

Corrupted

DECEPTION

KIANA HETTINGER

Corrupted Deception

A Second Chance Dark Mafia Romance

Kiana Hettinger

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By Kiana Hettinger

Corrupted Deception is the eighth book in the [Mafia Kings: Corrupted Series](#).

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See you on the inside,
Kiana Hettinger

Author's Note

I poured my heart and soul writing the last book of the Mafia Kings: Corrupted series. Cielo and Charlotte's love is one that has been lost throughout the years. These two had to fight hard to finally find their way together. But I hope you, my dear Kitten, know that even if love is misplaced, it's never truly lost.

Here's to finding what, and more importantly, who is worth the temptation.

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Prologue

Charlotte Santoro

The monitors flickered with their sterile glow, illuminating the dim room where I sat, tethered to the screen.

“You’re almost there,” I said as my fingers danced with practiced ease across the keyboard, tracking his movements, anticipating his needs. I liked to think of myself as the conductor orchestrating his symphony of danger, the silent guardian in his shadow. Okay, probably not the silent part.

“I was thinking La Paz, Bolivia, this time,” I mused aloud. We hadn’t discussed where to go to celebrate another job well done. “I hear biking down Death Road is one hell of an adrenaline rush.”

He grumbled low in his throat. “Too dangerous,” he whispered. His voice was little more than a breath but it reached my earpiece just fine.

I laughed. “Says the man currently skulking around Miguel Silva’s warehouse of horrors. I don’t think you’re the authority on all things safe and boring. Besides, what could possibly go wrong on a forty-three-mile switchback?”

“I was thinking Fiji,” he countered.

Ugh. “We’ve done that already, and I’m not spending another week sitting on my ass.”

“Fine, we’ll go to La Paz, but there’s no way in hell you’re riding down a switchback with two-thousand-foot cliff drops.”

I smiled. “We’ll see about that.”

I sat up straighter. He’d just about reached the end of the corridor. One more to go, and we were home-free.

“Make a left in ten—”

“It’s a setup, Char. Get out of there.” A jolt of electricity coursed through my veins as his words reached my ears, sharp and urgent.

The air in the room shifted, thickened with the weight of urgency.

I was on my feet in an instant, fingers flying over the keyboard with a precision born from years of practice, erasing our presence, wiping away any trace of our existence here.

“Talk to me,” I managed to force out as file icons vanished, folders collapsed, and progress bars raced to completion, leaving behind a digital void of expunged data. “Tell me what you need.”

No answer. Nothing.

I set the countdown and raced out the door to my silver Audi R8, the rain pelting me from the outside as my heart pounded inside my chest.

Fifteen seconds.

Fourteen.

Thirteen.

The engine roared to life, tires squealing as I sped away from the building.

Ten seconds.

Nine.

His breathing came over the earpiece, an audible testament to the gravity of the situation.

“Did you get out?” he asked, his voice raw with urgency.

“I did. The place is sanitized. We’re good,” I replied, my relief evident. “Tell me what you need.”

Silence.

A void that stretched out, heavy and pregnant.

“What’s wrong?” I pressed, desperation seeping into my words.

My question hung in the air, a lifeline cast into the void between us. More silence followed, a heavy silence that pressed upon me, an unsung requiem of unease.

And then he spoke. “I love you, Charlotte,” he said, his voice stripped of its armor, raw and unfiltered.

The world tilted. My heart froze, a tumult of emotions crashing within me.

In all the years since I'd found him, he had never spoken those words. Not once.

My eyes welled with tears, emotions swirling like a storm.

"I—" I began, my voice catching.

Then he severed the connection.

The earpiece went dead.

Three seconds.

Two.

One.

A blinding flash erupted behind me in the rearview mirror, casting a searing glow that bathed the stormy night sky in fiery brilliance. The shock wave reached me, a visceral force that shuddered through the car, rattling its frame.

I clutched the steering wheel, knuckles white against the leather, tears mingling with the rain that streaked down the windshield.

"I love you too, Dad," I whispered to the empty car.

Chapter One

Charlotte Santoro

Eight days later

Fried onions, that's what he tasted like. And stale cigarette smoke. God, didn't this man ever brush his teeth?

"You like that, honey?" he asked as he leaned away.

"Oh, yeah, handsome." *I like having my mouth back to myself again, thank you very much.*

He took a step back, his hungry, beady little eyes grazing over me. "Let's see what you've got on under that coat," he said, licking his thin lips.

Gee, a call girl who showed up in a trench coat; I wonder what could be underneath it. Ugh.

I faked a smile as I started to unbutton the coat.

His nostrils flared, and his little eyes got hungrier as the upper swells of my tits came into view, pushed way up by the black lace corset that was doing its damndest to cut off my air supply. I had a newfound respect for the women of olden days. How they hadn't suffocated in these things was a testament to their sheer will to survive.

When I'd finished with the buttons, I slipped the coat off my shoulders, letting it pool at my feet on the hotel room's carpeted floor—and making my foremothers real proud, no doubt. *Eye roll.*

The beady-eyed lech glanced from my tits to my stiletto-clad heels and all the way back up again, lingering on the garter around my thigh, my tiny, black lace panties, and the obsidian belly ring from Mount Hekla as he went.

A means to an end, I chanted in my head over and over again as I forced

my breaths to come slow and steady, letting him look his fill.

I can do this.

I'd reeled in plenty of marks. Not on my own, of course. There'd always been *his* voice in my ear, reminding me that if shit went wrong, there were the two of us.

Now, it was just me.

When my mark reached out to palm my tits, I grabbed hold of his hands and brought one of them to my lips, sucking the tip of his index finger into my mouth.

Ugh, gag.

"Lay down, handsome, and let me make you feel real good," I said, calling on my inner *Pretty Woman* because it was time to get this show on the road. The fewer memories of his hands on me I had to scrub from my mind, the better.

I took a chance and let go of his hands, hoping like hell he'd follow my instructions.

Not quite.

He grabbed hold of my hips and walked backward toward the king-size bed, pulling me with him. When the backs of his knees bumped the mattress, he sat down, tugging me into the wide V of his thighs.

"Take off my shirt," he instructed.

So long as we were taking off *his* clothes, not mine, I was game.

I leaned down, giving him an eyeful of my pushed-up tits as I unfastened the buttons of his plum-colored pinstripe shirt and slid it off his shoulders, grazing my manicured red nails down his arms as I went.

He wasn't badly built; no flab, no man-tits, but "manscaping" clearly wasn't a word in his vocabulary. He had a full pelt of hair on his chest, down his abdomen, and disappearing into the waistline of his pants.

With his shirt gone, I ran my fingers through the thick, dark hair on his chest, from his clavicles to his waist, lingering there, hoping he'd get the hint and lie back so I could get to work on his pants.

"Unzip my pants and pull out my dick," he commanded instead as he used his grip on my hip to try to force me down onto my knees.

Um, no. I'd already planned my dinner for tonight, and *that* was definitely not on the menu.

I licked my lips and pouted prettily. "Let me take them off, handsome. I want to see all of this sexy body," I crooned, forcing my fingers to slip a little lower, grazing over the head of his dick through his pants. I had to swallow back a bit of vomit that came climbing up my throat. Not that I was categorically opposed to dicks. On a whole, I was actually rather fond of them.

"You want to see more, do you?" he asked, a smug smile on his face.

Wasn't that what I just said?

"Uh-huh," I replied, smiling like I was hungry for his hairy, mediocre body. And just for good measure, I stroked my hands down his thighs and back up before moving to the button and fly of his pants.

If he could feel the slight tremble of my fingers, he didn't let on about it.

He put his hand over mine. "Will that make you wet for me, sugar?" he persisted, holding my hands still.

Honey? Sugar? Really?

Sugar pie, honey bunch. You know that I love you... The song flitted through my mind, making a hysteric giggle rise up in my throat.

I fought hard to swallow it back.

Dear Lord, was he seriously trying to play hard to get?

"I'm already wet for you, handsome," I practically purred.

Wet, dry... Same thing, right?

He let go of my hands, and I breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

"Show me, honey," he instructed as his gaze slid down to the apex of my thighs.

Uh-oh. I'd clearly made a wrong turn here. Time for a detour.

"Do you want a taste, handsome?" I improvised, willing him to say yes.

"You know I do," he said, grinning while his erection jerked in his pants.

I slipped one hand behind me, grazing down my own ass like I was on a slow glide to my pussy. At the same time, I leaned in until my tits hovered above him, keeping all his attention on them while I bypassed my pussy and headed south to the back of my garter.

My fingers wrapped around the first of two syringes I had hidden there, trembling just a little as I slid it up out of the elastic, using the tight grip to knock off the cap as I went.

I'd practiced this move at least a hundred times. It should have come as easy as breathing. But in my defense, he also should have been lying down for this, not sitting up.

Fortunately, his eyes were pretty much glued to my tits now, so he didn't even see it coming when I slid my hand back up my ass, then shot out at the last second, jabbing the tip of the syringe straight into his carotid artery and injecting him in a flash.

"What the fuck?" he hollered as he grabbed hold of my wrist, gripping so tight, I swear I could hear my bones crunching beneath his grip.

Don't fight. It's almost over.

Five seconds.

Four.

He swayed.

His grip on me loosened.

Three.

Two.

One.

He flopped back on the mattress.

Phew, much better.

"What... you do?" he mumbled, fighting to form the words while he tried uselessly to get his muscles to engage.

"I'm afraid my associate was fresh out of sodium pentothal—which would have made this much easier. But what I did was inject you with succinylcholine," I explained, ever-so-helpfully.

There was no hint of recognition in his beady eyes.

"It's a neuromuscular blocking agent," I went on. "You're essentially paralyzed, Mr. Marín. As you've noticed, it impairs speech, and you'll probably find it makes it difficult to breathe due to the effects on the respiratory muscles. But don't worry, the effects are temporary."

Potentially fatal too, a small, nagging voice reminded me... ever-so-

helpfully.

We've been over this. It's the only way, I nagged right back.

Daniel Marín remained motionless, but rage and hatred shone in his beady eyes.

The feeling's mutual.

“Now that I have your attention,” I said, looking down at the man who I bet had a lot less interest in getting into my panties now and more in watching me choke on them. “What can you tell me about Cade Finley?” I asked bluntly.

There was recognition in his eyes this time, but he remained silent, glaring at me.

“Cade Finley successfully infiltrated Miguel Silva’s inner circle,” I continued. “It wasn’t until the day after Silva had a meeting with *you* that Finley’s cover was compromised. At the same time, there was a sizable deposit made into one of your offshore accounts. So, I’ll ask you again: What can you tell me about Cade Finley? Where is Silva keeping him?”

God, please have an answer. Please.

“He’s... dead.” His lips struggled to form the words, but his eyes lit up with satisfaction.

“You’re lying,” I said, shaking my head adamantly. Because that was the wrong answer. Pretty much the only unacceptable answer here. If Silva had my father stashed in the heart of Atlantis, I’d find a way to get him back. But dead? No. That wasn’t an option.

“And if you keep lying to me,” I continued, ignoring the doubts that were closing in on me like bloodthirsty hounds, “you’re going to find yourself a very poor man, Mr. Marín. Mashreq Financial Group, Helvetia Capital Holdings, Pacific Horizon International Bank,” I recited, counting them off my fingers. “I’ve located every one of your accounts. So, it’s simple: Tell me what I want to know, and you’ll remain a very rich man.”

If my dad were here, he would have just cut the answers out of Daniel Marín. But my dad and the men he sometimes worked with had taught me to trust my intuition, and it was telling me this would work.

Marín would rather die than live poor. (*And there was also the small issue*

where I felt that knives were meant for cutting up food, not people. Semantics, and all that.)

“He’s dead... you bitch,” he reiterated.

Something twisted in my stomach. Even paralyzed and struggling for breath, Marín sounded pretty sure of himself.

I shook my head. “If Silva knows who Cade Finley is, then he knows he’s got more intel than any one man should have. There is no way he would have passed that up just to put down a traitor.” That was my surety, my guarantee that he was still out there. Somewhere. Being tortured? Brought to the brink of death over and over again?

The knots in my stomach twisted up tighter.

He’s lying.

He has to be lying.

I grabbed the second syringe and stared at it, my knuckles turning white at my grip.

This was a gamble, one hell of a long shot. It could just as easily make him incoherent as compliant.

Just woman up, and get the job done, Char.

I leaned over Marín, giving him a great view of my tits to get his primitive brain working, and jabbed the syringe into his thigh.

“Think of it like ecstasy, Daniel...” I whispered, “on steroids. You won’t ___”

Hands wrapped around my arms from behind. Big hands.

Seriously? Come on, fate, you’ve got to be on my side every once in a while. The dog stops playing when you never let her have the bone.

I’d been so caught up in getting Marín’s tongue wagging that I hadn’t heard the door or my assailant’s approach.

But I’d trained for this. I’d spent countless hours sparring, working my muscles until they were numb. For this. Right now.

As my assailant’s hands tightened their grip, adrenaline flooded my brain. Fight or flight. Survival. Hyperarousal: It was the high I sought out on a regular basis.

And that means we’re in my house now, asshole.

I jabbed my elbow back and connected with a solid wall. The impact shot up my arm as I threw my head back, but there was no satisfying crunch of a nose breaking beneath the blow—just a thud as the back of my skull slammed into something solid.

I swung my foot back, aiming for his shin. A sharp hiss indicated I'd hit my mark, but his grip didn't loosen. It was like his body was a shock absorber, taking everything I could dish out.

I gripped the syringe tight and tried to jab it back into his thigh, but his knee came up, connecting with my lower back and forcing me forward and down until I was bent right over the bed, right next to Marín.

Ugh, really? You're laughing at me up there, aren't you? I seethed silently, giving fate the stink eye.

"Are you finished, *signorina*?" the stranger said in one of those deep, just slightly raspy voices that generally shot like molten heat straight to the lady parts.

Finished? Oh yeah, I'll just lie here like a good little girl. Nothing bad could come from that, right?

Nevertheless, I forced my body to go slack beneath him.

He removed his knee from my back, but he kept me pinned with one big hand against the back of my neck.

I could feel his gaze traveling over me, from my dark chestnut hair to the backs of my thighs where his own thighs were pressed up against me, keeping me from kicking out at him.

"I missed the memo," he said as his other hand settled on my hip. "I didn't realize it was costume day for assassins. But I like yours very much, *signorina*."

I bet you do.

His grip on my neck loosened when I didn't struggle and then his thighs were no longer pressing against mine. He probably thought he had me cowering like a child here.

Big mistake, asshole.

I shot my stiletto heel straight back. I'd been hoping to connect with his nuts, but the tapered heel slammed into his thigh, hard enough he stumbled

back a step.

“*Stronzo*,” he spat.

I shot straight up and spun, but that’s when I finally got a look at my assailant.

He was nearly a head taller than me, and broad. Really freaking broad, like his suit-clad body-spent-hours-lifting-two-hundred-pound-weights-every-day kind of broad. *Shit*. I’d been hoping for more of a Steve Urkel kind of opponent—spindly and clumsy. An Urkel, I could take down. Definitely.

In a flash, my gaze swept up to a well-cut jaw. Full lips. Straight nose and defined cheekbones.

And then my swift perusal reached his eyes. Deep-set ice-blue eyes that slammed into me; that’s what it felt like. Like they’d knocked the breath right out of my lungs.

Cielo Luciano?

I hadn’t seen the man in ten years, and the universe decided that *now* was a great time for a reunion?

As I was looking at him, he was looking back at me. Was it too much to hope he’d forgotten all about me?

“Charlotte?” he said like he was testing my name on his lips.

Of course, it was too much to hope he’d forgotten. And that was definitely not an I’m-so-happy-to-see-you look on his too-freaking-handsome face.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asked.

“Would you believe I’m on a date?” I shrugged.

He looked pointedly at Marín who was still paralyzed on the bed, then back to me, one eyebrow cocked.

I don’t think he was buying it. At least the corners of his lips were twitching.

Amused was better than pissed off, right?

“Charlotte?” he pressed.

“It’s Char now,” I blurted out, because that was absolutely useful information here.

His eyebrows lifted. “‘Char’? As in ‘burnt to a crisp’?”

“Only if you piss me off,” I snapped.

He smiled.

My insides twisted.

Smiles were generally good things, but in Cielo Luciano's case, not so much. Particularly not when that smile didn't reach his eyes. Even as he grazed over my lingerie-clad body. His ice-blue eyes were anything but cold at the moment. I think they might have transformed into hot laser beams because everywhere he looked, my skin grew warmer. And warmer, until all of that heat seeped inward, pooling low in my abdomen.

Okay, time to regroup.

Subduing him wasn't going to be easy. Kill shots were the only safe option here.

So... kill him? I put the thought out there, testing it, tasting it.

Are you crazy? my conscience railed. It really was a pesky thing.

So, I did what any self-respecting, conscience-driven woman dressed like a hooker would do: I fainted right, then bolted left, shooting out of the hotel room, past the big, bald guy in the hallway, down the stairs, and out through the front lobby in stiletto heels and lingerie.

Dear fate, you really are a cruel bitch, aren't you?

Chapter Two

Cielo Luciano

I'd seen a lot in my life thus far, but I'd never seen a drop-fucking-dead gorgeous woman making a mad dash across a lamplight-lit hotel parking lot in lingerie, her tits bouncing, precariously contained within a black lace corset.

I had to admit, it was one hell of a sight. I would have put it on my bucket list sooner had I known.

But Charlotte Santoro?

I scrubbed my hand over the short hair at the back of my neck as I watched her.

Her long, bare legs were steady on her five-inch heels. Her body moved like a well-conditioned athlete, not a working girl on a chaotic flight from danger.

"Are you sure you don't want me to go after her, *signor*?" Vito Agossi, one of my family's most trusted men, asked, standing next to me as his bald head leaned closer to the glass for a better look.

"No," I said. We had a job to do. Not that I had any intention of letting the woman vanish into thin air.

I retrieved my phone from my jacket to make a call.

"Follow her, *per favore*," I said the moment Matteo answered.

He was parked in a black Mercedes at the edge of the lot, thirty feet from where she slipped inside a silver Audi, disappearing into the dark interior.

He laughed. "You got it, *fratello*. What do you want me to do with her

when I catch her?” he asked, though the tone of his voice said he already had plenty of ideas.

“That’s Charlotte Santoro. Hands off,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Whoa. Charlotte? As in—”

“Si. As in the girl who upped and disappeared ten years ago.”

Eleventh grade, that’s the year she’d come to my school. She’d looked too young for the rumors that had circulated about the reason for her transfer. Her eyes, though? Christ, those perceptive silver-gray eyes had lived three lifetimes in her fifteen years.

“*You don’t like people very much, do you?*” I’d asked her after a month of watching her. Always on her own. Always keeping people at a distance.

“*When they give me a reason to like them, I will,*” she’d answered, glaring at me.

She’d dressed in faded jeans and old band T-shirts back then, but she could have shown up in a potato sack and still been the hottest girl in school. Her long, dark hair framed a face that was equal parts enchanting and challenging. She had a light sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and her pink lips were so plump, they’d had every guy fantasizing about shoving his cock between them. But fantasize was all they’d ever done; I’d made sure of it.

“Well, damn, time has certainly been kind to her,” Matteo said, laughter and something I didn’t much care for in his voice.

I could picture his eyes narrowed, trying to get a better look at her, at her mile-long legs and the black jewelry that glimmered in the center of her toned abdomen.

My cock jerked as I imagined getting a taste of all that tanned flesh, sinking my teeth in and making her squirm.

Ten years.

I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to wring her neck, fuck her, or take a page out of her book and forget all about her.

All right, that was a lie. Fucking her was clearly at the top of the list.

I’d pin her down against the bed, just the way I’d had her minutes ago, her face pressed against the mattress, her ass at perfect height. Then I’d rip off

her black lace panties and shove my cock so deep inside her, she wouldn't be able to walk straight for days. Not a problem, though, since I'd keep her tied up, using her body again and again until I'd gotten my fill.

On the plus side, there'd be plenty of time in between fucking her to find out what the hell she'd been doing in one of my contacts' hotel room. A traitorous contact, no less.

The Audi's headlights turned on, and the sleek car shot back and out of the parking space with flawless precision.

"Don't let her out of your sight, Matteo. I want to know where she's going."

"Your wish is my command, oh wise one."

"*Stronzo*," I muttered as I hung up the phone.

I dropped the curtain and returned to the reason for my presence here this evening as Vito retrieved my briefcase from where I'd left it inside the hotel room door.

Daniel Marín stared up at the ceiling from his prone position on the hotel room's bed like he was oblivious to what was going on around him.

"Looks like the girl restrained him without restraints," Vito mused as he set down the briefcase on the edge of the bed and nodded to the empty syringes on the floor.

"Sì," I agreed.

There were no signs of torture on Daniel Marín's body, nothing but smeared lipstick on his mouth and around the tip of his index finger. She'd had her lips on him, and oddly, that knowledge left an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of my stomach. The image was wrong; a puzzle piece forced into the wrong spot. Those lips didn't belong there. *She* didn't belong here. Charlotte Santoro, an assassin?

"Sounds like this girl has history, *signor*," Vito said, his tone curious as I stared down at Marín's limp form.

"Ancient history," I replied, elaborating no further.

Vito nodded, wise enough not to pry, and looked down at Marín.

"Do you think he's found the answers to the universe up there, *signor*?" he asked, following Marín's gaze up to the ceiling.

“Either that or he’s having a profound conversation with the light fixture.” Vito chuckled.

After my run-in with Charlotte, I wasn’t feeling particularly jovial.

“What did the woman want, Daniel?” I asked.

The man’s eyes finally swivelled in his head toward me. Beady eyes. Pupils blown.

“Hey, man,” Marín said with the most maniacal grin I’d ever seen. His lips barely moved, but the grin managed to transform his whole face, right up to the suspiciously large pupils in his beady eyes.

“What did you say?” I asked, my voice cold, devoid of emotion. I’d killed men for showing that kind of disrespect.

“You won’t believe what just happened,” he continued, then laughed. “There was this girl... and she had this thing, and... oh, man, it was wild.”

He kept laughing. When he tried to lift his hand but couldn’t get more than his fingers to raise up off the mattress, he laughed harder.

I looked over at Vito. “It seems a paralytic isn’t the only thing she injected into him,” I mused aloud.

Vito nodded, the corners of his lips twitching. “Not sure if that makes this job harder or easier, *signor*.”

I scoffed. If memory served me correctly—and it always did—nothing about Charlotte Santoro had ever made anything easier.

Fuck you, asshole, her eyes had screamed at me tonight.

It was a look I remembered well despite the passing of time. A look that made me want to fuck all that anger out of her to see what she was hiding beneath it.

It always had.

“What did the woman want, Daniel?” I repeated myself, not something I was fond of doing.

“She, uh... she had this... this...” He paused, his brow trying to furrow in thought. “This thingamajig, you know? And the most amazing tits.” He grinned, and his beady eyes turned lecherous. “They were like clouds, man. Big, soft clouds. And she was asking stuff... important stuff, I think. But then it was like... I was floating, man, just floating on those clouds...”

My jaw tensed, imagining the half-naked body that had been pressed up against my cock just moments ago, wrapped around this asshole, his hands on her tits.

“Get his arms up, Vito.”

“*Sì, signor,*” Vito retrieved the handcuffs stored neatly in my briefcase and dragged Marín’s arms up, cuffing his wrists to the headboard.

“It seems like you’re having a difficult time concentrating, Daniel. I’m going to help you with that,” I said as I glanced at the assortment of tools in the briefcase, each one of them gleaming under the dim light of the room.

Vito retrieved a rag from the briefcase, and I nodded to him, giving him the go-ahead.

When the gag was in place, I retrieved a long, thin needle from my collection, meticulously sorted by size and thickness, and inserted it into the axillary nerve beneath Marín’s exposed armpit.

He screamed, and his fingers and toes managed to jerk like fish out of water, the mind-numbing pain breaking through his drug-induced stupor as a single drop of blood welled up around the needle and dripped down onto the navy blue bedspread.

His face was red, and tears and sweat were dripping down it by the time I withdrew the needle and signaled for Vito to remove the gag.

A trickle of dark red blood dripped from the wound onto the bedspread.

Red, like Charlotte’s plump lips, like her nail polish. The color had matched her tanned skin well. There’d been faint streaks in the polish, though—brush strokes. It hadn’t been applied professionally. A budget-conscious assassin?

“No more. Please,” Marín cried.

I swear, they were the three words I’d heard the most in my life. “Oh God” came in a close fourth and fifth. It was a wonder I didn’t have a god complex.

His pupils were still fully dilated, but there was a little more focus in them now.

I smirked.

The sooner we wrapped this up, the sooner I could find *her*. And her

budget-manicure. Her silver eyes. The tanned column of her throat that I still wanted to wring.

“I’ll ask you one more time before this gets unpleasant, Daniel. What did the woman want?”

Daniel stared at me, eyes widening like he was trying to focus.

“Finley,” he panted. “She wanted to know about Cade Finley.”

I looked up, exchanging a glance with Vito, but he shook his head.

“She was supposed to suck my dick,” Marín rambled as his eyes began to glaze over. “Man, that would have been fantastic. She had these lips... Fucking perfect, you know?”

Vito laughed. “Your blowjob days are over, *amico*.”

I sighed and retrieved another needle, this one’s gauge slightly larger than the last.

“No, you don’t have to do that,” Marín whined while he tried to lift his head up off the pillow for a better look.

Thanks to the lingering effects of the paralytic, his pleas had all the enthusiasm of a last-minute tax return.

Vito gagged the man as I inserted the needle, penetrating the axillary nerve once again.

Marín screamed and his body shook, but this time, even after the initial agonizing shock had worn off, I left the needle in place, the shrieking pain a constant reminder to keep his drugged-up mind focused.

Vito removed the gag, and I took hold of the needle’s end, a promise of sweet relief.

“Why was she asking you about Cade Finley?”

“She thought...” he panted. “She thought I’d sold him out.”

I withdrew the needle.

“And you did, didn’t you?”

He’d sold out the Lucianos. He’d gotten one of our men killed. So, I had no doubt he’d sold out this Cade Finley as well.

The wheels were turning behind his eyes, searching for a way out. When his drug-addled brain realized there were none, he nodded. “It wasn’t personal. Just money.”

“The same reason you sold out the Lucianos?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow at him.

His breath caught in his throat, and his eyes widened. “No. No, wait. I never said—”

“Did you sell out this Finley to the same man to whom you sold out the Lucianos?” I asked, not certain how I felt about my path and Charlotte’s converging on one common enemy.

Marín was finally sobering. Now, he looked like every other man in his position, eyes wide with fear but with a desperate hope lurking in the backs of them. Hope that I’d change my mind, hope that mine wasn’t the last face he’d ever see. The same hope I’d quashed over and over again.

The tears in his eyes welled over, and silent sobs wracked his chest. He’d regained some control over his muscles now, and he was trying to maneuver his whole body further up on the bed in what could go down as the slowest, most futile escape attempt ever.

Vito looked down at him, an amused grin playing at the edges of his mouth.

“Your tears are pointless, Daniel,” I explained. “They don’t mean anything to me.”

I’d like to say they once would have, that the apathy had been bred over time, that it was the result of hardening or thickening of armor, but it would be a lie.

To drive home the point—pun intended—I retrieved another needle, the thickest gauge in the briefcase.

“All right, yes!” he cried the moment the sharp tip touched his skin.

“Give me a name, Daniel,” I commanded, holding the needle there while Vito hovered close by, ready with the gag.

“I’ll... tell you,” he panted. “It—” He gasped, sharp and sudden.

His eyes rolled back, and his eyelids closed as his whole body went slack.

Well, this was inconvenient.

I pressed two fingers to the man’s carotid artery, checking for a pulse, but there was none.

A heart attack. Not the first I’d witnessed during an interrogation.

“Hand me the epinephrine, *per favore*,” I told Vito, holding out one hand while I located the midpoint of Marín’s outer thigh, three fingers below the hip bone.

The moment Vito handed me the syringe, I jabbed it in and depressed the plunger.

This wasn’t the movies, so Marín’s eyes didn’t fly wide open suddenly, body revived and ready to continue our conversation.

“Son of a bitch,” Vito muttered under his breath as he covered Marín’s mouth and nose with a resuscitation mask and I started CPR.

Thirty compressions, then Vito blew two breaths into Marín’s lungs.

Thirty compressions.

Two breaths.

No pulse.

We repeated the process, and I found a certain tranquility in the monotony of it, if not in the dwindling possibility of success.

When fifteen minutes had passed, Vito returned the used syringe inside my briefcase along with the resuscitation mask.

Daniel Marín was dead, his lifeless body beginning to turn pale and blue-lipped.

I wasn’t impressed.

Chapter Three

Charlotte Santoro

I think it was safe to write off tonight as a colossal failure.

No answers.

Not one step closer to finding my dad.

And let's not forget about the mad dash out of a hotel in my underwear.

That was awesome—*really*.

And now, I was on the Lucianos' radar.

Not good. Not good at all, Char.

Of course, it wasn't enough to be on their radar, I had to be right in their sights. Literally.

I tightened my grip on the steering wheel as I glanced at my side-view mirror, eyeing the black Mercedes five cars back that had been tailing me on every twist and turn out of the city. I don't think he was even trying to be all that stealthy about it.

I had options, though; everything from slamming on my brakes and confronting him in the middle of the street to leading him into the middle of nowhere and killing his ass. *Oh, that's tempting.*

All right, tempting, but probably a bad idea. The last thing I needed was even more Lucianos hunting me down. That, and the whole murder thing again. Ugh, scruples. They were very inconvenient.

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel. I supposed there was only one obvious option left.

With a calculated glance, I assessed the situation. A grin tugged at the corners of my lips as I tightened my grip on the wheel, and a thrill ran

through my veins, a spark of excitement that ignited my senses, a rush that was addictive, intoxicating.

My fingers danced over the gearshift, a seamless transition that propelled the car forward with a surge of power. The engine's growl echoed through the night, a fierce symphony that harmonized with my racing heart. It was a melody I knew well, a rhythm that called to me in moments like these.

As the road ahead stretched out, I gripped the steering wheel with a steady confidence. The car responded to my touch, a sleek extension of my intentions.

I downshifted as I approached a tight corner, the tires screeching against the asphalt with unwavering loyalty. The thrill of the chase coursed through my veins, and I reveled in the dance.

With a deft flick of my wrist, I swung the car into a narrow alley, the walls of concrete and brick mere inches from my sides. Adrenaline surged within me, a fire that burned brighter with every heartbeat. My senses were heightened, each sound and sensation woven into the fabric of my focus.

The Mercedes' headlights flared in my peripheral vision just as I emerged from the alley and hit the accelerator with precision timing. The city lights became streaks of color, a whirlwind of motion that mirrored the frenzy within me.

I shifted gears effortlessly, each change a note in the symphony of speed.

A straightaway beckoned, and I pushed the car to its limits, the wind whipping against my face like a playful challenge. I reveled in the rush of acceleration, a burst of power that defied restraint.

As the gap between us widened, a triumphant smile crossed my face.

The Mercedes' headlights faded into the oblivion of the night, a mere memory of a challenge overcome.

With a deep breath, I turned my attention ahead. Now that I'd left him behind, I could finally head for home, the echo of the chase still ringing in my ears.

Home.

It didn't look like much of a home as I pulled up to the big, weathered warehouse a half hour later.

The building's form was boxy and utilitarian, with squared-off corners and a flat, unadorned roofline that seemed to stretch on forever. The metal cladding, likely once vibrant in its metallic sheen, had now faded to a muted, rusty patina.

It looked just as dilapidated as the first time I saw it.

I'd knocked on the door, half-expecting to be greeted by the bark of angry, half-starved guard dogs.

Instead, a man in his thirties had opened the door. He was tall with dark hair, calculating—almost predatory—gray eyes, and a long scar cut down the side of his face from temple to jaw.

"If you're selling something, sweetheart, I'm not buying," he says in a lazy drawl, eyeing me warily.

"I'm not selling anything," I reply, looking him over—his V-neck tee, faded jeans, and the tats on his arms—assessing him the same way he's assessing me.

"Then what is it you want?" he asks as he leans his shoulder against the doorframe, arms crossed over his broad chest.

I squared my shoulders. Don't chicken out, I scolded myself.

"You're my father," I spit out, "so ideally, I'd like you to step up, but I'd settle for a place to crash for a few nights."

"Your father?" he repeats, his eyebrows reaching for his hairline.

I shrug. "Hey, you've been a ghost for the past seventeen years, so I'm not exactly thrilled about my parentage either."

He looks at me, silent, his wolflike eyes appraising. "Who did you say your mother is?"

I scoff. "I didn't say, but her name's Elizabeth Santoro. You gave her this." I hold out an old scrap piece of paper with a phone number scrawled on it, the phone number for this warehouse. "She said the two of you hooked up in Buffalo at Harborview Tavern, and I was the result. So, congratulations, it's a girl," I say dryly.

He keeps looking at me, but I haven't the foggiest clue what he's thinking.

Please, don't make me live on the streets, I silently plead. I have no idea how long a paternity test would take. And there's also the small issue of

“What if Mom lied?”

My heart pounds, and my palms feel sweaty.

He keeps looking.

Eventually, he nods. Just once. “All right, if you say so.”

“That’s it?”

I mean, I’d been hoping for smooth sailing but I wasn’t holding my breath or anything.

“Well, if you didn’t get those eyes from me, I’d say they’re a damn good facsimile.”

It isn’t until he says it that I realize it’s true.

I’d never really thought of my eyes as anything before, much less wolflike. They were just eyes—they were good for seeing, and I was simply glad they worked.

But now, staring back at the thirty-something dark-haired man in front of me, something came undone inside me. His silver-gray eyes are a mirror reflection of my own.

He steps back and lets me in. Into what looks like an old, run-down building on the outside but is maybe the coolest place I’ve ever seen on the inside—industrial-chic. And with security shit I’m pretty sure could rival Fort Knox.

I parked in the warehouse’s gravel lot and walked up to the same door now, slipping my fingers beneath a loose piece of the corrugated metal siding and onto the fingerprint scanner that was hidden there.

The moment the lock clicked open, a sudden bark resonated with power, a commanding burst that vibrated in the air around me.

I opened the door and stepped inside as a one-hundred-and-eighty-pound black Boerboel barreled toward me, barely skidding to a stop a foot away, then running in circles around me, his short tail wagging happily.

Despite his enthusiasm, a wave of emptiness enveloped me, an absence that echoed in the silence.

There was no burned meatloaf scent wafting from the oven. No rhythmic clicking of keys on my dad’s computer or The Rolling Stones playing on low volume in the background. The world he had carefully crafted in our home

was unraveling before my eyes.

“I missed you too, Ray,” I said, swallowing back the lump in my throat and giving my enormous teddy bear a two-handed scratch behind the ears, which, next to food, was pretty much his favorite thing.

And while I was hungry enough to eat a horse—okay, maybe not a horse because meat was murder and all that—Ray was not in the mood to be patient. As soon as I’d finished with the obligatory scratch, he started nudging the door with his big nose.

“All right, you win.” Because nose-nudging was just the start. Whining, door-scratching, and the dreaded puppy dog eyes were sure to follow. “Give me one minute,” I said, sidestepping him because I was so done with wandering around outside in lingerie.

I ran up the open staircase to my loft bedroom, threw on the first clothes I could find from the messy stack on my king-size bed, tucked a Glock 19 into the back waist of my pants—I wasn’t convinced my shadow had vanished—and headed back to the front door.

Of course, Ray remained on my heels every step of the way.

We’d just stepped outside and rounded the side of the warehouse when the black Mercedes turned into the gravel lot—because fate was awesome like that. But dear Lord, I just didn’t have any more in me tonight.

Ray darted behind me, growling at the car with his chest low to the ground and his hackles up. One would likely surmise from his stance that he was getting ready, preparing to attack whatever trouble came at us.

One would most certainly be wrong.

The driver pulled up next to my Audi, close to the building’s front door.

My heart raced, and I pressed a hand against Ray’s side, silently pleading with him to stay quiet.

The driver’s side door opened, and a man stepped out.

In the darkness, I strained to see his features, but all I could make out were the faint outlines of his silhouette.

He moved with purpose, walking toward the warehouse’s front door.

My pulse quickened, and I held my breath. So long as we remained hidden, there was some chance the man would simply turn and drive away

when he couldn't get into the building.

All we had to do was stay quiet.

So, of course, what happened next was pretty much on par with this clusterfuck of a night.

Ray barked. Loud and deep, an explosive sound that rent the night. Did he charge? Did he pounce? Nope. Just one booming sound that pretty much went off like a big, flashing neon sign that read: *We're right here!*

"I love you, buddy, but really?" I whispered as I withdrew my gun and flipped off the safety.

The man had already turned and was heading in our direction. He passed beneath one of the dim pot lights in the warehouse's fascia, and he was no longer a silhouette, but a man who bore a substantial resemblance to Cielo with his tailored suit, broad frame, and perfect blond hair.

His eyes, though, they looked darker than Cielo's, brown or hazel, maybe—it was too dark in the dim light to be sure. But this wasn't just a Luciano man; this was one of the brothers. Matteo, the younger one, if I had to guess.

The moment he spotted us, he stopped moving.

I patted Ray's head, then stepped aside, hoping the sight of my giant, growly friend might motivate him to get back into his car and drive his ass right on out of here.

Matteo remained in place, eyeing Ray warily.

"What the hell is that?" he asked. He took a step forward, one hand reaching toward his jacket.

"Most people call it a dog," I replied, gripping the gun tighter.

He shook his head. "I think that's what happens when a dog mates with a bear."

I forced my shoulders to move up and down in a shrug. "Love is love, right? Not my place to judge."

Despite his wariness, the corners of his lips twitched while his hand continued its slow journey toward his jacket.

"If you move that hand one more inch, though, I'll let the love child chow down on you," I cautioned him.

Inside, I was laughing. If he only knew what an idle threat that was.

Matteo lowered his hand, but he was still coiled tight.

If Ray lunged at him, he'd have his gun out before my dog could reach him—not that there was any chance of that happening. Ray was more of a growl-and-bark kind of dog, less of an I'm-actually-going-to-protect-you-here dog. He did the growling; I did the protecting. That was the relationship we'd worked out over the years.

And since I had a role to play here, I gripped my gun tighter, finger on the trigger now.

You can do this, Char, I pep-talked myself. It's no big deal. Just a dangerous mafia guy here who could probably kill you a thousand different ways, that's all.

I raised my gun, centering my aim on Matteo's chest. Cielo's little brother.

Was I seriously pointing a gun at a kid whose voice had barely begun to change the last time I saw him?

"Hey." He raised his hands, looking at me like I'd lost my mind.

Maybe I have.

"I'm just trying to have a conversation here, *signorina*."

I scoffed. "I'm not really in the mood for talking, so how about you just tell me what the hell you're doing here before I put a hole through you and let Ray eat the evidence?"

Cielo's little brother or not, I'd just threatened a man I had no doubt was a dangerous killer.

No harm could come from that, right?

Chapter Four

Cielo Luciano

I called Matteo for the third time in a row, letting the damn thing ring over and over again as I got into my onyx black Aston Martin DBS Superleggera, placing my briefcase in the footwell of the passenger seat. I was going to kill him. I loved my brother, but I was going to kill him. Probably with my bare hands.

With Daniel Marín as dead as a doornail and neatly packaged into Vito's trunk, Charlotte was the only hope I had of getting answers at the moment.

I was just about to hang up the damn phone when the ringing stopped.

"*Ciao, Cielo. How's it going?*" Matteo asked, his tone far too casual for an almost-dead man.

The urge to snap at him was potent, but I didn't *snap*. Not ever.

"Marín died before I could get answers out of him," I explained through gritted teeth while failure writhed beneath my skin. It wasn't something I experienced often.

"Forgetting how this works, *fratello?*" Matteo quipped. "I thought you had the whole 'Q&A before RIP' routine down by now."

Always a comedian.

"Tell me you've got eyes on Charlotte," I said, ignoring the jest.

"Oh, yeah. We're just hanging out. Maybe you want to come join us?"

"You were supposed to be following her, not 'hanging out' with her," I spat.

"*Hands off,*" I'd told him. He damn well better have listened.

"*Sì, well, it turns out she had other plans,*" he replied without missing a

beat.

“*Stai bene?*” I asked because while I couldn’t for the life of me envision the Charlotte I once knew hurting my brother, that was a long time ago. She hadn’t run around in lingerie with syringes of paralytics back then.

He laughed, though the sound was tight. “Hot woman with a gun and a killer dog? All good here, *fratello.*”

Christ. “Where are you?” I asked, scrubbing my fingers through my hair.

Something barked. I say “something” because the deep, cavernous sound could not possibly have come from a dog.

“She’s taking my phone and sending you the address now,” Matteo said. “Feel free to step on it. I don’t mind.”

The call disconnected at the same time a text flashed on the screen from Matteo with an address that was at least a half hour’s drive away.

Heeding his vague warning, I typed the address into my GPS and sped the entire way there, caught between visions of my brother laid out and paralyzed, and Charlotte still dressed in lingerie with my brother’s hands all over her.

I couldn’t quite say which one pissed me off more, so it was a relief when I pulled into the gravel lot to find Matteo sitting at a picnic table next to a big warehouse and smiling like a dumbass beneath a security light.

Charlotte was sitting on top of the table, dressed in a black tank top that left a strip of her tanned midriff bare, black pants that sat low on her hips and clung to her long legs, and the same heels she’d been wearing at the hotel.

Even fully clothed, she looked like she’d just stepped out of every man’s fantasy.

Her legs were dangling over the end of the table like she hadn’t a care in the world. But her spine was a little too straight, her jaw a little too stiff. And then there was the gun she had clasped in one hand. *That* contrasted sharply with the carefree aura she was trying to exude.

The giant dog on the ground next to her sure as hell didn’t help the image. Presumably, the deep, cavernous sound I’d heard over the phone had come from him.

“Nice of you to join us, Cielo,” Charlotte said as I approached her, the

gravel crunching beneath my shoes.

The big, black beast was on all fours, growling deep in his chest while he seemed to be trying to maneuver himself *under* the picnic table.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world, Charlotte,” I replied as I tore my gaze away from the black gemstone in her navel and glanced over my brother. He looked no worse for wear.

Charlotte tilted her head slightly to the side, looking at me like she was trying to make sense of what she was seeing as I stopped right in front of her, her knees nearly brushing my thighs.

Christ, the body was incredible, but those eyes... they’d always fascinated me. Silver gray, perceptive and intense with a hint of wildness lurking in the depths of them.

“Did you and my brother have a good chat?” I asked.

She rolled her eyes. “He doesn’t seem to know the meaning of ‘shut up’.”

Matteo laughed.

“Let him go, Charlotte,” I said in a tone that brooked no refusal.

She scoffed. “You think I’ve been keeping him here *on purpose*? Yeah, that’s all I need—a great big Luciano family reunion, *here*, of all places.” She looked around pointedly. “I must have forgotten the balloons, but I’m sure you have some body bags in your trunk, so we’ll just improvise.”

“If she’s not keeping you here, what are you doing, Matteo?”

He shrugged. “I was curious...” He let the thought trail off, still smiling at me like a dumbass. “She seems to know an awful lot about us,” he said, his eyes meeting mine meaningfully, not quite accusingly.

Once upon a time, I’d told Charlotte everything, far more than I should have. A mistake, of course, but seventeen-year-old males were stupid.

“Go home, *per favore*. We’ll talk later,” I told him.

First and foremost, about the difference between “following” and “hanging out”. And then maybe about what I’d do to him if he ever touched her, because the way he was looking at her said he was thinking about doing a whole hell of a lot more than “hanging out”.

He nodded as he stood up, still smiling far too happily.

“You two have a good evening. Don’t do anything I would do,” he said,

waggling his eyebrows at me before turning to Charlotte. “It was good to see you again. Perhaps, we’ll have a chance to catch up more later.” He flashed her a devilish smile, though I think it was more to goad me than to flirt with her right in front of me.

She rolled her eyes. “I can’t wait,” she said dryly.

As Matteo made his way across the lot, the only sounds were the gravel crunching beneath his footsteps and the dog grumbling.

When he’d gotten into his car and driven out of the lot, I turned back to Charlotte.

That was a mistake.

Looking at her now, it was as if time had folded in on itself, compressing a decade into mere heartbeats.

“You left,” I said, my voice full of accusation I’d thought had died a long time ago.

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Her eyes met mine, a flicker of something in them. Uncertainty? Guilt? With Charlotte, it was hard to tell.

“Believe it or not, I don’t actually spend a whole lot of time in hotel rooms with strangers.”

She knew that wasn’t what I’d meant, but if she wanted to pretend we were strangers, so be it.

“You stepped on my toes tonight,” I said, meeting her gaze head-on.

“No, I slammed my heel into your thigh. But semantics?” She shrugged.

Not before I had your ass rubbing against my cock.

She glanced over me from head to toe. “It seems it’s left you no worse for wear,” she replied flippantly.

Still the same old Charlotte from before.

“What did you give Marín?” I asked because the question had been eating at me since I’d found the asshole staring up at the ceiling like he’d found the secret to eliminating the male refractory period up there.

Charlotte’s puffy lips quirked. “A modified form of MDMA.”

“You gave the asshole ecstasy?”

She shrugged. “I was fresh out of truth serum. And besides, it looked like the guy could use a good time.”

She spoke with such a straight face it was hard to decipher whether she was lying.

“Okay, well, this was fun,” she said, hopping down, sliding sideways to land next to me and tucking her gun into the back of her pants.

The scent of jasmine and vanilla wafted from her, the warm and sensual wrapping around me the same way it did back in the hotel.

“It was great catching up, Cielo. We should do it again... in another decade or so.”

This deranged reunion was anything but great. If it was so “great” then I’d be balls-deep inside her already. Then I could get my head clear and figure out what to do with the girl who’d disappeared on me only to reappear ten years later in Marín’s hotel room.

I had a feeling the solution had something to do with handcuffs and neck wringing. But also fucking. There would definitely be a lot of fucking.

Unfortunately, I had a job to do.

“Who is Cade Finley?” I asked abruptly.

She pressed her lips together, and I swear her eyes darkened like storm clouds brewing.

“*He’s* not your concern,” she said eventually, then turned to walk away.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her back with enough force that her body slammed into mine. Her body was warm, and her full tits pressed hard against my chest, pumping pure arousal through my veins like an adrenaline shot to the heart.

Her breath came out in a rush, her lips parted. She didn’t pull away, didn’t move.

I swear I could feel her heart beating, harder than it should have been. Faster. I’d never had her this close, never imagined I ever would.

“Are you finished manhandling me yet?” she deadpanned but her voice sounded a little breathless. “Or do you maybe want me to spin in a circle and you just grab at whatever strikes your fancy?”

I smirked. *Tempting.*

She yanked her arm out of my grip and took a step back.

The dog—who’d managed to work half his body beneath the picnic table

—shifted agitatedly but maintained his position.

“We’re not finished here, Charlotte. What happened tonight is a problem.”

“Right... stepping on toes and all that shit?” she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “How about this: You give me a list of all the scumbags who are off-limits, and I’ll do my very best to steer clear of them. Does that work for you?”

I stared at her, far more intrigued than I wanted to be. “You’re mouthier now. I like that.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh, hand over her heart. “*Phew*, that’s a relief. Here I was worried I’d disappoint you. I guess I dodged a bullet there.”

I couldn’t help but smile, suddenly feeling like I was ten years back in time, in a screwed-up pocket in the time vortex where everything was the same but also completely different. That was the only way to explain why everything with Charlotte felt familiar and thorny at the same time.

A car went by, and the dog whined, wriggling out from beneath the picnic table and hiding behind Charlotte.

She scratched him behind his ear, murmuring to him soothingly.

“Your killer guard dog is afraid of cars?”

“I never said he was a killer. And he’s not *afraid*... he gets nervous... of cars. People. Thunder and lightning. Birds that move too quickly. Fireflies.”

I laughed, but she looked offended.

“Dogfighters had him. All things considered, I think he’s doing great, aren’t you, Ray?” she asked, but not in that syrupy way some people spoke to their pets.

The dog barked enthusiastically like he actually understood.

“You paralyze men and take in abused dogs?” The girl made no sense, always a puzzle I couldn’t quite solve.

“Hey, I didn’t *hurt* Daniel Marín. I was just trying to have a conversation with him.”

“By paralyzing him?”

She shrugged. “I find it’s a good way to get a man’s attention.”

“Hardly necessary.” I cleared my throat.

I had a feeling she had all his attention with that outfit she’d been wearing.

She'd kissed him, had her lips wrapped around his finger. Where else had she had her lips? I wondered while the urge to bring that asshole back to life just to kill him again writhed in the pit of my stomach.

"All right, so we've covered my dog, my mouthiness, and my promise to try not to step on your toes in the future. I think we're about done here, don't you?"

"We're done here when I say we're done, Charlotte. Daniel Marín sold out your Cade Finley to someone. I need to know to whom," I stated.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"You know I can't tell you that," I said, shaking my head.

"But you expect me to offer up my intel? What makes you think I'd do that?"

I smiled pure ice. "You're smart enough to know I win this. Don't make it harder than it has to be."

Or do.

I didn't mind the idea of tying her up at all. I wouldn't have to use pain to get answers out of her. I'd use pleasure, bringing her to the brink, then pulling back, making her scream, making her beg.

She stared at me, but there was no telling what was going on behind her silver eyes, a skill few people possessed.

She licked her lips then nodded after a moment.

"Felipe Espinosa," she said.

I almost wished she hadn't.

But thanks to her uncanny ability to hide whatever she was thinking, I couldn't gauge the truthfulness of it.

"You'd better not be lying, Charlotte."

She laughed. "Or else, what? You'll kill me? Maybe sic your family on me?" She smiled as she took a step closer. "Go ahead and try, Cielo."

The girl had no idea the things I wanted to do to her.

Without breaking eye contact, she leaned in close, up on her toes, until her lips were a hair's breadth from mine. The heat from her body seeped through our clothes, and every one of the thousand ways I'd ever fantasized about having her bombarded my brain.

“I dare you,” she whispered.

I swear the sound grabbed hold of my cock and squeezed like a hand job.

She dropped down off her toes, then turned and walked away, the dog following on her heels.

Christ, the woman had me hard as steel and mad as hell at the same time.

Some things never changed.

Chapter Five

Charlotte Santoro

If I never did that again, it would be too soon.

“Go ahead and try, Cielo.”

I slammed the heavy warehouse door shut behind me, engaged the locks, then sagged against the cool metal while Ray sauntered toward the kitchen, then back again when I didn't follow.

“I dare you.”

Had I lost my mind?

Maybe, I had.

I flipped through the camera angles on the monitor screen installed on the wall next to the door, watching as Cielo got into his car and drove away. I couldn't quite articulate how I was feeling. Relief was in there somewhere. Anger? Maybe just a smidge of something else we weren't even going to consider at the moment?

I shook my head disbelievingly.

Cielo Luciano was pretty much the walking, talking personification of every fantasy a woman could have, but he was part of a different life. A life that belonged in the past, not the here and now.

When the rear lights of his car were just pinpricks of light in the distance and Ray had begun nudging my leg like he could herd me in the right direction, I pushed off the wall.

“I'm guessing you're in the mood for food, my friend,” I said as I ditched my shoes and padded barefoot across the gigantic space to the open kitchen on the far side.

I pulled out a can of the new ethically-sourced gourmet dog food he'd fallen in love with and opened it up while Ray practically danced in circles. By the time I'd poured it into his bowl, he was drooling. Ray did not subscribe to the belief that meat was murder, and since he had an allergy to several plant-based proteins, I couldn't really fight him on it.

I rinsed out the can and deposited it into the recycling bin while Ray chowed down. I glanced at the fridge, but my appetite was gone.

I grabbed an open bottle of wine and poured a glass, the deep red liquid shimmering beneath the row of pendant lights above the kitchen island.

"Felipe Espinosa," I said the name out loud to the glass, shaking my head.

It wouldn't take Cielo long to figure out that name was a lie.

I grabbed my laptop and made my way to the roof. It was a sort of sanctuary, a place where we would come to unwind most nights when we were home. Two loungers sat there on the concrete patio, side by side, one for me and one for him.

I settled into my own chair, gazing at the empty space beside me while something twisted up tight in my chest.

I looked away.

The night sky stretched above, a canvas of stars that held no answers, only infinite questions.

You've got to help me out, Dad. If you haven't noticed, I'm not having a whole lot of success here.

With a sigh, I opened my laptop, connected to a secure line, and made the same video call I'd made each night for the past eight days.

"Charlotte! ¿Cómo estás?" a throaty, feminine voice answered.

Val's face filled the screen. Her dark eyes, normally filled with warmth, were clouded with concern.

Val, a smoking hot Colombian woman in her late thirties, was one of the few people my dad trusted. I think he really believed he'd done a good job keeping it hidden that the two of them fucked like rabbits every opportunity they got.

"*Buenas noches, amiga,*" I replied. "I'd be better if tonight hadn't been a total bust." *Understatement of the century.* "I don't suppose you've had any

better luck?”

She was well-connected in several South American countries and had been doing what she could to find out where Silva might have been keeping my dad.

She shook her head as a furrow formed between her winged brows. “No, I’m afraid not, *amiga*.” Her expression mirrored my sadness, her voice filled with empathy.

Tears welled up in my eyes despite my efforts to hold them back. There’d been no chatter, no rumors. It was almost as if—

I clamped down on the thought.

Because I was *not* going there.

I shifted the video call to one half of the screen and loaded up my email, silently sending up prayers to any deity who felt like tuning in at the moment.

There were a total of five people my father trusted out there—Val included—and I’d reached out to every one of them.

“Your father was right, though,” Val said. “Silva announced his intention to run for the Venezuelan presidency this evening.”

“*Frakking* hell,” I cursed as frustration writhed beneath my skin. That corrupted, sadistic prick had no business running anything but his own little corner of hell.

My email had loaded up, but there were no messages from the men I’d reached out to. Just one new message from an account I didn’t recognize, a jumble of letters and numbers that meant nothing to me. My heart quickened as I opened the message, a feeling of dread settling in the pit of my stomach.

“*Hello, Miss Finley. Or should I say, Miss Santoro?*” the email read. That was it.

“Shit,” I cursed aloud.

“Charlotte?” Val said, her voice thick with concern.

I tried to swallow, but all the moisture was gone.

“I have to go,” I forced out past dry lips.

“¿*Qué pasa?*”

“My cover’s blown.”

And because imaginations had a tendency to be most active at the worst

possible moment, I swear I could feel a dozen eyes on me all of a sudden. *Awesome.*

“How do you know that?”

“I just received this,” I said as I screenshotted the email and forwarded it to her.

Val’s eyes widened as her gaze shifted, looking at the other side of her screen. “¡Hijueputa!”

My father and I changed names as often as most people changed their socks. All right, maybe not quite that often. But with every new job came a new identity. And Madison Finley—my current identity—hadn’t existed until a year months ago, the same time Madison’s uncle, Cade Finley, miraculously came into existence.

“Charlotte,” Val began, her voice hesitant, her teeth digging into her bottom lip. “You don’t think your father—”

“No,” I cut her off. “He didn’t crack, Val. I know he didn’t.” It wasn’t misplaced faith; it was fact.

“All right. You know what to do, *chica*. Do it,” she said, her no-nonsense, pragmatic side shining through.

“I will. I’ll call you back.”

I moved my fingers to end the call, but paused. “Val?”

“Si?”

“*Gracias...* for everything.” She wasn’t just a source of information. She’d been a lifeline.

“*De nada, amiga.*”

I disconnected the call and took a deep breath, my mind racing with the digital labyrinth I was about to enter.

My first target was the government’s databases.

My fingers flew across the keyboard as I infiltrated the social security system, erasing Madison Finley, Cade Finley, and Charlotte Santoro from the grid, then the DMV records and electoral registry.

Despite the fact that I was sitting on my ass, sweat broke out across my brow and trickled down the back of my neck.

Bank accounts were next.

I liquidated my assets, transferring the funds to untraceable offshore accounts. I left no paper trail, no digital breadcrumbs that could lead back to me.

In a matter of moments, I was nearly finished, but my fingers hovered over the keys as I stared at Charlotte Santoro's birth record.

"You're about to delete your entire existence," I said to the fragments of my reflection I could see on the monitor.

Ray's heavy paws sounded on the stairs then across the concrete. He sauntered right to me and plopped his big head down on my knee, looking up at me. There was a decent chance he was trying to suck up for something, but it kind of felt like he was lending me his moral support.

"To find him, I have to stay alive, right?" And to do that, every trace of Charlotte Santoro needed to disappear.

He kept looking at me, his big, black eyes unwavering.

I nodded, but as the final keystrokes echoed through the quiet, early morning, I took a moment to catch my breath.

I was a ghost now, a shadow.

It left an odd hollow sensation in my chest.

I closed the laptop and looked out at the lightening city skyline.

I was alone, without a past, without a future, and with only one goal in mind: finding my father.

"What do you think, Ray? Should we try walking right up to Silva and demanding he hand over my dad?"

He whined and pressed his head harder against my knee.

"Yeah, I didn't think so either."

But short of that, I was out of ideas at the moment.

"What do you say you and I get out of here for a while?"

The feeling of imaginary eyes creeping across me had me wanting to wriggle right out of my skin.

Ray looked at me, no comprehension in his eyes.

"You wanna go for a ride?" I rephrased the question.

His head shot up, and he barked then bolted for the stairs.

"I'll take that as a yes."

I followed him down the stairs, dropped my glass in the sink and my laptop on the coffee table, then slid into a pair of sandals and led Ray out the door.

We spent an hour driving around with Ray sticking his head out the passenger-side window before I gave in to the tide that had been trying to pull me from the moment we left the warehouse. It pulled me another forty-five minutes out of the city to a place I hadn't been in some time.

As I pulled into the long drive, the imposing structure before me stood as a testament of time, its weathered brick façade bearing witness to years of existence. Tall windows, their panes obscured by curtains of lace, punctuated the building's exterior while a wide, manicured lawn stretched out in front, dotted with carefully tended flower beds that added a touch of color to the surroundings. A tranquil atmosphere enveloped the place, as if it held secrets and stories from a bygone era, waiting to be discovered within its walls.

I got out of the car and put on Ray's leash, which, personally, I thought was ridiculous. With people around, Ray wasn't leaving my side even if the whole world started to fall down around us.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed through the double glass doors and entered a world that felt both familiar and foreign.

The soft hum of fluorescent lights overhead bathed the lobby in a sterile glow. A reception desk, unoccupied at the moment, stood like a silent sentinel against one wall. I glanced around, my eyes catching on a nurse in pale blue scrubs, her attention absorbed by a clipboard.

Ray and I continued down a well-lit hallway, its white walls adorned with framed artwork that seemed oddly out of place. The faint scent of disinfectant lingered in the air as we passed closed doors on either side. As we reached the end of the hallway, my heart quickened. The door to the room was ajar, revealing a sliver of the world within. I hesitated a moment before pushing the door open.

The woman inside sat on a rocking chair, a blanket on her lap, her dark hair pulled back, heavily streaked with gray now.

She looked up at me, but there was no recognition in her eyes. She turned her attention to Ray and smiled.

“Well, aren’t you just a big, beautiful thing?” she crooned.

Ray loped over to her obediently, though I don’t think he minded the attention one bit.

I closed the door, crossed the small room, and sat down on the empty chair next to hers while she scratched Ray behind the ears and petted his shiny coat.

Finally, she looked up at me.

“Hi, Mom,” I said, my teeth digging into my bottom lip.

Her brow furrowed. She didn’t answer, just turned her attention back to Ray.

My chest ached and felt hollow at the same time.

“I used to have a dog a lot like him,” she said as she went back to scratching his head. After a moment, her brow furrowed more. “‘Ali’, I think I called him.”

Yeah, I know. You got him for me.

Chapter Six

Cielo Luciano

“All right, so we know Marín ratted us out, we just don’t know who Felipe Espinosa is or why he’s interested in our business,” my eldest brother, Amadeo, summed it up as he leaned back on one of the wingback chairs in the office at home.

“Sì. I’ve reached out to my contact in Colombia,” I told him from the seat opposite him. “She’s agreed to hold onto our product until we can sort out a new route.”

We paid Marín to ensure smooth sailing for our product across the border in Colombia to Venezuela and at the ports out of Venezuela and into the U.S —product we’d obtained not long ago in a less than conventional transaction with a Colombian cartel *capo*. Product that had nearly been stolen from the Venezuelan port twenty-four hours ago. The altercation had left one of our men dead, and the attackers had managed to get away. We all wanted retribution. Now.

“*Bene. Grazie, fratello,*” Deo said with a sigh of relief. The past few months had been fraught with more than their fair share of trouble.

I chuckled. “Don’t thank me yet. She’ll want a fee.”

None of my contacts did anything for free. I wouldn’t have trusted them if they did.

But that was me, the brother with the contacts—the less-than-lily-white connections all around the world.

Deo shrugged. “I’ll gladly hand over some cash in exchange for a little peace at the moment.”

Peace. That was the last thing I was feeling at the moment.

“So, are we going to talk about it?” he asked.

I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for him to elaborate, half-wishing he wouldn't.

“Matteo was here before he went back to his dorm last night. He mentioned running into the hot little disappearing act from high school. I'm thinking you might have something to say about that.”

Matteo needed to learn to keep his mouth shut. Yet another thing he and I were going to have a conversation about.

I sighed and scrubbed my fingers through my hair. “Is this the part where I'm supposed to pour out my wounded heart? Maybe we should light some candles and grab the tissues?”

Deo scoffed. “You were pretty pissed when she left.”

“It was a long time ago,” I said aloud.

He shrugged like it was irrelevant. “Some things don't have an expiration date, sì?”

“And you're an expert now?” I asked, shaking my head disbelievingly.

“Hell, no,” he replied, laughing. “If I had a hundred years with Heidi, I still don't think I'd be an expert.”

My brother had fallen hard for a doctor with a convoluted family history, and she was now his fiancée. He hadn't just gotten a fiancée out of the deal, though. They were now foster parents—nearly adoptive parents—to Grayson, a fifteen-year-old boy and Alice, a six-year-old girl.

As if on cue, a knock sounded on the door, and the little girl came running in, not waiting for an answer.

“*Buonasera, Zio Cielo,*” she said, pronouncing each syllable carefully while she smiled shyly.

When she'd first arrived here, she'd thought Deo was pretty much the greatest thing since sliced bread. Since Deo and Heidi announced their engagement, though, Alice had decided to shift her attention elsewhere.

“*Buonasera, Alice,*” I said, glad for the interruption.

She'd had a bath recently, and her long, dark hair was dripping a puddle onto the hardwood floor.

“Will you read me a story?” she asked me, eyes hopeful.

I didn’t have to look at the clock to know it was precisely 7:55 PM. It was the exact time she went in search of a story partner every night, which made her the best six-year-old I’d ever met—not that I’d met a great many of them.

“Of course,” I said, getting to my feet. “It would be my pleasure, Alice.”

If it saved me from a conversation about Charlotte at the moment, all the better.

She smiled brightly then turned to Deo. “And you too, Amadeo,” she said like she worried he’d feel left out.

He clasped a hand over his heart. “Second choice,” he said, mock-wounded. “But for you, *principessa*, anything.”

She smiled even brighter, revealing the gap in her teeth where she’d recently lost a baby tooth. Then she grabbed hold of both our hands and led us out of the office and up the stairs to her room.

When Deo opened the door, Heidi was standing next to the bed, shaking her head and smiling in amusement. With her dark hair and pale skin, she looked like a porcelain doll to me, pretty but too breakable.

“You’re going to have every man in the house doting on you pretty soon, *luv*,” she said to Alice.

“I think she already does,” I said right before Deo kissed his fiancée and Alice hopped into bed.

“And what are we reading tonight?” Deo asked her.

“*Cappuccetto Rosso*,” Alice replied in near-perfect Italian.

I laughed. Deo said she’d requested the same story—in Italian—every night. Soon, she’d be speaking more fluently than the rest of us.

Unfortunately, in less than thirty minutes, Alice was fast asleep, and Deo and I had returned to the office.

My brother poured two glasses of grappa, but he’d only just set down the bottle when another knock sounded on the door, this one was firmer, more certain than Alice’s timid knock.

“Come in,” Deo called.

The door opened, and Vito walked in, the light above shining down on his bald head and casting shadows in the deep furrow between his brows.

“We looked into the name ‘Cade Finley’ like you asked, *signor*,” he said, his gaze swinging back and forth between Deo and I, “but the man doesn’t exist, not in any database we can access, no government records, no bank accounts, nothing.”

“I’ve got information about the warehouse you mentioned, though,” Vito went on and held out a folder.

I took it and opened it up, scanning the file inside.

“The warehouse is owned by Precision Textile Group,” I said aloud for Deo’s benefit. “Charlotte’s name isn’t here anywhere.”

“I’m afraid this isn’t any better news, *signor*,” Vito said, handing me a second folder as the furrow between his brows deepened. “I’m not sure Felipe Espinosa is the man you’re looking for.”

Inside the second folder was a picture of a man in his late forties with dark hair, heavily streaked with gray, and a beard that matched. There was a birth certificate, various news clippings labeling the man a middling cartel *capo* in Ecuador.

And a death certificate.

Vito cleared his throat. “Felipe Espinosa died three years ago.”

“She lied,” I said, my jaw clenched tight.

Deo laughed.

“Something funny, *fratellone*?”

“I’m just not used to seeing anything ruffle your feathers, that’s all.”

I took a deep breath and let it out. “My feathers aren’t ruffled.”

I placed the folders down on the desk and stood up.

“I’ll be back in a while,” I said, my voice cold and calm. “I’d appreciate it if you’d continue looking into Espinosa,” I told Vito.

“Of course, *signor*,” he said, his brow still furrowed like he wasn’t quite sure of the point.

“It’s unlikely the name popped into her head out of nowhere,” I explained. “She knew this man somehow. And I have no doubt, she’d known he was dead.”

“*Sì, signor.*”

I nodded to Deo and walked out of the house with single-minded purpose.

She'd lied to me. Another betrayal that clung to me like a second skin.

The engine of my Aston Martin roared to life and the headlights lit up the dark landscape as I left the sprawling estate, its gates fading in the rearview mirror. As I drove, the transition to the city's bustling streets was palpable. My fingers drummed impatiently on the steering wheel, my foot pressed firmly on the gas pedal.

By the time the warehouse loomed in the distance, my grip on the steering wheel had tightened, knuckles white with suppressed anger, perhaps as much for me as for Charlotte. She'd fooled me, and I was not a man easily fooled.

The gravel lot was empty as I turned into it. Her car was gone. There were no security lights blazing from the far side of the property or dim lights shining down from the building's fascia.

I got out of the car and knocked on the building's door. A deep, cavernous bark sounded through it, but after seeing the animal's behavior yesterday, it was clear the beast was all bark, no bite.

After a moment, I took a step back and considered my options.

It was possible she was hiding inside with the dog, but that didn't feel right. Even afraid, I couldn't imagine Charlotte Santoro cowering away. She did run, though. History had proven that.

I wondered as I looked over the big, dark building. Had she upped and disappeared again, leaving the dog alone to fend for itself? Suddenly, I felt a great deal of empathy for the barking, cowardly beast inside.

But I returned to my car, and rather than driving away, I drove around the side of the building, out of sight.

She'd be back; I could feel it.

And when she returned, the lying little tempest was in for a surprise.

Chapter Seven

Charlotte Santoro

My eyes hurt. I swear I'd strained every muscle in them and used up half their lifespan in the past twenty-some-odd hours. But I had a lead.

And now, I had a quadruple espresso—yes, quadruple—from the kick-ass all-night coffee shop ten minutes from the warehouse.

“Are you certain, *amiga*?” Val asked.

I had the laptop open on the passenger seat, and she was looking up at me from the screen, eyes narrowed.

After hours of searching through VPN logs, connection times, IP addresses... “I'm certain the message originated from less than an hour from here, smack-dab in the middle of territory *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* have been trying to weasel their way into. It could be coincidence, but...”

Val scoffed.

“I think there's at least a decent chance that Silva has been making friends with the cartel.”

Because a slimy South American politician and a Venezuelan cartel? What could possibly go wrong there?

“And you think if he's using them to send messages, then perhaps, he's using them to stash his enemies as well, *si*?” Val asked, her accented voice lightly tinged with skepticism.

I shrugged. “According to my research, Luis Mendoza heads *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*' interests here in New York. He was a lieutenant in the cartel, likely sent here by *el jefe* himself, and hasn't been back to Venezuela since. Not until he and his sons, Gustavo and Carlos, made a

round trip to Maracay, Venezuela just prior to my dad being taken.” Which cast the trip into suspicion, in my opinion. “It’s a long shot, but it’s better than the no shot I had a few hours ago.” A tiny knot of excitement twisted in my stomach.

Val shook her head. “But Silva lives in Caracas, *amiga*. It is... What do you call it... ‘Quite a leap’, is it not?”

I nodded. Val didn’t know that my father and I had been monitoring one of Silva’s warehouses in Maracay. “But I’m still going to look into the cartel and their connections to see what I can find,” I told her as I turned onto the warehouse’s abandoned street.

“I’ll inquire around as well, *amiga*.”

“*Gracias*. If I have to put myself into play—”

Val sighed loudly, eyes narrowed.

Switchbacks and skydiving were my cup of tea. Working creeps without a safety net? Not so much.

“I’ll call you back when I know more,” I said as I turned into the warehouse’s lot.

Once the call was disconnected, I parked near the front door, the rumble of the Audi’s engine fading into the quiet night.

As I stepped out of the car, a prickling sensation crawled up my spine, a nagging intuition that something—or *someone*—was nearby.

It wasn’t the same haunting feeling of imaginary eyes on me that had plagued me all day.

This was different, more visceral.

Every nerve in my body tightened with apprehension as I returned the espresso to the holder in the car and discreetly withdrew my gun.

My ears strained to catch any sound out of the ordinary as I crunched across the few steps to the door.

I slid my hand beneath the corrugated metal and waited with bated breath for the telltale click of the locks. The moment I heard it, I grabbed the doorknob and pulled it open to the sound of Ray’s deep bark.

That’s when I found him, not with my eyes or ears.

It was the scent of bergamot and sandalwood right before his hands

grabbed hold of me from behind and his body shoved me forward, closing the door.

The metal was cool beneath my cheek, and it radiated through the thin layer of my shirt, a stark contrast to the hard heat that covered me from my shoulders to the backs of my thighs.

A shiver of fear rippled down my spine even as my skin tingled where he pressed against me.

“If you’re going for the creepy-stalker vibe, nice job,” I said flippantly, resisting the urge to fight him. “I’m definitely creeped out here.”

“You’re lucky you’re still breathing,” he spoke quietly against my ear. “Felipe Espinosa is long dead, and Cade Finley doesn’t exist. You lied to me, *temptesta*.”

Something clenched painfully in my chest.

“Don’t call me that,” I snapped.

He chuckled then leaned away far enough to spin me around to face him. At the same time, I slid the gun in my hand between us, pressing the barrel against his chest.

Bet you weren’t expecting that, I thought triumphantly until he cocked an eyebrow at me, looking far more amused than a man with a gun pointed at him should look.

In some fast two-handed move, he managed to get the gun off me, then he forced me back against the door, my body wedged between the warehouse and his body, so close, I could feel the grooves and planes of his chest.

Talk about a short-lived victory.

“You lied to me,” he said, his voice too quiet, too calm. One-hundred percent shiver-worthy. “And you pulled a gun on me.”

I stared up into his icy eyes. They felt cold and hot at the same time—which you’d think would have made them lukewarm, but no. Definitely not.

I gulped.

“Do you want to know how many people have done either of those things and lived to tell about it, *tempesta*?”

“Don’t call me that,” I tried to snap, but it came out lukewarm at best.

He smiled, the kind of smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “I don’t think

you're in any position to bark demands."

Well, maybe not, but he'd bested me two-for-two here, and that was kind of pissing me off. But then again, we were playing *his* game, not mine.

I let my body relax against him and shifted my thigh so that it rested between his legs, but dear Lord, I had not been expecting to find him hard. There was no mistaking the rather impressive erection my thigh had found and no stopping the gasp that slipped out of my mouth before I could swallow it back.

Arousal flooded my body, but at least I wasn't the only one effected here. His hands tightened around my arms, and the cold in his eyes gave way to heat. Ice-blue heat.

I rubbed my thigh against him as I licked my lips and tilted my head up. All the times before, this part had been an act, a carefully scripted scheme.

It felt too real now.

It wasn't an act when my breath started to come harder or when my nipples grew taut and the friction of his chest against them sent waves of pulsing heat to my core.

I looked at his lips, full lips just like I remembered them, but the scruff of a five-o'clock shadow around them was darker now.

He'd grown, become one-hundred percent man.

Potent male.

How many times had I fantasized about kissing him?

Thousands, at least, in all the days he'd spent with me.

And all the nights he hadn't.

Amidst the arousal, old hurt and anger bubbled up.

"Let me go," I demanded.

He cocked an eyebrow at me while he shifted so that *his* thigh was between mine now, pressing just hard enough that the friction against my clit made me gasp. *Asshole*.

"Is that really what you want, *tempesta*?"

I winced, but it strengthened my resolve.

"Since when did you give a flying fuck about what I want?" I snapped.

His grip on my arms loosened, not all the way, but enough I could have

broken away.

I could have gone running into the warehouse—he'd never be able to get in—but I was a grown woman here.

It was time to make a reasonable deal and send this man on his way, preferably on his way into another time zone, but I'd settle for another zip code for now.

"If I give you a name, you have to sit on it," I said. "You can't make a move until I give you the all clear. Then, he's all yours."

As much as I wanted retribution for what Silva had done, I'd hand it over gladly if it meant Cielo wouldn't go in now, guns blazing, killing what could be my only hope of finding my dad.

He shook his head. "You know that isn't how this works."

"We're all making concessions here, Cielo." I shrugged. "So, take it or leave it, but it's the only offer on the table."

He had the muscle and *all* the guns, but according to those who knew me, I had enough stubbornness to give an ancient oak tree a lesson in staying power.

"Cade Finley does exist," I went on. "At least, he did until I erased him last night. And the man you want might be the only person who can help me find him," I said, laying it out plain.

"Why?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Because he took him," I said, and of course, my eyes had to start stinging.

His head tilted just a little as he looked at me, eyes slightly narrowed. "Who is Cade Finley to you?"

I pressed my lips together.

Precisely five people on this planet knew that Declan Ryan had a daughter. Mom didn't count, since she didn't know who the hell *I* was even on a good day, never mind the man she'd slept with twenty-seven years ago.

"He's... important," I said vaguely.

Cielo dropped his hands like my arms had spontaneously transformed into live wires, and he took a step back.

"You give me a name, and so long as he poses no immediate threat to my

family, I won't pursue him... for *now*," he said, his voice cold and detached.

I nodded, but was it that simple? *He gives me his word, and I believe him?*

"But Charlotte," he continued, "there is a time limit. I won't be patient indefinitely. Whatever it is you need to do, do it fast."

I almost scoffed.

I met his gaze. The name was on the tip of my tongue. Was I wrong to do this? To put so much trust in him? My gut said no.

"Miguel Silva," I forced the name out.

His eyebrows raised just a little, the only proof that the name had taken him by surprise.

"He's a Venezuelan senator who—"

"I know who he is," he said, his voice clipped. "You let me know the minute you're through with him."

Cielo turned and walked away, but I needed to make myself clear here.

"Don't screw me on this, Cielo," I warned him.

He stopped walking and turned back toward me.

"I may only be one little girl," I went on, "but the people I'm connected to are powerful."

It wasn't the most "*I am woman, hear me roar*" thing to say. But Dad always said to leverage everything in my arsenal. And I had a feeling when it came to Cielo Luciano, I needed every weapon I could find.

He stared at me for what felt like an eternity.

"The clock's ticking, Charlotte," he said then disappeared around the side of the building and drove off a moment later.

I sagged against the door, not sure why my chest felt sore and my eyes were still stinging.

I had a job to do—before Cielo ran out of patience and before my mystery messenger decided to do more than send taunting messages.

Chapter Eight

Cielo Luciano

“Miguel Silva,” I told Deo as I navigated the flickering streetlamp-lit streets, lined with cracked pavement and trash. “He’s a Venezuelan senator, so my bet would be he’s lily-white on the surface.”

“Which means he’s as dirty as they come,” Deo filled in the obvious blank.

“Sì.” I turned a corner and came upon an unassuming brown-brick building.

The tension in my chest began to loosen even as adrenaline trickled into my veins.

“But why the sudden interest in what belongs to the Lucianos?” Deo mused aloud. “The man just announced his bid for presidency, which makes it a bad time to get caught up in drugs and guns.”

“Unless the drugs and guns aren’t for him but for whoever is helping to pave the way to his political success.” It was more than plausible. “Politicians are generally nothing more than puppets with every type of criminal pulling their strings.”

Deo sighed. “So, we find out when Silva’s most vulnerable, ask him very nicely who’s pulling his strings, then take him out,” he said, his tone resolute.

Admittedly, it sounded like a pretty good plan, but here’s where the conversation got tricky.

“We can’t move on him yet,” I said, clenching the steering wheel tighter as I pulled into an empty spot in the alley next to the building.

“Why not?” Deo said in a tone that made it clear that “can’t” wasn’t a

word in his vocabulary.

“Because I agreed to wait.”

Silence.

Then Deo laughed. “She’s still got one hell of a hold on you, doesn’t she?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “She needs us to give her time to get someone out of the way. I agreed.”

“And how many times before tonight have you made a concession like that?”

My jaw clenched so hard, my teeth ground together. “You know the answer.”

“Well, I’d argue with your call, but I’ve learned recently the importance of keeping your woman happy.”

“She’s not my woman,” I replied.

She belonged to another man. *Cade Finley*. The emotion in her voice, the sheen in her eyes; for once, Charlotte had been easy to read.

My fingers clenched the steering wheel so tight, my knuckles turned white. I felt like a goddamned pressure cooker.

“All right, no worries, *fratello*,” Deo said, his tone sober now. “Our product is safe. We can give your disappearing act some time to get her shit out of our way. I’d put some flashing lights on her or something if I were you, though. It might help to keep her from disappearing again.”

“Cuffs.” That’s what Charlotte needed. Or rope. Pinned down on my bed. Tied up spread-eagle, her sassy mouth gagged. Her chest heaving, her body slick with sweat

Deo laughed. “That’d be the way I’d go, but I don’t have a clue what gets you off.”

No one did. It was best that way.

When I hung up the phone, I sat for a moment, the distant background noise of the city barely a murmur beneath the rhythmic thump of my own heartbeat echoing in my ears.

As I stepped out of the car, the sounds of the city seemed to recede, giving way to a different kind of symphony. The distant roar of a crowd, an electrifying cacophony that filled the night air.

The entrance was unmarked, blending seamlessly into the urban landscape. It had only been weeks since I'd been here; usually, it took months to get to this point.

Pushing open the heavy door, I was hit by a wave of sensations that were both familiar and intoxicating.

The unmistakable thud of fists connecting with flesh reverberated through the walls, and the air was thick with the scent of sweat, blood, and something barbaric, something that stirred a primitive urge within me. It was the smell of adrenaline and raw emotion, a scent that fueled my every step.

I made my way through the dimly lit corridors, navigating the labyrinthine passages that led to the heart of the club. People who recognized me stepped aside, their expressions a mixture of respect and curiosity.

Stopping briefly in front of the club's owner, Vince Abruzzo, a burly figure with a calculating glint in his eye, I nodded in acknowledgment.

"I'm in tonight," I said, my voice steady and resolute.

Vince's eyes lit up with a hint of satisfaction. "Good to have you back, *Signor Luciano*," he replied, a wry smile forming on his lips.

Good fighters meant good bets. And there would be plenty of good bets tonight.

I nodded then continued to make my way toward the locker room. With every step, I could feel the anticipation building, like a coiled spring ready to snap.

The air in the locker room was heavy with the scent of sweat. I found a locker and stripped off my clothes, revealing the well-conditioned physique beneath, muscles honed through relentless training and years of nights in places just like this. Beneath my tattoos, my skin bore the scars of past fights, a testament to the countless opponents I had faced and conquered.

I reached for a roll of gauze, and as I wrapped my wrists, my mind focused.

My breathing steadied.

My senses sharpened.

The sounds from the arena beyond the locker room walls grew louder, the roar of the crowd punctuated by the thud of fists and the rhythmic chants of

support for their favorite fighters.

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the energy of the club wash over me. This was where I belonged, where the controlled chaos of the fight provided a release for the pent-up intensity that simmered within me.

With my wrists securely wrapped, I walked out of the locker room and down the corridor.

The arena buzzed with anticipation as I entered the ring where the overhead lights cast an unforgiving glare.

Across from me stood my opponent, tall with black hair, equal in size, with a steely gaze that mirrored my own determination and tats all over his body. Not just artwork; these tattoos told the man's story.

He had a cross tattooed between his eyes—a tattoo that wasn't only indicative of murder, but a high body count. Three simple dots around his eye that represented "*mi vida loca*"—"my crazy life". Devil and horns on his right shoulder and a joker on the other—a man who lived outside the law and had no fear. And a rosary across his chest—a deeply religious man, just like many of the South American cartels tended to be.

Mafia versus cartel.

I looked to Vince, who smiled wryly, though his eyes were pinched at the corners and his forehead was covered in sweat. He knew he'd taken a gamble here.

The ref's voice, a distant echo in the roar of the crowd, signaled the start of the match as the cartel soldier smiled at me.

We circled each other, a wary dance of combatants, testing the waters. The tension in the air was palpable, a coiled spring waiting to be released.

"You should tell your friend, Charlotte, to back off," he said, his voice heavily accented.

Caught off guard, the first blow came swiftly, a jab that landed on my left shoulder with a sharp stinging sensation.

Pain flared, but instead of ignoring it, I drank it in.

I feinted left and lunged forward, vaguely aiming for his ribs to get a feel for his agility and dexterity.

He deftly sidestepped, overprotecting his right side, and countered with a

swift jab to my right shoulder.

He was taking no time to size me up, to learn about his opponent. He was strong but undisciplined, it seemed.

I ducked under his attempted hook and countered with a lightning-quick jab to his side.

The sensation of landing a blow was a visceral one. The impact reverberated through my knuckles, the feedback coursing up my arm, a jolt of adrenaline, a primal satisfaction.

His face screwed up as he grunted, and his body jolted. His right side was more vulnerable than his left; an old injury, perhaps.

As the fight continued, the pain became a constant companion. Each hit, each bruise, was a testament to the brutality of the sport. But it was a pain I welcomed, a familiar ache that grounded me in the present moment.

I bobbed and weaved, my body moving fluidly, each movement calculated, each step a strategic choice.

But for every blow I landed, there was one that found its mark on my own body. Minutes felt like hours. The crowd's cheers and jeers were a distant hum, the world reduced to the relentless push and pull of combat. The air was thick with tension, with the knowledge that victory hung in the balance, a prize worth the pain.

Yet, his undisciplined approach was his Achilles' heel.

As he launched a wild haymaker, I sidestepped his colossal swing, my instincts guiding me meticulously. With a lightning-fast combination of strikes, I pummeled his exposed flank, each hit a calculated blow that wore down his defenses.

His energy waned, and his attacks grew sluggish. Seizing the moment, I snatched his arm, twisted it with precision, and sent him hurtling to the mat.

The arena fell into a hushed awe as the ref's count resonated through the air.

Then the crowd erupted in a deafening crescendo of cheers.

Victory was mine, but I crouched down next to the man, his chest heaving, his body bruised, and his face covered in blood.

"Speak her name again, and next time, you die in this ring. *Capisce?*" He

wouldn't be the first man to leave this place in a body bag.

He glared at me, tried to push up off the mat, then collapsed back down.

I stood up and walked out of the ring, my body battered and bruised, and my mind not nearly as at peace as it should have been.

I'd just stepped down onto the floor when Sienna, a blonde dressed in tiny shorts and a bikini top came running toward me. She frequented the place. We'd fucked after a few matches before.

"Hey there, fighter," she crooned as she threw her arms around me, pressing her tits up against my sweat-slick chest.

My cock jerked, less from the girl and more from the memory of Charlotte's body pressed up against me earlier, her nipples hard, her lips parted on a quiet gasp.

But Sienna was good. Obedient. Very little grit though, not like—
Son of a bitch.

"Another time, Sienna," I said as I unhooked her arms from around my neck before I needed to get my ass kicked some more to calm down.

Leaving the woman standing there with a disappointed pout on her fuchsia-pink lips, I headed straight for straight for Vince Abruzzo.

"Who is he?" I asked, nodding to the asshole who was still trying to get his ass up.

Vince shrugged. "Says his name's Pablo. Haven't seen him in here before."

I clenched my jaw, fighting the tension that was already bubbling up in my chest. "He doesn't fight here again, *capisce?*" I said plainly.

He stared at me for a fraction of a second, his money-hungry eyes always searching for the biggest buck. When keeping his ass alive won out, he nodded. "Whatever you say, *Signor Luciano.*"

I headed for the locker room and grabbed my phone from my locker.

"We need to have eyes on Charlotte," I said to Deo the moment he answered his phone.

Something jangled. "I'll be back in a moment, *perla,*" Deo said to someone nearby him—Heidi, if I had to guess.

"That's one way to keep her from disappearing, *fratello,*" he said,

speaking into the phone now, “but I liked your other suggestion more.”

I had a feeling I knew what that jangling sound had been.

“She’s got something to do with the cartel—I don’t know which one yet,”
I explained.

“*Cazzo!*” he cursed. “Your woman is a handful; I’ll give you that.”

A handful. A cock tease. A tempest. And the most intriguing puzzle I’d
ever met.

Goddamn her.

Chapter Nine

Cielo Luciano

Hot water pummeled my shoulders as I stood in my hotel suite's shower, forearm braced against the wall, and my hand wrapped around my cock.

As I stroked hard and slow, an image of Charlotte flashed behind my eyes.

She'd followed me from the club like a ghost and teased me while I slept. Taunted me from the corners of my mind every moment of the day while I worked. And here she was still.

But here, she wasn't teasing me with her hard nipples pressed against my chest or her plump lips parted on a quiet gasp.

Here, behind my eyes, she was naked, tied to a spanking bench.

I walk around her slowly, taking in the long, toned lines of her body and the way her back rises and falls with each heavy anticipation-laden breath.

I take my time; I'm in no hurry.

I have all the time in the world to take what I want, to wring every drop of pleasure from her.

I graze my fingers down her spine, from the nape of her neck to her tailbone. She's soft as silk until goose bumps raise across her flesh.

"What are you going to do?" she asks, her voice smooth, but I can hear the quaver hidden in it.

She's given herself to me, but now that she's trapped, she's reconsidering. They never reconsider, but of course, she does. She wouldn't be my tempest if she didn't fight me.

"I'm going to pleasure you, tempesta. And hurt you. But you're going to take it all, aren't you?"

She doesn't answer me. With her cheek pressed against the bench, she glares up at me, her silver gaze filled with anger and lust.

My cock jerked in my hand. Those eyes were like a drug, piercing silver, almost animallike. I gripped my shaft harder and twisted my wrist as I pumped. The air in the bathroom had grown thick and heavy with the shower's steam, making my lungs work harder to draw it in. As I breathed in deep, I swear I could smell the honeyed musk scent of her arousal in the steam.

She writhes on the bench as I tease her anus with the tip of a lubricated butt plug. Her muscles clamp down, fighting me. Always fighting me. But she can't win here.

I slide a finger along her wet slit, all the way up to her clit, teasing in slow circles at first, around and around the sensitive bundle of nerves.

A quiet moan slips from her plump lips as her muscles begin to relax, and I increase my pace, circling faster until her moans grow louder.

I push the tip of the plug inside her with slow, steady pressure.

She gasps, but she's too far gone to fight me now. Her moans tumble out, one on top of another as I insert the plug until she's taken every inch and her muscles clamp down around the narrow base.

"Does that feel good?" I ask her.

She eyes me, half-lust, half-glare even as her plump lips part on another moan.

"Yes," she hisses when she realizes there's no point in denying it. I can see it dripping from her pussy and in the flush of her body, now coated in a light sheen of sweat.

My hand worked faster up and down the hard length of my cock as the tingling at the base of my spine intensified. The whole room was blanketed in a thick haze of steam, making sweat bead up on my forehead.

With the plug buried inside her, I take my hand away and bring it down on the fleshy curve of her ass with a slap that makes her squeak even as she writhes her hips, pressing her clit harder against my finger.

A pink handprint raises up on her tanned flesh, and I bring my hand down again, marking her other cheek this time.

She cries out, and she writhes as wetness leaks from her pussy. So wet, so ready. But I've waited a lifetime to bury my cock inside this body, to feel her inner walls clamping down on me, to hear my name on her lips as I drive her over the edge. That's why, unlike all those who'd come before her, she isn't gagged. Her cries, her moans, her screams; they're all mine. I want every one of them, and she's going to give them to me.

The tingling at the base of my spine had spread outward, and my balls drew up. I worked my cock harder. Faster. I was so close.

And then, like a cruel joke, my cell phone rang from the vanity next to the sink.

The shrill, insistent sound pierced through the steamy haze and sent frustration coursing through me like wildfire.

With a growl, I released my cock, the pleasure dissipating into thin air as I wrenched open the shower door and crossed the floor to the vanity.

Snatching up my phone, I swiped to answer it without checking the caller ID.

"What is it?" I asked, my tone devoid of the frustration I was feeling as I wrapped a towel around my hips. The cuts and bruises from last night's fight stared back at me from the bathroom mirror.

"She's on the move, *signor*," Vito said without preamble. "And I get the feeling she's up to something."

"What gives you that feeling?" I asked despite knowing that Vito had good instincts.

"She came out of the warehouse with a laptop and a piece, looking like..." His voice trailed off.

"Like what?"

Vito cleared his throat. "Like sex on stiletto heels, *signor*."

An image of Charlotte dressed in black lingerie, bent over Marín's hotel room bed flashed through my mind and melded with the fantasy of her bent over a bench, her ass filled with a plug and her pussy begging for my cock.

"What direction is she headed, Vito?"

"She's about three minutes east of the warehouse now."

"I want you to follow her, but keep your distance and stay on the phone," I

said as I threw on pants and a shirt.

“*Sì, signor.*”

Wherever she was headed looking like “sex on stiletto heels”, her plans were about to be interrupted.

I grabbed my holster and jacket from the back of the chair next to the bed and headed out the suite’s door.

“She’s still heading east,” Vito said just as I reached my car in the underground lot.

I revved the car’s engine and peeled out of the lot, the tires screeching against the pavement.

Vito’s voice came through the phone, giving me directions, and I followed them, speeding through the city streets and onto the highway’s on-ramp to catch up.

“The girl’s pulling over onto the highway’s shoulder,” Vito said, less than a minute later.

I had a split second to make a call.

“Follow her.”

“*You got it, signor.*”

I heard the faint sound of gravel crunching beneath his tires.

“She’s getting out of her car,” he said when the crunching had stopped. “And she’s walking toward me.”

I rolled my eyes. She’d probably been onto him the whole time.

“Brace yourself, Vito,” I warned him right before I heard a tapping sound, like fingernails tapping glass.

“Hey there, handsome,” Charlotte said a moment later in a voice that was velvety smooth. The sound went straight to my cock. I could picture her leaning against the open window, her tits doing their damndest to escape the confines of whatever the hell she was wearing.

“*Buonasera, signorina,*” Vito replied, his voice unapologetic.

“If you’re going to spend the whole night on my ass, I’m thinking maybe you should buy me dinner first,” she said.

I couldn’t help but smile.

Vito said nothing. I think she might actually have rendered him

speechless.

“Hand her the phone, Vito.”

“*Signor* Luciano would like to speak with you, *signorina*,” he told her.

I heard a breath of air. I imagined her huffing and crossing her arms over her chest.

“I gave you what you wanted, Cielo,” she snapped into the phone. “Tell your men to back off and stay out of my business.”

“All right,” I said, fighting a smile as I caught sight of the two cars pulled off onto the shoulder ahead of me.

She was silent like she hadn’t expected me to relent. Smart woman.

I pulled off onto the shoulder, coming to a stop behind Vito’s car.

“Son of a bitch,” she hissed, no longer silent.

I disconnected the call and got out of the car, getting a look at the “sex on stiletto heels”.

This wasn’t just sex on heels; this was sensuality and sophistication wrapped up in one irresistible package. She wore a knee-length dress that draped her body like liquid ebony, hugging every curve with precision. The deep V-neckline revealed just enough to leave an indelible impression, and the daring side slit offered a tantalizing glimpse of toned, high-heeled legs that seemed to stretch on forever.

Her accessories were minimalist yet striking—a statement necklace with a single diamond that nestled in the hollow of her throat. Her makeup was flawless, smoky eyes and crimson lips, and her hair cascaded in sleek, dark waves, framing a face that bore the confidence of a woman who knew she could conquer the world with her allure.

Out the corner of my eye, I could see Vito staring at her, and the hot, potent rage that flared up was both foreign and familiar.

“You can go, Vito. *Grazie*,” I said, keeping my voice cool and calm.

Charlotte was looking at me, her gaze sweeping over my bruises and cuts as Vito drove away. “What happened to—”

“Where the hell are you going, Charlotte?” I asked, cutting her off.

Her eyebrows raised. “How is that any of your business?”

“It’s my business because I say it’s my business.”

She opened her mouth then slammed it shut and shook her head. “You really need to work on your people skills. Flies and honey and all that shit, you know?”

Her eyes grazed over my face again, and her brow furrowed. “What happened to you?”

I found it fascinating that I could generally read people so easily, but she was like a blank canvas, a thousand amorphous puzzle pieces.

I shrugged, fighting a smile. “I needed to blow off some steam.”

Something flared in her eyes as I spoke, but it was quickly gone.

“I like the whole Picasso look you’ve got going on,” she said, waving a hand in front of my face, “but have you thought about giving yoga a shot? I mean, think about it—less bruises, more flexibility.”

My lips twitched. “I’ll take it under advisement. But you haven’t answered my question, Charlotte.”

She looked around at the passing cars, then back to me, pointedly silent.

“We can stand on the side of the road all night, *tempesta*.”

“Don’t call me that,” she snapped.

She sighed, her eyes caught up in thought, but of course, I had no idea what she was thinking.

“I’m pursuing a lead, Cielo. Miguel Silva took Cade, but I don’t know where he’s keeping him, and I can’t exactly walk right up to him and ask him. I have reason to believe there are people here who know where he’s being held. And as I recall, I’m ‘on a time limit,” she said, rolling her eyes. “So, now that I’ve given you far more information than you ever would have given me, I’d appreciate it if you let me get back to doing what I need to do.”

“You plan on pursuing this lead the same way you went after the last one?” I asked, remembering what I’d walked in on in Marín’s hotel room. The thought of her lips on another man, his hands on her body... No, that wasn’t happening.

“Well, I thought about putting out a giant mousetrap, but I was fresh out of cheese.”

I grabbed hold of her hand and jerked her toward me, close, but not quite touching.

She smelled like she was made to be devoured.

“Spell it out for me, Charlotte, before I find a better use for that insolent mouth. Who’s the lead, and what’s the plan?”

“You can’t be serious,” she said, half-heartedly trying to pull her hand out of my grip. She might have been able to keep a good poker face, but her body was giving her away, swaying toward me ever so slightly.

“You can either spell it out for me, or I can throw you over my shoulder and call it a night. Up to you.”

She stared at where our hands were connected, hers almost entirely enveloped by mine, just the tips of her crimson fingernails peeking out.

“Has anyone ever told you you’re about as agreeable as a rattlesnake?” she seethed.

I shook my head. “Not twice.”

She rolled her eyes. The woman wasn’t afraid of me, not in the same way most people feared me. I wondered if she would be if she knew the things I’d done.

“I have a great deal of experience, *tempesta*. So, if I’m offering to help you, take it.”

She looked at me, lips pressed together. I was fully expecting a fight, so when she nodded her head, it took me by complete surprise.

“If you want to play wingman, be my guest, but *I’m* Maverick here, Cielo,” she said, her eyes boring into mine.

“Whatever you say, *tempesta*.”

She rolled her eyes like she wasn’t buying it for a second as she pulled her hand free, and this time, I let her.

“I received a quasi-cryptic email, and I was able to trace it back to territory here that’s been infiltrated by a cartel known as *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*,” she explained, idly rubbing the hand I’d been holding with the tips of her fingers. “I scanned flights and found Luis Mendoza, a lieutenant, and his sons—Gustavo and Carlos—took a round-trip flight to Maracay. The younger son, Carlos, frequents the Euphoria nightclub, and the rumor is that what the father knows, the son knows. I also learned that Carlos has a thing for classy women and cognac.”

“And you already have a hotel room booked near the club and a syringe or two of your paralytic and ecstasy,” I finished for her.

“Never leave home without them,” she said in a singsong voice.

“I see you’ve done your research, but I think the cartel is onto you.” If the guy in the ring last night was any indicator. “I know the club, though. I can have people keeping eyes on you. But that still puts you alone in a hotel room with a man that’s likely twice your size.”

She scoffed. “It wouldn’t be the first time, Cielo. I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

I shook my head. “You draw him in, and I’ll be in the hotel room, waiting.”

“Hey, Goose. You do remember what a wingman is, right?”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “Goose died.”

“Yup,” she said with a shrug. “See what I’m saying. I’d hate to see history repeat itself.”

“This is the plan, *tempesta*. Take it or leave it. I should warn you, though, if you choose to leave it, this evening ends with me dumping your fine ass in my car and driving you away from here.”

“Why?” she asked, her brow furrowed.

I looked at her, at the perceptive silver eyes I’d never forgotten, at the puzzle I’d never solved.

I shrugged. “Because once upon a time I knew a girl.”

Chapter Ten

Charlotte Santoro

As I stepped into the strobe light-lit nightclub, the bass thumped in my chest.

I'd read that music can affect a person's heart rate, and mine was already speeding up, thudding nearly in time with the heavy beat as the door shut behind me.

My gaze scanned the room, taking note of the vast mix of patrons, dressed in everything from jeans and Henleys to tailored three-piece suits.

I spotted Carlos Mendoza on a love seat in the far left corner of the club. He was an attractive man with medium-brown hair and eyes and dark scruff across his jaw. He wore a meticulously tailored dress shirt, the fine fabric gliding effortlessly over his broad shoulders. Its deep navy hue accentuated the sharp lines of his physique, and the top two buttons were undone, revealing the edges of a black tattoo and a sparse sprinkling of carefully clipped chest hair.

Well, at least this one manscaped.

He was hemmed in by two scantily clad blondes, makeup overdone and hair teased too much. It was too bad; they really were pretty girls, one curvy and one thin, the contrast highlighting the beauty of each of their figures. The music drowned out their laughter, but I could imagine it, tinkling light and fake as shit. If Mendoza were a wise man, he'd count his blessings and content himself with the two women who were quite obviously enthralled with the prospect of screwing the handsome man.

A wicked smile tugged at my lips. His preference for sophisticated-

looking women would be his undoing.

I navigated the crowd in search of a partner to lure Mendoza in.

In my experience, there were few things a man wanted more than a woman with a “claimed” stamp on her ass. The challenge of putting his own stamp on her was just too enticing to resist.

My eyes honed in on a tall, attractive stranger standing a few feet from the dance floor and right in Mendoza’s line of sight.

I moved toward him with calculated sensuality, making sure I caught Mendoza’s eye in the process.

The stranger, with just a hint of rugged charm, looked at me with curiosity and a growing desire.

I extended my hand, and with a sultry smile, I invited him to join me on the dance floor.

He accepted with a confident nod, and together, we began to move to the music as a memory flashed behind my eyes and made them sting at a most inopportune moment.

“I look ridiculous,” I whine, staring at my reflection in the wall-to-wall mirrors in the near-empty dance studio.

I’ve been bumping and grinding and rotating my hips for the past two hours. Well, that’s what I’ve been trying to do. I might as well be doing the chicken dance for all the sexual appeal I’m exuding here.

“Again,” my instructor from hell snaps.

Apparently, she’s trained some of the most successful exotic dancers in the country. Personally, I think she spends her spare time giving the devil lessons on how to be evil.

My father is standing in the corner of the room, his arms crossed over his chest and a deep furrow between his brows that has been there ever since I started my poor rendition of bumping and grinding.

I ignore the devil-instructor and roll my eyes at my dad.

“I think you’re punishing me for something,” I whine some more.

“If you think I’m thrilled about my daughter shaking her ass in some crowded club, think again. But if you want in, then you need to be equipped with every skill in the arsenal, Char. It isn’t all stealth and gunfights.

Sometimes, it's about flawlessly reeling in a mark without giving yourself away."

I huff, mainly because I know he's right.

"Try this," the devil-instructor says, and then the room goes black and the music strikes up again.

"Seriously?"

I hear my dad chuckle. "Just try it."

Without my reflection making me feel like I've got a hot spotlight on me, my joints loosen and the music works its way into my muscles. By the time my dad calls it quits for the day, there is the tiniest flame of confidence burning in the core of me. And just eight more weeks with the devil-instructor to go.

I blinked and forced the memory away, dancing flawlessly with the stranger in the Euphoria nightclub.

I could feel Mendoza's gaze burning into me, his interest piqued.

The sultry tension in the air thickened, drawing him in with each sensual sway of my hips.

I glanced in his direction.

Our gazes locked, engaged in a clandestine conversation, one that promised secrets and decadent pleasures.

Without looking away, he discreetly signaled to the two blondes, who exchanged confused glances before reluctantly departing.

Now, he sat alone, a predatory look in his eyes as he watched me.

Though the lights flashed all around, for me, the room was black.

No spotlight, just the feel of the music wending its way into my muscles.

As the song faded into a dreamy electronic outro, it was time to make my move.

With a quick, sultry glance back at my dance partner, I extricated myself from his grip, leaving him looking mildly disappointed, and gracefully made my way through the pulsating bodies on the dance floor to Carlos Mendoza.

I approached him with slow, deliberate steps, my eyes locked onto his as I sat down on the plush seat next to him, legs crossed, leaning in just enough to let my perfume tease his senses.

I watched his sharp, intelligent eyes take in my attire—the formfitting

black dress, the high heels, the diamond in the hollow of my throat.

His lips slowly curved into a faint smile.

He greeted me in Spanish, but I knew better than to respond.

This wasn't a Latin club, and I was passing myself off as one-hundred percent homegrown American here—which I was, so that was convenient.

“That performance was captivating, *hermosa*,” he said, his accent thick as he switched to English—mostly—and his gaze traveled back up to my face.

“I'm sure it was,” I purred, my voice a velvet whisper.

The devil-instructor would be so proud.

“But I have a feeling the real show is yet to begin,” he said.

An image of acrobats and bearded ladies sprung to mind.

“Oh, this is the greatest show...”

The lyrics played in my head, and I had to fight back the urge to laugh, letting it out as a soft chuckle instead as I leaned in closer.

“You're not wrong,” I conceded, letting my finger graze the collar of his shirt, the tip of my crimson fingernail a featherlight touch against his skin.

With practiced ease, I leaned closer, our faces mere inches apart. My breath caressed his earlobe as I whispered, “How about we take this somewhere a little more... private?”

His breath hitched as his gaze darkened.

“What did you have in mind?” he asked.

I daintily shrugged one shoulder. “I'm in the city on business for the week; my hotel's not far from here.”

“*Sophisticated women don't play coy, amiga*,” Val had instructed me once. “*They know what they want and aren't afraid to pursue it.*”

His gaze lingered on my lips. “Lead the way,” he said, standing up, offering me his arm.

The guy was tall. Like Jolly Green Giant tall. When I took his arm and let him draw me up, I was pretty much at eye level with his nipples.

Hm, did men realize this? I wondered. Because you'd think a lot more of them would pursue taller women if they realized it would put them face-to-face—so to speak—with boobs all the time.

A moment later, me and Mendoza's nipples—along with the rest of him—

were strolling out of the nightclub, the pulsing music gradually fading into the distance as we made our way to the pale gray Mercedes he had parked nearby.

Anticipation radiated from him like a palpable substance as he started the engine, and the car purred to life.

He was a handsome man. Usually, I'd try to play on that, use it to fuel my own arousal to make the act as authentic as possible.

But it just wasn't happening tonight.

"So," he began, his voice a low murmur as we merged onto the city street. "Tell me about yourself, beautiful stranger."

I let a smile play teasingly across my lips—and definitely didn't roll my eyes, no matter how much the urge hit me.

"What would you like to know? My secrets, my desires, or perhaps, my intentions?"

His hand landed on my thigh.

I stared at it, keeping my response hidden. I kind of wanted to pick it up, put it back where it came from, and give it a lecture about personal space.

"All of the above," he murmured.

"I believe I've made my intentions clear," I crooned while I placed my hand over his, laced our fingers together, and slid his hand down to my knee and back up.

Unfortunately, all that managed to do was conjure images of the last set of hands that had touched my body, the hands that had gripped my arms while his thigh pressed between my legs, rubbing my clit and making me gasp.

The memory warred with the current hand on my thigh, and this new one, a little too smooth and a little too small for a dangerous killer, looked out of place.

"My secrets and desires..." I pressed on then allowed the thought to trail off while I silently cursed Cielo to hell and back. The man wasn't even here, and he was screwing with my head.

Fortunately, it was only a three-minute drive to my hotel. When we pulled up, I gracefully exited the car, letting Mendoza help me up and definitely not thinking about whether it would hurt if I tripped and went eye first into his

nipple. Absurd, of course, but it was absurd thoughts like these that kept me from obsessing about more destructive thoughts, like what if he figured out my game, lured me into the elevator, and hacked me up into pieces? Or, what if he somehow knew Cielo was waiting upstairs and Mendoza put a bullet in us both the moment I opened the door?

You've got this, Char, my dad's voice spoke from inside my head. *I'll be watching over you every step of the way.* It's what he'd said the first time I'd talked him into letting me reel in a mark.

Except, it wasn't my father, the man I'd worked with for the past several years, watching over me, and he wasn't the one waiting in the hotel room for me this time.

I fought the urge to shiver as we stepped into the hotel's opulent lobby where a handful of people were wandering in and out, every one of them dressed to the nines and dripping in gold and diamonds.

Diamonds, just like mine, but I felt out of place here, nonetheless.

Charlotte Santoro wore jeans and tanks, and she spent the night camping out under the open sky every chance she got, not cooped up in a stuffy, overpriced hotel room.

"Room three-oh-seven," I murmured to Mendoza, leading him to the elevator.

When we stepped inside, the mirrored walls reflected our images, and his gaze met mine in the mirror as he entwined my fingers with his. He pulled me closer, turning to face me at the same time. He started to lean down until our faces were just inches apart.

I turned my head at the last second, caressing Mendoza's jaw with my lips instead, then leaving a trail of kisses down his neck to the hollow of his throat.

"I never kiss on the mouth," Julia Roberts said in *Pretty Woman*.

Thankfully, before I had to figure out where to go from the hollow of Mendoza's throat, we reached the third floor and the elevator door slid open. Hand in hand, we walked down the plush carpeted hallway, the clicking of my high heels muffled.

Outside room 307, I held my breath as I slid my key card into the door.

Cielo was somewhere inside, and that knowledge offered a modicum of—grudging—comfort, but we’d never rehearsed this.

Would he pounce the moment I opened the door? Or maybe he’d lurk in one of the corners, concealed by the dark shadows of the room? Exactly how *up close and personal* was I going to have to get with the Jolly Green Giant?

If he waits too long, just use the paralytic, I pep-talked myself and turned the doorknob with a renewed sense of calm—or something that at least resembled it.

The door clicked open, and I gently pushed it, allowing it to swing inward, ignoring my pounding heart and focusing on five things I could see.

1. The smooth painted wood
2. The black peephole
3. The gold numbers on the door
4. The round knob beneath my fingers
5. My crimson nails

Inside, the room was dimly lit, the curtains drawn to block out the city’s luminous glow.

My eyes swept the room, but I couldn’t see Cielo.

The en suite door was open.

There was a tightness in my chest, a visceral, tangible ache at the prospect of his betrayal, worse because like a fool, he’d caught me blindsided.

The people my father trusted had come through for him again and again, proved themselves loyal dozens of times over. And here, I’d been counting on a man I hadn’t seen since I was a kid.

I spun around to face Mendoza, took his hand, and walked backward into the room, yet another sultry smile playing on my lips.

The moment he and I cleared the door, it slammed shut.

Cielo emerged from the shadows behind it, lunging from the darkness, his strong forearm wrapping around Mendoza’s neck like a vise.

Mendoza’s eyes widened as he gasped for breath, his struggle seemingly futile against Cielo’s relentless grip.

I reached for the succinylcholine, hidden beneath my dress in the same garter I’d worn last time.

At the same time, Cielo repositioned Mendoza's body and jerked his arm higher, tipping Mendoza's head way back and giving me perfect access to the man's carotid artery as if we'd rehearsed this move a hundred times.

I jabbed the tip of the syringe into his neck and depressed the plunger.

Five.

Four.

Three.

Two.

One.

Chapter Eleven

Charlotte Santoro

Cielo laid Carlos Mendoza's limp body out on the king-size bed like a discarded rag doll.

The bedding made a crinkling sound as he dropped him down, drawing my eye to a clear cover that had been spread out over the bed, now spread out beneath Mendoza.

"He's all ears, *tempesta*," Cielo said. "What is it you want to know?"

He crossed the room to the en suite and returned with a briefcase.

A moment ago, it had felt like Cielo and I were in sync.

Now, it was like he was pulling control here right out from under my feet.

I licked my lips. Suddenly, they were bone-dry.

"What... the... fuck..." Mendoza managed to slur out. His breathing was shallow but steady at the moment.

I was about to launch into my speech about what I'd injected him with and what was going on in his body at the moment when Cielo set the briefcase down on the end of the bed, right next to Mendoza's useless legs, and opened it up.

"What's that?" I asked him, because somewhere, in some universe, it was possible my eyes were going wonky and all those sharp, pointy things were really pens, or metal straws, or I don't know... something other than a whole lot of scary shit designed to make people scream.

Cielo's brows drew down, eyeing me like I'd gone a bit daft. "Now that you have his ears," he said as he withdrew a small pair of pliers from the briefcase, "just think of these as a way to get his mouth moving."

“Eyes, ears, mouth, and nose...”

The childhood song flitted through my head as my pulse started to race.

“Find five things you can see...” Dr. Steele had reiterated at least a thousand times.

I looked around the room.

1. The navy-blue curtains
2. The television mounted on the wall
3. The white bathroom door
4. The painting of a field behind the bed
5. A chair in the corner of the room

“Acknowledge four things you can touch...”

1. The smooth surface of the nightstand
2. The rough texture of the carpet
3. The cool, hard surface of the window
4. The velvety feel of the microfiber chair cushion

I let out a breath and turned to Mendoza.

“What I’ve just done was inject you with succinylcholine, Carlos,” I explained to him calmly, ignoring Cielo and his briefcase. “It’s a neuromuscular blocking agent,” I went on just like I’d rehearsed a hundred times. “You’re essentially paralyzed. As you’ve noticed, it impairs speech, and you’ll probably find it makes it difficult to breathe due to the effects on the respiratory muscles. But don’t worry, the effects are temporary.”

Potentially fatal too, the small nagging voice felt compelled to remind me.

I had a feeling it was going to have a few other things to say by the time I was finished here tonight.

The same rage and hatred that had shone in Marín’s eyes shone in Mendoza’s, but just like Marín, he remained motionless.

“I’ve made an interesting discovery, Carlos.” I leaned in a little closer, lowering my voice like I was sharing a secret between friends. “It seems you have an account at Global Wealth Management Bank you haven’t been telling anyone about, and I can’t help but wonder where you’ve been getting the money to fill it.”

The hatred radiating from Mendoza’s eyes reached atomic levels, but he

didn't say a word.

He didn't have to because we both knew exactly where he was getting it.

The deposits were made on the same day deposits were made into the organization's accounts—collection day. Carlos was collecting payments from the businesses the cartel “protected” and extorting them for even more than the exorbitant fee they were already paying.

El jefe would not be impressed to learn about *that*.

I shrugged. “I might be compelled to keep that information to myself, maybe even forget about it altogether, if you can tell me what you were doing in Maracay.”

He glared. He didn't speak. No begging, no threats. Nothing.

“You can't blackmail him, Charlotte,” Cielo said quietly, “because he knows he's not walking out of here.”

I could have blackmailed him. I could have sunk the threat in deep and twisted.

Now, Cielo had forced my hand.

The old urge to lash out rose up, like a wave inside me, but it was thick and hot like blood.

I dug my fingernails into the palms of my hands, hard, redirecting the wave. Dr. Steele taught me the trick a long time ago. Another stim grounding technique, and it worked. For the most part.

“All right,” I said, wishing my voice sounded sturdier and less like I was going to projectile-vomit any second.

Thanks to my wingman, it looked like sliced-and-diced Venezuelan was now on the menu.

I held out my hand, not really caring which tool Cielo placed on it.

I'd gotten plenty of lessons on effective torture tactics, everything from unsettling your captive with politeness to avoiding heavy bleeders. The men I knew could pretty much write the book on torture. I'd call it *How to Make Small Talk with a Dying Man: Advanced Edition* or maybe *The Zen of Torture: Achieving Enlightenment through Enhanced Pain*.

Cielo stared at my hand like it was a foreign object he was considering.

“Ask your questions,” he said after a moment, his voice quiet but stern

while he hogged all his shiny tools to himself.

He retrieved a pair of handcuffs from his briefcase and used them to secure Mendoza's noodle-like arms above his head.

I swallowed back the white-hot anger that was bubbling up my chest. Only because I knew that any kind of dissension in an interrogation room would be counterproductive.

"What were you, your father and your brother doing in Maracay?" I asked Mendoza.

He didn't move—not that he could do a whole lot of that at the moment. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and I wasn't sure whether that was because he couldn't make his eyes move or if this was a drug-induced paralyzed man's version of giving me the silent treatment.

Cielo moved next to Mendoza's head. He had a rag of some sort in one hand and a long, pointy needle in his other hand now. It kind of looked like the tip of my syringe. Just longer. Much longer.

"This can be painless or painful for you, Carlos," Cielo said as he shoved the rag into the man's mouth. "But you will answer the woman's questions, sì?"

Without pausing for Mendoza to answer—not that he could with a rag in his throat—Cielo pressed the tip of the needle against Mendoza's chest, just above his right clavicle and jerked his wrist, plunging the needle in at least an inch on a downward angle, right behind the bone.

A muffled roar slipped out around the gag, but the sound was too quiet to travel far. The moment the roaring stopped, Cielo removed the rag from Mendoza's mouth.

"Ask again, *tempesta*," Cielo said, completely unruffled.

My heart was pounding.

My abused palms felt sweaty.

I could only imagine what shade of green I'd turned, but I forced the words out.

"What were you doing in Maracay?" Pretty sure I was starting to sound like a broken record here.

Mendoza's eyes finally swiveled in my direction. "*¡Que te den por el culo,*

puta!” he slurred.

“*Go fuck yourself, bitch*”? Not very nice, but I supposed I wouldn’t have been very nice either if I had a giant needle sticking out of my chest.

Cielo shoved the rag back into Mendoza’s mouth then shifted the needle just a little.

I could imagine it scraping right across the bone, but I had a feeling he was adjusting pressure points, bringing up the pain level incrementally.

Mendoza roared into the rag while Cielo waited patiently.

“Speak to her like that again, and this will get very unpleasant for you, Carlos,” Cielo said coolly when Mendoza stopped.

“Your trip to Maracay?” I snapped, losing a handle on my anger for a fraction of a second.

When Mendoza still didn’t answer, Cielo left the needle in place and retrieved another from his briefcase, shoved the gag back in, and inserted the needle right through Mendoza’s shirt-covered bicep.

The man screamed, the sound loud enough to fill the room despite the gag.

I took a deep breath, dug my fingernails in deep, and blanked my expression.

This was *my* interrogation.

“All right, Carlos. I’ve given you the opportunity to do this the nice way, but I’m afraid I’m out of patience,” I said, my tone smooth as velvet.

“I don’t actually enjoy reducing a man to a heap of blood and agony, but you’re not leaving me much of a choice.” I shook my head like it was regrettable.

Mendoza glared at me, but there was something new in his eyes now, an alertness, a single-minded attentiveness that had been lacking before.

“Would you mind removing his pants, Cielo?” I asked without looking away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Cielo staring at me, eyes narrowing.

“If Carlos won’t be leaving this room,” I continued on smoothly, “there is a part of him I don’t think he’ll be in need of any longer. And I do find men think much better without it.”

The corners of Cielo's lips twitched while he shook his head, now looking down almost sympathetically at Mendoza. "I think you were faring better with me, *amico*. But what the lady wants, she gets."

He moved to the man's waist, unbuttoned his pants, and jerked them down in one tug.

I leaned over Mendoza, pretending to survey the contents of the briefcase, taking my time, willing the man to hurry up and understand what I was about to do here, and ultimately, accept defeat.

I *really* didn't want to have to follow through on this. Pretty sure this was the kind of stuff that would make my therapist need a therapist.

Eventually, I selected a medium-sized scalpel and leaned away, carefully touching the slender blade to the tip of my finger and making a drop of blood well up.

Mendoza's shallow breaths were coming faster, his pupils fully dilated.

Pain was a necessary part of any interrogation, but often, it wasn't the pain itself that acted as the motivator, according to my father, but rather the victim's motivation to avoid *more* pain.

"Are you sure you don't want to tell me about that trip, Carlos?" I asked, my voice calm, almost conversational.

He eyed me as I moved into place, his pupils so big, his eyes looked almost black. Hm, that reminded me of someone.

"Miguel Silva," he slurred out.

Every cell in my body sighed, but the relief was short-lived.

Los Cazadores Sangrientos had a reputation for being beyond brutal—sick and twisted to the extreme. If Silva had sent them after my father...

My heart clenched so hard it tried to steal my breath.

"What was the meet about?" I asked, fighting the sting in my eyes, the burn at the back of my throat, the giant fist squeezing my heart.

"*No sé*," he hissed.

"You don't know?" I replied, my voice thick with skepticism.

Cielo glanced over at me.

I think he was only realizing now that I knew Spanish. He looked impressed, which was setting the bar kind of low, in my opinion. While I'd

barely managed to keep my ass from flunking back in school, it turned out, languages were a bit of a specialty of mine.

I touched the scalpel to Mendoza's abdomen, just below his navel and slowly dragged the flat of the blade downward against his skin to the top of his pubic bone.

"A... distribution arrangement," he wheezed reluctantly. "Pump more product into New York."

Los Cazadores Sangrientos' distribution network predominantly branched across the west coast. Mendoza held a small amount of territory in New York and New Jersey at the moment; to branch out further meant stepping over lines, starting territory wars. A very messy idea.

"What product?" I asked, grappling for some link between *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* and Miguel Silva's warehouse my dad had been investigating.

When he hesitated, I tilted the blade, making blood well up as I drew the tip downward to a place no man wanted a blade. It was a wonder my hand wasn't shaking like a caffeine addict at an espresso convention.

"Drugs. Guns!" He forced the words out fast while his eyes glared daggers at me.

"But no shipment has arrived, has it?" Cielo chimed in.

It wasn't a question I would have thought to ask, but I was still pissed at him, so he was getting no credit from me.

"No," Mendoza hissed. "The shipment was... diverted."

It rang true in his voice. He wasn't lying. He'd met with Silva about drug and gun distribution, not about my father. But my dad had still been taken, Mendoza's men had received no shipments, and I was getting messages straight out of their territory.

I stared at Mendoza for a moment, like the answer might materialize across his sweaty brow.

"Anything else, Charlotte?" Cielo asked.

"No."

My hands were shaking, but it wasn't like I'd never killed a man before. Never like this, though—up close and in cold blood.

Come on, Char. This guy's pretty much as evil as they come. Really, I'd be

doing the world a favor.

And yet, my pesky conscience still wouldn't leave me alone.

What would I do without you? I wondered, mentally rolling my eyes.

Probably sleep better at night, for starters.

But before I'd finished preparing myself, Cielo grabbed the scalpel out of my hand and dragged it in one swift slice across Mendoza's throat, severing right through his carotid artery so that the blood *poured* out instead of *pumped*.

Three.

Two.

One.

It hadn't been by my hand, but Carlos Mendoza was dead.

Chapter Twelve

Charlotte Santoro

I stared at Mendoza's body, pale from blood loss, surrounded by thick, dark blood. But he looked like a tunnel to me. A long, dark tunnel, empty and endless, the same tunnel it felt like I'd been running down for too many days now.

I let out a heavy breath. God, I was tired.

Was that wrong? Here I was, standing in front of a guy I'd just helped murder, and all I could think about was how much I wanted to lie down and take a nap. Yeah, that definitely had to be wrong.

There was a knock on the hotel room door, three sharp raps. Cielo had made a phone call the moment he'd set down the scalpel, calling for a clean up. I guess the cleaning crew had arrived.

I didn't move as he crossed the room, let in the big, bald man who'd been following me earlier, then got to work, the two of them wrapping Mendoza's body in the transparent cover beneath him and taping it closed.

Personally, I would have left the body. The police would never trace the murder back to me because there was no 'me'. Just a ghost. A shadow.

It had its perks, I supposed.

Cielo, though, I imagined he still existed. It was kind of hard to vanish when you were a part of a big-time, organized crime family. The Luciano name wasn't splashed across the tabloids on a regular basis, but they were *there*, wended into the fabric of society, like jet black threads that couldn't help but stand out amid a gray canvas.

"*Grazie, Vito,*" Cielo said once they'd stuffed Mendoza's body into an

oversized suitcase.

As Vito wheeled the luggage toward the door, *'I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again,'* flitted through my mind. There really had to be some screws loose up there.

The door opened. Then closed. And then it was just me and my co-murderer. One thing was certain: Cielo made a lousy Goose.

"Charlotte?" Cielo said quietly. He probably thought I was having a mental meltdown here over the dead guy.

"Yeah?" I replied, still staring at the bed.

When he didn't respond, I dragged my gaze off the bed and looked up at him.

Bad idea.

His lips were pressed together, and there was something going on in his eyes, making it feel like he was revving up for battle.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he said in a voice that was far too calm for the glint in those icy blues.

But seriously?

He shook his head. "*It seems you have an account at Global Wealth Management Bank you haven't been telling anyone about'?*" he reiterated my own words back to me in a less than kind fashion. "Fucking blackmail?"

"Yeah, 'fucking blackmail'. And it would have worked if you'd kept your god damned mouth shut. You are seriously the worst wingman ever."

He scoffed. "That man was scum who deserved everything he got and more. I recognized it the second he walked in the door. I thought you had better senses than that," he snapped—which wasn't something I recalled Cielo Luciano doing often. Or ever.

But I welcomed it because something about it cast off every bit of tiredness I was feeling and turned everything else inside me into one blissful ball of anger that swallowed up all the grounding techniques I'd ever learned.

"Because you know me so freaking well?" I snapped back, throwing my arms out wide. "You don't know a single thing about me, so don't you dare judge me."

He chuckled derisively. "So, what is it you do? Run around with your little

needles, asking your marks real nicely to hand over their intel before you let them walk right out the door? How many times have you done that, Charlotte? How many god damned bullseyes do you have painted on your back right now?”

“Oh, you asshole.”

My chest was heaving, and my fists were clenched so tight, my crimson nails were digging into my palms.

“Believe it or not, going around torturing people isn’t actually my god damned day job. I’m flying blind here. I never took care of this shit. My dad —”

Shit.

I slammed my mouth shut. I had a feeling I looked an awful lot like a deer caught in headlights. *Nice poker face, Char.*

“Your dad?” he said, his voice eerily quiet.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

His brow furrowed. “Cade Finley... he’s your father?”

Stupid, Char. Just plain stupid.

What was worse was the way it was starting to feel like I’d been backed into a corner, and already more stupid words were bubbling up, climbing up my throat, -slipping out right over my tongue...

“So what?” I snapped as my heart beat harder. “Even poor little trailer trash girls have fathers, Cielo.”

Oh, dear lord, where the hell had that come from? Were we seriously going there? I could see Dr. Steele shaking his head at me in disappointment.

Cielo took a step toward me, then another, barreling right at me.

Oh good, he’s going to kill me. Wasn’t that just a perfect end to another clusterfuck of a night?

But even as the thought flitted through my mind, my body made no preparations to defend itself, to search for the kill shot. Or any shot. Because I just couldn’t reconcile this man with inflicting that kind of violence on *me*. The mere thought made my brain short-circuit—more proof there were definitely some screws loose.

Before I could think of some way to respond, he was right in front of me,

his hands on either side of my face, gripping firmly, holding me still.

“Cade Finley is your *father*, not your husband?” he asked, his ice blue eyes boring into mine.

“Husband?” I would have laughed at the absurd notion, but I still kind of wanted to drop-kick him for railroading me.

“The way you talked about him...” he said, jaw clenched tight and his brow furrowed even as something in him changed. It was like one tension dissipated while another one grew, taking its place. But this new tension wasn’t thick and suffocating. It was a live wire stretched taut, ready to snap, to send sparks shooting off in every direction.

“Christ,” he said, but the word came out on a sharp sigh.

He was so close his warm breath tickled my cheeks as the heat from his hands seeped into my skin.

And then he wasn’t just close, he was everywhere, all around me, as his lips covered mine, bruising with their fervor.

He shoved his fingers into the hair at the nape of my neck, twisting tightly as he ravished my mouth, bombarding my senses. The peppermint and vanilla taste of him. The scent of bergamot and sandalwood that wound around me and wended its way into my veins like a drug. The sound of his heavy breath and the racing of my own pulse.

He’d never kissed me before. Not once. I’d spent plenty of time imagining it a lifetime ago; the press of his lips, the glide of his tongue. But there was no ‘pressing’ here, no ‘gliding’. He captured and took. Demanding, not beseeching. Hard and rough. It was lust and anger, pent up and spilling over.

And just the way I liked it.

My body sparked up, preparing for the push and pull, the back-and-forth rhythm, almost like combat. The kind of battle that was as good as an adrenaline rush. Already, it felt like there was the faintest electrical current traveling along my skin, and I knew that everywhere he touched me, everywhere he grabbed or shoved or dug in his fingers, would send shockwaves to the core of me.

I took it in, the sensations, the anticipation.

Then, like a lightning bolt out of nowhere, a memory of a much younger

Cielo flashed behind my eyes.

He sits down next to me in the short grass by the school's fence, a cafeteria tray in one hand, the savory, salty-sweet aroma of French fries wafting through the sunshine-warmed air. But as he settles in, I can smell the cheap-ass, fruity perfume on his clothes and see the hot-pink lipstick smudge on the collar of his shirt.

Something in my chest used to clench every time I saw the proof of another girl on him. It doesn't clench anymore. It just sits there, numb. Maybe broken.

I slip the scrap piece of paper I use as a bookmark into a library copy of Octavia E. Butler's 'Parable of the Sower' and wait for him to speak.

"Did you eat already?" he asks.

"Yup," I lie while I threaten my empty stomach with all kinds of retribution if it gives me away.

"A few of us are going to Ethan's cabin this weekend," he says in between mouthfuls of what might be the best smelling food in the world at the moment.

My mouth is salivating.

"You should come with us," he suggests.

Well, doesn't that sound like fun? Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll get to lie in the room next to him, listening to him screw Miss Hot-pink Lips' brains out. Yeah, thanks, but no thanks.

My mouth dries up, and I'm not hungry any more.

"I can't," I say with a careless shrug. I'm good at those. Fake smiles too.

"Why not?" he asks.

"I have to work, and my mom needs me," I say. I'm good at lying, but it's no lie. If I'm not here to get groceries and cook, Mom won't eat. She'll lie on the worn checkered sofa with the broken springs all day, shooting up and spreading her legs for her latest dealer. "But you have fun, Cielo," I say, and I try to mean it, I really do, because his life isn't easy either. He deserves to have fun.

He shakes his head slowly, eyeing me disapprovingly. "Fine, but one of these days, tempesta..."

Yeah. One fine day, and once upon a time, and in a land far, far away too.

And don't forget about happily ever after. Life's full of those.

I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing the memory away because I wanted this. God, how I wanted this. To fuck away my frustrations, to get lost in the arousal and the adrenaline. To forget all about impulse-control and wise decisions. It was what I needed after so many days of running down a dark, endless tunnel.

But this wasn't some random stranger, some nameless fighter outside an underground ring, sweat-slick with too much energy still pumping through his veins—the perfect mark for hard, rough 'fuck you and forget you' sex.

So, despite the heat that was already pulsing and burning low in my abdomen, I maneuvered my hands between our bodies and shoved with everything I had.

The shove was enough to break the kiss, to make Cielo stumble back half a step, but he kept his fingers in my hair.

“What the hell are you doing?” I hissed while my chest heaved, not entirely the result of physical exertion.

“Taking what I should have taken a hell of a long time ago,” he said without missing a beat, right before he delved back in.

Those demanding lips, the hard press of his body against mine. The tingling pain at the nape of my neck where he held my hair tight. So freaking good.

But I sunk my teeth into his full bottom lip, just shy of hard enough to draw blood.

He jerked his mouth away, but amid the anger in his eyes, there was heat. So much heat, it made my skin prickle and my clothes feel heavy and unbreathable against me.

“You waltz back into my life after a decade like sex on fucking heels and let me believe you—” He slammed his mouth closed.

“I didn't 'let you believe' anything,” I seethed right back. “I told you none of this was any of your business.”

He scoffed.

I shoved. But even I could feel the lack of conviction in it.

He didn't budge an inch. He just kept looking at me like he was

determined to see right into my thoughts. And for once, he seemed satisfied, like he'd found what he was searching for.

"You want this, *tempesta*."

"Don't call me that," I snapped, anger and arousal mingling in my veins and lighting me up in a way I couldn't recall experiencing before.

He cocked his head, eyes narrowed. "You know I don't take orders," he taunted while his eyes sparked up like blue freaking fireworks. Like he was looking for the fight, anticipating it, fucking high on it.

Dear lord, he couldn't be that perfect. He just couldn't. It wasn't worth considering. Not until he jerked his hand in my hair, roughly tilting my head on an angle as he kept his gaze on mine, watching, assessing.

The urge to turn this room into our own personal battleground welled up, so potent I could taste it. It tasted like sex and sweat and victory, like scratches and bruises and exquisite pleasure. It tasted like the thin line that hovered between sex and violence, more addictive than a switchback ride-fueled adrenaline rush.

So, instead of shoving him away, I fed the impulse and slid my hands up higher, grabbing him by the short hair at the back of his neck, jerking him toward me and leaning up at the same time.

When our lips met, it wasn't a kiss; it was a battle. Tongues dueling, hands gripping, chests heaving. My breath came out in a ragged gasp as he tugged my hair harder, trying to gain the upper hand by tilting my head back further.

I unsheathed my teeth and sunk them into his lip.

He hissed as he jerked out of my grasp, but before I could celebrate my small victory, he abandoned his grip on my hair, grabbed my shoulders, and spun me around.

My hands slammed against the wall to keep me upright, and then his body pressed against me from behind, flattening my breasts against the cool hotel room wall.

His hand was back, jerking on my hair and yanking my head to the side, exposing the back of my neck to him.

His lips found the junction between my neck and shoulder, caressing at first, sucking lightly on my flesh until he caught it between his teeth, not

enough to break skin but enough to send that rush straight down between my thighs.

I panted and planned, letting him think he'd bested me for a moment, enjoying the feel of his lips and teeth and the press of his hard cock against the small of my back. *So good.*

"You always have to fight me, don't you, *tempesta?*" he whispered, his lips a hair's breadth from my ear now.

"You're damn right I do, handsome." I replied.

He shook his head against me. "Wrong name. Try again."

Another memory came, unbidden and unwelcome.

"I thought you might like it," he says, handing me a copy of 'Kindred' by Octavia E. Butler.

I look at the book in my hand, smoothing the perfect, unmarred cover. My eyes start to sting.

"Well, aren't you just Prince Charming," I say flippantly, keeping my head down under the guise of flipping through the pristine pages.

He laughs. "I'm no prince."

"Then I guess it's just 'charming', huh?"

Charming.

The past and the present blurred together, making old feelings rise up and churn with the arousal in my veins, trying to turn this into something it wasn't.

And that just wasn't going to happen.

Chapter Thirteen

Cielo Luciano

Her body went slack against me, losing all of its fight in an instant.

“Let me go, Cielo,” she said. There was no challenge in her voice, nothing for me to grab onto and sink my teeth into.

Fuck.

I was twice her size. I could take what I wanted; she couldn't stop me. I could pin her up against the wall and bury my cock in the body that had starred in my fantasies for years.

She wanted it. I could feel it in the press of her body against me, and the scent of her arousal was making me fucking hungry.

But there were some lines I wouldn't cross. Just one line, really.

I loosened my grip on her hair, not quite releasing her, but she spun anyway and looked up at me. Her lips were swollen, and her cheeks were flushed, making the sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose stand out.

Even as she put up invisible walls between us, her body swayed toward me, her tits grazing my chest as she let out a heavy sigh.

“We've got history, Cielo, and that complicates things. I don't do complicated. I'm sorry.”

Sorry? “Who gives a fuck about history?”

I didn't want her sorry; I wanted her naked with her thighs spread and her pussy taking every inch of my cock.

She raised an eyebrow at me. “No part of this has anything to do with the past?—the one that got away and all that shit?”

I let go of her hair and slid my hands down to her hips, grasping lightly. It spoke volumes when she made no move to pull away.

“I’m not looking to take a trip down memory lane, Charlotte. What I want is *you* naked and riding my cock until you come so hard, you see stars.” Along with a few other choice things that would make my cock very happy along the way.

Her body swayed a little more, giving her away, but she shook her head.

“I have no doubt you can get that from at least a dozen nameless, faceless women within a two-block radius. So, go get it, Cielo,” she said, motioning toward the door.

“I’m not interested in the nameless, faceless women within a two-block radius, *tempesta*.” I said, shaking my head. “I want what’s right in front of me, and so do you.”

Her resolve began to crumble; I could see it, fucking taste it. But when she opened her mouth to respond, her cell phone rang, just about making her jump out of her skin.

Fuck.

“Let me go, Cielo. I have to answer that.”

I almost held firm when she tugged herself from my grip, but the urgency in her body won out, and I let her go.

She flew across the room in her fuck-me heels and dug wildly in her purse. The moment she had her phone in hand, she swiped across the screen to answer it.

“¿Aló?” she said, her voice little more than a breath as she hurried across the room to the ensuite and pulled the door most of the way behind her.

I couldn’t make out what she was saying, only that the conversation seemed to morph back and forth between English and Spanish. Rather fluent Spanish by the melodic sound of it.

I took a deep breath and let it out.

It didn’t do a damn thing to calm any part of me, least of all the painful hard-on.

This was uncharted territory. Women didn’t run from me—even if, perhaps, they should have. But something had spooked Charlotte, and I was

beginning to understand the ‘what’, even if the ‘why’ was elusive.

She reappeared from the ensuite and stared for the span of a heartbeat, her gaze sweeping over me from head to toe. While her eyes gave nothing away, she licked her lips like she was hungry before she dragged her gaze away.

The same urgency I’d felt from her when her phone rang was still there, and it had her eyes swiveling back and forth between me and the door and making one thing very clear: This girl was about to bolt.

“I have to go,” she said, then she stiffened her spine and straightened her shoulders like she was preparing for war.

“Where is it you have to go, Charlotte?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest while my cock threatened all kinds of retribution if I let her walk out the door.

She crossed her arms over her chest and met my gaze. “This was a mistake, Cielo. I’m going home,” she said.

But the phone call? The sudden urgency? There was something else going on here.

I dropped my arms and took two steps toward her, closing the distance between us. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t cower.

“I don’t like it when people lie to me, *tempesta*.”

“Let me guess, this is the part where you remind me you’re a big, scary mafia man, and I should be spilling all my secrets and quaking in my shoes. Oh, and definitely dropping my panties.”

My lips twitched even as my fingers curled. Fuck. The woman was infuriating. There wasn’t a woman in the world who could push my buttons like Charlotte Santoro.

“You’ve always got to fight me,” I said, shaking my head, not sure if I wanted to fuck her or wring her neck more. Wrap my fingers around her neck to control her breathing while I fucked her, maybe. I was all about compromises.

She shrugged. “Well, it’s either that or I’ve got to start arguing with myself, and trust me, that’s a whole new level of crazy.”

Christ, the woman *would* start fighting herself if she ran out of opponents.

“You might like to fight, Charlotte, but I like to win. So, no matter how

much you fight me, I'm always going to come out the victor."

"You're right," she said, which brought me up short, like I'd been running headlong at my goal and the ground just fell away.

No part of me had been expecting her to acquiesce so easily.

"You're used to winning, Cielo, and since I have no intention of backing down to you or cowering at your feet," she said as my brain conjured an image of the woman naked, on her knees at my feet, her silky hair twisted up in my hand and her swollen lips wrapped around my cock.

"I think it'd be best if I just leave. Right now," she continued.

She sidestepped me and headed for the door.

"This isn't finished," I said, laying it out plainly instead.

She turned back to face me, her hand on the doorknob and her bottom lip caught between her teeth. The wheels were turning behind her eyes, but fuck only knew what she was thinking.

"I appreciated your help tonight—even if you were a lousy wingman—but it's done now. 'This' is done," she said, her hand motioning between the two of us.

"This is done when I say it's done, Charlotte," I persisted, fighting the urge to drag her back and strip her naked. To tie her up and fuck her senseless. To make her scream and beg and come harder than ever before in her life.

She opened her mouth like she was going to argue, but then shook her head.

"*Ciao, Cielo.*"

And then the god damned woman left the room without another word.

I could have stopped her. As much as she liked to fight, she wasn't really any match for me, and that thin line I never crossed was getting really damn blurry. But I stood there, hands curled into fists, and let her go.

Not that I had any intention of letting Charlotte Santoro disappear, not this time.

So, I waited for her to get on the elevator, then followed her out and down to the parking lot, keeping my distance as she got into her silver Audi and took off out of the underground lot.

I followed at a distance through the congested city streets, all the way to the warehouse where I was beginning to suspect she lived. She'd said she was going home—true enough, it seemed—but there was more to it, more pieces to this puzzle. I could feel it bone-deep.

She parked near the front of the warehouse as I pulled off to the side of the road to watch. I'd only just shifted my car into park when my phone rang. I pulled it out, but the number was 'unknown'.

I swiped the screen to answer it and put it to my ear.

"I've spent nine years learning how to track people and to recognize when I'm being tracked, Cielo," Charlotte's voice spoke through the phone. "Do you maybe feel like coming out here?"

I smiled. Actually fucking smiled. The woman was good, very intuitive. But I'd have to remember that from now on. I'd been lazy, blowing my cover far too easily.

Disconnecting the call, I drove down the street and into the warehouse's lot, parking next to her car. The pot lights in the building's fascia cast a faint glow across the lot and glinted off the diamond in the hollow of Charlotte's throat. She had her arms crossed over her chest and one hip against her driver's side door as I got out of my car.

"What are you doing here, Cielo?"

"I don't know what that phone call was about earlier, but it sure had you moving your ass. Whatever it is you're planning to—"

"I'm not sure how that's any of your business," she snapped, then appeared to rein herself in. "Look, I told you I appreciated your help with Mendoza. I'm even willing to admit that maybe you were right, and the way it played out was the only way it could have gone. But," she said, holding up one hand, "this isn't a game to me. It isn't a puzzle to amuse my brain like it is to you. It's my father's life and—"

She closed her mouth as gravel crunched beneath the tires of a black SUV with tinted windows all around that turned into the warehouse's lot.

"Expecting company?" I asked as I reached for my gun, watching Charlotte's body language as much as I was watching the approaching vehicle.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” she said, and her body language told the same story. There was nothing wary in her stance.

This was the reason for the call and her sudden departure?—a late-night meet-up in a dark parking lot. She had no weapon on her, nothing but a single syringe of some form of modified ecstasy she’d gotten from fuck only knew where.

Her gaze swiveled back and forth between the SUV and I while her teeth dug into her bottom lip. “Don’t you dare pull that gun out, Cielo. I promise you, you’ll regret it.”

She didn’t know me very well, did she? Regret wasn’t a common word in my vocabulary, least of all when it came to the violence I inflicted.

The SUV rolled to a stop near the front of the warehouse, about ten feet from Charlotte’s Audi.

She rolled her eyes at me as my fingers wrapped around my gun, still in its holster.

“Would you give me some credit?” she huffed. “I wouldn’t have told you to come over here if I thought it would put you in any danger, trust me. But if you want to ignore me and leave here in a body bag...” She shrugged her shoulders.

Trust her? The list of people I trusted was a short one, and the girl who’d showed up after vanishing ten years ago wasn’t on that list.

So why the fuck was I lowering my hand?

The driver’s side door of the SUV opened and a man stepped out. A burly, dark-haired man, covered in tattoos. A lot of fucking tats.

He moved to the SUV’s rear passenger door, but Charlotte squealed or screeched—it was hard to describe the happy sound that came out of her. And then she was on the move, flying across the space between them.

My hands curled into fists as she threw her arms around the big man and he grabbed her up, swinging her around like a little girl. By the time he set her feet back down on the ground, the urge to rip his hands from his body was potent.

The man’s attention turned to me once Charlotte had stepped back. She was still smiling, but the man’s eyes were narrowed, glaring at me

suspiciously.

“It’s all right,” Charlotte said, putting a hand on his arm. “He’s... with me?” she said, cocking a sardonic eyebrow at me. “This is Cielo Luciano.”

The man’s brow furrowed more, drawing attention to the dark markings on his eyelid. “Luciano, huh?”

She nodded.

The man looked at me for a moment longer, then made a ‘*harumph*’ sound in his throat and turned away, giving me his back.

Not a smart move, asshole.

But Charlotte glared at me, a warning in her silver-gray eyes. And it seemed what Charlotte wanted, Charlotte got, because I leaned back against her car, arms crossed over my chest, looking to all the world like I was waiting patiently as the man opened the rear passenger door and stepped back...

...and a tall, dark-haired man in his early thirties stepped out.

A man with a scar cut across his eyebrow and the darkest eyes I’d ever seen. A man anyone in the criminal underworld would recognize.

Nacio Morales.

What. The. Fuck?

Chapter Fourteen

Cielo Luciano

Morales wrapped his arms around Charlotte, and she hugged him back and pressed her cheek to his chest.

“¿Cómo estás, cariño?” he asked her quietly.

“*Estoy bien,*” she replied, shrugging her shoulders as she straightened her spine and pulled away.

To most of the world, Nacio Morales was known simply as the dangerous-as-fuck Colombian cartel *capo* who nobody messed with, not if they wanted to keep breathing. But in recent months, he’d proven there was more to him. Deo had worked alongside him to take down human scum on more than one occasion.

Charlotte knew Nacio Morales, I mused silently. Her father was missing. It could have been she’d paid Morales to help her find him, but the relationship was clearly too personal for a simple business arrangement.

I drummed my fingers against my thigh as I turned the puzzle pieces this way and that, trying to find the right fit.

“I didn’t expect to see *you* here,” Morales said, directing his attention to me as he closed the distance between us. We’d never been formally introduced, but it didn’t surprise me he knew who I was.

Charlotte’s gaze swung back and forth between me and the two men. “Nacio, this is—”

“*Si*, I know who he is,” he said.

Surprise flickered across her face before she managed to cover it up. “You do?”

The corners of Morales' mouth twitched in a smile. "I've had the opportunity to work with his brother, *cariño*. How is Amadeo, Cielo?" he asked as he held out his hand to me.

I shook his hand, smiling wryly. "Deo's good. I'm not sure he knows just how small the world seems to be getting these days."

He nodded as he dropped his hand.

The burly man with what I could clearly see now was a pair of daggers tattooed beneath his eyebrow was still eyeing me warily. I couldn't blame him. Nacio Morales wasn't the only one with a reputation.

"I like your brother," he said to me, his face expressionless. "I hope I'll have reason to like you as well." His gaze slipped to Charlotte, then back to me.

I shrugged, not quite sure how I felt about the protective vibe radiating from these men when it came to Charlotte. And I sure as hell had no idea where this fucking puzzle piece fit in.

"I'm sure you will. Everyone likes me better," I said, a congenial smile on my face. I'd play friendly for now. It was a game I played often. In my line of work, it wasn't solely about ending lives. It required a mastery of subtlety, the art of putting people at ease, and the finesse to lower their guard.

"Do you suppose we can talk, *cariño*?" Morales asked Charlotte, his eyes moving suggestively to the warehouse.

She looked at me, teeth digging into her bottom lip.

"It's fine. He knows," she said eventually. "And he's like the cat who came back." She rolled her eyes, cracking a smile. "*Just couldn't stay away*," she said in an almost sing-song voice.

Even the burly, tatted guy cracked a smile.

"Just give me a minute to let Ray out," she said, hurrying to the door, sliding her hand beneath the corrugated metal siding until the door clicked and she pulled it open.

The big dog came bounding out. After its behavior the other night, I half-expected him to come to a sudden stop or go scurrying back inside when he discovered there were people milling about, but instead, I swear the dog's eyes lit up like it was Christmas morning. He bounded around the dark,

gravel lot, circling Charlotte, then Nacio, slowing long enough for an obligatory pet before running laps around the tatted man.

Charlotte laughed, shaking her head. “You’re still his favorite human, Julio.”

And if the attention Julio was bestowing on the dog was any indicator, the feeling was mutual.

“He’s just afraid I’ll send him back to that hellhole we found him in,” he said, his accented voice gruff as he brushed off the compliment.

She laughed and shook her head. “Not a chance. Ray knows you better than that.”

This Charlotte was different, not at all like the woman I’d seen or even the girl she’d been. She was... lighter in the company of these men, like their mere presence had lifted a heavy weight off her shoulders.

For just a moment, I set aside solving puzzles and figuring out what role they played in her life and why their presence here made something writhe uncomfortably beneath my skin. I just watched her as she smiled and laughed in between these men with whom she clearly had a history.

She’d never laughed like that. I don’t think she’d even smiled like that in all the time I knew her. But it lit her up from the inside out like her soul was smiling.

Christ, I think it might have been the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.

“I spoke with the son of a *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* lieutenant tonight,” Charlotte said as her smile fell away and her gaze shifted back and forth between Morales and Julio. “Carlos Mendoza—son of Luis Mendoza.”

Morales cocked an eyebrow while Julio grumbled low in his throat.

As Ray sauntered off, she rolled her eyes and the corners of her lips twitched in a ghost of the smile that had been there. “He met with Silva right before my dad was taken, but it had nothing to do with my dad, just some kind of distribution arrangement,” she said matter-of-factly, though I could hear the quaver in her voice. “The timing is too coincidental, but I can’t see the connection between my dad and this shipment. It wasn’t drugs and guns my dad found in that warehouse basement.”

The men were silent but attentive, waiting for her to continue.

She shrugged. “And according to Carlos, the shipment that was scheduled to arrive, didn’t.”

Morales exchanged a glance with Julio, then he shook his head slowly. “Silva has never dealt directly in the drug trade. What drugs could he have been offering?” he mused aloud.

Usually, I wasn’t prone to throw around information about family business, but for Charlotte, I found myself willing to make an exception.

“I think I can help with that,” I said, then filled Morales and Julio in on the job Daniel Marín had been doing for us and how he’d tipped off Silva about the drugs and guns—drugs and guns that had come into our possession thanks to a deal my family had made with Morales—and the attack on our shipment in Venezuela.

Morales’ brow was furrowed, but he nodded. “I’d been wondering why Val Rojas had been moving them back into Colombia.”

I cocked an eyebrow at him, not pleased he knew the name of my contact or what she’d been up to. Val Rojas loved money, but if she’d gotten sloppy in her pursuit of it, she was of little use to me.

Morales smiled, though it didn’t reach his dark eyes. “Few things go on in my country that I am not aware of, Cielo. Amadeo is well aware of this.”

Fair enough. For now.

Morales turned his attention back to Charlotte. “I have an... acquaintance who has confirmed Silva is not in possession of your father.”

“A reliable acquaintance?” she asked, her voice tinged with disbelief.

Morales nodded. “Silva is not auctioning off secrets either, which suggests he didn’t extract any,” he continued, the insinuation stark in the quiet tone of his voice. “I will keep looking, of course, but you must prepare yourself, *cariño*.”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head adamantly. “You know as well as I do he’s not an easy man to kill, Nacio.”

“I do know that. He has proven it many times before.”

“We won’t give up until we find him, Charlotte,” Julio said. “We will bring Declan home to you.”

There was something in the man’s voice, though; something that set me on

edge. I couldn't pinpoint what it was just yet, but he was hiding something.

Charlotte's lips twitched in another ghost of a smile. "*Gracias*," she replied, her voice quavering. "Val's looking into *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*," she said, her gaze pointedly ignoring me at the moment.

She knew Val Rojas, I mused, mentally shaking my head. And Nacio Morales. Next, I was going to find out she'd been best friends with my sister, Freya, for the past decade.

"Maybe she'll turn up something useful," she continued.

"I'll look into them as well," Morales said as Ray returned and dropped a stick at Julio's feet.

"You look tired, Charlotte," Julio said, looking her over as he retrieved the stick and launched it across the lot.

Ray shot after it, moving so fast he was a black blur in the dark.

She smiled. "No rest for the wicked, right?"

"I'm sure Phoenix would like to see you," Morales said, and that seemed to grab her attention.

"How are Phoenix and Nic?" she asked.

Morales smiled, a smile that almost lightened his dark eyes. "They're good, closer than you might think."

Her brow furrowed.

"They're here in New York," he explained. "She goes by Cait now."

Charlotte's lips parted, and her eyes widened. "How did that happen?"

"It's a long story, *cariño*. But I intend to see her later today. I'll let her know to be expecting you," he said in a tone that implied he wasn't really making a suggestion here. "I imagine Cielo can give you directions to her new home."

Cait? And Nic? "As in Gabe Costa's fiancée and son?" I asked.

Morales nodded.

Well fuck.

"The world just keeps getting smaller and smaller, doesn't it?" I said, shaking my head. Really fucking small.

Chapter Fifteen

Cielo Luciano

“I know how much you want to find him, *cariño*,” Nacio said as he put his arms around Charlotte, hugging her goodbye as he watched me like he was gauging my response. “But you must be careful.” He leaned away to look her in the eyes. “I do not want to have to step in here. ¿Sabes?”

She had her lips pressed together, but eventually, she nodded. “Si,” she replied.

No fight? No argument? It was like she’d shoved the fighter into the closet for these men.

Nacio stepped back, and Julio took his place, pulling Charlotte into his embrace, though his gaze remained fixed on the SUV’s right front tire.

When he released her, he turned to face me.

“I imagine *Señor* Luciano will be leaving as well?” he asked, eyeing me expectantly.

“No,” I replied bluntly. Fuck putting the man at ease. He was just lucky I wasn’t pissing a circle around her or cutting off his hands.

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “It’s fine, Julio. ‘*Just couldn’t stay away*’, remember?”

Julio’s brow furrowed, his narrowed eyes still fixed on me. “I think I like your brother more, *hermano*,” he said flatly, though the corners of his lips twitched with amusement.

A moment later, the black SUV was pulling out of the warehouse’s lot while the puzzle pieces flew around inside my brain.

Charlotte stared, silent, long after the car had disappeared up the street and

around a corner.

Eventually, she shook her head and let out a heavy sigh. “Not now, Cielo,” she said like she’d read the questions in my mind.

Ray took off toward the side of the lot, next to the warehouse, and Charlotte followed, hopping up on the edge of the picnic table while Ray investigated the spindly bushes at the lot’s edge.

Charlotte’s spine wasn’t stiff like the last time I’d seen her sitting there. Her shoulders were slumped, and she stared down at her shoe-clad toes like she couldn’t quite muster the strength to hold her head up.

The sight pulled on something inside my chest, an uncomfortable sensation that left me grappling with how to proceed. She’d put the brakes on fucking, and she had no more intel that would be useful to me. Every logical part of me was saying it was time to make my exit, but that damn pull kept my feet rooted in place.

“So, you know Val, huh?” she said without looking up, kicking her feet back and forth a little.

“Si,” I said, walking toward her. “She’s a business contact.”

She scoff-laughed, but she looked up as I stopped in front of her, and her lips curved up in a soft smile. “She and my dad go at it like rabbits every time we’re in Colombia.”

I sat down next to her on the table top, resisting the urge to touch her, to drag her onto my lap, to lay her out on the table and show her exactly why we should be fucking, not talking.

“How do you know Morales?” I asked as Ray ran over, nudged her hand for a pet, then scampered off again.

“My dad,” she said on another tired sigh.

She looked at me, contemplating something, then nodded. “He was a Navy SEAL—joined the military right out of high school. Somehow, he ended up crossing paths with Julio, who was a *Sargento Primero* in the *Fuerza de Infantería de Marina*,” she explained, the words rolling off her tongue, “and a man named Aiden who was a CIA operative. I don’t know much about it—Dad never talked about it—but something happened that left him disillusioned. He retired—they all did. Julio took on the role of Nacio’s

second-in-command, but Aiden and my dad, they took a different route. Though, I suppose it all equals the same in the end.”

“What does?” I asked as Ray returned, circling the picnic table.

“They stopped taking orders and started deciding on their own what to do with their skills.”

Highly skilled vigilantes. Interesting.

Ray stopped in front of us, but instead of nudging Charlotte for an obligatory pet, he shoved his cold nose beneath my hand.

Charlotte went very still, barely breathing, as I stroked the dog’s head and scratched behind his ear before he sauntered off again.

“It seems Ray likes you,” she mused, her voice quiet.

I shrugged. “I’m a likable guy.”

She didn’t laugh. Just kept staring at my hand.

“Declan,” she said after a moment. “My dad’s name is Declan Ryan.”

I could feel the weight of her admission, like she was offering up something valuable to her. I’d felt that weight before. It wended its way inside my chest now, just like it had then.

“*Grazie*,” I said quietly, but she brushed it off with a wave of her hand and hopped down off the table.

This was Charlotte shutting down and closing up.

“What makes you so sure your dad’s still alive?” I asked, knowing it would either send the walls soaring up or bring them crashing down. There were few in-betweens with Charlotte.

She stood still for a moment, then leaned back against the table.

“We were in a village in the Central African Republic a few years ago,” she said, her gaze on the road beyond the lot, but I had a feeling she was seeing much further.

“The fear in that place was a tangible thing in the air all the time, but no government wanted to step in.” She shrugged. “There was no money in it, no natural resources to exploit, you know?”

I nodded but kept silent, waiting for her to continue.

“The rebels came in the middle of the night. The things they do to human beings... it’s not—*they’re* not—human.” She shook her head, and I could

almost feel the atrocities she'd witnessed like they lived on her skin, had been imprinted into her soul.

"I was in the medical tent, helping a woman give birth—her name was Sylvie." She smiled wistfully, but it fell away quickly. "There were so many of them, Cielo. We held ground, but it cost us—nine died."

She closed her eyes as Ray came over and leaned his big head against her thigh like he was comforting her.

"I found out later my dad hesitated," she said as she stroked Ray's head idly, "and he did that because it was an eleven-year-old boy who came at him with an AK-47. The kid shot him—no hesitation there—and they took him, for ransom, maybe, or just because they could."

"I thought that was it. I was sure my dad was dead, but Aiden made me promise to stay and protect the village, and then he went after him. He came back eleven days later with my dad in tow." Her lips curved in another ghost of a smile as she laughed wistfully, a quiet sound that was little more than a breath. "He looked like shit, but he was alive."

She pushed off the picnic table and turned to face me. "And I've got a dozen more stories like it. He comes back, Cielo. He *always* comes back."

It was a flicker of hope in a dark sea of futility, but I got the feeling she needed to hold onto it. Maybe it was the only thing keeping her going.

"All right, count me in," I said. I could rationalize it if I wanted to—there were still men out there, possibly tied to her father's disappearance, who'd tried to get their hands on Luciano product and killed one of our men in the process—but who the hell was I kidding?

She looked at me, eyebrows raised. "This isn't your problem, Cielo. I still don't know why—"

"I told you why."

"Because you knew a girl once?" she asked, brow furrowed.

I looked at her, realizing just how well and truly fucked I was.

"I still do."

Ray started nudging Charlotte's leg with his nose, and he let out a low whine, breaking into the silence that had settled between us.

"I've got to feed him and do some research," she said, though it was a moment before she looked away and turned her attention to the miniature bear.

She rubbed his head, then started walking toward the warehouse door. Ray took off ahead of her, reaching the door in a flash and staring at the handle, his short tail wagging.

When I followed her rather than heading for my car, she looked back at me and rolled her eyes.

"Just couldn't stay away," she sang, her voice sultry and resonant, like liquid velvet. Just like the last time I'd heard her sing.

"If you tell anyone what you just heard, I'm going to kick your ass," she says, standing in the middle of the empty music room.

"I didn't know you could do that," I say. *I swear I can still hear the notes. They carried a weight, a depth that seemed to resonate from the very core of her being.*

She huffs and crosses her arms over her chest defensively. "Anyone can sing, charming."

"Not like that."

She's silent, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Thanks," she offers up reluctantly.

I smile. "Your secret's safe with me," I promise her.

I don't know why she wants to keep a voice like that hidden, but I'm okay with being the only guy in school who knows her secrets.

"Will you keep going, per favore?" I ask. *It isn't often I push her, but knowing she keeps this part hidden, I want more of it. Hell, I want all of it.*

"You're kidding, right?"

"No," I say. *No jokes this time.*

She rolls her eyes. "Turn around."

"Scusa?"

"You heard me. I can't do this with you standing there, staring at me."

"If you want to stare at my ass, Charlotte, you just have to say so," I say

as I turn around and face the door.

Instead of a witty rejoinder, she sighs. And then her voice erupts, a force of nature that demands attention.

“’And the people bowed and prayed... To the neon god they made...’”

‘The Sound of Silence’ became my favorite song that day.

It still was.

Without further argument, she slid her hand beneath the warehouse’s corrugated siding, unlocked the door, and opened it.

Ray shot ahead as I got my first look at the inside of the building that was nothing like the dilapidated exterior. An open floor space in muted tones with every comfort imaginable, from plush furniture in the living area and high-end electronics to a well-stocked bar and state-of-the-art appliances in the open kitchen.

Charlotte swayed on her feet as I closed the door behind us. She was beyond exhausted.

“When did you last sleep?” I asked, suspecting it was no time recently.

She scoffed. “Sometime last week, I think.”

I looked around, sorting out the interior’s layout and the most likely location of the bedrooms. Then I picked Charlotte up and threw her over my shoulder.

“Put me down!” she screeched, kicking her legs and pounding on my back like she thought she had a chance of taking me down.

“No,” I said and strode across the big space to one of the open staircases on the other side.

She continued to flail wildly, so much she was going to end up hitting something and hurting herself.

So, I slapped her ass on my way up the stairs.

She screeched indignantly while the feel of her flesh beneath my palm and the sting in my hand shot straight to my cock.

Fuck.

Fortunately, the top of the stairs opened to a loft-style bedroom with girlshit spilling out of the closet and sprawled all over the bed.

I made it to the bed with my unwilling captive and dropped her down in

the center of it. Christ, how I wanted to follow her down.

“What the hell are you doing?” she seethed.

When she moved to get up, I grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the mattress above her head.

“Lie still,” I said in what might have been the most ‘don’t fuck with me’ tone I’d ever used. Because I was walking a very thin line here, the one that was getting blurrier by the second.

She looked up at me, eyes sparking, but thank fuck she was smart enough to heed the warning.

Reluctantly, I released her wrists, fished a blanket out from beneath the clothes, and covered her up—not that it did a damn thing to keep me from thinking about what was beneath them.

“What are you doing?” she asked, brow furrowed now.

Good question.

I leaned in close, much closer than I should have. The soft scent of her reached out and tried to pull me closer.

“When I fuck you, *tempesta*—and I am going to fuck you—you’re going to be wide awake and full of fight, not swaying on your god damned feet. So, go to sleep.”

Christ, I was practically tucking her into bed. Where the hell had this shit come from?

“I have to feed Ray,” she said while her eyes continued to glare daggers at me, even as the breathlessness in her voice gave her away.

“I can figure out how to feed a dog,” I said with a little more bite than I’d intended, but that kind of thing happened when a man and his cock were at odds. “Now, do as you’re told and go to sleep before I change my mind.”

She huffed, but much to my surprise, she closed her eyes, and in less than a minute, her features softened and her breathing transitioned to the slow, even cadence of sleep.

Without her eyes cursing at me, she looked innocent, not like a woman who seduced and paralyzed men, who fought rebels in fucking Africa and kept company with people like Nacio Morales and Val Rojas.

Ray loped into the room and circled the bed, perhaps to be sure I hadn’t

murdered his mistress.

“Satisfied?” I asked when he’d finished his perusal.

His head swung toward me, then back to Charlotte as he let out a whine like the one outside.

“All right, *amico*,” I whispered, waving him toward the door. “Dinnertime, *si*?”

He hesitated for a moment, then followed me out of the room.

“I don’t suppose you can tell me what the fuck I’m supposed to feed you?” I asked as we made our way down the stairs. I’d had women in collar and leash before, but what I’d *fed* them, I sure as hell wasn’t feeding the dog.

Not surprisingly, Ray didn’t answer, but he veered right at the bottom of the stairs, headed for the kitchen, and stopped next to one of the cupboards that had a label near the top of it that read, ‘Ray’.

I opened it up and found it stacked full of cans of dog food.

“You’re pretty damn smart, aren’t you?” I asked as I retrieved a can and opened it up, expecting some putrid stench to waft from the concoction inside. Apparently though, dog food smelled good, kind of like the mild, slightly sweet aroma of fillet mignon.

“Makes you wonder why we bother cooking, *si*?” I asked Ray.

Then I got a look at the gelatinous cubes and suspicious lumps in a mottled mush of grays, browns, and greens. No more wondering. That was most definitely not something I would ever be putting in my mouth.

“It’s all yours, *amico*,” I said as I poured the contents of the can into a bowl and set it down on the floor.

Then I scrubbed my fingers through my hair and looked around at the empty main floor and the staircase that led to the sleeping woman above—the woman I could have been fucking at this very moment.

Christ, what the hell am I doing?

Chapter Sixteen

Charlotte Santoro

“Okay, so this is officially the most awkward morning-after ever,” I muttered to Ray as I stood at the top of the stairs in my own home, kind of wishing they’d swallow me up. Which was ridiculous. The ‘morning-after’ suggested there’d been sex the night before. There’d definitely been no sex, though. So, yeah, this sucked.

“I’ll catch up with Deo this afternoon,” Cielo said in a conversational tone somewhere downstairs.

I looked down at Ray, who was clearly sitting on the upper landing next to me, not down on the main floor with Cielo.

“If he’s not talking to you, then who on earth is he talking to?” I asked Ray.

Not that I minded. It actually made me feel a little better to think Cielo was downstairs talking to himself because the man had it way too together all the time. He needed a quirk that made him as crazy as the rest of us.

I started down the stairs in my bare feet, confident none of the steps would creak and give me away.

“I believe he’ll be overseeing a shipment at the docks, *Signor*,” an unfamiliar voice spoke from the same direction Cielo’s voice had come from.

I stopped mid-step.

Unless Cielo was talking to himself in multiple voices, he wasn’t alone down there.

Damn. And here I’d been thinking he was almost human. That, and the whole ‘why the hell were there other people in my home’ thing. That was

‘damn’-worthy too.

“I don’t suppose you want to go check it out and take a chunk out of whoever’s down there?” I whispered.

Ray looked up at me, then down the stairs, then back up again. I was pretty sure that was code for, ‘you go ahead and I’ll be right behind you—*really*’.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

I continued down the stairs with Ray following several steps behind me.

As I turned right at the bottom landing, I found Cielo standing at the breakfast bar with his arms crossed over his chest and—of course—not a single wrinkle in last night’s clothes. A few feet from him stood a man who was maybe in his mid-fifties, dressed in black pants and a cardigan.

Well, didn’t I feel underdressed in cotton shorts and a tank top?

The two men noticed me at the same time, and while Cielo’s gaze raked over me in a way that left my skin tingling, I wasn’t in the mood for tingles.

“How the hell did you disarm the system?” I asked, ignoring the newcomer for the moment.

Cielo nodded toward the panel by the front door where there was now some sort of white powder on the keypad.

“You dusted for prints?” Seriously?

He just nodded like there wasn’t anything abnormal about a guy dusting for fingerprints in a woman’s home. I supposed that explained the open canister of flour on the kitchen counter.

I shook my head, grappling for some sort of response to *that*.

“Even if you figured out which keys, there were still more than one hundred and fifty thousand possible combinations,” I said, because *that* was what my brain had decided to focus on. Not the creepy fingerprint thing.

He shrugged. “Thirty-four, sixteen, twenty-seven—your locker combination.”

My jaw tried to drop; I barely caught it in time. That he remembered my high school locker combination—a combination I’d never told him—left a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach. Time to move on to something else.

I curled my hands into fists and walked barefoot into the kitchen—because

it was my damn kitchen, even if it did feel a whole lot smaller with these two men standing in it.

Ray decided to wait by the stairs.

“When I mentioned a great big Luciano reunion, I wasn’t serious,” I said, looking back and forth between Cielo and the newcomer.

Both men smiled. Glad I was so amusing.

“This is Aurelio Carbone, *tempesta*,” Cielo said, motioning to the man who was giving off serious Mr. Rogers vibes with his kind eyes and cardigan.

“*It’s a beautiful day in this neighborhood...*” flitted through my head as I tried to recall what Cielo had told me about Aurelio Carbone because the name was definitely ringing bells.

“Aurelio,” Cielo went on, “may I introduce Charlotte Santoro?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, *Signorina* Santoro,” the man said with a polite nod and a warm smile.

Shit. Don’t I feel like a jerk? I didn’t actually make a habit of being rude to strangers, but nor was I accustomed to waking up to them in my home uninvited.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I replied. It came out kind of flat and insincere, but again, there was an uninvited stranger in my home. “Do you suppose I could talk to you for a minute, Cielo?” I asked, nodding across the space to the living area and heading over there without waiting for a response.

His footsteps followed close behind me, and Ray followed right behind him like the two of them had done some serious dog-human bonding while I was asleep. *Awesome.*

“I’m not sure if you know this,” I hissed quietly as I spun on Cielo, “but I’m not actually big on strangers in my home while I’m sleeping—hence, the security system.”

Cielo shrugged. “He’s not a stranger. Aurelio’s been with my family a long time,” he said like it was a perfectly reasonable explanation.

Aurelio Carbone... “He’s the kind of man who knows how to get answers’—that’s what you told me once.”

He nodded. “You remember?”

I chuckled dryly. “It was all riveting stuff for a sixteen-year-old girl, kind of hard to forget. But that doesn’t explain why he’s here.”

“I have business I have to tend to. Aurelio will stay here while I’m gone.”

Stay here? Like a babysitter?

Oh, that’s what you think, I fumed silently while my spine stiffened reflexively until I was standing up so tall, I nearly reached Cielo’s chin in my bare feet. I had to fight the urge to shoot up onto my tiptoes just to get right in his face.

“That hard-on you had for me last night says you’re well aware I’m not a child, Cielo, and I sure as hell don’t need a babysitter.”

The corners of his lips twitched. “He’s not here to babysit you; he’s here so you can bring him up to speed with what you know about Miguel Silva and your father’s disappearance.”

I opened my mouth to object, but he put his index finger over my lips.

“Before you tell me it’s not Aurelio’s problem,” he said while I seriously contemplated taking a bite out of his finger, “it’s about time you realize there’s nothing wrong with accepting help,” he finished more gently as he ran his finger along my lips, then dropped his hand.

My lips were tingling even as my skin writhed at the prospect of accepting help. Very contradictory feelings.

“It’s too early for this. I need coffee,” I said, then headed back toward the kitchen, discreetly rubbing my lips as I went.

Cielo’s phone rang, and he strode toward the stairs that led to the roof to answer it, leaving me alone with Aurelio Carbone who was sitting at my breakfast bar... in my kitchen... looking perfectly at ease. Dear lord, this was weird.

“Coffee, *Signorina?*” he asked.

Was he asking for coffee? Or was he asking if I wanted coffee? Someone had brewed a fresh pot recently, it seemed.

“I’ll get it,” I said, rather than asking for clarification.

I filled two mugs from the cupboard labeled ‘mugs’, and set one down in front of him with the sugar bowl and cream.

“*Grazie,*” he said with a warm smile while his eyes watched me

appraisingly.

“You don’t really look like you cut answers out of people for a living,” I mused aloud rather than in my head. *Oops*.

He chuckled and then took a sip from his mug.

“I’m sorry,” I said with a semi-apologetic shrug. “Sometimes my mouth runs faster than my filter.”

“It’s quite all right, *Signorina*. In fact, I’m glad to hear it.”

“You are?”

“*Si*. There is more than one side to a person, don’t you think?”

“Some people, I suppose,” I said, sitting down on the stool at the end of the bar. I’d seen plenty of people who were just evil through-in-through, in my opinion.

He nodded at the same time Cielo walked into the kitchen with Ray on his heels.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” he said to Aurelio.

“Of course, *Signor*,” Aurelio replied as he set down the coffee mug and stood up like he was ready to get to work.

Ray abandoned Cielo and made a beeline for me, hiding behind my stool and getting a little growly.

Cielo followed, but it caught me completely off guard when he put his hands around my waist and dragged me up onto my feet. He swept in so fast, my brain hadn’t yet caught up when his lips covered mine in a kiss that was like a brand, hot and possessive.

It was over before I’d decided whether to bite him or kiss him back and he was setting me down on the stool.

“Stay put, *tempesta*,” he said in a tone that brooked no refusal.

Ignoring the tingling lips and lava swirling around low in my abdomen, I cocked an eyebrow at him. “If you think I’m just going to mindlessly obey you, you’re out of your mind,” I told him quite rationally.

His eyes flickered with challenge as he leaned in closer. “You can promise me you’ll stay put or I can tie you up, if you prefer. I don’t mind spending the day picturing all the things I’ll do to your bound body when I get back,” he threatened, heedless of Aurelio’s presence.

“If you leave me tied up here, all you’re going to find when you get back is an angry woman with a very loaded gun,” I shot back even as the tingling sensation in my lips branched out and started running like current along my skin.

Cielo shook his head slowly as he leaned in more until his lips were right next to my ear. “I let you point a gun at me once,” he whispered. “Do it again, and I’ll have to cover your fine ass in my handprints to teach you a lesson.”

My hands curled into fists as my pussy pulsed with desire. I kind of wanted to hit him and fuck him at the same time. At the moment, I’d settle for savagely raking my nails down his back while he fucked me right here on the breakfast bar.

But since we had an audience...

“You were in a hurry to leave, weren’t you?” I asked in an offhanded tone.

His lips twitched. “Something like that. But you need to bring Aurelio up to speed, Charlotte. It is in both our best interests. The sooner we find out what happened to your father, the sooner you get him back and the sooner my family can seek out the vengeance we deserve, *si*? And right now, you’re missing something,” he said, all signs of humor gone.

“What do you mean I’m missing something?” I asked, sitting up straighter as the ember of hope in my chest sparked up. Fuck pride and self-sufficiency. If he had something that would bring me even one step closer to finding my dad, I was all ears.

Cielo shrugged. “Silva, Marín Lucianos, *Los Cazadores Sangrientos...*” He shook his head. “If Silva caught your father unaware, I’m sorry, but he could have put a bullet in his head and been done with it. He didn’t need the cartel to do his dirty work, and he’s well-insulated. It would have been difficult for you to get to him even if he shouted what he’d done from the rooftops.”

He had a point, one I’d been forced to consider and dismiss repeatedly because it led to an end I refused to contemplate.

“All these leaks and agreements and emails...” he said, tapping his fingers against his thigh. “It amounts to far too many cogs, too much noise obscuring

the picture.”

Too many cogs... too much noise... I mulled over the possibilities.

“You think they’re decoys,” I said when the puzzle pieces finally clicked together. *Great, now I’m thinking in puzzles.*

He nodded. “I think there was no reason for *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* to contact you, no reason to come after you. No reason but to distract you... or eliminate you. Someone is trying to keep you buried in research and chasing after leads that don’t add up until you get yourself killed.”

Damn it. “I fucking knew that,” I muttered under my breath. I’d been chasing after what was right in front of me like a rookie.

A wave of anger rose up, thick and hot like always, but I dug my fingers into my palms and stared at the five canisters on the counter, each one a different material. Wood... glass... tin... plastic... ceramic.

I let out a breath, feeling my lungs deflate. “Everything has just been smoke and mirrors.” Every assumption I’d made and every bit of intel I’d interpreted, I had to throw it all away and start over from scratch.

“We’ll sort through it, *Signorina*,” Aurelio said with his kind eyes and warm smile, like I wasn’t a complete stranger to him and this was more than just a job.

“Thank you,” I replied because the man was doing an irritatingly good job of smothering my snark and aloofness.

It was a good thing Cielo flashed me a smug smile, making all that snark rise right back up to the surface. But before I could let it out, he kissed the top of my head and strode across the hardwood floor to the door without another word.

“Damn smug man,” I muttered under my breath, but as I watched him punch in the code on the keypad and open the warehouse door, there was no denying that the damn smug man had an ass that could stop traffic.

Because that was totally what I needed to be focused on at the moment—*really*.

Chapter Seventeen

Cielo Luciano

Amidst the soft hum of clinking cutlery and muffled conversations, I sat back and finished off my glass of wine in the dimly lit, upscale Italian restaurant, *La Trattoria del Lusso*, outside Atlantic City. The ambiance was all oak panels and faux leather booths, the type of place where deals were sealed over steaks and secrets whispered over wine. Across from me, Anthony Sorrento, the man I'd carefully chosen as our political puppet, fiddled with the fine silk of his tie, betraying an air of restlessness.

"A problem, Anthony?" I asked, though I would have smelled his fear wafting from his bald head and portly body if there was.

"No, of course not, *Signor Luciano*," he said, shaking his head adamantly. "Everything is in order," he continued, pulling out a folder from a black leather briefcase clasped with ostentatious silver fixtures.

He handed the folder across the table as he looked around the restaurant surreptitiously. He reminded me of a nervous squirrel, his gaze continuing to shift around as I skimmed through the documents in the folder to confirm all signatures were in place.

Anthony Sorrento was a greedy, little shit, but he was also efficient. He'd expedited processing and paid the bribes necessary to have the Lucianos' third casino ready for breaking ground three weeks ahead of schedule.

"*Bene*," I said with a satisfied nod when I'd confirmed the paperwork was in order.

As I withdrew a thick envelope from my inside jacket pocket and handed it to him, his eyes widened and beads of sweat broke out across his brow. The

nervous squirrel was going to give himself a heart attack.

“Relax, Anthony. If there were prying eyes around, I’d know.”

He nodded and made an effort to stop looking around. “Of course,” he said, his gaze now fixed on the envelope full of cash.

“You can count it if you’d like,” I said, daring him to question my integrity.

“No. No, I’m sure it’s all there.”

Wise answer.

He stuffed the envelope into his briefcase and slammed it shut right before the nervous little squirrel hopped to his feet.

I stood up slowly—because I wasn’t a fucking squirrel—and shook his sweaty hand.

“You should look into an anti-anxiety medication, Anthony. It might do wonders for you,” I said, then I walked away, discreetly wiping my hand with my pocket square as I went.

I stepped out of the restaurant into the bright midday sun and got behind the wheel of one of my family’s Mercedes. But rather than driving away, I circled the building to the restaurant’s rear lot and parked at the far side of it, next to a gunmetal gray Beamer that was already waiting there for me.

The man in the Beamer’s driver’s seat got out and took off a pair of aviator sunglasses as he circled around to the passenger side of my car with a thick folder in his hand. He was tall, an inch or two taller than me, but wiry more than bulky, with dark blue eyes that were constantly scanning, watchful of his surroundings.

He slid into my passenger seat and hooked the sunglasses onto his shirt.

“This is everything I could get in a hurry,” he said without preamble as he handed me the folder.

“*Grazie*, John.” John Doe—not the most original name for a man who didn’t exist. No identification, no records anywhere. He was a useful man, though, when it came to intel. The man could find dirt in a clean room.

I opened the folder and scanned the intel he’d dug up for me, most of which I’d already expected.

“*Los Cazadores Sangrientos* are pissed,” John said as I came to a grainy

photograph of two men with machetes in their hands and a head on the ground by their feet. “You were right; they and their New York counterparts tried to abscond with your product. But they’re under the impression a third party got their hands on it after the altercation.”

“Val Rojas?” I asked, because if the cartel was coming for her, it would only be fair to warn her.

He shook his head. “Someone who goes by the name of ‘Finley’.”

Fuck.

John sighed, shaking his head. “Whoever this ‘Finley’ is would be wise to dig a deep hole to hide in until they’re off *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*’ radar,” he said, watching me more closely than usual.

If ‘Cade Finley’ had been planning to make a grab for Luciano product that had been ‘claimed’ by the cartel and failed, he might have had a damn good reason to be pulling a disappearing act now. But to leave Charlotte out of the loop? That was a shitty thing to do to his own daughter.

I skimmed through the rest of the pages—intel on Silva and *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*—but something was missing.

“Where’s the intel on Declan Ryan and Charlotte Santoro?”

John shrugged. “I’ve got nothing definitive,” he said, then withdrew a few loose sheets of folded paper from his jacket pocket and handed them over.

The pages were filled with grainy photos and stats of a dozen ‘Declan Ryans’ and ‘Charlotte Santoros’ from around the world.

“Do any of those match who you’re looking for?” he asked.

“No,” I said when I’d finished scanning through every one of them. Most of the Declans were located in Ireland and none of them bore any resemblance to Charlotte. And the Charlottes? Not one of them was *mine*.

“I’m not sure what to tell you, but I’ll keep digging if you want,” he offered.

Nothing had changed. Nothing about John’s countenance hinted that anything was off. But something was wrong here. There wasn’t a man on earth John Doe couldn’t find. Until now.

“That’s all right. I think I have everything I need,” I replied as I withdrew another cash-filled envelope from my jacket pocket. “For your services,

amico.”

I handed him the envelope, and he tucked it away without counting it.

“Until next time,” he said with a nod, then he put his sunglasses back on and got out of the car.

With my business concluded, I promptly headed for the airport where a private plane was ready and waiting to transport me back to New York.

“I’ve got intel on the problem that put our shipment at risk,” I told Val Rojas over the phone the moment the plane was in the air, heading back to New York. “As soon as we’ve dealt with it, we’ll make arrangements to move the shipment, *si?*”

“*Claro, Cielo,*” she replied. “There is no hurry.”

I chuckled. Of course, there was no hurry. *Signorina* Rojas was collecting a fee for every day our shipment sat idle in her warehouse.

“*Grazie, Val.* But be careful, *per favore.* The men who are after it are dangerous.”

She laughed. “Aren’t all men, *Cielo?*”

“Just men? I’ve met my fair share of dangerous women,” I said while a certain tempest whirled around and around in my head, always wreaking havoc in there.

“Hm, this sounds personal, yes?” she mused. “I think you have maybe found yourself a dangerous woman, *amigo?*”

“You’re all dangerous, Val. It’s those high-heels—ready weapons, if you ask me.”

Charlotte had certainly proven she could do some damage with her fuck-me heels. I still had the remnants of the bruise on my thigh to prove it.

She laughed. “I didn’t know you had a sense of humor. This is good.”

“Just call me *Signor* Chuckles. We’ll talk again soon, *amica.* Be safe.”

I disconnected the call a moment later and spent the remainder of the short flight reviewing the intel from John Doe, turning the pieces this way and that, but the puzzle I was putting together had nothing to do with our shipment sitting in one of Val’s warehouses.

Unfortunately, by the time the plane touched down in New York, I still had no answers. Nothing but a sinking feeling that no matter how the pieces

finally fitted together, Charlotte was going to end up hurt.

Chapter Eighteen

Cielo Luciano

“Everything is in order in Atlantic City,” I told Deo as I stopped next to him inside our warehouse and handed him the documents from Anthony Sorrento.

I gave him a moment to glance through them and watched as Vito and another one of our men, Carmine, pried open the false bottoms of the tall, wooden crates that had arrived recently, ensuring each one had been properly stocked.

“*Bene*. It looks like we’re ahead of schedule,” he said with a satisfied nod.

“*Si*, that’s the good news.”

“And the bad news is?”

I handed him the folder from John Doe. “This is less encouraging,” I said as he skimmed through the intel on the cartel and Miguel Silva who was virtually untouchable . He surrounded himself with enough protection to guard a small city. It would take some careful planning to get close. Charlotte’s particular... skillset would have been perfect for it, but there was no way in hell that was happening.

“So,” Deo said, reading over the intel, “I guess having a conversation with Silva when he’s at his most vulnerable is going to be no simple task.”

I shook my head. “Not simple, no. It will take time and planning.” But whether for my family or for Charlotte, I would get to the man.

“Any ideas in the meantime?” he asked, shaking his head disapprovingly as he came to the photo of the cartel men and their bodyless victim.

It wasn’t that my brother was opposed to violence, but many of the South

American cartels had a reputation for using it carelessly.

I nodded. “For now, Mendoza and his men in New York—we wipe them out and make sure *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* knows it was us who did it. Retaliation for the man they killed, and it will let them know that any plans they make for distribution here will be put down.”

Deo nodded, but his eyes were caught up in thought. “We’ll be looking at dealing with *their* retaliation if we don’t take them all down in one night.”

“*Si*, it’s a gamble,” I conceded, maintaining my composure even if I wasn’t used to having to work with others, even my brother. The type of tasks for which I was responsible were solo operations. “The risk is minimal if we act rationally. And if we succeed, it will either make the cartel back down or bring them here to us.”

“And that puts any confrontation with them on our home turf, not theirs,” Deo said with another satisfied nod.

“*Si*.”

He clapped me on the back. “I like it.”

Vito and Carmine were nodding, which pleased me. We would be asking them to put their lives on the line to see this plan through, something else to which I wasn’t accustomed. My life was generally the only one I put on the line.

“There is a possible complication,” I admitted. “Though, I don’t know what impact it will have in the long run.”

“Your little runaway?” Deo asked while the corners of his lips twitched with amusement.

“Very funny.”

He shook his head, smiling as he leaned back against one of the crates. “What are the chances, *fratello*? The two of you end up in the same hotel room, both of you looking for answers from the same man?”

I scoffed. “That’s nothing. You’ll never guess who she knows.”

Deo cocked an inquisitive eyebrow.

“Morales and his second-in-command.”

His mouth opened, not quite a jaw-drop, but pretty damn close. “Nacio and Julio?”

I nodded.

“Small fucking world,” he said, shaking his head.

“*Si*, that’s what I said. But back to the point, Charlotte’s been looking for her father. He’s the reason she was in Marín’s hotel room. But according to John Doe, her father might have been planning to make a grab for our product.”

“So, you’re thinking he might have disappeared on purpose, and who the hell knows when he plans to resurface?”

I nodded, but there was something else bothering me. “What do you know about Julio?”

“Why?” he asked, brow furrowed.

That was difficult to articulate. “Something about him wasn’t sitting right when I spoke with him.”

“Julio doesn’t ‘sit right’ with anyone,” Deo said, laughing. “Well, Cait and Nic, perhaps.”

“And Charlotte,” I said, still not pleased with *that*. “He was fucking spinning her around like a child.”

Deo’s brows raised. “You’re kidding.”

“Do I look like I’m kidding?” I said dryly. The urge to rip the man’s hands from his body was a little less potent now, but not gone by any means.

Rather than responding, Deo crossed his arms over his chest and eyed me shrewdly.

When he dropped his arms, he laughed. “Fuck, you’ve still got it bad, don’t you, *fratello*?”

I sighed and scrubbed my fingers through my hair. Unless I wanted to dodge comments like this for the next several weeks, it was time to bring this conversation to a close.

“What I feel for Charlotte isn’t up for discussion, Deo. I love her—there’s no sense in denying it. I don’t think I ever stopped. But I can’t trust her.” A woman I couldn’t read was a woman who could lie to me day-in, day-out. Her disappearance and refusal to talk about it since turning up again didn’t help either. “No trust means she isn’t someone I can ever bring into the family.”

She was a woman I could fuck—of which I had every intention of doing—and a woman I could love from a distance. Nothing more.

“So, what I have is an unsettling feeling about Julio,” I said, bringing the conversation back on topic once again.

“Fair enough,” he said, nodding and letting the subject lie. “What I know about Julio is Morales trusts him. So far as our association at the time went, that was all I needed to know.”

I opened my mouth to respond at the same time a blurry red dot appeared on Deo’s chest.

“Get down,” I shouted as the world sped up and slowed down at the same time.

My body felt like it was moving through molasses as I dove for my brother, but the ear-splitting crash came quick as the window nearest us shattered.

We hit the ground at the same time a bullet slammed into the wooden crate where he’d been standing.

A split second. Half a heartbeat, and Deo could have been dead.

The gunfire continued, a merciless staccato that transformed into a deafening symphony as Vito and Carmine returned fire.

Deo joined in, but amid the chaos, I assumed a different role, one in which I analyzed the trajectory of each bullet’s path, visualizing the lot outside, the cars in it, the buildings across from it, and the shed in between.

“Vito, keep my brother covered and keep them distracted,” I shouted over top of the cacophony as I nodded beyond the warehouse. “Carmine and I are going to circle around and take them out,” I said, exchanging a quick glance with Carmine.

Carmine nodded as Deo shot me a questioning look, his brows arched in a silent commentary. He was used to being the one giving orders.

“I’m not taking any chance of bringing you home with bullet holes in you, *fratellone*,” I said, shaking my head. “Heidi would not be impressed.”

“You do realize I’ve been taking care of myself and dealing with this shit longer than you have,” Deo replied as he shifted and fired out the window.

I shrugged. “*Si*, I know. It makes me wonder why I’m better at it than you

are.”

I smiled, squeezed his shoulder, then took off before he could reply, Carmine and I crouching as we moved toward the back of the warehouse.

“There are three shooters,” I told him as we slipped outside. “Find the one furthest to the left and take him out.”

“*Si, Signor,*” he said, then obediently took off along the back of the warehouse as I veered toward the other side of the building, clutching my gun in my grip, my steps silent, guided by an innate stealth that had been honed over time.

Nearing the front of the warehouse, I pressed my back against the brown brick wall and peered out, tracking the path of the bullets still flying.

There were only a handful of cars in the lot. From here, I could see the fresh scrapes and dings in my Aston Martin’s paint job and the god damned son of a bitch using my car as cover.

I took aim. Just his spiky, brown hair stuck up above the hood of my car, but I waited patiently. Five seconds... ten...

His head bobbed above the car’s hood, and I pulled the trigger.

The bullet lodged in the side of his head a fraction of a second later, and the asshole fell to the ground.

One down; two to go.

As I scanned the remaining hiding spots, I saw the flash of a steel barrel at the opposite corner of the warehouse, and I could pick out the individual gunshot as Carmine fired. His bullet shattered the window of a navy blue SUV and lodged unerringly into the masked man taking cover behind it.

There was just one left, and I wanted him alive.

But first, I had to find him.

I stepped out from the side of the building and shot wide, just to draw his attention to my location. But there was no return fire, nothing to give away his position.

Vito and Deo stopped firing from inside the warehouse. It was silent, nothing but the thrum of distant traffic.

I scanned the lot; the black SUV toward the center of it hadn’t been there when I’d arrived a few moments ago, and squinting, I could see shoe-clad

feet on the ground between the tires.

This is too easy, my gut said loud and clear, but there was no sign of other assailants. Just this one left.

With my finger poised on the trigger, I advanced toward the mysterious intruder, my heart beating a little harder. I half-expected him to fire from beneath the car, but he didn't. Maybe the asshole was out of bullets.

I was just about to come upon him from behind when Carmine fired at him from the opposite direction, keeping him distracted long enough for me to put a bullet in the back of his shoulder.

The shot left him writhing in pain, and I immediately pounced, twisting his wounded arm up behind his back, forcing him to his knees.

Like one of his fallen comrades, he wore a mask that covered most of his face.

"All clear," I called out, letting Deo and Vito know the threat had been neutralized, then I pulled off the coward's mask.

Pablo.

The asshole from the club.

Three sets of heavy footsteps sounded behind me, coming to a stop close by. Out the corner of my eye, I saw Deo rack the slide on his gun, checking the chamber.

"The asshole and I need to have a conversation, Deo," I told him, shaking my head.

Deo inhaled deeply and let out a heavy breath. "It had better be one hell of a productive conversation, *fratello*."

"Oh, I think it will be," I said while Pablo glared up at me, his lips pressed together and sweat pouring from his brow while he tried to hide the fear in his eyes behind bullshit bravado.

Deo holstered his gun and crouched down in front of him, smiling coldly.

"I've heard my brother have a conversation or two before, *stronzo*. Something tells me you're about to have a very bad day."

“*Grazie*, Vito. You can go,” I told him as I set down my briefcase in the warehouse’s back office and opened it up.

He’d secured Pablo to one of the chairs in front of the big wooden desk with nicks and gouges in it. His wrists and ankles were bound to the arms and legs of the chair and his hands taped down flat.

“Of course, *Signor*,” Vito said after a brief hesitation, and he left the room, closing the office door behind him with a quiet click.

Alone with a single task in front of me. *This* was familiar. I took a deep, cleaning breath and sat up on the desk top, hands clasped loosely in front of me, legs dangling over the side. I stared at Pablo for a long moment, feeling like myself again. Calm and collected. In control.

Pablo stared back at me, silent behind the gag in his mouth.

“You do understand that this can’t be quick and painless, *si?*” I asked, then gave him a moment to process that.

“If you’d taken a shot at me, it might still have been on the table,” I said, shaking my head. “But you took your gun, Pablo, and you pointed it at my brother—my flesh and blood—and you pulled the trigger.”

“*Hijueputa*,” he hissed while his eyes glared daggers and his breathing sped up.

“But you can make it end,” I offered up that small bit of hope. “You can choose whether you want this over and done with today or if you want me to keep you here and come back to visit, day after day, for as long as it takes to get what I need.”

I shrugged and hopped down from the table.

“I should tell you, I’m a patient man,” I said as I glanced over the tools still gleaming and neatly arranged in my briefcase. “However much willpower you think you have, whatever tolerance for pain you think you’ve built up... I will outlast you,” I said as I pulled the gag from his mouth. “This will not be pleasant, but you can make it end—I just want you to remember that.”

He continued to glare, silent, but for all his bravado, I could feel the fissures of doubt begin to form in him, letting his fear show through.

“All right, let’s get started, shall we?” I asked as I selected a slim scalpel

with a longer than usual blade.

He looked at me, then the blade. His whole body was rigid as he tried to maneuver himself away. When that didn't work, he pressed his bare feet hard against the floor and tried to push the chair back.

It didn't budge.

"You can probably figure out my most pressing questions at the moment, so let's get those out of the way first. Who sent you to kill my brother, and why?" I asked.

It didn't surprise me when he gave no response. This man would crack, but he wouldn't get there easily.

I shoved the rag into his mouth, then turned my attention to his right hand.

"I'm going to sever your median nerve, Pablo," I told him as I envisioned the scalpel's path through flesh and between bones. "And then, you won't be able to hold a gun in this hand, never mind pull the trigger."

The moment I was confident, I sliced and severed in one swift move.

He roared behind the gag and jerked in his chair as tears streamed from his eyes, cascading down his beet red cheeks. But as the blinding shock wore off, he settled into the chair and panted, slow and even, regaining his composure.

"I'm going to ask you again, Dmitri, but before I do," I said, setting the scalpel down on the desk, "I want to tell you that what I just did was a 'two' on the pain scale. If you tell me what I want to know, I might feel inclined to refrain from climbing much higher on that scale."

He glared and panted but not much else.

"Who sent you to kill my brother, and why?" I asked.

But of course, he didn't answer me. Not when I severed the median nerve of his left hand or removed his fingers. Not even when I punctured through the saphenous nerves of both his knees.

"What... what time is it?" he panted while his chin rested heavily on his chest, tears and saliva dripping off it.

I chuckled. "If you're late for a date, I'm afraid you're not going to make it."

"What time... is it?" he persisted.

I glanced at my watch. If he thought the cavalry was coming, he was going

to be sorely disappointed. By now, Deo would have had our warehouse guarded like the Pope himself had come to visit.

Usually then, I would have ignored him, used pain to focus his attention where I wanted it. But not today. My gut was telling me there was more to it.

“It’s thirty-seven minutes past six.”

Even as he grimaced, the corners of his lips twitched.

“My job is done,” he wheezed.

“What job?” I asked, keeping my voice cool and calm despite the way my heartbeat had picked up.

“To keep you distracted, *parce*.” His lips curled in a sinister smile.

Me. Not Deo.

A cold sensation prickled down my spine like shards of ice as Charlotte’s face flashed behind my eyes.

“A distraction from what?”

“From the *puta*, of course—the one you’ve been following around like she’s in heat.”

My heart pounded harder as I took hold of his chin and forced his head up, meeting his eyes, searching for whether he was telling the truth.

“You’ve got a real hard-on for her, don’t you?” He scoffed, then looked down at the stumps of his fingers.

He looked back up slowly, pain etched in hard lines across his face.

“That’s too bad,” he said, as a flicker of triumph darted through his dark eyes. “Because we’ve got her now, asshole.”

Chapter Nineteen

Charlotte Santoro

Aurelio set my laptop down on the coffee table and sat back, eyes lost in concentration.

“From what you’ve told me about your father, I think it’s highly unlikely he would have offered up information about you, no matter the... pressure he was under.”

My stomach roiled. I knew damn well what he meant by ‘pressure’.

“Whoever is responsible for your father’s disappearance knew about your connection to him prior to whatever took place in Venezuela,” he continued like he was quite certain of it.

“No, that’s not possible,” I argued as I stroked Ray’s back.

Ray and I were sitting at the opposite end of the sofa, as far from Aurelio as Ray could get while keeping his protector nearby him at the same time.

I shook my head. “My dad only entrusted that information to people he trusted.” There had to be something else that explained how the cartel had figured out the link between Madison Finley and Charlotte Santoro.

Aurelio sighed. “It is sometimes the people we trust the most who cut us deepest with their betrayal.”

He was looking at me as he spoke, eyes conveying their own message. It wasn’t the first time we’d circled this subject today

“Why do I get the feeling you’re talking about two different things, all with the same words?” I asked.

“Because you’re a wise, young woman.”

Okay, so apparently, we were done dancing around *this* conversation.

“This is about my leaving a decade ago?”

He nodded.

“It was hardly a betrayal,” I said with a scoff. “I’m not sure Cielo noticed with all the... distractions he had flitting around him. But regardless, it wasn’t like I had much of a choice,” I said while a prickling, defensive sensation climbed up my spine.

He eyed me for a moment like I had fine print written across my face and he was scrutinizing every word.

“I believe you didn’t,” he said with a satisfied nod after a moment.

My brow furrowed. “Just like that?”

“You’re not easy to read, *signorina*, but I have a... sense for the people who care about those who are important to me—a kindred spirit, so to speak.”

“I don’t—”

Aurelio’s phone rang. The sound felt sharp and shrill in the big, quiet space.

“*Scusa, per favore*,” he said as he retrieved his phone from where he had it hooked onto the waist of his pants.

“Get her out of there,” I heard Cielo’s voice bark through the phone at the same time the sensors at the edge of the warehouse’s lot tripped, filling the interior with a sharper racket than Aurelio’s phone.

“*Si, Signor*,” Aurelio replied smoothly as he surged to his feet.

“No, Aurelio,” I said as I got up and stepped into his path. “Please,” I said, holding out my hand for the phone.

With his brow slightly furrowed, he handed me the phone, and the moment he did, I dashed to the monitor by the door and flipped through the angles, watching as five jet black SUVs pulled into the lot and spread out around the building.

Shit.

I put the phone to my ear. “It’s too late to clear out, Cielo, but we’ve got this. Just... stay away.” I said as I flipped open the panel next to the keypad.

“Charlotte, you don’t think—”

“You have to stay clear of the lot, Cielo. Do not come here,” I snapped.

There was no time to argue. “Now, I’ve kind of got things to do here. I’ll let you know when it’s over.”

I took a breath, and without waiting for him to reply, I hit the top two buttons inside the panel.

All the lights went out and the call cut off.

I handed the phone back to Aurelio, who’d come up behind me. He didn’t look angry, exactly, more like someone had rearranged all the fluffy ducks he had lined up in a row.

“Don’t bother,” I said when he turned on his phone and pulled up his contact list. I nodded to the monitor with the SUVs outside, now parked in a surround formation. “I just jammed the signals all around here.”

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“So they can’t call for reinforcements.”

He nodded, his gaze fixed on the monitor while the wheels turned behind his eyes like he was cooking up a plan.

“Will you trust me, Aurelio?” I asked. I was so not in the mood to deal with another Maverick.

His brows raised. “I imagine I don’t have much of a choice unless I’d like to offer the gentlemen outside a round of target practice.”

“Fair enough.” It wasn’t trust, exactly. More like limited options, but I’d take it.

I ignored the nervous fluttering in my stomach and the cold sweat slicking my palms, and I pressed the lower left button inside the panel. A quiet grinding sounded right before a steel panel slid down and covered the front door.

Though I couldn’t see them, I’d practiced for this often enough I could envision the same type of steel panel sliding across the only windows on the upper floor of the warehouse and the access panel to the roof as well.

For better or worse, we were locked down now.

“All right, then let’s do this,” I said, wishing I felt as confident as I sounded.

I took off across the warehouse to the narrow hall at the back and down the stairs at the end of it. Ray followed on my heels as I used the fingerprint

scanner to open the armory in the basement and walked through it to the surveillance room beyond it. I was fairly sure Fort Knox really did have nothing on this place.

Inside the surveillance room, my fingers flew across the main keyboard, accessing the defensive measures my dad had installed over the years and pulling up camera angles on the dozen monitors on the wall.

As the scene outside came together on the monitors, Aurelio walked into the room.

“That’s quite the gun collection,” Aurelio mused, nodding toward the armory filled with everything from Barrett M82s and Heckler & Koch MP5s to fragmentation grenades and tactical gear, and enough ammunition to take out a small country.

I shrugged. “My dad likes to be prepared,” I said as the first car door opened and a man stepped out. An attractive man, impeccably dressed in a pale gray suit and midnight blue tie.

A lead weight dropped in my stomach as I increased the magnification for a better look. Medium brown hair and eyes and dark scruff across his jaw. And really fucking tall.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it,” I muttered under my breath as car doors opened around the warehouse and a lot of men stepped out.

“A problem, *Signorina*?” Aurelio asked, his voice tight.

“Isn’t there always?” I said with an impressive outward calm while it felt like my insides were running in a hundred different directions.

I dug the fingers of my left hand into my palm as I flipped on the intercom, which would broadcast throughout the warehouse and all around it.

I licked my lips. Swallowed.

Here we go.

I pressed and held down the intercom. “You’re trespassing on private property,. It’s time for you to leave,” I said in Spanish to Gustavo Mendoza, and I could hear the echo of my own voice a split second later coming back to me on the sound feed from outside.

“I do not think so, *Señorita* Santoro. You have something that belongs to me,” the man said, his voice heavily accented.

Okay, so he clearly knew who I was too. *Lucky me.*

“What is it he thinks you have, *Signorina?*” Aurelio asked.

“A dead body, I suppose,” I mused aloud, shaking my head. Though, if the guy thought I’d mounted his brother’s body on the wall like some sort of morbid hunting trophy, he had some serious screws loose. It did make me wonder what the hell was mounted on *his* wall.

Aurelio’s eyebrows raised.

“The man Cielo and I had a conversation with last night,” I explained.

“You can either hand it over,” Gustavo continued, his words morphing back and forth between English and Spanish, “or we can come in there and take it.”

“I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down’,” I sang quietly.

Aurelio chuckled.

“Something’s wrong,” I said.

He cocked an eyebrow at me.

“All right, there’s a whole lot wrong at the moment, but what he’s saying... he keeps using the word ‘it’, even in Spanish—‘hand *it* over’. If I’d killed your brother, you’d be out there demanding I ‘hand *him* over’, right?”

Aurelio nodded.

I pressed the intercom button. “Nothing in here belongs to you, *Señor* Mendoza. I’m giving you the chance to walk away,” I said, ignoring the blood pounding in my ears. “Take it.” *Please.*

“What is it you intend to do, *Signorina?*—if you don’t mind me asking,” Aurelio said with a wry smile and just a slight furrow between his brows as he looked from one monitor to the next.

I followed his gaze, taking a tally of the men surrounding the warehouse. Thirteen—including Mendoza. They all still stood close to their black SUVs, but I could feel their restless energy from here. It was making my heart pound harder and sweat trickle down the back of my neck, because there was only one way forward.

“If they don’t get back into their pretty, little cars, I intend to fry them,” I said like I was talking about fish and chips, not human beings.

“And how do you intend to do that?”

“The ground beneath the gravel outside is electrified flooring, four-by-four panels,” I explained, nodding to the monitor on the far right as I pulled up the flooring grid. The panels could be activated all together or individually. The choice was mine—lucky me.

“The gravel’s limestone—a good conductor,” I went on, trying to focus on the strategy and not the reality of what I was about to do. “The voltage is adjusted so that anyone wearing rubber soles will get knocked off their feet onto the grid. Those without... they’ll fry right away,” I said, though the last words tried to get trapped in my throat.

Aurelio nodded like he wholly approved, and for a brief moment, I could see it—the hardness behind his kind eyes, the ruthlessness beneath his warm smile. There really was more than one side to him, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to meet that other side.

I closed my eyes, though, and focused, like I could pull that ruthlessness right out of his veins and into mine. While I’d always known what this home could do, it had been a theoretical knowledge. Until now.

Dad, you really should have written a manual on all this stuff. ‘Killing Guilt-Free... for Dummies’, maybe?

“Charlotte?” Aurelio spoke gently.

“Yeah?” I forced my eyes open and looked at the men on the monitors. Men who were making no move to leave. Several of them had opened the trunks of the SUVs, retrieving what looked to be Saiga-12s and AK-47s while they rambled on to one another in Spanish about leveling this place and all the graphic ways they were going to kill the *puta* inside. They were creative—I’d give them that much.

“Show me what to do, *Signorina*,” Aurelio said in a tone that was very much like Cielo’s—that ‘you’re going to do what I say’ kind of tone.

I tore my gaze from the monitors and looked up at him. “They’re not here for you.” This was my responsibility no matter how much I wished it wasn’t. “I—”

Movement at the far edge of one of the monitors caught my eye. Movement on the road beyond the parking lot. Two cars, approaching fast.

And the lead car was a black Aston Martin.

“God damned Maverick,” I cursed under my breath as my heart raced and my stomach turned.

Cielo was going to walk right into this, right into a bunch of angry men with very big guns.

I pointed to the cars zipping closer when Aurelio looked at me strangely.

“I told him to stay away, Aurelio.” But of course, he didn’t listen.

Bile rose high in the back of my throat, and my heart pounded so hard I could feel it slamming against my ribs.

“Tell me what to do, Charlotte,” Aurelio demanded.

They’re going to shoot him.

I highlighted the four-by-four panels I needed to take out every one of them as the men in front of the warehouse turned toward the sound of the approaching vehicles.

They’re going to kill him right in front of me.

My fingers flew across the keyboard, readying the system as the Aston Martin turned sharply into the lot.

“Shoot them!” Gustavo yelled, but not one of them got the chance to pull the trigger because I flipped off the audio feed and pressed ‘Enter’.

One key.

One simple push of a button.

And then I watched as thirteen mouths opened in silent screams, their faces contorted, their bodies convulsing.

They fell like dominos, jolting on the panels like writhing fish out of water.

And then they were still. Every one of the thirteen men dead.

It’s over, I told myself as I shut down the system and tried to draw in a deep breath, but it wouldn’t come. It felt like all the oxygen in the room had been sucked out, leaving me gasping.

Get a grip, Char. It’s over.

“Just breathe, *Signorina*.”

But I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t tear my gaze away from the dead bodies. Thirteen dead bodies. Thirteen men I’d killed with the press of a button.

My stomach revolted. No matter how much I tried to hold it back, I wasn’t

winning this one.

I surged to my feet, pushed past Aurelio, and made a mad dash for the bathroom, but those contorted faces came with me.

As everything I'd eaten in the past month came back up in the sleek marble sanctuary of a bathroom, I had a feeling those faces were never going to leave me.

Chapter Twenty

Cielo Luciano

“What the fuck just happened?” I asked Deo.

He stood next to me in the parking lot of Charlotte’s warehouse, shaking his head while my heart pounded with residual adrenaline, my mind struggling to comprehend the bizarre scene.

The air bore the putrid stench of singed hair and charred flesh, a nauseating blend akin to burnt rubber and meat. It was not a scent to which I would ever become accustomed.

“Beats the hell out of me,” Deo said, mirroring my bewildered state as his gaze swept across the motionless figures strewn about the ground.

Both of us clutched our guns, our vigilant stance paralleled by Vito and Carmine, who joined us, equally perplexed by the mysterious turn of events. The fine line between life and death had been abruptly blurred.

One minute, I’d been racing into the lot, prepared to take on the whole fucking cartel to get to her, and the next, they were dropping to the ground, like marionettes with their strings cut.

“That’s an awful lot of men dropping dead for no good reason,” Vito observed, suspicion tainting his voice as he cautiously inhaled the air.

“I don’t think it’s poison,” Deo added, dismissing the possibility.

“Electricity,” I concluded with a newfound respect for Charlotte and her father.

That was one hell of a defense system.

Deo nodded. “In that case, is anyone in the mood for barbecue?” he joked.

Vito and Carmine chuckled, but my heart still raced. The assholes on the

ground were dead, but what about inside? If any of them had gotten into the warehouse...

Dread coiled around me, squeezing the breath from my lungs as my mind conjured horrific scenarios, all of them ending with Charlotte riddled with bullet holes.

"Stay here," I managed to force the words out past an unfamiliar lump at the back of my throat.

And then, without plan or forethought, I bolted across the lot, my shoes pounding the gravel while I hoped like hell there was no more current flowing through the ground.

Adrenaline surged, pushing me forward.

I was just a few steps away when the door swung open, and I braced myself for the worst, for screams or bloodshed, but it was Aurelio who stepped into the doorway.

"It's all right, *Signor*," he said, his voice steady and reassuring.

An invisible vise that had constricted my chest began to ease, allowing me to draw breath once more.

"Where is she?" I asked as I stepped into the warehouse, glancing around to see for myself that none of those assholes had managed to get inside.

No bullet holes in the walls, no furniture out of place, no blood on the floor.

"She's unharmed," Aurelio said with a reassuring nod, but his voice was tight, fraught with tension.

"What is it, Aurelio?"

The muffled sound of retching came from across the warehouse before he could reply. I took a step in its direction, but he put a hand on my shoulder.

"She's a brave girl, *Signor*, but I don't think she's killed often," he said, his eyes pinched with concern.

My heart clenched.

"No, she hasn't," I replied. "Charlotte isn't a killer." If there'd been any doubt, the way she'd hesitated with Carlos Mendoza had made that clear.

Aurelio nodded and dropped his hand, and I followed the sounds to the bathroom door where Ray was whining unhappily.

I paused there and scratched his head while I turned back to Aurelio.

“Get the bodies into the SUVs and drive them around back, out of sight, *per favore*.”

“Of course, *Signor*,” he said and immediately headed toward the door.

“All right, Ray; you keep watch, *amico*. I’ll take care of the tempest,” I said, talking to the damned dog just like Charlotte did, like he actually understood me.

But the moment I slipped inside the bathroom, I paused. She was bent over the marble toilet, her back to me, holding her hair back in one hand. She looked small and almost fragile, and it made me want to beat the fuck out of the dead man. But even more than that, the urge to hold her and comfort her was like a living thing inside my veins—not a feeling to which I was accustomed. It was one of the things I’d liked about Charlotte; the girl had never been clingy and needy like so many of the other girls I’d known.

“Go away, Cielo,” she said without looking up at me.

All right, so she still wasn’t needy. But that decided it. She fought, and I fought back. That was the way it had always worked between us.

I took a step further into the room and closed the door behind me. I crouched down behind her, my heart aching as I watched her dry-heaving into the toilet.

In between waves she shook her head, still gripping the toilet like a lifeline. “Believe it or not, most women don’t really want people staring at them while they’re throwing up last week’s dinner,” she sniped, her voice laced with discomfort and more than a hint of her usual snark.

I chuckled. “You’re not *most* women, *tempesta*. And you know I don’t care what you want.”

Her pained groan in response made me wince. I had no fucking clue what I was doing when I tentatively pulled her hair from her grip and smoothed it back while her stomach continued to revolt.

“I should have left the voltage flowing and electrocuted your ass,” she muttered in between spasms.

When the retching finally subsided, she slumped against the cool bathroom floor. I reached over to the sink, grabbed a washcloth, and soaked it

under the faucet.

"Feeling better?" I asked quietly as I offered her the cloth to wipe her face. She nodded weakly. "Like a million bucks."

As she shifted, I sat back right there on the bathroom floor and gathered her into my arms, supporting her weight, and cradled her close. She leaned her head away, but otherwise didn't object. It surprised me that she put up no fight, made me worry they'd done more than rattle her.

"I didn't have a choice," she said, her tone obstinate.

I could feel her shivers, her racing heart. I didn't think she was talking about the vomiting.

I stroked her back, my fingers moving in soothing circles.

"I've killed before, but it was... it was kill or be killed, you know?—like in the Central African Republic..." her voice trailed off. "I executed those men today, Cielo," she said, her voice cracking, a vulnerable sound, which was not something I'd ever imagined she could be.

The dead men scattered around her warehouse had made her crack. They'd found a way to break through her storm-laden exterior, and it made my heart pound harder. It called up the urge to paint the whole god damned world with the blood of the men outside.

"They deserved to die, *tempesta*," I said, feeling like truer words had never been spoken, "and you did it far more humanely than I would have."

She let out a scathing breath, but said nothing, and after a moment, she leaned her head against my chest, finally surrendering to my hold on her.

Vulnerable. Soft. I'd never held her like this, never imagined something could feel so inexplicably right.

As I held her trembling form in my arms, her head resting against my chest, something inside me shifted. It was a sudden, overwhelming awareness of the depth of my feelings for her, feelings that had lurked beneath the surface for a decade but had in no way been dulled or dimmed.

I'd always been self-aware, never a man to bury my head in the sand, but I'd truly believed I could love this woman from a distance.

I let out a slow, heavy breath. What a fucking fool I'd been.

She shifted after a long while and held her hands out in front of her.

“The blood on my hands, Cielo...” She looked at her hands, fanning out her fingers. They were spotless, but I knew what she was seeing.

I adjusted my position so that I could take each of her hands in mine. She half-heartedly tried to yank them back, but I held firm, staring at our entwined fingers.

“There is no blood on your hands,” I told her. “When you kill to protect someone, it doesn’t count. It leaves no marks.”

That’s why she’d done it—to protect me. I knew that. Of course, I knew that. There was no way Charlotte would have killed those men for the hell of it.

She scoffed. “I must have missed that page in the rulebook.”

I shook my head against the top of hers. “It’s in there. You wouldn’t fault a mother for killing to protect her child, would you? Or a husband for killing for his wife, a brother who kills to protect his brother?”

She stretched out her fingers entwined with mine, then curled them. Then again. I could practically feel the wheels turning inside her head.

“That’s what it is to you, isn’t it?” she said, curling her fingers a little tighter around mine. “That’s why it’s... simple?”

“*Si*, that’s why it doesn’t bother me—it never has. It sounds cold, psychopathic even, but there are few things that have ever been so clear for me.”

She was silent, stretching out then curling her fingers again, lost in thought. But like always, I had no idea what she was thinking, no ability to gauge or anticipate. And that was the problem.

That was why this could never work.

She scoffed and shook her head. “We are both seriously fucked up. You know that, right?” I could feel her smile against my chest.

“*Si*.” Fucked up and in a lot of fucking trouble. I kissed the top of her head.

When she slid her hands out of mine and shifted her weight so that she was supporting herself, I stood up, ignoring the urge to gather her back into my arms.

“Why don’t you take a few minutes to get cleaned up?” I asked, phrasing

it as a question since she would have fought me otherwise. I crossed the small room, nevertheless, and turned on the faucet to the walk-in shower.

She eyed me for a moment, then nodded, and while the thought of joining her held the kind of potent appeal that was making me hard, I turned away and left the room, closing the door behind me.

On my way out of the warehouse, I shoved one of the pillows from the sofa in the door to keep it wedged open, then looked around outside.

There were no more bodies on the ground, and the SUVs were nowhere in sight—presumably hidden around the back of the warehouse for the time being.

Deo, Vito, and Aurelio had congregated by our cars, but not one of them was wearing their happy face.

“What is it?” I asked as I stopped next to Deo.

“Gustavo Mendoza is one of the dead men,” he said, nodding toward the back of the warehouse. “There’s no chance his men didn’t know where he was going.”

Shit.

“And that means, when he doesn’t return, retaliation will be coming,” I added, filling in the blank.

“It looks like your runaway can take care of herself,” he said, a hint of awe in his voice. “But if she gets credit for wiping them out, that fucks over the message we need to send to *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*.”

I drummed my fingers against my thigh, rearranging the puzzle pieces in my head.

“Then we do what we have to do tonight,” I said with a shrug. Luis Mendoza had given the order that brought these men to Charlotte’s home. One way or another, he was dying tonight. “We bring the bodies with us and make it look like they were involved in the hit. All of Mendoza’s men gone in one night—that was the plan anyway. This way, we send a message and none of the fallout comes back on Charlotte.”

Deo nodded, rubbing his hand over the back of his neck. “We’ll need intel. Fast,” he said, a furrow between his brows. “If we intend to make a statement, I won’t be sloppy about it.”

I scoffed. “I don’t do ‘sloppy’, *fratellone*.”

But he was right. A hit like this would normally require days of careful planning.

“We still have Pablo,” I said while I tried to gauge just how much intel the man would have.

Vito shook his head. “He was sent on a veritable suicide mission, *Signor*, which means he was on Mendoza’s shit list, not privy to the boss’s secrets.”

“True,” Deo and I conceded at the same time.

“But he’ll have enough,” Aurelio interjected. “Even men who are low on the totem often know where those higher up tend to congregate.”

I nodded. “If we assume all of Mendoza’s men will be well-armed and well-guarded, and we proceed accordingly, then all we need are locations.”

“I’ll get them from our visitor,” Aurelio said, gripping my shoulder. “You should stay with the girl, *Signor*,” he said, nodding back toward the warehouse.

It wasn’t the right move. What I needed was distance from the woman inside. But she was in there, hurting, because she’d fried up a parking lot full of men to try to keep them from filling me full of bullets.

“*Si*, I’m going to make sure she’s all right.”

Aurelio nodded approvingly and dropped his hand, but as he and Vito headed back to have a conversation with Pablo, I could feel Deo’s wary gaze on me.

“It’s not like you to hand off ‘conversations’,” he mused. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing here?” he asked, inclining his head in the direction of the warehouse.

“Not a fucking clue,” I admitted, four words that tasted bitter on my tongue.

He scoffed, shaking his head. “That’s what scares me.”

Me too.

Chapter Twenty-One

Charlotte Santoro

Charter a plane. Kill Silva. Get my dad back.

That sounded like a pretty damned good idea to me.

I swept the clothes on the floor out of the way and yanked the suitcase out from under my bed. It was already packed. It was always packed.

Ray whined as I dropped the heavy luggage down on my bed and adjusted the hem of my dress—the too-short, skin tight dress with the plunging neckline that was sure to help me get past Silva’s security. Silva had a never-ending stream of ‘escorts’ in and out of his estate. All I had to do was knock one of them out of the lineup and take her place.

Easy.

Hell, I couldn’t quite remember why I hadn’t done this sooner.

“Don’t worry, buddy; you’re coming with me,” I told Ray, pausing long enough to give him a reassuring pet.

It wasn’t like there was anyone I could leave him with. Cielo, maybe?

“You two seem to have become awfully good friends,” I mused with just the slightest hint of accusation in my tone.

Ray looked up at me with his big, innocent eyes.

“All right, I get it. He makes it hard to walk away, doesn’t he?” It was one of Cielo’s most annoying features.

Ray shoved his head beneath my hand, looking for more pets.

I indulged him for a moment, but I had calls to make and some very unpleasant poisons to prep.

I’d just dropped my hand and turned toward the bedroom door when Cielo

appeared at the top of the stairs. His gaze traveled from my head to my stiletto-clad toes and back up again, making my stupid body tingle.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked in a voice that, what it lacked in volume, it more than made up for in menace.

I feigned a careless shrug. “I’m done with research,” I told him. “I’m done with chasing down cartels, and I’ve definitely had enough of them chasing after me. There’s only one sure way to get my father back, and that’s what I’m doing.”

One simple flight, and I could have him back. No more thinking about the risks, the dangers. Only the payoff, the prize.

It was rash, and it was reckless. It was everything I’d spent ten years trying to ‘therapy’ out of my system.

I dug my fingernails into my palms, trying to find some sort of grounding, but even I had to acknowledge I’d flown that coop thirty minutes ago.

“Like hell you are,” he replied, striding further into the room. Five long steps, and he was right in front of me.

I crossed my arms over my chest. We were both aware of the way it pressed my breasts closer together and shoved them up like a smorgasbord, and the hungry look in his eyes set off sparks in my brain.

Just fuck him, they screamed. Where’s the harm? It’s smarter than rushing off to Venezuela, isn’t it?

It was.

It was the lesser of two impulsive evils by far.

Adrenaline coursed through my veins like wildfire as his scent wrapped around me and the muscled body beneath his navy blue shirt called to me.

I stood there, on the precipice of a second reckless decision in the past thirty minutes, my heart pounding like a drumbeat of chaos. The impulse was screaming at me, tempting me with the sweet allure of immediate satisfaction.

“Pause and reflect,” Dr. Steele’s voice whispered in my ear. *“Impulsive actions lead to consequences you’ll regret.”*

I tried to look away, to find five things I could see, four things I could touch, but Cielo was right in front of me. Hell, it felt like he was all around

me.

“I have to go,” I said, but even I could hear the lack of conviction in my voice.

“*One step at a time, one breath at a time,*” Dr. Steele’s words reverberated in my head.

One god damned step, Char. Just take one step back.

Before I could step back—but let’s face it; I wasn’t going to take that step—Cielo tunneled his fingers through my wet hair, grabbing hold at the roots and twisting to force me to look up at him.

“I told you what would happen if you tried to leave. Is it that you want me to tie you up, *tempesta?*”

Before I could respond, he swept in, capturing my lips with that bruising fervor that was like heroine.

He tasted just like the last time, like peppermint and vanilla, and the heat of his body pressed against me had molten lava pooling low in my abdomen. And like before, I could taste it—sex and sweat and victory.

I sunk my teeth into his lip even as I pressed my body closer to his, and I grabbed hold of his hand in my hair, curling my fingernails into his flesh, rushing headlong toward the thin line that hovered between sex and violence.

He yanked his mouth away, just like I knew he would, but rather than test the waters this time, he spun me around, slamming me into my bedroom wall.

Instead of delving for my neck, he grabbed hold of my wrists and pinned them together below my tailbone, pressing my breasts hard against the wall while his eyes grazed over me. I could feel everywhere they touched like the faintest current along my skin. But the moment his grip on my wrists loosened just a little, I was ready.

In an explosive burst, I bent my knees and shoved back with everything I had, legs, hips, and shoulders. Rather than trying to break free, I used the momentum and his momentary surprise to shove his body around so that his back hit the wall with my back to him.

Then I spun to face him, to keep my opponent in my sights. And when my leg found its way right between his thighs, pressing against the hard length of his erection in warning, a thrill coursed through my veins, adding fuel to the

fire.

I didn't pause to see how he'd react, to see what he was planning next. I grabbed hold of his shirt and tugged hard, making the buttons fly loose and exposing jacked pecs and a six-pack that might have been the greatest thing I'd ever seen. His body was covered in fading bruises, and there were at least half a dozen old scars that said this man was no stranger to violence.

But even more than the ripped body or the bruises and scars that peppered it, what was drawing all my attention was the artwork across his chest and all the way down, disappearing into the waist of his pants. It was some sort of storm scene, portentous, dark clouds and a plethora of lightning bolts, beautiful in its sheer chaos, perhaps the most elaborate body art I'd ever seen—and I'd seen some detailed work.

The tats were sexy as hell, but wrong. Out of place. Because mafia men didn't have tattoos.

He took advantage of my surprise, shoving me back, then spinning me around yet again, just careful enough that my cheek pressed up against the wall rather than slamming into it.

"Still think you can fight me?" he whispered, his lips a hair's breadth from my ear.

"Always," I replied, bucking against him.

But he was prepared for it this time. He slid his foot between mine at the same time and shoved my right foot out, just enough to leave me off-balance. Before I could recover, he'd gotten hold of the zipper of my dress and yanked it down, exposing the long line of my back while the fabric sagged down over my shoulders.

In a real fight, this would have been a problem, but here, now, my body hummed as the cool air of the room brushed against newly exposed skin.

"Did you put this on for Silva, just like you did for Marín?" he asked. There was a hard edge to his voice as his hand gripped the back of my neck, holding me still while his free hand grazed over the lace corset, straight down my spine.

"Yes," I said, though it was a lie. It hadn't been *for* Silva; it was just work clothes, a 'costume' as Cielo had called it. But I wanted to rile him up to

make the sex even better, and maybe just a little, I wanted to piss him off. “Does that bother you?” I prodded.

He chuckled, a cold sound that sent a shiver down my spine. “Not at all. Because you’re going to burn it.”

I scoffed. “Not likely.”

That corset cost three-hundred dollars, and I swear there wasn’t a piece of lingerie out there that did nicer things for my tits.

“Then I’ll just have to take care of it myself, won’t I?” he said as he shifted his weight against me.

I was feeling pretty confident that it was an idle threat—since lighting things on fire tended to cause fires—when I felt the top of the corset give way.

And then the rest of it, so fast it wasn’t possible he’d unfastened it.

All the pretty black lace sagged as he tossed a pocketknife onto my night table.

“Oh, you asshole,” I seethed as I used that anger to shove back hard and spin my body around.

The quick movement made the unzipped dress slide off my shoulders, losing the ruined corset while the dress snagged on my hips.

His pupils dilated more and his nostrils flared as his gaze swept over me, taking me in from my bare tits to my black belly ring.

He was shaking his head just a little, not fighting me now, just staring.

“Christ,” he whispered under his breath. “You’re beautiful.”

The odd tone in his voice made something twist uncomfortably, like a knot in my chest. Whatever it was, it wasn’t welcome here.

“Thanks, but my self-esteem tank is all filled up.”

I reached for his open shirt, using it to drag him down to me, burying the uncomfortable sensation beneath the feel of his lips, the taste of his mouth, the aching heaviness in my breasts when his tattooed ribs grazed my nipples.

I yanked his shirt down his arms, dropping it onto the floor, and I’d just begun to explore the sinewy planes of his back when he grabbed hold of my arms.

He shoved me back hard this time so that the backs of my knees hit the

mattress, and then I landed on my ass on my bed.

He was fast. Before I'd managed to right myself, he'd gotten hold of the hem of my dress and yanked it off, leaving me in a pair of panties, a garter, and stilettos.

He shoved my thighs apart and stepped between them, eyes grazing greedily over my body "You look even better than I remember," he said, his voice low and rough.

I scoffed—a knee-jerk reaction to that tone again. "Pretty sure you've got me confused with someone else. You never saw this much of me before, handsome."

He shook his head. "Wrong name. Try again," he said as he leaned down toward me.

Charming. God, the name actually hurt, so I forced out a scornful laugh.

"I have a feeling the last thing you need is an ego boost," I said as I wrapped my legs around him, as high up as I could reach.

I used every bit of strength I could muster to drag him down, then flipped us until his back hit the bed and I was on top, straddling him. His cock rubbed against my pussy through the thin fabric of our clothes. Damn, that already felt good. So good, I couldn't resist rubbing against him, grinding my clit against the hard length of him.

The problem with things that felt good was they tended to break one's concentration, so I wasn't prepared for it when he jolted himself upright and grabbed my wrists, pinning my arms behind my back while I straddled his lap.

With my legs folded on either side of him, I didn't have a whole lot of moves when he leaned in and suckled a nipple into his mouth. And whoa, that was a lot of suction; my sensitive flesh prickled as hot waves of arousal traveled down, making my pussy clench. And when he sunk his teeth in, I swear I could feel the first tingling climb toward orgasm.

I almost groaned when his lips released me, but he was on the move, releasing my wrists only to flip us over so that he hovered above me.

"I've waited too long for this, *tempesta*. I'm done waiting."

He slid his thumbs into the waist of my panties and jerked until they

snapped, leaving me bare to him.

His gaze met mine as he leaned away, then stood. There was a command in his eyes. *Stay*, he told me silently.

Not fucking likely.

I bolted up onto my knees as he retrieved a condom, and I reached for the button and fly of his pants—clearly, he was overdressed for the occasion.

When I yanked his pants and black boxer briefs down over his ass and his cock sprang free, my mouth literally watered.

Dear lord, now *that* might have just been the best thing I'd ever seen. Long and thick, curved slightly upward like it had been handcrafted to hit a woman's G-spot just right. *Holy shit*.

And if that wasn't enough, he had a Jacob's ladder that pretty much guaranteed non-stop stimulation—because apparently, the gods were very, very happy with me today.

I wrapped my hand around his cock, squeezing to make my fingers touch. *Nice*. And when I ran my fist up and down the length, I couldn't help but imagine the feel of those piercings against my inner walls instead of the palm of my hand.

He hissed as my fingers caught the edge of the plump head, then he grabbed my wrist, squeezing hard enough that it forced me to let go. He held my hand there, itching to touch him, as he rolled the condom on one-handed, then used that same hand in the center of my chest to push me down.

I went willingly enough, but the moment my back hit the mattress, I grabbed him by the back of the neck and dragged him down to me, kissing mercilessly. I swear I was getting drunk off the scent of him, not just bergamot and sandalwood now, but something more primal, potently male, and intoxicating.

His hand slid between us and down, down my abdomen, brushing over my clit and gliding right through my wet folds like he was a man on a mission.

The mission became rather clear when he thrust his finger inside me, but I gasped as he hit my G-spot on the first stroke. While a decent number of men could find the spot, it usually took them a while, and sometimes, a guided tour, but dear lord, Cielo knew what he was doing. He crooked his finger and

hit it again, and then over and over again.

Searing pleasure coursed through me as his finger explored me, setting off a chain of sparks that threatened to burst into flames and consume me. I dug my fingers into the hard planes of his back. It was too intense, too fast. It left me breathless, struggling to stay on top of the sensations, to control the climb and draw it out.

But before I reached the peak, he withdrew suddenly, catching hold of my arms and thrusting them down above my head. His iron grip sent shivers of excitement through my veins as my body trembled in anticipation, desperate for more.

“Not yet,” he whispered. “I’m going to fuck you now, and I want to feel you coming on my cock.”

My stomach clenched, and my heart pounded.

He grabbed my hip at the same time I felt the plump head of his cock press against my pussy. *Yes. God, yes.* I wanted this. I don’t think I’d ever wanted it more.

But he didn’t move, he didn’t thrust.

“How rough, *tempesta?*” he asked, his voice whisper-quiet, his eyes boring into mine, trying to see deeper. Always trying to see deeper. But amid the ice blue lust in his eyes there was something else there. It looked like concern, and it made that thing in my chest twist up more.

“Everything you’ve got,” I said as I wrapped my legs around him, because I needed to be bombarded with pleasure, to drown in it, to be consumed in the physical act.

As he entered me with one powerful thrust, every inch of my body came alive. He filled me, stretched me. My body arched, innately struggling against his hold, but he held firm as he withdrew and thrust back in, so deep the head of his cock banged against my cervix. And that ladder. Oh, dear lord, that ladder.

His fingers dug into my hip as he moved faster, as he fucked me harder, every thrust sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body.

But unlike other partners, Cielo’s gaze never wavered from mine. His eyes remained fixed on me, watching me, leaving me feeling exposed in a way

that had nothing to do with being naked.

“Let me go,” I said, trying to jerk my wrists out of his grasp.

He shook his head. “Never,” he replied, jaw clenched tight.

The possessiveness in his voice should have sent me running. It should have had me making a beeline for the first train out of Dodge.

Instead, I screamed as it rocketed me right over the edge. My hands curled into fists and my back arched beneath him as shockwaves of bliss shot through every fiber of my body.

“Christ,” he hissed as my walls gripped him rhythmically.

He slowed but didn’t stop, and as I came back down, I unhooked my legs, placed my right foot on the mattress, and pushed off hard, rolling us until I was on top again, this time, with his cock deep inside me.

He let go of my wrists and grabbed hold of my hips, but I dug my fingertips into his chest in warning.

My turn, I told him silently as I started to ride him, setting the pace and the depth so that the head of his cock pretty much stayed in constant contact with my G-spot. God, that was good.

His hands slid up to my tits, squeezing hard and catching my nipples between his fingers. He tugged and twisted, sending hot jolts of pleasure straight to my pussy.

The scent of sweat mingled with sex filled my nostrils, and every thrust sent me closer to the edge.

I ran my fingernails down his pecs as I fucked him, grazing over his nipples and making his abs clench. And so encouraged, I leaned down and flicked my tongue over one tight peak. But before I could sample the other, I was moving again, being rolled beneath him.

“Your pussy feels fucking amazing,” he groaned.

“Thanks,” I panted flippantly. “Your cock’s not bad either,” I said, but I think he took it as a challenge if the sly grin was any indicator.

Whatever we’d been doing before had, apparently, just been a warmup because the powerful thrusts that followed rocked me to my core. He fucked me so hard, so deep, his hips slammed into mine and the headboard banged against the wall, thudding so loud, it sounded like thunderclaps.

If the last climb had come fast, this one had to have been setting a world record. I could feel it, taste it. Right there. And then it crashed over me like a tidal wave of monolithic proportions.

As my inner walls clenched around him, he threw his head back and his cock swelled impossibly more as he shouted my name through his own release.

My name.

My name on Cielo's lips, his face etched in pleasure.

That thing in my chest twisted, and I looked away, focusing on the aftershocks that were coursing through my body.

He dropped his head into the crook of my neck, catching his breath as his heart beat wildly against mine. The urge to run my fingers through his hair overwhelmed me. This felt tender, intimate.

And that needed to stop right now.

"You are going to pay for that corset, I hope you know," I said, curling my hands into fists at my sides.

I could feel his lips curve up in a smile against my neck. "Worth every penny."

Then, thankfully, he pushed himself up and rolled off me, unfortunately, taking that magnificent cock with him.

All right, so I had sex with Cielo Luciano, I thought to myself as I stared up at the ceiling. I won't say it was the most clear-headed thing I'd ever done.

I waited for my heartbeat to return to something that resembled normal, for the wave of bone-deep tranquility to pass. For the idle circles Cielo was drawing along my bare hip to stop feeling so damned good.

"Impulsive actions lead to consequences you'll regret," Dr. Steele had said.

But what Dr. Steele had failed to mention was they also led to mind-blowing orgasms.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cielo Luciano

Charlotte rolled to the edge of the bed and stood up, walking naked to her closet, and giving me an eyeful of her tanned, heart-shaped ass and legs that went on for fucking miles.

Christ.

There wasn't a tan line on her, just firm, lightly bronzed skin. I wanted to explore every inch of it, but for the first time, the urge to tie her up was muted behind the urge to feel her writhing and fighting me with teeth and nails like claws.

But I was out of time. Aurelio must have gathered all the intel we needed by now. With a sigh, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed as she slipped her arms into a short, silk robe and tied the sash.

"I have shit I have to take care of, but I'll be back soon," I told her as I reluctantly dressed.

"Soon?" she questioned, pausing a few steps away.

"*Si*, soon." I replied. "As in shortly. Before long. In a while."

She shook her head doubtfully. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"You're not still planning to offer yourself up to Miguel Silva like a god damned meal?" I asked, damn sure that was exactly what she'd been planning to do.

She sighed. "No, I'm not."

"*Bene*," I replied warily. Nothing with Charlotte was ever that easy.

She shrugged. "It seems that giving in to one impulse gives the other time to subside."

“Then as I said”—I reached for her hands and pulled her toward me—“I’ll be back soon.”

“That’s not necessary, Cielo,” she said rationally, her silver eyes unreadable. “Let’s not try to make this into something more than it was.”

“And what was it?” I asked. I wasn’t in the mood to be rational. I was in the mood to fuck, over and over again until we were both too exhausted to move.

She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest, which pressed the upper swells of her tits above the neckline of her robe. “Sex, Cielo. It was just sex.”

Maybe. But I’d never fucked like that. In the ring was the only place I’d ever let loose that primitive side of me. Sex had always been controlled; the more restraints I used, the more power I wielded, the better.

But power had been a fluid thing with Charlotte, a tantalizing back and forth that flowed so quickly it blurred the lines and became intangible, impossible to grab onto for more than a moment before it shifted again.

I’d fucked hundreds of women, maybe thousands, and not once had it ever been like that. But then, I always knew Charlotte would be different.

“It wasn’t just sex; it was great sex. And I don’t see any reason why we shouldn’t do it again.” The more I thought about it, the more it sounded like something we should be doing. Right now.

But she shook her head firmly and took a step back, pulling her hands from my grip.

“No, Cielo, it’s not going to happen again. It can’t. I don’t know how you managed to get Ray to warm up to you—maybe you walk around with raw steaks in your pockets.”

All right, what the hell just happened? Why were we suddenly talking about her dog?

“But we’re strangers,” she continued. At least, I thought it was a continuation of the same conversation. I couldn’t have said for sure. “Just because we went to school together once upon a time, that doesn’t mean shit now.”

“You mean once upon a time, back before you took off without so much as a word? Are we going to talk about that yet?”

Her eyes narrowed. “No, we’re not. It’s been ten years, Cielo. It’s not healthy to obsess like this. And speaking of healthy, I don’t need anyone else in my life any more than Ray does. Casual is all we need, thank you very much.”

“So, you just fuck random strangers?” I asked, latching onto the one bit of information that was making any sense here.

She scoffed. “Yes, that is exactly what I do. And then I send them on their merry way afterward... because they’re *strangers*. No ‘see you soon’; no ‘let’s do this again sometime’. So, this was fun, but it’s time for you to go find a new puzzle. Then you can make everything fit, neat and tidy in your life, just the way you like it.”

“If we’re strangers, then how the hell would you know how I like it?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest triumphantly as I trapped her with her own words.

She rolled her eyes, not appearing the least bit trapped. “Everything about you screams ‘organized’, like you’ve got all your shit together.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“No, of course not,” she said. “It’s just not *my* thing.”

Maybe, but something wasn’t sitting right. This was more than a casual brush-off.

“You’d rather I be disorganized and impulsive?—that’s your thing?” I asked, my tone cold. It didn’t feel like she was rejecting a random stranger here; she was rejecting me. “Would that somehow make me better in your ‘fuck-you’ eyes?”

“Hell no,” she replied, throwing her arms out wide. “Are you insane?”

Maybe. Or possibly daft. Because I was sure having a hard time keeping up with this conversation. I’d always known she was a tempest, but she was spinning me around so fast, I swear I was getting whiplash.

“Look,” she said like she was the perfectly reasonable one here, “Ray and I don’t need any one else in our lives who is going to give us a hard time about the mess on the floor, or how the sugar bowl ends up in the fridge, or how coffee runs, more often than not, turn into skydiving sessions or... impromptu Venezuela trips... or—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I interjected, raising my voice for the first time. I was pretty sure this conversation was not actually about a skydiving dog. Or maybe it was? Not one word was making a damn bit of sense.

She took a deep breath and let it out, then curled her hands into fists, digging her fingernails into her palms so hard her knuckles turned white. Her gaze darted around the room, settling on one thing and then the next like she was trying to look in every direction but mine.

“This,” she said after a moment, motioning back and forth between us, “is never going to be anything other than fucked up.”

I shrugged. “Like you said, we’re both seriously fucked up, and the results are cataclysmic,” I said, nodding toward the bed. “I wouldn’t want it any other way.” Though, a translation guide for fights like this wouldn’t have been unwelcome.

She shook her head and took another step back like she was trying to sneak more distance between us.

“You don’t know that. You don’t know me. And I...” She licked her lips, and her gaze slid away again. “...I don’t want to know you,” she said with her nose tipped higher in the air.

That’s what this was?—she thought she was better than me?

Something shriveled in my chest while anger pumped hot and thick in my veins. There were literally hundreds—if not thousands—of women who would have been damned glad to be in her position right now. So, fuck this.

“You be careful up there on your high horse, *tempesta*. If you ever have to come down, that’s going to be one hell of a fall,” I said, then I turned away, crossed the room to the stairs.

The cold, riled-up asshole in me almost kept going, but I paused there without turning around.

“If you leave your warehouse before sunrise, Mendoza’s men will swarm you like locusts,” I warned her. “I’d suggest you stay inside.”

“When the sun comes up, they’re all going to magically disappear?—turn back into mice and pumpkins?”

I scoffed. “By the time the sun comes up, they’ll all be dead. And if you

want to judge me for it, you go right ahead.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Charlotte Santoro

I pushed down harder on the gas pedal, weaving in and out of highway traffic.

“If you leave your warehouse before sunrise, Mendoza’s men will swarm you like locusts,” he’d warned me.

Ha!

They couldn’t sneak up on me, and they couldn’t out-drive me. What were they going to do? Launch a bomb in my general direction and hope it hit its target?

I scoffed out loud. *Unlikely.*

Besides, I’m just doing what Nacio told me to do, I thought to myself rather smugly.

But the truth was, I couldn’t stay in that warehouse, not another minute, another second. Their silent screams replayed in my head over and over again, but I could hear them echoing off the warehouse walls, a little more each time. Louder and louder.

“When you kill to protect someone, it doesn’t count. It leaves no marks,” Cielo had said.

He wasn’t necessarily wrong. No permanent marks, maybe, but like ink that faded over time, it was still fresh, vivid, not yet dulled.

“And I am not sitting on a high horse, you asshole,” I snapped out loud... to the steering wheel, or maybe the midday traffic.

Wow, you’re hitting new lows now, Char.

Fortunately, my GPS chose that moment to tell me to take the next exit.

I veered off the highway obediently and kept driving, turning this way and that until the GPS told me I'd arrived at my destination.

Nice house, I said, peering up past the open gates to the grand estate at the top of the long driveway. It felt odd. There should have been enormous peach and white hibiscus flowers lining the driveway and tattooed guards discreetly stationed all around.

I turned into the driveway and drove to the top, but while there were no guards with guns, I could almost feel eyes on me, staring at me through the cameras mounted in strategic locations along the roof.

"*Every breath you take... And every move you make...*" I sang quietly as I shut off the engine and got out of my Audi.

I walked up the stone steps and rang the doorbell.

A tall, broad-shouldered man opened the door. He was middle age, perhaps, but all the lines on his face drew downward, giving the impression that boredom would have been a step up from whatever monotonous plane this man existed on.

"Can I help you, *Signorina*?" he asked.

"*Buongiorno*, I'm here to see Phoenix... er, Cait." *Wow, that was weird.* With all the times I'd changed my name, it should have seemed commonplace for a person to jump from one name to the next, but not Phoenix.

The man's brow furrowed. "May I say who's—"

"Char!" an excited voice squealed from inside as my little, dark-haired guy appeared at the top of the stairs and came bounding down at full speed.

My heart squeezed just a little, like it did every time I saw Nic, ever since Nacio, my dad, and I had found him. He'd been taken from Phoenix—his mother—at birth.

The man who'd opened the door stepped fully into the doorway, blocking Nic's path.

"Hey!" Nic complained, scowling as he came to an abrupt stop. "That's not nice."

"It's okay, Rafael," a familiar voice called from inside. Phoenix. She was waddling down the stairs, the flame tattoos all the way down her left side

catching the glint of the sun and almost shimmering.

The man stepped aside and Nic barreled into my thighs, wrapping his arms around me.

I scooped him up and swung him around. “Damn, you’ve gotten big, *chiquito*.”

He nodded emphatically. “I’m going to be a big brother, so I gotta be big.”

I smiled and looked over at Phoenix... er, Cait, who’d made it to the bottom of the stairs. “Tell me you’re hiding a beach ball under there,” I teased.

She smiled—really smiled. That wasn’t something I recalled her doing often.

“All right, Nic,” I said, turning back to the wriggling kid in my arms. “I’ve got what I came for. Let’s go.” I made an exaggerated turn, holding him closer like I was about to run off with him. “What do you think? Skydiving? Ziplining?”

He shook his head. “Sharks!”

I laughed. “You like that one, huh?”

He nodded vigorously.

“There will be no sharks, kiddo,” Cait interjected, smiling to lessen the blow.

“Sharks?” a tall, dark-haired man with vivid green eyes asked as he came up behind Cait and wrapped an arm around her swollen belly.

Cait wrapped her hand around his arm and leaned back into him.

I just about did a double-take. She hadn’t just changed her name, it seemed. She’d changed a lot.

“Char shares all of her exploits with Nic,” she explained as the newcomer eyed me suspiciously. “Char, this is my fiancé, Gabe Costa. Gabe, this is Char Santoro, a friend,” she finished softly with a warm smile.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, *Signorina* Santoro,” Gabe said, still eyeing me warily.

Cait laughed and turned her head to look up at him. “Stop looking at her like she plans to eat your son,” she chastised him lightly. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

He raised one eyebrow at her.

“Your son is here, in part because of her,” she said, speaking quietly. “She helped Nacio find him.”

The wariness in Gabe’s green eyes fell away. “Then you have my deepest gratitude,” he said, making me want to squirm a bit like Nic.

I shrugged. “I’m just an avid “Where’s Waldo” enthusiast.” I turned my attention to Nic. “And you’re the best Waldo there ever was, aren’t you?”

Nic’s brows drew together. “Who’s Waldo?”

Cait laughed. “Come on,” she said, motioning for me to follow her through the house and out onto the back patio.

As we stepped outside, Nic hugged me tight, then wriggled like a fish out of water in my arms. The moment I lowered him down and his feet hit the ground, he was on the move, dashing across the yard and hurtling over ornamental shrubs.

“He hasn’t slowed down any,” I observed, watching him run as we sat down on the patio chairs.

Cait shook her head. “He seems to get more energetic—and more adventurous—by the day,” she said, eyeing me with mock reproof.

I opened my mouth to reply at the same time the patio doors flew open and another woman stormed out, her arms laden with magazines and folders. She was dressed in blue scrubs and had dark hair like Cait and I, but her eyes were blue and she bore no resemblance to Cait’s fiancé.

“That stupid, freaking—” she paused mid-sentence when she spotted me. “Sorry,” she said with an apologetic half-smile. “I didn’t realize Cait had company.”

“No worries. I’m less ‘company’ and more ‘friend who drops in unannounced’, so please continue,” I said with an awkward smile.

“What’s the matter, Raven?” Cait asked.

Raven huffed and dropped the armful of magazines, folders, and apparently, brochures down on the outdoor table.

“Nothing,” she said with a shrug as she flopped down in one of the patio chairs. “Just the fact my fiancé wants to stay single forever,” she said, glaring at the door.

Cait raised an eyebrow. “I somehow doubt that,” she said reassuringly.

Raven let out a heavy breath and shook her head. “Just wedding crap. Where... when...” She looked at the glass door, eyes narrowed. “Why,” she huffed under her breath.

The corners of Cait’s lips twitched.

“I can help you with the ‘where’,” I offered without thinking it through.

Raven looked at me like she didn’t quite know what to say.

“Um, who are you?” she asked, not unkindly.

“Raven, this is Char—a friend,” Cait explained. “Char, this is my fiancé’s brother’s fiancée, Raven.” She laughed. “That’s a mouthful.”

“And me!” Nic shouted as he came running toward us at full speed.

“And you, kiddo,” Cait said, smiling as Nic slammed into my legs.

She smiled a lot. She seemed happy, with a fiancé and a baby on the way.

For one flicker of a moment, Cielo’s ridiculously handsome face flashed through my mind, and I envied her. Cait deserved this, but it was the kind of life I could never have. That sucked.

So, let’s focus on good deeds, and all that shit, Char, the rational, albeit vulgar, voice in my head whispered.

As Nic released me and went back to hurtling over plants, I pulled out my phone and flipped through the photo gallery, in search of one particular picture. As it appeared on the screen, I hesitated. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea, after all.

Oh well. Too late to undo it now.

“Take a look,” I said, holding my phone out to Raven.

She leaned forward in her seat, and her eyes narrowed. And then they widened.

“Whoa,” she said. “Is that...?”

Cait took the phone to get a look, and her lips parted on a quiet gasp. “Is that Nacio’s wife?” she asked, her voice little more than a whisper.

I nodded. I didn’t need to see the picture on my phone to envision the dark-haired, soft-spoken woman on her wedding day. “It was Isabella’s favorite place in the world, so... Nacio bought it,” I said, remembering the cascading waterfalls that had served as a backdrop that day.

Raven's brow furrowed. "Then, I couldn't..."

"Isabella wouldn't have wanted that place to stay empty," I said, knowing it was true. And knowing that, Nacio wouldn't want that either. What better purpose for Isabella's sanctuary than a wedding?

"You knew her?" Raven asked.

I nodded. "Her and Emilio—their son—were like family," I said, regretting this conversation as an old ache rose up, the edges dulled from frequent wear but painful nonetheless.

The women were silent. Not even Cait had met Isabella and Emilio—they'd been murdered just days after Nacio had found Cait—in a fire in a whorehouse with burns over half her body—and she'd been in critical care during that time.

"It really is a beautiful place," I pressed on. "It's where I'd want—" I closed my mouth, no more deluded by 'one fine days, once upon a times, or happily ever afters' now than I'd been a decade ago.

"What about whales?" Nic cried, hurtling over the ornamental bush nearest us and coming to a stop—sort of—right in front of us.

"What about whales?" Cait asked him.

"If I can't ride a shark, what about a whale?" he asked very reasonably.

Cait opened her mouth to respond, then closed it, not quite sure how to respond to *that*, it seemed.

But I've got this.

"I think Ray would be awfully jealous if he heard you went for a ride on a whale, *chiquito*."

"Ray!" he squealed with equal enthusiasm, then turned to Cait. "*Mamá*, I want to go for a ride," he said, looking around like Ray might materialize out of thin air at any moment.

Cait chuckled and ruffled his hair. "I think you might be too big now."

"Nuh uh," he objected, shaking his head adamantly.

"Ray's hanging out with Aiden today," I explained. "But I'll bring him next time, and we'll see what he thinks, okay?" Because I was pretty sure Ray could carry *me* around if I'd felt so inclined.

Nic nodded and took off again, into the house this time.

I watched Cait as she watched him go.

“You look happy,” I said, thrilled for my friend but feeling that tiny ball of envy rolling around inside me, nevertheless.

“I am,” she said with a smile of contentment that grew brighter as her fiancé approached the patio doors from inside.

The tiny ball got bigger. It could have been that biological clock people loved to yammer on about, but I had a feeling it was something else. Or more aptly, *someone* else—the god damned, too-handsome, stubborn asshole who had the audacity to bitch about me and my high horse.

The stubborn asshole who’s planning to go up against a whole lot of unknown psychotic assholes tonight.

Shit.

“I have to go,” I said, shooting to my feet.

Raven’s brows furrowed. Cait’s didn’t. She was used to me.

I shrugged. “I have research to do.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cielo Luciano

“According to Pablo,” Aurelio said as he placed a piece of paper down on my father’s desk, “these are the locations we’ll find most of Mendoza’s men.” He nodded to the paper with a list of addresses and a few notes jotted down beneath each one.

“Most?” my father asked, a furrow between his brows, as Deo and Vito leaned in for a closer look.

“Si.” Aurelio nodded. “This one is going to be a problem,” he said, flipping over the sheet of paper.

There was a single address written on the back, not a restaurant or club but a private residence. I didn’t spend a lot of time in New York, but I’d grown up here. I recognized the location.

“It’s outside the city,” Aurelio continued, “and Pablo said there are guards on the property around the clock.”

“Who lives there?” Vito asked, but I had a guess.

“Luis Mendoza himself,” Aurelio answered. “The man holed himself up there after his son, Carlos, disappeared.”

“Holed up or not, he’s certainly not a man who can be overlooked tonight,” my father said as his gaze flickered up to mine.

Message received, I replied silently.

“Of course, *Signor*,” Aurelio said. “Pablo says he can get us in, but I’m on the fence whether to believe him. It would explain why he’d taken on the suicide mission rather than bolting.”

My father leaned back in his chair and steeped his fingers over his

stomach, tapping the tips together. “Pablo thinks if we need him, then we’re not going to kill him. I assume it’s a deal he wants?” he asked Aurelio.

“Don’t bother,” I said, shaking my head. “I’ll get the job done,” I offered, just as my father was expecting.

After all, this was what I did—getting to those who thought they were untouchable, taking them out. Sometimes violently, sometimes quietly.

While Deo was in his element here—the heir apparent—and he’d do a fine job leading the charge tonight, my expertise lay in the shadows.

My father eyed me for a moment, then nodded. “Leave the guards alive. I’d like to remind *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* that we can slip right past any defense.”

“Of course, *Papà*.”

“I’m not sure leaving men alive is Cielo’s specialty,” a woman’s voice spoke from the office’s open doorway. A tall, blonde woman with hazel eyes, who, though she bore a suspicious resemblance to Deo, was Vito’s niece, Greta Agossi.

She walked into the room on stiletto heels that looked a lot like Charlotte’s and planted a kiss on the top of Vito’s bald head.

“Count me in, Cielo,” she said as she sat down in one of the empty chairs across from my father.

Deo and I rolled our eyes in tandem.

“You don’t even know who the mark is or why,” I pointed out.

She shrugged. “I somehow doubt it’s for kicks and giggles, but if it is, just don’t tell me. Then we’re all good.”

Vito chuckled while my father scrubbed a hand over his mouth like he was hiding a smile.

Greta tended to think of herself as crazy, but she wasn’t. She was passionate. Whatever she did, she did it with everything she had, and sometimes, *that* came across as crazy.

“Next time, Greta,” I said.

I was accustomed to working alone, usually hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away from home. After Charlotte’s meltdown or high and mighty brush-off—I hadn’t quite figured out which one—I was in need of some

normalcy. The woman hadn't just rearranged the puzzle pieces; she'd cut them up into a million pieces, leaving one fucked up mess in her wake.

"Suit yourself," Greta replied, unfazed and unaffected.

"If you're looking to get in on the action," Deo said, drawing her attention, "there's plenty to be had tonight, *amica*."

"You know me; I'm down for anything," she said, nodding.

I doubt she was exaggerating.

"I'm going to do some research on Mendoza and his estate," I said as I stood up and glanced at my watch.

Usually, a quiet hit like this took even more time and preparation than a full-on assault, but time was of the essence here. Even if I could postpone it, there was no way I was giving Mendoza the chance to make another play for Charlotte—not that he could reach her all the way up there on her high horse.

"*Grazie, Cielo*," my father said with a nod.

"*Scusi, per favore, Signor*," Aurelio said to my father as I left the room, and his footsteps sounded behind me, following me out.

As he closed the office door behind us, I took a deep breath and turned to face him. He was concerned; it was etched across his face.

"Charlotte, she's all right, *Signor*?" he inquired.

I couldn't help but chuckle, though there was no humor in it. "She's fine, Aurelio. Her claws are sharpened and ready. No doubt, she's already planning more stupid shit, and all the power to her. Why do you ask?"

His brow furrowed, a hint of hesitation in his expression. "She seemed to have it under control for the most part," he replied, skirting around my question.

My curiosity was piqued. "Have what under control?" I inquired as I stopped outside the empty kitchen.

He started to speak but then closed his mouth and shook his head, leaving me in the dark. An uneasy feeling settled over me.

"What is it, Aurelio?"

"She's a fine, young woman, *Signor*, but she's going through a difficult time, more so than it would be for most people," he said.

I was taken aback. "How would you know that?" I asked.

His contemplative gaze met mine. This wasn't a general inquiry into Charlotte's wellbeing. This conversation was leading somewhere.

"Your father has always been a cautious man, *Signor*," he said, choosing his words carefully so that they came more slowly than usual. "When you were in school, he had me... look into anyone of particular interest to you—as he did with the rest of your siblings."

"And?" I asked while a prickling foreboding ghosted across the back of my neck.

He sighed. "Her medical records, *Signor*. They painted a very vivid picture."

Christ. Indignation crawled through my veins. "You looked through her medical files?"

"I did," he admitted without equivocation. "Your father was concerned—the fights she got into at her previous schools, her poor grades."

"And what 'very vivid picture' did snooping through her medical records paint?" I asked, my voice dangerously quiet, my carefully controlled temper simmering beneath the surface.

"The labels on the cupboards and the checklists throughout her home?" he said, his eyebrows raising. "The impulsive behavior and grounding techniques?"

"What about them?" I asked, fighting the urge to snap at him. It could have been because he was pissing me off. Or maybe it had more to do with the fact that with a few words, he was putting together more pieces of Charlotte's puzzle than I'd ever managed on my own. Hell, he was throwing down puzzle pieces I'd never even fucking seen.

"I don't believe they are random 'quirks'. She was born with FASD, *Signor*."

It took me a moment to make sense of what he was saying, but when I did his words hit me like a ton of bricks.

FASD? Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder? The words echoed in my head, and I took a step back, disbelief and frustration knotting my chest. The impact of those three simple letters weighed on me like a boulder.

"Are you sure?" I asked, a note of denial creeping into my voice. It

couldn't be true.

Aurelio nodded solemnly. "The medical records were quite clear. She was born prematurely while her mother had enough alcohol in her blood to fuel a frat party."

I clenched my fists, anger that I usually kept so well-contained, bubbling up higher and higher. Anger at her mother for allowing this to happen. Anger at Charlotte, though I knew it was entirely unfair. Anger at Aurelio for prying into her private life and suggesting there was something wrong with her.

I took a deep breath, trying to collect my thoughts.

"This... it can't be true," I said, more to myself than to him. "She's fine. There's nothing wrong with her."

Aurelio's gaze held a mixture of understanding and concern. "It doesn't change who she is, *Signor*. But it might help you understand why she sometimes acts the way she does. She's a unique and remarkable woman. The difficulties she's overcome are extraordinary."

The way he spoke, it felt like there was an intimacy there I couldn't explain.

"My father didn't just have you look into her; he had you keep an eye on her—back then?" I asked, trying to make sense of it.

He nodded slowly—too slowly—while tension tautened his shoulders. It slipped that pivotal puzzle piece into place. While the puzzle wasn't finished, there was always one piece, one moment when the picture became clear.

This wasn't a conversation; it was a confession.

"For how long *after* she disappeared did you keep an eye on her?" I asked, every word filled with ice and accusation.

"I didn't keep an eye on her, but I did look in on her every once in a while," he admitted, and though his face was etched with emotion, he still spoke without equivocation.

He'd known. He'd known where Charlotte was all this time and hadn't said a god damned word.

"Why?" I asked, my quiet tone at odds with the violence coursing through my veins.

"There was no way for me to get to her, not with her father in the picture.

And I couldn't do *that*, *Signor*. I couldn't take him from her. With him, she was... different. He arranged for her to see a therapist and employed a private tutor for her. He made sure she was fed and clothed and helped her establish routines that were good for her. Every time I went back, she was better—happier—than the last. She was thriving, Cielo. I could not take that from her," he said as he put a hand on my shoulder. It wasn't often he used my given name.

I looked at his hand, then back at him. "You kept it from me? You thought I wouldn't want her to be happy?"

"I think you loved her and you wanted her for yourself, and at your age, in this life," he said, motioning around us, "you were accustomed to getting what you wanted. But you couldn't give her what she needed—not then."

He was right. I was man enough to admit it, even if it didn't do one fucking thing to cool the hot rage lurking beneath the ice.

"Why, Aurelio?—why did she matter so much to you?"

The corners of his lips curved up in a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "You loved her. And what you care about, I do as well, *Signor*. I always will."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Cielo Luciano

I pulled off the highway and navigated the lamplit streets, the traffic sparse this far outside the city. The further I drove, the fewer lights shone down on the asphalt and the fewer cars passed in either direction until there was nothing but dark, empty streets ahead of me and behind. And a pair of ‘fuck you’ eyes that were following me everywhere.

It seemed Charlotte had taken up permanent residence in my head, stubbornly refusing to vacate. Her body, her laughter, the way she challenged me, all played on a loop. Not to mention Aurelio’s revelation, which I had no idea what to do with.

The turnoff up ahead signaled the last leg of my journey, and I clenched the steering wheel harder, trying to exorcise her presence from my thoughts.

Infiltrate, execute, and escape without leaving a trace—that was where my focus needed to be.

As I took the corner, a glint of silver in the bushes up ahead caught my eye, beyond the road’s shoulder. I slowed the car and narrowed my eyes for a better look as I approached, but surely, it wasn’t possible.

But the closer I got, the more my headlights glinted off the silver behind the bushes, illuminating the body of a silver car. A silver Audi, if I had to guess.

Fuck.

A wave of unease washed over me, making my heart beat faster as I pulled off to the side of the road next to the Audi.

She wasn’t in the car, and there was nothing to indicate it had been in an

accident. No dents, no broken windows, no crushed bumpers.

I got out of my car and circled the Audi, looking for any sign of foul play. Nothing.

The doors were closed, no keys in the ignition, and the area surrounding the car had seen minimal disturbance. She'd walked out of here of her own volition. There was no way Mendoza would have had her car dumped this close to his property.

I got back into my car and drove on, my mind racing, trying to figure out what she was doing out here, and more importantly, where the hell she was hiding. *If* she was hiding. If Mendoza's men hadn't found her after she left the car...

I shut the thought down—and the corresponding painful clench in my chest—and scanned my surroundings because she was smarter than that. For some unknown reason, she was here, watching Mendoza's estate.

Whatever the reason, I'm going to blister your ass when I find you, tempesta, I promised her silently.

Three hundred yards from the estate, I parked my car behind the wild overgrowth at the side of the road and got out. I was right on time, but I'd allotted no extra to searching for the stubborn woman.

I retrieved my gun from the glove box and shoved it into my boot. The sound of a gunshot would fuck with my plans to go in silently, but I was taking no chances, not when *she* was here. Somewhere.

Outside, there were no streetlamps, just the occasional dots of light from the windows of the sprawling estates that peppered the area. I threw on my night vision goggles and looked around, searching for Charlotte's most likely hiding place.

There, up ahead, a hundred yards from the estate, was a large cluster of bushes, set five yards back from the road. With a decent pair of night vision binoculars, it was an ideal spot to keep an eye on Mendoza's estate without drawing attention.

My gut said that was it, and I moved off the road and made my way toward the bushes, proceeding silently through the long grass.

Silently or not, it didn't surprise me when I reached the bushes and peered

inside to find her sitting in the dirt, staring right at me. She had good detection skills. I had to give her that much.

There was a light at her feet, just bright enough to turn the area all around her into a dark gray, but not bright enough to penetrate the shroud created by the leaves.

I opened my mouth to give her hell, but she beat me to it.

“I’m sorry,” she blurted out, confusing the hell out of me.

“What are you doing here?” I demanded.

“I said some things I shouldn’t have,” she replied, ignoring my question, “and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean them.” Her brow furrowed. “Well, not all of them. You do kind of give off ‘I’m organized to a fault here, and if you fuck with my plans, I’ll fuck you up without batting an eyelash’ vibes.” She shrugged unapologetically. “But that’s beside the point. I just wanted to say I was sorry.”

I sighed while the corners of my lips twitched. I still had every intention of paddling her ass, but she was making it difficult to stay angry with her. “Next time, a phone call would suffice.”

She smiled. “I don’t know your phone number.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that would have stopped you for long.”

“True. But there’s more.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her, waiting for her to continue.

“When you said that thing about Mendoza’s men being dead by morning, I figured that meant you and your family were going at them full force tonight. So, I looked deeper into them to see what you’d be up against.” She shrugged like delving into dangerous criminal organizations was no big deal. “When I found Luis Mendoza’s estate,” she said, nodding toward the stone mansion, surrounded by landscaped grounds, “I knew *you* would be here. And I’m guessing you already know Mendoza has been camping out here since we had a conversation with Carlos,” she said like we’d had a pleasant chat with the man.

“Because he thinks he’s untouchable here,” I said, filling in the obvious blank.

She nodded. “I think whatever research you managed to dig up on the

estate is wrong. The blueprints, the security system, maybe even the guard detail. I think he changed it up when he moved in here. For starters, look,” she said, grabbing a scope off the ground and handing it to me.

I held it up and leaned forward to peer through the bushes.

“Half a dozen heat signatures surround the house on this side,” I said, which was about what I’d been expecting.

There were also three heat signatures on each floor inside the house, some pacing, some standing idle, most of them by the front and rear entrances. But something was missing.

Charlotte nodded. “Two girls were brought in about an hour and a half ago—Mendoza’s entertainment for the evening, no doubt—but I followed their heat signatures down that hallway,” she said, pointing to the general location on the second floor of the house, “until the signatures disappeared there.” She pointed to an area currently devoid of heat signatures. “According to the blueprint, that’s the master bedroom.”

I sighed and handed her back the scope. “He’s got it shielded,” I mused aloud.

“Exactly,” she agreed, nodding her head. “I pulled up the estate’s original blueprints. The walls should be standard frame construction, but those walls are shielded, and that means it’s likely concrete or metal, probably with some pretty thick bulletproof windows too.”

“It’s a safe room,” I concluded.

“If it locks down, you’ll be trapped in there.”

“Then I suppose I’d better not get caught.”

She scoffed. “I assumed that was the plan, but plans have a nasty way of going sideways.”

Fair enough.

“I can tap into the estate’s main security system and disable it,” she said, “but you’re planning to go in through a window—on the second story, I’d guess. There are no guards near the windows, so it wouldn’t surprise me if Mendoza has a secondary system on them—old school, and probably not something I can tap into.”

“So, what is it you’re proposing?” I asked, curious.

“I think you should walk right in the front door.”

“If you wanted me dead, *tempesta*, there are easier ways to accomplish it, I’m sure.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Tempting. But no, I actually think your ass looks better without a clip full of bullets.”

“Good to know,” I replied, stifling a smile.

“If I set off a perimeter alarm on the opposite side of the estate, then disable the security on the front door, you should be able to walk right in. And if the guards don’t take the bait, I’ll know, thanks to their heat signatures.”

Not bad.

“You can do that from here?” I asked, because if this plan of hers involved Charlotte taking one step closer to danger, it wasn’t happening.

She nodded.

“You’re sure?”

“It’s what I’m good at, Cielo. It’s... my equivalent to puzzles, I guess—seeing the maze, the traps, the ways around them.”

I glanced at my watch. I’d used up too much time, but I couldn’t deny it might have been time well spent... *if* I trusted her. If I was willing to put the job—and my god damned life—in her hands.

Fuck.

“Okay, *tempesta*, but you have to promise me you’ll stay here. I can’t have my focus split, *si?*”

She eyed me for a moment, then nodded. “You have my word. But Cielo,” she continued, grinning too brightly, “there is a time limit. I won’t be patient indefinitely. Whatever it is you need to do, do it fast.”

Pretty sure those were my own damned words she was reiterating back to me.

Adrenaline pumped through my veins as I crouched in the shadows, my back pressed against the imposing stone wall of the estate. I’d made it this far

undetected. It wouldn't be long now.

"All right, Cielo, I've got their attention," Charlotte said, her voice coming clear through the earpiece. "They're swarming the east side of the estate. You've got a clear path. My guess is three minutes. Make this fast."

Christ. Now I wasn't just working with the tempest; she was giving me orders.

I took off toward the mansion's front door, keeping close to the stone wall and in the shadows.

"I disabled the system; the door's unlocked. Get in there," she demanded the moment I reached the front door, but those words brought an old memory surging to the forefront of my mind.

"If you insist on being here, charming, then get in there," she demands with her hands on her hips, glancing up and down the empty school hallway.

"Do you want to tell me what exactly it is that's worth stealing from the teachers' lounge?" I ask her as I peek inside, making sure the room's clear.

"I'm not stealing," she says indignantly as she pushes past me and barges right in. "I'm taking back what's mine."

"I did hear a rumor that Mr. Milner is a clepto," I tease as I follow her into the empty room.

She sticks out her tongue at me as she rummages through stacks of magazines. "Mrs. Leahy caught me reading in class and took my book—because clearly, reading is something that should be discouraged in schools."

I chuckle as I search through the stack of books and papers next to the coffeemaker. "You do know that if you just waited until class tomorrow, she'd give it back, right?"

She looks at me like I've lost my mind. "It's my book," she says emphatically, as if Mrs. Leahy confiscated a sibling or maybe a kidney.

I spy a copy of Octavia E. Butler's 'Kindred' on the chair in the corner and pick it up. It's a pristine copy—not a crease in the spine and not a mark on it, just a scrap piece of paper in the middle of it like a makeshift bookmark.

She crosses the room and peeks over my shoulder, then she sighs. "You

found it,” she says with more relief than an ordinary book warrants—in my opinion—and a rare smile that lights up her whole face. Fucking priceless.

“Do you still like to read?” I whispered as I slipped inside Mendoza’s front door and headed through the opulent, marble foyer and straight up the spiral staircase.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Just curious,” I said, my voice little more than a breath as my footsteps fell silently down the carpeted hallway to a pair of double oak doors. Luis Mendoza lay just beyond it, likely passed out after a Viagra-fueled fuck fest. *Perfetta.*

“Favorite book?” I asked as I crouched in front of the doors and slipped a slim lock-picking kit from my tactical vest. With deft fingers, I silently manipulated the tumblers.

Charlotte was silent. I thought perhaps she’d decided not to answer.

“‘Kindred’,” she whispered.

I smiled to myself as I swung the door open without making a sound.

The lights inside the room were off, but moonlight shone in through a part in the curtains, spilling across the king-size bed beneath it. And sure enough, the old asshole was snoring, fast asleep with two naked blondes laid out across his massive body. The girls were skin and bone—they looked like twigs laid out across a wrinkled trunk—and the track marks down their arms were red and swollen. Combined with the discarded needles that littered the floor, there wasn’t much guesswork necessary to figure out how they’d managed to fuck the ancient prick beneath them without vomiting.

I withdrew the syringe of pentobarbital from my vest as I crept across the room. Not one of the three stirred, not even when I had to lean right across the passed out twigs to reach the rolls of flesh that made up Mendoza’s neck.

The moment I jabbed the tip in, he let out a loud snore and one meaty arm swat out reflexively, but it missed its mark, and I depressed the plunger.

Mendoza’s body jolted, making one of the twigs roll over, flopping back onto the mattress before she nuzzled into his side and settled. But Christ, the girl couldn’t have been more than fifteen years old.

You sick fuck, I seethed silently as I stared at Mendoza for a heartbeat. The

drug coursing through his veins would kill him, but it would do it quietly. No pain, no violence. It was an unfitting end for the asshole who trafficked in everything from drugs and guns—which I couldn't exactly fault him for—to child labor and sex slaves. On the upside, when the teenage girls awoke, it would be less traumatic to find the old man cold and blue-lipped than it would be to find him with his throat slit.

I shook my head and turned away, heading back to the door and closing it quietly behind me.

“Are you done?” Charlotte asked—as if I'd forgotten I was on a time crunch here.

If I was a lesser man, it would have made me jump out of my skin. I wasn't accustomed to working with a partner.

“Because if I have to come in there and rescue your ass, I'm going to be pissed about it.”

“If you come in here to ‘rescue my ass’,” I whispered under my breath as I strode back toward the stairs, “you won't be able to sit down on yours for a week.” Which reminded me: “I still intend to paddle your ass for showing up here to begin with.”

She laughed. “Promises, promises.”

“That it is.”

“All right, but I give as good as I get—just remember that.”

I'd reached the top of the stairs when I heard a door at the far end of the house open.

“Fucking deer,” a deep voice spoke in Spanish. “Need to tell the boss it's time for another hunting expedition.”

“You've got thirty seconds before the guards are back at the front of the house, Cielo. Move it,” she snapped, all vestiges of humor gone from her voice.

Rolling my eyes, I strode down the stairs and through the foyer to the mansion's front door, counting down in my head.

I reached the door with fifteen seconds to spare and then moved along the stone front of the house to the west corner. And then I waited.

Ten seconds. Nine. Eight.

The moment the guards were back in position, I'd be able to make my way back to the bushes where Charlotte was waiting... *if* she hadn't outright lied or screwed this up.

She didn't, a confident voice whispered inside my head. That was interesting.

Three seconds. Two. One.

Three men rounded the east corner of the house and headed for the front entrance.

"Tell me you're safe, god damn it," she snapped over the earpiece.

I smiled. Maybe she was pissed, but it sounded an awful lot like concern to me.

"I'm safe, *tempesta*. I'll be there momentarily," I whispered as I took off from the edge of the house and navigated my way back under the cover of enough ornamental bushes to populate a fucking botanical garden.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Cielo Luciano

“You son of a bitch,” Charlotte seethed the moment I rounded the bushes where she was hiding and came face-to-face with a very angry woman.

“If that’s your way of saying you were worried, you might want to work on your people skills,” I replied easily.

“I’ll take that under advisement,” she said while her silver eyes grazed over me like she was checking me for injuries.

It was sweet, but I preferred it when she was looking at me like I was something she wanted to fuck.

“Time to go—unless you’d prefer to camp out in the bushes all night?” I said. Not that it was an option. There was no way she wasn’t going to be miles away from here by the time Mendoza’s guards realized their boss was vacationing in hell. Not on my watch.

She still had her hands curled into fists, but she nodded, grabbed a black duffel bag off the ground, and strode past me.

With no sign of trouble nearby, I used the distance to grab my phone and check in with Deo.

“It’s done,” I told him the moment he answered the phone.

“*Bene*,” he replied, breathing a sigh of relief. “We’re just checking faces on our end, making sure no one’s been left out of the party.”

“Remind me never to attend one of your parties, *fratellone*.”

Deo laughed.

“I’ll catch up with you in a while,” I said, scrubbing my hand through my hair as I watched the swaying hips and tantalizing ass in front of me. “I just

have to make a detour.”

“A detour? I assume that’s code for visiting your runaway?” he asked, insinuation thick in his tone.

I scoffed. “It’s code for taking Charlotte home.”

“Home?” he asked. The surprise in his voice was priceless. “You do realize that insinuates she’s there with you?”

“Si,” I replied without elaborating.

It wasn’t often Deo was left scratching his head. I wasn’t going to pass up the opportunity to leave him dumbfounded.

I hung up the phone a moment later, a few yards from my Aston Martin.

“We’ll take my car,” I said, catching up and grabbing hold of her arm. “I’ll send a man back to pick up your Audi.”

She looked down at my hand on her arm, then up at me, her eyes narrowed.

I shrugged. “Same ultimatum as before. You can give in, or I can throw you over my shoulder and carry you.”

I almost wished she’d fight me. Okay, I *did* wish she’d fight me. That primal urge was always there, lurking beneath the surface after a fresh kill, but with Charlotte in the vicinity, her scent wrapping around me, it was potent. Really fucking potent.

“Asshole,” she said, but there was no heat to it, and she didn’t try to yank her arm from my grip.

I nodded. “Grade A, *tempesta*.”

She scoffed but didn’t fight me as I steered us toward my car, and she didn’t say a word when I opened the passenger door. She dropped her duffel bag in the footwell and climbed in while I tried to decide whether to be worried about the silence or not.

She stared out the window as I got behind the wheel and navigated the car out of the bushes and back onto the road. And she kept on staring out the window, silent. Whether she was having a mental meltdown over what I’d just done or she was planning out her next grocery list was anybody’s guess. Fuck if I knew.

Twenty minutes had passed when she turned in her seat enough to glance

behind us, then turned back.

“Pull over,” she said, finally breaking the silence.

“Why? What’s wrong, Charlotte?” I asked, still utterly clueless about what was going through her head. Aurelio’s revelation didn’t help with that one bit.

“Just pull over, Cielo,” she demanded as she unfastened her seatbelt.

All right, this should be interesting.

I slowed the car and pulled off onto the shoulder between two low hanging willows. The moment I shifted the car into park, she was out the door.

I thought about the way I’d found her earlier, bent over the marble toilet in her warehouse. But this didn’t feel like that.

I followed her out fast, half-expecting her to make a mad dash into the forest, but she stood there next to the car, her hands at her sides. Her cheeks were flushed, and her breathing was coming harder, the rise and fall like a pendulum no man could resist watching.

“What is it?” I asked, stopping right in front of her.

Rather than answering me, she grabbed hold of my vest and yanked me toward her, leaning up at the same time so that our lips came together, bruising in the intensity of the kiss.

Well, fuck me. It wasn’t what I’d been expecting, but my cock was pleasantly surprised.

She tasted like mint and coffee, and her lips were so soft and so plump, an image of them wrapped around my cock shot through my mind, her cheeks flushed, making the sprinkling of freckles stand out, and her ‘fuck you’ silver eyes staring up at me. It might have been the best thing my mind had ever concocted.

She slid her hands down my chest, unfastening my tactical vest as she went while I grabbed hold of her hips and pulled her hard against me, grinding my cock against her abdomen.

If I didn’t know better, I would have said the girl was looking to get fucked. Here. Now. And if there’d been any doubt, when she slid her hands down further, reaching for the fly of my pants, her intentions became rather clear.

My cock jerked. A woman who liked it rough and was down with fucking on the side of the road, without a care about who the hell drove by? It was like hitting paydirt.

But Aurelio's words played in my head. "*The labels on the cupboards and the checklists throughout her home?*" he'd said like they'd meant something. "*The impulsive behavior...*"

Was this just an impulse she couldn't control?

So of course, like a dumbass who had something against incredible sex with devastatingly beautiful women, I broke the kiss and leaned away.

"I'm not sure what this is, *tempesta*," I said, meeting her eyes, trying for the millionth time to see behind them.

She curled her fingers in my shirt beneath the open vest. "This is me wanting to fuck, Cielo. Just sex," she said as she unfastened the buttons of my shirt.

Christ. Those were tempting fucking words.

I grabbed her hair and yanked her head up, more roughly than I'd intended. Her lips were swollen, her cheeks flushed.

"Tell me this is what you want, Charlotte," I forced the words out while my cock jerked and threatened retribution.

"Do I look like a helpless victim here?" She looked at me like I'd gone daft. "In case you've forgotten, I'm the one who started this... all of thirty seconds ago."

"Why?" I persisted like a daft man who was seriously hoping for a case of blue balls.

"Because it feels good," she said as she grazed her fingernails down my chest, not the least bit dissuaded. "And I'd rather feel good than worry about your assassin-ass or think about the shit I did today. Good enough?" She cocked an eyebrow at me as her fingers reached the waist of my pants.

"*Si*, good enough. But if you want something from me, you're going to have to make it worth my while," I told her.

She smiled seductively. "Is that so? And what is it you had in mind?" she asked, looking like she was down for just about anything.

Fucking perfect.

I used my hold on her hips to spin her around.

“Put your hands on the hood and keep them there,” I said, pushing her forward until she had no choice but to comply.

I grabbed the waist of the tights she was wearing and yanked them down, exposing her ass. It was perfect, heart-shaped and firm, and just as tanned as the rest of her. I grazed my hands down her cheeks, the sick fuck in me imagining them covered in pinkened handprints, or raised welts, or my come. I could envision gliding the flat of my blade over one firm curve, then the other, then spreading her cheeks, making her shiver before burying my cock deep in her ass.

“Would you hurry up and fuck me already?” she goaded.

I smacked that perfect ass, making her squeal. The sound of her voice and the sting in my hand went straight to my cock, making it throb painfully. So, I did it again. Not quite the spanking I had in mind, but it would do for now.

“Don’t make me gag you, *tempesta*,” I warned her.

She scoffed. “Don’t make me show you what happens if you try.”

Mouthy woman. As much as I loved the sounds she made, I was definitely gagging her next time—the tempest needed to be taught a lesson. As for this time...

I dragged her panties down, exposing her bare pussy at the same time a car drove by. We were off to the side of the road with the willows’ low-hanging branches all but boxing us in, but still visible to anyone who took the time to look. And it was fucking hot that she didn’t even flinch.

I grazed a finger along her lips, gliding effortlessly thanks to the wetness that glistened there. Then I slid a finger inside her, stroking her G-spot and making her body move, her hips writhe, from the first touch.

She pressed back against me, trying to set the pace, but I grabbed her hip.

“Stay still,” I told her as I worked a finger in and out of her cunt slow and steady.

It wasn’t long before her breathing grew heavier, and quiet, needy sounds slipped from her lips. When she started to moan, the sound ran right through my veins like liquid crack.

Releasing her hip, I unzipped my pants and grabbed a condom, staring at

the foil packet for the span of a heartbeat.

It wasn't the first time I'd thought about going bareback, but I'd never wanted it like this, never craved the feel of her heat all around me, with nothing between us.

I shook off the thought, tore the packet open with my teeth, and sheathed my cock. But rather than driving into her like I so fucking desperately wanted, I grazed the head of my cock along her slit. When she tried to press back and take me in, I grabbed hold of her hip again, keeping her still as I teased her over and over again until she was dripping wet.

"Fuck me," she demanded, futilely fighting against my hold on her.

I dragged the tip of my cock along her again, this time, pressing in just slightly, though I had to wonder which of us I was tormenting more.

She groaned in frustration, still fighting.

"Beg me, *tempesta*," I demanded.

"Like hell," she hissed.

We'll see about that.

I penetrated her just a little, then withdrew, dragging my cock up and down her slit from her clit to her ass hole. Again. And again.

She moaned, and her fingers curled. I was pretty sure she was scraping the car's paintjob with her fingernails—not that I gave a fuck.

"Is there something you want to ask me?" I goaded her.

She had her head tilted to the side. I could see her pressing her lips together until my cock grazed over her clit, and her lips parted on another moan. Once more, and I could feel her body giving in, ready to cave.

I leaned away, leaving her empty, the cool evening air grazing against her wet flesh while I pumped my cock, keeping well away from the sensitive ridge.

Her jaw tightened as her teeth clenched together.

"Please," she ground out. "Please, fuck me."

Magic words.

I lined up and drove in. Hard. Deep. She felt like fucking heaven.

She cried out, but instead of tensing up, I could sense the change all along her body as she forced her muscles to relax.

A gentler lover probably would have stayed still, would have politely given her body time to adjust. But I withdrew and slammed back in, so deep my hips hit her ass as I watched her cunt take every inch.

Her cries turned to moans as I fucked her, pressing her into the car so that her clit grinded against the cool metal. I could imagine it heating up and becoming slick beneath her as it helped to drive her closer.

Minutes passed, or maybe it was seconds? Hours? Fuck if I knew. There was only the woman bent over in front of me and her cunt that fit me like a glove.

She got louder. And louder. She was close. Right there.

“Fuck,” she cried. “Oh god, Cielo. Yes,” she screamed.

As her inner walls spasmed around me, I hissed between clenched teeth. It took every ounce of strength I had to fight the tingling at the base of my spine.

I withdrew and spun her around, hoisting her up on the hood and dragging her pants and panties down her legs and off her feet. I was so close, but I wanted to see her, to watch her face while I fucked her.

The temptress smiled and spread her legs wide, sliding her hand down her body and rubbing her clit.

Fucking perfect.

I stepped between her thighs, and she wrapped her other hand around my cock, stroking slow and steady.

“That ladder is magic, charming,” she said, making my cock jerk while my heart skipped a beat. “Now, how about you get back to fucking me with it, would you?” she asked, sliding her fingers from her clit to her slit, spreading herself open for me.

There wasn’t a straight man in the world who would have been able to resist that invitation.

I took her fingers from her cunt and brought them up to my mouth as I lined up my cock and drove in, burying myself deep in her body while I sucked one wet finger into my mouth.

“Get your shirt off,” I told her once I’d licked her finger clean. “I want to see more of you,” I said as I withdrew and thrust back in, making her gasp.

I held still long enough for her to grab the hem of her shirt and yank it off over her head, then she went one step further, unhooking the front clasp of her bra.

Her tits sprang free, bronzed with deep coral tips in the moonlight. I leaned in, grazing one taut nipple with my teeth before suckling it into my mouth while she threw her head back and dug her fingers into my shoulders.

She had her legs wrapped around my hips, and she hooked her ankles at my back, holding on tight while I thrust into her, again and again. She moaned, quiet at first and then louder.

I released her nipple, then grabbed her hands from my shoulders and drew them up above her head, pressing her back with my body until she was sprawled out across the hood of the car, her hands pinned above her head.

Then I leaned away enough to watch her, to see her lips parted and her face etched with pleasure, to see her tits bouncing with every hard thrust, to see the black gem in her navel catch the moonlight and glisten. There was a story behind that gem, and I wanted that story, maybe not as much as I wanted to hear her screaming in pleasure, but more than I should have.

I'd never wanted those things—never gave a flying fuck about a woman's stories. Just her cunt and how quickly she could hit her knees.

Charlotte wrapped her legs tighter around me, and I let her. I even let one of her hands go when she yanked against my grip on her.

She reached for the back of my neck and drew me down.

"I'm going to come," she said, her voice breathy, in between moans that were growing louder by the second.

I closed the distance between us and captured her lips, feeling the vibrations against mine as her moans turned to screams and her back arched off the hood. Her heels dug into the base of my spine as her cunt spasmed around my cock, gripping me so tight, I was done for.

I thrust in hard, throwing my head back as shockwaves of pleasure shot out and I came deep inside her.

Fucking incredible, but one of these days, I was having her bareback and filling her with my come.

She was breathing heavy with her eyes closed as I withdrew from her

body and ditched the condom. She slid off the hood of the car and dressed without a word. She wasn't moving quickly like she was ashamed. Just quiet.

I fixed my pants and shirt and ditched the tactical vest. Once I'd opened the passenger door for her, I dropped it down on the rear deck, then got into the driver's seat. And she still hadn't spoken when I revved the engine and pulled back onto the road.

"If you're about to tell me how impossible it is for us to be together, don't bother," I said, breaking the odd silence. "I agree. But your cunt is like a drug, and I'm nowhere near done getting my fix yet."

She laughed. I supposed that was a good sign.

"Yeah, well, your cock is pretty addictive too," she said, glancing up at me and then away.

Good to know.

"So, where to?" I asked.

She laughed. "I get a say in *this*?"

I shrugged. "Limited say. Your warehouse or my hotel suite."

Her eyes flashed, and she opened her mouth like she was going to give me hell, but she slammed her lips shut, and her brow furrowed.

"Why do you have a hotel suite when your family has a house the size of a small shopping mall?"

I sighed, choosing between the truth and a lie.

"I spend a lot of time away," I said, settling on a condensed version of the truth. "A lot of time in hotel suites—*empty* hotel suites."

"It's overwhelming," she said, catching on as quickly as I figured she would.

"It's... jarring."

She nodded. "The hotel suite might change from one day to the next, but the atmosphere remains the same," she elaborated.

And she was right, which made her appeal just as baffling as the woman herself. There was nothing consistent and predictable about Charlotte; there never had been.

"I can't leave Ray all night, but he's not at the warehouse," she said, proving my point by jumping subjects.

“Where is he?” I asked, since he didn’t strike me as the kind of dog one could drop off with the neighbors... not that she had any neighbors.

She scrubbed her hands through her hair, then sighed.

“Why not?” she said, shaking her head, then she gave me an address and basic directions to it.

It wasn’t far—a twenty-five-minute drive—but she was quiet the whole way there. It felt like she was preparing herself for something, though I couldn’t imagine what.

When we reached the address and turned into the driveway, I spotted a black SUV parked at the top of it. The car looked similar to the one Morales had arrived in at her warehouse, but it wasn’t identical.

“Where are we, Charlotte?” I asked.

She scoffed. “Home sweet home.”

“I thought the warehouse was home.”

She shrugged. “It is, and so is this... sort of.”

Not knowing who was inside waiting for her, the caveman in me wasn’t about to drop her off and leave her here with the mystery guest in the black SUV.

I parked the car and followed her up the steps to the front door and the security panel next to it. She leaned right into the panel, and the sound of a lock disengaging sounded.

The moment we stepped inside, Ray rounded a corner down a hallway straight ahead and came racing toward us in the hardwood foyer, surrounded by stone walls.

“It seems you already knew Nacio and Julio,” Charlotte said as she petted an overexcited Ray who was doing circles around her as she led the way down the hall. “And now, you know Aiden Quinn.”

As we turned the corner, she motioned to the tall, wiry man who sat on a black leather sofa on the other side of the open living room. The man with watchful, dark-blue eyes.

The man I’d known for years as John Doe.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Charlotte Santoro

The room crackled with a volatile energy as Cielo's gaze locked onto Aiden like a predator assessing its prey. An undercurrent of something unspoken passed between them, making it feel like I'd just walked into a minefield. In my own home. *Awesome.*

"It looks like you managed to find her after all, *amico*," Cielo said, his voice carrying an air of casual indifference that contradicted the ice in his eyes.

Aiden chuckled, a nonchalant echo that barely masked the chill in his gaze. "Guess I did," he replied as he stood up, leaving his laptop on the coffee table in front of him and the mess of papers and maps spread out all over the leather sofa.

I looked back and forth between the two landmines in the room, then rolled my eyes. "Do I even want to ask?"

As Aiden began to speak, I held up my hand, halting him mid-sentence.

"Rhetorical question. Don't answer." Because no. One hundred percent no. I had no room for any more trouble or surprises. "It's been a long day, so you both feel free to show yourselves out... or don't." I shrugged.

If they were in the mood for the world's longest stare-off, then so be it.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed," I announced. And hopefully, forgetting all about the lives I'd taken today—*god, was it really only hours ago?*—and the fact another day had passed and I was no closer to finding my father.

"Come on, Ray," I said, forcing the casual call out past the lump at the back of my throat.

“I found surveillance footage of our rat, Char,” Aiden said, stopping me in my tracks.

Surveillance footage was a glimmer of hope in a mine of uncertainty. I pivoted back while my heartbeat kicked up a notch.

“Surveillance footage of what?” I asked.

“It’s him, fifteen minutes before his one and only call to Silva,” he replied.

The thread of anticipation pulled at my senses and had me flying across the room and parking my butt on the sofa in front of the laptop on the table, shoving the papers to the floor.

Ray followed, more than game for a little running in the house and not the least bit hindered by the papers underfoot. *Oops.*

“Char,” Aiden said, his voice full of warning as I moved to click the video on his screen. “I don’t think *this* is a good idea.” He nodded in Cielo’s direction.

I scoffed. “Me neither. But if you thought I was stubborn and bossy, you should try spending five minutes with him,” I replied with an exaggerated eye roll.

“I’m not sure that’s possible. I don’t think *Signor* Luciano is often in one place that long,” he replied, making reference to Cielo’s... travel habits. He spoke lightly enough, but I could hear the disapproval in his tone.

“I’ll be here as long as Charlotte needs me to be,” Cielo responded, no venom in his voice as he crossed the room and stood behind the sofa.

Given the tension in the room, it surprised me for the space of a heartbeat when Cielo didn’t snap at Aiden, but then, he wasn’t the kind of man who did the macho ‘chest out, in your face’ bullshit. No, he was far more likely to do nothing at all... then come back while you were sleeping and kill you. Hopefully, Aiden had the good sense to sleep with one eye open.

I clicked the button on the laptop, and the video played. A busy, narrow street in midday light, hundreds of people hustling in both directions, congested traffic moving so slowly it could have been Canal Street in Manhattan but for the vivid display of colors and the South American architecture.

Cielo’s hand slid down the back of the sofa, onto my shoulder. He

squeezed lightly, then let go, but he kept his hand there, his fingers moving lightly over my collarbone.

That thing in my chest squeezed uncomfortably. It still felt like I was running down a dark, endless tunnel, but for the first time, it didn't quite feel like I was doing it all alone.

"There," Aiden said, a welcome distraction. He stood beside me now, pointing to the left corner of the screen as Daniel Marín's mediocre frame stepped out of a cab. I swear I could smell the old cigarettes and fried onions on his breath as he walked calmly across the street, weaving around the cars that crawled by, and disappeared inside a café I didn't recognize.

The video played on, and I waited. And waited.

Aiden crouched down next to the laptop, right beside me, which had Cielo squeezing my shoulder possessively—*awesome*. He skipped forward through the video until the timestamp showed that ten minutes had passed, and he paused the video.

"No one suspicious went in or out," he said, "And then this."

He un-paused the video, and Marín came walking out the café doorway—almost running, actually. Though the video played at normal speed, it was like he was moving in fast-forward, looking over his shoulder again and again as he wove through traffic so quickly, he nearly got clipped half a dozen times before disappearing off the screen. Even after he was gone, I swear I could smell the faint, pungent odor of his sweat and fear wafting from the screen.

Aiden paused the video again. "I've watched it right through, and no one that raises any red flags goes in or out the front door."

"What about the back door?" Cielo asked. "Surveillance footage from any other angle?"

Aiden shook his head, his lips pressed tightly together like answering Cielo was pretty much the last thing he wanted to do.

All right, so ignoring the testosterone in the room, I leaned forward and looked at the frozen frame on the screen, looking for something—anything—useful.

"Where is this?" I asked when my search turned up nothing.

“Cartagena,” Aiden replied.

Colombia?

I shook my head. “His passport showed no movement out of Venezuela, and neither did his bank accounts or his cell phone.”

Aiden nodded. “Everything said he was in Venezuela the whole time.”

“So, he travels into Colombia under the radar,” I said, thinking out loud, “meets with someone who stresses him the fuck out, then makes a call to Miguel Silva.”

Aiden nodded. “According to his secretary, he had meetings scheduled the following day—the day we know he met with Silva. He cleared them all at the last minute.”

The room grew silent, so quiet I could almost hear all the gears turning, thoughts whirring. And Ray breathing, almost panting with his tongue hanging out, ready for the next race across the living room.

“Someone fed intel about Charlotte’s father to him,” Cielo said confidently, rupturing the silence. “Marín didn’t rat him out on his own.” He squeezed my shoulder once more, then let me go. I couldn’t see them or hear them, but I could imagine his fingers drumming against his thigh as he shifted puzzle pieces this way and that in his analytical brain.

Aiden stood and looked over at Cielo, his eyes contemplative.

“No, he didn’t,” he said, albeit reluctantly. “I’ve sifted through everything. There isn’t one bit of evidence to suggest Marín was even aware of who Declan was before he made that call to Silva—who he’d also had no contact with, to the best of my knowledge.”—And Aiden’s knowledge bank was vast.

The two men exchanged a look, one of those silent man-conversation things, and it pissed me off.

“If either of you have something to say, use your god damned words,” I said, springing to my feet and making Ray do a double-take from the floor at my feet. I stroked his head and scratched behind his ear in apology.

Cielo nodded, pacing out from behind the sofa. “Silva was just a puppet. Someone wanted to go after your father but didn’t want any link back to them, so they bribed or blackmailed Marín—blackmailed, by the look of him

on the video—into feeding intel to Silva to get the job done,” he said, but there was a furrow between his brows. Something wasn’t sitting right for him.

“It’s a fair assessment,” Aiden agreed with a nod.

“My father isn’t a fucking job,” I yelled, hands curling, fingernails digging in. It was anger, but more because they’d hit a nerve. Because I’d been basing my belief my dad was still alive on my knowledge of Silva—a man who would want to glean every bit of intel he could from him and use it for bargaining power and profit. But if Silva was just a puppet...

“He’s dead, isn’t he?” I asked.

“Char, don’t say that,” Aiden replied, shaking his head.

“Not my dad; Daniel Marín.” I looked at Cielo. “The only man who could lead me to whoever the hell was after my father, and you killed him, didn’t you?”

Cielo’s gaze swung to Aiden, then back to me.

I laughed without humor. “What? You’re worried Aiden might learn a Luciano family secret or two?” I scoffed. “If Aiden wanted your family’s secrets, he’d have every one of them.”

I think I wanted him to get angry; I wanted him to argue with me, fight me, lose his god damned cool for once.

Instead, he looked back at me, his ice blue eyes devoid of the angry spark I needed.

“I didn’t kill him; he had a heart attack,” he said, his voice cool and calm.

“You know three thousand different ways to take a life but never figured out how to administer CPR?” I shot back, knowing it was foolish. Pointless.

But there it was—the tiniest frosty spark. And then it was gone.

“I gave him a round of epinephrine and fifteen minutes of CPR.”

I could feel Aiden watching on. He was probably amused, though he’d be doing his best not to show it. That was the effect my ‘antics’ and meltdowns typically had, like my whole life was some amateur improv skit.

I looked around before I ended up giving him any more entertainment. The shiny black leather of the sofa. The blue and green brush strokes of the painting/hidden gun cabinet on the wall. The brushed nickel sconces on either

side of the sofa. The bamboo shoots in the vase in the corner, and the sleek, mahogany wood coffee table, covered in a dozen rings—I forgot about coasters a lot.

I breathed in deep and let it out slowly. Harping on what had happened to Marín was useless.

“It doesn’t matter now,” I said aloud. “All we can do is move forward.”

I could envision Dr. Steele’s approving nod. Yup, that was me; calm, cool, and collected here.

Aiden nodded. “Nacio’s working on a lead. I told him I’d check in with him once the Lucianos were finished with Mendoza’s men,” he said as he gathered up his laptop.

Cielo’s gaze turned to Aiden, eyeing him coldly.

Aiden shrugged, unperturbed—not a wise move, in my opinion. “If Charlotte’s involved, you can bet your ass we know about it, Cielo,” he said, then turned his gaze on me, eyes searching.

I stared back, not fond of his overprotectiveness but not exactly angry about it either. Aiden was complicated like that. Nacio and Julio were simple, like honorary uncles, so to speak. But Aiden and I had crossed the line that tended to blur and complicate any relationship. It was a mistake, and we’d been struggling to set it right ever since.

“For future reference, I *can* take care of myself,” I said, leaving out the scathing tone a lesser man would deserve.

He chuckled. “No doubt, Char.” The smile fell away. “When we know more, I’ll let you know. In the meantime, no bringing any more cartels down on your ass. You’re running out of safehouses.”

I decided not to dignify that with a response, probably because he wasn’t entirely wrong.

Aiden had just started toward the hallway that led to the front door when Cielo stepped into his path.

Oh shit.

“Do Morales and Julio know about this?” he asked, nodding to the laptop beneath Aiden’s arm.

He shook his head. “I just finished with the video when you two walked

in. Why?”

Cielo stepped aside as he looked to me, then back to Aiden. “Perhaps it would be best if what you found stayed in this room... for the time being.”

Aiden’s eyebrows raised while my jaw just about hit the floor.

“You’re not serious?” I said, the words falling out of their own volition.

Cielo nodded, looking very serious, indeed. “Marín shared intel on both my family and your father with Miguel Silva. If we assume there is one puppet master blackmailing Marín into handing over that intel, then it’s also reasonable to assume that whoever is pulling the strings knew about your father as well as my family’s... venture in Colombia. There are very few points where those lines cross: Morales. Julio. Val Rojas—”

“And me,” Aiden said, filling in the last point.

Cielo nodded, unperturbed. But for me, every name hit like a drumbeat in a death march. They were just points on a line to Cielo, puzzle pieces, but those names were pretty much my whole world.

“But you would have been wise to keep that video to yourself if you were behind this,” Cielo said to Aiden, “And Val Rojas didn’t know about my family’s merchandise until after *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*’ attack in Venezuela.”

“Then it boils down to two,” Aiden said which would have floored me if I hadn’t already been sitting down. *When did that happen?*

I stood up and glared at the man who lived in a very strange place between honorary uncle and ex-lover. “You don’t actually think—”

“No, I don’t, Char. But we’re talking about your father here. Do you really want to take that chance?”

“No.” But that didn’t mean I wanted to acknowledge the possibility either. It was like admitting the sun had exploded or the world had fallen away beneath my feet. Or the endless, black tunnel I’d been running down was really a giant fucking black hole. Thanks, but no thanks. Denial was my kind of river.

“We’ll keep this quiet for now—just until we know more,” Aiden said, then continued out of the living room and down the hallway.

I held my breath, waiting for the sound of the front door closing behind

him. The moment it did, I turned on Cielo.

“That’s my whole world you just called into question, you know?”

He looked at me, his icy eyes intense. “Not your whole world, *tempesta*,” he said gently, throwing my equilibrium out of whack.

Then he kissed my forehead—not my lips. It was possessive and tender at the same time, making my heart clench—which it was doing far too often lately, in my opinion.

“I have to make a phone call,” he said in that same gentle voice, warm and deep, a voice I swore could have soothed the most savage beast.

All I could manage was a nod, and he left the room, down the hallway toward the front door. I watched him go, silently chastising myself.

What the hell did you get yourself into, Char? This is a seriously bad idea.

“A crash and burn and watch your stupid heart go up in flames kind of bad idea,” I told Ray who was no longer panting happily. I had a feeling he’d abandoned any hope we’d be playing tag in the house.

I had a different game in mind. One that involved a shot glass and a lot of liquor. All right, not so much a game as a pastime, but I was okay with that. I left the living room, headed for the kitchen, and grabbed a bottle of whiskey and two shot glasses from the cabinet labeled ‘liquor’.

Someone was pulling all the strings. Not Julio, though. Not Nacio.

“It’s not possible,” I told Ray, who’d sauntered into the kitchen after me. “And it couldn’t have been Val. So... who is it, buddy? Who’s pulling the strings here?”

Ray looked at me, but when it seemed no food would be forthcoming, he made a circle about the kitchen and left the room. Maybe he was going in search of the string-puller.

I placed the shot glasses on the counter, filled them up, and tipped them back, one after another. And still, Cielo hadn’t returned. I could hear the quiet murmur of his voice, tempting me. It wasn’t really the urge to eavesdrop—though, it wasn’t really eavesdropping in my own house, was it?—but the man. The tingling awareness of him that wasn’t so unlike the tingling warmth of the alcohol that was spreading through my extremities.

Ten years. Ten god damned years, and I was falling all over him again like

some lovesick teenager.

The smart move would have been to kick Cielo's perfectly chiseled ass to the curb. But who was I kidding? There was no way in hell I was going to do that.

Fuck.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Cielo Luciano

When I hung up the phone, I listened for a moment, making sure Charlotte wasn't lingering nearby, listening in to a call I didn't want her to know about yet.

It turned out, she wasn't listening in. I found her standing in the middle of a cherry wood kitchen, knocking back a shot. She refilled the glass as soon as she was done, and I got the feeling it wasn't the first time she'd gone for a refill in the past few minutes. I watched her as she drank it. The flush in her cheeks that made her freckles stand out said she'd had at least a few.

She was beautiful, even more so than she'd been in high school. But it wasn't just her curves or her features. It was the way she moved, the way she conducted herself—competent and confident. The way she'd learned to be lethal but didn't wield that power wildly. It was impossible to look at her and see her as flawed or broken or disabled, no matter what any medical file said. Those things that were 'wrong' with her had helped to shape the woman she'd become.

She looked over at me and shook her head. For one brief, ridiculous moment, I worried she'd read my thoughts—and the woman was perceptive enough, it wouldn't have surprised me.

“Do you realize you're exactly the same?” she said, her voice composed, her silver eyes giving nothing away.

“The same as what?” I asked.

She shook her head more, looking exasperated. “You haven't changed one bit.”

Ah, so that's what she meant. I shrugged. "I'm pretty sure I'm taller now."

I crossed the room, closing the distance between us while Ray wandered out of the room and down the hall like he'd gotten bored with the humans.

She rolled her eyes. "You were always tall, but that's not what I mean," she said, almost impetuously. It was cute.

I took the empty shot glass from her hand and set it down on the granite counter. "I know what you mean, *tempesta*." I grabbed hold of her hip and pulled her to me, but her tits had barely brushed against my chest when she pushed against me and sidestepped me.

"I wish you weren't," she said flatly, no hint of impetuosity or humor in her tone.

"Why's that?"

"What was it exactly?" she asked, ignoring my question like she was revving up to give me another bout of whiplash. "Did you not realize I had a pussy like all the other girls you fucked?" she asked like she was talking about the weather.

What was that now? I blinked hard like that could somehow make sense of what was happening here.

"Or was it you worried that fucking a girl no one else wanted would fuck with your reputation?" she went on, and finally, I figured it out.

"No one else wanted?" I laughed coldly. "Are you insane? Every asshole wanted to fuck you."

"Uh-huh."

"Which is why I warned every one of them to stay the fuck away."

Her whole body went still. I wasn't sure she was even breathing.

"You did what?" she asked, her voice eerily quiet.

Fortunately, I wasn't a man who was easily cowed.

"You heard me." I closed the distance she'd put between us in two strides, forcing her to look up to hold my gaze.

"You were mine—fucking mine, Charlotte. Even if you didn't want to see it. Even if you used every excuse in the book to stay away from me. Even when you took off and disappeared without a single god damned word, you were mine."

She opened her mouth, but I wasn't finished.

I tunneled my fingers into the hair at the nape of her neck and held her right where I wanted her.

You're still mine, I said without saying right before I claimed her lips. Not kissed them. I wanted her branded.

Marked.

Mine.

She softened against me for the span of a heartbeat, but then her body stiffened. She wrenched her lips away, got her hands between us again and shoved.

"I am not *yours*, and this is a bad idea," she said, her voice a little breathless.

Yes, she was. And no, it wasn't. Every minute I spent with her was another reminder of why I'd never forgotten her, why I saw her face in every woman, and why no other woman had ever measured up.

But the stubborn woman refused to see it.

All right, so we'll play this a different way.

"So what?" I said, because sharing the deep shit with her wasn't going to do anything but scare her off.

She looked at me, speechless.

"I don't see a ring on your finger, *tempesta*, so who cares if it's a bad idea?"

"I care."

I shrugged, keeping shit light. "Not really my concern. I can tie you up, if you prefer—let you play the helpless victim here."

Those silver eyes sparked, then darkened like she'd shifted gears in an instant. It could have been the alcohol in her veins, but I had a feeling she just liked giving me whiplash.

She smiled menacingly.

"Just try it. I dare you," she said, her voice practically oozing sex and battle.

What shot through my veins wasn't arousal; that was too small of a word for it. It really was a drug. One fix, and I was hooked, all the dark places in

my mind lighting up in a way I'd never imagined.

I grabbed her by the arms this time, holding her still while I kissed her, tasting the sweet, nutty liquor on her tongue.

She made no move to pull away, but I could feel the change in her jaw as she got ready to bite even as her fingers dug into my shoulders, holding on tight.

My cock jerked. I'd had no fucking clue that a woman who fought like Charlotte did was what I'd been missing all along. I'd sought out control—more and more of it—and there were countless women who'd submitted easily. Too easily, it turned out.

But I could feel the fine line we were walking on, like a tightrope wire in the wind, nothing but hard ground far beneath us if we teetered too far, leaned too far into violence and lost our balance.

Instead of letting her sink her teeth in, I clamped my fingers around her jaw, keeping her from biting down, and I pulled away, with one hand around her arm to hold her still.

“Tell me this is what you want, Charlotte,” I said because that son of a bitch drug dealer was still in my head, and I was taking no chances.

She nodded, her gaze locked on mine. “This is the only way I want it, Cielo.”

My feet felt sturdier on the wire.

“*Bene*. Because I'm still tempted to gag you,” I told her, my lips a hair's breadth from hers. “Try to bite me again, and I will.”

“You can try,” she said right before she wrenched her jaw out of my grip. “But I've still got my stiletto heels,” she said, looking down toward her feet. “And I won't miss this time.”

I chuckled, but there was no denying those things could be serious weapons. “Then I guess I'll just have to do something about that.”

I picked her up before she could anticipate the move, wrapped my arm around her thighs to hold her still, and used my free hand to yank off the weapons. And I was feeling pretty damn cocky about it until I set her bare feet down on the ground and she swiped out with one foot, sending me down on my ass. Hard.

Christ, the woman was good.

Rather than going after her weapons, she straddled my thighs and lowered herself down until her fabric-covered cunt hovered inches above my cock.

“Not feeling so cocky now, are you, charming?” she asked, tilting her head to one side.

Maybe not. But with her so close, I could smell her arousal. I could imagine her cunt glistening, ready to be fucked.

So, yes, I was still feeling pretty damn cocky.

“It’ll take a lot more than that to take me down a peg,” I said as I wrapped an arm around her waist and put the other behind her head, cradling it to protect her from the blow when I dug one heel into the floor and flipped us over, dropping her down on the cold marble floor.

But it seemed she wasn’t in the mood to be subdued. She dug in her heel the same way, bucked her hips, but we’d reached the base of the breakfast bar; there wasn’t enough room for her to carry out the move.

It did give me a wonderful idea, though.

I wrapped an arm around her and pulled us up off the ground, pinning her between my body and the breakfast bar with her back to me.

“I’m hungry,” I told her.

“That’s too bad; this isn’t a restaurant,” she said as she tried to jerk out of my hold on her.

I leaned in, nipping the back of her neck. “It’s not food I’m hungry for.”

Before she could fight any further, I removed my belt and caught her wrists in one hand, wrapping the belt around them, then over and over again until I could buckle it closed.

Bene.

Keeping a grip on her bound hands, I eased away from her enough to yank down her pants and panties, then turned her around.

She looked curious and ready for combat at the same time.

I hoisted her up on the bar, hands trapped behind her back, and yanked her pants off where they’d snagged around her ankles.

Unfortunately, her shirt needed to go over her head.

Fortunately, there was an easy solution for that.

I retrieved my knife from its sheath.

“I’d suggest you hold still,” I said as I slid the knife beneath the neckline of her shirt and dragged it down, keeping it away from her skin... mostly.

When I let the flat edge of the knife graze against her abdomen, she gasped, but it wasn’t fear—not if the heat in her eyes and the flush in her cheeks were any kind of indicators. She liked it; she was getting off on it. *Christ.*

When I was finished cutting through the fabric, I slid it off her shoulders. Lucky for her wardrobe, her bra clasped in the front. I unhooked the clasp, and her full tits spilled out, nipples hard, begging for my mouth.

So, I obliged them, suckling one into my mouth, grazing my teeth along her flesh before moving onto the other. Her stomach tautened and her breath hitched before coming heavier.

“I think you’re a little overdressed,” she said as I leaned away.

Maybe. But we’d get to that later.

I dropped down in front of her, looking up at her naked body, her hands trapped behind her. Tension—indecision—radiated from her like she couldn’t quite decide if she wanted to fight me on this or let me have what I was after.

When she made no move to fight me, I smirked. She knew what I was after.

I dragged her ass to the edge of the counter and spreads her thighs, revealing the glistening cunt I’d been imagining, her lips wet, her clit engorged, making my mouth water. I licked her from the bottom of her slit to her clit, and she sighed until I flicked my tongue across her clit and the sound transformed into a quiet moan.

Her eyes stayed on me, watching as I worked her clit with my tongue and slid a finger inside her, hitting her G-spot in the same rhythm my tongue grazed over her clit. Again and again.

It wasn’t long before her moans grew louder and her hips started to writhe, but she shook her head all of a sudden, trying to close her thighs.

“Fuck me, charming. I want your cock inside me when I come.”

I smiled against her and went in for one last lick. Then I stood up, unzipped, and wrapped my hand around my cock, fisting it slowly, watching

her face, her eyes intent on my every movement.

I grabbed a condom from my pants, sheathed my cock, and lined up, but rather than thrusting in, I reached around her and unfastened the belt, freeing her hands.

She smiled like she'd somehow been triumphant, but I chuckled.

"That wasn't for you," I said, then I put my hand on her chest and forced her back until she was laying out across the breakfast bar.

Fucking perfect.

Then I drove in.

Hard.

Deep.

She cried out, her body arching, but she took every inch.

Again and again.

She wrapped her legs around my hips and her arms around my neck, trying to pull me downward, digging in her fingernails until I let her have what she wanted.

I generally wasn't big on kissing, but I felt the innate urge to devour her, to taste every inch of her mouth and leave her lips swollen. More proof that she was mine.

The coil inside her wound up tighter; I could feel the tautness in her body and in the air all around us.

"Come for me," I demanded.

I wanted to see it, hear it, feel it. Fucking breathe it.

She threw her head back and she screamed, and her cunt gripped me so tight, I had to clamp down with everything I had not to follow her right over that blissful edge.

While women didn't have refractory periods like men, I was still expecting her body to go slack as the aftershocks rippled through her.

I was wrong.

She unhooked her legs from around me, brought them right up between us, and shoved against my chest.

I stumbled back, slipping right out of the tight, slick walls of her cunt.

"My turn," she said as she sat up, slipped off the counter, and dropped to

her knees on the marble floor, her mouth level with my cock.

I'd imagined those plump lips so many god damned times.

Instead of taking me into her mouth like my cock so desperately wanted, she wrapped her fingers around the base of my cock and slid her hand downward, taking the condom with her as she went.

Well, fuck.

She chucked the condom somewhere—no idea where—and licked her lips. The sight of her tongue had me anticipating the feel of it gliding along my cock, but she opened her mouth and took me in. Deep.

Christ.

My cock hit the back of her throat and kept going, just far enough I felt her throat muscles start to spasm around the head, like pure fucking heaven, right before she worked her way back.

And then again. And again. Slow and steady, but every time she took me in just far enough that I think angels started to fucking sing.

The woman most definitely knew how to give a blowjob.

Which also meant she was keeping it slow on purpose, maybe trying to drive me insane.

I grabbed hold of her hair and thrust my cock faster, increasing the pace, but the moment I did, her eyes met mine like she was sending up a warning, and her teeth just barely grazed me.

I chuckled. "Don't even think about it. I still haven't paddled your ass like you deserve."

Her eyes flared with heat, and my hand tingled in anticipation. And it didn't surprise me one bit when she took me in deep once again, she unsheathed her teeth a little more, taunting me. Daring me.

"That wasn't smart, *tempesta*," I told her as I pulled out of her mouth and dragged her up off the floor, shoving her face-first over the breakfast bar.

I thought about tying her back up, but I wanted her to fight me, to be an active participant in the battle, not just a passive receptacle.

So, I held her down with one hand on the small of her back, just firmly enough she'd have to struggle to get free. My fingers tingled more, aching for it, anticipating it.

I raised my hand and brought it down on her squirming ass. The sound of the slap filled the room and went straight to my cock, just as much as the half-moan, half-squeal that escaped her lips.

“You asshole,” she hissed right before I thrust a finger into her cunt and turned all that hissing into moans. Her hips writhed, grinding her clit against the cool granite.

I fingered her until her moans grew louder and she was holding onto the edge of the bar in a white-knuckled grip.

Then I withdrew and spanked her again. And again.

Even as she cursed me, her body pressed back against me, and by the time I slid a finger back inside her, wetness glistened on her thighs and she was flushed right down to her tits.

I let her climb for a while, writhing on my finger, but when I pulled out this time, she wrenched her body sideways, escaping my hand on her back.

She made a run for it, turning the blood in my veins boiling hot as I watched her ass shaking and tits bouncing as she flew in long-legged strides out of the room and down the hall, disappearing through an open doorway halfway down.

By the time I caught up with her, she’d made it deep into the room, half a foot from a queen-size platform bed.

“Thought you could run from me, *tempesta*?” I asked, quite certain she’d had every intention of me catching her.

But she shook her head.

“I wasn’t running; I was leading, charming,” she said as her hand shot out and her fingers wrapped around my throat. Her foot swept out at the same time, catching me off-guard—because men were not at their finest when they were thinking with their cocks—and I landed on the edge of the bed.

She wasted no time, climbing up on the bed and straddling my thighs. And lowering herself onto my cock.

“Fuck,” I hissed through clenched teeth.

No condom. Nothing but hot, slick walls.

One thin piece of latex shouldn’t have made so much of a difference, but it did. It really fucking did.

I was inside her. Filling her. Nothing between us.

The tingling at the base of my spine intensified, working its way to my balls. Fast. Too fast.

Her tits bounced as she worked herself up and down on my cock. Her lips parted. Her cunt gripped me like a glove, and the sound of her moans was like ecstasy.

I tried to force my head somewhere else, distant and detached. It wasn't happening, though. There was only Charlotte. If the rest of the world fell away, there was no way in hell I would have noticed.

But there was also no way I was ready to come yet. Not fucking yet.

I lifted her up and dropped her down on the bed on her stomach. Before she could try to right herself, I climbed on top and slammed into her pussy from behind.

She cried out, her body arching, but I kept going, fucking her hard and deep. No restraint. No control.

She turned her face into the mattress, muffling her moans.

I grabbed hold of her hair and jerked her head to the side.

“Don't,” I ground out. My teeth were clenched so hard, it was a wonder they didn't break. “I want to hear you scream.”

I fucked her harder. I lifted her hips to fuck her deeper.

“God, that feels good,” she cried. The great thing about a Jacob's ladder was it was like ‘ribbed for her pleasure’ to an extreme.

Her hands curled into fists, digging into the mattress. A light sheen of sweat coated her tanned skin, the faint salty scent combining with the potent aroma of sex that filled the room.

“Oh god, fuck. Cielo,” she cried, her voice reverberating off the walls.

My balls drew up tight, so fucking close.

“Cielo!” she screamed as her cunt clamped down on my cock.

“Fuck.”

I was done for, but some tiny remnant of reason stayed with me, and I pulled out, fisting my cock as lightning bolts of pleasure shot through me and I decorated her ass in thick ribbons of my come.

And while I'd been reluctant to pull out—to say the least—I couldn't say I

was disappointed in the result.

“I like seeing my come on you,” I said as I reached down and rubbed it into one cheek.

She chuckled under her breath and moved to try to roll out from under me, but I grabbed her hip, holding her still as I worked the proof that I’d fucked her into her other reddened cheek and up the small of her back.

“If that asshole comes near you again, I want you smelling like my come,” I said, even if it did make me sound like a dog marking my territory. Suddenly, I didn’t mind if Aiden Quinn came wandering back. Little did Charlotte know, he hadn’t wandered far.

“Caveman,” she said, laughing.

“Damn right.”

When I was satisfied, I let her go and rolled off her. The moment I did, I could feel the change in her, back to pushing away. When she moved to sit up, I grabbed her around the waist, pulling her back down next to me.

I shook my head when she opened her mouth to protest. “Don’t bother. You think this is a bad idea—objection noted. Now, go to sleep,” I said in a tone that brooked no refusal.

She eyed me for a minute, then—surprisingly—acquiesced. Or at least, mostly. She dropped down onto her side, facing me, and propped herself up on one arm. Her free hand began to trace idle circles across my chest. Idle at first, until her fingers started to follow along the clouds and lightning like she was tracing out the whole scene.

“What is this?” she whispered as she swept her hand across my chest, her voice hesitant, almost fearful. No doubt, she had to have some inkling that the elaborate storm scene had something to do with her.

“Read it,” I said, not certain whether doing so was just going to have her running again.

She leaned up further, her brow furrowed, as she searched across the scene for the text I knew was hidden there. The moment she found it, I could tell by the way her breath caught in her throat.

‘In the heart of the tempest I find my way’ it read down the lightning bolt that ran directly over my heart.

“When?” she asked as her fingers grazed over the words.

“When I was eighteen,” I admitted.

She nodded once, then shook her head. “Why? I was already gone. And even when I was there, you never—”

“I only ever wanted you, *tempesta*,” I confessed. Maybe it would send her running; maybe it wouldn’t. But while I was fine with shadows and secrets, lies had always tasted bitter and cowardly to me.

Her fingers stopped moving, and she looked up at me, one eyebrow raised.

“You were unpredictable,” I told her honestly. “I couldn’t read you—I never could. I had no idea what you were thinking, what you wanted. It scared the shit out of me.”

She scoffed, but the sound was forced. “So, what? I scare you?” she asked, her voice loaded with doubt.

“Scariest woman I’ve ever met,” I said, only half-joking. Never being able to read her meant never fully trusting her, and I had no idea how to make that fit in my world. Or maybe that was bullshit.

She eyed me for a moment, and like always, I had no idea what was going on in her head.

“My mother,” she said eventually.

“What about her?” I asked, preparing for another round of whiplash. If I intended to keep this up, a good chiropractor might have been a worthwhile investment.

“You wanted to know why I left, so I’m telling you because I don’t think it’s me that scares you, Cielo. I think it’s not having all the answers. I was a puzzle you could never quite put together. So, I give you the answers, and you can solve your puzzle. Then you can finally move on. And now you know, it was my mother who made me leave.”

She was right back to pushing me away.

Frustration welled up because it seemed I’d finally caught her in a lie.

“Your mother said *you* left,” I said, fighting the urge to snap, which was something that had become far too common since Charlotte had reappeared.

She opened her mouth, but I held up a hand.

“And she wasn’t lying,” I went on accusingly. Because unlike the

daughter, the mother had been an open book.

I knock on the door that's half-rusted off its hinges. I've never been to her apartment before, not until today. She's never let me walk her home, never invited me over.

I can hear sounds coming from inside, a couple of footsteps, then a dull thud. More footsteps.

The door squeaks open and a woman appears on the other side. A woman with dark circles under her eyes and deep creases across her brow and at the corners of her mouth. She's too thin—gaunt—with cheekbones so defined, they look sharp.

There's an overwhelming stench of garbage in the air, whether from the woman or the ramshackle house, I'm not sure.

"What do you want?" she asks, wrapping an old, ratty robe more tightly around her. It's a short-sleeved robe, revealing line after line all the way up her forearms. Track marks.

"My name is Cielo Luciano," I say, narrowing my eyes, searching for any bit of Charlotte in this woman. Maybe I've gotten the wrong address. But no, she's there in the shape of her face and the sprinkle of freckles across the woman's nose. "I'm looking for Charlotte," I say.

"Aren't we all?" she snaps, but she doesn't have her daughter's knack for hiding. The anger is shallow—paper thin.

"She hasn't been to school the past three days. I was just worried, Signorina Santoro."

I have a feeling I'm showing this woman more respect than she deserves. But Charlotte's never missed a day of school before, so I'll play along to get the information I'm after, to make sure Charlotte's all right.

The woman's eyes water, and she looks away, staring at the chipped doorframe. "Yeah, well, we're all worried. Didn't stop her from leaving, did it?"

"She left?" I ask as an uncomfortable sensation settles into my chest, heavy and tight at the same time.

The woman nods, making a tear spill over and trickle down her sharp cheekbone. "She hit the road, Jack," she says in a sad, almost sing-song

voice.

I look at the woman. She reeks of sadness, but I don't pity her, not for the sheen in her eyes or the tear on her cheek, not even for the wobble of her lips as she tries to press them together. This woman is a junkie, a drug addict mother whose daughter probably did more to support her than the other way around.

I take a step back as the realization hits me hard: Charlotte left.

I take one more step back, then turn away. I don't blame her for running from this garbage heap and the worthless woman inside it. But not one word? Not one god damned word?

Charlotte sat up and threw her legs over the side of the bed. "You're right, I did leave," she said nonchalantly as she stood up and walked naked to the closet.

Christ.

My cock jerked and started to harden. Maybe I could put the anger on the back burner for another hour.

"I just packed a bag one day and decided to leave everything I'd ever know behind so I could branch out on my own," she said with her back to me as she threw open the closet door. "Sounds like a perfectly reasonable thing for a teenager to do, doesn't it?"

For Charlotte? Probably. But I knew better than to answer that question.

"I saw your house, your mother. I get why you would have wanted to leave," I said, deciding I could be angry and enjoy the view at the same time. Her ass still wore my handprints and her movements were fast and jerky, making her tits bounce enticingly. "But you couldn't bother sticking around long enough to say goodbye?" I asked, old anger and hurt bleeding into my tone as I sat up, swung my legs over the side of the bed, and threw on my boxers.

She spun around, clothes in her hand, but still standing there stark naked. "I had twenty bucks to my name, Cielo. If I'd waited a day, she would have taken that too, and I would have been stuck. But you're right. I should never have left," she said, her voice thick with sarcasm as she threw on a black tank top with chains lacing up the sides over bare flesh. "Really, you've made me

see the error in my ways now. I should have stuck around,” she continued as she slid a tight pair of black pants up her tanned legs. “I should have gotten on board with my own fucking mother pimping me out to her dealers so she could get her next fix. I don’t know why I—”

“Your mother did what?” I asked, my voice quiet, while inside, it felt like a bomb had gone off.

She looked at me. For the first time, I could clearly recognize the hesitation in her expression. Then she scoffed, and it disappeared. “Not everybody grows up with a silver spoon in their mouths, charming. Some people have *real* problems.”

I swallowed, like it could somehow force back the red haze that seemed to have settled in the air, clouding my vision. “Your mother just said you left,” I said, trying to make sense of the fragments left from the bomb’s explosion.

“She was right, I did—the day I woke up to her god damned dealer’s hands on me, naked and climbing on fucking top of me.”

I’d tortured and killed countless men, but I’d never felt anything, not guilt or sorrow, but not enjoyment either.

I looked away because I didn’t want her to see the delight I would have taken in tearing apart the man—the dealer—who’d dared to fucking touch her.

“You could have told me,” I said to the floor, feeling jarred as a decade of old anger changed directions. “Christ, Charlotte, you knew who my family was, what we could have done, how we could have protected you.”

She wrapped her arms around her chest—not crossed them, wrapped them, like she was holding herself together, though nothing else about her countenance had changed.

“You were the guy I ate lunch with, the guy who broke into teachers’ lounges with me, the guy who brought me books like they were nothing because they probably were in your world.” She shrugged. “How was I supposed to start that conversation?” she asked, her voice devoid of sarcasm. It felt like an honest question.

But before I could respond, she shook her head. “Don’t answer that. If I’d told you, you would have jumped in. You would have taken it on—taken me

on—as your responsibility, and I wasn’t going to be that for you. I’m—” She closed her mouth and looked away. “It was an impulsive move, but I don’t regret it. It was the right move.”

“*Every time I went back, she was better—happier—than the last. She was thriving, Cielo,*” Aurelio had said.

Maybe it had been the right move.

I stood up and slid my hands along her hips. “Okay.”

Her brow furrowed. “Okay?”

“Puzzle solved, *tempesta*. But you have a problem.”

“I have about a thousand; I don’t think I need anymore, thank you very much.” She spoke nonchalantly, but she still had her arms wrapped around herself.

“Your problem is the puzzle is solved, and I’m still here. Kind of blows your theory out of the water.”

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe your brain’s just having a hard time catching up. Give it a few minutes.”

“All right.” I smiled. “But I get to choose how we occupy those minutes,” I said as I reached for the chains that laced up the sides of her shirt.

It turned out, those chains were no match for me.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Charlotte Santoro

Well, this was familiar.

Standing at the bedroom door in boy-cut shorts and a tank top, wondering what the hell I'd done and who I was going to find in my house today. Good times—*really*.

No Ray today, though. He was suspiciously absent from where he generally slept at the foot of my bed. And given that there were no unfamiliar voices chattering away in *my* kitchen, I had a feeling he was hanging out with his new best friend.

I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and marched out of my bedroom like I was going to war. From the hallway, I could hear Ray sloppily lapping up whatever Cielo had put in his food bowl. I smiled—I couldn't help it. Ray didn't make friends easily.

The moment I stepped into the kitchen, though, the smile fell away.

Cielo was standing in front of the open fridge in nothing but tight, black boxer briefs with a mug of coffee in one hand and the other hand rubbing lazily across the back of his neck.

Whoa.

Any coffee company that used *this* in their advertising would sink the rest of the market in a day.

Every cell in my body sparked up as arousal flooded my veins, but I barely noticed it because it was more than the jacked body that hit me like a freight train.

It was strange the way some things managed to do that, right out of the

blue, dead center between the eyes.

It was the rightness of the scene that shifted the world on its axis, I thought, or maybe the blossom of warmth in my chest that had nothing to do with sexual arousal.

It was Cielo's analytical mind and his dedication to those he loved. It was the thin line he walked between sex and violence with me and the way I felt at home in my own brain around him.

It was... love.

Shit.

He turned around, though I hadn't made a sound—Cielo Luciano was not a man one could sneak up on. His eyes grazed over me from head to toe, sparking with icy heat—if that made any sense.

I'd loved the asshole back then, and it seemed, I'd never stopped. It didn't help that he was still the same as I remembered.

But I'd changed. Ten years ago, I hadn't known myself, but I did now. And I wouldn't do that to him.

"This is a bad idea," I blurted out, not for the first time in our reacquaintance.

"You've mentioned that," he said, unperturbed, turning away to browse the fridge. "I'm here to stay, *tempesta*. You might as well accept that."

Oh no. No, that wasn't going to happen. I shook my head as my heart pounded harder.

"This can't work," I persisted, even as a small, selfish part of me tried to rationalize it.

He closed the fridge and looked at me, a furrow between his brow. "You don't have any food," he replied very seriously.

Of course, I had food.

"What are you talking about?" I said, crossing the kitchen and stepping in front of him. "There's plenty of food," I said as I grabbed two giant containers of yogurt from where they were perched in front of the cantaloupe, strawberries, and almond milk.

Instead of responding, he slid his hands along my hips and up beneath the hem of my shirt, palming my tits and catching my nipples between his

fingers.

Dear lord, that felt good.

“I thought you were hungry here,” I moaned, knowing this ‘conversation’ was headed in the wrong direction.

“I am,” he said, letting me go long enough to take the containers from my hands and set them down on the granite counter.

Then he closed the fridge and slammed my back against it, delving for my neck at the same time, forcing my head back to give him access.

Well, all right then.

As he worked his way up to my lips, he lifted me, wedging me between the fridge and his body with his hard cock pressed against my clit, grinding all that metal against my clit.

“God, that’s good,” I said, tipping my head back and enjoying the stimulation.

But he tilted my head down to look at him, his gaze meeting mine.

This wasn’t just physical, it was intimate—there was no denying it—and it made my heart clench as tears stung my eyes.

“Put me down,” I whispered.

His brow furrowed, but he did as I asked, though he kept his hands on my hips, looking at me questioningly.

“This was just supposed to be sex, Cielo, but it turned into something else,” I said while his hands grazed up my sides, the tips of his fingers catching the outer curves of my breasts and sending tingles everywhere he touched—the man had magical fingers.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to focus. “You were supposed to be paying attention here.”

He grinned. “If you wanted me to pay attention, then you should have come down dressed in a potato sack.” He took half a step back, looked me over, then shook his head. “No, I don’t think even that would have done it.”

I rolled my eyes, but dear lord, I wanted to give in.

Just fuck him, my mind screamed, reminding me how good he would feel.

I squeezed my hands into fists, digging my fingernails into my palms, feeling the sting and letting it ground me. This needed to end before I wasn’t

the only one getting hurt.

“I love you,” I blurted out, then cringed as his fingers went perfectly still.

Way to go, Char. Scaring him right out the door was definitely one approach.

He looked at me, not speaking.

Well, it was too late to put the cat back in the bag now.

“I don’t know if I fell really fast—that is the way I tend to do things.” I scoffed, rolling my eyes. “Or if I just never stopped. And I know this is more than sex for you too... which is why it can’t work. I’ll end up hurting you.”

He cocked an eyebrow at me while the corners of his lips twitched. “You’re strong, *tempesta*. And skilled—I’ll give you that. But you don’t really think—”

“That’s not what I mean,” I cut in, then shook off his loose hold on me and sidestepped to the coffeemaker. “Bruises heal. Other shit... doesn’t. It stays with you,” I tried to explain.

He came up behind me, but he was silent, giving me room to breathe, to think, to be. He’d always been good at that. He’d always been this quiet place where I could just be. No worrying about misreading social cues, no rushing out my thoughts before they were fully formed or cringing when the wrong ones fell out. He just accepted... me.

“Of all the shitty things my mom did,” I began when I’d wrangled my thoughts into something that resembled coherence, “it’s the betrayal that stuck. My dad forced her into... ‘Declan-approved rehab’, but even after she was clean, I refused to see her. By the time I did...”

I shook my head, remembering my first visit to the long-term care facility after her stroke.

“It’s because of her that I left, and I should be grateful for it. She sent me running to my dad who made a huge difference in my life.”

Thoughts of my dad made a lump form at the back of my throat, and I had to swallow it back as I finally turned to face Cielo.

“But part of me still hates her,” I admitted quietly. “I don’t want you to end up hating me like that.”

His brow furrowed. “I was angry when you left, but I never *hated* you, and

I understand—”

I held up a hand and shook my head. “No, you don’t.”

I hopped my ass up onto the counter, putting distance between us, but he kept coming, parting my thighs and stepping between them. His boxers did little to hide the erection beneath them, making my mouth water and my pussy clench in glee. He was so close.

Just fuck him. It would be so much easier... feel so good.

“You don’t understand,” I said, feeling like I had to physically shove the words out, grappling for a way to make him understand. Fortunately, my therapist had explained it once in a way that made sense.

“That quiet voice everyone has in their head that tells them to give in, to seek out immediate gratification?” I said, forcing my eyes upward. “That voice in my head is louder. It screams instead of whispers, making it more difficult to ignore, sometimes drowning out the other, more rational parts of my brain. And while I’ve learned all kinds of tips and tricks to keep it fairly under control most of the time, I... slip. I give in to impulsive things, like skydiving, like BASE jumping and racing... like sex.”

He went perfectly still, his eyes boring into me. “That’s what you’re worried about?—that you’ll cheat on me?” he said, his brow furrowed like the puzzle that had just come together was some fucked up Picasso.

I scoffed. “Why do you think I stick to fucking strangers?” I rolled my eyes, more at myself than him. “Even then, I’ve been known to make some pretty bad decisions.” I said, thinking of that one completely screwed up night with Aiden after he’d brought my dad back to the village in Africa.

Cielo kept looking at me. His gaze was intense, but it felt like he was looking inward, not outward.

“You won’t,” he said, but I could feel the way the words came as a surprise even to him.

“You can’t know that.”

He shook his head and leaned in closer. While he was still sporting a full-fledged hard-on and I was wet enough to promise the smoothest glide of a lifetime, this didn’t feel sexual. Or maybe it did, but... more—whatever that meant.

“I thought I couldn’t know that—that I couldn’t trust you,” he admitted. “I can’t read you, and that’s a problem for me. Then last night, I trusted you with my life. I just... did it. And after, I realized I didn’t need to be able to read you. ‘Trust’ isn’t knowing all the answers. It’s not knowing them, and trusting anyway.”

“But I’m giving you the answer, Cielo. I *will* hurt you.”

He sighed, then leaned back far enough to grab his phone from the breakfast bar. He swiped across the screen and held it out to me.

“I understand your difficulty with impulse control,” he said as a page all about FASD appeared on the screen. Still holding the phone out to me, he flipped from one page to the next, to the next, a few of them about understanding fetal alcohol spectrum disorder and the rest about supporting someone with FASD.

My heart clenched harder.

“How did you know?” I asked, feeling like maybe I’d done a piss-poor job of containing it if it had been that obvious.

He shook his head as he set his phone back down and stepped back between my thighs.

“I didn’t. Aurelio looked into you when we were in school together—on my father’s orders—and then... after.”

“After?”

He nodded. “He never told me, not until the other day.”

The thought of someone spying on me all this time felt like tiny pinpricks down the back of my neck. It made me want to swat them away, and maybe take a swing at Aurelio Carbone too.

Cielo slid his hands along my thighs, then back to my knees.

“Don’t be angry, *tempesta*,” he said with a flicker of a grin. “He knew I loved you, but he also knew I wasn’t what was best for you—not then.”

“You loved me?” I tried not to scoff—I really did.

He nodded, plain and simple, like I’d asked him if the sky was blue.

Cielo had loved me? *Dear lord*.

I couldn’t help but wonder what I would have done back then if I’d known that, whether I still would have left. Or would I have gone running to him

instead?

All the years I would have missed out on with my father, all the ways he'd helped me, all the memories we'd made together... just erased?

Maybe everything happens for a reason, some ridiculously naïve voice whispered, but I silenced it fast. If everything that happened in this world was all part of some grand plan, then fate really was a sick and twisted bitch.

And either way, none of it changed what was in front of me right now.

"I appreciate this," I said, motioning to the phone.

It was sweet he wanted to support me, not judge me for my condition.

"But I listened to my mom promise to be different, to change, to get clean." I could still hear her voice in my head, her teary apologies, her fake promises. "Just like I want to promise to control it now, promise never to stray, never to slip. But Mom never kept her promises. When the urge hit, she was back to shooting up. It was drugs that controlled her; for me, it's impulses. The end result will be the same, Cielo. Failure. Betrayal."

He was tracing idle circles along the insides of my knees, and he glanced down at his hands for a moment, watching the path his fingers took, then he looked back up.

"You're not your mother, Charlotte. And I've watched you rein it in. Until Aurelio told me the truth, I'd had no idea you were so fucking strong, but you are." He slid his hands up the outsides of my thighs to my waist.

"So, I have no doubt, you'll stay strong. You'll come to me when you're having a hard time with it, and we'll... fuck in the air, mid-skydive or in a cage surrounded by sharks—whatever gets you off. I don't mind pushing you to your limits one bit." He smiled devilishly as his fingers curled into my flesh. "Only for your sake, of course."

"That's very generous of you," I said sarcastically.

He shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a giver."

I laughed, but then sobered quickly. Because his words were so tempting, so easy to grab onto.

But he shook his head before I could speak.

"Your father trusted you—there's no way he would have worked with a loose cannon."

He slid one hand up higher, all the way up to my chin, tilting my head up higher until our gazes met.

“And I trust you, Charlotte,” he said, and I could feel the weight, the significance in those words. “But that doesn’t matter, not if you don’t trust yourself.”

His words hung heavy in the air between us. He wasn’t wrong. The old adage ‘you can’t love someone else until you love yourself’ ran through my head. It was true for trust too. Self-doubt would always worm its way in like a virus, growing and breeding and spreading outward. Maybe Mom had never been able to control herself because she didn’t believe she could.

“So, think about it, *tempesta*,” he said, but the tone of his voice had changed, thicker and huskier now. “In the meantime, I’m not going anywhere. Nowhere but inside you. Right now,” he said as he let go of me to shove his boxers down, letting his cock spring free..”

“Is that so?” I said coolly, even as my mouth watered.

He didn’t even bother getting rid of my panties, just shoved them out of his way and lined up his cock.

But he paused for a fraction of a second, looking up at me, eyes filled with question.

“Hell, yes,” I said, trying to wiggle my ass closer to get him inside me.

He grabbed my hair, taking my lips as he kicked his hips and thrust inside me.

Hard.

Deep.

And just like last time, no condom, just flesh. And metal.

His fingers dug into my ass as my nails bit into his shoulders. We were both covered in marks from last night.

Chapter Thirty

Cielo Luciano

I ran my fingers up her inner thigh, over her pussy, all the way to her clit, rubbing in small circles, watching my come disappear into her skin, ignoring the time, tuning out the passing of each second.

“Marking your territory?” she asked with an amused grin.

“Damn right.”

She laughed, then grabbed hold of my hand and brought it to her lips. “You don’t have to do that, you know?”

“Mark my territory?” I asked as she sucked my index finger into her mouth, making my cock jerk.

I’d had plenty of women clean up my come, but this was different. Knowing I was inside her, it brought out the savageness in me I’d only ever let out in the ring... and, to some extent, in sex with Charlotte. It made me want to fight and fuck... and protect like an animal.

“Sì, I do.”

She shook her head, then moved onto the next finger, then the next.

“I meant, you don’t have to pull out, charming,” she said, tapping her upper arm with her free hand right before she slid her tongue along my thumb and took it into her mouth too.

If watching her clean my come off her fingers had been getting me hard all over again, the thought of coming deep inside her cunt would have had me coming without contact if I’d been a lesser man.

Unfortunately, the way she was moving was languid and sated, and she had to be sore after the way we’d been fucking.

I waited until she'd finished with my thumb, then stepped out of the V of her thighs and fixed my boxers, trying like a god damned saint to think about anything but shoving my cock back inside her.

"You still don't have any food," I said when the first thing I caught sight of was the fridge.

"I thought we'd covered this," she said as her brow furrowed and she slowly closed her thighs. *Damn.*

"No bacon and eggs, no sausages..." I explained, opening the fridge door and peering inside—not sure why I thought I'd find anything different than the last time.

She made a fake gagging sound as she hopped off the counter and straightened her tiny shorts. "That's meat," she said matter-of-factly.

"Si, I know that." I wasn't sure if this was one of those times the conversation was veering off in a strange direction.

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest, pushing her tits up higher.

Christ, sainthood was hard.

"I don't kill and eat animals, Cielo."

What? "You've killed *humans*, Charlotte."

"Yeah, but I don't *eat* them. Big difference. Our culture says eating cows and pigs and chickens is okay, but in other cultures, they'd think it was okay to eat Ray. And I'm not okay with *that*."

She had a point.

I looked across the room to where Ray had been chowing down not so long ago. It looked like he'd had the manners to vacate the premises to give his mistress some privacy.

"Okay," I conceded.

Her brow furrowed. "Okay? What does that even mean?"

"It means I wouldn't be okay with eating Ray either, so I see your point."

She dropped her arms.

"Whoa. Just like that?" She shook her head disapprovingly while her lips curved up in a smile. "You know, it's not wise to give in that easily. It sets a precedent."

I smiled. “Don’t worry, *tempesta*. I have no problem fighting you when it counts,” I said, looking her over, not missing the faint bruises I’d left on her body. She’d left her fair share on me, not to mention the crescent moon cuts on my shoulders and the claw marks down my back.

She smiled, but though I had no idea what was going through her head, I could tell her thoughts had turned inward.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, accepting that not being able to read her meant I’d be asking that a lot, and then trusting in what she told me.

She looked away, then back to me. “I’m thinking that we had sex. We’re done. I should be more than ready for you to hit the road.”

“But you’re not?”

She shook her head. “No,” she said, her voice little more than a whisper. “I’m not.”

I feigned an exaggerated sigh of relief. “*Bene*,” I said, abandoning the fridge and any hope of sainthood.

“Because we are most certainly not done.”

I picked her up, forcing her to wrap her legs around me.

Her eyes heated up like liquid silver, and she squeezed her legs tighter around me, tilting her hips and grinding her cunt against my hardening cock.

Fuck sainthood. *This* was better.

“I want your—”

My phone rang. The countdown in my head hit zero.

Despite the phone’s incessant noise and the temptation to smash it into a thousand pieces, I set Charlotte down on the counter and grabbed the phone.

She smiled seductively, then ran her hands down my chest to my waist and kept going, cupping my balls in one hand through my boxers while the other slipped beneath the waistband and wrapped around my cock.

If it wasn’t Deo’s number flashing on my screen, there was no way in hell I would have answered it.

“What is it?” I asked the moment I put the phone to my ear.

“You were right, *fratello*. He didn’t do what we expected him to do,” he replied. “We’ll be there in five minutes. Nacio isn’t far behind me.”

I hissed through clenched teeth as Charlotte’s tight fist caught the sensitive

ridge of my cock. *Christ.*

“Cielo?” Deo prompted.

“Sì, I’m here. Five minutes.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it on the counter.

“Why do I have a feeling I’m not going to like what comes out of your mouth next?” she asked, though she still had a hand on my cock, working it in slow, languid strokes with just the perfect amount of grip.

“No less than me, *tempesta*,” I said, though I wondered for a moment just how much she would care if Deo walked in and found me fucking her on the kitchen counter. But then, even if that didn’t bother her, Morales and Julio walking in on the scene might.

I sighed and took hold of her hands before I’d reached the point of no return. “We need to get dressed,” I told her.

“Jeez, my hand jobs must need work if they make you want to put on *more* clothes,” she said without an ounce of insecurity in her voice. The woman knew she was damned good with her hands... with her mouth and her cunt. With fucking everything she had, it seemed.

“There’ll be people coming through that door in less than five minutes, but if you’re game, *tempesta*...” I said, putting the option out there.

But her smile fell away. “What people?” she asked. There was no wariness in her tone or tautness in her posture, but there’d been a shift in her, even if I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Disappointment? Anger? Fuck if I knew.

“My brother and Aurelio and two of your musketeers,” I said.

“I didn’t realize we were planning a party.”

“I’m thinking of them as more the party crashers at the moment.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because the last time I left you to take care of business, you got pissed at me.” She rolls her eyes, “I understand you have work to do, Cielo. I was pissed because you were leaving me with a *babysitter*.”

“He wasn’t babysitting, Charlotte. And they’re coming because we might have more intel—”

She opened her mouth to speak, but I held up a hand.

“I won’t know until they get here,” I lied. “So, just get dressed, *sì*? If

Aiden Quinn gets to see you like this,” I said, grazing a hand down her see-through tank top and tiny shorts, “then I’ll be keeping you marked in my come and handprints from here on out.”

“You know, your ass would look pretty good covered in *my* handprints, right? Don’t tempt me, charming,” she threatened idly. “And besides, Aiden —”

“I know what Aiden was to you. And I know what he isn’t now.”

While Charlotte’s body language had given little away last night, Aiden’s had spoke volumes. He’d slept with her at some point in the semi-recent past, and while a great deal of him would have liked to make that trip again, he seemed to be conflicted about it.

Not that it mattered. She was *mine* now, and I was just fine with that making me a caveman. I wasn’t above keeping the man close to keep Charlotte safe, though.

“How do you know that?” she asked, no sarcasm in her tone.

“I told you; I trust you, *tempesta*. You might as well get used to it.”

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

I decided to take that as a positive.

She turned to leave, but I grabbed her hand and pulled her back. She looked up at me, lips parted. She was expecting me to kiss her, but I held her gaze instead—not that those plump lips weren’t begging to be kissed.

“I love you, Charlotte,” I said, and the words felt solid and final, like letters chiseled into stone, inerasable and enduring.

She licked her plump lips, making them glisten. “I love you too.” She shrugged. “Hopefully, that turns out to be a good thing.”

“What is this about?” Morales asked as he leaned against the living room wall, arms crossed over his chest.

Julio sat on the sofa, while Deo and Aurelio occupied the overstuffed armchairs at either end of it.

Charlotte was standing in the doorway, watching on like a scientist

observing her laboratory—or her cage full of rats—with Ray behind her, watching warily and growling at Deo every once in a while. Like the true caveman I was, I stood next to her, watching over her laboratory.

“We had a man in our ‘custody’,” Deo began, sitting forward in his chair and taking the helm. “We believed him to be a member of *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*, but he isn’t.”

Ray had clearly had enough; he nudged Charlotte’s hand then disappeared down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“You ‘had’?” Morales pressed.

“*Sì*,” he replied. “Cielo called to suggest we release him last night.” He shrugged. “We did.”

“Why would you do that?” Julio asked, his gaze swinging back and forth between Deo and I.

And this was why I’d had no qualms with my brother taking the helm. I wanted to watch from the outside, like Charlotte, observing responses. And Julio’s responses were off. Not his words, but the way he looked at Charlotte, like he was just a little uncomfortable in her presence.

“We equipped him with a tracker, of course, and a microphone,” Deo went on unperturbed. “Of course, he’s not aware of it.”

Morales nodded. Julio seemed to be reserving his judgment for the time being.

“This is the ‘conversation’ Cielo had with Pablo when we first apprehended him—minus the screaming bits,” Deo said, then nodded to Aurelio who pressed play on the recording device, filling the quiet room with my voice, then Pablo’s.

I turned to watch Charlotte as the recording played on, but though she didn’t move, didn’t speak, her brow furrowed just a little more with every bit of dialect that was out of place, every wrong word. Words like ‘*parce*’ and ‘*hijueputa*’, which were used commonly throughout Colombia, but were not so prevalent in Venezuela.

When the recording finished, Aurelio turned it off and set the device aside.

“If Pablo were one of Luis Mendoza’s men,” Deo continued, “he should have made his way into what had been their territory when we released him

—he might have been in need of a Band-Aid or two.”

Nacio cracked a smile.

“But he didn’t,” Deo said. “He took a cab to a rundown apartment in the Bronx, stayed there for fifteen minutes and made one phone call during that time. He talked about travel arrangements—a flight—but the mic wasn’t close enough to the phone to pick up the voice on the other end of the line. He then took a cab to the airport and boarded a plane.”

“To where?” Charlotte asked, speaking up for the first time.

“Cúcuta,” Deo responded. “He landed twenty minutes ago.”

Aiden’s gaze shot to Morales, who stood up straighter, his black eyes wary. But before either of them could say a word, my phone rang.

I pulled it out, prepared to silence it, but it was Val Rojas’ number flashing on my screen.

I swiped the screen to answer the call and put it to my ear.

“Cielo?” Val rasped before I could speak.

“Sí. What’s wrong?”

All eyes swiveled in my direction.

“I’m sorry, Cielo,” she replied, her voice hoarse and weak.

“Val? What’s wrong?”

I heard Charlotte gasp as Aiden shot to his feet and Morales and Julio shoved off the wall.

“They... they came, Cielo. My men couldn’t... stop them. They’re dead. They’re all dead, and I...”

The call disconnected.

Every man in the room was moving. Voices colliding.

But I looked at Charlotte. She’d lost so much, and now, she’d lost even more.

Chapter Thirty-One

Charlotte Santoro

Val's hurt. Val's going to die.

No more. No more. No more. The words reverberated in my head over and over again. I swear I could feel them banging against the inside of my skull, fighting to get out. The urge to grab the sides of my head to hold them in made my hands shake.

Instead, I stared at the floor and dug my fingernails into my palms so hard, the sting left no doubt I'd drawn blood. I could feel it, sticky and warm.

I could feel the cloud coming in too—that's what Dr. Steele called it. The fog that settled into my brain and made it difficult to think, to plan, to reason.

I could hear Nacio on his phone, giving orders, calm and clear. Maybe that's why I'd liked him from the day I met him—he had that 'stay cool under any pressure' vibe that Cielo had.

But now, the words in the room were all blurring together, lost somewhere beneath the sting in my hands and the blood whooshing past my ears.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. The urge to scream rose up, thick and hot. 'Tantrums' and 'meltdowns' Dr. Steele had called them. Asshole.

"Charlotte," Julio's voice rose above the blur as a hand landed on my shoulder.

"No!" I shouted like I'd been slapped or stung. "Don't touch me!" I snapped and jerked away from him.

He stepped back, unperturbed.

That was the worst part, when they acted like my 'meltdowns' were just ordinary, everyday shit.

I took a slow, deep breath and tried to look around, but there was too much chaos, too many people around me to focus on grounding in my environment.

So, I looked inward. “*Visualize,*” Dr. Steele would say.

It was always the same, the freefall, those few moments of weightlessness when there was nothing but wind all around me and the world far down below. But this time, an image of Cielo sprung to mind in my calming place. He was lying in my bed beside me, skin to skin, his hand tracing idle circles along my hip.

I breathed in and breathed out, feeling the not quite smooth pads of his fingers against my hip, watching the rise and fall of his tattooed chest. ‘*In the heart of the tempest I find my way*’ it read down the lightning bolt that ran directly over his heart.

“Sorry,” I apologized to Julio as I opened my eyes.

Without turning my head, I could feel Cielo’s brother, Deo, watching me from across the room, and Aurelio. Cielo too.

‘*Oh, this is the greatest show...*’

“You’ve got it together, *tempesta?*” Cielo asked, but it didn’t feel like a question, not even a statement. It was a command.

Bossy, asshole.

“Yeah, I’m good.” It wasn’t quite the truth, but not a lie either. I could hear above the blood still pounding past my ears, and though my hands were sticky with blood, my nails were no longer digging into them, drawing more.

“*Bene,*” he said with one simple nod. He wasn’t looking at me like everyone else; there was no assessing going on in his eyes, no hesitancy like he was waiting for me to erupt.

“What’s the plan?” I asked, because there had to be a plan. I wasn’t going to lose any more. Not today. Not happening.

He took a step closer, forcing me to look up to hold his gaze.

“I need you to trust me,” he said, his voice so quiet it was clear this conversation was meant for just us. Nevertheless, I feared I knew what he was about to say.

“You’re planning to leave me here with a babysitter, aren’t you?”

He shook his head. “You need to be here, Charlotte. You need to be here, and I need you to stay calm, *si*?” he asked like he believed I had every ability to do that.

“You sound just like my dad,” I mused aloud.

He smiled. It didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

Hm, I guess it was.

“Cielo,” Deo called. “The plane will be ready when we get there.”

Cielo nodded, not looking away.

They were going to Val. They were going to save her. But then, why the hell did I have to stay here?

Something was off. There was an undercurrent of something unspoken in the room, like a whispered secret, bouncing from wall to wall, but too quiet for my ears to pick up.

Automatically, my ears tried to listen harder, but it was a feeling, not a sound. There was nothing to hear.

“You want me to just sit here and twiddle my thumbs?” I asked. Just like when I’d first moved in with my dad, when he’d leave with a sense of urgency radiating from him but not a word about where he was going or how I could help.

“That’s not what this is, but I need you to trust me,” Cielo said as he stepped closer.

He wrapped one arm around me, but the other slid between us, his hand moving between our ribs. I didn’t know what he was doing until he leaned in to kiss me, pressing my back up against the wall, and I felt the cool slide of steel into the back waist of my pants.

A gun? What the hell?

“*Then it boils down to two,*” Aiden had said. Was that what this was about?

I let the kiss continue, playing my role, but my breathing had sped up. I should have pressed the issue last night, made it clear that what they’d been suggesting wasn’t possible.

“Trust me,” he whispered against my lips. “And be ready.”

Ready for what?

But rather than explain further, he stepped back and let me go.

Apparently, that was all the information I was going to get. *Awesome.*

“Not your whole world, *tempesta*—remember that,” he said cryptically.

Then they left. No goodbyes, not a word. And no babysitter.

And I let them. Why did I let them?

The moment the door closed behind them, Ray peeked his head out from where he’d been hiding in the kitchen—even with his favorite human here, the living room had been too jam-packed for comfort.

“I hear you, buddy,” I said as an odd sensation settled over me. It was like waiting for a race to begin, muscles coiled tight, waiting for the whistle to blow, ready to spring.

With the coast clear, Ray came up to me, nudging my hand for reassuring pets.

Val’s hurt. Val’s going to die. The words banged around inside my head. “*Trust me... and be ready,*” Cielo had said. Ready for what?

“That would have been useful information,” I told Ray as I scratched him behind the ears.

He had nothing to say on the subject.

Minutes passed. Even Ray got bored with pets and wandered off, but still, it felt like I was waiting for the whistle to blow.

Cielo was up to something. But what? And why the hell was he shoving guns down my pants?

Val’s hurt. Val’s going to die.

I took a deep breath and fought the fog—it felt like a constant battle lately.

I grabbed my cell phone from my pocket. It would take hours for Cielo and Nacio to get to her, but we had contacts who were closer.

Why the hell didn’t you think of this sooner?

I swiped the phones screen, but nothing happened. It was dead.

Shit.

I retrieved the charger from its designated spot beneath the coffee table. Everything had a designated spot in any place we lived and usually labels to ‘remind’ me—one of those little things that helped keep my dad sane.

But as I leaned down to plug the charger into the wall, a door creaked. Not just any creak. That slow, drawn-out sound that only seemed to happen in horror movies?—that was the one.

Great. I'm a bad actress in a shitty horror flick again. This day kept getting better and better.

I turned around slowly, but my gut was telling me that reaching for my gun would be the wrong move. There were eyes on me already; I'd never get a shot off.

It was Aiden, standing in the half-open basement doorway. He had his hands at his sides, shoulders relaxed, but my gut was talking again, telling me something wasn't quite right here.

In case that feeling in the pit of my stomach wasn't enough, the tank of a man who came up behind Aiden was pretty much a dead giveaway.

The tank was holding a gun, the barrel pressed into Aiden's back. His features look squished—eyes too close together and not enough distance between his mouth and nose. But what stood out more than his face was his shiny, shaved head covered in a tattoo of a rosary winding all over it.

Oh good, a religious guy. No reason to worry then. 'Do unto others...' and all that shit.

"If I'd known you were showing up with company, I would have cooked," I joked, waiting for Aiden's eyes to tell me what was going on. An explanation about what he'd been doing in the basement wouldn't have gone amiss either.

"There is no need, *amiga*. We won't be staying long."

Oh shit.

The sound of her voice hit like a physical blow, leaving me breathless. Betrayal, that deep and gnawing sense of trust shattered, clawed at my insides, making it hard to swallow.

She appeared at the top of the stairs as the tank forced Aiden down the hallway, into the dining room, and less than kindly offered him a seat.

"You've got to be kidding me," I forced out the words, keeping my voice calm and even. It was a role, an act, one I'd rehearsed a thousand times. Still, I was kind of hoping I was reading the scene wrong—trouble with social

cues, and all that shit.

“I’m afraid not,” Val said, shaking her head. She had a gun in her hand, aimed right at me.

Nope, pretty sure this isn’t me misinterpreting the social cues.

Damn.

“There are very few points where those lines cross,” Cielo had said. “*Morales. Julio. Val Rojas...*”

We’d dismissed the wrong point.

Now would have been a great time for Cielo to figure that puzzle out and come running back. Either way, though, I was fairly certain *this* gave me the upper hand in any conversation we had in the future about babysitters and staying put.

Assuming there was a future.

Well, of course, there’d be a future. Whether I would be in it was up for debate at the moment.

“Do not look at me like that, *amiga*,” Val said as she motioned for me to follow the tank into the dining room.

“Do you think you brought enough muscle?” I asked her, getting a look at the guy’s steroid-enhanced arms. I swear, his biceps were bigger than my head.

Maybe if I stuck a pin in them, they’d deflate. *Pop.*

Val shrugged. “I don’t like to travel light.”

I exchanged a glance with Aiden as I stepped into the dining room. There was a light sheen of sweat across his brow, but his expression was neutral, even his pupils looked normal.

“Why are you doing this, Val?” I asked as she walked around me, keeping the gun on me the whole time. “You know this ends with you dead, any way you slice it.”

Brilliant, Char. Put thoughts of slicing and dicing in her head.

“You need to understand some things,” she said, then she looked at me for a moment and nodded.

“Do you know why I went into this... line of work?” she asked.

“No,” I replied, because whatever answer I would have given five minutes

ago seemed kind of irrelevant now.

She sighed and leaned one hip against a chair on the opposite side of the table from Aiden.

“Revenge, *amiga*. It is a very strong... how do you say... motivator?”

Yeah. I was feeling a pretty strong urge for some vengeance at the moment too.

“I’ve never done anything to you, Val, and you know it.”

“No. No, you didn’t.” Her lips twitched in an apologetic smile. There was no apology in her eyes though, nothing but hardness and determination. “You are a... causality, *sí*?”

“Pretty sure you mean ‘casualty of war’, but I get the picture.”

She shook her head. “No, *amiga*. You don’t.”

I had a feeling I was about to—*lucky me*.

She pushed off the chair and stood up. She was still pointing her gun at me, but her arm had to be getting tired. If I could keep her talking for a little while, she might get too tired to get off a straight shot.

“Then explain it to me, *por favor*,” I said, leaning back against the wall, looking for all the world like I deeply wanted to understand.

“Twenty years ago, I was forced to watch as men came into my home in the middle of the night. They murdered my father,” she explained in Spanish. “They murdered my mother and my fifteen-year-old sister right in front of me. They left me alive—I do not know why. I wanted revenge. I deserved revenge. I wanted the man responsible to pay.”

Fair enough. I nodded.

“So, I played the game, grew my fortune and my contacts so I could get close.”

Again, that seemed reasonable to me.

“Then, can you guess what happened?”

I got the sense that this was the part where the story started to go downhill.

“The *hijueputa* died,” she spat.

Yup. Straight down. And I had a feeling I knew what it slammed into. “Nacio’s father.”

She nodded. “When he died, I had every intention of making the son pay

for the father's sins..." She shook her head as she readjusted her grip on the gun. "Instead, I fell in love with him. What a... a fool I was. He married Isabella. He had a child with her."

I could almost feel the venom in her voice landing on my cheeks.

"I loved him, and he betrayed me. So... I betrayed him. I had to do it," she finished, her voice almost beseeching.

I mentally ran through old business deals Nacio had been involved in, anything that had gone bad, searching for any sign of betrayal.

And then it hit me. It was like a blow to the chest that left me reeling, grappling for balance.

"*El víbora...*" The man who'd murdered Nacio's family.

She didn't answer. She didn't have to; I could see it in her eyes.

"You told him how to get to Isabella... to Emilio?" I asked, my voice raw like my throat had been scorched.

Val sighed, shaking her head. "The *imbécil* wasn't supposed to touch Emilio."

Oh god, I was going to be sick.

Don't show it. Don't you fucking show it, Char. It was my dad's voice, so loud and clear in my head, it was like he was talking right into an earpiece.

I forced it all back, the raw ache in my chest, the scorched feeling in my throat.

I shook my head, tsking her. "All that time we spent searching for their killer, it was you. I have to admit, I never saw it."

"Of course, you didn't. You learned from men, *amiga*. Men who always seem to have blinders on when it comes to the women."

She looked at the human tank, then Aiden, and my heart skipped a beat. I had limited options here if she gave the tank the signal to fire.

But then she turned back to me.

"They pursue whatever they want, use any means to get it, but think we're too stupid to do the same."

She was getting angrier, and I had enough personal experience with anger to know 'loose cannon territory' wasn't a far leap from it. I needed to keep the conversation focused. I needed answers.

“That was years ago. So, what does any of this have to do with my dad, Val? You’re the one who set him up, right?” But did she kill him? Ten minutes ago, I would have said no. But now?

She scoffed. “He should have told me.”

“Told you what?”

“That he wasn’t just investigating Miguel Silva, that he was looking into all the men Silva dealt with.”

I grappled for a moment, trying to figure out why it would have mattered to her, but then it dawned on me.

“*Los Cazadores Sangrientos*. He saw you with the cartel—in that warehouse’s basement.”

She pressed her lips together, but confirmation shone in her eyes.

“Why the hell would you work with *them*?” I asked, but once again, the answer came, vile and pathetic.

“*Los Cazadores Sangrientos* was going after the Lucianos’ merchandise—the share of *El víbora*’s business that Nacio had given them for their assistance. You wanted it,” I said, answering my own question.

She shrugged. “*El víbora* ruined everything for me, stole my business, threatened to out me to Nacio if I crossed him. All those years, I couldn’t lead Nacio to him—there was too much risk. All I could do was wait for you to find him and then take from *El víbora* what he’d stolen from me. I deserved it.”

“For murdering Nacio’s family?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it and stood up straighter. “What happened to Emilio was a mistake. But I didn’t come here for old mistakes, *amiga*. I came here to correct a recent one.”

Was I the mistake? Because, with the gun in her hand, I was kind of feeling like all spotlights were on me at the moment.

“Where is he?” she asked, blowing my theory out of the water.

“Where’s who?”

“You cannot play dumb with me, *chica*. I know you. I’m not taking it.”

I had a feeling she meant she wasn’t ‘buying’ it. But whatever. I still had no clue who she was talking about—not that I’d be handing over that piece of

intel anytime soon. If she was looking for intel, then she needed me—alive. The minute she realized I was useless to her... well..

Let's just make ourself useful, shall we?

“You know I’ll never tell you,” I said with a flirtatious smile.

I could feel the seductress trying to come out, to take control of the situation the way I’d learned to do. The routine, the habit was comforting. My fingers even itched to reach for the paralytic in the back of my garter, but there was no garter, no syringe. And unless the human tank *and* Val were down for a three-way here, I wouldn’t have been able to get close to her with it anyway.

Val looked at Aiden, then shrugged. “I think perhaps you might tell me. I wonder what I’ll need to cut off of *him* to persuade *you*.”

I forced out a laugh. Not surprisingly, it came out sultry, like warm velvet. “I’m afraid I’ve been there, done that, Val. I don’t have much use for any of his parts now.”

She eyed me for a moment, eyes contemplative, sizing me up.

“Hm, maybe.” She shook her head slowly. “You always were rather odd, weren’t you?”

Thanks. Love you too, you bitch.

“Well, let’s find out,” she said, nodding to the tank.

Shit.

But instead of firing his gun, he removed a knife from the sheath at his waist.

“Don’t say a word, Char,” Aiden said, his voice far too calm for a guy on the verge of losing an extremity. “You know better.”

Just breathe. Don’t react. It’ll only be worse if you react.

I crossed my arms over my chest—which had the added benefit of hiding my heart since I was pretty sure it was beating right through my ribs—and leaned my shoulder against the wall, my gaze never leaving Val’s. It was a fine line I was walking, not quite bored, not quite smug.

Val stared right back at me. I could see out the corner of my eye as the tank grabbed hold of Aiden’s hand and held it down against the table.

Fuck.

He touched the blade to Aiden's flesh, right between the knuckles of his baby finger. And then he started to saw.

Aiden roared through clenched teeth, his face turning beat red.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Don't show it. Don't let her see it.

I kept my features unruffled, my muscles loose. How many times had I practiced this?

"*Lock it down, Char,*" my father had said more times than I could count, sometimes on the sparring mats, other times, in the middle of one of my meltdowns. "*Hide it.*" "*Bury it.*" "*Don't give them anything they could use.*"

Val scoffed and held up her hand, stopping the tank for the time being. "You really are your father's daughter, aren't you?"

"So I've heard," I replied.

"Then, I suppose we'll have to try something else. Perhaps someone whose parts you haven't finished with."

She nodded to the tank, who sheathed his knife, kept his gun on Aiden, and pulled out a phone from his jacket pocket. He swiped the screen, then turned it to face me.

It was a runway. The outside of a plane and a short stretch of tarmac beyond it. The Lucianos plane, if I had to guess.

My heart pounded impossibly harder. My stomach turned and sent bile rising in the back of my throat.

"The plane will be ready when we get there," Deo had said.

She had a shooter in place, ready to take out Cielo the moment he stepped onto the tarmac. But where was he? The plane looked empty. No pilot, no staff on the runway.

Fortunately, I had the sense—or the training—to keep an eye on Val. Her brow was furrowed. Something wasn't right.

All right, run with that.

"Problem, Val?" I asked, pushing off the wall and acting like everything I had expected to happen had taken place.

But maybe it had... sort of.

The pieces of the puzzle slid into place—*thanks so much, Cielo*—and the

picture made sense.

Val looked at the phone, then at me, but that was a mistake. I could see the fear in her eyes plain as day.

She reined it in fast, but not fast enough.

“Did you know I sent one of your father’s fingers to Julio. I did it to be kind, *amiga*. To give you proof that he’d been captured... killed, *sí*? I tried to—what is it called?—give you closure.” She scoffed. “At least until he upped and disappeared on me.”

I shrugged. “Family trait.”

He’s alive. My heart squeezed like someone was giving it a giant hug. If he’d upped and disappeared on her, he was alive.

“Julio was as stubborn as the rest of you, though. He didn’t say one word to you about it, did he?”

“No, because he knew my dad was alive. And you didn’t send a part of my dad to him to give me closure, Val; you sent it to try to make me stop searching. Because you knew I’d find you, didn’t you?”

I took a step toward her.

“I found Nic. I found *El víbora*. If you couldn’t throw me off the trail or get me to stop searching, then you knew I’d find *you*.”

That was why the cartel had contacted me, why they’d come for me, thinking I had whatever ‘it’ they’d been looking for. She’d sent them.

I took another step, heedless of the guns in the room or the tank hovering next to Aiden, looking to Val for instruction.

“And now that I know everything...*amiga*,” I said, emphasizing each syllable, “Nacio’s going to rip you apart.”

Her finger hovered over the trigger as dark determination flared in her brown eyes.

But I wasn’t worried. I could feel him. And then I could smell him, bergamot and sandalwood.

It came as no surprise when gunshots rang out, one and then another.

The first slammed into Val’s shoulder, the second hit the tank center-mass, and they both hit the floor.

“Are you sure you didn’t want to wait a bit longer?” Aiden joked. “Maybe

see if she'd get back to taking my fingers off?"

Without turning, I could feel Cielo there, right behind me. He wasn't alone, but I breathed in deep, focusing on his scent as he entered the room and wrapped his arms around me from behind slowly.

When I didn't pull away, he held me tighter, then shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose it could have helped to ensure you'd keep your hands to yourself," Cielo mused.

He leaned in closer until his lips brushed the shell of my ear.

"But I trust you, *tempesta*," he whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Cielo Luciano

There was a storm brewing. I had no doubt about it. Her body had melted into mine at first, but then it stiffened, her spine straight, her back rising and falling with each breath, faster and faster against my chest.

It was only a matter of time before the tempest unleashed her fury.

Three.

Two.

One.

“You trust me?” she railed as she yanked herself out of my grip and spun on me.

“You think that’s what I care about right now? What the hell were you thinking?”

Her chest was heaving, and her eyes were narrowed. She put her hands on my chest and shoved hard.

“You son of a bitch,” she snapped. “Trust you? Be ready? Are you fucking insane? How was I supposed to be ready for this?”

I watched the storm rage; it was magnificent, so at odds with the cold detachment I felt so much of the time. And if loving this part of her made me a fucked-up son of a bitch, then so be it. I’d been called worse.

“I couldn’t tell you, Charlotte.”

“Really? You couldn’t? Because your mouth seems to be working just fine now.”

I almost laughed. Even caught up in blatant fury, she had one hell of a sarcastic mouth. I had a feeling I was done with gags; I wanted every moan,

scream, and sarcastic word this woman had to give.

“I couldn’t know for sure what Val Rojas had bugged,” I continued rationally. “There are many listening devices that can’t be detected by a sweep. And she knows you; your response to finding her here needed to be authentic,” I said, nodding to where Val laid on the floor with Morales standing over her. He wore no expression on his face, but his eyes looked like they’d turned pure black.

Val’s eyes were just about bugging right out of her head. The woman had to know it would be no day at the park from here on out, not for her. I had a feeling the bullet in her shoulder would be the least of her worries soon.

Julio had wrapped up Aiden’s finger, the two of them now standing back quietly, leaving Morales to decide Val’s fate.

“So, I was what? Fucking bait?” Charlotte continued.

She had her hands balled into fists, but it wasn’t a grounding thing. I think she was just pissed. No part of her seemed to be trying to rein it in and regain control.

“What kind of an asshole move was that?”

I reached out a hand, but didn’t quite touch her. *I’m here*, it conveyed, *when you’re ready*. But for now...

“We weren’t going to take the chance of her catching you on your own when no one else was around to do something about it.”

“Ah,” she said with a deceptively agreeable nod. “So, this was all of you helping me?—taking care of the little woman?”

Julio was still standing quietly near Morales, and while fury was etched in hard lines across his face, his lips quirked for one brief moment as his gaze traveled back and forth between Charlotte and I.

“This was us making sure you’re still here tomorrow, *tempesta*. I knew you could handle yourself—there is no way in hell I would have left you here otherwise, even with Aiden close by.”

She might have had one hell of a temper when it got hold of her, but she was nobody’s “little woman”. Charlotte was competent and capable and just plain kickass like no other woman I’d ever met.

“So, that’s why Aiden was here? Another fucking babysitter?” she ranted.

“Was it your plan to get his fingers chopped off too?”

“He still has all his fingers, Charlotte.”

It was true, not that it did a damn thing to reassure her.

“And you did handle yourself, didn’t you? You held it together, and because you did, you learned more in the past twenty minutes than anyone in this room—including you—had learned in the past five years.”

“Go fuck yourself, Cielo,” she hissed. “You think I wanted to know any of that shit?”

Because that was what was truly fueling her rage here. Val and her lies and the evil shit she’d done. It pissed me off that Val had been right—not one of us had seen it, and perhaps for precisely the reason she’d said.

Charlotte turned to leave, but I grabbed her arm and pulled her back, slow and steady, no sudden, overwhelming movements.

“You now know your father is alive,” I said, my voice calm. I was prepared for this storm; I’d known it was coming. It would have been better if Val wasn’t weeping and whining in the background, but Charlotte would just have to learn to grab onto my voice, like a sturdy anchor no matter the storm.

She looked at me, lips pressed together, eyes still snapping with angry silver fire.

“He’s alive, and we’re going to find him,” I continued unperturbed. We were like fire and ice. I cooled her down; she heated me up.

And she was cooling. Her eyes grazed over my face, pausing on my lips, then her gaze slid to the side, focused on the artwork beside us, then back to my jacket.

“How did you know?” she asked after a moment, her eyes slipping to Val, then back to me. “How did you know my dad was still alive?—that she’d...”

“I didn’t. After Aiden’s discovery last night, we discreetly sent Vito to Colombia with one of Nacio’s men, just to take a look. She wasn’t there, and her warehouse was empty. She hadn’t attacked; she’d let *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* clear it out. And while the call Pablo made was to a Colombian phone number, the tower that picked it up was in New York. It made me think she was close by.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, but the words came out grudging. She didn’t like

this part of herself; we'd have to work on that.

"Don't apologize," I said, shaking my head. "Not for being a tempest. I would never want to change that part of you."

"Uh huh. It's entertaining, right?" she said, rolling her eyes.

I shook my head. "No. Its you. And I told you, I love *you*."

She was silent; she didn't trust this part of herself yet, didn't trust that we could make this last the same way I did.

"Yeah, well, you're pretty all right yourself," she replied. The corners of her plump lips twitched, but the grudging smile fell away fast.

"The things she did, Cielo," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

"We heard. Aiden installed our own untraceable listening devices last night."

Her brow furrowed. "While we were sleeping?" she asked. She didn't look pleased.

I shrugged, then took a chance, stepping closer and sliding my hands onto her hips. She didn't tense up this time. "If I'd had him do it while you were awake, it might have made you suspicious."

"You think?" She rolled her eyes, then sobered. Her gaze flickered to Morales, then away. She leaned in closer.

"I didn't know," she said, not bothering to hide the hurt and frustration in her tone. "I had no idea what she did, Cielo." Her voice cracked as she spoke.

"I can hear you, *cariño*," Morales said, turning away from Val as Julio dragged the woman up onto her feet, her arms trapped in his hold behind her back. Her makeup was smeared, her clothes were askew, and blood had saturated the shoulder of her shirt, dripping down her arm and the front of the peach-colored fabric.

Charlotte pressed her lips together, then forced her gaze to meet Morales'. She squared her shoulders like she was bravely facing a firing squad.

"I'm sorry, Nacio," she said. She was a difficult woman to read, but in that moment, the depth of her sorrow and regret was painted clear across her face.

He crossed the room, and she turned in my arms to face him head-on. No cowering away for my tempest. I wasn't sure she knew how.

"Do not apologize," Morales demanded, not unkindly. "Not for something

that isn't your fault. You have nothing but my gratitude—you know that. Do not insult me by suggesting it is unfounded.”

She stared back at him, thoughts well-hidden again, then nodded.

“How could she do that?” she whispered.

He sighed. “My father brought evil into her life, and I taught her how to hide it.”

Her brow furrowed. She opened her mouth like she was going to argue with him, but she stopped herself.

“You need to leave now, *cariño*,” Morales said, then kissed her forehead.

When he turned back to Val and Julio, his hand was idly tracing the tattoo of two angels on his forearm.

“On your knees, Valentina,” he commanded.

Julio loosened his hold on her enough for her to comply.

Her eyes were wide, her whole body shaking as she complied, making her movements jerky. The moment her knees hit the floor, tears spilled over.

Morales took hold of her chin, tilting her head up and brushing away the tears with his thumb.

“Let's go, *tempesta*,” I whispered against her ear.

She shook her head. “No, I have to be here,” she said, like this was somehow her penance, but she had no sin for which to atone.

“No, you don't.”

She pulled away, not quite out of my grip, just enough to make it clear she had no intention of leaving.

“I have to be here for her,” she said, surprising me. But maybe it shouldn't have, because beneath all the layers of sarcasm and fury, Charlotte had a heart the size of the moon.

She leaned back into me, clamping her arms over top of mine until I held her tighter.

Morales cocked the gun in his hand, keeping his other hand on Val's cheek, stroking gently.

“I am sorry, Valentina. I should have seen it in you sooner,” he told her, his voice quiet and filled with regret.

Then he pulled the trigger.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Charlotte Santoro

“Charlotte, are you okay?” Cielo asked. He still had his arms tight around me like he was holding me up or keeping me together. Maybe he was.

Val’s dead.

She’d fallen on her side. She wasn’t moving, not breathing.

Val’s dead.

Tears stung my eyes.

The woman who’d lived in some murky place between friend and sister—the only close female friend in my life—was dead. I had no idea where to put that, where to carefully store it away as a tragedy or a win or just another clusterfuck that had every intention of haunting me forever. I was leaning toward the last one.

And Cielo’s sneaky setup? Nope, I wasn’t ready to figure out where to file that one away yet, not until he and I had a very lengthy discussion about when it was and was not okay to keep me out of the loop.

For the time being, though, I decided to focus on those things I could categorize nice and neatly.

“My dad’s alive,” I said. That was a clear win in my books.

He’d managed to escape. But where the hell was he?

“Well find him, Char,” Julio said. “Or he’ll find us.”

Nope, I wasn’t waiting around for that. He was out there... somewhere. And I was going to figure out where.

I turned to leave, but then paused. “Where are your brother and Aurelio?” I asked Cielo, realizing they hadn’t come back with him.

He shrugged. “I thought fewer people here would be less overwhelming, and Aurelio wanted to get a head start.”

“A head start on what?”

“On finding your father,” he said like the answer should have been obvious.

“How would he even guess at where to start?” I asked, fighting the urge to get pissy that a veritable stranger thought he could do a better job of finding my dad than I could.

Cielo smiled. “It turns out, your father is just as good at recognizing when he’s being followed as you are. So, they’ve been... acquainted for some time now.”

More ties between us that I’d never even seen.

I looked at Cielo, then Val. There was a lot I’d apparently never seen, and it threatened to make my world shift a little, like maybe I wasn’t as skilled as I’d thought.

“What are you thinking, Charlotte?”

“He never told me.” I said. My own father had deceived me.

Cielo shrugged. “He wanted what was best for you—that’s not the worst thing in the world.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t,” I conceded grudgingly. Not only was I grateful for the years with my father, but the butterfly effect was a scary thing. One change could have had repercussions I couldn’t even have imagined.

But while the past was in the rear-view mirror, the hear-and-now was entirely within my control.

“I have to find my dad,” I told Cielo.

Cielo nodded, but as I glanced over at Nacio, I hesitated. He was still standing in front of Val, his gun in his hand, staring down at her. He wasn’t crying—I knew he wouldn’t.

“But I can’t leave him,” I whispered.

Nacio had put a single bullet in Val’s head. No drawing it out, trying to find succor in her suffering. How much pain was a man in to know not even that would bring the slightest modicum of relief?

“Sí, you can, *cariño*,” Nacio said.

He looked at Val a moment longer, then nodded, as if to himself, and looked away. I could see him tucking it all away, burying it all back down where he kept it deep inside him.

“It’s done now,” he said quietly.

I met his gaze, seeing the pain in them but also the determination. There was no point in arguing with him.

It seemed I had a knack for surrounding myself with stubborn men.

“I have to go *there*,” I said, looking back and forth between Cielo, Nacio, Julio, and Aiden. “He escaped from Val and hasn’t made his way back here. Something’s wrong.”

All three men nodded.

“We happen to have a plane on standby,” Cielo said, then he kissed the top of my head.

He adjusted his grip on the steering wheel of the Mercedes-Benz G-Wagon—the ultimate in off-road luxury—and glanced at his watch as we drove closer and closer to the border of Val’s estate. We’d been driving around, searching for two hours now. Aurelio was at the opposite end of the vast property, searching just like we were.

“You should be with your family,” I said. It wasn’t the first time he’d glanced at his watch.

He shook his head. “It’s a full-on assault; they don’t need me there for it.”

Lucianos and Nacio’s men, battling it out with *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*. Yeah, it wasn’t my kind of party, but that didn’t make it a universal opinion.

“But they’re your family, and I remember what you said about protecting them. It’s important to you.”

“So are you,” he said matter-of-factly.

Stubborn men, I ranted silently, pretending it wasn’t guilt hiding beneath it.

I caught sight of an old shack up ahead, probably a guard post from some

bygone era.

My heart started to beat in double time, just like it had at every one of the dozen places we'd stopped so far, from old buildings to clusters of fallen logs.

Cielo slowed the SUV as we approached the shack, and he'd barely shifted it into park when I hopped out and darted for the ramshackle building that couldn't have been more than six feet squared.

The door squeaked on its hinges, then fell right off as I threw it open, but there was nothing inside, nothing but old, rotted wood floors and broken windows.

"Damn it!" I cursed aloud.

I kicked the rotted wooden wall, and my foot went right through it. I would have fallen on my ass, but Cielo reached out and caught me. The man was fast.

He kept his hands on my waist from behind me as I looked around, staring out at rolling hills, cloaked in lush greenery, stretched out beneath an expansive sky that seemed to touch every corner of the earth. I tried to breathe in the serenity of the scene, but it was all I could do to fight the hopelessness that was like a rising tide inside my chest.

My dad was good as this survival shit, so good that if he'd holed himself up somewhere, not wanting to be found, no amount of "Where's Waldo" skills were going to help me. And if he was injured... he could die in his hiding spot, all alone, and I'd never find him.

If he isn't dead already, a voice whispered inside my head, a voice I rather wanted to punch in the face at the moment.

"He's too good at this, Cielo," I said, remembering the very first time he'd dragged me out into the middle of nowhere for survival training.

"You want me to do what?" I say disbelievingly.

"I want you to take that stick and catch a fish," he says like this is a perfectly reasonable request.

"you're not serious."

He spins in a slow, exaggerated circle, his arms out wide. "Do you see a better option, Char? Maybe a TGI Friday's nearby?" he says, half smiling.

I put my hands on my hips and huff. “How am I supposed to catch a fish with a stick?”

He shakes his head, refusing to give me the answer. “You tell me.”

Dear lord, this is ridiculous. He’s had me working at a computer desk... in the city. What are the chances some crisis is going to hit that will have me trying to catch fish in New York harbor?

But since he isn’t going to let this go—he’s even more stubborn than me, I think—I grab the stick, stomp to the river’s edge, and look down at the water slowly flowing past. I’m holding the stick like a spear, waiting, watching for a martyr fish to swim up to me and offer himself up—because clearly, that’s the only way I’m going to be able to catch a fish... with a stick!

I see a few coming, and I freeze.

They swim closer, and I grip the spear tighter. Just a little closer...

I slam the stick down into the water. And what do you know?—I come up empty.

Damn.

“This is stupid,” I say, glaring at my smug father who’s standing ten feet back, but he isn’t swayed.

So, I try again, over and over again.

Stab. Stab. Stab.

I feel like a crazy woman, standing here in the river with a spear, stabbing the water like I’m trying to make it bleed.

I see a deer.

I hold my breath. I’ve never seen a deer before. It’s on the other side of the river, all spindly legs and big eyes.

It comes closer, its eyes fixed on the river.

Perhaps for the first time in my life, I’m so still, it doesn’t even notice me.

Hm, maybe that deer would be easier than the fish, I think to myself, and the image comes to me, my own hand gripping the spear as it stabs that poor, defenseless animal.

Oh god.

“That’s it!” I yell as I turn and stomp out of the river, sending the deer running in the opposite direction. “I’m vegetarian now. No killing animals—

and that includes fish.”

I drop the spear on the ground while he laughs.

“All right, but I’m going to hold you to that, Char,” he says.

There’s no doubt in his voice—that’s what gets me. He has faith in me.

It reminds me of someone, but before that thought can settle in, my dad’s waving his hand, signaling me to follow him.

We moved onto finding shelter after that. I was pretty sure it was punishment—climbing trees to secure myself to branches and digging holes in the dirt to bury myself in leaves. Fun times—*really*. He’d also taught me how to turn some leaves into a waterproof canopy and how to scope out a cave to find out if anything was living inside it.

Oh!

“Caves!” I exclaimed, spinning around in Cielo’s arms.

“Okay…” he said, waiting patiently for more information.

“There are no caves on Val’s property, but…” I had to think. It had been a long time since I’d been here. “Two miles east of here, I think,” I said tentatively.

Cielo nodded, and we got back into the SUV and headed due east.

It was a long shot, but fair enough that my heart was already pounding. It felt like there were a hundred knots in my stomach, twisting up tighter and tighter with each passing second.

He was there. He had to be there. *Let him be there*, I prayed silently to any deity who happened to be tuning in to Colombia at the moment.

As we got closer, I sat up straighter, peering through vibrant yellow *Guayacán* trees.

“There,” I said, pointing, when I spotted the cave, which just looked like a big cluster of boulders.

It wasn’t actually a cave, but the way the boulders fell created a hollow in between them that served as one. The insides were actually a fair size, tall enough to stand up in once you got past the low opening.

Cielo brought the vehicle to a stop, and I flew out of it, running at full speed.

“Charlotte, slow down. Wait,” he called after me.

“Wolves and foxes have good instincts, charming. They’ll know to stay the hell out of my way.”

I heard him chuckle, but the sound fell away as he caught up to me.

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, taking my hand and squeezing.

Oh. Yeah, *that*. The whole ‘maybe I’m about to duck-walk into this tiny cave and find my father dead on the ground, all alone’ part.

“Nope,” I said, rejecting any possibility of it.

I turned on the light on my phone, crouched down, and headed in.

The moment the low entrance gave way to the taller interior, I stood up.

There was no build-up, no suspense.

There he was. My dad.

His long body laid out on the ground, chest down, dressed in a dirty gray shirt and combat pants. No weapons on him that I could see. Of course not. *She’d* taken them. One hand was stretched above him, the other by his side, wrapped in a grubby white cloth, splotted with dark red. Blood.

There was a lump at the back of my throat as I stared, focused on his back.

But it wasn’t moving. Was it? It didn’t look like it was moving.

A broken, strangled sound escaped my throat.

I stumbled back a step.

“Keep the light on him, *tempesta*,” Cielo said, his voice calm, the only bit of calm I could grab onto. My quiet place that I was still fairly certain I was going to completely fuck up.

He squeezed past me, dropped down to his knees right beside my dad, and pressed two fingers against his throat. He put his other hand in front of his nose and mouth.

It felt like my heart stopped.

I stopped breathing, like I could will my breath into him.

You can’t be dead. You can’t be dead. No. Please.

My insides felt like they were coming apart, or maybe breaking into a thousand pieces, all rough with jagged edges.

“He’s got a pulse. He’s breathing,” Cielo said, glancing up at me like he was letting me see the truth plain as day in his eyes.

The pressure in my chest erupted, and a choked sob slipped out with so

much force, I stumbled back a step.

“He’s alive, Charlotte,” Cielo said as he rolled my father onto his back.

At least, I was fairly certain it was my father. His face was swollen, covered in bruises so dark they were black in the dim light.

Then his eyes fluttered, just a little at first and then more until they were completely open. And they found me right away, silver and wolf-like, just like mine.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Cielo Luciano

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Charlotte exclaimed as I parked at the top of Nacio Morales’ long, hibiscus-lined driveway.

“What’s wrong, *tempesta?*” I asked as Morales stepped out of the side entrance to the grand, sprawling estate.

She huffed and turned to glare, but that glare was not directed at me.

“There is only one reason Nacio would be coming out of that door, Dad, and it isn’t a ‘cozy, feel good, help my father to heal’ kind of reason, is it?” she asked her father who was reclining uncomfortably in the back seat. The man had certainly seen better days.

“Don’t you think that maybe seeing a doctor ranks higher priority at the moment?” Charlotte continued without waiting for an answer.

“The doctor can wait, Char,” he replied, his voice hoarse thanks to the deep purple bruising around his throat. “I’m much more interested in a conversation with Miguel Silva at the moment.”

They’d caught Silva—my family’s and Morales’ men had. And they’d managed to round up Fernando Alvarez, *el jefe* of *Los Cazadores Sangrientos* too, thanks to a disgruntled ‘employee’ who felt he was underpaid and overworked. They’d obliterated *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*; no more cartel assholes waiting for our shipments at the docks in Venezuela.

And I’d missed it.

It felt like an act that had taken place backstage.

I should have felt more disappointment, but what I hadn’t missed was the look of utter relief and joy on Charlotte’s face when I’d told her that her

father was alive. That shit was priceless, maybe something that only came along once in a lifetime. Asshole scumbags who deserved a slow and brutal death?—there were always plenty of those.

Charlotte huffed and got out of the car.

“You do realize your code talk isn’t as stealthy as you think it is, right?” she said to her surroundings in general as she circled around to get to the rear passenger door before Morales could open it. “Everyone knows what you mean by a ‘conversation’.”

As I followed her out slowly, watching on, she leaned her back against the car door and crossed her arms over her chest, looking up at Morales like she was ready to go to war.

She should have looked like a chihuahua going up against a pit bull, but she didn’t. She looked... fierce, like a mother wolf protecting her cubs, primal and beautiful.

“He doesn’t need this right now, Nacio,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Declan is a grown man, *cariño*. He needs to deal with this how he sees fit.”

She scoffed. “Is that so? Because when I wanted to deal with Sylvie dying in Africa by going BASE jumping in Thailand, none of you thought it would be best to let *me* deal with shit the way I saw fit.”

“But that was not you dealing with it, that was you escaping it, was it not?”

She looked at him for a moment then nodded once in concession.

“Snuffing out the vile lives and influence of men like Miguel Silva and Fernando Alvarez is why your father does what he does,” Morales explained. “It is the reason he can withstand all he has been through and go back and do it again. Don’t try to take that from him.”

She pressed her lips together, glaring but silent. She sighed after a moment like she was accepting defeat, but she didn’t budge. She stayed blocking that door.

“He’s hurt, Nacio. He needs medical attention.”

Morales nodded. “I agree. That is why I have the best doctors money can buy, ready and waiting for him... for when he is finished.”

She was silent again, looking at him. Morales seemed to be in no hurry, letting her look.

“He’s right, Charlotte,” I said, stepping into the standoff.

“I know he is,” she snapped without looking away. “That doesn’t mean I’m fine and dandy with this.”

She pushed off the car, spun around, and looked through the window at her father who was looking back at her, a flicker of amusement shining through all the swelling and bruises.

She shook her head slowly and stepped back to open the door, but she continued to block her father from getting out.

“That foot is infected,” she said, nodding in the direction of the festering gash along the bottom of Declan’s foot. “If you spend too much time ‘having a conversation’ down there and Nacio’s doctors end up having to cut the damn thing off, I’m telling them to do it with no anesthetic,” she threatened. I couldn’t imagine her actually going through with it, but she looked damned serious at the moment.

Declan smiled. “Message received, Char. Anything else?” he asked as she stepped back and let Morales and I help him up.

“Yeah,” she snapped like she was getting ready for another rant. “I love you,” she spat out. “I never got to tell you that, and it has eaten at me ever since. Don’t do that to me again.”

He nodded and pulled her close in a one-armed hug despite the bruises that showed above the ratty neckline of his shirt. She was a grown woman, nothing childlike about her appearance at all, nothing but for the protective way Declan held her, like she was the most precious thing in this world and he would guard her with his life.

I could understand the feeling.

Two Mercedes turned into the top of the long driveway, slowly approaching. I could see Vito in the driver’s seat of the first car, then Deo and Aurelio in the second.

Declan smiled as they parked and got out, and he shifted to stand up a little straighter.

“She’s one hell of a girl,” Aurelio said as he stopped in front of him and

shook his hand, then winked at Charlotte.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m right here, you know?” she said, but she was smiling.

Vito’s gaze grazed over Charlotte. ‘Sex on stiletto heels’ he’d called her. I couldn’t blame him—that was precisely what she looked like. But when his eyes met mine, we had a silent conversation about precisely what I would do to him if he ever laid a hand on her. It felt like a productive conversation to me.

“It looks like your boy turned out all right too,” Declan said, nodding in my direction.

His *boy*?

Aurelio laughed. “Of course, he’s not *mine*, *Signor Ryan*, but I am proud of him, *sì*.”

I had a feeling Charlotte and I had been the topic of more than one conversation between the two men over the years.

“You did one hell of a job back in New York, runaway,” Deo commented, smiling at Charlotte.

“If we’re handing out nicknames based on way back in high school, then I suppose I should start calling you ‘chuckles’,” she replied without missing a beat, waggling her eyebrows.

Chuckles?

Deo’s smile fell like it had just discovered gravity, which was very intriguing. “Well played, *Charlotte*,” he said, emphasizing her name as his smile found its way back.

“Much better,” she replied with a satisfied nod.

I would most certainly be inquiring about *that* later.

“Shall we, gentlemen?” Morales asked, stepping in and motioning toward the side door.

Declan nodded and let go of Charlotte, but she grabbed his hand, loosening her grip when he winced.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked.

He nodded, smiling at her in a way that I hoped he’d been smiling at her since she found him ten years ago.

“I am, Char. You deserve to live in a world without men like Miguel Silva. It’s my job to do everything I can to make that happen.”

If ever I’d wondered if Declan Ryan had really been as good for Charlotte as she and Aurelio seemed to have thought, I stopped wondering in that moment.

Nacio and Declan started walking, and Deo and our men followed. Charlotte’s brow furrowed as she watched the way her father was limping along, but while injured, he was moving under his own power.

Alvarez was in there, the man responsible for the death of one of our men. Not long ago, I would have been first in line to right that wrong, but now, I hesitated.

“You can go with them, Cielo. I know that *Los Cazadores Sangrientos*’ boss is responsible for getting one of your men killed, and I... I get why you’re okay with doing the things you do, and I’m okay with that. If you need to do this...” she said, nodding toward the side entrance door, “I’ll be fine.”

I leaned back against the car door next to her. “My brother isn’t as good as this type of work as I am,” I said, “but I think, with Aurelio and Morales there, he’ll do all right.”

“You don’t—”

“Charlotte, there is nowhere I’d rather be,” I cut in.

She looked at me for a moment, then nodded. “In that case, I happen to know a place,” she said while the corners of her plump lips turned up in a devilish smile.

“A place?”

She nodded and took my hand, pulling me further, past the house and onto the grounds of the estate behind it.

“You’ll see.”

She walked, then ran, pulling me along with her through the guava trees behind Morales’ estate. By the time we stepped out into a clearing and she slowed her pace, there was a light sheen of sweat coating her arms and neck.

She stopped five yards from an enormous pond, kept fresh with a fountain in the center of it. She dropped my hand, then kept walking, grabbing hold of the hem of her shirt as she did and yanking it off over her head.

I had a feeling I knew where this was going.

I watched as she unclasped her bra and tossed it on the ground. She had her back to me, but all that tanned flesh was already getting me hard. Fast.

Her pants went next. She hopped on one foot, then the other as she tugged them off, making her tits jiggle.

Then the thong, the last scrap of fabric she was wearing. She'd reached the water's edge by the time she tossed the lacy scrap to the ground and she spun to face me.

Christ.

Naked, tanned all over, with the sun filtering in through the canopy overhead and glistening off her sweat-slick skin.

Fucking beautiful.

"Are you coming? Or am I flying solo here?" she asked, sliding her hands down her body enticingly.

"Why don't you get started, and I'll join in?" I asked, not at all opposed to watching her hands slip and slide all over her body, seeing her fingers glide through her lips and disappear inside her cunt. Not opposed at all.

Instead, she smiled mischievously. "Okay," she said with a casual shrug, then she turned and jumped in, disappearing beneath the water's surface.

"That was definitely not what I meant," I muttered to myself as I stripped at record speed and followed her in.

The moment I landed in the water, she took off, swimming across the pond.

I dove beneath the water, sinking toward the bottom to swim past her and come up in front of her so that she ran right into me.

She laughed as I moved to catch her around the waist, but her slippery body slid right out of my loose grip and she was off again, swimming back to the other side.

This time, when I caught up, I grabbed hold of her fast and spun her around, pinning her wrists against the small of her back.

“Playful today, I see,” I said as my free hand glided down the front of her body, from her neck, gliding over her tits, which floated like two perfect globes on the water’s surface. Then I continued downward, her ribs, her abdomen.

My fingers had just brushed over her clit when I heard a rustling, not close by, but close enough that if the noise kept coming in this direction, it wouldn’t be long.

“Ignore them,” she said, laughing as she pressed her clit harder against my fingers. “Its just Nacio’s guards. If they see anything, they’ll keep their mouths shut.”

She seemed confident enough that I wasn’t going to pass this up to go investigate. If a bunch of Morales’ men wanted to get their rocks off in the bushes like peeping toms, then all the power to them.

I used my hold on her wrists to turn her around until she faced me, hair slicked back, freckles standing out across the bridge of her nose, silver eyes shining in the sunlight.

Looking at her, something shifted inside me, not something I could even explain. But when she grabbed hold of my shoulders and lunged up as high as she could, I threaded my fingers through the wet hair at the nape of her neck, just holding her, not controlling her.

I kissed her, slow and thorough, tasting every inch of her mouth. For just a moment, it wasn’t just the mad rush to pleasure and fucking, but something... more.

And then she wrapped her legs around me, pressing her cunt against my cock, and the mad rush to pleasure and fucking took over.

I walked us the few steps to the water’s edge where it was shallower, not quite waist height, and set her down on one of the giant, flat-topped rocks there, stepping between her open thighs.

I grabbed hold of my cock, running the head up and down between her lips, knowing that when I fucked her this time, it would be bareback, and there’d be no pulling out. That knowledge alone was enough to send the faint tingling at the base of my spine into overdrive. But still that sense of *more*, more than fucking, more than pleasure, stayed with me.

She leaned up, getting her elbows beneath her to sit up, but I put a hand on the center of her chest and held her down, continuing to tease her cunt.

“If you think you can make me beg again, think again, charming.”

“Are you sure about that, *tempesta*? Because I think I could make you beg.”

“Uh-huh. Sure,” she said, smiling.

That was the kind of challenge I was more than happy to accept.

I stepped back, spreading her legs further, and leaned in until my lips were a hair’s breadth from her clit.

She let out a rugged breath, watching me until I started to lick in slow, featherlight strokes, teasing her. She dropped her head back and her fingers curled against the rock.

When her hips started to writhe, I splayed a hand across her abdomen to hold her still and slid the other between her legs, inserting a finger inside her, crooked just right so that her whole body jolted as I glided right over her G-spot.

“God, no map for you,” she said on a moan.

I chuckled, then went back to work, which basically involved slow pleasure to the point of torment. I suckled her clit into my mouth, just enough pressure to keep her climbing, but not enough to get her where she clearly wanted to go. I fingered her the same way, slow strokes, just enough pressure. And just to make sure she was good and ready to beg, I coated her ass hole in her own juices, and on the next thrust into her cunt, I inserted a finger in her ass, slow and steady.

She squeezed her eyes shut and let out a moan as I worked my finger into her up to the first knuckle, then the next. And it wasn’t long before she’d taken another finger, and then another, her tight muscles around me sending my thoughts in one very specific direction.

“God, Cielo. Fuck, that feels good,” she moaned, climbing too high, too fast.

“Not yet,” I said, withdrawing my fingers from her body and giving her clit one last lick before standing up.

I leaned right over her, grinding my cock against her abdomen as I reached

for my pants—fortunately, I’d dropped them close to the water’s edge.

With my torso right above her, she leaned up and pressed her lips to my pec, then glided her tongue downward to my nipple, flicking it before grazing it with her teeth.

When I moved back between her thighs with a condom in my hand, she tried to grab it or maybe swat it away.

“We don’t need that, charming.”

I smiled. “Sì, we do.”

Her brow furrowed, then smoothed. I think she got the idea.

“Turn over,” I said as I sheathed my cock.

She didn’t hesitate. She slid off the rock, into the water and turned around, leaning over and supporting herself with her hands on the rock.

I slid a finger into her cunt, getting it plenty wet, then moved on to her asshole, sliding a finger in, then another, stretching her, making sure she was ready.

When I couldn’t wait any longer, I withdrew, slid my hand beneath her to her clit, and lined my cock up, working her clit as I pressed against the tight hole with steady pressure, penetrating her, filling her ass one slow inch at a time.

Her body tensed, and she breathed out, long and slow, then her muscles relaxed, letting me in more, deeper. Until she’d taken every inch.

Fucking perfect.

This time, I paused for a moment, giving her body time to adjust before I withdrew until just the head of my cock was buried inside her, then I thrust in slow and steady again, rubbing her clit, gritting my teeth, and fighting the urge to rut like an animal.

Slow and steady, over and over again, while her ass gripped me tight. I never wanted to fucking leave.

She looked back at me over her shoulder. “More, charming. Fuck me faster,” she moaned.

Fuck. I was going to be coming far too quickly if she kept that up.

But I gave her what she wanted, quickening my pace, burying my cock deep until my hips hit her ass while I worked her clit at the same time.

Her moans got louder. She pressed back harder, taking every inch of me she could. Faster and faster until her moans turned into screams and she came, her back arched, head thrown back and her muscles clenching down around me.

“Christ. Fuck,” I hissed.

That was it.

I pulled out, ditched the condom, and lined myself up, grazing the head of my cock along her dripping wet cunt.

“Please,” she moaned, sooner than I’d expected.

“I told you I’d have you begging.”

Before she could respond—or argue—I kicked my hips and thrust in, burying myself to the hilt in one hard, deep thrust.

No waiting this time, I withdrew and drove back in, holding her hips and pulling her back to meet me until her ass cheeks hit my hips, every inch of me inside her. So deep. So fucking good.

And then I rut like a god damned animal, fucking her harder.

Deeper.

Faster.

Her heavy breathing turned to moans, then turned to cries. It wasn’t long before she was close, and that was a damned good thing because I was close too. So fucking close.

“Come for me,” I demanded. I wanted to feel her coming on my cock, nothing between us, just her tight, slick walls around me.

“Bossy,” she cried, but she wasn’t going to be able to fight me this time.

Her back arched, and that cry turned to a scream as her cunt clamped down like a vise and sent me hurtling right over the edge.

I thrust in once more, and that was it. Lightning bolts of pleasure shot through my body as I came deep inside her, no barrier, no condom.

Fucking perfect.

It was a long time before I withdrew, but knowing that even as I did, my come was still inside her? It had me wanting to bang on my chest like King Kong.

I chuckled as I grazed my hand down the long line of her back.

“What’s so funny?” she asked as she stood up and turned to face me, looking like a woman who had just been well fucked.

I shook my head, still smiling. “You’re right; I’m a caveman.”

She scoffed. “You’re just figuring that out?”

I smiled, but that thought brought up another. “Sometimes, it takes some time to see the truth,” I said with a deceptively casual shrug.

She narrowed her eyes at me. “This is the ‘we’re having one conversation, but really, we’re having another’, isn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Okay,” she said, elaborating no further.

I laughed. “Okay? What does that mean?” I asked, reiterating her own words back to her.

She sighed as she slid her hands up my chest and up to the back of my neck. “It means I love you, and I…” She hesitated. “And I don’t want to walk away from this, charming.”

“*Bene*,” I said, pulling her closer. “Because I love you too, *tempesta*.”

Epilogue

Charlotte Santoro

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the priest said, his voice raised to be heard over the cascading waterfall not far from the orchid-adorned arbour. “You may now kiss the bride,” he continued, as if these dangerous people needed permission to do anything.

Raven smiled from ear-to-ear as Nico—her fiancé, now husband—leaned down and kissed her upturned lips in a thorough kiss that certainly wasn’t church-appropriate. Good thing they’d opted for an open-air wedding in paradise.

The kiss went on as guests clapped and cheered, and one particularly rowdy group of men in leather cuts whooped and whistled.

Lucianos, Costas, and Lucas. The Old Dogs MC. Nacio and his men. Three freaking New York crime families, a motorcycle club, and a Colombian cartel all together in this tropical oasis. This had to be something right out of the ‘Twilight Zone’.

I’d met them all, a constant barrage of introductions in the day leading up to the wedding. And I had to say, for a bunch of criminals, they were some pretty awesome people. Awesome, and overwhelming at the same time. My nerves were seriously frayed here.

When the kiss finally ended, Nico was smiling. It was a completely thorough smile—bone-deep, I was tempted to say.

I guess he wasn’t trying to stay single after all.

The happy couple led the procession back down the aisle. And what a procession it was. Ten bridesmaids and ten groomsmen. I had a feeling no

one here lacked for company in their lives back at home.

“Are you ready for the party?” Cielo whispered against my ear as Raven and Nico made their way down the orchid- and Colombian rose-lined aisle, hand in hand. He spoke lightly, but I could hear the genuine question beneath it.

“Just point me in the direction of the bar, and I’m good to go,” I said, because believe it or not, crowds weren’t really my thing.

Cielo leaned away enough for me to see it when he raised an eyebrow at me.

“Don’t give me that look, charming. I could drink anyone here under the table.” All right, maybe not *anyone*. I’d yet to out-drink Nacio, but it was a work in progress.

He laughed. “Do you remember Greta?” he asked, smiling.

I had to run through the long list of names and faces in my head—which was no simple task when it tended to get messy and disorganized in there.

“The maid of honor,” he explained, nodding to the blonde-haired woman who followed behind Raven and Nico in the procession.

Right. That was Greta. She’d been one of the first guests to arrive—Vito’s niece... *apparently*, and she was dating the biggest biker I’d ever seen. An attractive man, but big. Really freaking big.

I nodded. “I liked her,” I said because she was kind of impossible not to like. She radiated the kind of larger-than-life energy that was almost addictive. That, and she seemed like a bit of a daredevil to me. I could definitely work with that.

“I’m glad,” he said, smiling, “but don’t ever tell her you could outdrink her.”

Hm, interesting. I definitely wasn’t going to do that—*really*.

It turned out, though, I didn’t get a chance. Between dinner and dancing and conversations with everyone from a man named Rome—cool name—who worked for Raven’s family to a blue-eyed, blond-haired biker in his mid-twenties named Hack. I had a feeling that he and I had a lot in common.

I danced with Julio and Nacio, Deo and Matteo—which Cielo seemed to accept grudgingly. But when a man named Leo pulled me onto the dance

floor, I could actually see the vein in Cielo's temple start to pulse while he tried to keep up conversation with his dance partner, Leo's girlfriend—Ella, I thought was her name.

The moment the song ended, I thanked Leo for the dance and hightailed my ass off the dancefloor.

Before Cielo could catch up to me, Greta snagged him for another dance, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I needed a break, an escape. My anxiety levels were rising, surrounded by so many people and so much noise.

I wandered away from the crowd, weaving through Guayacán and mango trees back to my favorite spot, just off from where the ceremony had taken place.

I could almost believe in fairytales here. The hibiscus flowers and orchids, the greenery so lush and bright, even in the moonlight, it seemed to glow. More than that, this place was alive, the squawks of black-crowned night herons, the croaks and gargles of pauraques, the rush of cascading water in the background.

Isabella and I had climbed those rocks, slippery from the spray of the water, so close to the falls. We'd swam in the pool at the base of them and brought Emilio here more times than I could count.

Isabella was gone. Emilio was gone. And now Val too.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

"This is a lot of people, *cariño*," Nacio said, coming up beside me.

I smiled as I opened my eyes, remembering the small, intimate affair Nacio's wedding had been. They'd had little family, and Isabella had never been much for the spotlight.

"Are you okay, Nacio?"

His lips turned up in an almost smile. "Isabella would approve; she would be happy."

"Yeah, she would."

While she'd never been the woman who wanted the spotlight, she'd liked people. She'd always been *kind* despite the cruel world she'd grown up in. And Emilio? He'd been just like her. Well, a more energetic version of her, maybe. He'd been a little ball of energy, just like Nic. And a little

mischievous—I think he'd gotten that from Nacio.

God, I missed them.

“Don't stay out here too long. Cielo might get worried,” Nacio said, just a hint of a grudging tone in his voice. *Overprotective uncles.*

Nacio wandered back toward the crowd, but he hadn't been gone two minutes when footsteps sounded through the brush several yards away, two sets, moving fast.

A couple came out from the other side of the clearing, maybe twenty feet from me. With the trees all around me and their attention fully engrossed in each other, they didn't see me.

I could have left. I should have left.

But when the man slammed the woman up against the tree nearest them, I paused, feeling trapped, not really wanting to draw attention to myself.

I'd never seen the woman before, but the man looked vaguely familiar. I'd definitely met him.

“Oh, Caio, yes. More,” the woman cried in Spanish as he delved for her neck and their hands went to work between them, unfastening and yanking clothes.

Right. Caio—one of the younger Costa brothers.

I watched, feeling just a little like a creepy voyeur, as the dark-haired girl yanked Caio's open shirt down his arms, leaving his torso bare. I couldn't see much with their bodies pressed together, but from what I could see, he looked pretty damned built to me.

He still had his mouth on her neck, and he started to work his way downward, pulling her dress down with him as he went, kissing across her clavicles, along the upper swells of her breasts, pushed up high thanks to a bra that rivaled the nice things my corset did for my girls.

At the same time, he'd slid his hands to the backs of her thighs, sliding her dress higher as he worked his way up to her ass.

“Daniela!” a voice called out, back from the direction they'd come.

The two of them froze, then broke apart, and the woman moved frantically, fixing her clothes in a hurry.

When Caio reached for her hand, she shook her head.

“I have to go, please,” she said, once again in Spanish.

The moment he let her go, she ran off, leaving him standing there, running his hands through his hair, the moonlight spilling through the open gap in the canopy above and playing across his ripped body.

He looked up, like he could feel me watching him, and our gazes met.

His eyes grazed over me, from my bare shoulders, down the long line of my strapless dress, to my bare toes. When he looked back up, I could see the fire in his eyes even from a distance.

He’s all yours. Go for it. Just fuck him, a voice screamed in my head. *It’ll feel so good, wipe away all this anxiety, all this melancholy, right from the first hard thrust.*

Just do it.

There was another voice murmuring in my head, so quiet, whispering about logic and consequences, but I could barely make it out. It gave me nothing to grab onto, no distraction from the voice screaming all the things it had screamed so many times before.

Just fuck. Come. Scream.

The whispering beneath it stopped. But that sneaky little voice got smarter. Very smart.

It held up an image, like a neon sign flashing in my brain. It was Cielo’s face. His blue eyes sparked up with cold fire. The way the corners of his lips twitched when he was fighting a smile. The way they curved when he was looking at me, smiling at me. *Loving me.*

“I trust you,” he’d said.

Trust.

Love.

Faith.

I blinked and held onto those words, to the image of the man I didn’t want to betray. Not now. Not ever.

Maybe that quiet voice hadn’t gotten smarter; perhaps there’d just never been a picture to throw up before, no one that had mattered more than all the cheap thrills in the world put together.

I turned on my heels and headed back the way I’d come, searching for

him. And I found him alone, off to the side of the dance floor. He was looking at me, eyes appraising. I took a deep breath and crossed the distance between us.

When I stopped right in front of him, he took my arm and kept going, leading us away from the crowd again until the music was just blurry notes in the distance. When he stopped, he looked at me, silent, like he was waiting patiently.

“I’m coming to you,” I blurted out, remembering what he’d told me.

He smiled. “Si, I know.”

“You do?” Was I that obvious?

“I thought we could try something new, something both of us will find terrifying—one hell of an adrenaline rush,” he said, ignoring my question.

“Okay…” I replied tentatively.

“Marry me?” he asked. There wasn’t a hint of humor in his tone. This didn’t feel like a joke.

My lips parted. My heart pounded.

“Scary, right?” he said, like it was a perfectly reasonable question.

I nodded. “Um, yeah.”

He smiled. “I never pegged you as a woman to hide from what scares her.”

“I’m not,” I replied automatically.

“So, is that a yes?” he persisted.

“You’re serious.” That’s why there was no humor on his face. That’s why this didn’t feel like a joke.

He nodded and held out a ring comprised of intricate swirls of white gold, all surrounding a black diamond, like the eye of a storm.

“Marry me, Charlotte. I lost you once; I don’t intend to let that happen again.”

“What are you going to do?—put a tracker in the ring?” I joked, but when he smiled, I got the feeling this ring came with something *extra*.

His smile fell away, but he kept looking at me, waiting.

“Yes.” The word slipped out of its own volition, but when I tried to reach for it, to pull it back, I realized there was no part of me that wanted to take it back.

He slid the ring onto my finger. It caught the moonlight and twinkled at me, kind of like it was winking.

Then he kissed me. It was a kiss like at the pond, not rushed and heated, but thorough, like he had all the time in the world and he wanted nothing more than to spend eternity exploring me.

By the time he pulled away, I was breathless, and my heart felt so full it was close to bursting. *Dear lord, that sounds cheesy.*

“I’ll find the priest,” he whispered against my lips.

The priest? “You want to get married... *today?*”

He nodded.

Today. He wanted us to get married today. Right now. Here. *Oh god.*

“I think we need licenses or... something like that,” I blurted out. I didn’t actually know—marriage wasn’t something I’d ever considered.

He smiled a little sheepishly—that was new.

“I may have taken care of that already.”

“How?” Because surely, a man who’d been that certain I’d say yes needed to be taken down a peg.

He shrugged. “I enlisted help. If it makes you feel any better, I can assure you that we have your father’s blessing.”

I went very still. “You asked my father for permission?”

“No,” he said, and he shook his head for emphasis. “I asked for his *blessing*. You’re a grown woman, *tempesta*—I know you don’t *need* his permission. But I knew you would want his blessing. He’s important to you—he’s good for you. I wouldn’t want to come between that.”

Well, damn. That kind of made it hard to stay angry with him.

“I love you,” I blurted out. But I did, and I was certain now that I would never do anything to jeopardize this.

He smiled. “I love you too—kind of why I asked you to marry me.”

“And I trust me,” I went on, which felt like the weirdest thing to be saying out loud.

“So do I,” he said, not the least bit perturbed by the odd confession.

When he leaned in and kissed me again, there was plenty of that heart-bursting feeling going on, but also... more. Like sparks and electricity and

fireworks.

“What do you say we get started on the honeymoon, and we’ll get to the wedding part once the party’s over,” I asked, because immediate gratification was sounding like a pretty good idea at the moment. And there were no flashing signs in my head telling me otherwise.

He nodded. “I’d say that sounds like a perfect plan.”

He grabbed my hand and started to pull me deeper into the tropical forest around us, but then he paused.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you,” he said, a furrow between his brows.

“Oh?”

“You called my brother ‘chuckles’... Where did that come from?”

I laughed and waggled my eyebrows.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

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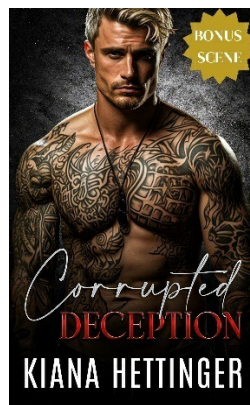
“Have you ever done this before, Charlotte?” I asked, not because I wanted to imagine her under the control of another man, offering up everything she had to give—actually, the thought made that primitive part of me snarl. But I needed to be sure she knew what she was handing over.

“No,” she admitted, which, despite the predicament it posed, just about made my cock punch right through my pants.

Mine, the caveman in me roared. All mine.

I sighed and scrubbed my fingers through my hair, fighting the potent urge to take exactly what she was offering, consequences be damned.

“Don’t look at me like that, charming,” she warned while the corners of her lips twitched.



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