



Bad BLOOD

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Bad
BLOOD

Bad Blood
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“The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.”
—William Shakespeare

BAD BLOOD



*A Santiago is a lesson in ruin.
A Carrera bleeds for revenge.*

Thalia Santiago is the daughter of my enemy.
A beautiful rebel with a single cause.
Impulsive.
Fearless.
And ripe for her father's undoing.

I recognized her the moment she stepped into my casino. I watched her start the fires that burned her
pretty fingers, then poured gasoline on the flames.
Now she's in my debt, and her dues are a shiny gold ring and a vow of deception.

I'll bend her.
I'll break her.
I'll turn our mockery of a marriage into a battlefield.
And that river of bad blood that flows between our two families?
I'll make it an ocean of hate.

**Bad Blood is book 1 of the Corrupt Gods duet.
Preorder Tainted Blood, book 2, releasing June 9th.*

AUTHOR NOTE



Dear Reader,

Bad Blood is Book 1 of Corrupt Gods, a dark mafia romance duet. While it ***does end in a cliffhanger***, Book 2, Tainted Blood, releases June 9th.

“These violent delights have violent ends...”
—William Shakespeare

xoxo,

Cora and Catherine

PLAYLIST



In no particular order...

Gasoline - Halsey
Kill or Be Killed - New Years Day
Beast Within - In This Moment
The Archer - Taylor Swift
Fine Line - Mabel, Not3s
Only Love - Ben Howard
Bartering Lines - Ryan Adams
Gypsy - Fleetwood Mac
Goddess - Xana
Only Happy When It Rains - New Years Day (feat. Lzzy Hale)
Crazy On You - DIAMANTE
Hit Me Like a Man - The Pretty Reckless
I Really Want You To Hate Me - Meg Myers
Sick Like Me - In This Moment
Turn You On - Stitched Up Heart

[Listen to the Bad Blood Playlist](#)

PROLOGUE



MEXICAN FOLKLORE CALLS IT *LA BODA ROJA*, THE RED WEDDING—A DAY meant for celebration, but one that ended in death and betrayal.

Once the toasts were made, the bullets started flying, though who fired the first shot remains shrouded in mystery. Valentin Carrera loyalists claim that the ill-fated truce between the two most powerful cartels in the world was severed by a Colombian trigger finger, while Dante Santiago's men maintain that war was declared by Mexican treachery.

Others say that there are two sides to every story, and somewhere in the middle lies the truth.

To the next generation, their hate became a new hate. Their pain became a new pain. *La Boda Roja* became as real to them as if they'd stood on the battleground themselves that day.

Eventually, they took their bad blood across the border.

New York fell to the new Santiago Cartel order. New Jersey fell to the Carrera regime.

Twenty years ago, two kings declared war...

And only one dark prince can end it.

CHAPTER ONE

THALIA



TEN YEARS AGO

IT STARTED SNOWING AN HOUR AGO.

Thick, swirling mists of white fell upon our stolen car like hungry animals with soft teeth. Edier switched the wipers on, then turned them off again when the curtains in the old house opposite started twitching.

Fast forward, and the storm is a never-ending eddy as we sit and wait—though what we’re waiting for hasn’t been explained to me, yet. The flakes on the glass are as big as my fist. Drifts are forming against the line of big black cars parked outside the abandoned church, a little way up the street. Our windows keep getting fogged up, but nothing much else seems to be happening out there anyway.

“Do you think they’re praying?” I ask doubtfully.

“Not unless they’re praying for their lives,” Sam jokes from the back seat.

“Zip it, shithead,” Edier mutters, folding a new piece of Juicy Fruit gum into his mouth. “Thalia’s nine, not nineteen. Don’t go giving her nightmares, or else.”

“Or else what?”

“Or else you can find your own way back to New York.”

“They’ve been in there for *ages*,” I say, screwing up my face. “We watched them go in an hour ago.”

Edier shoots me a sideways glance. “You worried, bug?”

I shake my head. “I never worry about *papá*. He’s indestructible.” I-n-d-e-s-t-r-u-c-t-i-b-l-e. I spell the word out a couple of times under my breath. I heard a man say it about him once, and it stuck in my head like a piece of Edier’s gum.

“Me either,” he mutters.

It’s not just my *papá* in there; it’s his and Sam’s, too.

I’m tempted to tell him that I don’t really care what’s happening, and that I’m only here because sleep is boring. I saw them sneaking out of the apartment earlier and I made them take me. Otherwise, I told them I’d squeal.

I never would. These boys are my brothers by a different kind of blood. Cartel blood.

C-a-r-t-e-l.

I didn’t understand what that meant until I saw our *papás* beat a man to death last year—until I saw the same shade of crimson smearing their knuckles.

Ours are clean, but it’s only a matter of time.

I know that in the same way I know my sister, Ella, is really sick, and she might not be getting better.

Glancing out of the car window again, I watch the gargoyles on the outside walls of the church turn from stone-gray to white. They’re starting to look like angry angels. I guess *papá* was right. Some monsters *can* be beautiful at night.

“Why the hell is it so cold in New Jersey?”

Edier yanks his gray beanie down lower over his face until it’s hugging his eyelashes. He’s nine years older than me, but he never treats me like a little kid. He once told me he did most of his growing up when he was my age. I know bad things happened to him before he was adopted by one of *papá*’s friends, but I don’t know what. Sometimes you only need to look into a boy’s eyes to see their truth, and his are swimming in it.

He’s slouched in the driver’s seat, chewing his gum. There’s a notebook balancing on his knee, and he’s pencil-sketching the church. His drawings are unreal. My bedroom walls back home are covered in them. In another life, he might have been an artist, but he’s stuck in this one now, and there’s only one job description.

“Anywhere is cold outside of Colombia, numbnuts.” Sam appears in the gap between the two front seats again, scraping his scruffy brown hair out

of his eyes. “This weather is so chilly...it’s ‘snow’ joke,” he says, grinning goofily at me.

“Ugh, Sam, you’re so lame.”

“Lame-o, same-o.” He laughs. He’s only happy when he’s breaking rules, and we’ve broken *a lot* of them tonight. Sneaking out of *papá’s* apartment after a family party... Stealing Edier’s bodyguard’s car... Driving across state to a place that’s forbidden...

Edier wouldn’t let it go. After our fathers left during dessert, he’d wanted to follow, and nothing was stopping him.

“Cut it out,” I say crossly, as Sam tries to ruffle my hair.

“Where do sheep go to get a haircut? *The baa baa shop.*” He collapses with laughter again, so I smack his shoulder a couple of times with my glove. “Ouch! Stop! Thalia, that hurts!”

I hate it when he takes our age gap and stuffs it full of bad jokes. He thinks he’s funny, but he’s nowhere near as funny as his stepdad is.

“What’s that?” he says suddenly, his face turning serious.

“What’s what?”

He jabs a finger between us. “That.”

Edier leans forward in the driver’s seat to swipe his sleeve across the fogged-up glass. One of the black car doors has opened up. As we watch, a dark shape climbs out and walks slowly in our direction. His head is braced against the storm, his arms wrapped tight around his body. Meanwhile, the black car has zoomed off down the street and disappeared into the night.

He stops under a streetlight that’s more mellow yellow than amber, a couple of feet away from us. He looks both ways, and then he’s raising a cell phone to his ear.

It’s the shortest conversation ever. Before I can blink, he’s pocketing it again.

“Do you think he’s part of the meeting, Sam?” I whisper.

“He’d be inside the church if he was.”

“Can he see us?”

“I doubt it.” Even so, Edier leans across and shoves his notebook in the glove box—just in case we need to make a quick getaway.

“What if he’s cold?” I muse out loud. “He looks cold. It’s so cold out there.”

“You can’t tell from this distance if a person’s cold or not, dummy,” Sam mutters.

“But his ride went and left him!”

Just then, a violent gust of wind divides the driving snow like curtains. At the same time, the hunched figure turns in our direction, and our eyes meet in the darkness.

“He’s a boy,” I gasp in surprise. “He’s the same age as you, Sam.”

“I am *not* a boy,” he huffs out, sounding offended.

“Twelve is *not* a man,” I retort, tossing him a look.

“Thirteen last month, actually.”

“Quiet,” Edier hisses. “I’m the oldest here, I’m driving, so it’s my rules.”

I watch the boy in the snow jerk his head left and right again. It’s almost like he’s waiting for something.

Well, he can’t wait out there. It’s freezing.

Before Edier can stop me, I’m opening the passenger door. The bad weather muffles the sound, but the movement catches the boy’s attention.

“Bug, come back,” Edier hisses again, swiping for the back of my jacket, but all I give him is sliding fingertips.

I kick my boots through the fallen snow. It’s nearly up to my knees.

“Are you waiting for someone?” I call out. “Do you want to come sit with us?”

The boy doesn’t move. He’s watching me with deep, dark eyes like distant planets.

“Did you hear what I—?”

“Go,” he snarls, leaping toward me suddenly. “Get out of here. It’s not safe!”

His English is hesitant, his accent oozy like soup.

“Go!” he says again, pushing me backward.

The force makes me stumble. His words are confusing me.

“Leave her alone!” I hear Edier shout as the squealing of tires cuts through the storm. Seconds later, the sound of gunfire inside the church explodes into the night like the flames from a bonfire.

The next few minutes happen loud and fast.

I see Sam yanking Edier back into the driver seat as another two black cars scream past us out of nowhere.

I feel something vicious whiz past my woolly red toboggan.

I taste ice in my mouth as the boy grabs me by the waist and drives me down into the ground—the heat of his body pushing me deeper into the

snow as he curls around me, protecting me like a brave knight would.

More gunfire from the church.

More shouts.

Edier's yelling out my nickname again. He's spun the stolen car away from the curb, swung it around, and skidded to a stop by the sidewalk I'm now sprawled across.

"Bug—"

His next words are cut short as a bullet hits the trunk.

"Shit!"

Sam kicks open the back door. I feel his hand dragging me toward the car, with the boy still attached to me, but he rolls away at the last second, leaving me free to be yanked to warmth and safety.

"Go," I hear him croak in his strange accent from the white ground. "You don't belong here, *muñequita*... Go!"

"Shut the door! We need to get out of here!" Sam sounds scared as he reaches around me for the handle.

"We can't leave him!"

"He's a Carrera." He spits out the word as if it were poison. "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 boy in the snow unleashes a rush of angry Spanish at him.

He doesn't look scared. Not like us. *Maybe he's a knight, after all.*

Another bullet bounces off the trunk. A hundred feet away, men are still fighting and killing.

Men including *papá*.

But he's invincible, right?

Are the Carreras invincible, too?

Carrera.

I spell out the word under my breath: *C-a-r-r-e-r-a*.

Sam's wrong. He doesn't deserve to die. He tried to warn me. He tried to save me.

"Come with us!" I reach out my hand to him as Edier revs the engine in warning.

The boy shakes his head, his dark eyes blinking something unreadable into mine. "I can't. I won't... This isn't our war yet. But it will be soon."

I open my mouth to ask for more, but he swings his foot out and kicks my door shut. Sam pulls me back just in time. Edier hits the gas with the

sound of police cars rising above the gunfire flames.

No one speaks until we reach the bridge.

We plot our alibis before Manhattan.

All the while, I'm thinking about a knight in the snow and a war that's coming for me.

CHAPTER TWO

THALIA



PRESENT DAY

LIVING UP TO YOUR PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS IS A LOSING GAME.

The dice are loaded. The odds are stacked. But when you're the daughter of a Colombian cartel king and an American angel...? That's like surviving a snake pit with a fading flashlight and a water pistol.

Maybe that's why, at nineteen, I find myself stranded on the island of Manhattan, somewhere between breaking all the rules and doing the right thing.

Stranded between doubt and determination.

Fear and fury.

"He wants to speak with you, Thalia," comes a gruff voice as I'm attempting to slip into the apartment I share with my older sister, Ella, undetected. "And just so you know, he's called three times this morning already."

—Stranded between my father's oppression and the keys to my freedom.

Spinning around on last night's heels, I find the tall figure of Reece Costello bruising up my shadow. He's our head of security in New York—a tough Irishman in his fifties, who lost any trace of an accent around the same time he lost his hair.

He's holding out a cell to me, but it may as well be a loaded gun.

"Call him," he urges.

"At least let me have a double espresso first."

"Not this time."

“Please, Reece.” I clasp my hands together. “It’s too early in the morning to be dealing with parental disapproval.”

“You spit in the devil’s face when you keep a man like him waiting.”

But he pockets the cell with a grimace. I can tell it’s physically hurting him to do it, though.

“Thank you,” I whisper in relief, wishing for the hundredth time that my father was more like him. There’s a layer of sympathy behind those cool, gray eyes—the likes of which never blessed Dante Santiago’s DNA. “Besides,” I add, with a hopeful grin, “ten extra minutes isn’t going to hurt.”

“Wanna bet?”

I watch his eyebrows knit together as he takes in my extra short, overly expensive, silver designer cocktail dress, with the deep ‘v’ lace decolletage that kisses my belly button. Reece has been working for my family for longer than I’ve been screwing shit up on this planet, so I know what he’s thinking. This outfit is anathema to all the ripped skinnies and leopard print Chucks I usually wear. The thing is, I’m on the edge of a life precipice and it’s throwing all my norms into chaos. If that means resorting to every cheap trick in the book, so be it.

“You need to be smarter than this,” he warns, leaning over to shove the apartment door open for me. “He knows you slipped your bodyguards again last night. Even before I made the call.”

“Of course, he does,” I say flatly. “He knows everything.” *Except why I’m acting out so much.* “Listen, I’ll deal with him later. I swear.”

His grunt of disbelief speaks more truth than I ever will. I haven’t spoken to my father in over a month. Our last words were poisoned with blame and anger, and I can’t bring myself to taste the antidote of forgiveness, yet.

I shift my weight from foot to foot to offset my blister pain. “Did he give you a hard time about it?”

He chuckles darkly. “Santiago’s threats lose their jagged edge when they’re delivered from a thousand miles away.” His grin fades. The rifts in his face deepen. “I can’t keep you safe if you keep flying south on me, sweetheart. If you’re in some kind of trouble—”

“I’m not,” I say quickly.

“Where did you go last night?”

“Some bar.”

Another lie.

“You know the dangers—”

“I didn’t cross the Brooklyn Bridge, Reece. I didn’t go anywhere near New Jersey, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Then where—”

“I went hunting... Oh God, not for *that*,” I groan, seeing dark things flash across his face. “Nothing occurred that was A—love related, or B—sex related.”

“Now you’re talking stupid.”

No, solutions, Reece.

Bad solutions to bad problems.

Like the forty-thousand dollars that’s burning a hole in the bottom of my Gucci silk purse.

“Have you been drinking?” he says suspiciously.

“Nope. Gotta go. Have a phone call to make.”

I slam the door and rest my forehead against cool wood, my panic rising up inside me like a flock of birds. I have a secret: a dark and dangerous thing that’s slowly ripping me apart. But I have a plan to make it go away, too. It’s cradled tight to my chest, and I can feel it fluttering wildly as I wait for the birds to disperse.

I find my sister sitting hunched over and cross-legged on the living room couch, her fingers weaving last minute college assignments out of a flurry of furious laptop clicks, a frown of concentration crumpling up her beautiful face.

She hasn’t heard me enter, so I’m gifted a rare moment to watch her unnoticed. She’s a carbon copy of our mom—with the same shiny dark waterfall of hair grazing her shoulders, the same thoughtful gaze, the same quietly ambitious nature... The minute we found out mom used to be an award-winning reporter, there was never any other future for Ella. Getting accepted into NYU and then majoring in Journalism were the two best days of her life. Not even the heavy crown that comes with being cartel royalty was going to crush them for her.

Not even a bad secret is going to derail them.

My sister chooses her family battles carefully.

I fight with all of my tiger heart, too, but I always come up short, even when I’m winning. I begged for years to attend a US college like Ella, and then I dropped out after one semester.

One whole semester.

Sam calls it the Freshman Fuck-up Special. He lasted a whole two years before he was tossing his frat house keys in the trash. There was only one way he was going, and that was straight into the family business...

The Santiago Cartel business.

As for me, I'm like one of those insects that dances above treetops on a summer's evening, with too much energy and no place to go.

"Good night, last night?" Ella finally glances up from the screen as I stumble into the room, leaving a trail of bleeding Louboutin's behind me.

"It was okay." I reach for the volume control on the portable speaker, hitting the mute button with a frown. "You know you're the only person under forty-five who thinks Fleetwood Mac are cool, right?"

"Don't diss the Mac," she whispers in mock horror, raking red-rimmed eyes over my non-existent cocktail dress. "And what the heck are you wearing? You'll give Reece a heart attack."

"Heck" is the closest Ella ever comes to cursing.

"Reece was already flat-lining in the hallway about something else." I go to pick up her iPhone from the coffee table.

Now it's Ella's turn to cluck with disapproval. "Don't tell me you ditched your security again? You know it's not safe on the East Coast. Edier warned us about standing too close to Mexican fire." She waves her hand. "Or something like that."

Ignoring her, I flick through her Spotify playlist for something that wasn't born and bred in the era of bad fashion sense. "Does Edier know you're a flower-powered soul trapped inside the body of a twenty-one-year-old goddess?"

Ella blushes. "Why would Edier give a damn what I am, or what I wear, for that matter?"

"Damn" is her second closest word to cursing. Somehow, she ended up with all the good girl genes.

She's making me feel guilty again. The heat on her face is like a love declaration with a megaphone. Ella's had a secret, long-term crush on another of our childhood friends, Edier Grayson, for longer than she's dreamed of being a reporter.

Unfortunately, Edier doesn't know she exists beyond the parameters of their friendship. Or if he does, he's smart enough not to cross those lines. He's another man who's fully entrenched in my father's cartel. He runs the

New York Santiago territory with Sam as his second, and despite their yin and yang personalities there's not a whole lot of mercy going on between them. Sam's the hot-headed arrogant one, with smooth dealings and fatalistic charm. Edier's like deadly nightshade in comparison—deceptively handsome, but lethal as hell. Sometime over the last decade, my childhood friends turned into killers and sinners, and I guess I'm still mourning the loss of their innocence.

“What's your assignment about?” I ask her.

My sister is so out of place in this dangerous world of ours, and I worry about her constantly. The slightest knock sends her spiraling. I once heard Sam describe her as a fragile flower trying to flourish on a mountain of shit.

She has health issues, too. Ten years ago, I found her crying on the bathroom floor, curled up in a ball of agony. Every muscle in her body was on fire. Next, her knees and fingers swelled up, and then came the rash, ulcers, and the fever. After seven doctors, we finally had a diagnosis, and our father had a new enemy—Lupus.

Her future is unpredictable, a lengthy remission damn near impossible... I toss the iPhone back down on the coffee table with far more force than necessary. I can't think about that right now. I can't think about an existence without her. She's the person I adore most. The one person I would do anything for.

My thoughts stray to last night's blackjack table.

I'm winning.

I'm losing.

“Fascism during the second world war,” she answers with a frown. *Did I mention she's a history major, too?* “By the way, *papá* called.”

“Fascism, huh?” Oh, the irony. “Speaking of which...”

“You're going to have to speak to him sometime, Thalia.” She candy-coats her censure with a smile, but all I see is her sadness. She hates it when we fight, but it's the one thing I refuse to compromise on. “That's unless you want him turning up here in New York...”

A shiver of fear hits my spine. He's too perceptive. He'll know something's wrong the moment his boots cross the threshold of our apartment.

“I'm going to go take a shower,” I say, backing out of the room.

“You know what your problem is?” Her soft words trail me into the hallway. “You and he are way too similar.”

I stop dead, clutching at the door frame as a deep-seated pain takes hold of my stomach and twists...*hard*.

“Mom’s not going to let this go, either. If we can see the good in him, so can you.”

“You know what he is, right?” I swing back around, fighting to keep my cool. “Those scars on his chest aren’t just tattoos, Ella. When he does wrong, he doesn’t just shrug his shoulders and learn his lesson. He *is* the lesson... I suggest you make your assignment all about blood-thirsty Colombian dictators. You have a ton of research already. Twenty-one years, to be exact.”

Her face pales. “Drop it, Thals.”

“Never going to happen.”

CHAPTER THREE

THALIA



I CROSS THE HALLWAY TO MY BEDROOM UNDER A CLOUD OF BLACK thoughts. Most days, I feel like I’m punching underwater, though what or whom I’m punching is usually up for debate.

Today, I have a face and a name.

Marco Bardi.

He’s a small-time mafiosi from Canal Street with an even smaller dick—better known as my latest battle, and the man on the cusp of my older sister’s ruin. He’s also blowing up my cell as I slam my bedroom door shut, his slimeball aura seeping into my life again.

“How much?” he demands as soon as the call connects.

“Forty-thousand.” I scoop out the wads of crumpled dollars from my purse and toss them onto the bed. The notes scatter, tainting the crisp, white sheets with a dirty green.

“Not enough,” he states bluntly.

My teeth slash bloody lines into my lower lip. When all of this is over, I’m giving his name, address, and social security number to Edier. After that, Marco Bardi will never see another sunset again.

“I need more time. Too many of the casinos in Pennsylvania are Santiago-associated. I’m running out of—”

“Not possible. Try another state.”

Damn the assholes who revoked New York’s gambling laws five years ago.

“My father’s security is all over me! I can’t travel to Massachusetts—”

“There’s an obvious answer, bitch.” He chuckles, but it’s an unclear, hostile shock of a sound, like finding unwanted grit in my favorite clam chowder. “Are you going to say it, or should I?”

Shit.

“How are you going to get your fifty-thousand if I get my throat slit?” I say desperately.

“Don’t get cute with me, Thalia Santiago. All I need to do is to press that button and Pornhub gets super juicy.”

Panic fills my mouth. “Okay, wait!” *Don’t say it. Don’t say it.* “Fine. Atlantic City, it is then. As long as I’m there and back in one evening, Bardi.”

There’s a long pause. Even Marco the super creep knows I’m playing fast and loose with my life by venturing into a rival cartel territory controlled by Valentin Carrera and his son.

Is he having second thoughts?

“Do you want your money, or not?” I say, now forcing this decision down his throat as much as I’m forcing it down mine. “I’m all out of options. Atlantic City is the gambling mecca of the East Coast.”

One chance to win all the money I need.

One night to save my sister’s reputation.

Everyone falls, and Bardi was the high cliff edge that Ella never saw coming.

It’s my fault. I *made* her join me in that bar last June where he bought her drinks all evening. I wouldn’t let up at her. I’d practically dragged her there in her nightgown.

He was my sister’s one moment of tasting reckless, a stupid drunken mistake, and now there’s footage of it—grainy images tainting something sweet and precious.

Ella doesn’t know about the tape, yet. Bardi came straight to me. If I can somehow raise the half a million he’s demanding, her big mistake never has to see the light of day. But, like he said, I’m fifty grand short and my deadline is one day away.

Sam and Edier would help me in a flash, but I’m too scared to ask them. One slip up... one loose word... That’s all it’ll take to smear the colors of a rainbow.

I know my sister. This kind of humiliation will disfigure her with cuts that will never, ever fade.

If I told dad, he'd shoot first and dissect the consequences later, and by then it would be too late—the footage would have bled its filth all over the internet, soiling the pages of her history forever. As for me, I don't have that kind of money. Ella and I were never destined to be playthings maneuvered around a cartel power board, but our father snapped invisible collars around us just the same. We have a cool apartment, cars, drivers, but we'll never have enough cash in the bank to lead us into trouble.

Or out of it...

When Bardi started blackmailing me, I had no choice but to lie, to distance myself from my family, to tumble headfirst into a world that I'm not even legal enough for in the eyes of the law.

Gambling.

Ella must have told Bardi I have the kind of memory that retains things at a single glance—book pages, images, the patterns and sequences of playing cards... Last summer in Monte Carlo, my father let me sit in on one of the private tables at Black Skies Casino. Within half an hour, I could predict what cards the dealer was going to turn.

Still, there's a 101 for counting cards and not getting caught. I never get greedy, I start small, and I only play a six-deck game. I move from casino to casino and keep in the shadows of the big players, wearing shorter and shorter dresses as a camouflage and the bright white smile of youth and inexperience.

In four days, I've won four-hundred and fifty-thousand dollars.

"New Jersey it is, then," Bardi agrees.

I sit down hard on the bed, crunching loose dollars, feeling like a cornered animal.

I must be insane to even consider this.

"Does Carrera's influence extend to the casinos?"

"Not by choice, but I believe his son has designs."

Shit.

"Do you know which ones?"

"No idea. Why don't you pay the gambling commission a visit on your way in? If you drop to your knees and kiss their dicks, you might get your answer."

Bastard. "Like I said, do you want your money, or not?"

"You're fifty grand short, sugar. And you've one more day to get it for me."

The next thing I hear are the moans and groans of a woman in the throes of the hardest fuck of her life.

It might be regular porn.

It might be Ella.

Irrespective, it's a shotgun incentive.

"Meet me outside The Haven at eight p.m.," I tell him, as soon as the sex gets muted. "If I'm doing this, you're driving."

"I'll be there."

"The second I hit fifty-thousand, I want that footage, Bardi."

Instead of answering, the line goes dead, stranding me all alone in the wicked wasteland of no guarantees.

With a curse, I chuck my cell across the room and it hits the carpet with a muffled thud. Down the hallway, I can hear Ella chatting with one of her friends. Her laughter floats into my room, via the crack under the door.

I have to protect that sound.

I can't let it fade away.

Tonight, it's play or pay.

CHAPTER FOUR

SANTI



“GOOD MEN FOLLOW THE RULES. SMART MEN FOLLOW THEIR INSTINCTS.” Locking eyes with Legado’s casino manager, I raise my glass, letting the words hang in the air.

The man’s face blanches, and with good reason. While mildly entertaining, the pathetic song and dance routine he just performed broke two of my three cardinal rules.

Never lie to me.

Never waste my time.

I can’t decide if it’s because he’s scared, stupid, or shrewd. All three can be dangerous to a man like me, which is why I don’t care to delve into what drove him to commit his first sin.

Never steal from a Carrera.

“Santi...” He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “You don’t understand...”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong,” I offer calmly. “I understand you perfectly, Ashford. You’ve reeked of desperation for weeks.”

A bead of sweat rolls down his temple. “Santi...”

“Your priorities shifted from the bottom line to a white line.” A tinge of anger seeps through my cool façade.

He lifts his chin. “A little hypocritical from a man who imports and distributes it.”

Well, look who decided to grow a pair of balls.

“I sell it, *cabrón*, not snort it. That shit rots the brain, and like I said, smart men follow their instincts. If you’d followed yours, you would’ve

come to me for a loan. Instead, you helped yourself.”

I’ve known for months that the man was up to his ass in debt and addiction. *Not my problem*. As long as he came to work, did his job, and kept his mouth shut, he could snort fucking bath salts for all I cared.

But he stuck his hand in my pocket and made it my problem.

“Yeah,” he huffs, more sweat glistening his forehead. “At forty percent interest.”

“This is Atlantic City, *pendejo*. You play, you pay.” Finishing my drink, I set the glass on the table before adding, “One way or another.”

I don’t elaborate. My reputation speaks for me. At twenty-two, I’ve accomplished more than men twice my age. New Jersey’s playground bows to me. For two years, I’ve owned its cocaine distribution, and now I’ve seized control of another of its vices.

Gambling.

It’s a side venture that feeds my hunger for power and vengeance. The only thing I love more than the smell of money is the scent of blood.

Neither masks the scent of a traitor.

Does forty-thousand-dollars make a difference in my bottom line? Not in the least. I’ve made twice that during the span of our conversation.

Could I forgive it? *Probably*.

Will I? *No*.

“I swear, Mr. Carrera,” he pleads, his knees bouncing with the frantic cadence of his words. “Nothing like this will ever happen again.”

More empty promises fall from his lips, faster than a golden-tongued auctioneer. Pointless, of course. They’re nothing but wasted energy and white noise.

That’s when I hear a familiar, throaty laugh behind me. One that knows better than to show up three hours early.

Good men follow the rules. Smart men follow their instincts.

My own words chisel into my skull as I rise from my chair, ignoring the frantic bargaining still going on. Ashcroft is throwing himself on the mercy of the devil’s court, and at any other time, I’d enjoy delivering his sentence.

But not today.

He gets a reprieve.

She doesn’t.

Pulling out my phone, I make my way over to her, unsurprised when RJ answers before it even rings—a hallmark of his upbringing. “Platinum Bar

Lounge,” I say before disconnecting the call and tucking the device back inside my jacket. In five wide steps, I make my way to the counter, my hands fisted by my side. “Still can’t follow directions, I see.”

Two slender shoulders stiffen under a curtain of long, dark hair. “Why start now?”

“You weren’t supposed to be here until five o’clock. Explain yourself.”

“Boss.” Like a phantom, RJ, my second in command, appears by my side.

Announcing his presence wasn’t necessary. I knew he’d arrived by the sudden wave of whispers rippling across the bar. The man is a genetically engineered tank stuffed inside a designer suit. It’s what makes him so dangerous. People focus on the muscles shaping his body, ignoring the most lethal one of all.

His brain.

A diabolical machine with the IQ of a genius.

Despite his appearance, RJ Harcourt can blend in better than any of us. Having been born in Mexico City and raised in Houston he’s a cultural chameleon—able to look the part of a hardened narco and speak with the eloquence and civility of a silver-spoon fed CEO.

I nod at my ill-fated casino floor manager, still sitting motionless where I left him. “Please escort Mr. Ashford downstairs.”

Where he’ll pay until his skin drips red.

RJ crosses the room and engulfs Ashford’s arm in his grip. Impressively, the doomed man doesn’t say a word, simply stumbling along the trajectory of his fate, his face the color of spoiled-milk.

Once they’re both out of sight, I shift my attention to my left and the college asshole at the bar with his eyes attached to my sister’s chest. “Leave.”

Cocking a blond eyebrow, he offers a disinterested scan down my handmade Italian suit. “Man, fuck off. I’m buying the lady a drink.”

I don’t argue; I act.

One glance at the bartender is all it takes. With a subtle nod, he discreetly hands me a credit card.

I glance down. “Channing Yeager.” *Stupid name for a stupid fucker.*

“Santi...” a soft voice groans next to me.

“Quiet,” I snap. “I’ll deal with you in a minute. Now, Mr. Yeager...” I say, redirecting my focus. “You have thirty seconds to leave the premises of

your own free will”—leaning in, I lower my voice—“and in one piece.”

That cocky smirk melts off his face like a crayon in the sun. “Y-you’re Santi Carrera...” I have to admit, my blood sings at the terror my name etches into his face. With a shaking hand, he retrieves his card. Glancing briefly at the fuming woman beside him, he sprints toward the exit. “You’re on your own.”

Silence dances an out of step beat between us as I slide into the newly vacated barstool. Both of us wait for the other to speak first, neither wanting to concede.

Without asking, a glass of *Añejo* tequila appears in front of me. Biding my time, I lift my glass, savoring the familiar burn to the familiar tune of spinning slot machines in the background.

“That was a little over the top, don’t you think?” she says finally.

Setting my glass down, I fight a smirk. “No.”

“What are you going to do?” She peers up at me from underneath those dark lashes. “Run every guy who looks at me out of town?”

I’m rarely questioned—even less so in such a petulant tone. Biting back a knee jerk response, I filter my words through clenched teeth. “If I have to.”

There’s a long pause before my little sister tilts her face up at me, the stubborn set of her jaw frustratingly familiar. “It has been a year and a half. How long are you going to punish me?”

Until every trace of Sam Sanders is gone and forgotten.

Until I raze New York to the ground, leaving nothing but a bad memory.

I gaze at her, refusing to give my pain a voice. Emotion equals weakness, and all a man’s enemy needs is one crack. “I’m not punishing you, Lola,” I offer solemnly. “I’m protecting you.”

She stares at me, those bright blue eyes wide with something dangerously close to pity. “Do you know the difference?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” With a growl, I slam the glass down so hard, a piece chips off the bottom and skids across the bar.

She sighs. “Santi, you’re my big brother. I love you. But I’m family, not one of your men.” Lowering her gaze, she spins a silver bracelet on her wrist. “I wear the Carrera name, too.” she adds quietly.

“And the Santiago brand.”

Lola stiffens, her palm dropping from her wrist to cover her right hip. “That’s not fair.”

She's right. She didn't ask to get stalked and kidnapped by one of our family's enemies. She didn't carve a rival cartel's initial into her own skin.

None of that was her fault.

My sister may have grown up as a cartel princess, but she's hopelessly idealistic. She still sees the good in people.

"Life isn't fair, *chaparrita*. The sooner you realize that, the better off you'll be."

I brace for another argument. To my surprise, she inhales a breath and exhales resignation. "*Ugh*. I outgrew that nickname years ago, Santi."

She didn't, but "*shorty*" likes to think of herself as a cartel badass in stiletto heels.

"Too bad your height didn't follow suit."

Groaning at the jab, she leans in and bumps my shoulder. "I've missed you, you big asshole."

My lips twitch, a rare smile threatening to break across my face. "I may have noticed your absence, once or twice."

"Careful," she says, lazily spinning a cocktail napkin with the tip of her fingernail. "That almost sounded like actual emotion."

Anyone else would be picking up their teeth after such audacity, but my little sister is given liberties no one else is allowed.

In America, I am an island—a solitary extension of Mexico's underground. *An empire of one*. The men in my inner circle are invaluable but not irreplaceable. But Lola is different.

Family is priceless. Other than power and vengeance, it's the only thing I live for, and the one thing I'd die for. And, for as much danger as my sister's presence brings, it also brings comfort.

Reaching across the bar counter, I tip her chin toward me. "No more surprises, okay? When I give you an order, it's for a reason." *Her protection and my sanity*.

She nods reluctantly, so I let it go.

Lifting my glass, I motion around the bar. "So how long have you been here?"

Her gaze travels toward the empty chair of my soon-to-be-ex-floor manager. "Long enough."

Growing up as the child of one of the most feared men in the world doesn't allow for the luxury of ignorance. She knows his fate.

That off-beat silence dances between us again, and this time it's laced with tension.

As if desperate to change the subject, Lola surveys the bar. "Swanky place, Santi. It's different."

And by different, she means flashy.

Un-Carrera-like.

Legado Casino is a purchase my father and I didn't agree on. The kingpin of Mexico's Carrera Cartel is old-school. He prefers to fly under the radar. Keep a low profile. Remain an international ghost and blend in.

Fuck that.

I've run our East Coast operation his way for two years. All it's gotten me is a one port cocaine distribution and ridicule on the other side of the river. Now, it's time to do things my way. I'm making noise and lighting cannons. When I'm done, everyone will know the name Santi Carrera.

"Different." I repeat. "So is that dress." I narrow my eyes at the skimpy black material suctioned to her body like Saran Wrap. "Where's the rest of it?"

Those pale blue eyes darken. *Trophy eyes*, my father calls them. Ones that left a string of shattered hearts and broken bones back in Mexico. "Don't start."

I don't plan to.

For now.

"Come on..." Placing my empty glass on the bar, I stand and offer her my hand. "I'll give you a tour."

Lola slides out of her chair with a grin. "Does it include a free stop at the blackjack table?"

"No," I murmur, dragging her behind me.

It's going to be a long fucking summer.



A half hour later, I've paraded Lola through Legado's main casino floor, four more bars, a world-renowned restaurant, two spas, and finally the executive offices on the third floor.

The minute I open the door, a short, perky blonde pushes away from her desk and catapults herself out of her chair. "Good afternoon, Mr. Carrera,

Mr. Spader confirmed your appointment for tonight.”

It's about time.

The Atlantic City Gaming Commissioner has kept me waiting for forty-eight hours. That's not how I do business. People wait on me, not the other way around.

“Thank you, Audrey.” Pressing my palm against Lola's back, I maneuver her toward my office, adding over my shoulder, “By the way, you're fired.”

“I d-don't...” she stutters, her eyes glazing over. “What did I—?”

Do? Nothing. She's simply not needed, and I always trim excess.

My focus returns to Lola as she takes a leisurely stroll around the executive office lobby.

“Cheerful setup you have here.” She folds her arms across her chest while taking in the dominant dual color scheme. One that carries through to every single office—especially mine.

Black and red.

Two colors that not only match my mood, but hide more incriminating colors.

Yet I don't owe her an explanation, so I don't offer one.

“So, you've kept me in suspense long enough.” Circling around me, she perches on the corner of the desk. “What am I going to be doing here all summer? Director of Marketing? VP of Operations?”

“Secretary.”

One word, and my sister's face drops. “Santi! I'm your sister, not your damn secretary.”

Dios mío. Did I not just order her to stop questioning me?

She needs an internship for college credit, so I'm giving her one.

I'm on her in less than two strides, my hands gripping her slim shoulders. “That's right; you *are* my sister. And that's why I can't have you flaunting your ass all over my casino. You're a liability, Lola. I need you in a position that keeps you out of the public eye but always in my sight.”

A muffled sniffle causes me to glance over my shoulder, where I find Audrey watching us with glassy eyes and quivering lips.

“Why are you still here?” I demand.

Blinking, she backs up, nearly tripping over her own feet.

“You okay?” Lola asks. When Audrey nods, she swings her heated gaze back to me. “I don't want to spend three months locked in an office, Santi.”

“It’s the safest place for both of us,” I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. “You have to admit, you’re a goddamn magnet for trouble.”

That’s putting it mildly. Carrera women are the sirens of the underworld.

“Santi, you—”

A crash interrupts her, and we both turn to find Audrey on her hands and knees, frantically shoving the strewn contents of her purse back inside it as if her life depends on it. We watch in silence as she stumbles to her feet, clutching her bag to her chest and trembling as she closes the door behind her.

Lola sighs. “You’re a bastard.”

“Don’t start,” I warn, shoving a finger in her face before turning toward my office with her right on my heels. “She’ll be well compensated for her troubles.”

“You keep treating people like that, you’re going to die alone.”

The words snake around my neck, sinking their truth into my jugular. “Didn’t you learn anything growing up?” I say, my tone razor-thin. “Carreras can’t outrun destiny.”

CHAPTER FIVE

THALIA



LEGADO IS MORE EXTRAVAGANT THAN I EXPECTED. AND TALLER... LIKE A glimmering, rose-gold castle of sin, rising up from the depths of hell to high five the skyline.

The *porte-cochère* is dripping with thick green ivy and big enough to fit at least a dozen cars. Bardi pulls up behind a Porsche Cayenne and we sit in silence, watching parades of money exit their rich-people vehicles and sashay up the black marble front steps and into the glass-fronted lobby. There's not a hint of Vegas cliché about any of it. All the prowling bride-to-be packs have been herded up and penned into some other, less exclusive casino down the road.

The muscles-in-tuxes on the front door have a mean gangster look about them that's ricocheting unease around my stomach. I know security like that. I've been around them all my life. In fact, I'm straight-up ignoring mine...

My cell has eighteen missed calls from Reece already. I won't be able to joke my way out of this one. The new guys he'd put in charge of my security were doing a great job, until I used the bathroom window escape route from a bar on 16th Avenue. As arranged, Bardi was out front waiting for me.

Thirty minutes later...

"Why here?" I ask, tugging the hemline down on tonight's designer dress—a claret-red showstopper with embellished maroon detail that rises and falls with the curves of my body like the waves of an ocean. I hate it, but not as much as I hate the asshole sitting in the seat next to me. Bardi's

been staring at my legs all journey long, and the unwanted attention has left me with two clenched fists.

It doesn't help that I'm running on empty. Adrenaline hasn't allowed me much sleep this week, but it's a small price to pay. I just want out of this mess, and to go back to playing family politics and looking after my sister again.

Fifty thousand. That's all I need.

"Legado is the best in America's Playground." Bardi gives me one of his irritating laughs. "I thought you could start with pure gold and end up with the shitty bronzes where old folk mainline slot machines like junkies."

I glance at the casino entrance again. In a place like this—if I play super smart—I'll be coasting home on a tank of relief by midnight.

"Nice dress." He shifts in his seat, and I catch the foul odor of a fresh wave of sleaze. "Maybe we can come to some arrangement if you come up short... I reckon you'd be worth a couple of grand."

I grind my teeth together before one of my fists makes another dent in his eye socket. He's twenty-five, and not nearly as hot as he thinks he is.

He's smart, though... Like back-up plan smart. Like don't fuck with me, bitch, because I'll press that button regardless smart. He knows there's no way out for me tonight, other than up those damn marble steps.

"Are you sure it's not Carrera affiliated?" For some reason, this place is making me nervous.

"Life's a fucking gamble, right, babe?" He appraises me with half-lidded eyes that dare to stray southward again. "On second thought, you'll never look as hot as your sister. Now, when *she* wrapped her lips around my cock—"

"Go fuck yourself, Bardi!" Angrily, I swipe at the door handle. How dare he disrespect Ella like that. *How dare I lead her astray and get her into this mess in the first place.*

Swinging out of the passenger seat, I grind my five-inch heels into the gray stone driveway. "Little tip for you," I say, leaning back inside the vehicle. "Keep your eyes off my legs, or I'll be showing you this real neat knife trick my father taught me."

I regret my words instantly.

Little tip for myself? Don't piss off the guy with my sister's reputation in his hands.

“Go count your cards, Thalia Santiago,” he calls out from the driver seat. “Go make Daddy proud.”

With his words stinging my ears, I slam the door and make my way into the casino, tensing my stomach muscles as I pass through security. Fortunately, my fake ID checks out. They don’t even glance at my face as they sweep my purse for hidden bombs.

Whoever owns this place has their market by the throat. The main gaming floor is a silky-smooth set-up, with a black and gold decor, mirrored walls, and crystal chandeliers hanging from high domed ceilings. The acoustics are amplifying the sound of the play, making me feel like I’m entering a Gladiatorial arena, where success hangs on the mercy of the cards and the lions of failure are constantly prowling the perimeter.

I take my time, buying up a couple of grand’s worth of chips, drifting between tables, my free cocktail in hand—catching hot glances and returning them with an icy-cold detachment that freezes their hopeful balls off. Eventually, I settle at a table, sliding into the Third Base seat of seven, and stifling my grin. It’s a great position. The one I’ve been waiting for. I can see all the other player’s cards dealt before mine and I’m always the last to hit, split or surrender.

“How many decks?” I ask the dealer, signaling to one of the circling waitresses for another drink.

“Eight,” she says curtly, loading up the shoe. “We only use eight at Legado.”

My grin slips as I watch her insert a red plastic card into the decks. I’m used to counting six. The house edge here just made my job a hell of a lot harder.

The chairs are soon filling up.

I lose a thousand on the first five games—partly intentional, partly out of nerves. There’s some beefy Texan and his trophy wife next to me who are determined to be the big stakes at the table, betting higher and higher to match their egos, like new money often does.

Settling into a groove, I keep my bets under five hundred as I start to see the rhythm in the cards. Before long, I’m ten thousand up, and three drinks down.

Half an hour later, I’ve gained another ten after a tactical, diversionary loss of four.

“Paint it, paint it!” the Texan yells, clawing at the table behind his cards like he’s cat-scratching the felt. The requested card sends him crashing over with a bust hand of twenty-two and a volley of Dallas profanity.

I glance at the dealer’s “upcard” and the one she just revealed. It’s a shiny red ace of hearts and a nine of clubs.

Total of twenty.

I glance at my cards again.

Another blackjack hand.

Twenty-one.

I wave at her and slide the cards under my bet, calculating that I’ve just netted myself another three thousand, when there’s a flash of black and blue to my left.

Two men are moving through the gaming floor on a fast trajectory that’ll bring them within spitting distance of my table. One is short and non-descript, wearing a cheap navy suit and glasses that make him look like a Pro Bono from the ass-end of Queens, but the other... My breath catches... *The other is sinful royalty himself.*

He’s taller than most, making him even harder to ignore. Tousled dark hair, hard penetrating brown eyes that are taking a sledgehammer to my senses, a devilishly-well cut black suit to match... His skin is a rich golden color that only adds to that mysterious aura of money and power, and the high cut of his cheekbones is casting serious shade over a fierce expression.

His movements are sleek and precise. One hand hangs loose from his suit pant pocket, but I can tell it’s more from habit than some masculine, dick-swinging statement. It’s pulling his white dress shirt taut against his lower torso, outlining the wall of muscle underneath which barely shifts as he walks.

Stalks.

Fear ignites in my veins again, and this time it’s the kind that no amount of free drinks can extinguish.

“Ma’am,” snaps the dealer, losing patience with me.

I play my cards while I’m still staring at the man, oblivious to the excited gasps all around me as I claim another win.

He’s close now. I can see the satisfied twist to his cruelly sensual mouth. He’s younger than I’d first figured—maybe mid-twenties—but he’s the sort to view his age as a disadvantage. Maybe that’s why he’s overpromoting his dangerous vibe.

At the last second, I drop my eyes to the table. I feel the heat of his gaze passing over my lowered head like a blast from a furnace, and then he's offering up his broad back to me as some kind of "fuck you, I'm not interested".

He skims past the poker tables, and then he and the other guy disappear into a door marked "private", adjacent to the long bar.

His shadow continues to linger over the floor.

I glance at my fellow players to see if anyone else is affected by the Tornado of Danger that just blew through the casino, but all eyes are fixed on the dealer.

Without thinking, I chuck a couple of thousand in chips into the betting circle, and then scramble to remember the last cards that were played. *Come on, Thalia... keep it together.* But it's like my concentration just disappeared through a door marked 'private', too. The urge to run is so strong, my fingers start gripping the edge of the table. My father always swore that instinct was his greatest weapon.

Whoever that man is, I need to stay away from him at all costs.

That's when I do something I've never done at a blackjack table before—I make a stupid, rash decision that sets my destiny on a collision course with the Prince of Darkness himself.

I add every single chip I've won tonight to my pile on the betting circle before a single card is dealt.

I need to get the hell out of here, and I need to do it fast.

CHAPTER SIX

SANTI



I DREAMED OF HER AGAIN LAST NIGHT.

The young girl in the red toboggan with the brown eyes.

Like always, I see her spilling out of the black sedan, the snow crunching beneath her boots as a nickname trails behind her. She pays no attention to it. We're too locked in our own world—her bright curiosity tainted by my dark purpose.

"Are you waiting for someone?" she asks.

Yes, you...

"Do you want to come sit with us?"

I want her to move so that I can fire two bullets into the car behind her, but I stand frozen, just like the barrier of snow between us.

She shouldn't be here... It isn't safe. I'm a falcon—eyes, ears, and wall of protection for the men inside that church. And right now, the only one I want to protect is her.

Last night was different.

Instead of rushing forward and shielding her from the gunfire, the dream I've had for nearly ten years extended into something new. Something so hauntingly disturbing, I can't get it out of my head.

The young girl in the red toboggan was a woman in a white dress. Her head was bowed, her face hidden behind a thick curtain of onyx hair. A flickering light swung above the corner of the damp, dark room where she knelt with her hands bound behind her back. Even in her vulnerable position, she never cried. Her shoulders never shook with fear.

"I trusted you," she whispered. "You failed us."

Us.

She whispers the word each time I see her, only she's always alone—this unknown woman I shouldn't waste a spare moment thinking about. Yet, her accusation pierces like a dagger to my heart.

The image has haunted me all day, following me about like a phantom. It occupies unwanted space in my mind, bleeding its chaos into my business.

I'm silent as the elevator doors slide open, my gaze settling on the steel door a few feet in front of me. This is where everything makes sense. Four floors below the most exclusive casino in Atlantic City lies the gates to hell.

Down here, nothing matters but what's behind that door. My focus should be the slow build of adrenaline pumping through my veins, but it's not. It's still locked on that damn woman, and it's pissing me off.

She pisses me off.

A manifestation of my own guilt.

My mind devours the word as I press my thumb against the access pad and a faint click grants me entry. Shoving the door open, I step inside my sanctuary of sin.

Fuck it.

Drowning in a sea of guilt is a waste of time and mistakes are nothing but stagnant water: they'll never flow differently. Revenge, on the other hand, is a rushing rapid that, without warning, plummets off the side of a cliff.

It's revenge that fuels my appetite for power and my thirst for blood.

It's in the air tonight. I can smell its coppery scent.

It's time a certain traitor choked on it.

There's a trace of a smile on my lips as I close the door behind me. "Rough day, Ashford?"

An understatement. Getting hit by an eighteen-wheeler would've been *rough*. Ten hours of being tied to a chair and slowly mutilated is a fate worse than death.

Unfortunately for him, that was just the prelude.

My former casino floor manager lifts his chin, and I take a moment to appreciate RJ's artwork. The man has skill. Angry, purple bruises paint the canvas of Ashford's alabaster skin like a damn Picasso.

"Santi, please..." he begs, blood streaming from both corners of his mouth. "I'll get you your money. I swear..."

I don't dignify that with an answer.

Removing my jacket, I drape it over a nearby table and roll up my sleeves as he grovels for his life.

Then I drive my fist into what's left of his nose.

Ashford's head snaps back with a satisfying crack, a fresh river of blood coating his face. "Cleaver," I order, opening my stained hand.

The command needs few words. One is enough for RJ to place a meat cleaver in my waiting palm. As my second, it's his job to anticipate and act. Of course, the fact that he's also my cousin adds a layer of depth rarely found in our line of work.

Depth, not trust.

I depend on a few. *I trust no one.*

Glancing down, I loosen my grip around the cleaver's worn handle and give it a light spin. Simple, but effective. I usually prefer more sophisticated toys, but I'm late for a meeting. Tried and true will have to suffice.

I hold it up just to watch Ashford's swollen eyes well up with tears, and a wet stain appears at his crotch as he pisses himself. "You're making a fucking mess in my casino, Ashford."

"P-please..." he gurgles.

"My father always believed in the punishment fitting the crime." Folding my arms across my chest, I tap the flat end of the cleaver against my chin. "You stole from me, so maybe I should make sure that never happens again." Without taking my eyes off him, I nod my head. Before I can blink, RJ has a folding table placed between Ashford and me.

"N-no. No, please!"

RJ disappears behind him with a switchblade, slicing through the zip tie binding Ashford's hands within seconds. Wrapping his fingers around the man's wrist, he slams his palm onto the table and firmly holds it in place.

Ashford is so fucking dazed he doesn't bother using his free arm to fight back. The *cabrón* just leaves it hanging by his side like an overcooked noodle.

Who am I to refuse an open invitation.

Without hesitation or remorse, I slam the cleaver down, unbothered as his pinkie and ring finger scatter across the tarp. I stare down at the severed digits, kicking the one imprisoned by a gold band out of my sight.

There. I did us both a favor.

Ashford's screams are a calming melody, and I hum the familiar tune. This is where my demons dance. Uncaged, they chant their oaths to the devil while reveling in their own sin.

Four floors up, I am a shark in a designer suit.

Below their feet, I am *El Muerte*.

My shirt is no longer white. Streaks of red soak the front, sealing it to my chest like a second skin.

RJ grabs a handful of Ashford's dark blond hair, snapping the man's head back like a rubber band. Barely conscious, he stares up at me through glassy eyes. He's no longer sniveling. There's a calmness blanketing him that I don't like. It's as if he's straddling two worlds and the gateway is an opaque window.

"Your guilt will force you to choose one day," he wheezes, death rattling in his chest.

Leaning down, I flash a rare smile. "I always choose revenge."

Drawing my arm back, I swing the cleaver, lodging it deep into his carotid artery.



Lola's head snaps up as I open the glass doors to the executive offices. Shoving her chair back, she glides around her desk, her high heels clicking in a staccato rhythm. "Where have you been?"

"Out."

Frowning, she slams the heel of her palm against my chest, halting my movement. "It's ten o'clock at night. Normal secretaries don't keep these kinds of hours, *Santi*."

"Normal secretaries don't have three-fourths of her family plastered across the Ten Most Wanted list, *Lola*."

That shuts her up, which would give me a modicum of satisfaction if this entire day hadn't gone completely left of center.

Leaving her to roll that around in that stubborn head of hers, I take a step forward only to find her blocking my path again. "I've called you six times. That Spader guy has been waiting in your office for over forty minutes." Huffing out a breath, she glances over her shoulder at my closed office door. "He's a real barrel of laughs, huh?"

I know that tone. Subtlety isn't one of my sister's finer qualities. Instead of tiptoeing around a subject, she prefers to hit it head on, run it over, and drag it a couple miles.

On edge from a lack of sleep and waning adrenaline, I scrub my hand down my face—two days of stubble scraping my palm. “Tell me you didn't mouth off to Atlantic City's chief gaming commissioner.”

“Okay, I won't tell you.”

“Lola,” I warn.

“¡Ay, Dios mío! I'm kidding.” She pats my chest. “Lighten up or you're going to have a stroke before you're thirty.” When I don't laugh, she sighs. “Look, you may have saddled me with a shitty, and frankly demeaning job, but I'm not going to make my own brother look bad.”

I stiffen at her affection, but force myself not to react. No one is allowed to touch me. It's an unfortunate by-product of having a mother who didn't know who I was until I was nearly eight years old. That kind of shit damages a kid. Although it wasn't her fault, the scars run deep.

Not her fault.

A common theme in my family with one twisted Colombian root.

The smile on Lola's face slips along with her hand. “I told him your meeting was running late, and you'd be here in ten minutes—of course that was four ten minutes' ago...” Her voice trails off as she tilts her head, her focus dropping from my face. “What's that?”

“What's what?”

“You have something on your neck.” Before I can stop her, she licks her thumb and scrubs at a patch of skin below my ear. Drawing her arm back, she rubs the pads of her thumb and index finger together, the leftover evidence of my sins coating her skin. As her pursed lips slowly part, I brace myself for what I know is coming next. “It's—”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with.” Taking hold of her wrist, I wipe the red stain onto my black suit jacket. “I cut myself shaving.”

She doesn't answer, and with good reason. We both know I'm full of shit. My sister grew up on a compound in Mexico City surrounded by guards armed with military grade artillery where a day's body count was nothing more than dinner conversation.

I've never hidden who I am or what I do from her. However, I prefer to keep her on the outskirts of it, if at all possible.

Releasing her wrist, I slide my gaze toward my office. Smoothing the frayed ends of my patience, I push my family out of my mind and center myself on the business at hand.

“Clear my schedule,” I instruct, following the stench of corruption and cheap aftershave into my office.

Opening the door, I find Monroe Spader bent over the side of my desk, the back of his greasy brown hair bobbing as he tries every drawer like his life depends on it.

“They’re all locked,” I note, closing the door behind me. Monroe’s spine stiffens as he slowly rises to his full height. *All five foot eight inches of it.* “Nice try, though.”

“Carrera,” he stammers, flashing a smile as sincere as a used car salesman. “I was just—”

“Save it.” Motioning for him to get the fuck out of my way, I collapse into my desk chair. “I’d be more offended if you *didn’t* try to break into my files. Any business partner worth my time would never take a man’s word at face value.”

None that are still alive at least.

“So are we...?” He hesitates, fisting the lapels of his suit jacket. *Nerves. They always manifest whether you want them to or not.* At my silence, he clarifies, “Business partners I mean.”

“You tell me.”

The answer had better be a confident “yes” with a lot of ass kissing. Our proposed partnership stands to not only line our pockets, but to carve deep inroads into enemy territory as well.

A deal that infiltrates the one place they aren’t protecting, and all arranged by the stupid grinning puppet staring down at me.

I’ve known for a while that Atlantic City’s chief gaming commissioner is a pious prick with his hand out. Like most politicians, Monroe’s morality is a two-faced whore: one face spews political promises while the other sits on a back-alley auction block.

One who can be collared and screwed for the right price.

Then again, the video footage I sent of him fucking his mistress sped things along.

“I don’t like the imbalance of risk, Santi,” he says, tugging at his collar. I cock an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“I’m the one shouldering all of it. If this deal goes south, I lose everything—my job, my reputation—hell, if enough violations add up, maybe even my freedom. What the hell do you have at stake?”

The fact that he has to ask irritates the shit out of me.

“Fuck your stakes. Your white-washed political risk means nothing. Jobs can be replaced. Reputations can be rebuilt. Even freedom can eventually be reclaimed.” Gritting my teeth, I jab my finger onto my desk. “But if this fucks up, I don’t get a reprimand, *pendejo*. I get tossed in the Hudson with a bullet in the back of my skull. You wanted to play in the big leagues, well here it is.” I spread my arms wide. “Welcome to the upper echelon. You either win big or lose your life. Those are the stakes. You still want to play?”

Sweat beads across his forehead, but to his credit, he doesn’t fold. Instead, he releases his death grip on his lapels. “Yeah, I still want in.”

Dance, puppet, dance.

“Good.” Turning, I motion across the black lacquer desk at the two empty chairs. “Have a seat and update me on the status of the New York situation.”

The New York situation has been a thorn in my side for months. After successfully turning Legado into a gold-plated laundromat, it only made sense to replicate a winning formula and spread it across enemy territory. Unfortunately, a bunch of sanctimonious pearl-clutchers managed to get New York’s gambling ordinance revoked five years ago.

But I don’t accept defeat. I always find a way around it.

“I don’t know how he did it,” he says, shaking his head while lowering himself into the chair directly across from me. “But Senator Rick Sanders managed to get another ‘State gaming commission proposal’ passed through the General Assembly. After burying it deep within an eight hundred and ninety page Senate bill, all that’s left is to get it approved by the State.”

“Any chance they’ll kill it?”

“Not likely. Sanders has solidified a damn-near unanimous vote.”

Unsurprising. New York’s flashiest senator is used to swaying the opposition in his favor. Twenty years ago, he ran New York’s cocaine distribution for Dante Santiago. These days he hides behind that American seal pinned to his lapel while his adopted son plays bitch boy to Santiago’s newest protege.

Edier Grayson: the other side of this fucked up East Coast coin. A piece of currency he's going to wish he never stamped his face on.

A smirk tugs at the corners of my mouth. It seems Slick Rick has lost his edge. For all his street smarts, the Brooklyn asshole-turned-political prick didn't think twice in sliding a few hundred thousand Monroe's way in exchange for his expertise in crafting a new gaming bill.

And in screwing me over.

Well, surprise, fucker. That piece of shit's name has been on my payroll for two years.

"And he has no idea what's about to happen?" I ask, steepling my fingers.

Monroe's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "Senator Sanders? No, none. And as far as Sanders's son and Edier Grayson are concerned, this is a New York power play." Mimicking my gesture, he steeples his fingers under his chin. "Once the bill passes, they're free and clear to turn their bars and clubs into high-end casinos so they can—"

"Get a piece of Legado's action," I finish for him.

Of course. Why wouldn't they? With the current ban against any legalized gambling that doesn't involve a scratch off, New Jersey is siphoning money straight out of Santiago's deep pockets. Pissed off New Yorkers have no problem crossing state lines to blow their paychecks at the toss of the dice.

And Legado is more than happy to oblige.

Folding my hands, I tap the pad of my thumb against my bottom lip. "So we're firmly on the offense?"

"Acquisition of BarNone is a solid lock," he answers confidently. "I have a contact at the health department who owes me a favor. After Sanders was served a laundry list of code violations..." He smirks, flashing teeth straight out of an orthodontist's wet dream. "Well, let's just say, the 'good' senator isn't one to bother with renovations and upgrades."

Or with details.

"So he's set an asking price?"

He nods. "And he's highly motivated to sell. We should be able to add his club to our assets by the month's end. Your first behind enemy lines."

The first of many.

"Our assets?" I flash him a heated stare.

A nervous laugh escapes his crooked smile. “My apologies, Santi. It was a slip of the tongue. I meant *your* assets, of course.”

“See that it doesn’t happen again, Spader,” I warn darkly. “Or the next ‘slip’ may be onto the floor.”

Wincing, he pushes his falling glasses back up his nose. “There could be one slight hiccup.”

“How *slight*?”

Pulling a handkerchief from the inside pocket of his cheap blue suit, he dabs his forehead. “Another buyer has thrown his hat in the ring—and he’s offering twice what we are.”

I don’t like the hesitation in his voice. “Who?”

He winces again. “His son.”

I slam my palm onto the desk. “*¡Hijo de su puta madre!*”

Sam Sanders is like the gift that keeps on giving. A goddamn poison repeatedly infecting my family. Two years ago, Valentin Carrera sent his only daughter to the United States, and I allowed her to fall into *his* hands.

One blink and the Santiago Cartel left their stain on one of my own.

My little sister.

A kid who mistook affection for annihilation.

Lola was my responsibility, and I failed her.

And here this *pinche cabrón* is again, sticking his dick where it doesn’t belong.

This war between the Carreras and the Santiagos may have started a generation ago, but its legacy has been fed by the river of bad blood dividing New Jersey and New York. Between Carrera-ruled territory and Santiago-owned grounds. Between a new generation hell-bent on stoking the fires of a twenty-year feud. Between the son of Valentin Carrera and the spawn of Dante Santiago’s inner circle.

The original debt has yet to be paid.

The sin against my sister has yet to be atoned.

And now with the Santiagos attempting to backdoor my backdoor, the East Coast just became a powder keg of anarchy.

“If Sanders wants to join the game, let him,” I say, meeting Spader’s surprised gaze with a hardened stare.

“What?”

“Have your New York contact double Sanders’s offer.” *Compliments of an offshore shell corporation.* “While he’s there, have him drop by Sanders’

father's office and give him this." Pressing my thumb against another access pad, I wait for it to click before opening my desk drawer and pulling out a brown office-sized envelope. Monroe doesn't say a word as I toss it across the desk. "That should deflate his balls for a while."

He reaches forward, then stalls. He doesn't want to look inside, but he will. The envelope is a forbidden apple, as tempting as it is poisonous.

It takes less than three seconds for him to give in. Dragging it off my desk and into his lap, he unpins the top, bows his head and peers inside, all the color draining from his ruddy cheeks. "Jesus, Carrera. Remind me never to get on your bad side."

"You're already on it, Spader. It's the only side I have."

"Santi?" Monroe and I both turn as Lola appears in the doorway.

I toss her a hardened glare, her casual tone grating on me like nails on a chalkboard.

She rolls her eyes. "I mean, *Mr. Carrera*."

Still petulant, but a concession.

"I'm busy, Lola."

"I know, but—"

"That means no calls, and no interruptions," I say, in a clipped tone. "If I need something, I'll let you know."

The temperature in the room plummets as her fingers tighten around the doorframe. I smile to myself as I catch a flicker of the infamous Carrera temper dancing in those icy blue eyes.

"Understood, *sir*. However, I thought you'd like to know that I just got a call from surveillance. One of your guests has been caught on closed-caption counting cards."

"Then have security deal with it."

"It's your casino." She shrugs, slowly closing the door. "So, if you don't care about getting cheated out of fifty-thousand dollars..."

I'm rising from my chair before she can finish her sentence. Gripping the edge of the door, I swing it open, fire blazing through my veins. "Some bastard just gamed me out of fifty grand?"

"Oh, trust me." Lola laughs, trailing behind me as I push past her. "The only *bastard* around here is you."

Monroe and his sweaty forehead are forgotten as I exit the executive lobby with murder on my mind. I've already killed one man for stealing from me.

Spilling blood twice in the same day is only going to worsen my mood.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THALIA



THERE'S A WORD FOR THAT MOMENT WHEN VICTORY IS SNATCHED FROM you, when you're stretching for the finishing line and someone overtakes you with less than a foot to go.

Disbelief.

It fuses with another when there's fifty thousand dollars-worth of casino chips stashed in your purse, and the heavy hand of authority just smacked down on your left shoulder.

"You need to come with us, ma'am."

No, thank you.

His accent is scaring me more than his tone. It's all flat vowels and thick syrup...

Mexican.

"W-why?" Heart thudding, I rise from my seat to find a wall of those muscles-in-tuxes behind me. I glance at each of them in turn, but their blank expressions are like a second uniform. "Is something wrong?"

The hand on my shoulder tightens. A second later, my exit from the table is an embarrassment and a stumble as I'm yanked out onto the gaming floor and flanked, two-deep, while I'm forced to undertake the gambler's walk of shame.

So much for my gladiatorial contest. The emperor just condemned me, and now the lions are loose.

"Is this how you treat all your patrons?" I shove the hand away, recovering some of my bite, but it fizzles out again when we skirt the main

entrance and head straight for the door marked “*private*”. “Look, if you’re going to throw me out, just throw me out, okay?”

“Can’t do that.” A hand finds my shoulder again.

“This is bullshit! I won that money fair and square!”

But it’s like talking to concrete. Golden-skinned concrete, with flat, black eyes that are unnervingly similar to those of the man I saw walking through the casino half an hour ago.

“We can’t throw you out for counting cards,” the tallest admits. “Too bad the state laws aren’t the only laws in this place.”

Too bad for me, you mean.

I’m man-handled into an elevator carriage that’s wall-to-wall mirrors. I keep my eyes fixed to the floor as they pile in too, filling up the small space with their unspoken threats. I don’t want to see my fear reflected back at me. *I don’t want to see my failure.*

“At least let me have my purse.”

“Can’t do that.”

If he says that to me one more time, I’m shredding his boot with my stiletto heel.

I then watch, incensed, as he opens it up, removes my phone and pockets it.

“You make any calls on that thing, you’re paying the bill!”

“Whatever you say, *ma’am*.”

The elevator carriage stops at the third floor. I’m led out and marched down a long, hallway toward a pair of double doors. There’s a receptionist’s desk to my left, but the chair is empty.

One of the tuxes raps his knuckles and a deep voice answers.

“Bring her in.”

“Your funeral, *puta*,” hisses one of the tuxes, opening up and giving me a hard shove inside. “Don’t forget to smile for the camera when *Santa Muerte* blows you a kiss.”

“Who the hell is—?”

My question is drowned out by their laughter, and then the doors slam shut behind me.

Silence.

“Welcome.”

It’s a black greeting, but all I see is crimson. It’s all around me, boxing me in—a deep, punishing color that makes the walls look like they’re

bleeding out.

The whole effect is so distracting it takes me a minute to focus on the tall, dark man leaning against the front of his desk, with his fingers curled around the lip of the polished glass and his long legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles.

The Prince of Darkness himself.

At first glance, it's a pretty *laissez-faire* stance considering the reason why he's dragged me all the way up here. After all, he just caught me scamming fifty-grand out of—*what I assume*—is his casino.

The thing is, I've never relied much on first glances. Look harder, and you find the tiny details that paint the real truth—stuff like the unpleasant tilt of his lips, the rigidity in his broad shoulders, the still manner, and the faint bloodstains on the collar of his white dress shirt... He's not the first man I've met who's swapped lipstick for carnage.

I straighten my dress and stand as tall as my five-foot-six frame in five-inch heels will allow.

"Why am I here?"

It's a question we both know the answer to it, but when there's a sticky moment, I tend to run my mouth off, and it's usually a sprint toward trouble.

"Why do *you* think you're here?" he says slowly.

His voice is like the darkest richest chocolate cake I've ever tasted, only to find it stuffed with Carolina Reaper chilis after the first chew. He has an accent too, and it's one I'm trying very hard not to place in case it lets the fear back in.

"Because you're impressed with my blackjack skills?"

He doesn't answer at first. Instead, he tilts his head to cover every inch of my body with those terrifying dark eyes.

If hate had a name, he owns the copyright. I've never seen so much antipathy in a man's expression.

In turn, I can feel my own force shield of hostility coming into play. Yes, I screwed up, but he doesn't have to do the whole Miami Vice interrogation thing on me. I'd rather take my chances with the cops.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, *sir*," I say, taking a couple of steps toward him. "But isn't it customary to sit *behind* your desk in an office environment, instead of against it?"

His lips don't even twitch. "It all depends on the type of business. Paperwork necessitates chairs. Reprimanding a thief requires something a little more *inventive*."

My stomach drops. I know a threat when I hear it.

"What's your name?"

"Mickey Mouse," I blurt out. "But only on the weekends. What's yours?"

"Don't play stupid games with me. How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

He scoffs. "*Maldita mentirosa*. Show me some ID."

"I am *not* a fucking liar" *As far as he knows*. "And that might be tricky," I say, glaring at him. "Considering your security just walked off with my purse."

"Stealing is a contagious disease, *muñeca*."

"But easily explainable if you're innocent in the first place," I lie, bristling at his contempt. *Doll?* I'm not his damn doll. I'm half Colombian, which means I'm fluent in Spanish and bullshit names from men who refuse to tell me theirs.

"We'll see about that." He pushes off from his desk and walks toward the door, blasting me as he passes with a scent-rush of spice, cedarwood, and sinister, and an overriding sense that there's a subtext here I'm still not grasping. "RJ," I hear him bellow into the hallway. "Get me her purse."

There's a flash of silver as it's handed over to him, and then the door slams shut again.

Seconds tick as he makes his way back to me, dangling my purse between his fingers like it's something repellent.

Firing his scornful gaze into mine, he upends the entire contents onto the floor. The sound of plastic clattering across the black marble tiles is the noise of my last hope crashing and burning.

"You bastard!"

"¡*Silencio!*"

Once done, he tosses the empty purse away, and circles back to stand behind me. I flinch as a couple of casino chips hit my toes and go rolling off into death spirals.

"Eyes to the front," he snaps, when I try turning to face him.

"Are you some kind of weird—?"

"Don't test me, *muñeca*!"

“Fine,” I mutter, doing as he says, but only because his close proximity is malfunctioning my defenses. My body braces as his cologne seeps into my skin. In my mind, he’s already tilting his head again and glazing my back with more of his hate.

“I don’t see any ID down there, Mickey,” I hear him murmur. “I don’t even see a credit card.”

“I must have left them downstairs,” I say stiffly. “Maybe your men took them when they took my phone.”

“Admit it, *muñeca*. You haven’t spoken a word of truth since you entered my office.”

I can’t bring myself to answer that when my sister’s happiness is lying in ruins at my feet.

“I’m going to require compensation for the inconvenience you’ve given me and my men tonight.”

“I don’t have any money,” I grit out, shivering with fear and loathing when I feel his hot breath lacing the nape of my neck.

He laughs—thick, throaty, and disbelieving.

More of that hot breath.

More fear and loathing.

“Do you see that picture behind my desk?”

Somehow, I drag my eyes from the mess on the ground to a gilt-framed, six by four, oil painting hanging on the wall, depicting a smiling skull of a woman with red feathers braided through her long, dark hair. She’s terrible in her beauty. Haunting, intimidating... She’s also half in profile—enveloped in a cloud of thick, gray smoke—and something tells me I never want her turning her empty gaze in my direction.

“What is she?” I whisper.

“Who is she,” he corrects, moving in so close I can feel the outline of his snarl against my hair. “*Nuestra señora de la Santa Muerte*. Mexico’s venerable Lady of the Dead...”

If he hears my sharp intake of breath at this, he doesn’t comment.

“*Santa Muerte* serves as protection from my enemies... *Thalia Santiago*.”

Shit.

Before I can run, a steel-like vise is wrapped around my wrist and I’m being spun around to face him.

“You’re Santi... Valentin Carrera’s son,” I gasp out in horror.

“And you’re trespassing into *very* dangerous territory. Why the fuck are you here, *señorita*?”

“I-I didn’t know this was your casino, I swear.”

“You cross that state line, you may as well have Carrera stamped all over your fucking passport. Did your father send you to spy? To steal from me?”

“No!” I try to yank my wrist away, but his grip is too firm. “He doesn’t even know I’m here!”

“¡*Maldita mentirosa!*” he curses again.

“I’m not a fucking liar! And neither am I a *muñeca*!”

“All dolls break if you apply the right kind of pressure. Did the poor little cartel princess decide to have her fun at my expense, or is this Edier Grayson’s doing?”

Oh Jesus, he’s terrifying. I’m never getting out of here alive.

“I needed the money!”

He drops my wrist as if it’s burning him; as if he can’t bear my touch for a single second longer. “You expect me to believe the daughter of one of the richest sinners in the world is coming up short on pocket change?”

“It’s the truth!”

“In a thousand-dollar dress?” He studies my face for a beat, and then takes a step back. “Prove it.”

“I don’t think I—”

“Drop to your knees, Colombian *princesa*,” he clarifies scornfully. “Go ahead, gather up your winnings if you need them so badly.” He kicks a couple of loose chips in my direction with the toe of his dress shoe. “I’ve always wanted to see how low a Santiago can go.”

He can’t be serious?

That’s when I know his hate for me will never match my hate for him.

“Well?” He slides his hands into his pockets and waits, daring me to expose myself as an even greater fraud than he thinks I am already.

It’s just a power thing, I tell myself as I sink to the floor. *Think of Ella. Think of the bonfire I’m going to make with that footage.*

Still, it doesn’t stop the tears of shame from burning my eyes as I gather up pieces of black and gold plastic at the feet of one of my father’s greatest enemies.

“Why did you ask me for my name if you knew it already?” I mutter.

There's movement in my periphery as he squats down on his haunches, bringing his face level with mine. "Because big cats like to play with their mice before the kill... *Mickey*." There's a pause. "*Dios mío*, look at you," he mutters in disgust. "On your hands and knees like a whore. Why do you need it so badly, anyway? Daddy cut your allowance?"

"Like I said," I rasp out, my voice trembling. "He doesn't know."

I find myself staring down the barrel of his gun.

"Wait!"

"I'm not known for my patience, *señorita*," he says, slowly flexing his fingers around the grip. "If I were you, I'd start talking. Because on my side of the river, the punishment fits the crime, and I've already ruined one thief's day. Would you like me to make it two?"

Hell no. But I can't afford to back down now.

"You're not known for your compassion either, Santi Carrera," I grit out. "Why the hell would I bother telling you anything if you're just going to kill me anyway?"

"You have three seconds."

"Go ahead. Pull that trigger. Start the war to end all wars. See how far my father will go to avenge the death of his youngest daughter." Now it's my turn to shake my head in disgust. "I know all about you Carreras and your dirty tricks and deceit. You call me a *maldita mentirosa*, but tell me, have you taken a good look in the mirror lately?"

I'm rewarded for my words with cool steel pressed against my forehead. Whatever strings of patience this man had just snapped at my insults.

Me and my big mouth...

I close my eyes and wait for the bullet.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SANTI



IT'S HER UNAPOLOGETIC INSOLENT THAT SHREDS WHAT LITTLE RESTRAINT I have left.

What the fuck happened to the pathetic *princesa* who was just crawling around on her hands and her knees in front of me, scraping up casino chips like they were her last meal ticket?

Now there's this...*fearlessness*, but that emotion sits too close to stupidity. Thalia Santiago seems to have confused the two. There's no other explanation for her to fling insults at me with a loaded Glock pressed against her forehead.

After I'd stopped pacing long enough to watch the video footage, I'd recognized her immediately. Cartel warfare isn't contained by border walls. It spills out like poison, turning foreign soil into a game of land chess. The difference between a good boss and a dead one is knowing all the players. And just like in regular chess, I know when to watch and when to attack. Once I saw that heart-shaped face and long dark hair—a vision that struck a hauntingly familiar chord inside me—playing strategically was no longer an option.

A Santiago is a threat—*whatever form it takes*.

“Either answer the question or pull the trigger.” Her breathy voice fans across my face. “Indecisiveness is a poor quality in a leader, *Señor Carrera*.”

A valiant effort, but I see right through her. It's like my father always said, *an enemy in a designer dress is still an enemy, and seduction wrapped in forced bravado is still fear*.

She's scared, but her pride has her walking a very thin line with no safety net. It shouldn't surprise me. After all, it's the first of the seven deadly sins—closely followed by greed—the one that landed her here in the first place. So why have I absorbed the razor-sharp barbs spilling from those luscious lips and not pulled the trigger?

I have no idea.

Thalia Santiago should have drawn her last breath already. Instead, my finger is curled around the trigger, the bullet still lodged inside the magazine.

"You're a brave little thief, *señorita*."

"I'm not a thief," she says, her nostrils flaring.

"Right. And I'm not a killer." I reach out to trail a finger down the long, graceful line of her neck. The move catches her off guard. She flinches, her body betraying her. Smiling to myself, I brush my thumb against the erratic beat of her pulse point. "Nobody likes labels, but reality doesn't give a fuck about your feelings. Besides, considering your bloodline, you should be used to hearing much worse."

Those midnight eyes shift to the side, avoiding my stare. Her mouth may spew venom, but her eyes speak the truth.

I was right. This girl is hiding something.

And this standoff just took an interesting detour.

"I'm not a thief," she repeats, her voice brittle with emotion. "I earned that money."

"By cheating me out of mine. Are we adding 'liar' to your list of offenses, as well?"

Thalia snaps that fiery gaze back to me, her small show of weakness now firmly tucked away behind that beautiful exterior.

An exterior I find much too intriguing.

I can't allow desire to distort reality. Not here. Not with *her*. Business is my lover, power my mistress. Women are simply an enjoyable pastime, not a necessity. Watching my father's humanity erode away after my mother's "accident" taught me to detach emotions from physical needs.

La Boda Roja. The Red Wedding.

The day my father held my mother in her arms as the light slowly drained from her eyes. Luckily, she survived—but miracles come at a cost. The woman who held his black heart awoke to find that a brain hemorrhage

had stolen three years of her life—including memories of her husband and children.

Truth became inconsequential. In my father's eyes, Dante Santiago had cursed him with a fate far worse than my mother's death. He erased her love.

Twenty years have passed, and while the wounds have healed, scars never fade...

"Screw you, Carrera," she hisses, her outburst drawing my attention back to her. "Counting cards isn't illegal in New Jersey. Your men just said as much. You'd think as a casino owner, you'd be more familiar with local law. In fact, I could have *you* arrested."

"For what?" I ask, mildly amused.

"Harassment. Assault." She glances down at the strewn contents of her purse. "Robbery. Take your pick. All three would hold up in a court of law."

Her offended tone makes me laugh. Santiagos only care about laws when they're trying to circumvent them. Not that a Carrera has ever been accused of planting a bloodstained flag on moral high ground. However, I'm not the one standing here spouting judicial jargon like Lady *fucking* Liberty.

Hauling her to her feet, the sweet scent of jasmine disorients me as I trap her against the wall. Irritated by my body's response to it, I revel in her sharp inhale as my forearm settles deep within the plunging neckline of her dress. "The only law that matters here, *muñeca*, is mine."

"I told you, I'm not your doll!"

"And I told you..." The rest of my threat dies in my throat as the sound of gunfire erupts outside my office door. It's not just a shot or two, either.

My mind is already three steps ahead of my feet. Grabbing Thalia's wrist, I tug her away from the wall to go and investigate when a dead weight drags me back again.

I swear to God, this woman...

I glance down to find her crouched low, her heels digging into the floor. "Get the fuck up," I command through clenched teeth. "You're leaving scuff marks all over my Lux Touch marble."

"Where are you taking me?"

"On a date," I growl, weighing the consequences of putting a bullet between those pretty eyes right here. "Where do you think?" I wave my gun toward the closed door. "Out there to see what the fuck is going on."

“But those were gunshots.”

And the wide-eyed innocent act continues.

Pressing the grip of the Glock to my forehead, I fight to reign in my temper as another round of gunfire lights up the lower level of my casino. “Yes, and those are, too.” A flicker of emotion flares across her face at my sardonic tone. “If we wait another thirty seconds, they’ll explode the back of our heads against that wall. Now, get up!”

Whether motivated by intimidation or by the thought of dying alongside a Carrera, Thalia climbs to her feet. Dragging her behind me, I storm across the lobby and barrel through the double glass doors. Glancing to my left, I make a snap decision.

There’s no time for the elevator.

Thalia stumbles in my wake as I sprint down the hallway and into a small alcove. Opening a camouflage square within the wall, I press my thumb against a hidden access pad. Within seconds, a sealed door opens, granting us entry to the fastest and most discreet access to the main casino floor—a private stairwell.

Taking a calculated risk, I release my hold on Thalia to shove my hand in my pocket and pull out my phone. With one press of a familiar button, I lift it to my ear. After the first ring, I glance over my shoulder to find Thalia still matching me step for step. On the second ring, RJ answers, the sound of war waging in the background.

“What the fuck?” I roar, my pulse matching the cadence of my steps.

“Invasion,” he answers, his even-keeled tone out of place among the turmoil. “Ten—at least twelve men came out of nowhere and started firing. There were a few AR-15s but, Santi...”

“What?” I snap.

“Most are packing M27s.” He says nothing else. We both know what he’s implying. M27s are infantry automatic rifles—military grade. A fan favorite of the Marine Corps.

My grip tightens around my phone as the scent of jasmine floats over my shoulder. *And guess whose daddy is an ex-marine?*

“Casualties?” I ask, my voice tight. *I’ll deal with her later.*

“Negative.”

Gracias a Dios. Not that I’d mourn faceless people, but spilled civilian blood is bad for business. “Contact Rocco. Have him meet me at the west

executive door.” I don’t wait for an answer. Disconnecting the call, I slide my phone back in my pocket.

Thalia remains silent, her high heels clicking a frantic tempo as we make our way down the third and final flight of stairs, through a second door, and straight into the jaws of anarchy.

Screams bounce off the chrome and crystal as well-dressed patrons scatter like prey. They’re trapped in a chaotic web spun from the heart of the casino floor: an epicenter of destruction where at least a dozen pairs of black combat boots are crushing the expensive green felt of my gaming tables.

I assess the situation. With steel-plated eyes, I scan the black military fatigues of the ski masked intruders opening fire, the *rat-tat-tat* of their automatic rifles nearly drowning out the cries. Rage does nothing but dilute critical thinking and incite costly mistakes, so I lock it away and aim my gun.

“Don’t shoot them!” Thalia screams, grabbing hold of my arm.

Un-*fucking*-believable.

“Would you prefer to be on the receiving end?” I say, pushing her away. “It would be my pleasure to arrange it.” Taking aim again, I fire, not bothering to hide the smile that curves my lips as my bright green blackjack table stains a deep shade of red.

“Oh my God.”

As my target falls to the floor, Thalia looks shocked. We catch each other’s gazes and find we can’t look away. For the first time since she stepped into my office, there’s no façade, pretense, or bravado between us. We see each other for who and what we are—two products of a dark and twisted history.

“Boss...”

A rough voice on my left breaks the stand-off, and I turn to find Rocco Altieri, my best lieutenant and head of security appearing out of nowhere, fists clenched, and gun drawn. He looks like hell, which is exactly where he’s headed.

Thalia is forgotten as I lunge and shove my gun under his chin. “How the hell did they get through security?”

“They didn’t,” he says, looking me dead in the eye. *No fear*. Having a gun pulled on him is simply part of the job. “I’ve been stationed at the front

entrance all night. They didn't come through my detectors." He slides a hardened gaze over my shoulder. "*Someone* let them in through the back."

I've heard enough.

Retracting my gun, I spin around to take Thalia's arm. Looking dazed, she doesn't protest as I slingshot her into Rocco's chest. "Here. Take her back to my office. And don't let her out of your sight." He gives a curt nod, and I watch with clenched teeth as her delicate wrist is swallowed by his huge hand.

"No, wait!" As he drags her toward the stairwell, Thalia tosses a panicked look over her shoulder. "You can't just leave me with him!"

I don't offer her an answer as I turn my back and fight my way through the rush of patrons still pushing and trampling each other toward the exit.

First, I'll deal with the destruction and carnage she caused.

Then I'll return and create my own.

As more of my men flood the casino floor, the ambush settles to a dull roar. I fire a couple more shots, sending two more motherfuckers six feet under.

With the main floor less congested, I survey the damage.

My casino is a mess, but the only bodies littering the floor are swathed in black and cloaked in ski masks. It makes no sense. Why barge in guns blazing, only to miss every goddamn target?

It's almost as if this wasn't intended to be a mass murder as much as...

I stop cold.

A suicide mission.

The gun sits like concrete in my hand as I stalk forward, past a row of silent slot machines. As I turn the corner into one of the private poker rooms, every muscle in my body coils in hatred. Every drop of blood boils for revenge. And every instinct I had from the moment I laid eyes on that surveillance footage roars with vindication.

Because that's when I see it... A declaration of war, perfectly drawn graffiti on the back wall by a hailstorm of bullets, its tail curled up like an exclamation point.

The Santiago Scorpion.

Thalia.

Icy numbness overtakes me as I turn slowly, her name a rhythmic chant in my head.

Thalia. Thalia. Thalia.

My mind is a spinning funnel of revenge as I make my way back through the now quiet casino. It isn't until a hand grabs my shoulder that the funnel touches down, leveling everything in its path.

"Boss."

The deep, accented voice is familiar, but I'm too far gone to discern an ally from an enemy.

"Santi," he tries again, stepping in front of me.

The black haze clears, and I blink him back into focus.

RJ.

"Call a clean-up crew," I instruct, shoving him out of my way. "Get those dead Colombians out of my casino."

"Santi."

"And call Chief Rinaldi at the Atlantic City PD. If that *cabron* knows what's good for him, he'll make sure there's no trace of a report."

"Santiago!" he shouts.

"What?" I snap, finally turning back to face him.

"It's Lola..."

For the second time in less than ten minutes, I stop cold. Suddenly, it's no longer Thalia's name drumming a furious beat inside my head.

Lola.

I've been so consumed by the daughter and the attack, I pushed everything else to the side—including the whereabouts and safety of my own family.

After I'd recognized Thalia on the surveillance footage, I'd sent Lola to the lobby and Monroe back to the hole he crawled out of. I needed to be alone when she was brought to me. I couldn't protect and punish at the same time, but while I bore my fangs upstairs, the wolves had already sunk theirs into a main artery.

"Where is she?" I demand.

His answer is to walk back toward the destruction, knowing damn well I'll follow.

My own casino becomes a maze of lights and blind turns. All I can hear is the punishing thud of my heart slamming against my ribcage.

My movements are mechanical as we reach the lobby. Lola is on the floor, her back against the wall, her bare legs sprawled out in front of her like a rag doll. Her eyes are closed, and her sun-kissed skin is the color of

chalk. The tight, black dress I've spent all day bitching about is ripped from her mid-thigh all the way up to her hip.

And coated in thick, sticky blood.

I drop to my knees. "*Chaparrita...*"

Lola opens her eyes and forces a weak smile. "I'm fine."

I can't think straight. The black haze is back, and this time, it's suffocating me. "They'll pay," I swear, brushing a piece of drenched hair away from her face as I press a kiss to her forehead. "They'll all pay."

"Santi, it's just a nick."

"Flesh wound," RJ notes behind me. "Barely grazed the skin. A few stitches and she'll be as good as new."

Dragging my finger through the puddle of blood staining the floor, I rise to my feet and shove it in his face. "Do you see that? *That* is Carrera blood. *Family blood*. What does that mean to you, RJ?"

"Vengeance," he says solemnly.

"Take her to the car," I instruct as *El Muerte* awakens. "I'll be there in a minute."

"What?" Lola's eyes widen as I round the front desk and head back toward the main casino. "RJ! Put me down! Where's he going? Santi!"

I keep walking, forbidding myself to look back. If I do, I'll insist on taking her to the hospital myself—and I can't.

Not when I have a dark promise upstairs still waiting to be kept.

CHAPTER NINE

SANTI



I KICK MY OFFICE DOOR OPEN TO FIND THALIA PACING LIKE A CAGED animal. The moment she sees me, she freezes, the breath whooshing from her chest. “Where have—?”

The remainder of her words are cut off. In four wide steps, I’m across the room with my hand around her throat. Those dark eyes flare in panic seconds before I’m pinning her against the wall. “*You*,” I say with a growl.

She claws at my hand, her toes barely dusting the floor. “You’re hurting me!”

Grabbing her chin with my other hand, I turn her head to the side and press my lips against her ear. “Bruises are a blessing, Thalia Santiago,” I murmur, my tone deceptively calm. “They should be bullets for what you’ve done.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Don’t lie to me!” I roar. “A dozen men just shot up my casino. My fucking sister got caught in the crossfire.”

Thalia stills. “Is she...?”

“Dead? No, unfortunately you failed.”

“Me?” Startled, she blinks at me as if I’ve slapped her. “You can’t think that I planned this?”

Not at nineteen... I know how old she is, and it sure as hell isn’t twenty-one like she claims. No, this turn of events has Edier Grayson written all over it.

“I think you were the decoy: a shiny distraction who opened the gates and diverted my attention. Someone should have warned you, *muñeca*. I

always win in the end.”

“You’re wrong!”

Tightening my grip, I push her harder into the wall, the space between us all but evaporating. “Those scorpions now decorating my walls contradict you. If Grayson wanted you to walk out of here alive, he should have calmed the theatrics.”

I’m pretending not to notice the softness of her breasts pressed up against my chest. But my body notices. In fact, that traitorous fuck is having a hard time focusing on anything else.

Damn this woman.

“Theatrics aren’t Edier’s style.”

“Maybe not. But they’re definitely your father’s.”

That strikes a nerve—a raw one.

Stiffening, Thalia glances away. *Interesting.* There seems to be dissension on Santiago Island. A loose thread just begging to be pulled... One that could unravel an entire dynasty.

The corners of my mouth twitch as a plan takes shape in my head. One where I don’t end Thalia Santiago right here for the sins she has committed tonight, but one where I use her to my advantage.

One where I avenge an attack with one of my own.

An eye for an eye.

“Take her upstairs to my penthouse and lock her in the east wing,” I instruct the man who has been silently watching our confrontation with interest.

Thalia glances over my shoulder as Rocco rises from one of the two chairs in front of my desk. As his heavy footsteps draw closer, she tries, and fails, to push me away.

“What? No! I’m not going anywhere with him!”

“Oh, *muñeca*,” I chuckle, releasing my hold on her throat. “You don’t have a choice.” Giving her a wink, I nod at Rocco. “Go.”

“This is kidnapping!” she screams as the behemoth of a man picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder like she weighs nothing at all. I watch in amusement as she drives her fist into his back, but it’s like beating a brick wall with a pillow.

“Didn’t your father teach you that actions have consequences?” I call out, laughing at my own question. “Then again, I guess a man like that wouldn’t.”

As Rocco crosses the threshold between my office and the lobby, Thalia lurches forward and grabs the door frame with both hands. “I swear, I didn’t do this. I just came here to win enough money for...” She curses as her fingers are pried off one by one. “I came to win money, not to hurt anyone.”

If she were anyone else, I might believe her.

But she’s not. So, I don’t.

“I don’t care,” I say, my smirk fading as Rocco readjusts his hold and carries her through the executive office lobby. “You drew Carrera blood, *muñeca*. So, you’d better hope to God or the devil or whoever your family prays to, that my sister lives. Because if she doesn’t? You don’t either.”

I revel in the shock playing out across her face as Rocco carries her through the lobby and disappears through the glass doors.

Will I follow through?

Maybe.

But I’d sooner destroy the priceless *Santa Muerte* painting above my head than a work of art like Thalia Santiago. However, wants and needs come second to honor and oath. Sometimes beauty has to be destroyed to feed a greater good.

And a life-long vendetta.

Running a hand through my disheveled hair, the events of tonight land on my shoulders like a cinder block. The tension between New York and New Jersey has finally come to a head. The new blood in the Santiago Cartel has fired first. A retaliation is warranted and expected—and the one I’ll deliver will be a bouncing red ball that distracts Edier Grayson from the waiting bomb.

I’m my father’s son. I don’t play by rules, and I don’t follow expectations. I’ll make my move, but it will be one they aren’t expecting. Besides, the only advantage a man has over his enemies is the element of surprise.

With another revered glance at my prized *Santa Muerte* painting, I button my suit jacket and make my way into the executive lobby. I only make it a few steps before I find RJ standing at the entrance, a pinched look on his face.

“You know what to do,” I say, moving to push past him. *If Grayson wants to soil my baby with bullets, I’ll set fire to one of his.*

“Santi...”

“Move.” As volatile as I feel, it’s the only word I can muster and remain in control.

Instead of following a direct order, RJ stands his ground, his body rigid, rage swimming in his dark eyes. “We need to talk.”

“It can wait.” I go to push past him, when he takes two steps back to block my path. “RJ, you’d better have a damn good reason for doing that. This is not the time to test boundaries.”

He doesn’t flinch at my threat. “During the attack, we secured the grounds. Our men didn’t come back empty handed.”

There’s no need to elaborate. I can smell his thirst for blood, and it drives my own.

“Alive?”

It’s the only word I speak. The only question I want answered. When he nods, we both exit the lobby and walk silently toward the elevators.

Four floors below ground level, the carriage doors slide open, and my pulse jumps.

Someone was left behind.... And now, that someone will pay.

RJ is first through the steel door, holding it open for me as I step through to find a calming sense of *deja vu*. A metal chair sits on top of the tarp in the middle of the room, and in that chair sits a man. One in a bad suit, a broken nose, and two swollen eyes. Pleas to Catholic deities fall from his split lips.

Words are his only weapon since kneeling and lifting his hands in prayer are out of the question. Both are a little tied up at the moment.

“Name’s Marco Bardi,” RJ divulges, nodding toward the sniveling piece of shit. “Security caught him outside with this...” Reaching into his pocket, he produces a cell phone. “Same number dialed twelve times in twenty minutes. Two guesses who he was calling.”

I don’t have to *guess*. It’s written in drywall like a chicken shit calling card. Too bad he didn’t have the common sense to realize when a plan had taken a major detour.

In the wrong direction.

Taking the phone, I scroll through it, recognizing the number my men pulled from Thalia’s phone. “Any texts or voicemails?”

He shakes his head. “No. At least the asshole was smart enough to delete those. But I put a call out to Gianni Marchesi and discovered Bardi and Thalia’s sister had a one-night thing last year.”

Gianni Marchesi. Boss of New Jersey's extension of the East Coast Italian mafia and firmly planted on the Carrera side of the cartel war.

"Which one?"

"Ella. Two years older. They live together."

Well, this just got messy.

Did she realize what a piece of shit he was and raise her standards, or did he simply grow tired and make a lateral move to the more gullible sister?

Either way, their taste leaves a lot to be desired. He's not only out of the Santiago sisters' league...he's a couple miles past the ballpark selling handjobs for a dimebag.

Concrete proof would have expedited the hell out of this, but, then again, I didn't get to where I am today by waiting for opportunity to fall in my lap.

"Has he broken?"

"Not yet." RJ glares in disgust as Bardi hiccups through another snivel.

"Our *sicarios* didn't hold back, but the *pendejo* still refuses to talk."

Oh, he'll talk.

"Bardi," I call out, leisurely making my way toward him. "It seems you've found yourself in quite the predicament."

"I don't know anything, Carrera."

"Well, that puts you at a disadvantage, doesn't it?"

His head flops around like a fish. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, if you don't know anything, then I have no use for you," I say, my arrogance taking center stage as I hold up his phone. "Because these phone calls to Thalia Santiago are all I need to condemn you. Right here. Right now."

"Maybe I'm screwing her too."

And maybe you don't need a tongue. "Don't insult my intelligence," I warn, my hand clenching around the back of his chair. "This is a business deal gone wrong. See, Bardi, I think you were outside my casino because you were waiting for Thalia Santiago to return." Leaning down, I offer a cold smile. "With her stolen earnings, of course."

It's an educated guess. I have no idea if they were working together to split the money or if there were a few more moving parts. What I do know is that Marco Bardi is a simple-minded criminal. One lacking finesse and style.

He'll crumble like a stale donut if given the *wrong* incentive.

"Fuck you, Carrera!"

Strong insult. Weak delivery.

They're the words of a cornered man. He has no rebuttal, so I sharpen my knives and go for the kill. "She's in my penthouse, right now. Whatever you offered must not have satisfied her needs, Marco," I lie. "Because when I bartered protection for truth, she threw you under the bus faster than you can say 'traitor.'"

"Bullshit."

"Think so? Then tell me why, just half an hour ago, she fell to her knees begging for her life while selling you out? She told me everything you're doing to her."

More lies. I have no fucking clue what he's doing to her. This is a power play with a fifty/fifty odds payout.

"You're lying."

"Maybe," I say, tucking his phone into my inside suit jacket pocket. "Maybe not. Are you willing to take that risk?" Pushing off his chair, I hold up a finger. "Before you answer, let me give you a tip—there's already a deal on the table. There can be two, and you can prove your worth to me, or you can keep protecting the woman who sold you out and watch as RJ here carves your heart out of your chest." I motion behind me where RJ spins a vintage dagger in his palm.

My fist aches to drive into his face, but I fight the urge, leaving the threat to detonate by itself.

I don't have to wait long.

Bardi's frantic gaze bounces between RJ and me. "It wasn't me!" he sputters, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth. "It was that bitch's idea to come here and steal from you."

"That's not what she said." Sighing, I glance over my shoulder. "This is going nowhere. You know what to do."

RJ advances with a nod, the dagger in one hand, a pistol in the other.

That's all it takes for Marco Bardi to tattle like a little bitch. His body jerks, causing the chair to skid a couple of inches. "No! No!" He swallows hard, sweat staining the front of his shirt. "So you know about the video..."

No, but I do now.

"What do you think?"

His face blanches. “Fine, so I may have used the skin flick of *sweet little Ella* as incentive for extra cash. It’s half a million, for Christ’s sake. She’s a fucking Santiago. It’s not like they can’t afford it.”

I control a knee-jerk reaction to put a bullet between his eyes. *Jesus Christ*. This son of a bitch was blackmailing Thalia with a sex tape of her sister? Is that why she was so desperate for money?

“Incentive...” I say, walking around him like a tiger assessing his prey. “Is that what we’re calling extortion these days?”

Bardi’s bound hands tug on their restraints. “Why do you care?”

I don’t give him an answer because, frankly, I don’t fucking have one. “Was shooting up my casino part of your *incentive*, Marco?”

“I told you...I had nothing to do with that. I’m opportunistic, not suicidal.”

Condemned men will say anything to save their own asses. Marco Bardi is a waste of space who exploits women at their weakest—a wanna-be gangster with the intelligence of a dishrag and the balls of a toddler.

However, he didn’t mastermind the attack on my casino tonight. This dumb fuck was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

So, what to do...

I could kill him just for being an idiot. That’d be the easiest and most satisfying end to the night. But it’s obvious how easily he’s manipulated.

Moldable.

Usable.

Thalia stole from me and refused to tell me why. Now that I know, it’s information easily leveraged to my advantage.

RJ steps forward, the knife tucked tightly in his fist. “Can I slit his throat now? This *pinche cabrón* is giving me a headache.”

I hold up a hand. “Where’s the tape, Bardi?”

“Why?”

“Because unlike you, I have plans for it that don’t involve jerking off into a Kleenex.”

Bardi’s swollen face puckers. “If I give it to you, what’s in it for me?”

“You live to see tomorrow,” I say, bracing both hands on the arms of his chair. “And maybe even a few after that...”

A defeated glaze coats his bloodshot eyes. “It’s in a safety deposit box in Queens.” At my raised eyebrow, he sighs, adding, “The bank account is under Donatella Bardi—my grandmother.”

He sold out his own grandmother?

I hated this motherfucker before, but now I not only want to cut off his fingers, but the traitorous lips of a treacherous grandson.

Family disloyalty is the deadliest sin in the eyes of a Carrera.

“Does *Abuela* Donatella know her piece of shit grandson has involved her in a goddamn cartel war?”

“No,” he admits, shaking his head weakly. “She didn’t ask questions.”

“Of course she didn’t.” I grit my teeth. Why would she? She’s just another innocent life tainted by his greed. “Take a trip to Queens,” I instruct RJ, my eyes still locked on Bardi. “Escort Donatella Bardi to the bank to retrieve our stolen property.”

“It’s not stolen—”

“Shut up!” I growl, forcing myself not to ram my fist into his face. Fucking him up won’t do me any favors with Thalia. “Don’t scare the woman. Tell her whatever lie she needs to hear in order to comply. Return with the tape, not blood—*comprendes?*”

Bardi’s eyes shift between us. “I’ve given you everything you’ve asked for, Carrera. Now let me go.”

He’s right. Which proves he’s telling the truth about one thing—he’s not working with the Santiagos. Any cartel associate knows the only thing ever standing between life and death is information.

It’s time to turn up the heat and watch this piece of shit burn.

I glance over my shoulder where RJ still fists both weapons. “Go for the carotid and make it messy...”

“No, wait!” Bardi’s tied limbs thrash in the chair. “That’s not everything! If you kill me, you’ll never know what he has planned!”

“He?”

“Edier Grayson,” he says hesitantly. “That’s who shot up your casino, right? There’s more coming your way than just a few stray bullets hitting the wall, Carrera. And this shot will be heard round the world.”

I stiffen, grabbing him by the throat. “I thought you were here just for a handout, Bardi. What the fuck do you know? And don’t lie to me this time.”

Bardi’s Adam’s apple bobs against my palm. “If I tell you, you won’t turn me over to Grayson?”

“Now why would I do that when you can be much more useful with your hands still attached.” My slow smile punctuates the thinly-veiled threat as I release my grip.

If Thalia's extended family found out Bardi not only filmed Ella in a compromising position, but then proceeded to blackmail her with it, his death would become Colombian folklore. Nothing I could do to him would be half as sadistic. Revenge takes a much sharper blade when family is involved.

"No, Bardi. I won't turn you over to Grayson."

I prefer to end problems myself.

"Then I'll tell you," he says, flipping his newfound bargaining tool in the air like a fifty-thousand-dollar poker chip. "*After* I walk out of here and collect my money."

"You're a greedy little fuck, you know that?" Irritated, I stroke my chin, the thickening stubble raking across the pads of my finger and thumb. He could be lying, but instinct tells me otherwise.

He's balls deep in Santiago shit. Until I have that tape in hand, I'll need to keep him alive so his tongue can spill its secrets.

And then I'll cut it out.

"You have a temporary reprieve, Bardi," I tell him. "I have more pressing business to attend to at the moment. However, when I return, you and I are going to have another chat." I give his bruised cheek a firm tap. "And you're going to tell me everything you know, or not only is the deal off, but I'll also toss you into the river missing a few limbs. Are we clear?"

He nods so hard I'm surprised his neck doesn't snap. "Y-yes. Whatever you say, Carrera."

Pushing away from the chair, I give him a slow, brittle smile, which he devours like it's his last meal. I'm not fooled by his fervor. A man dying of thirst will drink his own piss if he's desperate enough.

I didn't lie to him. I just didn't tell the whole truth.

CHAPTER TEN

SANTI



“WHERE IS SHE?” I SAY, STORMING DOWN THE HALLWAY OF ATLANTICARE Medical Hospital with the devil coursing through my veins.

Startled nurses back away as I charge forward, my hand on my gun. I’m intercepted by a looming shadow and a hand on my shoulder.

“That way.” Rocco tips his bald head toward a room tucked away in a corner at the far end of the hallway.

I don’t wait for an escort. Knocking his hand away, I close the distance in five long strides and barrel through the door. “Lola, are you—?”

“Nice of you to join us,” my sister chirps, flashing me a condescending smile.

Exhaling a relieved breath, I glance over my shoulder at Rocco. “What did the doctor say?”

“Hey!” I turn back to find Lola snapping her fingers at me. “Why are you asking him?”

“He’s the one who brought you here,”

“And I’m the one who took the bullet, remember?” she says, throwing back her blanket.

Rocco was right. Her injury is barely a flesh wound. Only seven small stitches mar her skin. It’s a sight that should calm me...

But it doesn’t.

I’m too wound up over Marco Bardi and my Colombian houseguest.

Exhausted, I scrub my hand across my face, and then a scuffling movement draws my attention toward the bed. “What the hell are you doing?” I say, as she swings both legs off the side of the bed.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” She gives me her best deadpan stare. “I’m leaving.”

“Like hell you are!”

“Santi, I’ve been discharged,” she says with a groan.” Clean bill of health, and prescriptions already filled.” She motions to the side table where two pill bottles sit next to a water pitcher. “We could’ve left an hour ago, but *somebody* kept blocking the door.” She wrinkles her nose at Rocco, who answers with a hand gesture.

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“But Santi—”

“Don’t push me on this, Lola. I’m not in the fucking mood.”

Having her discharged poses a major problem. She’s living with me at Legado where I have Thalia on lockdown. I need time to figure out what the hell I’m going to do with her before adding yet another irate female into the mix.

One call to the Chief of Medicine. That’s all it will take. Every key player in this town owes me a favor, and he’s no exception.

Giving her a quick kiss on the forehead, I turn to Rocco. “Don’t let her out of your sight until RJ gets here.”

“Got it, boss.”

“You can’t do this!” Lola says angrily as I step into the hall.

I pause in the doorway. “I can do anything I want, *chapparrita*,” I tell her calmly. “I own this motherfucking city.”

“You can’t keep people locked away against their will, Santi!”

“Watch me.”

Giving her a deliberate smile, I close the door behind me.



Traffic is nearly at a standstill on the Atlantic City-Expressway Connector, but I’m weaving in and out of both lanes like I’m threading a needle, Lola’s protests ringing in my ear.

“You can’t keep people locked away against their will, Santi!”

That’s where she’s wrong.

I can, and I have. *More than one, in fact.*

I hit the gas harder as my mind drifts to the Colombian princess locked away in my penthouse on the top floor of Legado.

Which is precisely the moment my phone rings.

I don't have to look at it to know who it is. I've been expecting this call. Any man remotely connected to him couldn't take a shit in Siberia without word crossing the border. Hell, he probably knew what was happening by the time the first bullet hit the wall.

Exhaling a hard breath, I hit the answer button. "Good news travels fast."

"How were Santiago's men able to infiltrate Legado?" a thick accent growls over a staticky connection.

My father is asking *me*? He's Valentin Carrera. Mexican kingpin and a god amongst thieves. If anything, I assumed I'd get my ass handed to me for allowing his sworn enemy's daughter to walk through the door of my...

He doesn't know about Thalia.

Interesting...

I should tell him what she did, where she is, and my plans for her. I've never lied to my father. The Carreras operate better as a machine, not loose parts. But the anger in his voice drives a sharp knife straight into everything I hold sacred.

"What are you going to do?" he bellows, breaking my internal tug-of-war. The one between upholding my oath and fulfilling a need.

"What do you think I'm going to do?"

There's only one way to cut off the head of a snake and that's to become the snake. I'm going to leverage my two assets and infiltrate from the inside.

But I don't say any of that. Instead, I clench my jaw as a dangerous chuckle rumbles in my ear. "This is the second time your sister has been hurt under your watch, Santi. *Si esta vez no te vengas en nombre de tu hermana, estarás acabado.*"

"What the hell do you mean, if I 'don't get revenge, I'm finished'?"

"Exactly what I said, son," he says, matter-of-factly—as if he didn't just drop a bomb on me from twenty-five hundred miles away. "Carreras protect their own. It's the first lesson I taught you, remember?"

Do I remember?

He never lets me forget. It's my first memory as a child. Most kids got bedtime stories like *Goodnight Moon*. I sat in my father's lap listening to

tales of revenge, blood, devils, and destiny.

"I remember," I answer coolly.

"Then if I can't trust you to uphold our family's most basic rule, how am I supposed to trust you to run an entire cartel?"

And there's the dangled carrot. The promise of an empire outside of American borders. One that spans the globe, built off the backs of three generations of Carrera men.

"The Santiagos will suffer for what they've done," I swear through clenched teeth. It's a vow I'll honor with my dying breath, which if what Bardi claims is true, may come sooner than later.

"See that they do. Because, Santi, if they don't...? I'll have to assume I made a grave error in judgment." He offers no other words and no goodbye before there's a subtle click and the line goes dead.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel.

He means New Jersey—a grave error in handing me control of the East Coast.

My father may be head of this cartel, but I'm not some wide-eyed teenager who worships the ground he walks on anymore. I respect him, but I'm a man now, and New Jersey is mine. The only way I'll be returning to Mexico is in a body bag.

No one is going to take what I've spent the last two years building.

Even Valentin Carrera

An eye for an eye.

To prove myself, I'll take more than a life to make the Santiagos pay. I'll find another way to rip at the heart of their seams. Something more personal. Something that will brand the Carrera name into *their* legacy for generations to come.

"Carrera." As my own name rolls off my tongue, my pulse roars with the shape of a new plan. A plan so dangerous, it will either make me a god or destroy everything.

Pulling into my private parking spot behind Legado, I kill the ignition and stare up at the brightly lit penthouse—the one licking the sky four hundred and thirty-one feet in the air. Thalia needs money. I want revenge. The debt she owes is so personal, she'll do almost anything for it...

I smile to myself.

Even commit the ultimate sin.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THALIA



HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF, AND THEN YOU DIE—PREFERABLY NOT IN SOME cartel boss's penthouse apartment in the middle of Atlantic City. The End.

I tuck my knees to my chest and pull the black comforter tighter around my shoulders. Everything in this room is that color, from the expensive side table and nightstands, to the chaise longue in front of the huge, floor-to-ceiling windows, and the high thread count Egyptian cotton sheets that I'm lying on. The violent beast who locked me in here was born without an imagination it seems—along with decency, acceptable social skills, and a pleasant attitude to be around.

My fingers drift to the marks on my neck where he held me up against the wall of his office. No one has ever laid their hands on me like that before. No one has dared... And then to accuse me of having his precious casino targeted? *Of hurting his sister in the crossfire?*

From the Prince of Darkness to the King of *Loco*. He's a dual nationality of crazy.

The more I think about it, the more nothing about tonight makes sense. It's not Edier's style to shoot up a casino like that. As for me, I tolerate violence because it runs through my veins. It scorches the edges of my life like a match to paper, but I never seek it out, except when they deserve it.

Like Santi Carrera, for holding me against my will like this.

Like Marco Bardi, for terrorizing my sister

My heart jolts unpleasantly when I think about the sleazy Italian. Is he still waiting for me outside the casino? Did he get hurt in the chaos? The way this night is unraveling, I wouldn't be that lucky...

I toss and turn a couple more times. I can't get comfy in any position. There's so much uncertainty, it's like trying to rest on a bed of nails. *There's so much history in danger of repeating itself.*

Perhaps it's a form of destiny. You can fight it all you want, but it still happens anyway, leaving you with even more scars to contend with. Not so long ago, my father stole my mother and locked her up in a bedroom like this. She doesn't know I know, of course. Her housekeeper, Sofia, told me after she'd drunk too much *Aguardiente* last Christmas. It sort of slipped out, like the worst kind of punchline: "Oh, by the way, your father is this brutal man who chops up people for fun, but don't worry he only held your mother against her will and made her marry him, too."

What does that make me? The forced spawn of the devil? Did she even want me and Ella in the first place, or did he take away that decision from her as well?

Rolling onto my back, I stare up at the ceiling, blinking back hot, angry tears. I always do this to myself. I'm a world champion self-masochist. I'm thinking horrible things to punish myself for letting Ella down so badly.

I won her future, and then I blew it.

I counted cards, but I never counted on *him* ruining my plan.

Santi Carrera.

I shiver at the memory of those first moments together in his office. Who knew hate could spark electricity between people? Who knew dead eyes could glint with flecks of gold, like hidden secrets in a pool of darkness?

Outside, the first colors of dawn are painting carnage onto the horizon, and worse is to come. Reece won't have kept quiet about my latest escapade. My father is most likely plotting World War Three with Edier already, and Ella...? I scrunch my eyes up as tightly as I can.

I'm so sorry, Ella.

There's the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside. The lock on my door clicks open and the soft reds and pinks illuminating the far wall are snuffed out by a tall dark shadow.

A shadow who smells far better than he ought to.

"Get up."

His voice isn't chocolate and chili cake anymore. It's Mississippi Mud Pie with a twist of arsenic.

Throwing off the black comforter, I scramble to my feet as the shadow reveals the man who is currently sharing the top spot on my Worst Man Alive List.

“Sleep well?”

“Like a baby,” I lie, tugging my dress down, but I lose the attitude as soon as I spot more bloodstains on his white dress shirt.

There’s a pause. “How’s your sister?”

He freezes in the doorway, my concern catching him off guard.

He recovers quickly.

“The fact that you’re still alive and breathing should give you an indication.” He kicks the door shut behind him, and there’s something in that casual, I fucking-loathe-you movement that jolts a pulse between my legs.

“Listen, I know you don’t believe a word I say, but I swear I hadn’t nothing to do with this. Sam—”

“¡*Silencio!*” At the mention of Sam’s name, his handsome face twists into something savage. “I swear to *you, muñeca*, if you mention him again in my presence, I’ll be sending you back to your father in pieces.”

He takes a step toward me, and I shift one back so fast I hit the side of the mattress. I’ve never met a man with so much rage and intensity spilling out of him. He’s like a volcano in permanent eruption.

“Here.”

I flinch as he tosses something onto the bed next to me. There’s a soft flutter against my leg, and then another sea of dirty green is messing up another counterpane.

“You’re giving me money?” I say stupidly.

“Fifty thousand in one-hundred-dollar bills. That’s what you ‘won’, right?”

I don’t like the implied quotation marks around the word “won.” I like the Machiavellian look on his face even less.

“What’s the catch?”

“First, tell me why you need it.”

I glance away, aiming for anywhere other than him or at the money, which pretty much just leaves the floor. “Is it deal breaker, if I *don’t* tell you?”

“I’ll get it out of you eventually, but a swift confession is preferred.”

Arrogant bastard. “Has anyone added you to the donor list for a personality transplant yet?” I say bitterly. “If not, I’d be more than happy to oblige.”

His resulting smile resembles that of a cold, dead fish. “I’m not the one who dropped to the floor over a couple of casino chips... Sell your soul often?”

“At least I still have one to sell.”

His next step toward me is a threat in an expensive suit with blood stains.

“You have an unfortunate mouth on you, Thalia Santiago. One of these days it will carve your name into the side of a bullet.”

“Really, *señor*?” I say, losing my temper again. “All threats and no decorum make the Mexican cartel boss an even bigger piece of shit.”

He stills a couple of feet away from me—as still as a statue and as brittle as a pyre.

“Come on then, explain my *investment* in this deal,” I say, nodding at the money. *Investment. Solution. Same thing, different colors.* “I’m sure nothing comes for free around here. What glorious indignity will I have to suffer for it this time? Pick the bills up with my bare teeth? Strip naked on top of them with rainbows shooting out of my ass?”

There’s the briefest tug at his mouth and then it’s gone again. The rarest of things. *Now, I’m intrigued...* Is there another man dancing beneath his surfaces? One who doesn’t act like a character from the *Godfather* Hall of Fame?

“Before you ask, I’m not giving up information about my family,” I warn, pouncing on the obvious trade-off before he has a chance to speak it.

“Who says you’d have to do anything that dramatic?” He saunters closer, but this time I stand my ground. He’s at least a foot taller than me without my heels on. Most of that is hate. “You need the money, and I need revenge, *señorita*. Some might say that’s a match made in hell.”

“I don’t need it that badly,” I lie, feeling a rush of impending doom.

“Oh yes, you do. You can’t count your cards out of this one, *muñeca*. I can smell desperation a mile off. In my office, you fucking reeked of it.”

“I have a question for you,” I say shakily. “Do you hate me more for my name, or for what you ‘think’ I did last night?”

“*Muñeca*, you will never know how much I hate you. *All of you...* There’s not an abyss in this world that is deep enough to contain it.” I recoil

at the bite behind his words. *The sureness.* “Now, I have a question for you... Are you planning to wear white to your forthcoming wedding?”

“*Wedding?*” I bow forward slightly, certain I’ve misheard. “What wedding?”

He offers me another of his arctic smiles. “In sickness and in health, *señorita.*” He gives me a wink that’s more a threat. “Let’s make your *papá* really mad, shall we?”

Oh.

My.

God.

The air lodges at the back of my throat and it doesn’t shift. “You really *are* insane,” I whisper, scanning his face for mockery, but seeing only blank certainty. “One minute you’re siding me with Hitler and the next you want to...”

I can’t even say the words, let alone breathe in oxygen.

Then I remember why I took this trip to Atlantic City in the first place, and suddenly the future is paved with black and gold and mutual animosity of the murderous kind.

“There must be another way,” I stammer.

“You either take the money and accept, or I can end it all now.” He opens the left side of his suit jacket to reveal his gun and holster.

More blackmail?

What a week.

“This isn’t a choice. This is basement extortion. Congratulations, Carrera, you just created a new bullying low point.” I start to sway. I think I’m going to faint.

“Get used to that name, *muñeca.* In twenty-four hours, you’ll be wearing it too.”

Thalia *Carrera?*

My heart lurches in protest.

“Look at me.” Lunging forward, he holds my face prisoner, inches from his own. I feel the bite of his touch, but it’s nothing compared to the sting of his indecent proposal. “You’re right. You don’t have a choice, so I won’t waste words trying to spin this into something it’s not.”

“I’m nineteen,” I gasp out. “Girls my age think about marrying Henry Cavil, not the devil.”

“You can set a fucking precedence then, can’t you?” He lets go of me, and this time I lose my balance in my haste to get away—sprawling backward across the mattress, and covering hundred-dollar bills in shock, shame, and a crushing inevitability. “You want that money?” He stares down at me with that same look of distaste on his face that he wore last night. “Then this is my price.”

“I hate you too,” I croak, as a crimson jewelry box is tossed carelessly down next to my head.

Prince of Darkness.

King of Loco

Soul Crusher Extraordinaire.

“I take it that’s a ‘yes’? I hope the ring fits, *fiancée*.”

“I hope you rot in hell,” I hiss, scrambling to sit up and regain what little dignity he’s left me with.

“I’ll defer that honor to your father and his *sicarios* in New York.”

Oh fuck, my father. Santi Carrera has no idea what he’s about to unleash.

“White dress it is,” I hear him say. “Though if you’re a virgin, I’m *Santa Muerte* herself. Santiago gave you too much freedom. I won’t be making the same mistake. Maybe we’ll start with a wardrobe that doesn’t pussy-flash every man in the room.”

“How dare you,” I seethe, lobbing the first thing I can lay my hands on which happens to be a Legado branded notepad on the nightstand.

With no weight behind it, it fizzles to a pathetic nosedive between us—which, to be honest, is a pretty good representation of how much control I have over my life right now.

He lifts a withering eyebrow at me. “Either way, we’ll find out soon enough.”

Don’t tell me I’ll have to share a bed with this monster, as well?

Turning on his heel, he starts walking toward the door. “We’ll marry tomorrow. You’ll live here with me. I’ll release that money to you in exactly one week. And don’t bother running. There’s a hundred armed guards between you and your freedom.”

“A week?” Panic blooms in my stomach. Bardi’s deadline has already passed.

“In that time, you will be respectful and dutiful to me and everyone who works for me. You’ll convince your family how fucking irresistible you find

me, and that free will is a twenty-four-hour party in this penthouse. Understood?"

"I need it now, Carrera," I say, rising to my feet. "He won't—" I stop myself just in time. "Please, I'm begging you."

"One week. No less... To sweeten the deal, here's an early wedding gift." He tosses a burner cell on the table as he passes. "You can use it to tell Daddy all about the good news, or maybe not. When's the last time you spoke to him again?"

Without waiting for an answer, the door slams shut behind him.

A beat later, I'm grabbing the cell and dialing out Bardi's number. I feel like crying when it clicks straight to voicemail.

"Bardi, it's me. I have your money, but I need a couple more days. Meet me at that bar you picked me up outside yesterday at nine p.m., next Friday. Look, I'll even take a photo of it, so you know I'm not bullshitting you." I glance at the dirty dollars on the bed. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I'm begging you not to do anything stupid with that tape until you speak to me. Please... Damn. Call me." I ring off as my voice starts to crack.

I slide down the wall in a crumpled heap of anger and confusion. Not only have I been kidnapped at gunpoint, but I'm also being forced to marry against my will, just like my mother did.

History really does repeat itself.

But this is where it ends.

I'll play his stupid games. I'll wear his stupid ring, but as soon as Bardi is paid off and I get that footage, I'll be serving Santi Carrera with an annulment so fast he'll be bleeding out from all the paper cuts.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SANTI



DRIVING IS BECOMING A RECKLESS ENDEAVOR.

“Bardi, it’s me. I have your money, but I need a couple more days. Meet me at that bar you picked me up outside yesterday at nine p.m., next Friday.”

That’s the third time I’ve listened to her begging that Italian piece of shit to call her back. I have to tighten my grip on the steering wheel just so I don’t drive my fist through the windshield. She sounds desperate. Panicked. *So fucking broken.*

She was telling the truth last night. She didn’t toss Bardi whatever information he’s clinging to like a lifeline. Even so, an innocent Santiago is the living definition of an oxymoron.

Still, I think of how she’d stood up to me in my office last night, with her attitude and confidence. How she’d absorbed my threats—choosing to face her fate head on with dignity instead of tears. I think of the woman who’d sashayed into my casino in a crimson dress, laying her life on the line to salvage her sister’s.

I listen to it again.

Hearing the pain in her voice makes me crave to hear *him* beg. To break him like he broke her. I have no idea how to reconcile the urge to protect a Santiago with the hate I’m supposed to feel for her.

I knew she’d call him. I’d counted on it. My plan can’t proceed without a scheduled rendezvous between my bride-to-be and the man who betrayed her. Thalia has no idea I’m pulling all the strings in this puppet show. Now

that there's a confirmed date, all that's left to do is open the curtain and make my marionettes dance.

"You know the definition of insanity, Santi?" Lola asks, nodding to where Bardi's phone is still plastered to the side of my head.

"Picking you up, instead of calling Uber?"

Cocking her head, she wrinkles her nose. "Cute, but no. It's doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. Like listening to the same message four times, thinking maybe the fifth won't cause that vein in the middle of your forehead to pop and give you an aneurysm."

Scowling, I drop Bardi's phone in the console.

Lola mutters a string of curses and scrambles for the overhead handle as I take the car in a sharp hairpin turn toward Legado. "*Dios mío*, slow down!" she yells, wincing as her shoulder slams against her window. "I didn't survive getting shot only to die by vehicular manslaughter."

"You were grazed by a bullet. Don't be dramatic."

"*I'm* being dramatic? You kept me locked in a hospital room for *observation*." She punctuates the word with air quotes. "A few stitches and you acted like I needed to be given last rites."

I'm not having this argument with her again. She's pissed and rightly so. I've given her a string of vague answers and half-truths concerning the events from last night and my reason for, *and I quote*, "acting like a total shitbag and treating her like a criminal."

I want to tell her that what I'm doing is for *her*. For my mother. For the Carrera name. For two decades of sins against all three.

I pull the car into the circular valet station in front of the casino's main entrance. As the car slows to a stop, I steal a look at her out of the corner of my eye. "After what happened at Rutgers, can you blame me for being overprotective?"

My words hit their mark. Lola flinches, her shoulders curving at the direct hit. Regardless of what she claims, she didn't spill the *entire* truth about what happened between her and Sam Sanders last year. The "kidnapping" story she spun to our father had more holes than a slice of Swiss Cheese.

However, the truth will come out eventually.

It always does.

Just like it will with Thalia.

Thalia...

Her name spreads an unfamiliar warmth throughout my chest. She's a welcome departure from the parade of vapid whores constantly vying for my attention. The youngest Santiago may be intimidated by me, but that acid tongue of hers is so easily provoked.

Most women I encounter open their mouths for one thing, and it tends to impede further conversation. But Thalia... That iron will and sharp wit hardens my dick more than any blow job ever could. I shift uncomfortably in my seat. *Something I'll have to take care of myself, sooner rather than later.*

More memories of her efforts to stand her ground last night bring a ghost of a smile to my lips. My little thief is holding her cards close, but she forgets that this is my casino. My playground. My rules. Last night, she agreed to the highest stakes game of her life—and I never sit at the table without an ace up my sleeve.

I think of the horror on her face when I tossed that diamond ring at her. Perk of owning a casino? There are always drunken assholes willing to tie the knot over the spin of a roulette wheel. Legado caters to their every need, as long as their credit is good.

A chapel. A justice of the peace. A florist. A boutique.

And a jeweler.

Thalia looked as sick at hearing the words as I felt saying them. *Marriage?* I'd never intended on marrying anyone, much less a Santiago—the fucking root of all evil. However, a couple of vows and a piece of paper isn't what's important.

It's what it all symbolizes.

Possession.

My father demanded revenge, but staining my hands would simply be a warning flare: a short-term solution to a much bigger problem. The Colombians would retaliate, resulting in a never-ending see-saw of death and loss, and a lack of retribution.

Blood and bullets are temporary, but betrayal... well, that's forever. And there's no greater betrayal to a father than his daughter taking the name of his enemy.

Marco Bardi gave me the perfect bargaining chip, and if the events of the last twenty-four hours have revealed anything, it's that Thalia will sacrifice everything to protect her sister—including herself.

I'll keep my word. I'll pay her debt. I'll salvage her sister's reputation.
But my generosity comes with a price—a plant in the heart of New York.
Dante Santiago will suffer in a way he never imagined.
And his daughter will orchestrate it all.



Lola glares down at the offered crutches in my hand like they just insulted our mother.

“Are those really necessary?”

Is this whole goddamn conversation really necessary?

“Unless you want to walk with a limp for the rest of your life, yes. Now stop arguing.”

Snatching the crutches out of my hand, she scowls while muttering to herself in Spanish. Still, she flops onto the crutches without protest and hobbles toward the front entrance of Legado.

The moment we enter the grand foyer, her breath catches. “*Whoa.*”

A sentiment lacking in eloquence, but accurate, nonetheless.

Construction crews are crammed into every available corner in a state of perpetual motion. My Legado—the most luxurious and high-end casino in Atlantic City—has gone from the epicenter of opulence to a hub of demolition.

While Lola gapes, I settle my gaze a few feet away where RJ stands talking to a stocky man I assume to be the crew foreman. “I’ll be right back,” I say to her over my shoulder, not waiting for a response.

As if sensing my presence, RJ stiffens, giving the worker a curt nod and then sending him away.

Frowning, I tap the sole of my Santoni dress shoe over a missing chunk of marble. “I’d ask how it’s going, but I’m not sure I want to know.”

“Repairs should take no more than seventy-two hours.”

I raise an eyebrow. Expedited work usually comes with a hefty price tag. I’ll have to do a rinse and spin on a few offshore accounts to cover the cost, but if the bullet holes are gone, and there’s not a drop of Santiago blood staining my marble anymore, it’s worth it.

“And the *abuela* situation...?”

“Will be handled by tomorrow. Procuring things *delicately* isn’t a usual practice, Santi.”

Delicate isn’t a familiar word to any *sicario*. We want, we take—by any means necessary. Pasting on an ingenuous smile and sweet-talking little old ladies isn’t a tactic in our wheelhouse.

I don’t tolerate delays, but this is one concession I’m willing to give. Besides... there are more pressing matters to discuss. “Did you do what I asked?”

He crosses his arms, a smirk playing on his lips. “Sanders’s club got lit up like the Fourth of July. You should have come along. We could have roasted marshmallows and watched it burn.”

I’ll give it to him; the man is efficient as hell. Not only that, he takes pride in molding even the simplest acts of violence into a work of art.

“Maybe some other time.” *Because if Bardi is telling the truth, there will be many more opportunities.* “What about the other thing?”

RJ offers a hesitant nod, his fists clenching. *Jesus.* The man has zero poker face. He wears his disapproval like a cheap suit. If body language had a voice, RJ’s would be a string of obscenities hurled right in my face.

He thinks I’m making a mistake. If anyone should be ready and willing to charge into battle, it should be him. After all, Dante Santiago murdered his birth father in cold blood—a brutal act that left him orphaned at three years old.

RJ Harcourt would probably be dead right now if my *Tiá* Adriana and *Tío* Brody hadn’t taken him in, eventually “adopting” him. I don’t care that he grew up in Houston. His loyalty is tied to a falsified document buried deep within the Mexican border.

“Wipe the judgment off your face,” I warn. “Your job is to be my second, not my conscience.”

He scoffs. “You don’t have one.”

“Something you should keep in mind, *primo*.” The stressed “*cousin*” isn’t a familial term of endearment. It’s a subtle reminder. When he doesn’t respond, I take that as a silent acquiescence. “Good, then I’ll expect everything to go as planned later. I want double the security.” At his raised eyebrow, I palm the back of my neck in frustration. “In case two cold feet try to do something stupid.”

He knows how to read between the lines. There will be no runaway bride today.

Leaving him to handle the details, I turn back toward the front desk, only to collide with a five-foot three tornado, holding a steel crutch like a Samurai Warrior.

Shoving a hand through my hair, I exhale a sigh. “We need to work on your inability to follow instructions.”

“What the hell was that all about?” she demands, jabbing the rubber-tipped end of the crutch into my chest.

I know she heard pieces of our conversation. The real question is, how many, and were they enough to cause a problem. I have no doubts where my sister’s loyalty lies. However, I don’t trust women. I especially don’t trust women with commonalities.

Two cartel princesses.

Two daughters of sin.

Two women whose lives are controlled by the very power that created them.

I’ve already determined it’s best if Lola is introduced to her new sister-in-law *after* the ink dries on our marriage certificate.

“Business,” I answer curtly. By the way her lip curls, I might as well have told her we were trading DIY tips. I’m both irritated and impressed. She’s acting like a Carrera. Which is exactly the problem. *She’s acting like a Carrera*—suspicious, ruthless, and relentless in getting what she wants.

“Don’t give me that bullshit ‘cartel king’ rhetoric. I was shot in the leg, not the head.”

I look away to keep from laughing.

“It’s not funny!” The crutch jabs deeper into my sternum. “I’m serious, damn it.”

I am, too. Keeping my impending nuptials from my sister is a strategic move, not a punitive one. Eventually, I’ll have to inform my parents of my actions—and weather the repercussions. It’s safer for Lola if she’s as blindsided as the rest of my family.

My father will condemn my methods. A lethal storm will make its way across the border, and the less of an accessory Lola is to my crime, the less of a chance *papá’s little girl* will get swept into its path. Besides, she’d only try to talk me out of it—which we both know would be a waste of time. Once I make a decision, I don’t waver. The first domino has been tipped, and the chain reaction is already in play.

There’s no stopping an avalanche once it crests the top of a mountain.

Gripping the steel rod of Lola's crutch, I calmly push it away from my chest, lowering it between us until balance forces her to drop it onto the floor. "I'm serious too, *chaparrita*. You're my secretary, not my business partner. If information is needed to do your job, I'll tell you."

It comes out harsher than I intended, but *my* job is to ensure her safety, not to stroke her ego.

"Does this have something to do with Thalia Santiago?" Lola's matter-of-fact delivery catches me off guard.

"What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe common sense? I was there in the control room, remember? I stood right behind you when you saw her face on that surveillance screen. You whispered her name under your breath, for Christ's sake."

"*Dios mío*, Lola!" Pressing my hand to her lower back, I gently but firmly maneuver her toward the elevators.

Once the doors slide shut, I lift a slot below the row of buttons and press my thumb against a hidden access pad. Right away, it illuminates, and we start to rise. I watch as the floors tick away, my anger slowly fading with each one. By the time we pass the twenty-second floor, I'm calm enough to face her again.

"That was reckless. Anyone could have overheard you."

"Maybe if you'd stop treating me like a child, I wouldn't have to resort to drastic measures." She slams her crutch onto the floor. "I recognize a blitz attack when I see one. It doesn't take a genius to see two plus two always adds up to four." Sighing, she leans her head back against the elevator wall. "I know you, Santi. If Dante's daughter is responsible for turning Legado into a goddamn turkey shoot, you're not going to sit back and take it."

Folding my arms across my chest, I stare at her—straight through her clipped words to the tremble on her lips. Her nerves are showing, along with her humanity. *There's so much of our mother in her.*

"Why do you care so much?"

"I-I don't," she stammers, my question catching her off-guard. "I just don't like being forced on the outside of my own inner circle, that's all."

Before I can answer, the elevator dings, and the doors slide open revealing the entrance to my sister's "summer home"—an extravagant apartment, one floor below mine.

“It’s late,” I say, guiding her across the threshold and into the lavish accommodations. “You need your rest, and I need a drink. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”

Surprisingly, she doesn’t argue. After getting her settled in her bedroom, I slip away toward the kitchen—a room with enough bells and whistles to employ an entire fleet of Michelin star chefs. It’s bright, too. The kind of bright that makes you wonder if you’re about to sit down to a meal or meet your maker.

That’s by design.

I renovated the entire place when Lola announced her plans to spend the summer in New Jersey. I wanted her surroundings to be bright, white, and pure.

Unlike the penthouse sitting directly above it.

It’s that need to preserve her innocence that ultimately drives me to destroy her trust.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SANTI



FILLING A CRYSTAL GLASS WITH JUICE, I SET IT ON THE COUNTER AND retrieve two prescription bottles from the inside pocket of my suit jacket. Placing one beside the glass, I pop the cap on the other and shake two capsules into my palm.

I don't stop to think about what I'm doing. If I do, I'll change my mind. Breaking each capsule open, I dump ten milligrams of OxyContin into the orange liquid. Giving it a stir, I grab the glass in one hand and the second prescription bottle in the other before crossing the open-floor plan back to the bedroom.

Lola is tucked under the covers, stress and fatigue already claiming her.

"Here," I say, offering her the glass and the pill bottle. "Take your antibiotics so you don't get gangrene."

"Funny." She pops two pills in her mouth, and I hold my breath as she washes them down with half the glass.

"Finish it. You need the Vitamin C." *And I need assurance my wedding won't be disturbed.*

She rolls her eyes but doesn't argue.

Fifteen minutes later, a wrecking ball could barrel through the floor to ceiling windows and Lola would be none the wiser. That's because she'll be spending the next ten to twelve hours in a narcotic wonderland.

Was it a dirty play? Of course.

The brother in me hates myself for drugging my own flesh and blood. However, the cartel boss accepts it for what it is—a necessary evil. This is a war, and sometimes the ends justify the means.

As I stare down at my sister, her face clean of makeup and her dark hair strewn across her cheeks, I'm struck with how young she looks. *Barely twenty*. Older than Thalia, but still younger than Ella. My chest flares with rage at the thought of anyone trying to hurt her. I'd turn the heavens black and the seas red in order to protect her.

Just like Thalia did for her sister.

At that moment, my hate for Marco Bardi becomes a living, breathing thing. Ella Santiago could have easily been Lola Carrera—and then a sister's jaded desperation would have become a brother's unholy crusade.

I can't excuse her methods, and I won't ignore her role in what I still believe to be a planned attack on my casino... But as a devoted brother, I respect the lengths Thalia was *and still is*, willing to go to in the name of family.

Turning out the light, I kiss Lola's forehead. "I'm sorry," I whisper. "*Te amo, chaparrita.*"

Stepping back onto the elevator, all traces of regret fade away as it ascends one final floor. As the doors part, I button my suit jacket and take a step into my onyx lair—five thousand square feet of banished sunlight and weighted tension—only to come face to face with a set of wringing hands and a pinched face.

I can feel my eyebrows arching. My housekeeper isn't easily rattled. It's one of the reasons I keep her around. Not only is she efficient, but she also knows how to keep her mouth shut.

"Svetlana."

"Sir, your *guest*..."

For some reason, I bristle at her tone. "She has a name."

She flinches, but I offer no apology or explanation. I don't need my housekeeper and my betrothed to be best friends, but I'd prefer to keep the bloodshed to a minimum.

"Of course," she says, dialing back the attitude. "Miss Santiago refuses to eat. Francois has prepared her three meals, and she... Well, sir, she vehemently rejected them."

"How *vehemently*?"

"She threw them across the room, sir," she answers, indignation flaring in her eyes.

Not a crisis in my opinion, but Svetlana takes offense to waste. And justifiably so. She's a Russian mail order bride, left behind by Legado's

previous owner as if she were a broken slot machine. Svetlana has known hunger few will ever suffer.

To refuse food is to sin.

“Has my package been delivered?”

She nods, motioning behind her where a long, rectangular box rests on a black lacquer and glass coffee table.

RJ may not agree with my tactics, but he has one hell of a follow through.

“Key,” I say, extending my palm. Svetlana digs a small keyring out of her apron and places it in my hand without question.

“*Spasibo*,” I thank her in Russian while crossing the foyer into the main living room. A dark laugh rumbles in my chest as I tuck the box under my arm, spinning the keyring around my index finger as I head toward the spiral staircase that sits in the dead center of the room.

Two floors, two hallways, and one quick detour later, I unlock the door and let myself into the room where I find Thalia sitting on the floor with her back against the opposite wall, hugging her knees to her chest.

She drops her legs as soon as she sees me.

“*Feliz noche de bodas, muñeca*.”

She scowls, but the dark circles under her eyes betray her. “You’re in a good mood. Did you kick a few puppies on your way up here?”

“I’ll chalk the rudeness up to pre-wedding jitters.” Stepping further into the room, I clench my teeth as the heel of my shoe sinks into something soft and sticky. Glancing down, I exhale in annoyance. “Crème Brûlée is a French classic, not a congealed weapon.”

“I believe the word you’re looking for is *concealed*,” she grits out.

“Not when it’s defiling my shoe.”

That brief spark of fire flickers and dies when she sees the box I’m carrying. “I don’t want anything from you.”

She turns her head away sharply, her long, dark hair tangling around her shoulders. Her body language is hellfire and brimstone, but her profile is a raw canvas of water-colored worry. The corners of her mouth curve down, making her seem less like the tool of the devil as much as his pawn.

This Thalia is the one I heard on Bardi’s voicemail.

This Thalia is fragile—a broken doll hidden beneath a layer of thinning steel.

This Thalia ignites that foreign warmth in my chest again. The one I don't understand and don't care to dissect.

This Thalia strikes a chord deep within a shadowy corner of my mind. One with a solitary hanging light.

Get a grip, Santi. This is what she wants. One chink is all she needs...

"This hunger strike of yours isn't hurting anyone but yourself," I say, regrouping while shaking custard off the sole of my shoe. "We both know that you're not going to starve yourself. Self-destruction isn't in your DNA. So, you can eat what's on your plate now, or eat it off the floor later and risk salmonella. Your choice."

Her response is a middle finger.

Bad girl.

I glance across the room where the burner phone I gave her sits silently on the nightstand. "Does Daddy know his little girl is about to shit all over his legacy?" When she doesn't answer, I chuckle again to myself and give the package tucked under my arm a light tap. "Aren't you going to ask what's in the box."

"Nope."

That fucking mouth of hers. "That's foolish. What if it's a plane ticket? Or a check for fifty-thousand, free and clear?"

She shoots me a withering look. "You aren't that stupid and I'm not that gullible. Try again."

"Well, look at that. We *can* agree on something."

Her disgusted snort draws a smirk to my lips.

Winking, I toss the box at her feet. "Smart and beautiful. My bride is quite the catch."

Beautiful.

Thalia freezes at the word, and I kick myself internally, drawing blood.

Giving the box a quick scan, she looks away again, disinterested "Go to hell."

"Oh, *mi amada*." My tone is thick with condescension as I lower to my haunches in front of her. "That wish was granted a long time ago. Let's strive for a little originality, shall we?"

A moment of uncertainty glazes her brown eyes, and then it's gone—quickly replaced by a deadly cocktail of fatigue and loathing. "What do you want, Santi? I've already agreed to marry you. Do you want it signed in blood?"

Yes. *Just not yours.* “Maybe later. For now, opening the box will suffice.”

“Fine.” She hisses the submission between clenched teeth. “If it will make you go away.”

Crossing her legs, she leans forward, tearing the gold ribbon off the box as if the keys to her freedom are buried in there somewhere. The top is ripped off just as *delicately*, derision coiling her lips as paper is tossed over her shoulder like garbage...

And then she freezes.

“What the hell is this?”

“I believe in America it’s called a wedding dress.”

“Is this your idea of a joke?” she says, holding up the swathe of white satin.

My smirk fades. “I rarely joke, Thalia, and never about business.”

“Business,” she repeats, spitting out the word as if its taste of torture. “Well, take it back. I’m not selling my soul in some cheap knock-off gown.”

“Try a twenty-thousand-dollar gown.”

If I hadn’t been watching her so closely, I would’ve missed the way her shoulders jolted, as if the price tag itself delivered a hard punch to her chest.

“It’s not my size.”

“Check the tag. You’re a four, if I’m not mistaken.”

Her jaw drops. “How...?”

“I pay attention to detail. It’s a skill you should learn if you plan to survive a week in my world.”

Technically, it’s not a lie. I paid an exorbitant amount of attention to the shape of her body when I had her pressed up against the wall in my office. Every curve. Every valley. Every single fucking inch of her... “Look underneath,” I instruct, nodding toward the gown. “There’s more.”

She doesn’t want to, but she can’t help herself. After all, curiosity and impulsiveness are the two endearing traits that landed her ass here in the first place. I don’t have to look to know the exact moment she sees it.

That gasp is music to my ears... *And my aching dick.*

Thalia lifts the black lace bustier and matching thong in the air as if they were just peeled off a dead hooker. “Oh, fuck you, Carrera!” she breathes. “There’s no way in hell I’m wearing this.”

“Maybe I was unclear,” I say patiently. “It wasn’t a request.”

Despite what she wants to believe, I'm not a soulless monster. *At least not completely.* This may not be the wedding day she dreamed for herself, but she deserves to have beautiful things to wear, regardless. The gown isn't a designer slap in the face. It's an attempt to counteract the cheapness Bardi made her feel.

However, the lingerie? That's to show her that even though we're standing on opposite sides of the battleline, I'm still a man who can appreciate a confident woman.

However, the color isn't for her.

It's for me.

It's a symbol of dark consuming light. A reminder that while heart and innocence may radiate on the outside, underneath all that satin and crystal, sin and lace wrap around her in blasphemy.

Blinking away her shock, she climbs to her feet. "This isn't a dream wedding, Santi. This is..." Her words trail off as her eyes settle on the lace dangling from her outstretched hands. "This is matrimonial terrorism." She exhales dramatically, and then she blushes as the sexy lingerie flutters under the force of her breath.

The truth stains her cheeks like a scarlet letter. Basic animal instinct can't be controlled. It knows no boundaries and doesn't give a fuck about crossing enemy lines. *Right now, Thalia is imagining me ripping this off her tight little body.*

I don't even try to stifle my laugh.

"You think this is funny?" she says, the blush on cheeks darkening with anger.

No, Thalia Santiago. Nothing I want to do to you is funny.

"I told you, I never joke, *mi amada*."

"I'm not your beloved. I'm your prisoner, and this"—balling her fists, she hurls the scraps of lace at my chest—"is revolting. If you think a couple of meaningless vows entitles you to anything other than a cold shower, you're very much mistaken. You lay a finger on me, and I'll break it."

Dislodging the thong hooked around one of my shirt buttons, I step forward, erasing all but an inch of space between us. "Big words for such a small woman."

I expected her to crumble under my wicked torture, but I should've known better. This girl is no wilted daisy—she's a wild rose with thorns the size of her petals.

“Haven’t you ever heard that dangerous things come in small packages?”

“No, I’m used to handling... *large things*.” I lower my eyes toward my tailored pants. As if pulled by an invisible tether, hers follow. The innuendo isn’t veiled. It’s framed by a flashing neon sign. Her lips round in shock and I let out another laugh. “It’s a gift, Thalia. A simple gesture.”

Composing herself, she kicks the lingerie and the box across the room. “You want to be generous? Bring me a long black dress and a veil.”

“It’s a wedding, not a funeral.”

“Semantics.”

Okay, that’s it. I’ve indulged her tantrum long enough.

A low growl rumbles in my throat as I stalk toward her. A startled gasp escapes those tempting lips as Thalia takes a step backward—right into the wall. Placing a palm on either side of her head, I cage her in with nowhere to go...

Nowhere to run.

“You want to talk funerals, *muñeca*? Last night, you came within an angel’s breath of being the guest of honor at yours. The only reason you still have breath in here”—I don’t ask for permission before dragging a hand from the wall and placing it between her breasts—“is because I allowed it.”

“But you—”

“*You* chose life, Thalia. *You* chose our unholy union. *You* chose debt over loyalty. So don’t act like you’re doing me any favors by following through.”

She’s quiet for a moment, her heart thumping wildly beneath my palm. “You still don’t believe I had nothing to do with the attack last night.”

It’s not a question.

“The word of a Santiago means nothing to me.”

“And the promise of a Carrera means nothing to *me*.” Raw hate flares in her eyes, turning the warmth in my chest into a goddamn inferno. “You’re a bastard.”

“And you’re soon to be fifty thousand dollars richer. So, what does that make *you*, *señorita*?”

I may as well have struck her. As my words sink in, Thalia visibly deflates—any lingering boldness dissipating in a cloud of truth and deceit. Nobody likes having a mirror shoved in front of their face—especially when the reflection isn’t pretty.

“I need to get out of this room, Santi,” she whispers. “At least let me go home and offer up an explanation to my—”

“Do I look like a fucking moron to you?”

“They’ll be looking for me. They’ll trace me here, and when they do—”

“Let them come.” My challenging tone is as dark as a starless Mexican sky. “You won’t be the only thing I take from them. It’s only a matter of time before New York is mine as well.”

The moment Thalia says, “I do,” I’m lighting a fire under Monroe Spader’s ass. If Grayson thinks he can keep me out of New York, he has a surprise coming.

Regardless of what he might have planned.

For the second time since she stumbled through the doors of my office, my bride-to-me drops the queen bitch act. That scorched gaze dims, only to be filled by unshed tears. “Please...” she chokes out, pressing her hand against my chest. “I know you—”

One touch. One simple touch sparks a deadly live wire. My skin sizzles under my shirt, the pressure of her hand burning a permanent tattoo on my chest.

Everything distorts.

Wrapping my fingers tightly around her wrist, I pull her hand away and slam it against the wall above her head. “Don’t. Touch. Me,” I growl, my voice razor-thin. “Don’t ever touch me without my permission.”

“I’m s-sorry,” she stutters. “I didn’t know.”

How could she? I’m the heir to a cartel empire. I don’t explain myself to anyone.

I need to get out of here.

Twisting around, I drive both hands into my hair as I stalk toward the door.

“Santi...”

I pause with my back to her. I don’t acknowledge her, but I can’t seem to walk away either. *Stuck in fucking limbo—as usual.*

“What’s in this for you?” she asks softly.

“What’s in this for *you*?” I counter, flinging her own words back at her. “What does my fifty grand buy?”

Neither of us answers.

“Be ready in an hour.” I turn to leave. “I’ll have Svetlana bring makeup and a brush and whatever the hell else it is girls need to look presentable.”

“And if I’m not?”

“Then you’ll need that black veil after all,” I warn, locking the door behind me.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THALIA



I'VE NEVER CONSIDERED MYSELF TO BE A REBEL.

It's hard to break the rules when you spend the first eighteen years of your life on an armed island compound in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, surrounded by more guns than fun. Even my words don't carry that much of a shock value anymore. My mouth has always been a box with a broken lid.

That's until Santi Carrera left me all alone with an expensive wedding dress and a pair of nail scissors I just found in the bottom drawer of the ensuite's vanity unit. Now, dissidence is my New Jersey state of mind.

Kneeling down on the cool tiles, I pick the scissors up and examine them again, sliding my fingers into the eyes and feeling how snug the metal fits against my skin. They're too blunt to cause any real damage, but they're sharp enough to make a scene. And that's the aim of the game now—to slide myself like a piece of glass underneath Carrera's surfaces until I bleed his patience dry.

Beyond my father's protection, I'm learning that rules can be bent by the subtlest of mutinies. I won't push Carrera so far that my money comes into jeopardy—but by the end of this week, he'll be begging me to leave.

Walking back into the bedroom, I stare down at the silky white material spilling out of the box on the floor. *And this cost him twenty thousand dollars?* I grind my teeth together in frustration. That's nearly half the money I need to pay Bardi off.

The wedding dress itself screams money and status—from the intricate Swarovski crystals sewn into the neckline, to the detailed stitching on the bodice. Even if I felt a modicum of emotion for him, *which I don't*, I

wouldn't be caught dead in something so flashy. This man wouldn't know refinement if it smacked him over the head with a loaded Glock.

It takes me over an hour, and by the time I'm done, my forefinger and thumb are throbbing with pain. For the final touches, I rip the velveteen petals off the red rose bouquet that his blonde housekeeper delivered with her bags of makeup, and then I arrange them into two words on the bed's counterpane that speak for me and every member of the Santiago Cartel.

Fuck.

You.

Catching my reflection in the mirror, I smile at the carnage.

And then I wait.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SANTI



I'VE NEVER IMAGINED MY WEDDING DAY.

Not because I haven't found the right woman, or because I'm too busy sampling all the wrong ones. It's not even because I likened the institute of marriage to a six by eight prison cell complete with a warden and fifty-year march toward Death Row.

It's because of who I am. What I've done. The soil I've stained.

It's because a man like me spends a lifetime acquiring just as many debts as he collects. They come in the form of a scorned business partner. A grieving widow. A jealous friend.

A dangerous rival.

Over the years, each debt darkens to a sworn vow, and unatoned sins tip the scale of judgment against his favor. From the day I was born, I've been living on borrowed time. And those debts? Those vows? Those sins? They all have an expiration date.

Like me.

I was too young to remember the day my father's world stopped turning, but he made damn sure the images painted in my head as I grew up did it justice. *Skyfall*, he called it.

La Boda Roja. The Red Wedding. The day the heavens opened, and angels wept. The day our family's tragedy set the course of destiny hurling my way. The day a bullet meant for him almost took my mother from this world. And the day two years later my father dropped three bullets in the chamber of a revolver, gave it a spin, and stared down the barrel of his own gun.

That's when I knew I'd never allow myself to be so consumed by a woman. I'd rather die by my own hand than live in a world without her.

That's why I never imagined my wedding day, because marriage is nothing but a game of Russian Roulette, too. The sins of the father may be laid upon his children, but his mistakes are his to keep. When *Santa Muerte* comes for me, I plan to leave this world the same way I came into it.

Alone.

But that all went to hell last night, when, in a snap decision, I bartered my soul and Thalia's as well. I broke my own rules. Now, with two shiny gold rings, not only will I have a partner in life, but thanks to the shiny gold bullet inevitably coming our way for this, I'll have one in death too.

I tug at the collar of my white shirt. The dark gray suit I chose to wear feels more like a silk coffin than formal wear—something I'd prefer not to have amplified in a thirty-six by forty-six-inch mirrored funhouse, *thank you*. Whoever decided to plate the inside of this goddamn elevator with angled mirrors should be executed inside of it.

I don't want to see *one* image of myself dressed like this, much less a couple dozen. Not because the suit costs more than most people's houses. Excess is my calling card. It's because the image staring back at me looks less like me...

And exactly like *him*.

From my slicked back dark hair to the five o'clock shadow that never lasts a minute past six, Valentin Carrera's image is etched across every line and crevice of my face like cursed stone.

It's a realization that sours my mood even more.

"Fuck destiny," I mutter as the elevator doors slide open, revealing my devil's paradise.

"Thalia?" I call out, hearing nothing but my own echo bouncing off the black walls. "Thalia Santiago," I repeat, every vowel in her last name like a mouthful of broken glass. "Get out here now. It's bad luck to arrive late to your own wedding."

As far as I'm concerned, all weddings are bad luck...*period*.

"I'm marrying *you*," a voice calls out. "Obviously, Lady Luck already slammed the door in my face."

I scan a restless gaze across the room, only to have my eyes assaulted by what can only be described as a visual blitzkrieg.

"What. The. Fuck?"

Thalia is standing on the bottom step of the spiral staircase, her body draped across the coiled banister like a serpent. Cradled in her hands is a bouquet of long green stems, every single one plucked clean of their petals.

And that's only the beginning... While I spent the day ensuring every detail of my plan was executed to my specification, this crazy woman has gone fucking *Edward Scissorhands* on a twenty-thousand-dollar wedding gown.

What used to be a full skirt with a long, ornate train now looks like a demented cocktail dress. Miles of smooth, golden legs pave a deadly pathway from her ivory Louboutins to the jagged material that's now barely covering her ass.

At least she's wearing the black bustier I gave her—as a fucking tube top.

However, it's her face that causes my jaw to drop. Not only does her makeup look like she fell into a box of sixty-four count crayons, but she's also fashioned her hair into pigtails.

Goddamn pigtails.

I stepped out of the elevator expecting to find Grace Kelly and got bitchslapped by Harley Quinn, instead.

“Do you like it?” she says, peeling herself off the railing and sauntering toward me with a dramatic spin. “I wanted all the joy I felt inside at becoming your wife to be reflected on the outside.” A wicked smile dances across her bright purple painted lips. “Now, I’m not one to brag, but I think I nailed it.”

If I wasn't so pissed, I'd be impressed at the steel *cojones* on this woman.

“You *nailed* it, all right,” I say dryly. “Straight through the part of your brain that controls your common sense.” I grab at her arm to stop her incessant twirling. “Is this your idea of a joke?”

“Oh, Santi... *I rarely joke*,” she says, pleased as hell with herself as she repeats my own words from earlier.

“You look like a psychopath.”

“Oh no!” Gasping dramatically, Thalia presses a hand over her heart. “My betrothed is displeased. But I worked so hard to look the part of a *Carrera*.”

“Watch it,” I warn, inhaling the string of Spanish obscenities resting on my tongue. Her little insults are becoming a big problem—one I plan to

address *after* the ceremony.

I inherited my father's temper, but I also know when to pick my battles. Thalia's act of defiance was a commendable effort, but a complete waste of energy. This woman thinks that by shredding her gown and then covering it with the bustier like a confused whore in a brothel, I'll assume she's *loca en la cabeza* and send her on her merry way?

Hell no.

Thalia *wants* me to lose my temper so she can hate me even more. She *wants* my anger. She *wants* my hate and her fear all twisted up and displayed in all its fucked-up glory.

And she almost had it.

My initial instinct is to drag her back into the ensuite bathroom and force her to change after scrubbing all that shit off her face. *But why?* This isn't a real wedding—at least not in any traditional sense. It's nothing more than a binding agreement, a gold shackle that ensures her a front row seat to her family's destruction.

If Thalia wants to walk down the aisle dressed like a circus freak, so be it. Her act of rebellion is nothing more than an eyesore.

The Colombian *princesa* is about to get a lesson in playing with fire.

"It's short," I note, my eyes tracing the uneven cut barely grazing the tops of her thighs. "I thought I told you to stop pussy-flashing my men, *muñeca?*"

"What's wrong, Carrera?" she purrs, batting those long eyelashes. "Don't you like what you see?"

Like it? I could devour it. Even a package wrapped in a shitty attitude still shines. If the blood of my enemy didn't flow through her veins, I'd happily wreck that pretty little cunt she keeps parading in front of my face. However, I'd rather chop off my own dick before I'd fuck a Santiago, despite my unspoken thoughts to the contrary.

"It definitely makes a statement."

She pauses, clearly taken off guard. "Wait, you're not mad?"

"Should I be?"

That proud jaw tightens as I step closer. "You're toying with me, aren't you?"

I catch the faint scent of jasmine as I lower my mouth to her ear. "Not yet," I whisper, that charged electricity crackling between us again as I call her bluff. "I'm saving that for our wedding night." Reveling in her breathy

gasp, I bend my elbow, offering her my arm with a salacious grin. “Shall we, *mi amada*?”

“I’m not your *beloved*—or your wife,” she mutters, looping her arm around mine before sinking her bright yellow nails deep into my skin. “At least not for the next few minutes.”

I choose to ignore her final act of defiance. It’s not the first time a woman has tried to leave scars, and it won’t be the last.

She draws blood under my suit jacket as I walk us to the elevator. “Enjoy *those few minutes*, Thalia,” I warn. “Because after you say, ‘I do’, all of the minutes after belong to me.”



Fueling hope is like feeding a wishing well.

You can walk by the same one every day for years, blindly tossing in penny after penny—believing that eventually, one magical coin will make all your dreams come true.

Here’s the cold, hard truth—it won’t. Because a penny is just a dirty piece of copper, and a pool of water doesn’t give a fuck about your wishes.

Wishes can’t deliver dreams.

And hope doesn’t change fate.

Two hard lessons Thalia Santiago is learning today.

She hasn’t opened her mouth since we left the penthouse. Not that I expected much more than the blank stare currently painted across her face as we make our way down a narrow hallway toward Legado’s “chapel.”

Part me wonders if, despite her sharp tongue and acid words, there was a small part of her that believed fate wouldn’t be so cruel as to deliver back-to-back blows. That surely, she wouldn’t be forced to sell her soul to two evil men twice in one week; that if she stayed strong and just *believed*, at the last minute the family she holds in such high regard would ride in on their black horses and save the day.

But there are no horses here.

No saviors.

And only one Santiago.

Her.

A half a dozen guards in dark sunglasses stand motionless in front of the closed double doors. As Thalia and I round the corner, they nod in quiet respect, parting like the Red Sea.

As the chapel doors open, Thalia inhales sharply. It's her first emotive concession since taking my arm.

"I'd ask if you're having second thoughts," I say, scanning the curious faces of the few trusted men I've allowed to be in attendance, "but I assume that's rather rhetorical at this point."

Thalia's answer is to dig her nails even deeper into my arm.

I'm not offended. In fact, the less my intended speaks, the less chance there is of anything veering off course. I've afforded her tantrums. I've put up with her disrespect and destruction of my generosity. I've even tolerated her recent attempt at physical violence. However, this ceremony is one thing I won't allow anyone to impede—especially the bride.

There's a side of me Thalia has never seen.

And I promise her, she doesn't want to.

Sliding my gaze to my left I stare at Rocco's shaded eyes and arch an eyebrow. He dips his chin in a silent affirmation to my unspoken question.

Excelente.

Words aren't needed for me to know what has transpired. After settling Lola earlier, I provided Rocco with a specific task—*track the scorpion*. His findings were just as I anticipated. Edier Grayson already knows about our impending union, and Daddy Dante's private jet has already landed in New York.

Everything is unfolding perfectly.

With one final nod toward Rocco, I smile inwardly as he reaches into his suit pants and pulls out his phone.

"Smile, *muñeca*."

Thalia snaps her face toward me, but before she can utter a single protest, there's a click and a bright flash of light.

"Did he just take our picture?" she says, sounding shocked.

"Yes," I answer. Lifting my chin, I offer an unapologetic stare.

"I don't want any mementos of this day."

"They're not for you, *mi esposa*." Thalia flinches as I punctuate the words "*my wife*" with a slow smirk. "They're for my new father-in-law."

For once, she's rendered speechless.

As the reality of my words sink in, that rainbow of color splashed across her face vanishes underneath a thick veil of chalky-white fear.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words.

This one is worth fifty-thousand, but Dante Santiago's reaction when he sees it...?

Priceless.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THALIA



THERE'S MORE DANGER IN SILENCE THAN WITH A SPOKEN THREAT.

My father taught me that.

When I was twelve, we visited Edier's family in Colombia for a whole summer. One evening, after dinner, a man was brought to the main house in chains. I remember watching from an upstairs window as he and Edier's father stepped onto the front porch below to receive him. I'd cranked the glass open in the hopes that I'd overhear what this man's offense was, but all I'd heard were his begs and pleas for forgiveness.

There wasn't a word from anyone else—not even from the guards.

After ten minutes of this, I saw the flash of silver in my father's hand. The man was dead before he hit the ground, his mournful eyes staring up at a night he'd never get to fill with begging and pleading again.

It wasn't the murder that shocked me. It was the brutal way in which his justice was delivered.

Silently.

I sometimes wonder if that's the reason why I talk too much. Why I spill my thoughts and emotions into a room to keep some kind of a messed-up equilibrium, because when the world goes quiet, things get serious.

Like the long, painful pause last month before I told my father that I never wanted to see him again. That I spent every day wishing I'd be born to another man.

Like when Bardi showed me his tape...

Like now.

There's no finesse to how I'm being marched up the chapel's aisle. It's the only room in his casino that isn't black and gold. The walls are white, and daylight is streaming in through another of those dome glass ceilings, making me feel like I'm under some kind of divine interrogation.

Sorry, God, but there's nothing holy about this marriage.

I stumble in my heels as we pass by the rows of empty pews, but his tight grip on my arm doesn't give me a chance to fall. I hate that he's won the first battle in this marriage. My outfit missed the mark, and now I feel like an idiot.

As we reach the altar, he spins me around to face him. "Well?" he says irritably.

"Well, what?"

"I'm bracing myself for your last stab of hostility as an unmarried woman."

"*Stab?*" I yank my arm free, refusing to acknowledge how the cut of his dark gray wedding suit is doing strange butterfly-like things to my stomach. "That's an interesting word to use with your partner-in-hate... And it will be my pleasure to disappoint you, *señor*. I'm all out of words."

"Except for the ones that count in a place like this."

"I'm a liar, remember?" I say through gritted teeth. "This should come easy to me."

He lifts a slanted eyebrow, but he doesn't comment.

There's a scuffling noise behind us as a couple of his muscles-in-tuxes enter the chapel and take their seats in the furthest pew. Trailing behind them is a short man in a blue suit, with a pinched face and thinning brown hair. I recognize him as the man I saw walking through the casino a couple of nights ago with Santi.

"Ah, the witnesses," he says, nodding at the justice of the peace who's been staring in open-faced horror at my face and outfit. "You can begin."

"Wait!"

All heads turn toward me. A flash of annoyance dances across Santi's face but he kills it, stone dead. "I figured as much. Come on then, spit it out."

"No, it's not that..." I trail off, struggling to put into words the deep sadness I'm suddenly feeling.

Is this how my mother felt on her wedding day?

My fingers fumble for the pendant around my neck, the one she gave to me when I turned eighteen. The one I'd always admired as a child, and the one I wear every day. The same one my father gifted to her, over two decades ago.

It's a silver chain with three diamond-encrusted numbers that seem so fitting for today.

666

"Well?"

If this pendant protected her from the worst of her devil, maybe it can do the same for me.

"Thalia?" he snaps. "I'm waiting."

"I was just giving you the opportunity to back out of the deal," I say, smiling at him sweetly—my sadness turning to acid. "My father always said it was a specialty of Carreras."

Angry murmurs rise up behind us.

Santi's smile is the stuff of torture porn.

"Begin," he snaps at the officiant again. "And this time don't stop until this Santiago *puta* has a new last name."

It turns out it doesn't take long to dishonor your entire family. Five minutes, to be exact... In the end, it's all a countdown of numbers to the ultimate anti-prize:

Three witnesses with their fingers on the trigger, should I decide to run.

Two vows of gut-churning deception.

One marriage, borne out of blood and thorns.

As a wedding ring is rammed onto my finger, I allow a single tear to escape from its strict confinement—turning my head away so my new husband doesn't see. This is a temporary deal for me, but for Edier and Sam ... for Ella... They won't understand. Not until the truth comes to light.

Until then, I'm stuck with Carrera, for better or for worse.

As if it could be any worse.

There's no wedding breakfast afterward. No celebratory drink to mark the occasion. Instead, he leaves me hanging in the lobby while he conducts a brief exchange of words with the man in the blue suit. Afterward, I'm led down a flight of stairs to a private underground garage where a black Aston Martin DBS is parked.

Trust him to drive a car as beautifully brutal as he is.

“Get in, *mi esposa*.” Swinging my door open, he all but hustles me into the passenger seat.

I wish he’d stop calling me his wife. It’s revolting.

I watch him slide in next to me. “Where are we going?”

“Time for another wedding gift.” With that, he accelerates down the driveway and sets a course for the Garden State Parkway.

More silence.

More lost words.

My heart is sinking like the sun overhead as we cross into Manhattan.

“If this is a concession from you, it’s a really shitty one,” I tell him. “Thanks to that wedding photo, I’m now as unwelcome in this city as you are.”

“Pariahs in matrimony,” he murmurs.

“Who was that man at the wedding?” I blurt out as we’re driving up 9th Avenue.

“One of my security guards.”

“No, the short guy. The limp lettuce in between the meathead sandwich. Looked like a rat in a suit.”

“Rodents *are* the most loyal and dedicated animals.”

He’s mocking me now. I can tell.

“Oh, forget it,” I say, as he pulls up to the curb a hundred feet from my apartment block. “What are you doing now?”

“*I’m* not doing anything. You, however, are going to get your things.” He cuts the engine and yanks at his silver necktie so as to loosen his top button. At the same time, he reaches for his gun and rests it on his lap. “You have thirty minutes, and then you won’t be returning.”

That’s what he thinks. One week. Seven days. One-hundred and sixty-eight hours, and I definitely will be.

I go to grab the door handle and feel his heavy hand on my thigh.

“Remember the rules, Thalia. One week of happy, fake-smile honeymooning, or my half of the arrangement is off. You know damn well your sister isn’t going to be the only member of the Santiago Cartel in your apartment right now. Fake it, or fuck it up. *Comprendes?*”

Without answering, I push his hand away and exit the car, catching sight of myself in the window. *God, I look ridiculous.*

Ripping off the black bustier, I chuck it back on the seat, and lose the pigtails. I go to slam the door and catch him staring at me.

“Cartel pervert,” I hiss, flicking him my middle finger.

“*Your* cartel pervert,” he corrects coldly. “Signed, sealed, delivered.”

“Not in this lifetime,” I mutter under my breath as I cross the street, aware of his dark gaze on me constantly.

Entering the building, I head straight for the elevator. I’m so nervous I could die. *Is Ella ever going to speak to me again? Is Edier going to line me up against a wall and shoot me?* My knees keep doing a weird shaking thing, so I kick my high heels off to give me a shot at some semblance of balance. I’m still frantically scrubbing off the last of the crazy makeup as the elevator doors slide open.

Scooping up my heels, I go to exit, and then freeze. Two of the most lethal men in New York are leaning against the far wall, waiting for me. From their stiff stances and sour expressions, I’m guessing this isn’t a friendly fly-by. Sam looks like I just took his Bugatti for a test-drive and hit every street light post from here to Central Park, while Edier’s face is as impenetrable as his father’s these days, but his brown eyes are dancing with rage.

That’s when I know the next thirty minutes are going to be the longest of my life.

“What the *fuck* have you done, Thalia?” Sam roars, leaping away from the wall to slam his hand across the closing doors. “You just took this war to the next level.”

Edier pulls him back again as I shrink against the carriage wall. “Leave it,” he murmurs, authoritative as always. “She’ll explain herself when she’s ready.”

“Damn right, she will.” Taking a step back, Sam flings open my apartment door for me. “Get inside and take that stupid dress off. You look like a clown.”

“A clown, huh?” For a second, I’m so angry, I can’t speak. “Try walking a mile in these, Sam Sanders.” I surge forward to shake my Louboutins in his handsome face. “Believe me when I say you’d break your fucking ankles before you hit the sidewalk.”

“Do you have any idea how much trouble you’ve caused?”

“Why don’t I take an extra long shower, and then you can tell me all about it?”

His gaze dips to what’s left of my wedding dress again. “You can wash all you want, but you’ll still stink of Carrera.”

“Tell that to your dick after you screwed his sister last year.”

“Cut it out,” Edier snarls at the both of us. “Don’t let that Carrera bastard divide us any more than he has already.”

That’s when it hits me. The weight of this bad blood was always going to drown us, but standing here in this hallway with two boys I used to steal cars with, for the first time I can feel our heads slipping under.

We’re all connected now, whether we want to be or not—Santi, me, Edier, Ella, Sam, Lola... It’s a generational fuck-up, like a computer glitch in our matrix. We’re programmed to hate each other for as long as our fathers tell us to, no matter the pain, the anguish, the violence...

I glance down at my wedding ring, and catch Sam doing the same.

Cursing under his breath, he stalks off down the hallway, and for a fleeting moment I wonder if he knows that Lola was shot the other day. I don’t know the details of what went down between them, but it was enough to turn the most popular boy on Rutgers campus into a killing machine.

“Are you going to take aim at me, too?” I ask Edier warily.

He regards me for a moment, all six-foot-two inches of cool self-assurance. No one else would dare provoke him like this and expect to get away with it.

Ella and I have special decompensation, though. Or Ella does... I think my status got revoked a couple of hours ago.

“Jesus, Thalia, why did you do it?” he says, shaking his head at me.

“You have a problem in this city, you come to me?”

The disappointment in his voice kills me more than his words.

Shame turns to accusation.

“Did you guys shoot up Legado last night?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Even Sam stops and turns at this.

“He told me, Edier.”

“And you believed him?”

“Just tell me it isn’t true...”

“You heard what he wanted you to hear.” He catches Sam’s eye over my shoulder and mouths a name at him, but he says it so fast I don’t have a chance to lip read.

“So, you’re saying you *didn’t* order it?”

“I’m saying that Santi Carrera has an agenda, and it doesn’t include giving a damn about you, whatever you might think.” Edier jerks his head

toward the open door. “Time to face the music. He’s been waiting up most of the night for you.”

I bet he has.

Assuming he means Reece, I’m dragging my guilt behind me as I enter the apartment. He’s been good to me over the years, and I’ve gone and thrown it in his face. My father won’t be happy either, so that’ll necessitate a dreaded phone call to deflect *that* bullet. I’m going to need to do some serious groveling to make this right.

My bare feet sound like sighs on the mahogany floorboards. I’m right outside the living room when a familiar rich scent wraps itself around my throat, making me stop dead—my heart exploding in my chest.

It can’t be...

And then I watch in horror as his presence fills the doorway—a man far taller and broader than Reece Costello, with a firestorm raging in his brooding black eyes, and his expression as dark as the shadows stretching out behind him.

Age hasn’t softened him. If anything, it’s made him sharper, harder... Deadlier.

The only man in the world who scares me more than Santi Carrera.

The shoes in my hand clatter to the floor.

“Hello, *papá*,” I whisper.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THALIA



THERE'S THAT SILENCE AGAIN... THAT LONG, PAINFUL PRECURSOR TO HELL.

It takes me back to a snowy night ten years ago, sitting in a stolen car outside an abandoned church, waiting for something to happen and knowing I wouldn't like it when it did. That was the night I first heard the name "Carrera"—the night I first learned anything about this war.

Who double-crossed who first doesn't matter anymore. All I know is a tentative truce became a bloodbath, and it hasn't stopped splashing over the sides ever since.

Through the years, there have been more bullets fired, deals undercut, lives lost... Like my knight in the snow predicted, it passed down to the next generation, and now I've been forced to marry into it and face the consequences.

My father doesn't comment on my appearance at first, but the downturn of his mouth does all the talking for him.

"Thalia," he greets, in that drawling, mocking intonation of his that delivers kill orders in the same way he used to tell me bedtime stories. "Nice of you to join us."

"I can explain..."

"I can't wait to hear it."

"About the dress..."

"No need to start there, *mija*," he says, lifting his eyebrows at me. "Clearly, Santi Carrera isn't picky about what the fuck his vengeance looks like."

And so it begins...

“Don’t. Just don’t.” Brushing past him, I flop down on the nearest couch and pull a cushion to my stomach for protection.

“Don’t, what?”

“Don’t... *this*.” I gesture at his casually deceptive stance. He’s leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded, but I’m not fooled for a second. He’s so unapologetic about everything. It’s his way, or he’s blowing up the highway. There’s a good reason why I never went to him about Bardi’s footage in the first instance. The situation needed tact, and he only knows how to stomp.

“You mean I’m not allowed to congratulate my youngest daughter on her wedding?”

His tone could flay skin... Which is something he’d know all about.

“Next, you’ll be telling me you’re in love with him.”

“I *am* in love with him,” I lie. “It’s been a perfect day.

“I see.”

“Shame *mamá* couldn’t say the same about her own wedding day.”

My cheap shot chills the atmosphere in the room to minus figures. Even in his fifties, *papá* carries a gravitas that reduces grown men and wayward daughters to trembling, self-doubting heaps.

“Don’t try and understand it, *mija*,” he warns. “Just know that it brought light into a dark place.”

“You kidnapped her and forced her to marry you!”

“And she’s so *fucking* unhappy about it.”

There’s a tic working hard in his jaw.

That’s another thing about my father. He doesn’t like to be questioned about anything. He parked his conscience a long time ago and lost the valet ticket on purpose.

“I don’t think much of your husband’s deference to his new family.” Taking a step toward me, he tosses his phone onto my lap. “Is this meant to be some kind of reverse dowry with spikes?”

Glancing sideways, I suddenly see why Sam was so angry.

“What happened?” I whisper, knowing how much he loved that place. The Barfly was Sam’s favorite property in Manhattan—the bar his father gave to him on his twenty-first birthday.

It’s nothing but burning embers and ash now.

“Unsubstantiated kitchen fire.” He takes back the cell with a vicious swipe. “I’ll give you one guess whose lieutenant was caught standing by the

oven with a box of matches in his hand.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have provoked him by graffitiiing your scorpion all over his casino?”

“Maybe you should have stayed the right side of the fucking river,” he snarls, losing his temper. “This madness ends today, Thalia. You’ve had your fun. You’ve caught my attention—”

“Your *attention*?” I jump to my feet, the sharp claws of indignation slashing at my self-control. “I’ve been ignoring your calls for the past month because I didn’t *want* your damn attention! I needed to fly—without getting my wings pulled off for once.”

“Straight into Carrera’s net?” He shakes his head in disgust. “I gave you too much freedom, *mija*. I never should have let you come to New York.”

“I never expected you to like this. I know how you feel about—”

“I’ve never much cared for the word ‘like’,” he muses darkly. “It doesn’t describe ‘premeditated murder’ in the way it should.”

“You’re unbelievable!” I cry. “Stomp, stomp, stomp, all over everything. I’m done talking about this. You can see yourself out.”

I’m halfway to the door when he starts speaking again.

“There’s a bag packed and ready on your bed, *mija*...I suggest you choose wisely.”

“Choose what?” I say, turning back slowly, knowing that any option he gives me is going to be a one-way ticket to heartache.

“You can either leave with me today and return to the island, or the sniper I have trained on the black Aston Martin halfway down the street outside gets the call he’s been waiting for.” He holds up his cell to show me he’s not messing around. *Not that I’d ever accuse him of that.* “Santi Carrera is a vindictive shit... Yesterday, he sent an envelope of fake documents to Rick Sanders’s office which showed him rigging ballet boxes. It took ten million dollars to make it go away.”

“How do you know they were fake?” I mutter defiantly. “Uncle Rick doesn’t strike me as the kind of man who always plays by the rules.”

“That’s beside the point,” he snaps. “Carrera will be reaping the repercussions of that little stunt very soon. Rick’s son is seeing to it personally.”

I don’t like the sound of that. I know what Sam’s like. Revenge is his favorite pastime.

I feel tired suddenly. So very tired.

“How’s *mamá*?” I ask, missing her quiet diplomacy, now more than ever. She’s the only person who can calm *papá* when he’s a raging inferno of malevolence like this.

“Pissed... Hurt.” His eyes narrow, and my stomach drops. When Ella and I were young we were always in the worst kinds of trouble with him when we did something to upset her. “Same as your sister, in fact.”

Ella.

I’ve been trying to reach her for a whole day now, and she’s still not picking up. I glance around for her stuff, but there’s no laptop, no speaker system, none of her clothes are draped over the back of the couches...

“Where is she?” I say, feeling panicky.

“It’s not safe for her in New York... Not now that her sister has lit a bomb under a box of fireworks.”

“But she has her finals next month! She won’t graduate!”

Oh God, it’s like Bardi just demanded another half a million from me.

“And who’s fault is that?”

“Don’t do this.” I reach out to touch his arm—to halve some of the distance between us for Ella’s sake. “Let her come back. I’ll speak to Santi. Call a truce with Valentin Carrera before it wrecks all our lives.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” he roars. “The sooner you come to your senses and hire a fucking divorce lawyer, the sooner she can return and graduate.”

Is there anyone not trying to blackmail these days?

“Where’s Reece?”

“Re-deployed,” he says viciously.

“Did you hurt him?”

He smiles, but there’s no warmth to it. “I might have shown him and his team my displeasure for letting you fall amongst the sharks of Atlantic City. Your security won’t be so lax in future.”

The bars of my prison cell start looming again.

“What does the son have over you, Thalia?”

I swallow quickly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I want the truth, *mija*, so I can ram it into his chest before I rip his heart out.”

Shit. Shit. Shit. I knew he’d see through this wedding in a hot minute, but I refuse to ruin my sister’s life any more than I already have.

“Don’t bullshit me, *mija*...”

“The marriage is real,” I croak. “My life is in New Jersey now. With him.”

“Shame.” His word sounds like a bullet hitting bone. In a daze, I watch him lift the phone to his ear. “Just know that I never wanted this life for you, Thalia. You sought this out yourself.”

“You’re wrong,” I say, shaking my head. “You had this life and all its petty vengeance wrapped around me like a straitjacket from the day I was born. I couldn’t escape it, even if I tried, so I had to adapt. I learned to live with it... To survive. And now you want to punish me for it.”

“Jackson,” he snaps into the mouthpiece. “One minute.”

“One minute to what?” I demand.

He gives me that cold smile again. “One minute before the Aston Martin receives a new paint job.”

“Please don’t shoot him,” I whisper. “For me.”

If Carrera dies. I won’t get the money I need. Bardi wins.

That tic starts jumping in his jaw again.

Without waiting for his response, I turn and run.

With my overnight bag in my hand, I can feel his dark shadow moving up behind me as I reach the front door.

“You walk out like this, Thalia Santiago, and you’ll be a fucking widow by nightfall,” he warns.

I close my eyes as something jagged rips strips inside of me.

“I’m walking out of here as Thalia Carrera,” I tell him softly—*regretfully*. “And she makes her own decisions now.”

Who knew heartbreak could be such a physical thing? There’s pain in every part of my body as I hit the elevator call button.

Spilling out into the lobby, I make it all the way to Santi’s car before the first bullet is ricocheting off the sidewalk behind me.

I freeze, too shocked to move.

Is my father shooting at me?

“Thalia!” Santi erupts from the Aston Martin with his gun in his hand as another bullet strays too close to my head. “Get in the car!”

I watch in a daze as he fires five rounds in the direction of my apartment block, the squeals and gasps of passers-by resonating all around. As they crouch for cover in shop doorways, another stray bullet hits the sidewalk and I’m throwing myself into the Aston Martin. A beat later, a string of returning fire is shattering the back windshield.

“Keep your head down,” Santi orders, swinging in beside me. He’s cool as ice, but his grip on his gun is a white-knuckled ride. “I take it our happy news didn’t go over so well?”

Not waiting for my reply, he spins the car into a savage one-eighty in the middle of the street. With steam still rising up from the tires, he fires three more shots as a final goodbye before his foot hits the gas and I’m being flung backward into my seat

He’s running red lights like he’s on a suicide mission, weaving in and out of yellow cabs to put as much distance between us and 9th Avenue as possible.

As for me, I’m too numb to cry. For all the angry words exchanged, for all the resentment and frustration I’ve felt toward him and this life he brought me into, deep down I’ve always loved my father.

I thought we were unbreakable.

But the way he looked at me back there... The fury in his voice. The betrayal he heard in my words... I know there’s no coming back from that.

I didn’t count the cards right.

There were too many shots fired.

I’ve gambled and lost everything to a man who flat-out despises me.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

SANTI



I KEEP THE PEDAL TO THE FLOOR UNTIL WE'RE ON THE ATLANTIC CITY Expressway. It's hard to let up when there's more octane than blood pumping through my veins.

The back windshield is completely blown out. The only thing circulating in my Aston Martin is air. No conversation. No explanation. We haven't spoken since 9th Avenue, but she doesn't like the silence. It's there in the way she's hugging her arms across her body and gazing out of the window, the breeze from the blown-out window wrapping her long hair around her neck like a black silk noose.

She looks trapped.

She is trapped.

But what to do with my prey now?

As a wedding gift, her father just pulled the pin on an invisible grenade and tossed it into the backseat. It's as if she's shielding herself, waiting for me to explode.

Not today, mi amada.

Controlled composure elicits a stronger reaction than rage. If I push her hard enough, maybe she'll start opening up to me. Maybe we're finally have a fucking conversation in this marriage, instead of trading insults with one another.

As I pull the car into Legado's underground parking garage, the overhead lighting slices through the shattered windshield, casting a serrated prism across Thalia's face.

How appropriate: shadow and light, twisted together in a forbidden union.

Killing the ignition, I sit there for a moment, absorbing the tension—growing stronger from it... Harder.

Thalia opens her mouth to say something, and then quickly snaps it shut again.

If it's an apology, she can save it. I'm pissed—and it's not just because Santiago opened fire and destroyed my car. I would have been more suspicious if he *hadn't* tried to take a shot at me.

It's because he took a shot at *her*.

I keep seeing her face when the first bullet hit the sidewalk. It shattered something inside Thalia, more than when she was standing at an altar promising to honor and obey with her fingers crossed behind her back. She doesn't approve of her father's business practices any more than she approves of mine, but she still loves him. What happened back there was a violent turning point in a father-daughter relationship.

I should be fucking ecstatic about it. I should be swimming in *Dom Pérignon*. Wasn't this my plan all along? To break that family apart, piece by piece? The deepest and most permanent cuts are always through the heart.

But I'm not.

Why the fuck am I not?

I glance across at her again. She's chewing on her fingernail, head bowed. I can't shake the feeling that we're veering off course toward an unknown destination.

The tension finally snaps. She tries to open the passenger's side door, her small hands fighting with a handle that won't relent. Giving up, she lets out a frustrated sigh.

"Unlock it... *Please*."

"I will when you tell me what happened back there."

I follow the glide in her throat as she swallows, wondering what her skin would taste like if I followed that same route with my tongue.

"Someone fired a bullet that came within a couple inches of ruining my dress." She glances at me, her lips tipping into a reluctant smile as she motions at the already-wrecked garment. "Oh wait... Too late."

"I'm serious, Thalia."

“What would you like me to say? That my father was there waiting for me? That when his tough love tactics didn’t work, he resorted to more drastic measures?” I can hear the vulnerability seeping through her cracks of confusion. “God, you must be loving this!”

Far from it.

“That’s not what—”

“Those bullets were meant for *you*.” Her tone is sharp, but the false certainty woven through it is all too familiar. Children of criminals are so fucking proficient at lying, especially to themselves.

Shooting me a dirty look, she starts beating her fist against the passenger’s side window. “Unlock this door, Santi. You got what you wanted. At least let me go inside so I can lay down, close my eyes, and pretend it’s all a bad dream.”

Offering comfort isn’t a part of my skill set. I’m usually the one inflicting pain, not soothing it, but something compels me to reach over and tilt her face toward me as gently as possible.

“Let’s just say the celebration is on hold.”

“Why, because you feel *guilty*?” She jerks her head away, letting out a scornful laugh. “Can a Carrera even spell that word?”

She’s lashing out with good reason, but I’m not a reasonable man. She can insult me all she wants, but never my family.

That’s what I get for giving a shit.

Unlocking the doors, I climb out of the Aston Martin, slamming mine behind me. I make it all the way to the elevator before I feel her fingers close around my bicep. Just that small impact is enough to cause a short circuit in my brain.

Fire.

Her skin feels like fire burning mine.

Before I can react, she curses and quickly releases her hold. “Shit, I forgot... No touching.”

Silently, I reach for the call button, her shallow breaths falling into rhythm with the chaotic beat of my heart.

What the fuck is happening to me today?

“Look, I’m sorry. That was disrespectful. All the stuff I said about guilt and the Carreras? Well, it’s not like I have the moral ground to be throwing stones...” Her voice trails off again, and she lets out a sigh. “Can we call a temporary truce and go back to hating each other tomorrow?”

I give her a curt nod in response.

“I’m sorry about your Aston Martin, too.” She steps into the carriage beside me, looking even more like a doll without her shoes on. “Though my *mamá* always told me that big, expensive cars were an overcompensation for something.”

I catch a small smile twitching at the corners of her mouth.

“I hear you father has quite the collection.”

That same smile disappears, and I’m suddenly angry at myself for mentioning him.

“Still,” she says, her tone stilted once again. “It’s a good thing he hit the side of the car rather than the side of your head.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I’m surprised to hear you say that, *mi amada*. You’ve already stated your preference for a black veil over white lace. I assumed being given the opportunity to wear it would’ve been the perfect ending to your day.”

She drops her eyes to the floor. “Not if I’m fifty thousand dollars short.”

Because it’s all about the money, right?

And revenge... Let’s not forget that beautiful, toxic cherry.

My phone beeps. Glancing down, I find more missed calls from my father than I can count and a short message from Monroe.

The bill passed.

I type out a quick reply.

Excellent. Meeting at Legado 10 a.m. tomorrow

It seems Rick Sanders can check off another box on his corrupt political scorecard—a prepaid victory. Not only has he already bought his constituents’ votes, but he’s now purchased the rights to his fellow senators’ opinions. A couple more insignificant steps and the bright lights of Vegas will shine on the Big Apple once more.

New York is reopened for business.

And mine for the taking.



When we reach the top floor, I hang back to allow Thalia to exit first. She turns in mild surprise when I don’t follow her out.

“Business,” I murmur, sliding my hands into my pockets and reaching for the button again.

As they close, I swear I see a flicker of frustration on her face.

Dropping one floor to Lola’s apartment, I’m relieved to find my sister fast asleep.

Even under sedation, she’s a creature of habit. Ever since she was a little girl, she’s slept in the fetal position. *Autodefensa mental*, my father calls it. Defense mechanism. He claims it’s from residual trauma still floating around in her subconscious from almost dying in utero, thanks to another of Santiago’s bullets.

He got real philosophical after my mother’s accident. There was a lot of talk about fate and scars and destiny. He started to believe that all sins committed were reenacted over and over on a continual loop, in a realm between dreams and reality—like reincarnation—only no one ever learns. No one repents. All that’s waiting there is a never-ending punishment.

The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.

Like a war that stains a new generation, and the next, and the next...

For the second time, I brush the hair away from my sister’s face.

“*Autodefensa mental...*” he would say. “*Even in sleep, the soul remembers.*”

Hopefully, she won’t remember being drugged by her own brother. I’m guessing I have another four or five hours left before the narcotics wear off and she comes looking for answers.

Hopefully, by then, I’ll have some.

A shrill ring fills the quiet room, causing Lola to stir.

“Shit,” I mutter, reaching for my phone again. Silencing the ringer, I catch a glimpse of the coded number flashing on the screen.

It’s another hand-held warning flare. His twentieth today...

I should answer it.

Instead, I slide it back into my pocket. There will be repercussions for ignoring Valentin Carrera, but I’m in no mood to deal with my father right now. He’s another who’ll want answers I can’t give.

Leaving Lola to sleep, I make my way downstairs to the Platinum Bar where RJ is waiting for me. There’s a glass of whiskey in hand and judgment scrawled across his face.

“Don’t start,” I warn, unbuttoning my jacket before collapsing into one of the oversized chairs across from him.

“Wasn’t planning on it.” Raising his palm in peace, he nods toward another drink placed on the table between us.

I can’t pick it up fast enough. *Añejo* tequila. Straight and strong. I’ll need more than one after today.

“What has our Italian guest down below been up to?” I ask.

“Shitting his pants, mostly.”

I laugh for the first time in what seems like forever. *What a dickless fuck.* Not that I expected much more out of a man like Marco Bardi. “So, am I to assume he’s sung like the piece of shit canary he is?”

“Not exactly,” he grumbles. “He keeps yapping about irrelevant stuff nobody gives a fuck about.” The rest of his sentence is drowned in fifteen-year-old Glenfiddich Special Reserve.

Damn it. I assumed that *idiota* would have broken by now.

“Do we have the tape?”

He nods. “Original, plus seven copies and a plate of lasagna.” At my raised eyebrow, he adds, “Abuela Bardi was more than cooperative to help her little ‘*patatino*’... And insisted on thanking us with frozen casseroles.”

I chuckle at the nickname. Her *little potato* has become a huge liability.

“*Muy bien...*” I say, lifting my glass in honor of a job well done.

RJ frowns, hesitation playing across his face as he pulls his cell from his pocket. A long pause extends between us as he stares down at it.

“Spit it out, RJ. I’m too tired for mind games.”

“I watched it,” he says slowly.

“So?”

“I think you should, too.”

I shake my head. “Hard pass. Not into homemade porn, thanks.”

“I’m serious.” He lowers his gaze to his phone, his heavy tone dragging mine along for the ride. “You need to see this.”

My gut churns as I lean forward and take it. The video is already queued up. I know it’s the sister on that tape, not Thalia, but something inside me is warning me not to look.

Autodefensa mental.

Ignoring it, I press play, and quickly see what RJ’s so twisted up about.

There’s a naked girl passed out on a bed. Not just any girl—one with the same heart-shaped face as Thalia’s and the same luscious black hair spilling all around her face like a dark promise.

The same way I've imagined the wife I claim to hate would look lying underneath me.

We watch in silence as the camera pans this way and that, covering every inch of her tan skin, before Bardi is roughly pushing her onto her front and continuing. When he turns her back and starts spreading her legs, I hit the pause button and toss the phone across the table.

"I've seen enough. What the fuck is he doing to her? Measuring her for a new dress?"

"It's an audition."

"A *what*?"

"For a sex trafficking auction, I believe."

The air comes shooting out of my lungs. For all of my family's sins, flesh trade is a barter we don't tolerate. A few thousand kilos of cocaine couldn't care less how it's cut or defiled, but a human being—a woman whose only crime was to exist—never recovers. Sex slave trade scars are permanent.

Provided she survives the bite of its blade.

"*¡Hijo de su puta madre!*" I bite out between clenched teeth. "He never had any intention of handing this over to Thalia."

RJ shakes his head. "Can we kill him now?" There's murder in his voice. The kind that would give even the hardest of criminals pause.

"Not until he's served his purpose."

He grunts his displeasure. "What's the plan, then?"

"To win."

"Santi..."

"This isn't up for debate, Harcourt." In truth, I need time to formulate a new one after everything that's come to light tonight. "Look into the group behind this auction. See what you can find out."

"There's one other thing," RJ notes, draining his glass. "Bardi is still claiming to have no knowledge of what happened here the other night."

"I think it's pretty obvious he's not working for Santiago if he's using a skin flick of one daughter in an attempt to blackmail the other." Raking a frustrated hand through my hair, I dislodge the last remaining remnants of its slicked back style. None of the pieces of this puzzle are fitting together. They're all different sizes and shapes with entirely separate pictures on the front.

"Should we put the bar buyout on hold for a while?"

“No.” If anything, I want control of New York even more. “I have another meeting with Monroe scheduled for tomorrow morning.”

“In the interim, this should cheer you up.” RJ flicks through his phone again and holds out a photo of the burning wreckage that used to be Sam Sanders’s flagship bar—The Barfly.

“Tell Rocco he did well,” I say with a grim smile. “Send him an extra grand as a bonus.”

Is this what finally made Santiago snap and fire a “Daddy gunfire special” at his youngest daughter?

The thought makes my lips flatten in a tight line.

“Thalia has requested to meet with Bardi on Friday night. Speaking of which...” Reaching into the inside pocket of my suit jacket, I pull out the Italian’s phone. It’s time my new bride receives the answer she’s been waiting for.

Happy fucking wedding day, Thalia Carrera.

Draining the last of my tequila, I type out a short text, mentally punching that asshole’s face as I hit send.

It’s about time. Friday at nine. Don’t be late, bitch.

I’m about to pocket the phone when I change my mind and type one final line.

Nice pic of MY money... Next time, send me one with your legs open.

Disgusted, I hit send, and toss the phone back onto the glass table, quickly ordering another drink to dilute my guilt.

RJ lowers his gaze, chuckling as he scans the text. “Are you asking for Marco or for yourself?”

“Fuck off.” Swiping the phone off the table, I flip him my middle finger as I rise to my feet to head back upstairs. “I don’t touch Colombian pussy... I marry it, and then I ignore it.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

SANTI



THERE'S A ROCK SITTING IN THE PIT OF MY STOMACH AS I PROWL THE black hallways of my penthouse apartment.

Craving a glass of *Gran Patrón Burdeos Añejo* tequila, I'm irritated as hell when I discover my office bar empty. Striding into the kitchen, thinking dark thoughts about my housekeeper, I'm greeted by the sight of a perfectly rounded ass in a pair of denim cutoffs, with the seams stretching in all the right places.

¡A la verga! I'm going to need something stronger than tequila.

"Can I help you?"

Thalia's head quickly re-emerges from the refrigerator. She straightens and turns with a jerk, her cheeks flushing. "What are you doing here? I thought you were out for the evening." She glances at the door. "Do you want me to stay in my room? It wasn't locked so I figured—"

"We're married. Do whatever the fuck you want. You know the rules." Leaning over the kitchen island, I crush my elbows into the cool surface, pretending to ignore the hurt look on her face. This woman is a goddamn guilt machine. It's all I seem to be feeling today.

I'm not telling her I have the tape, though. Bardi is my one bargaining chip—I control him, I control her—and I can do a lot of damage to the Santiago Cartel in a week with Thalia in my corner.

Hell, I already have.

"Does this mean the hunger strike is officially over?" I watch her stirring a saucepan, the fragrant aroma of garlic and tomatoes sweetening

the tension between us. “Or will I be sliding into bed later, courtesy of another crème brûlée floor wax?”

The stirring stops. “I thought you said we had separate bedrooms?”

“Relax. It’s a joke,” I say, watching her shoulders deflate in relief. “What the hell are you eating anyway? I’m sure there’s something more refined that my Paris-trained chef has made in the—”

“I like spaghetti and tomato sauce,” she says flatly, spinning around to switch the gas off.

“Suit yourself.” I flick through the messages on my phone, overlooking another two from my father, all the while stealing more glances at her. She’s wearing a loose white Tee tucked into the front of her dick-tease shorts. It’s molding her small breasts into something far more appetizing than dinner.

She’s also looking every minute of nineteen and vulnerable as hell.

“Do you have anything in particular against French cuisine?” I ask her.

“I’m in need of comfort food tonight.”

“*Autodefensa mental*,” I mutter.

She cocks her head, her eyebrows drawn tight. “Huh?”

“Defense mechanism,” I repeat in English. Holding up the empty box of processed pasta, I give it a shake. “This isn’t comfort food, *mi esposa*; it’s a heart attack in a bowl.” Leaning into the refrigerator myself, I remove a plate of foie gras p te.

“At least it’s not pureed animal livers,” she says, frowning at me.

“This is a French luxury. Here, try it.” Digging out a fork, I attempt to lift a portion up to her lips, but she backs away with a disgusted look on her face.

“Ugh. No thanks, I’m a vegetarian. And do you know how cruel that stuff is? They force feed the ducks and geese until their liver explodes. Not to mention that they keep them in tiny cages.”

“Cruel food for a cruel man,” I say dryly, adding it to a piece of brioche and popping the entire thing in my mouth.

Shooting me a withering look, she turns back to the stove, rewarding me with another view of those shorts as my dessert. *Comfort food, indeed...*

“The best meals don’t always have to come from animals, you know.”

“Okay, Miss PETA. Educate me.”

“Speak to my sister. She’s the vegetarian cook.”

I try not to think about the images on the tape. The indignity of those ten minutes has ensured that Bardi will be missing a few fingers before

dawn.

As for the rest of him...

I watch her drain the water from the pot and mix in the jar of sauce. "Tell me your sister is a better cook than this."

"She's great. And a brilliant writer too." There's a sudden warmth in her voice. "It's amazing really, after everything she's been..." She stops abruptly, as if her words have strayed somewhere they shouldn't.

"What's amazing?" I push the foie gras to the side. Now, I'm craving spaghetti, and I never eat that shit. It's official. My taste buds have ADHD.

Thalia tosses a fork into the pot, her dark eyebrows bunching together again as she stirs. "She's sick... Lupus. She was diagnosed ten years ago. The symptoms come and go, but when she's in a flare, it's..." The stirring stops. "It's really bad."

Bardi just lost a fucking hand now.

"What can they do for her?"

The stirring resumes; this time in a swift and punishing rhythm. "Nothing," she clips, the word swaddled in anger. "There's no cure. Her body will keep attacking itself until one day..."

"I get it," I say stiffly, eyeing my missing bottle of *Gran Patrón Burdeos Añejo* sitting on the counter behind her. *Dios mío, I need a fucking drink...*

"Yeah, sure you do," she mutters under her breath.

I don't share kills, and I sure as hell don't share my family's personal shit with my enemy's daughter, but my mouth is playing mutineer tonight.

"My *Tía* Adriana... My father's sister. She was born with Type 1 Juvenile Diabetes. When I was a baby, she went into kidney failure."

"Oh God, I'm so sorry." She spins around, her delicate features creased in sympathy. It's such a genuine reaction that it has me reaching around her for the bottle of *Añejo* and pouring myself a large double. "Did she—?"

"Die along with her organs?" I finish, causing Thalia to flinch. Shaking my head, I place the bottle back down on the counter. "No. She got herself a brand new one."

"Let me guess. The King of Mexico made his *sicarios* draw straws, and the poor bastard who pulled the short one 'volunteered' a vital organ."

"No, *he* did."

Fuck off, mouth. Just. Fuck. Off.

"Are you serious?" She looks shocked.

“Blood is blood. Even criminals wear capes once in a while... Speaking of which, when did you learn to count cards?” I take a swig of my drink, not only savoring the burn, but that blush staining her face. *Maybe even more so...*

There’s a pause. “Did you have your cameras on me the whole time?”

My lips turn up in a reluctant smirk. “Only when you passed twenty-thousand on the same table. House policy.”

“Damn. I knew I should have moved on. It’s part of my 101.”

“My wife, the master criminal,” I mock. “How much have you won from other casinos?”

“Four hundred and forty-five thousand dollars,” she says quietly. “In four days.”

“*Four days?*” I slam my glass back down on the counter. Shit. I need her on my payroll. Even my best dealers can’t move enough shipments of cocaine fast enough for that kind of payout.

“I hate doing it, though. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Don’t tell me I married the only Santiago with a conscience?”

“No, that’s my sister. I’ve done plenty bad.” She points to the bottle of *Gran Patrón Burdeos Añejo*. “Can I have one?”

“Be my guest.” I unscrew the cap and pour out another double. “Unlike you, I don’t mind breaking the law. Serving alcohol to a minor is at the bottom of a long list of offenses in my lifetime.” Extending my arm, I offer the glass. She takes it, and then retreats back to her half of the kitchen.

“Did you ever want to do anything different with your life?” she asks as I slip off my jacket and holster, placing my gun on the island between us.

“No,” I answer tersely, shooting her look over the rim of my glass. “The penthouse apartment and the millions in the bank are a real kick in the balls at the ripe old age of twenty-two.”

As the first-born son of Mexico’s bloody version of Camelot, *this* is what was expected of me. I never cared to explore other options because to me, there were none. Carrera men honor their families by protecting them and raining hell on anyone who tries to hurt them. My father’s name is sacred. Our way of life isn’t always honorable, but it’s never disloyal.

A man doesn’t choose his destiny. It chooses him.

“*Twenty-two?*” she looks surprised. “I figured you were older.”

“Looks can be deceiving, *mi amada*... What about you? College? Job?”

“Tried college. Lasted one semester. Wanted a job. Wasn’t allowed.” She scans my gun again and then frowns. “Violence is like an earthquake, don’t you think? There are so many aftershocks and consequences, even if you can’t see them. The man you killed might have had a family who now miss him. A trafficked woman might have been lucky enough to escape, but she’ll always have severe PTSD.”

“I’m more of a survive-the-moment kind of crime lord,” I say, leaning back against the counter, intrigued by her strange outburst of metaphorical wisdom—wanting more, even though it’s painting me in every shade of asshole.

One thing’s for sure. Thalia Santiago is much smarter than I ever perceived her to be. Atlantic City is full of eager women willing to bend to my every command. However, I’m a man who fulfills his needs and then moves on. I have no interest in anything more than a hard fuck. Plus, there’s usually nothing between their ears except for air and a wicked tongue. A week ago, that’s all it took to satisfy me.

Things change.

My new bride doesn’t follow rules, and she sure as hell doesn’t fit in any premade box. She’s perceptive and brave and cunning—a woman who understands this savage life fate has chosen for us.

Thalia Santiago Carrera stimulates more than my dick. She challenges my mind.

And *that* turns me on more than I could’ve ever imagined.

Her defiance and intellect, the two attributes that landed her in my clutches, are the same damn things making me want to keep her there.

That’s some psychological bullshit I don’t care to analyze.

“My friend’s mom runs a women’s sanctuary in Colombia,” she continues, spooning the spaghetti into two bowls, taking it upon herself to assume I want one. “She supports abuse victims and victims of trafficking... I helped out one summer, and I really enjoyed it.”

Tactfully done, Thalia. Her so-called “friend” is my number one rival, Edier Grayson. I know all about him and his family’s *telenovela*-worthy drama.

I bite my tongue at my own words. *You’re one to talk, Carrera.*

Still, it strikes me that our two families have something in common: a shared aversion to human trafficking. Neither of our cartels supports it. In fact, we both actively condemn it.

Thalia clears her throat. “Listen, I’m not saying I’m a saint or anything —”

“Cheating casinos out of half a million this week certainly puts you in a gray area.” I yank at my tie and loosen the top button of my white dress shirt.

“Oh, forget it,” she scowls, pushing one of the bowls toward me. “Here you go, *dear*.”

I’m starting to enjoy her acid tongue. *Maybe a little too much.*

Leaning over the island, she takes a bite from her bowl, and the obscene noise she makes hits me straight in the dick.

“Are you going to tell me what you need the money for?” I ask, mimicking her stance. We’re barely a couple of feet away from each other now, but I can smell that sweet jasmine perfume as strongly as if we were skin to skin.

“You have your deal clauses,” she says, shaking her head. “This is mine.”

Those dark eyes catch me staring.

“Are you ‘cartel-perving’ on me again?”

“Can’t ‘perve’ on someone you hate.”

Her fork clatters back to her bowl. “This is officially the worst week of my life,” she mutters, “and there are still six more days to go.”

As far as she knows... “You’ll live.”

“I need to breathe, Santi,” she pleads. “Can’t you at least try giving me an inch?”

I flash a salacious smile. “I’d give you all ten, but I doubt you could handle it.”

“God, you’re such an arrogant...” The next thing I know, I’m wearing a fistful of spaghetti—the tomato sauce spreading like blood stains all over my Tom Ford dress shirt.

No one speaks until the spaghetti finally loses its traction on the eight-hundred-dollar material and hits the tiles by my feet with a *splat*.

“You really shouldn’t have done that,” I say slowly.

Thalia’s dark eyes sparkle with triumph. “Why? What are you going to do about it? Force me to marry you? Too late, you already—”

She shuts up pretty fucking quick when a fistful of my own spaghetti hits the front of her white T-shirt.

“You’re a bastard,” she hisses.

“And you’re a spoiled Colombian *princesa*,” I snarl.

“At least when I marry for real, I won’t have to blackmail my fiancé up the aisle!”

“You’re not going anywhere, *mi amata*,” I growl, an unfamiliar emotion rising up inside me as I circle the island to reach her like I’m an animal stalking my next meal. “When this week is over, you’ll be begging me for a key to the Carrera castle.”

“Stop calling me that! I’m not your *beloved* anything. In fact, when this week is over, you’ll be begging me to leave!” She seals the promise with a flick of her middle finger before swiping the lingering strands of spaghetti off her chest—a move that leaves a wet smear across her breasts, turning her T-shirt transparent. I can see the hard outline of her nipples beneath, but it’s nowhere nearly as hard as my dick is right now. “I’ll never forgive you for what you made me do today!”

“I don’t remember asking for your fucking forgiveness!”

“You’re a cruel, heartless, murdering—”

“You’re running out of words there, *wife*.” I crowd her up against the counter, and she shoves both palms into the mess on my chest, freezing as I emit another low growl.

She opens her mouth, and I’m not sure if it’s to scream, apologize, or hurl another fucking insult, but my self-control has heard enough. Her warmth, her scent, her spirit... *It’s all too damn much*.

Fisting the ends of her long hair, I yank her head back and crash my mouth onto hers before I can talk myself out of it.

I feel her softness turn to stone, and then her fingers become twisting vines in my hair. But when I drive my tongue past her lips...? That’s when shit gets really messy.

“Fuck... *Me vuelves loco*.” Hooking my arms underneath her thighs, I hoist her onto the counter and roughly part her legs.

“Say it in English,” she gasps out.

“You make me crazy, Thalia. So fucking crazy.”

I slide a trail of heat to her breast, feeling her pounding heart beneath my fingertips as she grinds against my dick. “Did you do this on purpose, *pequeña seductora*? Parade around my penthouse in those shorts just to tempt me?”

“No... I.... Oh God...”

“There’s no God, here, *mi amada*. He left my life the day your family entered it.” I feel her reaching out to touch me again, so I pin her hands to the counter, resisting the urge to sink my teeth into her pouty lower lip just to taste the flavor of Santiago blood.

“You like to break rules, don’t you?” Smirking down at her, I feel her flinch. With just one kiss, she’s mine for the taking. “Lift your hips. I want to know if your pussy feels as good as the rest of you.”

I catch the beat of her hesitation before she complies, and then I’m ripping denim down her long legs. Dragging her to the edge of the counter, I tug the crotch of her panties to one side and rest my middle finger against the entrance to her soaking-wet pussy.

Wet for me, and only me.

This is wrong.

She’s a fucking Santiago.

Less than an hour ago, I was telling RJ, I’d never touch her.

My hate is all twisted up. I feel it more for myself than I do for her right now.

“Beg me to finger fuck you, Thalia Carrera,” I demand, looming over her like the devil I am.

“W-what?” Her eyelids flicker open in surprise.

“Beg me, *mi pequeña seductora*.”

“Okay then, fuck me,” she whispers.

I offer her a smile with the warmth of a sheet of black ice, and then I drive my finger deep inside her, right up to the knuckle.

She opens up wider—letting out a helpless moan as I swipe her needy clit with my thumb.

“Now, beg me to make you come.”

As I say it, I start pumping in and out, waiting for her words to become a triumphant melody to my ears.

“No.”

I pause, feeling her soft muscles pulling me in deeper. “No?”

She’s so fucking close already. But if she refuses to submit to me, I’ll make us both suffer.

Fisting her hair again, I hold her head prisoner as I slide my finger out of her tight heat and smear her desire for me across her lips.

“W-why did you stop?” she rasps in confusion.

“Because, despite what’s written on a piece of paper, you’re still a Santiago, Thalia,” I murmur, leaning in extra close to deliver my truth. “And if you won’t beg for it from a Carrera, then I’m not fucking interested.”

Running my tongue across the seam of her mouth, I taste her addictive sweetness before I’m pushing her away.

“Pleasant dreams,” I say, turning on my heel and swinging a goddamn hammer into her guilt machine.

For one brief moment, I touched her light. I imagined another version of Camelot.

Then I saw it for what it really was—a beautiful bullet in a spinning chamber.

I lost sight of what’s important.

I lost sight of the end game.

I will never lose control like that with her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THALIA



SHAME IS A CLOTH HELD TIGHT ACROSS YOUR FACE AS YOU'RE SPLASHED with cold cruelty. Pride is the air you try desperately to suck back into your lungs, even when it's an elusive prize.

An hour later, I still haven't moved from the kitchen counter. I know what and who I am now. I'm one of Santi Carrera's torture victims, but instead of missing fingers, my scars are on the inside, like survival lines scratched into a prison wall.

The seconds tick.

I think I've forgotten how to move.

From feeling everything with him to feeling nothing at all... I offered up a piece of myself, and what did he do? He crushed it with his fist.

Lesson learned.

Move, Thalia. Move.

Ella uses a meditation app to help her stress levels. I can hear the soothing voice in my head, as my feet hit the tiles, my stiff muscles aching in protest.

Breathe in.

Hold.

Breathe out.

I do this for a couple of minutes, feeling the cloth slowly slipping from my face and my lungs expanding again.

Breathe in. Bardi finally messaged me back. The meet is confirmed.

Hold. In six days, I'll be gone from this place and that man forever.

Breathe out. I'll make all of this right somehow. I know I will.

Placing the discarded bowls in the sink, I set about cleaning the remains of dinner away and tidying up the kitchen. It takes me ages to scrub dried sauce from the countertops and the floor, but once I'm done the place is gleaming, and it's after midnight.

I'm reaching into a cabinet to put the saucepans away, when Santi's housekeeper, Svetlana, comes barreling into the kitchen. She stops dead when she sees me, her gaze dipping to the state of my clothes, and then she's backtracking fast and closing the door as quietly as she can.

"I've cleaned up as best I—"

"Shhh," she whispers fiercely, bringing her finger to her mouth. Grabbing my hand, she pulls me sideways into a pantry. "Are you alright, *vezda moya*?" Her hands are all over me, patting me down as if searching for bullet holes.

"I'm fine," I say, cringing away. It's weird behavior for someone who's barely even talked to me. Plus, I've had more than enough of being manhandled for one evening. "It's just sauce. I had an accident."

One I won't be repeating anytime soon.

"I meant from earlier," she urges. "The gunshots outside your apartment?"

My mouth drops. "How did you—?"

She pulls me even deeper into the pantry. "I have been asked by a business associate of your father's to deliver a message."

The air comes whooshing out of my lungs again. I should have known his spies would be everywhere.

"What message?"

"He did not fire those bullets at you, *vezda moya*. He would never, ever harm you."

Tears of relief prick my eyelashes. "But my father had a sniper—"

"He was killed during the shooting. *Señor* Santiago found his body a couple of hours ago."

Even in the dim light of the pantry, I can see the dark circles under her eyes. The lines on her face look like crevasses. She's risking *everything* to tell me this.

"But if it wasn't my father...?"

"He does not know who is behind it yet. All he has is a discarded M27 rifle. His men are tracing it now." She glances over her shoulder at the closed door. "I must go, *vezda moya*." *Señor* Carrera would kill me if he

knew I was talking to you. He is much more dangerous than you think he is.”

“Wait,” I hiss again, as she’s reaching for the door handle. “Can you deliver a message back to my father for me?”

She nods, her movements jerky and jittery like a frightened mouse.

“Can you ask him to trust me?”

Another nod. She turns to leave again.

“One more thing...” She waits impatiently. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SANTI



THALIA SANTIAGO'S PUSSY IS GOING TO SEND ME TO AN EARLY GRAVE.

I slam my bedroom door, unsure if I'm about to put a bullet in the wall or in my own head. I wanted her to beg for me. No, I *needed* her to beg for me.

For my touch... My kiss... My cock.

Please.

One word and I would have devoured her. I would've made her come with my fingers and then sank my tongue into that greedy pussy until she screamed for mercy.

Screamed my fucking name.

I can't decide if I'm more furious with myself for letting it get so far or with her for denying me the pleasure of breaking her. One simple word from those lips, and I would've taken more than her name...

The scent of her arousal still coats my fingers as I rip off my tie. It's an infuriating cocktail of jasmine and pussy juice, causing me to tear at my shirt until the buttons pop off. Shrugging it off my shoulders, I break the zipper on my pants in a desperate attempt to free my swollen cock.

The moment it curls against my stomach, I turn and drive my fist into the wall.

It only hardens my dick even more.

Taking a vicious hold at the root, I pump my hand, my cock enduring a savage punishment meant for her.

The faster I stroke, the harder my fist pounds into the wall.

Pound. Pump. Pound. Pump.

“*Dios mío*, fuck... Thalia...” She’s all around me—her face in my head, her scent in the air, her taste on my tongue. As my hips thrust into my hand, I imagine it’s her cunt I’m driving into. Her cunt I’m fucking. Her Santiago cunt I’m going to stain with Carrera cum.

It’s that image that pushes me over the edge.

My balls tighten as my rhythmic strokes and punches become frenzied and frantic.

Pound. Pump. Pound. Pump. Pound. Pump.

I close my eyes and see her face—cheeks flushed, and eyes glazed with desire. My breath comes hard and ragged. In my fantasy, I’m grabbing the back of her neck and pulling her upright off the counter.

“Look,” I rasp, thrusting harder. “Watch the moment I own you, Thalia Carrera.”

Then my mind goes blank, and I roar out my release, like I’m spilling every drop of cum inside her.

When the fog clears, I draw air back into my lungs and slowly open my eyes.

My clenched fist is encircled by countless dents in a wall, where a few inches below, a trail of cum slowly drips down the dark paint.

Pushing away, I step back and stare at it—and decide not to clean it up.

Let it stain.

Let it be a reminder to us both.

She’s a little girl playing with a box of matches and a can of gasoline.

I forced myself to walk away tonight, but next time...

Next time, I won’t have the control.

Next time, I’ll fan the flame and toss us both into the fire.



I wake to the sound of incessant ringing.

Rolling over, I land a heavy hand onto my nightstand, searching for the source while managing to knock over a half empty glass of *Añejo*.

“Son of a bitch...” I mutter, swiping my phone into my hand seconds before it swims in tequila. Rolling back over, I glance at the flashing screen and groan.

RJ...

And how the hell is it nine o'clock already? I just closed my eyes.

"This had better be important," I say with a growl into the mouthpiece.

"What are you doing?"

"Having a goddamn tea party." I drop my forearm over my eyes. *Fucking sunlight.* What do you think? I'm sleeping—or at least I was."

"Get dressed. You need to come to Elizabeth right now."

Elizabeth Marine Terminal—the Carrera owned Newark shipping port used for cocaine import and distribution. Two years ago, when my father handed me New Jersey on a silver platter, I flipped it over and launched an attack on Red Hook Terminal in Brooklyn—Santiago territory.

The Carreras lost eight loyal men, and I lost something it's taken me two years to regain. Valentin Carrera's trust.

It was a hard lesson in reckless ambition.

However, it's this same lesson that allows me to catch the subtle shift in his tone. He sounds rattled. In twenty years, I've never known RJ Harcourt to be anything but apathetic to the unforgiving reality of cartel life.

I sit up, fully alert. "What's happened?"

"Santiago diverted a hundred kilos of an incoming shipment from Guadalajara. Three dock workers were found nearby with their throats slit."

"Are we sure it was a Santiago hit?" There's a hesitation I don't like. "RJ?"

"An 'S' was carved into all three chests," he says quietly.

The scorpion calling card.

Memories I've tucked away for eighteen months rise to the surface. Ones of sitting across from Lola at a pizzeria in Camden, New Jersey, my heart impaled on the jagged image in my hand. A picture she begrudgingly took of the "S" for slut some frat boy cut into her hip after spiking her drink.

Only it wasn't any frat boy. It was Sam Sanders.

And the "S" wasn't for slut. It was for Santiago.

That bastard branded my sister with the same mark I'd found carved into a dead dockhand not twenty-four hours earlier.

Unstable feet carry me toward the shower as my lungs fight for air. "I'm on my way."

Before I can end the call, I hear my name. "Santi?"

I freeze, my hand on the shower door. There's that tone again. That unfamiliar rattled lilt giving conscience to a killer. "What now?"

“The stolen shipment and dead workers were the opening act to their shitshow. There’s more.”

“How much more?”

There’s a tense pause and then, “The main event.”



The main event consists of seventeen dead girls—stripped of their clothing and dignity and dumped like garbage in a forty-foot shipping container.

Some as young as ten, some as old as twenty litter a dark, damp mausoleum. Some healthy, others starved to nothing but a layer of skin and bones. Some with painted faces and nails while others wear the gaunt mask of poverty.

Death doesn’t discriminate. It just takes.

“Did they arrive this way?” I ask, unable to look away from their faces.

Frozen in fear for eternity.

Nodding, RJ palms the back of his neck. “Rocco got here first. He’s the one who discovered the missing shipment and this...” He jerks his head toward the stench, as if unable to stomach another look. “When he opened the container, the bodies had already started to...”

He doesn’t finish. We both know what he means.

Decompose.

“That didn’t come from Guadalajara,” I say.

No one in Mexico would dare to traffick women behind my father’s back. His fight to end it resulted in the origins of *La Boda Roja*.

The Red Wedding.

The start of everything.

“No,” RJ agrees, sliding his hand up to rub the back of his closely cropped black hair. “But someone sure as hell wanted it to look that way.”

My mind flashes back to a conversation four floors below Legado’s marble surface

“No, wait!” *Bardi’s tied limbs thrash in the chair. “That’s not everything! If you kill me, you’ll never know what he has planned!”*

“He?”

“Edier Grayson,” he says hesitantly. “That’s who shot up your casino, right?”

Son of a bitch...

"Not someone," I grit out as another piece of the puzzle clicks into place. "Grayson."

RJ's thick dark eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. "Not Santiago?"

"Even Santiago wouldn't stain his hands in trafficked blood. The man has left a trail of body parts from here to Romania for over thirty years in revenge for shit like this." At RJ's sideways glance, I tighten my jaw. "Personal reasons."

"You think Grayson has the *cojones* to go against him?"

"*Cojones?* No. Reckless ignorance? Yes." *Even the smallest taste of power can do damage.* "We're the second generation of this war, RJ. You included. Sometimes as it evolves, so do values."

Neither of us speaks again. Partly out of anger, but mostly out of respect. Seventeen innocent girls just became a casualty of a war they knew nothing about. They were someone's daughter... Someone's sister...

And my final straw.

The reverence is shattered by a shrill ring coming from my pocket. I don't bother to pull out my phone and see who's calling.

I know who's on the other line.

"Get a clean-up crew down here immediately, and then see to it that they get a proper burial." With a final glance toward the shipping container, I allow the image to imprint its evil into my mind before turning to walk away.

"Where are you going?" he calls after me.

"To tie up loose ends."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THALIA



I SLEEP FITFULLY, TOSSING AND TURNING IN A STRANGE BED WITH SHEETS that are cold, stiff, and unwelcoming. The darkness is weakening my defenses, and bad thoughts keep pouring into my head—like how stupid I was to believe that swapping secrets could bridge two worlds.

How I fell for his touch so easily.

I wake up feeling even more angry and confused, with sunlight streaming onto my pillow. Dressing in black skinny jeans, a clean white T-shirt, and my favorite leopard print Chucks, I check the burner phone to see if Ella's called—I've left her this number repeatedly—and groan in frustration when I'm greeted with another blank screen.

I hope she's okay.

I hope she's not too mad at me.

I hope she's looking after herself.

Next, I fire off another message to Bardi. For someone who wants his money so badly, he's being unusually cool about the delay. *More worry. More blind faith.*

I'm tempted to storm into my new husband's office and demand he gives me my own phone back, but when I finally pluck up the courage to do so, the room is empty.

It still smells of him, though: rich, woody, masculine... *Irredeemably cruel.*

Shutting the door behind me, I take in the expensive furniture, the shelves, the bar in the corner, with his beloved *Gran Patrón Burdeos Añejo*

tequila. He tasted of it last night—mixed with a persuasive invitation and a heavy dash of sin.

Walking over to the bar, I unscrew the lid and take a sip. It's not the most reckless thing I've ever done before breakfast, but it's pretty close.

I take another, the flames of the liquor burning away the memory of Santi Carrera's tongue. I take a third to make sure my mouth is cleaned of him forever, and then I'm emptying the rest of a six-hundred-dollar bottle down the sink and filling it up with water.

That should serve him right for being such a cold-hearted bastard.

You don't get to play with Santiago hearts and expect to celebrate with a drink afterward.



There's still no sign of Santi when I leave his office. The hallways are empty. The kitchen, barren. After the *Añejo* incident, I'm feeling audacious, so I head for the front door, expecting to feel a disapproving hand on my arm at any moment.

It never comes.

Even the blank-eyed security guards blocking the route from his penthouse to the elevator part to let me through.

Exiting on the ground floor, I find myself stepping into a hive of activity. Legado's casino restoration is near completion. A quick peek through the double glass doors reveals a new carpet, new black and gold décor, new pristine-green gaming tables... Santi's gambling gladiatorial arena is close to being back in business, and as I pass by a couple construction workers, I overhear them mentioning how the place is on schedule to reopen on Thursday night.

A wicked thought steals into my head as I return to the lobby. I could slip Santi a couple of Oxy and sneak down here to win the rest of my money while he's passed out and dribbling. But as tempting as it sounds, my plan would necessitate being within ten feet of him, and right now I'd rather stick pins in my eyeballs.

I follow signs for the Platinum Bar. It's another swanky room with high domed ceilings and mirrored walls. Fleetwood Mac is playing softly on the stereo. Ella's favorite. It's a musical dart to the heart.

Five days to go, and then we're all free.

There's a bartender polishing an already-gleaming counter. He glances up and notices me standing in the doorway.

"Can I get you something to drink, Mrs. Carrera?"

That wipes the smile off my face.

"Juice, please," I say sliding onto one of the stools at the bar. *I may as well throw in a mixer with all the Añejo tequila lining my stomach.*

He places a clean coaster and a glass in front of me, and then glances up again.

"Mr. Spader," he says, not sounding nearly as enthusiastic with *that* greeting.

"Andrew," comes a thin, reedy voice. "The usual, if you will."

The stool next to me gets pulled out and "unwanted company" parks his slight frame with a grunt.

"Mrs. Carrera," he says, bowing his thinning head.

"That's the second time I've been called that in the last sixty seconds," I muse, taking in his blue suit, thick, black-rimmed glasses, and drawn appearance.

The rat in the suit.

"New names can take a little time to get used to," he says, patting my hand.

His touch is cold and clammy, like a lizard deprived of sunlight.

"New names can also be reversed." I withdraw my hand, resisting the temptation to wipe it on my jeans.

"You're looking very well." His beady gaze lasers in on my chest. "Married life must be agreeing with you."

Who the hell is this guy? He's giving me serious Marco Bardi sleaze vibes.

"I take it Santi hasn't mentioned me?" He frowns as I fold my arms on purpose to nix his view. "How remiss of him when I was invited to your wedding."

"Santi and I have a language barrier," I state bluntly. "He speaks in threats, and I ignore him."

The sarcasm is strong in me today. *I'm blaming the Añejo.*

The man laughs. At least I think it's a laugh. It sounds more like a hyena on speed.

“How amusing... I’m Monroe Spader,” he says, as the bartender places a Bloody Mary in front of him. “I’m the gambling commission in this state.”

“Ah, so you’re one of Santi Carrera’s minions?”

“I prefer the term ‘business associate’.”

“I get the impression you do more than just issue gambling licenses to my husband, Mr. Spader.”

He pushes his glasses back up his nose. “I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean.”

I follow his eyes to my crotch, and then back to my face. It’s creepy and evasive, but it’s also oddly methodical, like he’s committing my vital statistics to memory.

“I take it you’ve heard the news?”

“What news?”

“Senator Sanders passed his bill through the State Senate yesterday. Next stop is the Assembly and then it lands on the good Governor’s desk.” He leans in close. “She won’t be a problem. Soon, gambling will be legal in New York again. It’s going to open up the gates to all sorts of exciting new business ventures.”

“Ventures like Carrera-owned casinos, you mean,” I say, catching on fast.

The King of Loco strikes again.

It’s madness for Santi to even consider this. Edier would raze any establishment of his to the ground before the doors opened.

“Perceptible little thing, aren’t you?”

Condescending piece of shit, aren’t you?

Taking a cautious sip of his Bloody Mary, he rises to his feet. “I’m afraid I must leave it there. I have a meeting with your husband in five minutes.” After this declaration, he’s draining the rest of the drink in one, like he’s the Jekyll and Hyde of cocktail consumption. “Delicious,” he says, smacking his lips together. “Enjoy the rest of your honeymoon.”

“You mean the one spent in a cage,” I say sweetly.

“One woman’s bars are another woman’s freedom, Mrs. Carrera. No doubt we’ll see each other again soon.”

I can’t wait.

I’m still contemplating his words when there’s an exasperated sigh behind me.

“Andrew, hit me up with something strong and fast. My brother is in a bad mood again, and if he tells me I make a shit cup of coffee one more time, I’m going to throw it at his damn head.”

A pair of gray crutches and two slim elbows hit the counter next to me, followed by a mass of dark silky hair that’s not unlike mine.

“Hi there, sorry about the drama...” Her words die a death on her lips as she turns to look at me. A beat later, she’s staggering back from the counter as if it’s burning hot.

“*Hijo de su puta madre...*”

“You must be Lola,” I say calmly.

“And you’re a Santiago scorpion in Chucks,” she gasps back. “You do know who owns this place, right? When my brother finds out—”

“Oh, he knows.” I hold up my hand to show her my ring finger and her brilliant-blue eyes widen to saucers.

“Andrew?” she breathes, sitting down hard on Mr. Spader’s recently vacated stool. “You better make it a double, and fast.”

“How’s your leg?” I ask, nodding at her crutches.

“How’s your mental state after agreeing to marry a Carrera?”

“Questionable.”

She points to her thigh. “Hurts.”

“Stitches?”

“Seven... Not the thirty-seven that my brother seemed to think I needed. Your *papá*’s bullet missed the mark,” she adds, aiming a vicious smile at me.

It’s no less than what I deserve, sitting here in the center of the Carrera lair, with all fingers pointing squarely at me.

“Edier didn’t destroy Legado, Lola.”

She scoffs. “You expect me to believe that? After the hell your father has put my family through?”

“I think you’ll find there are two hells to every story.”

“You know my *mamá* and I nearly died that night of the wedding?”

“So did mine.”

“Your father fired first.”

“Not according to him.”

Her sneer glides effortlessly into a frown. “We’re just going to have to agree to disagree then, aren’t we? Without the guns, though,” she adds dryly. “Crimson doesn’t match my outfit.”

“Mine either,” I say, my mouth twitching.

I’m beginning to understand how Sam fell so hard for her last year. He could have any woman he wanted. God knows, he’s sampled most of them over the years. It was always going to take someone truly spectacular to knock my playboy friend on his ass.

A long pause follows, filled with a thousand possibilities, as Andrew places another juice down on the counter with an apologetic wince.

“I’m sorry, Miss Carrera. You know that Mr. Carrera won’t let you have alcohol at this time of the morning.”

“Controlling fuck,” I hear her mutter as she tosses it back and offers out the empty glass for a refill. “If you don’t mind?”

Andrew smiles, looking relieved. “My pleasure.”

I catch her glancing at my ring finger again. “Now I know why he slipped me those OxyContin last night.”

“He *what*?”

Don’t act so shocked, Thalia. You were just considering doing the same to him.

“He knew I’d try and talk him out of the wedding, the fucking hypocrite.” Her expression hardens. “So tell me, oh, voodoo temptress. How did you go from counting cards in his casino to marrying my brother in two days? I was there when he saw the surveillance footage,” she confides, seeing my confusion. “He went *loco*. I thought he was going to punch RJ in the face.”

“We, uh, came to an...arrangement.”

“That’s more beneficial for him, I can imagine. I know my brother well, *señorita*.”

She can hide it all she wants, but I see the love behind her brutal mockery of him too.

“My name’s Thalia.”

“Thalia.” She repeats it slowly. “So, what’s in it for you?”

“Money,” I say honestly, staring down at my untouched juice.

“That’s something I didn’t expect to hear from a Santiago.”

“It’s complicated.”

“The best stories always are.” She catches my eye again. “How’s Sam?”

“Pining.”

I can tell she’s weighing her next words carefully.

“Did he ever tell you what happened?”

I shake my head. “Not much. It changed him, though.”

“It changed us both.” She glances at her phone. “Shit. I need to get back up there before Santi detonates another nuclear bomb on me for not answering his phone.”

“He has you working as his secretary?” I say in surprise.

“The worst kind of penance for daring to love the wrong man,” she says, rolling her eyes at me. “He won’t let me out of his sight after what happened with Sam. He blames himself. It’s also to fill a college internship requirement. Lucky me, right? Come. I’ll show you around if you like...” She picks up her crutches. “Let me be your hobbling tour guide for today.”



By the time we reach his office, I’m wound up to the point of detonation myself. As much as the thought of seeing him after what happened last night makes me want to puke. There’s another emotion drawing me here.

Curiosity.

I knew I was a self-masochist.

“Coffee?” Lola asks, as I collapse into the chair in front of her desk.

“Does it come with a toxic sweetener?”

“I imagine sharing a bed with my brother is toxic enough,” she answers with a slow grin.

I blush to the roots of my dark hair. “We don’t... We haven’t—”

“Of course not,” she clips, sensing my discomfort. “I’ve only known you for five minutes, and I already know you’re not stupid.”

“Just a viper,” I say slyly. *And desperate.*

“Well, we can’t all be perfect.” She gives me the ghost of a wink.

“I’m so far from perfect, it’s unreal,” I say with a sigh, thinking of Ella.

She pauses and starts nibbling on her lower lip. “He doesn’t *hurt* you, does he?”

Not physically.

“Actually, don’t answer that.”

“Tell me about him,” I ask, curious again. “All my experiences so far haven’t exactly been—”

“Complimentary?” She laughs. “What did you expect? When it comes to the Santiago Cartel, our father taught him to hate first, love never.” She

wanders backs over to me and leans against the side of the desk. “Unfortunately, the main thing that drives Santi is family. Considering who your father is, I don’t think it bodes well for the success of your marriage.”

“I don’t want our marriage to be golden,” I tell her. “I just want to survive it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

SANTI



LEANING BACK IN MY CHAIR, I PINCH THE BRIDGE OF MY NOSE IN A FUTILE attempt at warding off the headache that's been brewing for the last hour.

Instead of taking it as a cue to shut the fuck up, Monroe drapes himself across the opposite end of my desk and lets out a huff. "I have to admit, Carrera, I thought you'd be happier about the Senate vote."

Glancing up, I stare at him through parted fingers. Type in *sleazy politician* on any search engine, and Monroe Spader's plastic smile and pock marked face would pop up like an STD.

I have no clue how this *idiota* got appointed to the Atlantic City Gaming Commission. With his cheap suits, parted and slicked back brown hair, and black rimmed glasses that refuse to stay on his face, he looks like he should be hanging out next to a white van passing out candy rather than issuing gaming citations.

Then again, good things happen to bad people. Especially when their brother is banging the Governor.

"What do you want, Spader? A parade? You didn't fuck up simple instructions. Dropping my hand, I give him a slow clap. "Congratu-*fuckings*-lations."

"Someone's in a bad mood." Settling back into his chair, he reaches inside his suit jacket and pulls a half-eaten bag of peanuts. Shaking a handful into his palm, he tosses one into the air, missing his mouth by a good six inches.

"In case you've forgotten, my casino was shot up the other night. You were there, I believe...until you weren't."

“I don’t stick around for fireworks, Carrera.” Tossing another peanut in the air, he curses as it bounces off one of the lenses in his glasses. “Speaking of fireworks, how’s that new wife of yours treating you?”

I’m suddenly regretting my choice to have him attend my wedding—even if it was strategic. “She’s an unhappily married woman, as expected.”

“Gotta admit, that was one hell of an outfit she—”

“Is there a reason you’re still here?” I ask, cutting him off. I’m not discussing Thalia with him. I don’t even want him speaking her name. A second glance at his lecherous smirk almost has me reaching for my gun.

I don’t want him thinking of her at all.

She’s mine.

Wait, where the fuck did that come from?

The only claim I have on Thalia is a legal one. Just because she let me touch her pussy last night, that doesn’t mean we’ll be getting his and hers monogrammed towels.

“The new Mrs. Carrera is the least of my concerns since a shipment of dead women was dropped on my doorstep.”

A third peanut flies in the air, this time hitting its target. Monroe’s eyes widen, and he lets out a hacking cough.

I’m not sure if he’s choking on the peanut or my revelation.

“I heard.” He clears his throat, tucking what’s left of the bag of peanuts back inside his jacket. “One of the port terminal operators is an old friend. We...talk.”

Jack Wentworth. Another *pendejo* on my payroll with his hand out. Meaning that the two associates whose asses I own because of the morality I bought, have been trading war stories.

“You know what they say about loose lips, don’t you, Monroe?”

“Santi—”

“They sink ships...and careers. So, I suggest you shut yours.”

His face pales. “I want out.”

“What did you just say?”

“Look, I know who your family is, Santi. I know what they do...” He pushes his glasses back onto his nose, swallowing hard as I grip the edge of my desk. “I took your deal because it’s none of my business if somebody wants to take a line up the nose. But I didn’t sign on for dead hookers.”

“They’re not hookers,” I say, my tone low and deadly. “They were trafficked women.”

He waves his hand. "Either way, they're dead. Something I don't want to be. I agreed to pull some political strings, but no amount of money is worth this, Carrera. Not at the risk of getting caught in the middle of a cartel war."

"The risk?" I bark out a dark laugh. "Monroe, there's no risk anymore. You sank balls deep in this shit the minute you walked through my door. There's only one way out of our arrangement, and it leads six feet under."

"But I've done my part. The Barfly is nothing but soot and ash."

A cold smile slowly parts my lips. "You wanted to be business partners, remember? I warned you then if you chose to play in my league, you'd either win big or lose your life. You reached for the brass ring, Monroe. Whether it stays in your hand or gets wrapped around your neck is up to you." I wait a beat or two and let that sink in before nodding toward the door. "Now, get out. I have work to do."

Within seconds, his chair flies backward, and Monroe Spader becomes nothing more than a department store, blue-suited blur.

Once my office door closes behind him, I spin away from my desk and collapse back into my chair. *Dios mío, what the fuck else is going to go wrong?*

My eyes travel up to the oil painting above my head where my silent challenge is met by the smiling skull-faced reverence of *Santa Muerte* herself. "Don't answer that..." I tell her, and after another glance at her haunting stare, I quickly add, "*Por favor.*"

Even with the weight of the Terminal attack weighing heavy on me, my thoughts drift back to Thalia. She let her guard down last night. Not only did she offer me a glimpse behind that iron wall she's always hiding behind, but she also offered me herself.

I took what I wanted.

And then I broke what was left.

Loosening my tie, I unbutton the first button on my shirt. Something inside aches. It burns. I press my palm against my chest. It's starting to spread.

Fuck, maybe Lola was right. I *am* going have a stroke before I'm thirty.

As if summoned, my gaze drifts back to Santa Muerte who is staring down at me in judgment. "Fine," I grumble, digging my phone from my pocket. "I get it."

Svetlana picks up on the first ring. "Sir?"

“Have Francois make spaghetti for dinner.” Before she can ask any questions, I add, “And none of that boxed shit. I want fresh pasta and gourmet sauce.”

“Of course, Mr. Carrera.” I can hear the smirk in her voice so loudly she might as well have ended it with, *you overbearing fuck*.

“And throw out that Day-glo bullshit she smeared on her face for the wedding. Buy her some classy makeup and a new dress. What else do women need to feel secure?”

“Freedom,” she says flatly.

“So just the spaghetti then.”

A low chuckle rumbles on the other end of the line just before I end the call.

Fucking women.

Speaking of women...

Spader was already in my office waiting for me by the time I made it back from Newark. I didn’t get the chance to speak to her but judging by the pinched look on Lola’s face as I rushed past her desk, I didn’t need to.

The fire burning in her blue eyes said it all.

Spaghetti won’t cut it with my sister. If I hope to have any sense of peace in a life that’s already imploding, I’m going to have to swallow my pride and apologize.

Apologize.

Cursing under my breath, I stride across my office and open the door to find that my two worlds have collided, spewing twisted wreckage and brunette-infused gasoline across every inch of the executive lobby.

Thalia sits perched on the edge of a chair, while my sister rests against the side of her desk like the queen of the damned. They’re deep in conversation, and although I can’t make out their words, I have a pretty good idea who’s the topic of their conversation.

The pinche cabrón who let time get away from him, only to have it bite him in the ass.

Women talking is never a good thing. But two *Carrera* women in deep discussion? That’s a Molotov cocktail.

I clear my throat, and a set of bright blue eyes swing my way.

“Santi...” Lola flashes me a lethal smile. “We were just talking about you.”

“I’ll bet.” *About which common household cleaner can be used to induce a cardiac arrest?* “Thalia... My office. Now.”

She doesn’t budge.

“I said, *now*.”

Flashing me daggers, she slowly rises to her feet. Before she can take a single step, Lola clamps a hand around her wrist. “Your wife is not a Cocker Spaniel, Santi. Try again.”

I grit my teeth. “Please.”

I’m going to demote her to toilet attendant after this.

“Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Grinning, she releases Thalia’s wrist and flops back down into her own chair. “You two kids have fun.”

Turning on my heel, I stalk back into my office before I throw something at that grin and knock out a tooth. By the time the door closes behind me, I’m already pacing. I’m pissed, and it’s not just because Lola challenged me in front of Thalia.

It’s because I wouldn’t put it past my new wife to try and draw my sister into her corner.

What just happened out there was Lola being...well, Lola. I’d planned to tell her about my marriage. *Me*. Her brother. It wasn’t Thalia’s place to cross that line.

Thalia...with her long dark hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun that’s somehow classy in its chaos. Thalia...her face fresh and beautiful with only a hint of color on her lips and lashes. Thalia...in tight black jeans showcasing her long legs and another dick-tease white T-shirt.

“You don’t need to worry,” I hear her say. “I played my role, but your sister isn’t stupid. I had to be honest about us—”

“*Us?*” Pausing mid-pace, I cock an eyebrow at her.

In response, she gives me the look of a woman who has spent the last twelve hours plotting my painful demise. “Don’t worry, *husband*. Lola already knows her brother is a *pinche sangrón*.”

My head snaps up. “Did you just call me a fucking jerk?”

“I’m half-Colombian. You don’t think I know Spanish, too? Now if that’s all...”

Fuck, she’s beautiful when she’s angry.

I grab her arm before she can take a single step. “About last night—”

“It was a mistake—on both our parts. I have my agenda and you have yours. As long as we remember that, they’ll be no more of *this*.” She

motions between us with a disgusted look on her face.

“And what is *this*?” I demand, mimicking her gesture.

She smiles sweetly, venom dripping from her lips. “Emotional extortion. Something I’ve become depressingly familiar with over the past week.” Thalia turns back to the door and once again, I find myself stopping her with a firm grip on her arm. Her body tenses beneath my fingertips. “I’ve said all I have to say, Santi.”

“Good, then maybe you’ll listen for once.”

“Fuck you,” she snarls, pushing me away. There’s fire in her eyes, but it’s not a solitary emotion. Somewhere, in that river of molten rage, there are ribbons of pain too. “I may be your wife, but I won’t let you treat me like a whore.”

“You’re no one’s whore, *mi amada*.”

A bruised laugh rumbles in her throat. “After the way you acted last night? I let my guard down. I confided in you about my sister’s illness, and you twisted it into something ugly.”

“You don’t think I let mine down, too?” I’m advancing closer and closer to her as I speak. At this rate, we’ll both be crashing into that wall.

“For a second maybe,” she admits reluctantly. “Then it shot up pretty goddamn fast again.”

“And with good reason.”

Damn it. I didn’t want to have this conversation, but she’s forcing my hand. She doesn’t want amends, she wants blood.

Fine.

I’ll slice a vein for her. But what spills out isn’t going to be what she expects.

“I am *not* a monster.” Reaching out, I trail the backs of my fingers across her rigid jaw. “Not all the time, anyway. I’m a man of extremes. If there’s a middle ground, I’ve never found it. The line between hate and lust blurs too easily for me. Once it’s crossed, I crave...*something more*.”

She swallows hard, her throat constricting against my skin. “Did you want to hurt me?”

“Yes.”

“That’s why you wanted me to beg for it last night,” she whispers. “Because you knew I wouldn’t.”

The stark truth in her words is something she’ll never understand. It’s a truth buried deep within the dents peppering my bedroom wall. Her

refusing me was the only salvation I could offer her.

My cruelty wasn't simple malice. It was a lifeline.

I cradle her face in my hands—a tender gesture wrapped in a sharp warning. “I’m not a gentle man...in or out of bed. And you, *mi esposa*, are a virgin.” She opens her mouth to refute my words, but I press my thumbs over her lips. “You have no idea what I’d do to you, Thalia Carrera. Vile things no virgin should ever know.”

Silence tucks itself into every corner of the room. Waiting... Listening...

“I just want to go home,” she says, her lips trembling beneath my touch.

Those deep brown wells are brimming with unshed tears. One finally breaks free and trails down her cheek. When it hits my thumb, instead of wiping it away, I smear it into her skin. “You and I were born into a nightmare, and we’ll die in one too. This is the hand we’ve been dealt. But even in nightmares, we can control our own destiny. We can claim what’s ours and live by our own rules...our own desires.”

Her breath catches.

“What do you desire, *Señora* Carrera?”

Holding my gaze, Thalia opens her mouth and wraps her lips around my thumb. There’s a skipped heartbeat where we stare at each other—one of us testing boundaries, the other daring them to be crossed.

Then she hollows her cheeks...and sucks.

And once again, my prized control snaps like a dry twig.

I drag my thumb from her mouth, only to slam her up against the wall and replace it with my tongue. Diving my fingers in her messy bun, I pull at the strands while grinding against her.

Her moans are feeding the monster I warned her about.

I fucking warned her...

She kisses me back just as hard, taking everything I have to give, but the harder we kiss, the more I know her lips won’t be enough to calm this storm.

I want more.

I want her.

I reach for the zipper on her jeans, and she stiffens. “Santi...stop. *Stop!*”

But it’s too late. My monster has already consumed me. All I can do is brace my palms against the wall and lock my arms to keep from doing something I can’t take back.

After a couple of wide-eyed blinks, Thalia ducks under my arm. Pressing her fingertips against her swollen lips, she backs away, her eyes never leaving me. “I can’t... Not after...”

“Thalia.”

“I’ll stay out of your way.” She reaches behind her for the door handle. “I... I have to go.”

I close my eyes, trying to breathe through the thick haze of unsatisfied lust. *She did it again. She fucking made me lose control again.* This hot and cold seesaw has to stop. I can’t destroy someone and hunger for them at the same time.

I have to get my shit together.

When my head finally clears, I open the door and barrel straight into a five-foot three tornado ready to level me to the ground.

“Was it worth it?”

“If you’re referring to my new bride, you’re going to have to be more specific.” I go to step around my sister when she hobbles in front of me, blocking my path.

“While I have no doubt backing her into a corner was the highlight of your year, I’m referring to me.”

Okay, so we’re doing this right now. “What egregious sin have I committed this time?” I say, crossing my arms over my chest with a sigh.

“How about drugging me so I couldn’t attend my own brother’s wedding?”

I stiffen. The bite in her delivery tells me it’s not just an accusation. When Lola is mad, she reacts like a Carrera—methodical and calculating with very little emotion. But when she’s hurt, she’s vicious.

“I’m not stupid, Santi,” she scowls, shoving a surprisingly powerful jab into my chest. “I was roofied, remember? I know what being drugged feels like.” The tightness in her face fades, only to be replaced by a devastated frown. “But until now, I didn’t know what it felt like to be drugged by my own brother.”

Fuck, she went straight for the jugular.

“I did it for your protection.”

“Bullshit,” she hisses, her eyes narrowing in accusation. “You did it for *your* protection.”

“From who?” I shout, the pain in my gut turning into something much darker. “You? I’m king of this empire.”

Those light blue eyes narrow again as she studies me. “Well, your highness, bullets aren’t as sharp as arrows.”

“You should probably take the rest of the day off. It appears the drugs aren’t fully out of your system.” I push past her again. This time she doesn’t try to stop me.

“I saw the way you looked at her,” she calls after me. “This isn’t just about revenge, Santi. She’s getting to you.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I don’t know why I stop. I should just keep walking—only I don’t.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I? You can’t choose who you fall for, Santi. The heart doesn’t care about battle lines.”

“Are you speaking from experience, *chaparrita*?” *She’s not the only one who can throw stones.* I glance over my shoulder to find her glaring at me. “Because that worked out so well for you.”

As usual, any mention of Sam Sanders and Lola’s big mouth turns into a sealed vault. Bowing her head, she exhales a defeated breath. “I’m not fighting with you, Santi. I’m on your side.”

“Could have fooled me. From the way things looked when I walked in here, you’ve already jumped onto Thalia’s she-ship and set sail.”

She groans, shaking her head. “Just because I feel for the girl, it doesn’t mean I don’t know how dangerous she could be.” I hear her crutches drag across the marble and then still.

I tell myself to walk. *Just fucking walk away.* But, once again, I stand there, stock still, as my sister rests her hand on my shoulder before quickly drawing it back.

“We’re Carreras. I understand we have to break rules. Just promise me you won’t break *her*.”

“You really think I’m a bastard, don’t you?”

“No. I think you’d do anything to prove your loyalty to *papá*...and to yourself.”

Just the mention of his name and my chin slingshots back over my shoulder. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She stares into my eyes, her gaze softening. “Loyalty isn’t always a straight path, Santi. Sometimes it forks when we least expect it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THALIA



I DON'T WANT TO GO BACK UPSTAIRS. I DON'T WANT TO DISSECT THE STATE of my one-day marriage inside an empty room again. It's a dangerous activity when you're forty-two floors up and the sky is within touching distance. If Santi were to wander in unannounced for another round of unresolved sexual-hate tension, I might end up pushing him off the balcony.

Instead, I find myself back in the Platinum Bar, ordering another orange juice from Andrew that I know I'm not going to drink.

"Here you go," he says with a wry smile. He knows I'm not going to drink it either, but he's too polite to say anything.

I watch him polish the counter for the umpteenth time, until I can see my misery reflected back to me in perfect definition.

"How long have you worked here?"

"Two years."

"Do you like it?"

He laughs. "Is that a loaded question? I know who you're married to, Mrs. Carrera, and I value my...*employment*."

"Fair enough," I say, grinning back at him.

I watch him place a box of Johnnie Walker Blue on the counter and start unpacking the bottles. He's handsome in an All-American quarterback kind of way, but I know that if I were to ever find myself alone with him, his touches wouldn't sear my skin, and his kisses wouldn't burn like fire.

Not like another's... When *he* touches me, I know I'm already in hell.

Damn you, Santi. Why did you have to go and make everything so confusing?

“Are you a New Jersey native?”

“Born and bred,” he says proudly.

“Tell me a joke,” I say suddenly, and then I blush, realizing how forward that sounded.

“Are you okay?” he says, frowning down at me.

“It’s not a come-on, I swear,” I stammer. “When I was a kid, my friend used to try and make me laugh with bad jokes all the time.” I shrug helplessly. “I guess I could use that right now.”

He side-eyes me with a slow grin. “A joke, huh?” Leaning across the counter, he nods and accepts my challenge. “Okay then, two guys walk into a bar... The third guy ducks.”

It’s way too stupid to be funny, but I find myself laughing anyway.

Or I do until a fist comes flying past my face and slams into Andrew’s jaw before he has a chance to duck himself.

“Get the fuck out of my casino!” Santi roars, taking the polished counter like he’s Bo Duke from *Dukes of Hazzard* sliding across the hood of a car, as Andrew reels backward into a shelf of vodkas.

“Santi, stop!” I scream, climbing up onto the bar myself to try and haul him away, but it’s like trying to calm an angry wasp. The harder I try, the more stings keep raining down on the bartender.

“Did he touch you?” He whirls around suddenly and catches my chin in a vise-like grip. His face is blazing. His touch, savage.

“Oh my God, *are you jealous?*” I gasp out.

“You’re mine, Thalia Carrera,” he growls. “That fucking ring on your finger proves it.”

“A piece of metal proves nothing! I’m filing for an annulment unless you hire Andrew back right away.”

“First name basis with the staff, already? You *do* move fast, Thalia.”

“In five days, I’ll be fucking sprinting out of this place. See how fast I move then!”

Mouthing an apology to Andrew who’s holding the left side of his jaw and looking dazed, I push backward to free myself, vowing to speak to Lola as soon as I can about her brother’s unreasonable behavior. If Andrew isn’t rehired within twenty-four hours, I’ll do more than fill his bottles of *Gran Patrón Burdeos Añejo* up with water.

“Thalia Carrera, come back here,” I hear him thunder as I reach the entrance to the bar.

Ignoring him, I flick my middle finger up as an *au revoir* and then wait for the thunder of angry footsteps to follow me.

He catches up as I'm stepping into the elevator.

"Leave me alone," I grit out, as he barges into the carriage after me, crowding me into a corner as the doors *ding* shut.

"Did he touch you?" he repeats as the carriage starts to rise—along with the temperature inside it.

"I asked him to tell me a joke," I respond, bitterly. "I didn't expect my husband to be the *punchline*."

It's a great pun, but neither of us are in a laughing mood right now.

"You're lying!"

"And you're the King of *Loco*!" I say, jabbing my finger into his chest.

"The, *what*?"

"It's the name I've been calling you in my head since the day we met. You make these crazy, mad decisions all the time, and only you can see the logic. Is it true you're going to open casinos in New York now that Uncle Rick's bill passed through the Senate?"

"Oh, *hija de tu puta madre*!" he spits out. "Don't say it like you care about my safety."

"You're right; I don't!"

Our chests are heaving in time with each others' now. We're standing so close, we're creating our own friction from the movement.

I can feel his hard erection pressing up against my stomach. My nipples are like bullets.

"You're lying to me again," he accuses harshly.

"Fuck you!"

"Good idea."

Just then, the elevator gives a lurch. It may as well have snapped its wires for all the self-control left inside the carriage.

It's hard to tell who moves first. *Who started this war first?* But suddenly, I'm full of him again. Possessive, strained kisses that drive his tongue so deep into my mouth, there's no amount of *Añejo* that's going to burn this memory away.

In turn, I take my anger out on his body—twisting my fingers into his thick black hair and yanking hard. He groans, spilling Spanish curses and filthy words into our kiss as the heat between my legs ignites into a pulsing inferno.

Sliding his hands to my ass, he lifts me up, forcing my legs around his waist, and pins me against the carriage wall.

“If you ever...”

Kiss

“Laugh like that with another man again...”

Kiss

“I will fucking murder him...”

Kiss.

“And then I will fucking murder you.”

Kiss.

“That’s if you can catch me,” I rasp, tipping my head back to offer him my throat for the killer finale.

Somewhere in the distance, the doors *ding* open again.

He carries me wrapped around him like this into his apartment, shouting at his security guards to avert their eyes as we pass.

Kicking the door shut, he lays me down on the table in the middle of the hallway, rips at my jeans and panties, and then sinks to his knees between my legs.

“I thought I was the one who had to beg,” I pant, lifting my head.

Our gazes meet.

Our worlds collide.

“Oh, you’ll beg, *mi amada*,” he says with an evil smile, spreading my legs even wider for him. “I won’t stop devouring this pussy until you do, and then I’m turning you over and tongue-fucking your ass until you forget you ever had a name before Carrera.”

All of my thoughts fragment, except one.

“What about...?”

“I can wait,” he says, guessing at my question. “Because when you’re ready to take my cock... when you come to me willingly... I know that your innocence will be worth every second spent desiring it.”

I’d never stopped to consider how it would feel to have a man kissing me *down there*, but when his tongue paints a hard line up through my folds, I don’t recall much of anything anymore. When he wraps his lips around my clit and draws hard, the universe ceases to exist.

When he wrings his first orgasm out of me so violently my back arches up from the table and his name becomes permanently tattooed on my lips, I think I’ve reached oblivion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SANTI



MY PHONE IS RINGING AGAIN BY THE TIME I MAKE MY WAY BACK DOWN TO the Platinum Bar an hour later. RJ already has a full glass of *Añejo* tequila waiting for me. For the first time, I stare at my poison of choice with mixed emotion.

I need a drink. This day is starting to warrant many of them. However, I've just sampled a much more powerful vice, and now the familiar, soothing burn has competition.

I roll my neck, my tight muscles stiffening in protest. While taking that first sip may ease the knots created by Grayson's counterattack and Monroe's pathetic bullshit, it will also erase the taste of her. And right now, the sweet essence of my wife's lust is the only thing keeping Marco Bardi's skull in one piece.

I reach into my pocket to silence its incessant ringing before unbuttoning my jacket and sliding onto the barstool. With one sideways glance, the bartenders scatter, busying themselves with mopping up invisible spills at the other end of the counter.

Luckily, that *pendejo*, Andrew, is nowhere to be found. Thalia's warning filters through my head... *Hire him back, my ass...* He's lucky he still has hands to lift his dick to take a piss, much less pour drinks in my casino.

After what just happened upstairs, the stakes are even higher. Thalia isn't just a pawn anymore. My hunger for her is tipping the scales in the wrong direction.

I wanted to own the world.

Now, she's flipping it upside down.

I've never walked away from pussy so many times without fucking it. Yet here we are again—the virgin and the villain—charging the same lust-laded battlefield. Advance and retreat. Attack and surrender. We're crossing two territories filled with hidden landmines, and eventually, one of them is going to explode.

I'm going to need that drink, after all...

"*Gracias*," I mutter, downing half of the glass before taking a breath.

RJ places his half-empty whiskey on the counter next to it. "Rough day with the missus?"

Rough and brutally delicious. An image of Thalia lying on her back, legs spread, and neck arched in ecstasy invades my thoughts, and my cock swells again with the need to possess her. *All of her.*

Her inexperience drew me in, but it's her vulnerability that keeps me interested.

I pause, the tequila halfway to my mouth, and flick him a hard stare. "Keep that shit up, and I'll be sending your nuts back to Houston in a Ziploc."

He laughs, the sound grating on my last nerve.

"What did our friend Bardi have to say about the *gift* Grayson left on our dock?"

"Haven't asked him yet. I figured you'd want to do the honors."

My cousin knows me too well. After having my port turned into a crime scene and watching my sister stage a mutiny, there's nothing I want more than to beat a confession out of that Italian motherfucker.

"Well, at least we know he wasn't responsible," I offer, settling back onto the barstool with exaggerated casualness. "He's a little tied up at the moment."

The joke goes over about as well as the bartender's did earlier.

"Speaking of which," says RJ. "If you're done using his phone to catfish your wife, hand it over. I'll have one of our hackers see if they can pull anything off it."

"Already done. Nothing but bootleg porn and dick pics."

He's reaching for more whiskey when his phone starts ringing. It's quickly followed by mine—*again*.

There's a hard set to his jaw as he slides his phone from his pocket and notices I'm not doing the same. "Aren't you going to answer that?"

"Nope."

“Harcourt,” he answers.

A tap of my empty glass on the bar sends the bartenders scattering once again. Within seconds, a new drink is placed in front of me, all wrapped up with an invisible bow.

“What do you mean?” A sharp note in RJ’s voice catches my attention. I glance over to find him gripping his phone so hard, I’m surprised it hasn’t turned to dust. “Well fucking find him, you stupid *pinche cabrón!*”

“Tell me.” It’s all I can do to force out the command through clenched teeth.

“Bardi is gone.”

Three words. Three fucking words, and all my best laid plans crumble like a house of cards.

“What do you mean, ‘he’s gone’?” I grit out. “Where the fuck could he go? The son of a bitch was tied to a chair in a locked room!”

RJ stands, raking his fingers through his short hair. “I need to find out. Rocco just went down there, and the door was open along with two dead *sicarios*. No chair. No Bardi.”

My fingers tighten around my glass moments before I’m hurling it across the bar, watching as it shatters the mirrored walls. “So what? Did he sprout wings and levitate his way to freedom? Fucking find him! Now!”

“Santi, I—”

He’s cut off by yet another shrill ring, and then I fucking snap.

Reaching for my own phone, I silence it before slamming it onto the bar. “*Don’t you know how to leave a fucking message?*”

“Yes, but I prefer to deliver them in person.”

Every muscle in my body tenses as the deep, familiar accent amplifies in surround sound, controlled and deceptively smooth in its delivery. Slowly, I turn to find the cold, unforgiving eyes of my father staring back at me.

Phone held to his face.

Murder darkening his eyes.



Valentin Carrera doesn’t sit. He stands like Zeus himself, presiding over my office like it’s Mount Olympus.

He hasn't spoken a word since I closed the door, but to be fair, neither have I. Our chilly reunion drew more than a few stares in the bar, so my only reaction was to suggest we move it elsewhere.

Somewhere more private—with fewer witnesses who could be called to testify in the event of a murder.

I lean back in my chair, widening my fingers and pressing my fingertips together. Choosing to sit rather than stand was a strategic move. My desk chair is a seat of power—a self-built throne under the watchful eye of *Santa Muerte*.

This isn't Mexico.

This is New Jersey.

And here, I'm king, not him.

My phone chimes, alerting me to a recently left voicemail. I'm in no mood to deal with anything else right now, so I toss it onto the desk between us like a grenade.

Lowering his eyes, my father gives it a half-interested glance. "So, your phone isn't broken after all."

I'm also not in the mood for explanations, so I reach for the crystal decanter sitting beside me and pour myself a drink. "Help yourself," I murmur.

His dark gaze lowers to the decanter and then settles back on me. "I don't like to be ignored, Santi."

With my glass in hand, I sit back in my chair and mimic his calm, lethal tone. "And I don't like to be questioned. You demanded I handle Grayson's attack on Legado, so I did. I wasn't aware my decisions needed a prior authorization." Holding his stare, I take a long drink, letting the challenge hang in the air. I've never been anything but reverent toward my father, so we're both treading in uncharted waters here.

"Depends on the decision," he says, scanning my office with the same stormy eyes I see in the mirror every day. Dark brown with flickering glints of gold, which means he's barely containing his rage. "This is quite a place you have here, son."

It's not a compliment.

And a flicker is nothing more than an impending fire.

Although my father's hands are tucked loosely in the pockets of his black suit pants, it's a dubious stance. Judging by the hard set of his jaw and

unwavering stare, I wouldn't be surprised if he drew out a thunderbolt and hurled it at my face.

"Repairs went well, I see."

I nod. "The Carrera name has a way of expediting things."

"You're welcome."

My blood pumps a furious rhythm at the insinuation. "For what?" I ask, biting out the words, struggling to keep my temper under control. "You think *you* did this? You think it's *your* name they fear in this town?"

He lets out a dark chuckle. "They fear *El Muerte*."

Those two words are like a gunshot. *The Reaper*. A name he's referred to in hushed whispers all across Mexico.

"On this side of the border, I am *El Muerte*," I say, baring my teeth and slamming my glass onto the desk.

My father's lips curl into a tepid smile. *Son of a bitch*. He provoked me on purpose. He wanted me to break first.

My empty stomach churns on nothing but acid and tequila.

"You didn't come all this way to talk about building structure," I say idly. "I know you have falcons planted up and down the East Coast reporting back to you. You know I have a caged songbird in my penthouse."

He doesn't confirm nor deny, but he doesn't have to. We both know I'm right.

"Legado..." he notes, ignoring me, the heavily accented word rolling off his tongue. "It's ironic, don't you think?"

"What is?"

"That you'd name your casino after your *legacy*..." His smirk vanishes, the black calm of a cartel kingpin sweeping across his face as his palms smack onto my desk. "Only to put a ring on a Santiago, and shit all over it."

"Watch it," I warn in a low tone, but I don't know what I'm defending more—my casino, or my wife.

"Have you let her pussy poison your brain, Santi?" he seethes, his palms curling into tight fists. "That woman is *not* your ally. Have a few days between her legs made you forget everything I've taught you? Everything her father did to your mother? The pain he caused our family? The time he stole from *you*?"

That last one was a well-flung dart to the weakest part of me. A dark corner inside my head filled with nothing but scorched hope and unanswered prayers.

“No, I haven’t forgotten,” I counter, recapturing my deadly tone—only this time, it’s sliced paper-thin. “How could I? You’d never let me.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I don’t answer him. It’s not a conversation I care to have, now or ever. Arguing about the past is like spinning circles inside a hamster wheel and expecting to travel in a straight line.

“Seventeen dead women washed up in a shipping container in my port this morning,” I say flatly, changing the subject.

He grinds his teeth. “*Si*, I know.”

Of course, he does. This war has escalated to a new level, and now it’s resting in my hands.

On my fucking shoulders.

“My casino got shot up.” I rake my hand through my hair and tug at the roots. “Lola got hurt. Sanders’s bar is a pile of ash and stale memories. Santiago used his own daughter as target practice for Christ’s sake.”

He’s quiet for a moment and then cocks his chin, the gold flecks in his eyes turning from a flicker to a spark. “You knew this was always your destiny. My battle is your battle.”

“No!” I accuse, jabbing my finger across the desk. “It was always your battle. You made it my burden.”

“You are a Carrera. A sin against one is a sin against all. We don’t rest until vengeance has been claimed and blood has been spilled.”

“That’s *your* truth.”

The spark becomes a flame, his knuckles flattening into my desk. “And you made it *your* truth when you took the oath and accepted a seat at *Senado*,” he hits back, his accent thickening as his anger escalates. “I may have groomed you to be a king, Santi, but you coveted the crown all on your own.”

He’s right. And I want to hate him for it—only I can’t. Valentin Carrera molded me to be his successor. To bloody my hands and absorb his hate as mine. But in the end, I chose this life. As young as eight years old, I’d sneak out of the house and follow my father and uncles to the one-room building on the far end of the estate.

Senado. The Carrera Senate.

The only law that exists within those four walls is the law of the cartel.

Men inside those walls earned their seat. They took an oath. I coveted what they had. My soul burned to belong. To claim what was rightfully

mine.

I earned my seat the night I stood with New Jersey snow under my feet and gunfire erupting all around me. The night I took my first life...

And faced my first weakness.

As I stare at my father, I suddenly realize how much I've become him. Not only physically, it's also there in our mannerisms and words. My office is bathed in darkness, just like his. My Italian suits are made of only the finest silk, black and dark grays, just like his. While his hair is now salt and pepper, and mine is jet-black, they both act as mood barometers—slicked back when we're in control and chaotic when we're not.

Truth's reflection is a bitter pill. Even now, we're both leaned forward on opposite sides of my desk, fists clenched, jaws tight, unrelenting and stubborn as fuck.

Mirror images.

Mirror sins.

The sins of the father...

I can feel a cold smile spreading across my face. "It seems I am my father's son, in more ways than one."

He cocks a dark eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Thalia Santiago came here trying to win money to protect her sister from an Italian piece of shit who was blackmailing her. Instead of letting her keep her earnings, I've held her against her will and used her to my advantage in the middle of a cartel war." I hold his stare, my sadistic smile widening. "Sound familiar?"

For the first time, I see my father flinch. He was just a few years older than me when my grandfather sent him to Houston to run stateside operations for the Southeastern leg of the cartel. My mother was a bartender at a Carrera-owned cantina, and somehow her whole family got trapped in the middle of a Mexican cartel rivalry.

Which ended with my father kidnapping her.

He claims it was to protect her, but Valentin Carrera does nothing that doesn't benefit him.

I never asked the details. I didn't want to know. Now, I'm thinking I should have...

Stretched silence paints the room in even more volatile darkness. Only a single breath separates action and consequence.

Until the door flies open.

“Santi, I’m sorry to barge in, but you aren’t answering your...” Lola’s voice trails off as her gaze settles on the opposing force standing across from me. “*Papá?*” she whispers.

My father shifts his attention toward the open door, his scowl softening. “*Hola, cielito.*”

His little sky. His greatest weakness, second only to my mother.

“What are you doing here?” she asks incredulously. I didn’t...” When his gaze locks onto the crutches tucked under her arms, she shoots me a panicked look.

All I can do is shrug. Trying to contain his vengeance now would be like trying to capture a breeze. *Futile as fuck.* Whether she has a flesh wound or a paper cut, it won’t matter to Valentin Carrera. Someone drew blood from his little *cielito*. Someone will die.

Lola clears her throat nervously. “Is *mamá* here?”

He nods. “*Sí*, she’s resting in a room upstairs.”

The words are aimed at her, but they punch me straight in the chest. “You’re staying here? At Legado?”

“*Sí*,” he answers again, and I don’t like the look in his eyes. “In fact, she is very much looking forward to tonight.”

Lola gasps. “Tonight?”

My father strides across the office, gently cupping her cheek. “Didn’t Santi tell you? The five of us are having our first family dinner together.”

Santi didn’t know shit about it.

Wait... “Five?” I ask, realizing I’m about to steer myself right into another shithole.

I grip the edge of my desk, bracing for the response that is every bit as toxic as I anticipate.

“Yes, you, me, your *mamá*, your brother...and our new daughter-in-law.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

SANTI



MY FATHER GLARES DOWN AT HIS PLATE IN DISGUST. “WHAT THE FUCK IS this?”

The waiter becomes a wax statue, his face frozen in terror as he glances across the table at me for guidance. Unfortunately, I can’t pull him from this fire.

I’m the one who lit the match.

Legado’s Cellar Bistro is a world-renowned five-star restaurant occupying a large portion of the eighth floor. The food is high-end and eclectic, which besides being completely empty due to renovations, is one of the main reasons I chose it for tonight’s festivities. My father is a product of his environment and a creature of habit.

Valentin Carrera will charge into enemy territory with nothing more than a vendetta and a steak knife, but when it comes to his food, he rarely strays outside his comfort zone. If his plate doesn’t have Mexican roots or come with a side of Texan nostalgia, he isn’t interested.

So, I may have enjoyed it a little too much when the waiter set a plate of sautéed baby octopus in front of him.

Bon appetit, Zeus.

My mother, however, isn’t so amused. *Or at all.* In fact, if looks could kill, I’d have eight baby octopus legs tied in knots around my neck.

“It’s *Jjukkumi Gui*, s-sir. I-it’s a-a Korean delicacy.”

The man can’t form a sentence without stuttering, and instead of reveling in it, I find myself feeling sorry for the *idiot*. This newfound guilt Thalia has shoved down my throat is putting a damper on my fun.

Flashing the waiter a gracious smile, *mamá* leans in close to my father. “That looks delicious, Val. Do you mind?” Without missing a beat, she switches plates, placing her roasted duck in front of him while taking the octopus for herself.

Delicious, my ass. She’s full of shit but no one dares argue with her.

Crisis averted. *For now.*

Mamá glares across the table at me, her red lips pursing in that familiar, disapproving way—the one that always hits in the same raw places. The same scars. But it’s her eyes that wipe all traces of smugness from my face—narrow slits of blue, identical to Lola’s but much less innocent. Eyes that have always held endless well of devotion and the deepest source of pain.

For both of us.

She hasn’t changed much in two years. Even in her late forties, Eden Lachey Carrera is still striking. The long, cherry red hair I used to grasp as a security blanket as a young boy, now dusts her shoulders, but it’s still just as vibrant.

I wish happy memories were the only ones I had of her. The ones where I tugged on that hair and she laughed and squeezed me so hard I thought I’d die.

But they’re not, and I have Dante Santiago to thank for that.

Thankfully, the view to my right helps. I had to put the brakes on the spaghetti extravaganza, but Svetlana delivered on the dress.

This time, Thalia didn’t turn it into a Halloween costume—a concession that didn’t even require heated debate.

She looks like an angel, with those sexy loose curls flowing down her back. But it’s her dress that’s the star of the show. It’s white—elegant and sophisticated, while still showing enough skin to make me contemplate the ramifications of escorting her to the restroom for round two.

That Russian needs a raise.

Refusing to give the roasted duck a second glance, my father raises a stem glass of *Gran Patrón Burdeos Añejo* to his mouth and takes a slow sip, his dark gaze settling to my right as well. “I would toast to the happy couple, but it seems I wasn’t invited to the festivities.”

“Val...” my mother warns. I can tell they’ve already had words—none of them pleasant.

“*Cereza...*” he counters, his tone thickening with reverence as he speaks his name for her.

“It’s fine, *mamá*,” I murmur, because *fuck that*. I’m a grown man. I don’t need anyone fighting my battles. “There wasn’t time to invite anyone.” I glance at Thalia, reaching for her hand under the table, more for solidarity than anything else.

As soon as my skin touches her, she jerks it away.

Orgasms are not concessions, in her book.

Noted.

“...From either side,” I finish, glaring straight at my father.

“You’ll have to excuse my son, Thalia,” he says smoothly. “He seems to have forgotten his manners. Please... tell us about yourself.” He pins her with a lethal stare. “You are, after all, *family* now.”

The insult is unspoken, but it’s loud and clear. Thalia will never be a part of our family, in this life or the next.

I slam my wine glass down, but my retort dies on my tongue when I catch Thalia shaking her head at me. “Santi, it’s fine. Your father has every right to be curious about me. And every right to have his question answered.”

I know she’s putting on a show to hold up her end of our agreement, and I can tell she’s nervous from the slight edge to her voice. Thalia isn’t afraid to stand up for herself, but her bravery has limits, and those limits have a distinct tell:

The sharper her words, the greater her fear.

All her life, she’s been taught to hate the very people she’s being forced to make polite conversation with tonight. I expected tantrums. What I’m receiving is fucking Oscar-worthy.

Is it for her, or for me?

We made a deal, but somewhere along the line the terms started blurring

“I’m nineteen,” she says, glancing around the table, meeting everyone’s curious eyes in turn, even the ones flashing unwelcome signs at her. “I moved to Manhattan to be with my older sister, Ella, a year ago”

“Do you attend college, or does your father not allow it?”

“College isn’t my thing,” she admits, ignoring the jab. “I lasted one semester.”

The contradiction of that acerbic tongue and innocent appearance holds me captive. I couldn’t look away, even if I wanted to.

“And what is your ‘thing,’ *Señorita* Santiago?”

“*Señora* Carrera,” she corrects softly.

What the fuck?

My father leans forward as if he's misheard, but his brief glance my way has all the charm of a razor blade. "What was that?"

"You called me *Señorita* Santiago," says Thalia, meeting his gaze. As you pointed out, I'm part of the family now, and that includes my name."

Lola's jaw drops.

My mother laughs softly.

My dick turns to stone.

But my father's jaw ticks as he says, "*Lo siento, Señora* Carrera. My apologies."

"And my 'thing' as you put it," she adds sweetly. "Well, I guess I'm still figuring that out. All I know is that there's a lot of ruin in this world, *Señor* Carrera. Perhaps, some things need to be put right."

I'm not sure if I want to hold my hand over her mouth or drive my tongue into it and kiss her senseless. Other than my mother and my aunt, I've never seen any woman dare to stand up to my father like this.

She's fucking fearless.

I wait for the explosion, but instead, my father indulges in a long, slow drink, studying every facet of her face as he does.

"I'm surprised to hear that, *Señora*. You sound more philanthropic than ambitious... I thought charity was one of the Santiagos' deadly sins."

Boom.

There it is.

Thalia's polite smile slips as she returns my father's weighted stare, neither of them blinking. "I want to help the world, not make it spin for me—something that you and my father seem to take great pleasure in."

No one breathes.

No one dares.

What's happening here is so casual in its destruction, there will be nothing left of Legado to repair.

"Painting pretty colors over bloodstains won't make them go away, *Señora* Carrera," he counters finally, the cords in his neck straining. "Eventually, the paint chips away, and the blood reveals itself."

"That's enough," I warn between clenched teeth.

The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.

That's what his whole paint and blood metaphor bullshit means.

It doesn't matter what I do or what Thalia does. Hell, for that matter even Lola, or those fuckers Grayson and Sanders. We could cure cancer or fly to the moon, but it's all just colored paint covering our fathers' sins.

Their blood will always be our stain.

And this isn't a family dinner. It's a slaughter. And I led Thalia here like a sacrificial lamb.

"So, am I supposed to dissect this thing first or just hack a leg and go for it?" my mother asks loudly, attempting to force a distraction by jabbing her fork into a tentacle.

"What's out of line is this whole act you two are putting on," my father snaps, ignoring her. "I don't care what you convinced that bastard father of yours, but I know my son." Thalia flinches, and he takes that opportunity to turn his vitriol on me. "I know you, Santi," he repeats viciously. "This whole family knows you. And we all know *why* you put a ring on this woman's finger. There's nothing real about a bartered marriage. What I really want to know is what made her agree," he adds, flashing Thalia a look of derision. "What would make a Santiago open her legs for a Carrera?"

I rise to my feet so fast, my own legs collide with the table, tipping over wine glasses. "I said that's enough!" I roar, not giving a fuck who hears me. "You're my father. I respect you and I love you, but this isn't Mexico. This is my territory and my casino. The minute you stepped foot inside it, your authority ended. As such, you will *not* disrespect my wife."

Lola places a hand on my arm. "Santi—"

"No..." My father stretches out the word with full confidence. "Let him speak. I'd like to hear this."

Apparently, so would the rest of Cellar Bistro's wait staff because every eye in the whole damn place is on us, waiting for the conclusion.

Drawing in a deep breath, I try to remember whose side I'm on. Whose name I bear. Whose blood runs through my veins. But all I can see is white. All I can smell is jasmine.

"Why Thalia married me isn't important, and frankly it isn't any of your business," I tell him, lowering my voice. "The only thing that matters is that she did." I reach again for Thalia's hand, unable to stop the torrent of rage as I flash her ring across the table, a part of me registering that she isn't jerking it away this time. "You can either accept it, or you can leave."

There's a tense moment where nobody knows what to say or do. I've just thrown down the gauntlet, and part of me is starting to question my own sanity. This is Valentin Carrera. Anything could happen. He could storm out and disown me, or put a bullet between my eyes and enjoy a Chianti.

He does neither.

What he does shocks everyone.

A slow, arrogant smile lifts the corner of his mouth. "Sit down, son. I'm not going anywhere until I finish my drink. Leaving good *Añejo* on the table is as much of a sin as pouring it down the drain." He turns toward Thalia, his smile widening. "Wouldn't you agree, *Señora* Carrera?"

At that, Thalia pales.

"So, I'm failing chemistry, in case anyone cares..." Lola pipes up, trying to ease the tension.

Nobody cares.

As I lower back down into my chair, my father holds his glass at his lips. "I do have one question for you..."

I grit my teeth.

"How philanthropic will your wife be when another shipment of dead trafficked women is dumped on your dock?"

You bastard.

"Trafficked women?" Thalia recites the words as a whisper—as if refusing to give them a voice will make it untrue.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Only then does my father pick up his knife and fork and begin vigorously sawing at the now cold duck on his plate. "*Dios mío*, did he not tell you?" Pausing, he points his knife across the table. "Communication is the key to lasting marriage, Santi... Deception after only a few days isn't a good sign."

I clench my fists. "Don't..."

"Danger..." my mother cautions, trying to diffuse him with a soft but stern whisper of the name only she calls him.

He ignores both of us. "Then allow me, *señora*. This morning, your childhood friend Edier Grayson intercepted a Carrera shipment arriving from Guadalajara. Recreational goods, of course. However, in exchange, he left us a present. A forty-foot shipping container filled with seventeen dead naked women. Trafficked women."

“No...” She shakes her head vehemently, her hands white-knuckling the table. “You’re wrong. Edier would never do that.” Her breathing is erratic, her pupils dilated and wild as she turns to me. “His mother is the one who runs the women’s shelter in Colombia. His mother *was* a victim herself. He’s grown up with his father’s hatred for the business all his life. My own father abhors it. He would never sanction this. Tell him, Santi!” she says desperately, turning to me. Though what the fuck she wants me to do about it is anyone’s guess. “Tell him Edier wouldn’t do that!”

The strange clamp around my chest is back... squeezing harder and harder. But I can’t tell her what she wants to hear just to spare her feelings.

Before was personal, this is business.

“There’s no other explanation,” I state bluntly. “He’s right. Revenge changes people, Thalia. It’s changed us all.” *Me and you, included.* “It makes them do things they never thought themselves capable of doing.”

Glancing at my father’s callous stare, I deliver the final blow. “You of all people should know that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

THALIA



IT WASN'T EASY FOR ME TO WALK AWAY FROM THAT FIGHT, AND I CAN'T deny that it hurt my heart to do so.

My damn Santiago heart.

Ella was right. I *am* similar to my father in some respects, no matter how much I argue to the contrary. Our shared stubbornness is what drove me to Santi's casino in the first place. I made the problem, so there was only one person who was going to fix it.

It's this same stubbornness that keeps me playing along with Santi Carrera's mind games.

Swinging my legs out of bed, I check my phone on the nightstand.

Still no call from Ella.

Still no message from Bardi.

Still no closer to morning.

Three a.m. is a dead time—*the worst time*—shipwrecked between night and dawn. Still, I need a drink of water and a pee so another day in captivity is going to have to start extra early for me today.

Pulling a hoodie over my old gray sleeping tee, I follow a long black hallway all the way to the kitchen. Part of me hopes that I'll run into Svetlana again, just in case she has another message from my father, but when I hit the lights, the place is sterile and empty.

I pour myself a chilled glass from the bottle in the fridge and lean against the island to survey the scene of our food fight explosion the other night. Turns out, it was just the beginning because we haven't stopped

exploding since. Every day, every minute, every hour brings with it a new bomb—the latest being the table of doom last night.

I came straight back to the penthouse after the meal. I didn't expect him to come and find me because he'd made his feelings clear. When all is said and done, Santi will never trust me. I will always be the enemy. My words and opinions mean less than nothing to him.

I shouldn't care, but I do.

Finishing up my glass of water, I place the empty back in the sink and head for the door. I see us for what we are now—we're a war within a war—fighting for ascendancy on a slippery slope. I find myself conceding a little more with each hour I spend in his black tower. With each time he infuriates me, confuses me...*touches me*.

A few days ago, I wouldn't have been caught dead in a white dress without a Santiago special makeover.

A few days ago, I hated him with every breath in my body.

A few days ago, I hadn't felt my whole axis shift when his tongue carved the promise of his own concession into my pussy.

And it's all because of a brutal, demanding, passionate man who presides over a kingdom of bones.

I'm heading back to my bedroom when I hear a scuffling noise coming from his office.

Back-tracking fast, I open the door to find him sitting in his black leather chair, with his feet up on the desk, his head facing the ceiling, and a half-drunk tumbler of something brown and alcoholic in front of him.

For a man who prides himself on his appearance, he didn't get the memo today. His gray tie is a coiling snake across his chest, the top two buttons of his crumpled white dress shirt are wide open, and both sleeves have been rolled up to the elbows.

He's a silent statue until the door clicks shut behind me. The sound echoes like gunfire. He drops his head and pins me with his hard brown eyes, looking stupidly angry, and stupidly handsome, and very, very drunk.

"You're up early."

"Never went to bed." Blowing out a sigh, he slides his tumbler across the table in my direction. "Care to join me? It's your father's favorite."

He's clumsy with his movements and the whole thing starts to topple. I hold my breath before it miraculously rights itself.

"I don't like bourbon," I confess, curling up in the chair opposite. "It reminds me of family parties invariably cut short when he went off to murder someone."

He grunts and doesn't comment. His hair is a disheveled, furious mess like the rest of him, and I'm aching to run my fingers through it.

"I was looking forward to my bottle of *Añejo*, until some fucking liver liberator sneaked in here and swapped it out for water."

I blush beet red. "Guess she was a, uh, liver-tarian?" I say, wincing slightly.

"Never knew you cared." He gestures at the bourbon. "Thought I'd try drinking alongside the enemy for a change instead of trying to bury him."

"How did your father know it was me who poured your bottle away?" I ask, curious all of a sudden.

His palms flex into fists as he slides them behind his head. "My father knows everything."

"Sounds familiar," I say, hugging my knees to my chest.

"It's not fun, is it, *mi amada*?" He drops his fists again. "Getting born into chaos and spending your whole life trying to make sense of it."

"I think you've done okay," I say, glancing around his office. "You built your own empire of sin."

"You say it like it's a *very* bad thing."

"Just because I don't appreciate the process, doesn't mean I can't appreciate the results. It couldn't have been easy to step out of Valentin Carrera's shadow."

I'm still learning to step out of my own father's.

"Cut the bullshit," he says, narrowing his eyes at me. "You'll only be happy when my head is on a spike."

"Likewise," I say, trying not to smile.

"I'd rather see it in my bed, attached to the rest of you."

He's only saying it because he's drunk.

With a shaking hand, I pick up the bourbon and take a sip. He chuckles when I make a face and put it straight back down again.

"God, that's disgusting."

"There's a Coke in the refrigerator, if you'd prefer."

"All the better to drown you with, you patronizing asshole," I say, my temper flaring.

"It's called gratitude, Colombian *princesa*."

We glare at each other as our war within a war spills out into early morning.

“Fucking fearless,” he muses eventually.

“Prince of Darkness,” I retort.

He barks out a laugh. “That’s a new one.” He considers me for a moment. “You have a fire inside you, Thalia Carrera, and it’s too goddamn distracting. Was this your plan all along? To infiltrate my kingdom and implode it? My father wants to murder me, my mother is a close second, and my sister... Fuck!”

“Edier *didn’t* plant those bodies, Santi,” I say softly. “The same way my father didn’t storm this casino and he didn’t fire those bullets—”

“Don’t be so naïve.” He yanks his tie off and chucks it across the room.

“Don’t be so short-sighted! I know you want this battle, but what if we’re not the only sides playing?”

“Did Grayson put you up to this?”

“No.”

“Do you really want to change the world, or just make it more palatable?” he says, changing the subject.

“Is that a serious question?”

“I liked it when you came on my face earlier.” He drops his feet and leans forward over his desk. “My benevolent, little virgin.”

I grab the bourbon again. It’s a reflex action. This time my sip is enough to make my eyes water.

“My virginity seems to be a bigger deal to you than it is to me, Santi.”

The atmosphere in the room recharges with something other than liquor fumes.

“That’s because I’m going to be the one to break you. My wife. My pussy.”

I blush again. “You can’t claim ownership of everything, Santi.”

“Says the woman who hasn’t fucked me yet.”

I roll my eyes in mock disgust. “How does your ego even fit in the door?”

“Turns out I have a big penthouse.” I watch him pull out a sheet of white paper from his drawer and a pen. “New deal terms,” he announces, and I watch him write a sentence in a jagged, inelegant scrawl. “Let’s expedite this shit. One night with me, and you get your fucking money in the morning.”

“That’s not fair,” I whisper, the blood draining from my face. “You’d be an even crueler man than I thought if you made me make that choice.”

A beat later, he’s balling up the paper and throwing it in the trash.

“You’re right. Stupid idea.”

He looks like he wants to say something else, but he stops himself in time.

“You could just give me the money now,” I say hopefully.

“And have a chorus of slammed doors ten seconds later as you hightail it back to New York?”

Something in his voice makes me pause.

“Is that why you’re dragging your feet, Santi?” I say slowly. “Do you not want me to make that decision? To leave as soon as my locks turn? You could have given me that money from the start, but you made me wait a week, even though the maximum damage you could inflict on my family was made the moment I said, ‘I do.’ The rest was just cartel posturing. A blown-up bar here, a political hit there—”

“A crate full of dead women down on my fucking dockside.” He leans back in his chair again to study me. “Are you saying you *wouldn’t* leave if I gave you the fifty-thousand?”

“You and I could never work, Santi,” I say with a sigh. “Even if we wanted it, there’s too much bloodshed under the bridge. What we have is hate lust. Hate fascination. It’s toxic and it’s beautiful, but it only ends one way.”

I remove the rings from my finger and place them on the desk between us.

“I’m not going to sleep with you because I want your money, or because I’m your wife and it’s my duty. I’m going to sleep with you, simply because I want to. Because it’s something that’s mine to give, without threats or coercion. You say that you’re this big, terrible man, so come on... Show me your worst. Destroy your enemy’s daughter’s innocence. Deliver that killer blow to my father, or deliver that killer blow to me if you refuse.”

Rising to my feet, my heart pounding, I slip my hoodie from my shoulders and pull my gray tee over my head.

His eyes darken, but he doesn’t move a muscle as I climb across his desk in my black panties. I’m halfway there when his willpower snaps, and he’s pulling me the rest of the way into his arms.

“You have no idea what you’re offering me,” he warns, settling me astride him. “But my dick can’t handle the way you just pussy crawled across my desk like that.”

“Good thing *I* can handle it,” I whisper, digging my fingers into his hair like I’ve been wanting to do since I first entered his office.

“So young...so fucking delusional.”

“Kiss me... Make me forget.”

He tastes of bourbon and temptation—*the devil’s favorite cocktail*.

I can’t get enough of it.

I can’t get enough of him.

“Fucking fearless,” he repeats, placing a hand over my heart, and then he’s pushing me off him and rising from his chair. There’s a primal look on his face that’s both scaring and thrilling me.

Spinning me around, he bends me over his desk, thrusting against my ass so violently that I’m forced to lock my fingertips around the edges for purchase.

“Shit!”

“Firebird.” He covers me with his body crushing my breasts against the cool glass surface. “My beautiful, fearless firebird... I’m not capable of being gentle on a good day, but when I’m half a bottle of bourbon down, I’m goddamn vicious.”

Taking a step back, he flips me over again and drags my panties down my thighs.

“Open up,” he orders, ripping at the buttons of his shirt. “I know you’re going to feel as good as you taste.”

His body is to die for—broad, tan, bullet-scarred, tattooed, perfect—with a wall of muscle behind a trail of black hair.

“Pretend I’m not a Santiago,” I say, groaning as he trails a hand down the center of my naked body, while the other rips at his belt and zipper. “Pretend—”

“No pretending.” He pinches my nipple between his fingers, sending another bolt of desire shooting through my pelvis. “Not tonight.”

His clenched fist comes crashing down next to my head as he leans over me to trail that same wicked finger up through my soaking wet folds.

“This pussy,” he groans, shaking his head at me. “This *fucking* pussy...”

He doesn’t ease me in with a finger. The smooth head of his cock is already pressing against my entrance. Like everything else with us, we’re

pushing boundaries, breaking rules—

“Look at me.”

My eyes snap open.

“You’re right. I am going to destroy this cunt,” he says savagely. “I’m going to fucking mold it to me.”

“Is this the part where I have to beg for it?” I whisper, feeling the heat and fullness of him, and wanting more. *So much more.*

“No, *mi amada*,” he says, his fingers tracing my ‘666’ pendant. “This is where *I* do some of the begging for once. Because if you don’t let me inside you, if you don’t let me fill you up, I won’t be held responsible for the carnage I’ll be causing to this office.”

“Beg for it then, Carrera,” I whisper, pushing back on him, feeling him slide in slowly until he hits resistance. “Beg for pleasure from your Santiago wife.”

He slides in a little deeper and the first bite of pain makes me groan with pleasure.

“Fuck, you’re tight.”

“Santi...”

His fingers find the hollow of my neck. I can feel the warmth of his palm wrapping around my skin—pressing, squeezing.... “On second thought, I’ll ask for your permission instead.”

Good enough.

“It’s yours.”

His hand tightens around my neck. *Another inch.* “Like you had any fucking choice in the matter.”

His next thrust buries his cock so deep inside me, his name on my lips is a scream and a prayer.

He curses.

“Santi!”

There’s nothing tender about the way he fucks. He means to shatter me. Pain turns to pleasure as he forces every inch inside me with every thrust. His hands are on my breasts, my ass, my mouth. There’s nowhere that doesn’t bear his delicious scars.

His control is insane. It’s as ruthless as he is. When he picks up his pace, each stroke—each vicious grunt—is a masterclass in expelling air from my lungs and more screams from my lips, as the glass desk below me turns as wet and slippery as my inner thighs.

I start to free-fall, and he forces his fingers into my mouth, turning my final scream into a twisted mess of skin and desire. As my back arches and my body shudders, he pulls out of me, his hand pumping viciously until thick ropes of cum cover my aching slit.

“Mine,” he grits out, giving me one of those blazing hard stares that turn our lies into truth.

“Ours,” I whisper, pulling him into my arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SANTI



THE ROAD TO HELL IS PAVED WITH GOOD INTENTIONS.

The road to this bed was paved with bad.

Thalia sighs in her sleep and rolls onto her side, tucking her hands beneath her chin and bringing her knees up to her chest, as if she's keeping all her dreams hostage. The twisted white sheet that was wrapped around her naked body falls away, and I'm drunk off the sight it leaves behind.

No matter what happens, I'll always own a piece of her. I'll always be the first man to sample that helpless, rasping melody she makes when she comes... Tearing my gaze away, I lean back against the headboard and close my eyes.

The first to ruin her...

The empty glass in my hands demands a refill because that's what happens when the woman you're supposed to hate flips the fucking script on you. You start your drinking day before dawn.

I was supposed to use her and then toss her back to her family broken and shamed. Now, she's lying in a bed I've never allowed another woman to sleep in before and stealing more than just my sheets.

Her debt chains her to me, and the key is buried in a vow of lies. But Bardi is gone, along with all my fucking leverage, so there's no reason to keep her here...

So why can't I let her go?

Placing the glass on the nightstand, I lean over and brush a lock of her dark hair away from her face. *So beautiful. So dangerous.*

She calls me the Prince of Darkness, but after last night—after she broke in my arms—I'm the Prince of Deception now.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

SANTI



THREE DAYS LATER, AND THE TRUTH IS STILL HANGING AROUND MY NECK like a noose.

Each time we touch, I can feel it tightening more and more.

And there's still no fucking sign of Bardi.

"Are you sure this isn't some kind of trick?"

I scan down the length of Thalia's outfit. *Jeans and a T-shirt again.* Her style leaves a lot to be desired, but it's growing on me.

"Are you going to elaborate, or do I have to read between the lines of your skepticism?" I say, straightening my tie.

"You're allowing me to leave Legado to go shopping." Her eyes narrow to sharp slits as she adds, *"Alone."*

"You'll have an escort."

She rises to her feet. "Your sister? *That's* your security guard?"

"Yes," I lie. *As if I'd leave Thalia and Lola unprotected for a moment.*

"Are we talking about the same person? Five-three, a hundred pounds, likes to push your buttons and make that vein"—she waves her finger at my forehead—"swell as big as your..." She trails off, her cheeks staining red again.

Once upon a time, that mouth drove me to hold a loaded gun to her head. Now, it makes me want to defile her even more.

"My what, *mi amada*?" I say, my voice dangerously low. Closing the distance between us, my fingers stray a little too close to her heart. "Say it..."

"Your cock," she rasps.

I claim that dirty, fucking mouth with a kiss.

“You’ll come back today, *mi amada*.”

“Give me one reason why I should?”

“I’ll give you fifty thousand of them.”

At this, a shadow crosses her face. It passes a mirror image across my chest.

“Did I interrupt something?” comes an amused voice from the doorway.

Perfect timing as ever, Lola.

“Nope,” says Thalia, ducking out of my embrace. “Santi was just giving me his credit card.”

I arch an eyebrow at her. Opening my wallet, I hand her my AmEx Black. “With a pre-set ten-grand limit,” I add, icily.

Her smile falters as she finally sees this domestic illusion for what it is.

I still don’t trust her.

I don’t even trust myself.

As the door closes behind them, my phone rings.

I answer, ready to lay into RJ for giving me radio silence all day when he cuts me off before I can say a word. “Come to the control room. There’s something you need to see.”



I stare at the black and white screen, every instinct of mine straining to put a bullet through it.

“You told me the security footage was hacked and erased.”

“It was.” RJ pauses the video. “But Legado’s previous owner installed backup servers. It took us a day to hack, and we weren’t able to recover all of it, but I think this is enough to determine we have a problem.”

“Play it again.”

He starts the surveillance footage from the beginning. We watch as a large man, dressed in similar black fatigues to the bastards who destroyed my casino, enters the basement. A beat later, he’s firing two bullets at my *sicarios* that they never saw coming. Stepping over one body, he grabs the corpse’s wrist and wrenches it upward, pressing the dead man’s thumb against the access pad.

This wasn’t an accident.

This was intel.

I remain silent as the man approaches Bardi, sitting slumped and bound to the chair. He keeps his back to the camera, but the look on Bardi's face when he sees him tells me all I need to know.

Recognition.

I watch the relief washing over that bastard's face. "Is there sound on this?"

RJ shakes his head. "Just images."

From there, it's the same flurry of motion as during the last two times I've watched it. The man pulls a knife from his pocket, slices through Bardi's restraints, and then the two of them exit the camera's line of vision.

"Here, take a look at this." RJ backs the tape up to the moment right before the man pulls out a switchblade to free Bardi. "There," he says, pointing at the screen. "Look familiar?"

I lean closer. The image is grainy, but those harsh black outlines cut through the static. The tattoo on the side of his neck is blazing—black and ugly—like a beacon.

"Is that an ax?"

We exchange glances.

RJ grits his teeth. "The New York Italian mafia insignia."

"Ricci." The name burns as it passes my lips. "That's an unwelcome blast from the past."

Twenty years ago, Don Ricci ran New York's cocaine distribution—a billion-dollar baton handed over by Rick Sanders when he stepped into the political arena.

Don Ricci. The same man who turned state's witness against his own Syndicate, inciting civil war and leaving New York ripe for the taking—a territory both my father and Dante Santiago were determined to control.

What the hell is a dead man doing back in the fucking picture?

Thalia was right. This isn't just an East Coast rivalry anymore. There are more seats at this table than we thought.

"Find out who that man is, and how he got into my casino."

RJ scrubs a hand across his unshaven face and nods.

"Until you have an ID on whoever has picked up Ricci's reins, and then find the intel on how Bardi's involved, we keep this between us. *Comprendes?*"

"Yeah, I got it."

Fucking Ricci. Even from the grave, he's still waging war against us.

I'm pulling out my phone as I exit the control room. "Rocco, it's me. Are you still tailing them?"

"Yep."

"Step it up and be vigilant. Call for backup."

He doesn't ask questions. The tone of my voice is warning enough.

Until I know how deeply the remains of Ricci's fractured Syndicate are involved in this, *all* Carreras are in danger.

And as my wife, that includes Thalia.



Four hours...

That's how long it's been since I met with RJ and everything went sideways.

I once read that the art of war was to know your enemy better than you know yourself, but it's not that fucking simple when one of them is a ghost from the past who's started haunting our cartel again.

Why him?

Why now?

Fixing the collar of my tuxedo, I fire off another message to my second in command. If someone so much as breathes the wrong way tonight, we'll know about it. There are more armed men surrounding this casino than guests, but there's a storm coming from an undisclosed direction and we need to be prepared.

"Thalia!" I call out, checking my watch again as I'm hit with a jarring sense of *déjà vu*. "Get down here. We're going to be late."

These were my exact words six days ago—right before she appeared looking like a carnival sideshow act.

"Okay, I'm coming."

Expecting black jeans—hell, maybe a clean T-shirt if I'm lucky—the vision standing at the bottom of the spiral staircase drop-kicks my preconceived notions right out of the penthouse door.

She does a long, slow twirl that has all of my attention. The floor-length, crimson halter dress exposes curves in all the right places. Her dark

hair is styled in a low bun at her nape, exposing a stretch of flawless tan skin that's begging for my mouth.

"Red," I muse, the corners of my mouth tipping.

Giving me a coy shrug, she runs a hand down the delicate beaded fabric. "What can I say? I was feeling nostalgic."

"Nostalgic or vindictive?"

Her seductive smile hits a straight line to my cock. "To quote my husband, 'the line between nostalgia and vindictiveness blurs too easily.'"

"I believe that referred to hate and lust."

"You have your interpretation. I have mine."

"You're playing a dangerous game, *mi amada*," I warn, stalking up to her. "That sultry insolence is severing what little control I have left. Are you trying to provoke me?"

She lifts her chin and holds my gaze. "What if I am?"

Don't ask questions you don't want the answers to.

Trailing my hand down her spine, I feel her shiver as I lean in to whisper a dark promise in her ear. "Oh, I'm sure I'll think of something for your retribution."

"Do your worst," she whispers back, her brown eyes sparkling. "You only have twelve more hours to corrupt me."

Spoken like a true Carrera.



Legado shines like a diamond tonight.

The jewel in my empire of sin.

As we make our way through the crowds toward the Platinum Lounge, I lean in to graze Thalia's ear with a heated promise. "I've decided to take another of your firsts later."

She stops and turns, a question forming in her eyes.

Sliding my hand from her waist to her face, I press my thumb against her lips. "I dream of these, you know? Hurling insults... Wrapped around my cock..." Hooking my fingers under her chin, I force her to look at me—savoring her embarrassment like it was my finest bottle of *Añejo*. "When this night is over, I want you on your knees in that dress, *mi amada*. You're going to open this beautiful mouth and take me. *All of me*. And you'll be

looking up at me the whole time as I fuck my pleasure into you until the tears stream down your face.”

“Would you like me to beg for it?” she asks softly.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Over her shoulder, I catch my father staring at us from across the lounge. “Have a drink. Have three.” I say, my mood souring. “You’re going to need it.”

His stare is unwavering. Seconds pass like minutes until finally, he lifts his glass of tequila and nods.

A silent message... *we’ll talk later.*

Turning back to Thalia, who is now at the counter, I watch Monroe Spader sliding onto the spare barstool next to her. That fucking man is beginning to outlive his usefulness.

The bill has passed.

Sanders’s bar is a pile of dust.

Our business has concluded.

I watch as she offers him a polite smile. *A fuck off smile.* Only he can’t take a hint, pushing those black-rimmed glasses back up his nose as he leans in closer.

If he touches her, I’ll rip his arms off.

“Green is an interesting color on you, Santi.” I turn to find my mother has materialized beside me with a glass of my finest Malbec wine in her hand.

She thinks I’m jealous.

She’s right.

“She’s a Santiago,” I say grimly, taking her inference and turning it into something unpleasant. “She serves a purpose. Nothing more.”

Her thoughtful gaze travels back to the bar. “If you push people away enough, eventually they don’t come back.”

And so she fucking shouldn’t.

I make my decision, then and there. It’s time to let my firebird fly and see if she leaves me for heaven or sits by my side in hell. After tonight—*after one more taste of her*—that footage is hers.

“Santi.”

We turn to find RJ standing behind us. I’ve never seen him so tense. He gives my mother a respectful nod then turns to me with a grave expression. “There’s a man outside requesting to talk to you.”

Something in his voice makes me pause. There's anger there. Pain...
History.

"Go," my mother says, stepping back, her eyes shifting to my father.
"I'll handle him."

"Tell me," I say, falling into step with RJ as we exit the bar.

"Ten minutes ago, he walked up to the security at the front entrance," he clips out. "Unarmed and uninvited. He's waiting for you by the front steps outside. We have thirty guns trained on him and his men as a precaution. Just give us the order when you're ready."

"That's quite a welcome," I say, shooting him a look. "Who's the VIP, and why the fuck is he so deserving?"

"It's Edier Grayson," RJ says grimly. "He says he wants to talk."

CHAPTER THIRTY

THALIA



“IF I ASK SANTI TO BUY YOU DIAMONDS, WILL YOU TEACH ME HOW TO count cards?”

Lola swivels on her barstool to study the empty blackjack table behind her. We both needed a break from all the Carrera tension threatening to break bottles in the Platinum Bar, so we’re swapping Rapple cocktails and relief in one of the empty private gambling rooms off the main floor.

It has free drinks and no drama so we’re both in heaven.

“I would if I could.” Leaning over the bar counter for more ice, I *plink* a couple more cubes into my highball. “Some people assign values to each card in a deck, but it’s more of a visual thing for me. It’s like my brain is hardwired to be a criminal, even when the rest of my body is resisting.”

“I’m envious,” she whistles. “I could totally clean up in here, and Santi wouldn’t be able to do shit about it.”

“Knowing your brother, he’d find a way,” I say with a laugh.

“At least it wouldn’t be a ring on my finger.” She swivels back to the bar to drain the rest of her drink.

Not for much longer I reflect, glancing down at mine.

Kicking off my red heels, I flex out my aching toes and take another sip of my Rapple. Tomorrow has all the ingredients of an emotional cocktail. There’ll be relief at finally being able to pay Bardi off and secure the tape; fear about coming clean to *papá* and being ordered back to his island with his next breath... And then there’s something else—an unwanted flavor that’s sitting uneasy in the pit of my stomach.

I don't want to go back to being like one of those directionless insects above trees in summertime. *I don't want to miss the way he fucks his anger into me, like I'm to blame for blurring these lines, only for him to kiss me like I'm the only clarity in his life.*

"I need to pee," Lola announces, rising to her feet.

I drain the rest of my drink and eye the rows of tequila behind the bar. "When you're back, I'll mix us up a couple of margaritas."

"My national drink," she says with a grin. "Don't fuck it up. I'll make sure the private sign is up so no one barges in."

"Thanks."

I hear the door click shut behind me. Silence pervades, and then there's another click, followed by a turning lock.

"That was fa—"

My words become a muffled scream as a large hand clamps across my mouth

"Thalia, it's me," comes a familiar drawl. "Don't fucking bite, or I'll torture you to death with bad jokes until the end of time."

"Sam?" I gasp out, as rough skin turns to air again—whipping round to confront him. He's dressed in a black tux, like some kind of criminal mastermind version of James Bond, but with a much smoother smirk. "What the *hell* are you doing here?"

He slaps a finger to his lips as my voice rises to an undignified screech.

A Santiago on Carrera territory is never a good thing, but tonight it's suicide.

"I've come for you... Orders from above." He points to the heavens, but we both know that finger should be pointing in the other direction. "Edier wanted discretion. There's some bigger shit at play."

"I can't, Sam—"

"We know."

Two words. Numerous possibilities. *An ocean of heartbreak.*

"We know everything, you crazy, beautiful, brave, total fuck-up of a woman," he continues, sounding exasperated. "What the *hell* were you thinking trying to deal with this shit on your own? I nearly put a bullet in your brain for your alleged betrayal six days ago. Edier wanted to throw you in the Hudson."

"How much do you know?" I whisper, realizing my lungs haven't actually expanded since those two words entered the room.

His expression darkens. “You mean the tape?”

“Oh God.” I sit back down on my stool with a *whoosh*, frantic tears filling up my eyes. “Shit, Sam, you can’t tell him, you can’t tell him! Please, you can’t tell, you can’t—”

“*He* knows as well,” he says heavily, cutting across my hysteria. “Marco Bardi is a dead man walking.”

I let out a sob. This is my worst-case scenario—the one thing I’ve ripped myself in two to avoid these past few weeks.

“If you kill him, he’s going to release another copy! You don’t know him like I do. He’ll find a way. Ella—”

“Is fine,” he says soothingly, wiping the tears away from my cheeks. “She’s safe. She doesn’t know about any of this and she never fucking will. Edier’s bartering for the last remaining copies now. He’ll kill everyone in America before he walks away empty-handed. He can protest it until his blue balls fall off, but we all know how he feels about her.”

My hand flies to my mouth, pressing hard to stem a thousand different emotions for spilling out. I start to sway on my barstool.

“Jesus.” Sam grabs my arm to steady me before sliding it around my shoulder and pulling me in for a hug that smells of sandalwood and cast-iron guarantees. “You’re free, Thalia,” he murmurs into my hair. “Chuck your rings over the side of the Bridge when we cross it doing one-ninety later. The divorce lawyers are on stand-by. You’re walking out of Atlantic City tonight, sweetheart, and you’re never coming back. You hear?”

I think of that one ingredient again.

The one thing I can’t bring myself to consider.

“How did you even find out about Bardi?” I stammer.

“We caught one him trying to blow up one of our shipment warehouses down at Red Hook Terminal yesterday. Edier followed a trail of fuckery which led us to a very sweet old lady in Queens who was more than happy to give up her grandson. Last night, your father cut the truth from his tongue.” I watch Sam’s smirk slip into something more unpleasant, *more befitting* of the man he’s become. “Bardi’s currently sitting in a car outside your soon-to-be-ex-husband’s casino with an ‘S’ carved into his chest. Or what’s left of him.”

“Wait.” I grab his arm in confusion. “You’re telling me you’ve given Bardi to *Santi*? After everything he’s done? When did Edier and *papá* learn such restraint?”

“He’s a bloody peace offering,” he says, leaning over the bar to help himself to a vodka bottle. Pouring himself a double, he knocks it back before continuing. “He’s the foundations of a temporary truce. Bardi is Carrera’s, so long as he agrees to talk with Edier and not blow the back of his head off.”

I watch him pour out another in a daze. “Has the world stopped turning since I’ve been locked up in a penthouse tower? My father actually *agreed* to this?”

“After what we uncovered yesterday, it’s in all our best interests to shut the fuck up and listen to each other for once, instead of trying to turn the East Coast into World War Three.” He takes my hand and yanks me off the barstool. “Time to go,” he announces. “My car’s outside”

“But why would Santi want Bardi?” I say, scrambling to slip my heels back on as he marches me toward the door. “How is he a bargaining chip?”

“The fact that he spent most of this week as an inmate of his fucking basement is pretty indicative.” He lets go of my arm to unlock the door. “Carrera chopped off half the fingers on his left hand before he escaped. Edier took great pleasure in evening it up on the right.”

I screech to a halt, my heart following suit. “Are you saying Santi *knew* about the tape?”

Sam frowns and nods. “From the first night you met.”

The pain explosion in my chest steals my breath away.

Santi knew how badly I needed that money. Instead, he chose to use that knowledge to turn every kiss, every touch, every fuck into a lie.

“Bardi was the one blackmailing me,” I gasp out. “I needed fifty-grand, but I never told Santi what it was for.”

All he ever cared about was winning jabs in a war he never even started in the first place.

“Take me home, Sam,” I whisper. “I’m done with Atlantic City.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SANTI



IN THE END, THE STORM CAME FROM THE NORTHEAST, BRINGING WITH IT A dangerous man from New York, wearing cold curiosity and black.

With ten men arranged in a semi-circle behind him.

They're not pointing their guns. They're still concealed. But their threat lingers over the *porte-cochère* like a bad secret waiting to be shared.

Loosening my bow tie and leaving the silk strands hanging, I slow to a stop right outside Legado's tinted front doors, sliding my hands into my pockets: keeping my cool on the outside, even when I'm raging behind my mask.

It's my first tactical move of this meeting. Five marble front steps separate us, and guess who has the height advantage.

Edier Grayson stands like a statue in front of me, his hands clasped in front of him, wearing the same uniform as his men. On them, they look like soldiers. With Grayson, he looks like a motherfucking assassin.

He's a suave bastard—as tall as me, with a Colombian heritage that shows in his features, and an adopted upbringing that has sharpened them into the ultimate weapon.

His stillness is unnerving.

His dark gaze, unswerving.

I sense RJ falling in beside me, his hand hovering over his gun, but this is the last place I need bullets to fly. We're already giving my guests a free show.

Steeling my jaw, I glance over at Rocco who's hovering a few steps behind. "Secure the entrance. I don't want anyone walking through those

doors. Got it?”

He offers a curt nod, before retreating inside.

“You brought our war back to my casino, Grayson” I say idly, turning to my uninvited guest and breaking our standoff with a casual accusation. “Are you here to piss on my walls this time instead of shooting them?”

His face darkens. *Finally, a reaction.* “You know that wasn’t us, Carrera. If that was the play, I would’ve aimed a scorpion bullet at your head, not the wall.”

He’s right. Grayson would consider it a waste of time and good artillery. If he aims, he aims to kill. Which is why his presence is like a downed power line—calm exterior but filled with enough voltage to light up a man with a single word.

“I’m surprised you have the balls to cross that Bridge. You’re gate-crashing my big night.”

He doesn’t react. Not one damn smirk cracks that facade. “I’m sure I would have enjoyed myself immensely, but my invitation got lost in the mail.”

“Yet here you are...and you brought friends.” Spreading my arms wide, I gesture to his ninja-clad entourage. “Obsession isn’t a good look for you, Grayson.”

Taking one slow step at a time, playing fast and loose with the swagger, I hold his icy stare until we’re face to face. Two feet apart. Boss to boss.

Prince to prince.

I don’t need to look behind me to know that RJ is right there, or to know that the thirty sniper guns we have trained on the situation need only one good reason to fire.

“You have sixty seconds to tell me why you’re here, Grayson. After that, you and that piece of shit car you hauled over state lines are getting a remodel.” I direct his gaze to where a long, dark sedan is parked, blocking my valet stand.

Arrogant fuck couldn’t even park like a normal person.

“You dare to ask me that, Carrera, after all the trouble you’ve caused?”

“That *I*’ve caused?”

“You forced Thalia to marry you. You made her look her *father* in the face and lie. That’s the kind of shit, Santiago remembers.” His own mask is slipping, and I want nothing more than to rip it off and shove it down his

throat. “We both have blood on our hands. That truth is as real as our hate, but you went too far when you stained hers.”

My smirk disappears. “No more than Sam Sanders did with my sister last year.”

He considers this for a moment, and who am I to interrupt? *Let him tie his own knot and hang with it.*

“This isn’t over,” he says, stepping forward to meet me halfway. “That shot *will* be returned at some point. But right now, there are more important things to discuss.”

“Enough dick swinging,” I snap. “Tell me what you want, or get the fuck out of New Jersey.”

He straightens up, rolling his shoulders back like he’s gearing up for the fight of his life. “You have something of mine, and I want it back.”

Over my dead body.

“Thalia is a Carrera now, Grayson.” I cut the distance between us to a single foot, escorted by the sound of ten Santiago rifles preparing to spill their deadly secret. “She’s my wife—in *every* sense of the word.”

Let that sink in for a minute, you Colombian asshole.

His eyes narrow as he holds up his hand for his men to stand down.

My amusement doesn’t last. As usual, his allergy to emotion is a buzzkill.

“Classless innuendoes,” he tuts. “How very *Carrera* of you. You’re becoming annoyingly predictable, Santi. Which is why I came prepared to offer you an incentive.”

“Fuck off,” I reply, succinct as always.

“I’m not here for Thalia.”

I pause. “Why the incentive then?”

He gives me a chilly smile. “Hear me out before your snipers”—he gestures to the windows of the casino behind me—“decide to ruin my evening.”

“Spit it out, Grayson. I bore easily.”

His jaw flexes. I’m pushing him closer and closer to the edge. “You give me what I want, and I’ll give you something you’ve been looking for.” He nods to one of his men, who turns and opens the rear passenger’s side door of the sedan.

I’m not sure what I’m seeing at first, and then it hits me.

Bardi.

He's slumped over in the backseat, with what's left of his hands bound in front of him. I thought he looked like shit the last time I saw him, but shit is a step up from what's staring back at me. His face is a goddamn color parade—at least the parts I recognize. Most of it is a canvas of bloody gashes and open flesh. He's still struggling though, but it's a waste of everyone's time and energy. Unless he plans to log roll his way down the Atlantic City Expressway, he's totally fucked.

I don't care why he's here.

I care about *how*.

"How the fuck do you know Bardi?" I demand, forcing down a visceral reaction to put a bullet in both of them. "You have no idea what he's done to Thalia. *Dios mío*, to Ella!"

Her name is a cracked whip, and suddenly all the monsters here are dancing.

"Of course, we know what he did," Grayson snarls. "Why the hell do you think I'm here? Cocktails are for pussies, and poker is a cunt's game. We caught Bardi at Red Hook Terminal with a bag of napalm and a smile, attempting to blow up a shipment of ours all the way back to *Barranquilla*." He tosses a disgusted look at him. "Goddamn idiot nearly blew his nuts off."

What has this Italian idiota gotten himself involved in?

"You're telling me he was trying to sabotage a Santiago import?"

A curt nod is his only affirmation I get. "Our *sicarios* brought him back to the warehouse, and we had ourselves a messy conversation. I'd planned to remove a finger for every ten minutes he kept his mouth shut." Something like a smirk threatens to tilt his lips. "Then I saw that you and I like to have the same fun." He motions to Bardi's three remaining fingers. "Turns out, he only needs two to sell you out."

"Shit," RJ mutters beside me.

"He was playing both sides." Grayson's lips tilt even more. He's enjoying digging the knife in and giving it a good, hard twist. "But with a little motivation, we made him sing."

"You drove all the way out to New Jersey to tell me this? Don't you have technology back in the Big Apple?"

"I know about the tape, Carrera. And I know you have it." His smirk disappears. "Give it to me now, and then we can all be home in time for milk and cookies."

Now?

Bad move, Grayson. I don't bow down to demanding fucks.

"Are you expecting me to be impressed by your intimidation act?" I say with an exaggerated sigh.

"I know exactly what's on that footage," he says, losing his cool. "If you think I'm going to leave an audition tape of Ella Santiago that was made for some mafia princess trafficking ring with *you*, you're wrong. I'll fucking shoot it out of your hands, if I have to."

My blood runs cold.

We suspected there was a ring, but we didn't know all the fucked-up details.

"It was requested by a specialized ring," he continues. "One that comes with the highest price tag on the market. Crime boss's daughters. Cartels, bratvas, mafia... Those Romanian bastards don't discriminate, so long as the bloodline is certified." He glances back at the sedan again. "It was another confession from our mutual friend, Bardi. I didn't believe him until our docks turned into a graveyard."

Fuck.

"Let me guess... A shipping container with a bad surprise."

He nods, the muscles in his neck pulling as taut as a bowstring. "Eleven dead girls... That was personal to us, Carrera. That was personal to *me*."

I remember what Thalia said during the dinner from hell. How his own mother was a victim of trafficking.

"I was about to burn this place down to the ground thinking you were responsible until Sanders reminded me of something." We're nose to nose now. *This could go one of two ways, and neither of them ends well.* "Despite all the betrayal, despite the death and destruction, despite the years of bad blood, the Santiagos and Carreras will always have one thing in common... We don't trade flesh. That's one sin neither of us is willing to lay claim to."

It's true. This swings back to *La Boda Roja*.

Son of a bitch. La Boda Roja...

Old scars are reopening, hemorrhaging their truth for a new battle.

One neither of us saw coming.

"It's not the Romanians," I tell him coldly. "It's Ricci."

"Ricci? As in Don Ricci?" He lets out a clipped laugh. "The traitor wearing a pair of concrete shoes at the bottom of the Hudson?"

“No, a restructuring of his Syndicate.” Saying the words out loud is enough to stir the monster inside me. “And if I’m right, history is about to repeat itself.”

He stills. “Explain.”

I turn and catch RJ’s eye, giving him permission to speak.

“We have surveillance footage of the man who helped Bardi escape,” he says. “There’s an ax tattoo on his neck.”

Grayson’s fury swings back to me and he jabs a finger into my chest. “If I find out you’re lying about this, Carrera...”

He’s riding that edge again.

“He fucked with my business,” I snarl, shoving his finger away. “He was wearing the same fatigues as the men who destroyed my casino six days ago. Now why do you suppose they’d shoot scorpions into my wall?”

He doesn’t hesitate. “To make it look like a Santiago attack and ensure a retaliation.”

“War is starting again with the Italians just like it did twenty years ago. Only this time, we’ve brought it to American soil, and they have the home advantage. They’re behind this mafia princess ring...not the Romanians.” Side-stepping Grayson, I glare at Bardi. “He lied to hold on to the one card he had left.”

A fact proven by frantic screams now coming from the black sedan.

I half expect my enemy to level the barrel of his gun to the back of my head. Instead, he moves to stand beside me, and I know we both feel something shift. Standing toe to toe. Talking instead of killing...

“If Bardi is working with the Italians, why hold the tape over Thalia’s head? Why blackmail her with it?”

“He didn’t,” I grit out. “Bardi was never planning to make the tape public. He counted on Thalia’s love for her sister to outweigh everything. He played on her worst fears and used it to pad his own pocket. The blackmail was a side venture to go along with the main event.”

There’s a flicker of respect in his eyes. “How can you be so sure?”

“Thalia told me about her sister’s illness.” I catch a muttered curse under his breath. “To the men Bardi was working for, she’s damaged goods. She won’t fetch the same price.” I stiffen as the final piece clicks into place. “Not like Thalia will... He didn’t bring her here that night to collect a debt. He brought her here to deliver one. It was pre-arranged. Swap out one sister for the other. Even better when they look like twins.”

RJ exhales a weighted breath.

"If I hadn't caught her counting cards, she'd be theirs already."

"Motherfucker!" Grayson roars, causing all ten guards to aim their guns at my head again. "Thalia—"

"Is safe," I grit out.

"And your sister?"

A beat later, the barrel of my Glock is being introduced to his forehead. "Are you questioning my abilities to keep them safe, Grayson?"

In his defense, he doesn't even blink. "If history *is* repeating itself, it's up to us to change the outcome."

"I'm listening." *With my gun still cocked and loaded.*

"Twenty years ago, Dante and your father agreed to a temporary truce in order to bring down a common enemy. Let's make this come full circle. We blow up this ring, we stop trying to kill each other, and we end these bastards, once and for all."

"Because that ended so well last time," I drawl.

He lets out a dark chuckle. "Don't get me wrong Carrera, this changes nothing. My emphasis is on the 'temporary' here. When all of this is over, I'm still putting a bullet in the back of your skull and smiling while I'm doing it."

"Not if I have that pleasure first. Considering I'm holding a gun to your head right now, I'm fucking calling it."

"Lower it, Carrera... I came here with a show of good faith. Give me the tape, and you get Bardi's severed head as a new wall mount, and we both stop dead girls from turning up on our docks."

Common sense tells me this is a bad idea. *Never trust a Santiago.* The past doesn't lend itself to a happy outcome.

But the alternative...

Fuck.

I can't even think about that.

"There's one copy of the footage on RJ's phone. You can watch him delete it." Lowering my gun, I turn toward my stunned looking second. "Call Rocco. Have him bring the other copies out."

"It's official... Hell is freezing over." Grayson holds my gaze for a beat before nodding at his men. Two of them lower their guns to drag Bardi from the car, forcing his frantically twisting body to his knees in front of us. "He's all yours."

Usually, I like to fuck with my prey before I kill them, but not today.

Lifting my gun, I aim right between his eyes. “For Thalia,” I murmur, refusing to consider the alternatives.

If that red dress hadn’t strutted into my office and fired her own calling card at me.

If my fearless firebird had fallen into the hands of monsters who are even worse than I am.

For my wife.

When I fire, the bullet is dried ink on a truce we just made in blood.

Temporarily, of course.

Tucking my gun back in its holster, I glance at Grayson. “Take him back to New York. I don’t want that kind of shit stain on my doorstep.”

There’s a flurry of motion behind me as Rocco appears with the footage and hands it over to Grayson.

“Watch your back, Carrera,” he murmurs, as I turn to leave. “We both have traitors in our midst for this carnage to have been orchestrated this smoothly.”

My thoughts entirely.

“One last thing...”

Pausing halfway up the steps, I watch the Colombian lean against the side of the car and cross his arms, while his men throw the piece of dead meat into the sedan’s trunk.

Something in his casual stance makes my trigger finger itchy again.

“I have a confession to make.”

From the look on his face, he’s not sorry about it either.

“Considering my state’s newly reinstated gaming laws, I was intrigued by the competition... Tonight, Sanders has been inside your casino, taking notes and catching up with old friends. He should be long gone by now, though.”

As soon as I hear that *pendejo*’s name again, I freeze.

Lola.

Goddamn it, Lola was in there.

“He had strict instructions to avoid your sister,” he reassures. “This time, anyway. Truth is, we missed Thalia. We wanted to bring her up to speed with the fact you’ve had Bardi’s tape all along. We thought it might help with her *lucidity* toward the true state of her marriage.”

I watch in mounting fury as he opens the passenger door and slides into the seat, calm as fuck—as if he didn't just pull the trigger on me after all.

"She's coming home with us, Carrera," he says, reaching for the handle, and then winding down the window to continue his backhanding clusterfuck. "Santiagos don't belong on this side of the East Coast. You know that as well as I do."

But firebirds do.

They can fly anywhere.

"I thought we weren't fucking each other over," I snarl.

The bomb I'd planned for another of Sanders's bars is about to get predated.

"Starting now," he calls out in mock apology, rapping his knuckles on the roof of the car. "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."

I stand there long after the taillights disappear into the night, in the ruins of a ten-year-old grenade he just tossed at my feet.

The girl outside the church.

The one I risked everything to protect.

The one who haunts me dreams.

Thalia.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THALIA



HURT IS A HAMMER, DESIGNED TO BREAK YOU APART.

Pain is what happens on impact.

I'm feeling the brutal effects of both as Sam leads me through Legado's back entrance and out into the deserted parking lot. At any other time, this would be at full capacity, but tonight was "by invitation only" for a select few.

A night of celebration.

A night of last memories.

A night of betrayal.

Don't look back, I tell myself as my heels spark misery off the asphalt. Our future isn't written in the stars. It's scrawled on a note passed back and forth between enemy lines.

And then he was caught.

And now I hate him more than I ever did. *So why the hell are there tears in my eyes?*

"Am I going to have to deprogram you?" Sam asks as we reach his Bugatti. "What the fuck are you so upset about? The man duped you into marrying him. He forced you to betray your family. He lied to your face about—"

"Okay, enough."

I'd forgotten his sympathy chip was ripped out and stamped on the day he made his first kill.

Freeing myself from his grip, I take a step back as he opens the door for me. "We were a war within a war, Sam," I say quietly, casting one final

look at Legado—shimmering high against a skyline, as black on the inside as her emperor's heart. “You and Edier didn’t get to fight this one.”

“No, we just fucking liberated you from it.” He gestures for me to get in the car.

When I refuse, he shakes his head at me slowly. “Thalia Santiago... Always wanting to save the world. Never realizing that it’s better to push certain people off it first... *Especialmente a Carrera.*”

“That’s a little hypocritical, don’t you think?”

His face loses all traces of amusement. “Get in the car, Thalia.”

“Wait.”

Sighing, he braces his hand against the door frame.

“How did you do it?”

“Do what?”

I hesitate. “How did you stop feeling for Lola, if it’s so wrong to care about a Carrera?”

I wait for him to blow up at me, but he gives me a gray smile that’s neither a lie nor an admission.

“You just do.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Jesus, Thalia...” He runs a frustrated hand through his dark hair. “You’re a fucking Santiago. This family comes first. Follow that rule, and you’ll figure out the rest.”

Deeply profound and evasive as hell.

“And you *still* haven’t gotten in the car.”

I steal one more look at the place I called my reluctant home for six days.

“Okay, Sam, I’m—”

Boom

The gunshot shatters the night, blasting chaos into the space between us. My heart slams against my chest and I fall back against the Bugatti door frame. Then I look to my left and find an ugly bloom of red spreading across Sam’s white dress shirt.

Oh God! Oh God, no!

“Sam!” Terror buckles my knees as I shove away from the car, watching as he skids down the side panel with a hissing curse and a final order.

“Run, Thalia... Get the fuck out of here!”

I have to get to him. I have to help him. He’s going to die.

I'm on my knees and reaching for him, when rough hands grab me from behind, squeezing so hard around my middle, I can only wheeze out a shocked scream.

As I'm lifted into the air, a bag is pulled over my head while another gunshot rings out.

Sam!

I can't breathe.

I can't breathe.

I fight as hard as my father taught me to.

I kick.

I twist.

I buck...

Then something sharp pierces the side of my neck, and my whole world slides into darkness.

EPILOGUE

THALIA



IT'S PITCH-BLACK.

My eyelids feel like concrete.

I keep them shut tight until I can muster enough strength to open them. When I do, a hot and sticky world comes rushing in—blanketed by a cloudy haze.

It smells of metal and salt. I can hear something, too. There's a buzzing noise above my head. I try to look up, but my head feels even heavier than my eyelids.

There's a flickering LED tube light running along the ceiling.

Flick. Buzz. Flick. Buzz. Flick. Buzz.

Watching it makes me feel sick, so I close my eyes again and concentrate on forcing back the waves of nausea. It finally subsides, only to be replaced by a drilling ache inside my head.

Dizzy.

Why am I so dizzy?

It feels like my brain is sloshing back and forth.

Am I hungover?

I go to rub my temple, but I can't.

I try again.

I still can't.

Something's not right...

Opening my eyes wider, I force myself to focus on the light. That's when I notice it's not my brain that's sloshing back and forth. It's the floor.

My pulse thumps a wild beat in my ears as I try to move my arms again.

“What’s happening?” I beg the haze, my voice hoarse and unrecognizable to me.

Only silence answers.

I hate silence.

Squeezing my eyes shut again, I force myself to remember snapshots from *before*.

I was with Santi at Legado’s reopening night... And then...

There’s a sharp pain in my chest when I remember what Sam told me.

There’s another when I remember the sound of two gunshots.

“Sam,” I rasp, tears spilling down my cheeks.

After that, everything comes back in a rush of choking fear—the hands, the bag, the pain. I’m too scared to look down. *I’m too scared not to*. My hands and feet are bound together with black duct tape, and I’m wearing a white, satin slip dress that’s ridden up past my knees.

Last night, I was wearing red.

Look around, Thalia... Assess your surroundings... Fighters survive...

I blink back my tears and force myself to concentrate. I’m in a box—a damp, dark, gray, steel box—that’s gently rocking back and forth. There are no markings on the corrugated walls, and no signs to tell me where I am, or who has taken me.

That’s when I hear soft crying.

Frantic, I scan the darkness again, and then I see her. There’s another woman in here, wearing the same white dress as me. She’s slumped in the corner, her head pitched into her knees, her long dark hair a messy contrast to her tan and bruised skin.

I’m about to call out for help when the crying stops.

“Perdona nuestras ofensas, como también nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden.”

Forgive our offenses, as we also forgive those who offend us.

“No nos dejes caer en tentación y líbranos del mal.”

Do not allow us to fall into temptation and deliver us from evil.

I know those words. They’re the ending verse of the Lord’s Prayer...whispered in Spanish. I know that voice, too.

“Lola?” I hiss.

She lifts her forehead from her knees, tears matting her hair to her cheeks.

No. No, no, no, no.

As we stare at each other, Valentin Carrera's words come rushing back, soaking me in their dark candor.

Shipping container.

Dead women.

Trafficked women.

We weren't just kidnapped.

We're being sold.

They say that when you're desperate, your mind swings a pendulum back and forth between survival and comfort...

In this moment, I only see him.

Brutal, demanding, passionate him.

"Find me, Santi," I whisper to our new hell. "Find us both."

THE END...

For Now

Thank you for reading Bad Blood...

Santi and Thalia's story concludes in Tainted Blood, Corrupt Gods Duet Book 2, releasing June 9th.

TAINTED BLOOD



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



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xx

#fuckcancer

ABOUT CORA KENBORN



Cora Kenborn is a *USA Today* Bestselling author who writes in multiple genres from dark and gritty romantic suspense to laugh-out-loud romantic comedy. Known for her sharp banter and shocking blindsides, Cora pushes her characters and readers out of their comfort zones and onto an emotional roller coaster before delivering a twisted happily ever after.

Cora believes there's nothing better than a feisty heroine who keeps her alpha on his toes, and she draws inspiration from the strong country women who raised her. However, since the domestic Southern Belle gene seems to have skipped a generation, she spends any free time convincing her family that microwaving Hot Pockets counts as cooking dinner.

Oh, and autocorrect thinks she's obsessed with ducks.

ABOUT CATHERINE WILTCHER



Catherine Wiltcher is an International Bestselling/Amazon All-Star Author of ten dark romance novels, including the Santiago Trilogy. A stage 4 cancer thriver and a self-confessed alpha addict, her writing is best described as sinfully sexy and her characters 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.

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