more book updates and news visit:**

<https://www.corakenborn.com>

Hang out with Cora by joining her reader group.

[Cora's Twisted Alpha Addicts Reader Group](#)

**Everywhere else you can find her:**

[BookBub](#)

[Facebook](#)

[TikTok](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Spotify.](#)

All Cora's books are on [Amazon](#) and are  
**FREE** with Kindle Unlimited

## FOLLOW CATHERINE WILTCHER



For newsletter sign-ups and book updates, visit  
[www.catherinewiltcher.com/newsletter](http://www.catherinewiltcher.com/newsletter)

Come and join her on the following social media platforms too:

[Facebook](#)

[Facebook Reader Group](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Bookbub](#)

[Goodreads](#)

[Twitter](#)

[TikTok](#)

All Catherine's books are on [Amazon](#) and are  
**FREE** with Kindle Unlimited.