

ROTTEN ROMANCE DUET - BOOK ONE



HER LIFE WAS FORFEITED

# Calavera Society

V. DOMINO



# CALavera SOCIETY

---

## ROTTEN ROMANCE DUET - PART ONE

# V. DOMINO



# CONTENTS

[Untitled](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[End Of Book One](#)

[Preview of Ugly Truths](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)



Copyright © 2023 | V. Domino

Rotten Romance Duet (Calavera Society, book one) All rights reserved. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. The author acknowledges the trademark owners of various products, brands, and/or stores references in this work of fiction, which have been used without permission. The publication/use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.



## TRIGGER WARNING

Calavera Society contains graphic scenes of violence such as abuse, domestic abuse, self-harm, and bullying. There is also recreational drug use, underage alcohol consumption and explicit sex scenes. There're also scenes of blood kink and mask kinks. MM/FM scenes as well.

This story is about secret societies, so you will read about rituals and forms of dark worship.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

This note may be left unread by most, but I'd like to point out that while I may not be like any of my characters, I have been on this earth for 34 years and I am from a Mexican family that is steeped in various religions. One of those religions is something my grandmother followed deeply. My husband's family is also split with different faiths, some dark, some light, so my knowledge within these different beliefs is well versed.

This story focuses on one in particular, but due to the severe privacy of this cultured religion, I will not delve deeper into the ritualistic aspects of the culture.

All of the rituals you read in this story are fictional and completely made up.

Again, I cannot stress it enough that you read the trigger warning before continuing.

If you took the time to read this, thank you so very much!

-Domino

*For the women who just want their hair pulled and their asses  
smacked.*

*This is for you.*



# ONE

---

“CUÉNTAME UNA HISTORIA DE RENCOR”

KEVIN KAARL, EL GUINCHO

THE FIRST DAY OF SUMMER IS ALWAYS THE WORST IN MY opinion. Your internal clock is still set to school time, but your mind is telling you, *sleep in, take it easy, fuck the system*. But the two don't mix well. It isn't until you're about halfway through the summer break that your clock finally catches up with your brain but by then, you've already missed half the fun. Bummer for everyone going back to school in the fall.

Luckily for me, I already graduated and all that's left is finding a good spot to kick it with my best friend Noah.

Chillin' all day and wild parties at night, yeah, this summer break has been one to remember. Core memories were created these last weeks, and with the bonfire tonight, I know more are coming.

I stare into the mirror, applying my dark purple matte lipstick and parting my long black hair down the middle to begin the French braids I have planned for tonight. My head bobs to the music as I work my hair into place, pausing every few minutes to let my muscles rest. Why is it that I can play basketball all day, but doing my hair leaves my arms shaking?

Damn whacked out body.

With my hair done, I take off the long-ripped t-shirt I've been lounging in all day and change into a red tank top, black ripped mom-jeans and red Converse shoes. I dig in my closet for my black and red flannel shirt, forcing my hung clothes out of the way as I try in vain to pull the damn thing from the hanger. I successfully knock my backpack off the shelf in the middle, cursing as all the contents inside spill around my feet.

After ripping the flannel off the greedy hanger, I slip it on before squatting to pick up the papers and other junk I've shoved in my bag during the last week of school. That week was such a chaotic mess with parties and celebrations with my graduating class. We didn't have homework or any real lessons, but we were handed a shit ton of pamphlets of information for colleges and universities. Of course, there were military recruiters doing their best to lie their asses off and get us to sign up...I can't say I didn't think about it, but in the end, my *hell-fucking-no-sir* won out.

I grab a handful of the leaflets and shove them back into the bag - *making a mental note to recycle these fuckers later* - when I come across a photo one helpful sophomore took of me and my friends on the front steps of the school.

Noah and I stand between Leroy and Rico, the other pair that makes up our small circle. I grin as I run my fingers across the polaroid image. All of us have our arms over each other's shoulders, all of us smiling big like this was the happiest moment of our lives. Rico looks like he's in the middle of blinking, but I know he's just high as a kite. His green tipped hair is flopped over to one side as he throws the middle finger to the school over his shoulder. Leroy stands with his head tipped back, his smile crooked on his caramel face, showing off his pretty dimple and neck tattoos. Meanwhile, my goofy ass has my leg kicked up like some wannabe Vegas showgirl, my hair a wild mess over my shoulder and a giant wide grin on my face while Noah smiles down at me.

This really was the best day ever. The last day of our torturous high school lives...now it's time for tortuous adult lives.

My mom wants me to go to college, expand on my love of justice, but I honestly don't feel like college is really for me. Besides, I think my mom and I have different definitions of justice. She believes in the law, in the whole system, but I'm the kind of girl who demands street justice. I know college isn't a bad idea, in fact I know I should absolutely go, but I'm not in a rush like she seems to be.

Sometimes I think she's trying to get rid of me so she can party it up. Sounds funny when I complain to Noah about it, but I'm dead serious. She's been on my ass about one college in particular but I always blow her off. The university is a private one with fucking uniforms. Not even my high school put us in those stuffy ass clothes.

I looked for their website after my mother brought it up and found out that uniforms are the least of my problems with that school. The place is steeped in some kind of religion, though they didn't specify which. Like that's not suspicious at all.

They have Sunday mass, religious science and priests for professors and counselors, even baptisms!

Okay, so I made that last part up and I may have exaggerated the priests, but Sunday mass was definitely listed as mandatory. They do have some older, stern looking men in what looks like Roman Catholic cassock, but there was no white collar in sight. These men were the counselors and church staff. One thing that stood out about them was that in all their photos, they have their right hands cupping their left forearms near their elbows.

It could be the pose of someone unsure of something, the stance of a shy person, but these men looked too confident for the placement to be anything but intentional.

Whatever the reason, it completely sealed the deal for me; I am not going anywhere near Coventry University. I don't even understand how my mom would want me to go there. She told me it's where she went and where she met my father, but that's it. She's not like other moms who tell their kids all the crazy stories about their college experience, never spoke

about college parties. Though I doubt she has any party stories with how religio the place seems. It's almost like she'd rather forget the place exists, so why is she trying to push me to go?

She's religious for sure, but not catholic. My mom worships La Muerte, like all our family does. I'll have to take her word for it because I've never met them. Still, religious or not, I don't drink from the same punch bowl as her, so I'm not interested in going to CU. Plus, the place looks like it's filled to the brim with snobby ass rich people and I'm from the hood; the two never mix well.

I get up from the floor and grab a couple of push pins before attaching the photo to the wall beside my desk next to my favorite picture of me and my mom.

My mother is my best friend, she's my mom *and* my dad, since the prick left us years ago. Valentina Calavera is not like other moms, and certainly not like Noah's cunt of a mother. I mean, my mom has been extra intense lately with this whole college thing, pushing me toward Coventry, but she knows me better than anyone. When I'm pushed, I'll push back regardless of it being right or wrong. Still, Valentina is the kind of mother most teens wish they had, she's tough, but she's the greatest friend anyone could ask for and I was lucky enough to be birthed by her.

My dad left us when I was fourteen, and while he and I get along super great, Roberto Calavera holds no flame to the inferno that is my mom.

"Valeria Roma!" I yip when my mother's irritated voice penetrates my thoughts, "If I have to yell your name one more time—"

"Coming!" I kick the stack of leaflets as I rush to my door, sighing when they scatter once more. I ignore the mess and leave my room, digging my phone out of my pocket to check for messages. I bound down the stairs, skipping the last step that always feels like it's going to break every time I put my weight on it. Mom's been meaning to get it fixed but with the double shifts she's been pulling at the laundromat and me not being able to find a summer job, we haven't had the funds.

*I should just do it myself*; I think. It'll come out shitty, but I'll make sure it doesn't wobble like it does now.

I pause at the bottom of the stairs when I see that I have missed calls and texts from Noah.

Noah: Ay Dios, Val! You better not be late tonight. Bonfire at Celorio's, remember?

I ROLL MY EYES EVEN THOUGH HE CAN'T SEE ME.

Me: Calmaté wey, I'll be there. No sweat.

I tuck my phone away and turn, walking through the living room and into the kitchen where my mom sits at the table with a glass of red wine, the only kind she drinks. It's also the one she drinks when she's pissed off or worried, judging by the look on her face, I'd say *worry* is the cause tonight.

“Worrying is like paying interest on a debt you may never owe.” I tell her as I slide into the chair across from her.

She gives me a humorless smile, “Mark Twain may have let his worries blow away with the wind, but I'm not him, *mija*.”

I watch her take a generous gulp from her glass, my index finger instantly digging into the side of my thumb nail as a sense of unease washes over me. Usually, my mom just gets right to the point, ripping the band aid off and all that jazz. Like the time our finances went a little thin in the skin and she told me I wouldn't be able to take piano lessons anymore, I could tell she was sick to her stomach at having to admit that, but she did it without stalling. This moment of hesitation has my skin crawling.

“¿Qué pasa?” What's wrong?

Instead of answering me, she asks her own question, “Have you thought about Coventry University?”

I roll my eyes, “Why do you want me to go to that place so badly, mama? What if I wanna go to a community college or hell, what if I wanted to become a church nun?”



My mother's resting bitch face has me shutting up and slouching in my seat.

"First of all, you're too wild for a vow of celibacy, the church would toss you out in a week." I shrug my shoulders, *she ain't wrong*, "Secondly, this is very important to me, to your future, *mija*."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes again or make a snarky comment and sigh, "I have thought about it," I sit up and fold my hands on the table in front of me, "and I'm not going. I was thinking of taking a break from school for a year so I can help out around here. I know I wasn't able to find a job this summer, but once school starts back up, there'll be more openings an—"

I shut up when mom lifts a shaky hand to her forehead, rubbing her temples deeply with her finger and thumb before taking another generous drink from her glass.

"I wanted you to choose it for yourself, but it's already been done." She mumbles vaguely.

The hairs on my arms rise at her words, her downcast face, the wine she only drinks when upset...

"What do you mean, mom?" I ask her, needing to hear the confirmation.

With a shaky voice, my mother shatters my life. With only a few breaths, my world turns on its axis.

"It was decided for you long ago that once you reached your Quinceañera, you would be moved to Coventry so that you may learn your history. I convinced your father to let me keep you longer and he agreed. I was allowed to keep you until you were eighteen, but seeing as you're an October baby, and college starts in August, you'll have to leave early. I wish I could say it was up to me because if it were, you'd never set foot in Coventry, but it's not and everything is already paid for including your dorm and entire first year.

"You'll have your own car to get around and all of your necessary electronics have been purchased as well. I'm sorry I didn't tell you this sooner, but your father insisted on telling

you himself, but of course he didn't and left it up to me—" she stops herself mid-rant, taking a deep breath to calm herself, only to break into a sob as my mind floats a million miles away - eight hundred and forty-eight miles to be exact. My dad decided *my life* for me. *Allowed* my mother to keep me? Put *conditions* on a mother over her only child? The eternal bachelor himself wants his only child to invade his life after all this time of fucking off while mom picked up the slack? Fuck no. Absolutely not. I loved my dad when I was a little naive girl, but that love disintegrated the day he walked out of our lives without a glance back. He can go straight to hell with his demands. Who the fuck does he think he is?

"I hope you told him to suck your spiritual cock, ma. He can fuck right off with all that bullshit just like he did when he walked out of here and left you to work two jobs just to pay for my basketball uniform. Where was he then, huh? Fuck that and fuck him; I'm not going to Coventry just because he demands it."

My mom takes another big gulp from her wine glass, and it pisses me off like nothing else. Now he's even got her drinking like it's her last day with—

"Wait, when is this asshole expecting me, huh? Does he think I'm some piece of shit who will drop you like deadweight just like he did?"

"Valeria!" She snaps at me, like he deserves to be defended.

"Mother!" I growl right back, making her audibly sigh and reach for the bottle for a refill but I snatch it away.

"Don't sit there and try to defend his sorry ass when he left you all alone to raise the child he helped bring into the world. You taught me to never make excuses for some asshole's actions, so practice what you damn well preach!"

The whooshing of the air is all the warning I get before my mother's open palm stings across my face. My French braids swing across my throat with my momentum, lassoing around my neck like a fucking noose as I stand there in shock. My mom has never hit me before.

By the look on her face, tears hanging off her lashes, her shaking hand - *which I know hurts because she's got some weak veins* - I know she's shocked herself as well. She steps forward to apologize, but I step away, holding my hands up to stop her from coming near me.

“If only you had the balls to slap that asshole like you did me, maybe we wouldn't even be having this conversation. Instead, you coward out. But hey, slap your daughter, right? Slap the only person who has been with you through thick and thin.”

I laugh humorlessly as I walk backwards, my shoulders rising and falling with angry breaths. I spin on my heel and yank my jean jacket off the stair railing before racing to the door, all while ignoring my mother's sobbing pleas for forgiveness.

Of course, I'll forgive her, how can I not? But right now... fuck, I can't even look at her. I need a drink, a blunt, and someone to distract me. In whatever order they come, I need it.

## TWO

---

### ‘RETURN OF THE TRES’ DELINQUENT HABITS

I’VE ALWAYS NOTICED WITH PURE HATE THAT GIVEN THE chance, life will undoubtedly roll you over and fuck you dry just for the thrill of it. I mean, have you ever seen a motherfucker who hasn’t released a tear over the unfairness of life? No, you haven’t because each and every one of us isn’t ignorant to the hateful world we live in, and the worst part is... we created this society we live in.

Everything is all backward. Like an abused spouse who stands up for their abuser because they believe it’s done out of a sick version of love, or a person asking for honesty only to get offended by it. It’s shit like that that really dumbfounds me but the one fucked up scenario that really gets me is when karma lumps the innocent with the guilty. As far as karma is concerned, we’re all fucked one way or another.

We pacify ourselves by saying bullshit like, *karma always repays the guilty*, well by that thinking, we must all be a bunch of guilty bastards because I have yet to see anyone not bitten by the venomous fangs of that bitch, and for some unknown reason, that cunt is gunning for me.

My feet stomp down the sidewalk as my insides boil with barely fettered anger. I don’t notice the heavy silence around me, nor the way the fog creeps along my legs, swishing like smoke with each aggravated step I take down the two blocks

to Noah's house. All I see, hear and feel is the slap my mother delivered at the defense of the man who left her, left us! How could she do that to the one person who never gave up on her? I can't even try to convince myself that she did it because when he was here, he was good to her...he wasn't. I've done my best to forget my dad, but the things that won't simply fade into the abyss of lost memories are the times my father made my mom cry. The times he demanded I stop crying because tears are a sign of weakness and no Calavera is born with weakness.

If I didn't stop crying, he'd give me a reason to. For years it was punishment by taking things I loved from me. Soccer, my piano, gifts my mother got for me but the punishments got worse with age. I was backhanded, forced to hold a push-up position for an hour. Those were the worst, but my mom always tried to help me by winking at me while my dad was none the wiser, so I could let my arms rest until he came back in.

I know my mom tried to help in other ways, ways that ended with her bruised, broken and sobbing while I covered my ears and imagined my father's blood spilled at my feet.

Sure, there were times where he seemed like an almost normal dad, especially when he'd return home in fall after spending the entire summer break working out of state, but that only lasted a couple of weeks. I never understood why my mother stayed with him, why it was Roberto who left instead of us.

According to my mom, he wasn't always that way. But that's the same story every abused spouse says. What I saw was something very different. I had a father who was like two different people, all depending on the day. If he was ever the kind of man my mom talked about, then he went from madly in love with her to tolerating her existence the day I was born.

A few months before he left, we had a weird reprieve from his iron rule in our house. He closed off and barely paid attention to us. He never sat down for dinner, never bothered to ask me about my grades. Just nothing. He was there, but not really. I was grateful he seemed distracted enough that

punishments were no longer a threat, but it was also a cause of huge anxiety for us.

Often, I found myself wondering when the next shoe was going to drop. It was like living with a bomb, the timer set for an hour we had no knowledge of, and the fuse was slowly shortening. When it finally blew, our lives were left in tattered remains.

He left us and took with him every financial stability we had.

We had to leave our fancy neighborhood with its gated community and coveted education system in an effort to survive on our own. I don't know what kind of childhood my mother had, but from the looks of how she floundered for a few months, I'd say she had never seen a day of struggle until that moment.

But she didn't cave. She learned, she adapted, and she got us through the worst time of our lives, all while suffering from heartbreak.

For me though, it was a relief. The dad I was supposed to have, was never there. Instead, I had someone I wished were dead. I felt for my mother even if I didn't understand her pain. I knew that for her, it was more than heartbreak over a lousy break up, it was living with the betrayal that hurt most.

But as far as I can tell, that's the way love goes. Love is nothing but a noose around your neck, one wrong move and its death for you.

"Omigod! Just shut the hell up already!" I sigh to myself before stepping off the sidewalk to cross the street.

Noah's house sits quietly with the curtains pulled open, the lamp inside shows the hundreds of crosses on the wall surrounding the large *ofrenda*. Noah's parents are hardcore Catholics...at least, that's what they say they are. On the outside, they represent everything the religion states, but behind closed doors, they're so off the standards of what we know that I don't honestly believe they're true Catholics...not the kind you see today at least. Mrs. Cabañas, Noah's mom,

tried to have the sexual orientation exorcized out of her only child and when that didn't work, she decided good old fashioned ass beating would help her son. All of this done with Noah's dad watching like a disgusting prick.

First of all, Noah is perfect the way he is, but even he hasn't put a label on himself. His mother, with all her two brain cells of higher intelligence, has decided her son needs fixing.

Fuck, if I could, I'd shoot the bitch in the face, but Noah chooses to be better than her. To be better than most. He'll never have to deal with her again once he moves out, he's just waiting for an acceptance letter from one of the many colleges he applied to. Until then, he refuses to stoop to her level of sadistic insanity.

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but one day, I'm going to make sure that whore knows what it feels like to be at the mercy of someone else.

If your "religion" forces you to do unspeakable things to your children, then you are one sick motherfucker if you continue to practice. It's one thing to disagree with or even hate the choices your child has made, but it should be common fucking knowledge that you don't beat the shit out of your kid in hopes they see the fucking light.

Fuck, this all makes me feel like shit for being so pissed at my mom. She's a fucking saint in comparison to Noah's bitch ass egg donor. She's done more for me than Mrs. Cabañas has done for him.

I turn my back on the house and pull out my phone to text Noah that I'm outside. I get his text back immediately.

Noah: Sit tight, bonita, but don't let the wicked witch see you.

I grin down at my phone before pocketing it and walking toward the overgrown tree he'll be climbing down before dropping my ass on the curb to wait.

This giant Elm tree should have been removed by the city long ago since its roots are a hazard for anyone walking down the sidewalk, especially anyone with a disability or elderly people, but it's technically on the Cabañas property and we've already established that Noah's parents are worthless. So here it stands, huge and proud, giving cover for me and a ladder for Noah. I'm sure if his mother knew he was using it to sneak out, she'd have it removed in a day.

My phone buzzes with a call, my mom's name flashing on the screen, but I ignore it and text Noah to hurry up, but of course, I get a taste of my own medicine when he ignores me.

The evening air has a bite to it today, a cool forty degrees, so I pull my flannel and jean jacket tighter around me and huff into the air. The way the fog moves around my face, in a soft and fluid way, eases my turbulent mind. A dog barks somewhere in the neighborhood. There's a lot of them loose around here and like the gang members, these hood dogs run in packs, attacking anyone who looks at them wrong.

I scoot further into the shadows of the branches, hoping like hell there's not a pack running through here.

I reach into my pocket for my knife and rest my head against the trunk of the tree, fighting and failing to keep my mind off the situation I now face with my mother and my piece of shit, no-call-no-show father.

Me and mom aren't perfect, but we hardly ever see eye-to-eye when it comes to my dad but slapping or hitting isn't something you'd ever catch us doing to each other, unless you count the multiple *chanclas* she's thrown at me, but I don't. That's just funny shit. Tonight though, I don't know, somethings got my mom in a fucked-up spot, and I don't think she's ever been there before.

"Fucking hell, I need a lobotomy." I sigh and stretch my legs out in front of me, twisting my back from side to side to pop the bones.

Just as I'm about to shoot off a *hurry your ass up* text to Noah, the sound of something falling and people laughing nearby has my head spinning. The fog has grown dense and



it's hard to see past ten feet in front of you, but I swear to God I see someone - the silhouette of a man standing - between the two houses across the street. It's not the same area I heard the laughter from, but now that I've seen it, all my senses are telling me that shadow is the real threat.

I stare for a minute, hoping my eyes are playing tricks on me, but no, there's definitely someone watching—

“Boo!”

My scream pierces the silent street until Noah's hand slaps over my mouth.

“Quiet! You're going to wake up *la bruja!*” He hisses.

I punch him in the chest before climbing to my feet.

“You fucking scared me, asshole!” I look back across the street and still see the man, “Do you see that guy standing there or am I trippin'?” I ask Noah, ticking my chin toward the silhouette.

Noah runs a hand through his hair as he squints, “Uh, yeah, babe, you're trippin'. That's mister Dumar's scarecrow. C'mon, the guys are waiting at the spot.”

Fucking scarecrow? *Dfaq?*

Noah grabs my wrist and pulls me alongside him and begins yammering about the latest bullshit with his mom, but I don't pay much attention as I look over my shoulder.

But the *scarecrow* is no longer there.

---

“Is mister Dumar a night owl or something?” I randomly ask from the back seat of Rico's beat up Cadillac, interrupting his story of how he banged his boss last Wednesday. It's total bullshit if you ask me, but to each their own, I guess.

I met Rico when I first moved here in middle school. He was one of Noah's friends and the quickest to ask me out. I would have said yes, cause he's not bad looking in the least,

but he introduced me to his friends and Noah had my interest from the moment I laid my eyes on him.

Noah has had my attention ever since. His hair is straight and black, my favorite color. It hangs over his dark brows in a mess, but the way he styles it with products that make the strands look wet gives him a very e-boy look. His eyes are the color of newly mint pennies, a mix of bronze and copper that are framed with black lashes that look like eyeliner. He has angular but strong features which sometimes reminds me of an anime guy, but Noah is too *everything* to be narrowed down into a fictional character.

He's taller than my five feet, seven inches, but he feels so much taller. He's very Chicano but also goth, covered in tattoos from his fingers to his neck. I know he has a lot more under his jeans, but seeing as he's only into guys, I doubt I'll ever get a chance to see what he's packing...I mean what kind of tattoos he has.

Nah, I totally meant his dick.

Sigh, anyway, it was Rico who introduced me to Noah and Leroy my first week here. Now, we're a whole crew, tight knit and down for one another, but Noah and I became incredibly close. Best friends, without the benefits...*unfortunately*.

Rico and Leroy are the kind of guys that'll make you laugh on a shit day, but Rico is the *machismo* of the group, flirting with anyone possessing a pulse and fucking anyone willing, guy, girl or anything in between. Still, he's the only one with a car and in Indianapolis, you need a car if you wanna get around, so we listen to his sex-capades and laugh at his ridiculousness.

"Why are you asking about that old timer? Do you have some sort of elderly kink, Val?"

Noah and Leroy laugh at Rico's moronic question.

I roll my eyes and flick the back of his ear, "Does everything have to be sexual to you, numb nuts?"

"Ouch! Damn, *ruca*, I was just asking. No need for violence. If you like old balls no one—"

Noah slaps him in the center of the chest hard enough to knock the breath from him and make Leroy and I crack up.

“You talk too much, Ric,” he rumbles at our coughing friend before turning back to me, “Dumar ushers at the church my parents go to, so I’m pretty sure the man goes to bed early like them. Why, you still think that scarecrow was a person?”

“It *was* a person. I know because I turned back, and it wasn’t there anymore.”

Leroy taps my arm and jerks his chin up in question. Leroy is the quiet one out of us, and usually speaks with a look or gestures rather than actual words, but that’s only because he has a stutter and is very self-conscious of it. I’ve fought a few bitches for making fun of him like the cunts they are. He’s a gem, one of the good ones that got fucked over one too many times and now he’d rather fuck ‘em and leave em than risking a moment getting hurt again.

The final straw for him - *and all of us to be honest* - was when he tried to ask a girl to prom. He stuttered the whole way through until the cunt had the audacity to laugh in his face in front of the whole school.

I got the bitch later, catching her in the locker rooms after gym. I spent the next two minutes introducing her face to my fists and the nasty cement floor that hasn’t been mopped since installation. She missed prom for her mistake, and her wired jaw let everyone know what happens to someone who hurts one of my boys.

Needless to say, she lost the nerve to laugh at Leroy ever again.

“I was waiting outside Noah’s house because his slow ass was taking forever, and I saw a guy standing between the two houses across the street. Noah thinks it was a scarecrow - *in the middle of July, no less* - but I think Dumar is starting to go senile, like the *sundowning* kind.”

They’re all quiet for a minute, only the sounds of the tires on the highway fill the silence. Could it have been just old mister Dumar wandering around in a daze or was it some

random shit my mind is using to block out the turn I know my life will take in the coming weeks?

“Alright, I think it’s time for a smoke.” Rico says before pulling out a blunt and passing it to Noah. He turns the music up to a mind-numbing level and I let my thoughts and worries drift away with the heavy bass and sweet, sweet taste of Mary Jane.

Noah turns to me from the front seat, his eyes locking on mine through the smoke and I feel my world settle for a moment.

Life can be a real bitch, but when you have good friends and a baggie of some weed, you should be alright. At least, that’s the notion I feel like telling myself right now.

Rico passes the blunt to me over his shoulder, his pretty emerald eyes connecting with mine in the rearview mirror, “Sorry for fucking with you, Val. And listen, Dumar may be an old man with ghosts of the past visiting him in his last days, but I’ll still go and check on him if you want me to, make sure the man isn’t some creep trying to fuck with my main bitch.”

He gives me a wink, making me chuckle and shake my head. That’s what I mean about Rico, he’s a punk but he’s *our* punk and in his own way, he’s one of the good ones.

“We all will, right, Leroy?” Noah reaches back and smacks the man in question on the knee.

“A-always, chica.” I lean over and kiss his cheek, loving it when he uses his words with me.

I lay my head on his shoulder as I pull in a drag from the blunt. Someone rolls down the windows, letting the cool air pound through the strands of my hair around my face as I exhale the smoke from my lungs.

As the weed cruises through our systems, we begin belting out the lyrics of *Delinquent Habits*, all of us living in the moment together, our eyes clashing during the intermittent flashes of the streetlamps, not a fuck or a care in the world. This is what I needed, a night with the boys.

I just don’t know how I’ll tell them I’m leaving.

## THREE

---

### ‘CROSSROADS’ BONE THUGS N HARMONY

“NO! FUCK NO, VAL. YOU CAN’T JUST MOVE AWAY!” NOAH practically shouts.

“Shh!” I shove him toward the edge of the property where the bonfire is being held. Thankfully, Leroy and Rico seem to be busy talking to some of our old classmates.

I sigh and turn back to Noah who’s staring at me like a wounded puppy.

My best friend is a handsome guy, like *drop-your-burning-panties* kind of gorgeous, with a lean but muscular body that has most girls drooling and the guys envious, too bad for us ladies, he prefers dick to pussy.

“Don’t look at me like that. It’s not like I have a choice here.”

“You’ll be eighteen this fall! You *do* have a choice!”

I sigh and sit down on the log that was once a beautiful tree in its day, now it’s a fallen carcass with hundreds of carved initials from all the graduating classes partying here for the annual bonfire.

My fingers trace the heart encasing two initials as my mind imagines what they’re lives have become. Did they stay together, high school sweethearts becoming the power couple,

or did they go to separate colleges and forget all about their whispered promises of undying love? I'm betting on the latter being the case.

"That's just it, I'm seventeen. I don't have anyone else I could go live with, so it's either rebel and cause my mom a world of stress and baby daddy drama, or just suck it up and go until I turn eighteen. Then neither of them will have a say over my life."

Noah is quiet for a minute, a look on his face that tells me he's coming up with a plan. It's the same look he got when we were trying to come up with fresh senior pranks; a crease between his brows, his full lips pulled to one side as he chews on the inside of his cheek. The Giant centipede that wraps around his neck is one of the first things most people notice about Noah, you know, once you get past the beauty that is his face, but what really drew me in was the warmth of his smile. Noah has always been such a light in my world, not that my world was dark when I first met him, but it was as though I knew deep inside it would be, and he would become the sun in my stormy world.

We met had a strong Spanish accent, but luckily that was my second language, so we spoke easily. It's probably one of the main reasons we became best friends. We watched each other survive our pimple-face awkward stages, puberty, first crushes, first heartbreaks...we went through it all together. Hell, I was there when Noah kissed the one and only girl - *Sloppy Becky Rolando* - and watched him go through three months of soul searching afterward.

The memory has me smiling to myself, biting my lip and looking down at my hands as I think of the mortification on his face when Becky shoved her tongue into his mouth. Yeah, it was consensual, but I'm pretty sure Noah had no clue kissing could feel so foreign. We sure as shit learned two things after that.

One, Becky was a sloppy kisser, hence the moniker *Sloppy Becky*.

Two, Noah was definitely *not* into girls...or their tongues.

I blame Becky for the unforgivable loss all women have suffered due to her lapping tongue.

I can't hold back the snicker that leaves me. I slap a hand over my mouth and glance at Noah, finding him glaring at me like I just popped a squat on his grandmother's grave.

"Really, chica? You're laughing right now? Wait, have you been bullshitting me this whole time?"

I chuckle and force composure, but the weed has the giggles running through me at the moment and I can't stop from grinning like a fool as I answer him.

"No bullshitting, *guapo*, I was just in my head, thinking about you and Sloppy Becky."

His face is priceless, a mask of complete horror at the forbidden topic and I can't help it. I burst out laughing, making gross kissy faces at him, sticking my tongue like a snapchat filter before screaming when he grips the back of my neck and yanks me down. Before my slow brain can catch up to his movements, my chest slams down on the tops of his thighs, his fingers dig into my neck painfully as he growls in my ear.

"You swore an oath to never speak of that again. If you think you can bring up forbidden topics and the jet out of here, you're wrong, *chica*, because I'll follow you even into death and make sure you take my punishment."

With his free hand, he swings down onto my ass in six quick hard slaps that have me squirming and panting, ready to bite the crap out of his thigh. He's done this to me before, but it's so rare that he has to truly be pissed with me or so beyond frustrated with me that he resorts to physical punishment.

It was funny when we were kids and he used a *chancla* rather than his hand, but now...fuck me, I don't have the fucking courage to admit how confused it makes me, so I do what I do best, I joke.

"Oh yes, daddy, harder!" I scream, making him jump up and taking me with him. His eyes glitter with emotion.

“I swear to fuck, your mouth is something else. C’mon, let’s go get some drinks. I’ll come up with a plan to keep you here cause there’s no fucking way I’m done with you yet.”

He walks off leaving me alone with only the sound of my ovaries exploding and my heart cursing my feminine parts.

Damn, how I wish he was into me.

A couple of hours and a six pack of beer later, I find myself in the middle of a heated debate between Rico and some douche from school about who the best rapper of all time is. Of course, Rico goes with Megan Thee Stallion while douche chooses Tupac. I don’t disagree with either of those choices, but I know without a doubt Rico chose that queen because she’s fucking hot as sin, everything Rico Suavé dreams of. After all, his mind takes up residency in the gutter 24/7, expecting anything else from his hormonal mind is a fool’s wish.

I stand, tired of the bickering, and snatch the blunt they were passing back and forth during their ridiculous argument and walk off to find a quieter spot to chill.

“Hey, puta! We were smoking that!” The douche yells at my back before his painful grunt rents the air followed by Noah and Rico’s angry voices.

I keep walking, stepping over discarded beer bottles and a couple making out...*or are they fucking already?*

The bonfire is held on the Celorios’ private property on the edge of the city, the land has no buildings aside from what was once the barn that held all the cows the previous landowners had. I’m guessing the place was once a dairy farm. I’m unsure what the property will be turned into, maybe nothing considering the Celorios haven’t set foot here since purchasing some odd years ago, so it’s been used to host our parties.

In the middle of the twenty or so acres is a small lake - *or big pond, depending on how you see it* - and it’s where I’m headed now. The grass around the bed of water is marshy and will suction you like wet cement, so some of the past partygoers placed large logs on spots that won’t leave your



shoes stuck in the mud. I find the closest one and sit down alone before relighting the blunt I stole. I turn at the sound of Noah calling my name and grin when he's accosted by none other than Sloppy Becky. Noah is too nice to her for his own good, so he stops and chats with her, entertaining her because he never had the heart to tell her she kisses like a slug.

"Who kisses like a slug?" A voice startles me out of my trance.

I'm too high to really scream in fear, but that doesn't stop me from staring wide-eyed at the guy standing ten feet away. How the fuck did I not see him there?

He's dressed in all black with a leather and suede jacket, black cargo pants tucked into high-top buckle boots. His long brown hair hangs around his face giving him an eighties hair band look. The sleeve of his jacket has an even darker outline of the skull. There's not a hint of color on him. His face is covered by shadows with the bonfire being at his back.

When he turns to me, probably wondering why I haven't answered him, I can see he has a tattoo beneath his right eye, but I can't make out what it's supposed to be. It looks like an upside-down triangle, the kind you see painted on a clown.

Forcing myself to acknowledge him rather than stare like a fool, I clear my throat, "Erm, what?"

Smooth, Val, you don't sound like a moron at all.

The guy chuckles softly before snapping his arm forward, releasing a rock that skips along the surface of the water before sinking.

"I guess you weren't speaking to me when you said that girl speaking to your boyfriend kisses like a slug."

My attention swings from the dark waters back to the guy as he turns to fully face me and holy tits on ice, is he fucking stunning.

His eyes are crazy looking with multiple colors ranging from blue to gold. His brows are perfectly thick and masculine - *manly brows are a sexy thing, no one can tell me otherwise* - hovering over his eyes, slightly blocking my view of their

unique color. His rich tanned skin glows with the flames of the bonfire, showing off his sharp features.

He's got a sharp jawline, cheekbones for days and a perfectly straight nose.

I instantly hate him, purely based on his looks that hit my self-esteem like a bitch.

Ignoring my internal hater, my eyes catch on the glint of a nose ring, and I have to force myself not to groan at how unfairly beautiful this guy is.

I roll my eyes when he smiles at my ogling, "He's not my boyfriend."

I say while still staring, surprised that my voice didn't come out as a breathy moan.

His shoulder pulls up in a shrug, but other than that, he stands completely still. That is, until he moves closer to me, his steps eerily silent, even with the ground sopping beneath him; it sends a shiver over my skin. Only a predator moves with silent precision.

"Who are you? Did you come with someone or are you crashing the party?"

He shrugs again, "I'm no one you would know, and I came with a friend to celebrate her graduation, but she seems to have disappeared on me."

Why does that sound ominous as hell? I do my best to keep the tremor out of my voice, my mind no longer foggy as this handsome stranger emits a dangerous vibe that has my high dulling instantly. I've seen too many horror movies to let a pretty face distract me from my gut feeling, and my gut is growling with nothing but warning bells.

He comes to a stop just a few feet away and gives me what I'm sure he believes is an open smile, "Mind if I sit?"

I narrow my eyes and scoot over more than socially polite, "What friend?"

"I believe you call her Sloppy Becky." He says as he takes a seat, "Not a very nice name for a sweet girl, you know?"

I feel my cheeks flame with remorse, erasing all my worry about this guy's identity.

“Fuck, she knows about that?”

He chuckles and shakes his head, looking back out over the water, “Nah, I just overheard a few people calling her that. I take it the name was coined by you?”

I sigh and put the blunt to my lips, inhaling deeply before replying, “Yeah. I'm an asshole like that, but if you knew the story behind it, you'd understand the reasoning.”

I gaze at his profile, wondering how he knows Becky. She doesn't seem like she'd run in the same circles as him. This guy looks like he'd be the lead singer in a rock band or maybe the president of one of our local biker gangs, while Becky looks like she's part of the math club. Two totally opposite worlds.

“I'm Val.” I offer him the blunt instead of a handshake, but he declines.

“Mateo Del Toro.”

I hum under my breath, taking another drag, “Why are you really here, Mateo?”

He pulls a fresh pack of cigarettes from his jacket pocket, packing it before tearing the wrapper off and lighting one up. The ember lights up his features, giving me a second view of his ridiculously beautiful face.

“Why? You don't believe I'm friends with Becky?” He asks, the scent of peppermint and tobacco clinging to the air around me.

I chuckle, “Actually no, I don't believe you, but that's not why I asked.”

He blows smoke out through his nose as he looks over at me, “Again, *why?*”

I've never been one to beat around the bush, so I just tell him exactly why I asked.

“I don’t believe you because Becky is a motormouth with a peppy attitude and well, you look like you’d rather drown yourself than hang with someone like her. But the reason I asked is because I need a distraction to ride on, and you look like someone who knows how to give a good ride.”

He huffs and shakes his head, his mouth pulling up into a cocky grin as he stares at the water but doesn’t say anything. We sit in silence for a while, listening to the sounds of the ongoing party behind us, the sounds of laughter and the crackling of the giant bonfire being the only music surrounding us. I’m not embarrassed by my forwardness, in fact, I’ll do it again one day because life is too damn short not to go after what you want, no matter how primal it is.

But the silence becomes too much when my mind travels back to my mom and the shitstorm that is becoming my life.

I know that my mom has been through hell, but why is it suddenly falling on me? Don’t get me wrong, I’d love nothing more than to take the burden of pain off my mom, but that’s not what this sudden displacement is. I’m ordered to go live with my father, to leave my mom and everyone I care about because my father said so. Why is she just falling in line? It’s almost as if my dad has some dirt on her and now, he’s blackmailing her or some shit.

Maybe I’ve been watching too much TV.

I stand suddenly, surprising Mateo as I turn to leave without a word of goodbye.

“Do you normally proposition men and then just leave?”

I turn my gaze to him, my RBF in full mode as I reply, “Nah this was a first because I’ve never mistakenly propositioned a guy too pussy to bang.”

He makes a face, “Do you kiss your boyfriend with that foul mouth?”

I know he’s talking about Noah, and to be honest, I can tell he’s fishing for information; *is he her boyfriend? Are they serious?*

I know, that sounds completely egotistical of me, but this is the second time he's called Noah my boyfriend as though he wants me to confirm or deny and he didn't take what was being offered. I'm not saying I'm hot as fuck and every guy wants me, but we're at a high school party, there's no strings attached, no reason to not get our mutual rocks off. I got turned down, and that's okay too, but I'm not going to sit around and plead for it.

I run the tip of my tongue across my top lip before replying.

“Yep, sure do, and if I'm naughty, he even lets me suck him off and lick him clean.”

I stand up, flicking the end of the blunt into the water before looking over my shoulder, “Well, it was unpleasurable meeting you. I hope you trip and fall into a pit of snakes.”

I give him a sweet smile before walking away, internally shivering when his deep voice halts my steps, “You couldn't handle me, little girl. I'm like the dark, imposing and fraught with dangers.

“I've never been afraid of the dark...I thrive in it.” I turn and look at him, “If you change your mind, come find me.”

## FOUR

---

### ‘SHOOTOUT’ IZZAMUZZIC

BECKY IS TALKING A MILLION MILES A MINUTE, ASKING ME questions about college choices and where I’ll be choosing to go, as if I have a shit ton of options on the table. I don’t. In fact, the colleges I’ve applied to either rejected me or haven’t responded. That’s fine by me since they were picked by my mother. She wants me to go to a religious college, someplace where my abomination willfulness will be replaced by some sort of spiritual awakening. She’s so full of crap I’m surprised she’s even taken seriously in this life.

To her, and my weak spine father, boys liking boys or girls liking girls is the broadest road to hell, but what she doesn’t understand - *or refuses to* - is that my road to hell was her birth canal.

I’ve been in hell since the day I was born.

If there is a God, he’s not interested in me and certainly not interested in my parents. As far as I can tell, they’ve been hidden away, like a dirty secret, and kept out of any deity’s eyes. I mean, what creator would want to look at the royal fuckups that are my parents?

I try to step around Becky as I watch Val’s back disappear through the crowd, but she’s relentless in her efforts to garner my attention.

“Listen, Becky, we just graduated, okay? School is the furthest thing from my mind. Now, I got shit to do.”

I try to step around her, but she moves with me.

“Well, it’s always good to have a plan, I mean you never know what’s going to come up and change—”

Her voice trails off, becoming static noise in the background as Val’s sad voice replays in my head.

“I’m moving to Louisiana with my dad...”

Val has been my best friend, a true ride or die, and now she’s just leaving. Leaving like she’s got absolutely no choice. Legally, she doesn’t, but when have we ever been the type of people to live law abiding lives? With the money I’ve saved up selling weed, coke and pills, we can buy a car and leave town, just the two of us if Rico and Leroy don’t wanna go. We could get a job and find a cheap apartment somewhere and never have to look back.

But I know it’s a fool’s dream. Val would never leave her mother behind unless she had no choice, not even for me.

I don’t blame her though. If I had a mom like hers, I’d be the same way. But I don’t and leaving this place has been in the plan for years. If I don’t get into one of the colleges I applied for, I’ll do as I have planned. Pack up and bug the fuck out.

But with Val leaving...well, it’ll be even easier. I had hoped she’d come with, keep us together like we promised each other as kids, but I guess that was a fool’s dream too.

Sloppy Becky’s annoying voice comes back to life, loud and desperate, but still, all my thoughts are on Val and what the future holds.

This morning, we had a whole fucking life ahead of us, one where we decided how it would be. Now there’s nothing. She’ll be shipped off to her father’s, leaving me behind like a memory in her past. Sure, we’ll keep in touch, but what happens when time passes, and she gets new friends who take up her time as I would...what then?

“Fuck that.” I growl forgetting Becky is standing right in front of me until I practically run her over, “Move, Slo-*Becky*, I need to talk to Val.”

“But what about your promise? It was the first day of senior year and you said you’d be my date to the graduation bonfire.”

My eyes widen at the fact that she remembers that bullshit...and the fact that she *believed* it. I made that empty promise during a scenario similar to what’s happening now, her badgering me for attention. Becky is a nice girl, but incredibly clingy and ridiculously annoying as fuck. It’s not her fault...but it kind of is, and I can’t help the spike of frustration that has my teeth grinding.

I cup the tops of her arms, hating the way her eyes soften under my glare.

“I’m going to be as straightforward as possible, Becky,” I clench my jaw and force her back when she tries to step closer to me, keeping her at arm’s length, “You and me will *never* happen. I don’t like you in any romantic way and I never will.”

“But—”

“But nothing Becky! Fuck! Move on because you don’t stand a chance with me.” I lean in closer, my fingers tightening around her arms, eliciting a hiss - *slash fucking moan* - from her, “You’re weak, too soft, and way too willing. I’d rip you to pieces and leave you for the next sucker, and the most pathetic part is, you’d enjoy every fucked up second of it until you realize you’ve been used. Now get the hell out of my face.”

I shove her to the side, ignoring her shaky voice calling my name. Fucking hell, Becky has been a pain since middle school. The only fucking reason I kissed her was because I was dared to. I wanted to kiss Val instead, but I was too chicken shit even then to act on my feelings. I didn’t know what I liked when I was that young, guys, girls, something in between, but I did know that Val was my infatuation. Now



though, she's gone from crush to obsession, the drug I won't quit, the liquor I won't give up, *the secret I won't tell*.

I've never been with a girl, guys yes...fuck yes, but never a female. It's not because I don't like them - *as I've led Val to believe* - but because I don't want to have just any girl be my first...it's Valeria Calavera or no one.

But with her leaving soon, it's now or never. I have to tell her how I feel or I'll risk living a life with a huge regret hanging over me. Regrets are poison. They tarnish all your decisions, making you second guess yourself at every major turn, and I don't want to be one of those old men who live with a constant frown, bitter and cruel because they fucked up in the past.

Sounds cliché as fuck, but I want to be able to look back as say, *fuck yeah I did that*.

With my mind made up, I go in search of Val, shoving through people to get to where I last saw her. My eyes narrow behind my glasses when I spot her sitting by the lake with some guy. I can't make out who he is or what they're talking about, but I see her offer him the blunt. Jealousy stirs in my chest, making my stomach twist with bitterness. I do my best to ignore it, reminding myself - *as I do every time Val hooks up with some rando* - that this guy means nothing to her and she isn't mine. Not yet at least because one day, even if it's for one night, I vow to make Val mine. One way or another, my name will be screamed from those sexy, pouty lips, and I'll savor every fucking syllable.

"You should tell her how you feel." Rico's voice has my head spinning in his direction. "I mean, fuck, this whole *will they or won't they* shit has to end sometime."

He tosses his arm over my shoulders before passing me a beer, both of us watching Val's shoulders shake with laughter. I swallow a gulp of the alcohol, tasting nothing but the jealousy on my tongue.

"Better hurry up though, you don't want to miss your shot before you even shoot it."

“Rico?” I ask with my eyes burning a hole through the back of the guy’s head.

“Yeah, wey?”

“Shut the fuck up.”

He chuckles, pulling his arm from me before clapping me on the back, mumbling something under his breath, but I’m too annoyed to call him out on it.

My mind drifts back to the spanking I gave Val earlier. It started out as totally innocent until I had her at my mercy on my lap...that’s when it felt wholly sinful and so fucking sweet. I could hear her panting, see her wiggling, and all the while I told myself it’s because she felt it too. Felt this need and hungry desire that basically pours from my eyes anytime we’re together, but I know that’s not the case. I know she’s blind to it, blind to how I feel. Though I’m unsure if it’s forced blindness or if she really is that ignorant to my feelings.

I wonder if I’m blind to what she feels. Is there a chance I’m so stuck in my feelings that I can’t see there’s a possibility of Val wanting something more with me?

Fuck me, I have no clue.

Does it even matter? Not like she’s sticking around anyway, and that long distance relationship thing is all total bullshit if you ask me. Yeah, I’d be faithful, hell, I have been, and I trust her to do the same, but if I finally have Val, there’s absolutely no way I’d let miles be the gap between us. I’d need her, *physically* need her, every day.

“Hey, you okay?” Val’s voice is suddenly breaking through my chaotic thoughts.

I look over her head and spot the guy standing now, staring at her back, “Yeah, I’m good just thinking about everything.” I keep it vague but thankfully, it’s not a lie.

Val follows my gaze, huffing under her breath before throwing the finger at the guy, “Prick.”

I do my best to keep the curiosity and relief out of my voice, but I’m unsure if I do a good job, “Not a fan of yours?”

She chuckles and wraps her arm around my waist, pulling me toward the party, “Nope but that’s fine by me. He has a giant stick up his ass anyway.”

As we walk away, I look over my shoulder to find he’s still staring only now he has his phone out, the glow from the screen lighting up his face as he smiles at me. I reply with my middle finger, sending him my own smirk before pressing a kiss to Val’s head. Was that petty as fuck? Absolutely, but what can I say? I’m a petty motherfucker.

“Wanna get out of here?” I ask her, knowing I want to get her alone so I can tell her how I really feel before it’s too late.

“I do, but I don’t want to face my mom yet. I’d rather stay out until I know she’s crashed.”

She sighs as we stop by the beer keg, waiting for someone to finish filling their red solo cups.

“You don’t have to face her at all, Val. We could just leave. We’ll take off and never look back.”

“Trust me, I’ve thought of that too, but I can’t bug out on my mom, Noh. I can’t leave her to face the wrath of my bitch ass dad.” She chews on her lip, making me groan internally.

“Can you stay with me tonight?” Fuck, her plea is so sweet.

“You know you ain’t even gotta ask me.” I tell her, squeezing her once before moving toward the keg and pumping alcohol into our cups. I know if I held her a second longer, I’d end up saying fuck it all and kissing her right there, but I don’t want to taste her lips for the first time in front of everyone here.

She watches me, her brown eyes warm and always fucking open for me. Unlike the look Becky gave me, Val’s looks always have me ready to fall to my knees and promise the world. She’s the only one who can make my hard edges soft, and there’s not a thing I can do to change that.

“Good, because I don’t have it in me to be without you tonight.” Something passes behind her eyes before she quickly looks away and changes the subject, “Besides, my mom

fucking loves you. Remember when she tried getting your mom to let you live with us.”

I chuckle remembering when Mrs. Calavera lost her shit after spotting the bruises on my face and the cut on my brow. I told her I had fallen off my bike, but there was no faking the fingerprints on my biceps. She wanted to call the cops, take me away and keep me safe, but I was just a boy, and I still loved the pricks who gave me life. Now though, it would be a pleasure to see my parents cold and lifeless.

“Yeah, well, now you’re leaving.” I know I sound bitter as fuck, but I can’t help it.

“It’s not like that, Noah.” She says softly.

“Then how is it? I’ve got enough money for us to leave, shit we can even tell your mom to come with us.”

“And what then, huh? We just stay on the run for my bastard father? Do you have any clue what he’ll do to my mom if he finds her? No, we can’t just run. It’s only a few months ‘til my eighteenth birthday and that’s it! I’ll be free and then we’ll leave, just you and me.”

I shake my head, chuckling humorlessly, “That sounds like every fucking failed promise, but whatever, Val. Do what you gotta do, I just don’t know if I’ll be here when you get back.”

I turn and walk away, chugging my filled cup until I find myself a bottle of tequila and some distraction.

## FIVE

---

### 'BATHROOM' MONTELL FISH

I WATCH NOAH WALK AWAY, HURT, ANGER AND SADNESS FLOW through me faster than a drug. I wish I could make things different; I wish I could leave just like that and never look back, but I can't. It's fucked up that I'm already in this situation, but for him to put me into another bullshit position is selfish as fuck and he damn well knows it.

I'd never do that to him. I'd never make him feel like he's picking anything over me. I watch him walk over to Lucas, a guy I've never liked for a second because he's Noah's go to fuck buddy. He's a total dick but thankfully he's not a clinger, preferring to fuck and done than be in a relationship.

"Trouble in paradise?" That cool, deep voice asks from behind me.

I turn to Mateo and find him leaning against one of the trees nearby. Like Noah, girls eye Mateo hungrily, the difference is I don't have the chest burning jealousy when they stare at Mateo.

"Something like that." lean against the keg and let my gaze drift over to Noah, but just as his eyes lock on mine across the party, Mateo's rough fingers meet my chin.

"Let's get your mind off things then." He says as he turns my face to his before his lips fuse mine.

I wish things were different, I wish Noah and I weren't fighting, I wish I wasn't leaving, I wish my dad had died when he left...but that's not how things turned out.

So, as I kiss Mateo back, I force all those thoughts out of my head and allow myself to feel what's instinct, pure unadulterated sex.

My arms wrap around Mateo's neck, his arms coming around my waist as our kiss deepens. I don't think about the taste of this stranger, I don't think about how foreign his touch feels or how incomplete our kiss is, I just fall into the unfamiliar abyss of pleasure.

When I feel the hard ridge in his pants pressed against my stomach, I pull back and grasp his hand in mine and tug him deeper into the trees that surround the property. I don't care about being seen by people, but I do care about my guy friends seeing me, especially my best friend.

I don't look back to where Noah is, I just pull Mateo until we're deep in the dark wooded area where I stop and return my mouth to his. My hands find Mateo's belt and I pull it undone, slipping my hand inside and wrapping around his very large cock. Yeah, this bad boy should do the trick for a quiet mind, a loosened body, a cliff to fall from.

"Sometimes, my mind doesn't quiet either." Mateo says before pushing me away, his crazy colored eyes wild and hungry as he steps closer to me, "I find making someone scream to do the trick. You wanna scream for me, Valeria?"

I don't get to ask him how he knows my name, or what he means because he's on me the second I open my mouth. He spins me around and presses my chest against a tree. He pops the button on my jeans and dips his hand inside where his finger instantly finds my clit.

Mateo is hot as fuck, a walking wet dream, but I'm not as wet as I would be if it were Noah kissing me. Still, I'm soaking the minute he strums me. Maybe it's my visions of Noah standing in Mateo's place, his fingers sliding through my wet lips and straight into my entrance, either way, it's got me begging.

“Please,” I moan, “fuck me.”

I hear rustling in the woods nearby, another pair fucking each other’s brains out and their grunts and skin slapping has me dripping.

“Fuck,” Mateo growls before pulling his fingers free. I turn to see what he’s doing, but it’s too dark to see much.

“Pull your pants down, *princesa*.” I hear the foil of a condom opening and I picture him rolling it onto his dick as I pull my jeans down.

“Fuck me, look at that pretty ass. He’s going to have a hard time with you.”

His words confuse me. Who the fuck is *he*? Please don’t tell this guy is going to dirty talk about his cock like it’s a whole ass human.

He grips my hips just as I get my jeans down to my knees, pulling me against him as he grinds his cock up and down my ass making us both groan.

“Hard, fast, no talking.” I tell him, “Talking is for lovers, I want to be used.”

I can practically see the smirk on Mateo’s face as he wraps both of my braids around his fist tight enough to burn my scalp. He pushes me forward and demands me to grip the tree.

My hands fly to the rough bark as Mateo slams into me, my scream piercing the air alongside some guy’s groan in the distance. Seems everyone is riding a high tonight, finding silence in the screams.

Mateo pulls out of me before slamming back in, never giving me a chance to adjust to his girth.

“Mmm, I think you should see this.” Mateo says, his cock coming to a deep-seated stop as he pulls me up until my back hits his chest. He rips my flannel open, sending the buttons flying before dipping his hand into my shirt and roughly pinching my nipple.

I scream, loving the pain that raises the hairs on my arms, but Mateo covers my mouth with his hand.

“Shh, I don’t want them to stop.” He growls into my ear as he begins to move in and out of me, making my eyes roll, “Do you see them?”

My muddle brain is having a hard time trying to figure out this guy’s train of thought, and his hand covering my mouth keeps me from questioning him. I shake my head and moan behind his hand.

“Your boyfriend Noah,” he says, making my eyes snap open, “looks like he’s looking for a quiet place too.”

I squint into the woods until I find him. Noah and Lucas are deeper into the woods where they’re fucking.

Noah has his shirt off as Lucas sucks his cock. My eyes widen when I see how big he is, how perfect he looks. His head is tipped back, a joint in his mouth and his eyes on the sky. He blows smoke through his nose as he looks down where Lucas swallows him down.

“I bet he’s humming around him,” Mateo says, his fingers leaving my breast and sliding down to my clit, swirling it as he whispers dirty words in my ear.

“I bet Noah fucks rough, but I bet he’s never taken what he gives. Do you think his ass is virgin? Do you think he’d come harder than he ever has if he got fucked?”

My moan is muffled as Mateo slides his thick cock in and out of me while my eyes watch Noah. Lucas grips Noah’s hips as he anchors himself to bob his head faster, but it’s not fast enough because Noah tosses the joint before gripping Lucas’ hair in both hands and begins fucking his face.

“Ah yeah, he fucks like he hates.” Mateo whispers, his tongue coming out to lick my neck to my earlobe, his hips picking up the pace. My breathing comes faster and faster, my orgasm is on the verge of exploding on me, but Mateo stops. I whimper, trying to move against him, but he tsks in my ear.

“Orgasm denial is the best fuck you’ll ever have, sweet girl. Besides, it looks like your boy has had enough of that mouth.”



I've never been one to watch others. No shame on voyeurism, but I've never done it until now and fuck me, it's my new favorite thing.

Mateo circles my clit with his fingers, but never actually touches it. It drives me crazy, makes me want to scream, but I force myself to take it, to ignore the almost painful pulse of my pussy as I watch Noah shove Lucas onto all fours as he drops to his knees behind him. Fascinated and incredibly turned on, I find myself pushing Mateo's hand from my mouth and dropping to all fours like Lucas. Picturing myself in his position so that it's Noah behind me and not a stranger. Albeit he's a very endowed, very talented stranger, but still, he's not Noah.

"Such a filthy little whore, huh? Coveting what you can't have."

I turn back to Mateo, "Shut the hell up and fuck me."

I won't be shamed. I won't be embarrassed that I want what I can't have.

Mateo chuckles as he drops behind me. I return my gaze back to Noah and catch him spitting on Lucas' asshole before rubbing his condom covered cock over it. He wastes no time before shoving inside the guy. Mateo copies the movement, slamming into me and begins pounding me in sync with Noah. It's only a matter of time before my orgasm finally slams into me without interruption just as Noah slams into Lucas for the final time, his roar overlapping my scream.

Mateo must've finished at the same time too, because he pulls out of me, tossing the used condom before standing and tucking himself away. I stand as well, pulling my jeans up with me and fixing my shirt.

"Looks like it was me being used, but don't worry princesa, I have a feeling this won't be the last time we see each other."

He leans in and kisses my cheek before leaving, going deeper into the woods like a fucking weirdo. I don't bother

stopping him, what's the point? I don't know him and he's crazy if he thinks we'll see each other again.

“Val! Noah!” I hear Rico yelling at the entrance of the woods, “The cops are here!”

Shit.

## SIX

---

### ‘COVET’ SAPHIR

ALL OF US MADE IT TO THE CAR IN TIME AND THANKFULLY Rico had the good sense to leave it parked somewhere unseen from the main road. The ride home was quiet, awkward between me and Noah as we sat in the back seat. Even though I know Noah didn't see me getting fucked as I watched him fuck someone else, I still felt weird about it.

Thankfully he pulled me to him, the scent of sweat, weed and woods still clinging to him, “I'm sorry about earlier. You're right, we can't just jet, but I can't lose you either, so we'll figure something out. Maybe I can move to wherever the fuck it is you're going.”

I nodded my head, deciding not to reply lest I piss him off again. The fact is, I'm not sure him following me is a good idea. Noah doesn't know my dad. Hell, I don't even know my dad, so the last thing I want is for Noah to be caught in something he had nothing to do with to begin with.

We get to my house, and I clap both Leroy and Rico on the shoulders before climbing out. Once we're inside, I immediately notice my mom is laying on the couch with her back to us, twirling her wedding ring between her thumb and forefinger.

Without looking, she says hello to Noah.

“Hey Mrs. C.” He says awkwardly before I grab his hand and pull him up the stairs.

“I’m gonna take a quick shower before talking to my mom. It’s going to be a long night, so don’t wait up for me.” I tell him before snatching up my pajama shorts, tank top and panties.

When I get to the door, Noah stops me, “Hey, Val, we’re good right? You and me?”

I give him a smile, “We’ll always be good.”

We stare at each other, and I can tell there’s something he wants to say but something keeps him from it. I motion to the hallway after a second, “I’ll be quick.”

He clears his throat and drops into his usual spot, the ratty bean bag chair in the corner that I’ve had since I was like five years old. Noah always sits there, especially when he’s rolling blunts which is what he busies himself with now. I close the door behind me and make my way to the hall restroom, looking downstairs only to find my mother still laying in the same spot.

I wonder if she’s drunk.

Once I’m done in the shower, my mind much too anxious to prolong the way I normally do. I slip on my pajamas before brushing through my long black hair. I used to have it short because I’ve always hated when my mom brushed my hair. She literally did not give a fuck if she pulled it in sensitive places, so I begged for it to be cut at my chin.

But then I met Noah, and he complimented the color of my raven hair and since then, I’ve let it grow. I took extra care of it, using rice water to help it grow and stay shiny. Still, it doesn’t mean it’s not a pain in the ass, but every time Noah plays with a lock, wrapping it around his finger mindlessly, I’m reminded that the pain is worth it.

Once my hair is tangle free, I quickly part it and hastily do two twisted buns, so I have waves tomorrow, then head back down the stairs, stopping at my door to listen for Noah. I hear him humming under his breath, so I know he’s still awake.

I didn't tell him about the slap I got from my mom, that shit is between her and me, but I wish I had his perspective on it. Though, I'm pretty sure he'd tell me what I already know; my mom isn't known for hitting, so if she did it, she's in a shitty place. Not that she's excused for it, but I do take her situation, whatever it may be, into consideration.

I make my way to the kitchen, finding the wine she was drinking in the trash with a quarter of it still full. I huff and take it out, rinsing it off before pushing it to the back of the counter beneath the hanging wine glasses.

No need to let an expensive bottle go to waste, especially when it's the same kind that was served at my mom and dad's wedding. It's the only kind she drinks; I understand the nostalgia. Those were better times for her...according to the stories I've been told.

"Valeria." My mother's broken voice hits my back, but I refuse to face her just yet.

I hear her step closer to me, sniffing as she searches for words. My own tears fill my eyes, blurring my vision as I spin in place and throw my arms around her neck. My mother is my best friend, and I realize I'm not mad at her for the slap, I'm sure I deserved it, and it was long overdue, I'm just heartbroken that I'm being pushed away by her. Like she doesn't want me anymore. I know that logically that's unfair and untrue, but that's how it feels...how it hurts.

"I'm so sorry, baby," she says as she holds me, her fingers running over my hair, "I never should have done that, and I hate myself for it."

I pull back and look at her, watching her eyes skate over my cheek as though she's looking for more reasons to hate herself.

"Mom, I'm okay, I swear. I just want to know what exactly is going on. I don't want platitudes or bullshit pandering; I want the truth."

Her head drops and takes a deep breath, "I can't tell you everything, but I'll tell you what I can."

I throw my hands up and spin away, pacing the kitchen, “What does that even mean, mom?! Is dad part of some gang? Is he in debt with someone? A money launderer? Why do you sound like this is life or fucking death?”

“Because it is, *mija*. For this family, it’s life or death.”

I almost trip over my feet, falling into the fridge as my widened gaze finds my mom’s serious face. What the hell? I was only joking...*partly*.

“What?” My voice is barely audible.

We stare at each other for a silent moment, her eyes burning with nothing but pain, misery and love while mine plead for understanding, for hope that this is all a nightmare or sick joke. My mother has never lied to me, not about anything important, like *life-threatening-important*, so I have no reason to distrust what she’s saying.

“Come sit down.”

“No.” I tell her firmly, “No. Tell me right here, right now, mother.”

She crosses her arms over her chest, her shoulders straightening and her eyes hardening, but it’s all an act. The truth is, she’s barely holding on and I’m not helping, but I really don’t have it in me to care.

“Fine. Your father and I met around the same ages you and Noah were when you two first met. He was my best friend, always full of light and love. He was a defender to anyone in need of defense.” She smiles fondly as speaks, her eyes far away, “I always told him he’d make a great defense attorney, but he wanted to work with kids. He wanted to become a social worker to help children escape their neglectful homes.”

“But he’s a financial manager, I doubt that helps kids escape shitty homes.”

She turns and makes her way to the table, grabbing a photo album from the built-in bookshelf on the wall of the hall.

“You’re right, that’s not the path he took but there’s a reason for that. He was top of his class and incredibly

intelligent, especially with numbers, but it wasn't enough for his father. When Roberto told him what his plans for his future were, your grandfather was furious, forbade him, saying *'No son of mine will go down a path made for the weak.'*

She slides the open photo album across the table, her eyes pleading with me to come and sit with her, so I do, but not before I snatch up the bottle I washed and two glasses, knowing I'll definitely need a little more alcohol for this. My mother has never allowed me to drink unless I'm home with her and even then, I'm only allowed one glass of wine.

I look down at the photo, my grandfather, whom I've never met, stares back at me with a frown on his serious face. He has gray hair that sits like a helmet on his head, thick and combed to perfection. He looks like he belongs in the seventeenth hundreds with his handlebar mustache and pressed suit. There's an obnoxious pendant on his coat that looks like a silver mask with two long horns, but I can't be too sure. His right hand covers his left forearm just like the images on the Coventry University website. *Did gramps go there too?*

Every time I look at these photographs, grandpa Efrem always gives me the creeps and this time is no different.

My father stands beside him looking the polar opposite, with a giant goofy smile that matches my own, wild black hair befitting the late nineteen-eighties, and some sort of certificate in his hand.

"What happened then?" I ask her in anticipation and dread, both mixing in my stomach and making me nauseous.

"Your father changed. He never told me what happened, but I saw the darkness in his eyes, eating away at the light each day until there was nothing left but the man you knew. I know you've always wanted to ask me why I stayed with your father even when he lost his temper, but the fact is, I love him. I love the man I know is buried inside; the man I know I can bring back."

"Mama, please, what happened?" I'm pleading now, begging for answers and only getting more questions.

“Your grandfather, and every Calavera man before him, are part of a secret society. They’re a very powerful entity in this country, creating big names in the political system. They’re the quiet chess players, you see their marks on the citizens, but you never see them. Your father did something that was demanded of him and because of that, he was initiated into the society.

“He was a pawn to them, being molded until he no longer resembled the boy I knew. Gone were the dreams of helping others. He moved up in power, but we were still best friends, still so close and very much in love.”

I flip through the album noting that after a few pages, it was my father who wore the silver pendant. His goofy smile was gone, his attire was pressed to perfection...who he was in these images matches the man I grew up knowing.

“He looks like a copy of grandpa, frowns and stern brows. But what does all this have to do with me going to live with him?”

“I’m getting to that, but you need to understand the genesis first. The Society has a major council, a hierarchy that controls the entire thing. There’s the president who at the time was your grandfather, there’s the vice president, the coat of arms, and so on until you reach the novices. The council is deeply rooted in tradition much the way a normal Fraternity is, only this group changes you, turns you into someone you don’t recognize for their own gain.”

She pulls two photos out and lays them side-by-side, one is my goofy dad, the other is the stern dad. Together like this, you can truly see the harsh differences.

“How much time is there between these photos?” I ask her before pouring a glass of wine for us.

“Six months.” I almost spill the wine, pushing the bottle and the glass back as I take a closer look. There’s no way these pictures were taken only six months apart. No way my father could have aged three years in that short time.



“The council did that to him.” My mother says as she watches me, “They break people down and build them back up in whatever form will be beneficial to them. They make you someone the world will fear, they give you money, power, and respect, but they can easily take it all back and leave you worse off than when you started, trust me, I’ve seen them do it. Yet that’s not the worst part.” Something bitter hardens her jaw as she says that, as though she knows this from personal experience.

“What’s worse?” I’m not certain I want to know, but I have to.

“Picture a bug passing across the sidewalk you’re walking on. It’s just trying to get by, trying to do whatever it is bugs do and live in peace. Just as it thinks it’s in the clear, you step on it, squishing its life away without a backwards glance. It’s just gone. Its life is over in mere seconds. Now picture you and your family as that bug and the Society as the person walking by. That’s how easily they can erase you from existence. Wipe your whole life away as though you were nothing but a bug on the sidewalk. Play the game, you live, defy them and you die.”

“Who are they?” I ask in a whisper, as though one of these motherfuckers can hear me.

“Put it this way, mija, they have one of their own in every political seat of the world, not just this country. They have their fingers in pies you didn’t know existed...even the archdiocese answers to them.”

I feel the hairs on my arms stand on end, the same way they did with that creepy guy outside Mr. Dumar’s. A ball of dread forms in the deepest part of the stomach, twisting and turning with every word my mother speaks. Her voice is dead, her eyes far away, her soul completely defeated.

“Mom?” I ask with a shaky breath, “If these people are as bad as you say they are, then why am I going there?”

I fear her answer, my body breaks out in a cold sweat as my mind runs through a hundred different answers, but deep inside, I think I know. My father owes a debt and I’m the payment.

“Because we have no choice. It’s either you go and fulfill the obligations set or...I suffer for it.”

What. The. Actual. Shit.

## SEVEN

---

### ‘YOU WEREN’T SPECIAL’

#### CORBAL, GENRIX, SHILOH DYNASTY

“WE LEFT WHEN WE FOUND OUT WE WERE PREGNANT WITH you. At first, your father didn’t want to go, he wanted to stay and complete his ascension to the highest level of novice so he could be granted a seat of power within the Society. He had plans that he wouldn’t confide in me, but I trusted him. I trusted he would do the right thing, maybe even take down the twisted Council from the inside.”

She chuckles but there’s no humor in the sound, “How wrong I was. He gained power, yes, but he reveled in it. He forgot about me; about the life we created growing in my womb. All he wanted was more power; the *Coat of Arms* wasn’t enough for his hunger. He decided my family name wasn’t powerful enough to tie to his, so despite my love for him, he married someone else.”

I feel my brows hit my hairline at that confession. My eyes tear up, for what? I don’t know. Maybe for the fact that my father hurt my mom so badly, or that she was so blinded that she didn’t see the heart shattering aimed at her...or maybe it’s just the injustice of it all.

I rub my eyes, refusing to cry, begging my anger to rise because fuck this pain. Fuck this hurt. Fuck my pathetic, evil

fucking father.

“Tell me the rest.” My voice sounds dead even to my own ears.

When she shakes her head and covers her eyes, I can't help the rage that shoots through me. I jump from my seat and slam my fist to the table.

“TELL ME NOW!”

My mom jumps from her seat as well, her eyes hard and red, “What do you want, Val, huh? You want me to detail how I had to watch your father marry some *puta* who already had a bastard child? How your father gave her and him his last name because he not only needed a more powerful familial tie but also a son to be his heir? Or how about I tell you the details of losing everything because I wanted to expose the Society for what it is and how they came after me, killed my mother, father and baby brother as they tortured them for information on my whereabouts?!”

She sobs, her voice breaking, and I feel my heart beating wildly in my chest as I think about all that my mother has gone through.

“Mom...” I whisper.

“They didn't know where I was,” her voice is barely above a whisper, her shoulders sagging, “so they killed them. When the Society finally found me, it was your father who got them to change their minds on killing me with you still inside me. *'A life for a life, a debt for a debt,'* he said when they left, *'because you are the mother of my princesa, I will let you live, but for that you owe me a debt'*. Once you turned seventeen, you were in their sights. In your father's sights.”

“You gave up too easily.” Noah's angry voice has us both jumping from the table. He's sitting on the top step of the stairs, hidden in the darkness. He stands and walks down the steps, his heavy boots bringing him into the light. Each thud on the steps matches the churning of my insides. When he's at the bottom of the stairs, his angry hate filled eyes lock on my mom.

“But I’m not weak like you.”

## EIGHT

---

### ‘OH DARLING’ FREDDIE DREDD

GROWING UP, I NEVER FELT LIKE I’D FIND MUCH WORTH LIVING for. No matter how many years I lived, I was convinced I’d never find something or someone who would make me feel anything other than the constant numbness I lived with. My first memory, the earliest one I can recall, is getting an ass beating from my mother while my father watched. I don’t remember the reason I was forced to read the bible out loud, line for line, while my mother whipped my back, but the memory has yet to fade.

It was from that moment that I began to grow numb to normal human emotions. Love, joy, peace, happiness...those were all foreign to me.

Until Val, that is. I wouldn’t say I found happiness the moment I met her; it was more like intrigue. But that intrigue grew quickly. It morphed before I was even ready for it—*obsession*.

It was new to me. I had felt something similar to it once before, when I kissed one of the boys in my class, but unlike that moment, my obsession for Val only grew until there wasn’t enough time in the day to spend with her. I began sleeping over—her mother allowing it because by then, I was her gay best friend; I wasn’t a threat to her daughter.

Little did she know, I was spending my nights lying next to Val imagining all the ways I could bury my cock inside her until I was so hard that I had to jerk myself into her panties. All while her daughter slept soundly beside me.

I always felt bad for it though, felt like a filthy fuck dog for my twisted deeds, hated myself for lying straight to Valentina's face, but I never enough to stop.

It was all new feelings for me. Painful need, sick obsession, shameful actions...and now I feel hate unlike anything I've ever felt. A new desperate need to keep my obsession with me, and I'll be fucking damned if I let Val leave my side.

I stare at her whimpering mother, seeing her in a new light and feeling nothing but murderous hate. Sitting on the stairs, I had to force myself not to rage as I listened to Valentina tell her daughter the truth about not only her father but also herself. I had to breathe through my anger as I listened to her say words that I know lashed at Val's heart. I sat and listened until control was no longer working.

I step forward, my jaw aching from clenching it painfully hard, "Because from what I can tell, your daughter is the sacrifice. She's the lamb and you're practically leading to the slaughter yourself. Instead of using the seventeen years you had to run, to fight back, to do *anything* to protect your daughter...you spent it trying to love a bastard back from his evil ways. You spent seventeen fucking years feebly trying to bring a dead heart back to life."

She looks at Val before looking back to me, her eyes wide as I reach the bottom step.

"Noah—" she says but I'm done hearing her bullshit.

I step closer to her, anger radiating from me in each footfall. I stop when Val steps between us, her small hand on my chest feels like an anchor I desperately need but my anger won't be quelled so easily.

"Am I wrong?!" I snap over Val's head, making her mother jump as though she fears me.

Good. She hurt my Val, so she better fucking scared, even if I won't lay a hand on her. But that's only for Val's sake.

"Noah, please—" her mother pleads, but I yell above her.

"For seventeen years you loved the wrong person!"

"Shut the fuck up, Noah!" Val screams, pushing me back as hard as she can, but I only move a foot, my eyes still locked on the silent bitch.

I'm right. Undeniably right and I know Val doesn't want to hear it. She doesn't want to face the fact that her mother allowed this shit to happen. Allowed Val's sperm donor to abuse her daughter, to treat her only child like trash just to save her own fucking skin.

Val stares at her mother, her eyes watering at the betrayal. She practically pleads with her eyes, her wobbling lip, her shaking hands...begging her to deny it and say she loved Val more.

But she doesn't. She won't even look at her.

"It's true, isn't it?" Val whispers brokenly.

A pain filled silence is her reply.

I pull Val into my arms, her shoulders shaking as she cries into my chest. I stare at her mother, watching her as her tears fall from her eyes, and I know without a doubt she loves Val but not enough to fight for her.

I reach down and scoop Val up into my arms, "I'm taking her upstairs, but I'll be back. Don't fucking leave. This conversation isn't over."

Valentina doesn't reply to me, she doesn't even acknowledge that I'm there. I shake my head and turn toward the stairs.

Once I have Val in her bedroom, I put her on the bed and move strands of her hair out of her face, "I'm sorry, *mi vida*. I'm sorry I lost my temper down there."

Val's hazel eyes just stare into mine and in them I see a thousand questions, how could she do this? How could any



mother love an abuser more than her own child? What did I do wrong?

“You did nothing wrong, Val. You don’t deserve this pain.” I place my hand on her chest, feeling her heartbeat beneath my palm, “but I promise you won’t face it alone. Whatever you decide to do, run with me or do whatever it is your *puto* father wants, I’ll be right beside you.”

“I have to know what my father is into, Noah. I have to go. But not because I want to help him...”

She doesn’t elaborate but based on the sudden speed beating of her heart, I know what she wants to do. She wants to kill him.

“I’ll be there for that too. Somos tú y yo, verdad?” *It’s you and me, right?*

She leans up and places her lips to mine, shocking the hell out of me. It ends as quick as it started—a quick peck and nothing more.

“Yeah, it’s always you and me. *Mi vida.*”

She rolls onto her side, her tears dripping off the bridge of her nose as she closes her eyes. I drop my ass to the floor and lean my back against the bed, my ear close to her face where her breathing raises goosebumps along my neck.

I don’t know how long I sit there, replaying the way her lips felt on mine, but when she mumbles my name, I know she’s dead to the world.

Time to have a talk with her mother.

## NINE

---

### ‘LAY ME IN THE RIVER’ BONES

VALENTINA SITS AT THE TABLE, HER HEAD IN HER HANDS AS she stares at something silver sitting on the tabletop between her elbows. I make my way over to her, pulling the chair beside her out and facing it to her.

I sit and rest my elbows on my knees, “Why does Roberto want Val? You said this Society is like a fraternity, so I’m gonna take a wild guess and say it’s a men’s only kind of club. What does Roberto need with Val now?”

Valentina shrugs, lifting her head and staring at me with almost dead eyes. Val resembles her mom, but there’s such a vivid difference between them that I hadn’t noticed before. Val has the spark of life in her eyes whereas her mother looks like she’s ready to lay her bones down.

“I wish I knew what Roberto’s plans were, but I was never privy to them. My best guess is he’s going to say she isn’t his by blood, claiming his so-called son as his true heir and forcing them to marry. His reign would stay intact as he would puppet master them from behind the scenes. Just like he did to me.”

My blood boils at the mere thought of Val being tied to some illegitimate asshole who is probably worse than her

father ever was just for Roberto's political gain. I don't know the guy, but I already want to kill him.

I sniff, rubbing a thumb across my brow as I sit back in my chair, "What's this guy's name? He's a bastard, but does anyone know his father's name?"

She shakes her head, "No. I tried finding out who the father was to Helena Navarro's child, but either someone scrubbed the information, or the girl never exposed her lover. His name is Rey. I know nothing else about him, just that he's been groomed to take over Roberto's position one day."

"What is his position?" I ask after a second of silence.

She blows out a breath, "He's the president."

"Seems like a bunch of trouble to go through with when originally, he just wanted Rey as his heir. There's got to be something more to this."

Valentina scoffs humorlessly, "It's a riddle I've never been able to figure out, and this is no trouble in comparison to wiping out an entire family. Making people their puppets is a cakewalk. When Roberto wants something, or someone, he gets it, no matter who has to go through. He's far too powerful to fight."

"Is that why you didn't run?"

I reach over and grab the silver piece, ignoring how she stares at me as I inspect the pendant. It's a depiction of a person, a bust of someone wearing a mask with two devil horns. It looks as though it's coming out of a mirror. I flip the thing over, noting Val's last name carved into the silver as Valentina answers me.

"I didn't run because it wouldn't have just been me who they would have killed, Noah. Anyone—and I do mean *anyone*—close to Val would have been used as bait. Just as they did with my mother and father, my kid brother...they would have done it to you, to Rico, to Leroy. Do you think I want their blood on my hands too, or see Val blame herself?"

I want to slap the shit out of the only woman I've ever considered my second mom for the images she put into my

head. I want to tell her not to use me or anyone else as an excuse for cowardice, but she's partly right. Val would blame herself, but the most painful thing I can imagine is losing her to all of this. The fact is, Val is a selfless person and without hesitation she would throw herself in the line of fire before she'd ever let one of us be hurt.

"I'm going with her." I say plainly.

"I know." Valentina replies as she stands up and makes her way toward the staircase, "I also know that if it comes down to it, you'll protect her better than I ever did."

"What's the name of this Society?"

I ask her, making her pause, her fingers white knuckling the railing of the stairs. She looks over her shoulder, her voice dead.

"Calavera Society. Welcome to the family business."

## TEN

---

### 'ICARUS' HAARPER

I STARE AT THE FRONT DOOR OF THE HOME MY SWEET LITTLE stepsister entered with her boyfriend after being dropped off. I know they're not actually a couple, but it was plainly obvious to my best friend Mateo that there's some heavy sexual tension between them. It's beside the point, far from the reason I'm here, but it's information I store for later use.

Moving through the shadows, I was able to listen in on her and her whore of a mother talk for a while until Valeria's pet decided he needed to step in with his two cents.

It was very enlightening. He's a slave to the girl. I could easily tell this *Noah* not only lives for my stepsister, but he would also kill for her too. At least that's what his veiled threats tell me.

The Council wanted to kill Valentina and Roberto's unborn daughter, but for some reason I can't comprehend, Roberto saved their pathetic lives. Now, after years of enduring his cruelty while his *actual* child lived peacefully without him, he wants her back. I should be thankful his attention will be on her, this weak, unsuspecting girl, but I'm not.

What does he want with her? Why did he give my mother and me his last name, raise me as his legitimate son and heir,

denying his true offspring only to just through hoops to save her life and force her to come to Coventry?

I have no clue, but I'm determined to find out. I have suffered Roberto's abuse, watched my mother be beaten and broken more times than I can count, watched her become a shell of who she once was. I was raised by Roberto to be a strategic player in this world, to be heard but never seen, to see weakness and use it to my advantage, but I don't think he ever figured I used his teachings against him.

I smile to myself, fuck checkers, I play chess.

It's a shame really, I'd love nothing more than to watch the bastard burn for his deceit and cruelty. Lies never make friends, and Roberto Calavera is the biggest liar of them all.

It doesn't matter if the council will sanction his punishment or not, because in my mind, there's no ruler prohibiting me. I may play the part of the Calavera puppet convincingly, but I answer to no one, and all I see is blood when I look at this pathetic family Roberto kept a secret. It'd be a fucking pleasure to end their lives in honor of my mother.

Roberto ruined her. Broke every piece inside her, throwing the name *Valentina* in her face any time he got, comparing the two women. I never knew about Roberto's family, hell, I thought I was his actual son for years. When I asked my mother who this Valentina woman was, she said it was Roberto's ex who died years ago, the girl he wanted to truly be with. I never looked into the woman, but during my ceremonial celebration when I was just a kid, Roberto announced his plans to bring his illegitimate daughter back.

On the night I was crowned the prince of the Calavera Society, celebrating becoming a novice to the society, I watched my mother spiral into a depression she's never come out of.

After that, I was determined to find out all I could about this daughter. I continued to be the dutiful son, believing I could be the child Roberto saw as golden, perfect, irreplaceable. I told myself that his daughter, that unwanted

sperm and egg, was nothing more than a charity case, that Roberto was only doing this out of pity.

It was long until I realized Roberto pities no one and every decision he makes is thoroughly thought out.

I soon found out who Valentina was through the rumor mill and my own research. It's a shame she wasn't there to witness her family's death. Of course, I wasn't either, but the rumors of their blood being spilled for her sins lull me to sleep on my bad nights.

Damn, I guess the real shame is that I wasn't there to witness it.

In truth, I know I shouldn't hate this woman nor her daughter. In fact, I should feel some sort of pity for them. Mourn for their wasted lives because now they're slaves to Roberto just as me and my mother are...but the only soul I'll ever mourn is my mother's.

The lights inside Valeria's house finally went off and after two hours of silence, I moved from my hidden spot.

I heard Noah's declaration. Heard him say he would be going to Coventry, but I highly doubt the guy would survive a week there without someone's protection.

Coventry isn't for normal people, it's not for blue collars or blissfully ignorant everyday Joe's, but I do have to say I'm very intrigued by him. I briefly saw his face when he and Valeria arrived earlier, but it wasn't enough. Thankfully Mateo did his job well...a little too well if you ask me, fucking Valeria was not exactly on the to do list, but he deserved a little self indulgence.

Mateo gathered enough information for me, including both Valeria's and Noah's social media accounts. I have to say, my stepsister is one hell of a beauty. I can see why Noah is so hung up on the girl. She has bedroom eyes that stare through the screen at me in a way that makes me feel like she can truly see me. She's seductive without trying to be.

One particular image stuck out to me, one that I admittedly screenshot and saved to my phone. It's one she posted tonight,

she's sitting between two guys, one who turned out to be Noah and one with green tipped hair flipped to one side of his head.

Her arms were thrown over their shoulders while her knees were hooked over their thighs leaving her spread wide. Between her legs, almost directly on the seam of her jean clad pussy, was a rip in the fabric, showing just a hint of red lace panties. It was enough to make my cock rally, but it wasn't until I took in her face that I really found myself adjusting my hard as fuck cock.

Her face was tipped up slightly, her hazel eyes smoldering as she pushed her tongue out, the tip curling and touching the two beer bottles held up to her mouth. Fuck me, even thinking about how sexy she looked had my dick hardening. The way Noah's hand laid on her thigh, close enough to the rip in her jeans, a tear that undoubtedly gave him perfect access to driving his fingers into her heat. It drove me insane thinking of how they'd both look if he had moved his hand just a little higher.

My imagination ran wild, picturing exactly how it would all play out had I been there to command them to move how I want them to. His mouth would be dropped into an O, and her head would be tipped back, her bottom lip between her teeth as her hips worked to get his fingers deeper. But I wouldn't let either of them come. No, that would be saved for me. I wouldn't let either of them mark the other, not until I marked them both first.

It both shocked and pissed me off that my thoughts ran in such a direction from just one picture.

I shake my head and force those thoughts aside.

The boy I didn't care to identify, was looking directly into the lens of the camera, a fuckboi smile on his face. But Noah...now he is a lost fucking soul. He stared at her as though all he wanted was to rip her clothes off and fuck her in every position possible. No, it was more than that, he looked like he wanted to possess her, to ruin her, hurt her in ways she's never been hurt before. He wants to break her, put her back together again and break her again.



But I can tell he's *never* had her. Mateo informed me of how badly Valeria wants this guy, so why haven't they at least given into their primal desires? After scrolling through his Instagram, it was obvious the guy prefers dick to pussy, but given the chance I know without a single doubt he'd sink balls deep into my stepsister.

His desperation to not only have her, but to protect her with everything he has could come in handy for me. For my plans to ruin Roberto.

I send off a message to the dean of the university, a woman I've had on her knees for me more times than I can count, and to remind her of a debt she owes me.

Her reply is instant.

**Whitmore:** What can I do for you, sir.

I smirk at her submissiveness as I type Noah's address, which was pathetically easy to get, and the rest of his information.

**Me:** Noah Cabañas from Blacktop, Indianapolis, class of 2022, graduated from Blacktop High in. Send him an acceptance letter to the University and your debt will be cleared with me. Make sure his housing is in Skull Valley, the Calavera Dorm house to be exact. Tell him he was selected for the scholarship program and all expenses are paid for. Put him on my account.

Whitmore: Done. But what if he doesn't accept it, is my debt still cleared, sir?

Me: He will accept.

BEFORE TURNING OFF THE SCREEN, I SEND HER ONE MORE MESSAGE.

Me: Tell anyone about this and I'll make sure your debt falls onto your daughter.

Whitmore: I understand.

I stand from my spot, cracking my neck as I light up a cigarette. The neighborhood is a Latin community, with neighbors who will no doubt see me if I'm not careful. But I am, and even if anyone sees me, they'll never identify me. Besides, I'll be gone before they can even begin to describe me to the authorities.

I toss my cigarette, eyeing the windows on the second floor. I find the one I saw Noah moving around in when they first arrived here tonight. Though I know that Noah is allowed to sleep over, I know there are nights where the guy sneaks in after everyone is asleep. Obviously, I have no proof of this, but the way he practically worships Valeria, I know there's an obsession pushing him to do things no normal friend does.

Of course, I'm proven right when I look through the bush below the window I'm after. A wooden ladder lays perfectly hidden, and I have to silently give Noah credit for the creep traits. No shade from me, I honestly have respect for the guy because I understand his level of obsession.

We both have an obsession with Valeria. For two different reasons, but an obsession, nonetheless.

I place the ladder softly before climbing up, counting on Noah to have left the window unlatched. Once again, Noah has proven to be quite useful to me. I quietly open Valeria's window, smirking when it makes no sound.

There's a sturdy looking wooden desk in front of the window, one that I will have to climb across, thankfully it's not cluttered with bullshit. Across the room and pushed into the corner is a full-size bed with two people sleeping soundly.

I pull my black sugar skull mask from my back pocket, the pliable rubber covering my face from sleepy eyes if Noah or Valeria happen to wake up and spot me. I crawl through the window and crouch on the corner of the desk, watching the two sleep as I pull the hood of my jacket over my head.

I honestly don't know what I came in here for - *which is not like me at all* - but I had to see this pair in person. I respect

Noah's creep level because I myself have passed the boundaries of morality more times than I can count; I no longer see the lines between right and wrong, I just do what I want without remorse or regret.

I tilt my head as I spy my stepsister's bare leg uncovered by the large comforter blanket. She has such mouthwatering legs, thick, tanned and begging for rough hands. My eyes travel from her small ankles that would look fantastic in manacles, to her calves that suggest she works out or plays sports, they'd look sensational with teeth marks, all the way up to that contraband worthy thigh. Fuck me, no one can tell me thick thighs aren't the downfall of man.

It's a damn shame this girl - *with the body of a sex queen* - is my sworn enemy. But I'll use her, there's no doubt about that. I'll have a taste of this pretty little *muñeca*, and when I'm done with her, she'll be nothing but a stained memory.

I silently step off the desk and move closer to the bed, my eyes sweeping up and over Valeria's little boy shorts panties and toward her white tank top that barely hides the dark color of her nipple. It's cut so low that all it would take is a slight of the hand and her breast would be free, but I know if I do that, I'm liable to wake her up with my dick shoving deep into her pussy.

How Noah hasn't fucked her brains out is beyond me. It almost makes me want to cut his dick off if he's not going to use it on her.

Growing up in my home, with a single mother who drank her liver to practical death and popped so many pills the woman is a walking pharmacy, I learned pretty quickly how your life can fall apart because of one poor judgment call.

My grandfather, though, he never saw the world as I do, and he fucked up and the lives of every member in his family. All of us have been under a hostile takeover because the patriarch of our family got just a little too hungry for power and played a short game that ended in his ruin and Roberto Calavera's checkmate. It's true, however, that it would have been found out one way or another, and it was Roberto who

cleaned up a mess my grandfather made, but it wasn't for free. It also stands to admit that if it weren't for him giving me, my mother's bastard baby, his last name, I would have been less than nothing in Coventry, a servant at the bidding of his owners.

I'm all for orgasm denial, but I'd rather swallow battery acid than to torture myself day after day, watching the object of my obsession fuck anyone else but me. Mateo told me how Noah watched him touch Valeria. How his eyes turned murderous when their lips touched. If it were me in Noah's place, I would have made Valeria watch as I carved Mateo's face so badly, he'd be unrecognizable.

I walk over to her side of the bed, lightly dragging my fingertips up her thigh, my cock rallying when goosebumps rise, following my touch. I tilt my head and stare at her sleeping face, peaceful, falsely angelic...I can see why Noah wants her.

I want her too, but she'll be my tool to the throne and her blood will be my crown.

I want to be the one who lights the match that burns Roberto's world to the ground, and I'll use his daughter and her pet to do it.

I walk around Valeria's queen size bed to where her boyfriend sleeps, my brows furrowing beneath my mask as I notice he's fully clothed and sleeping on top of the comforter. I don't fucking get it. How can he have all that next to him and *not* be asleep with his dick inside her?

I lean over him, eyeing the guy's handsome face. His images online hold no candle to him in person. His face is symmetrically perfect, full lips that make me want to run my tongue across to see if they're as soft as they look. He's got an indent in his chin and I have to physically force myself not to touch it. His jaw is straight, covered in day-old stubble.

He has a small tattoo on his left sideburn, a dagger that looks like it's pricking his skin, a small drip of blood tattooed at the bottom. He turns his head, his throat bobbing as he swallows, and I spot another tattoo around his neck. A

centipede wrapped around him like a noose, the head and tail dipping into the fabric of his shirt.

I wonder where it ends, if he has more and how much of his body is covered in the intricate designs.

*Would he show them to me?* This internal question shocks me, so I quickly compartmentalize and move on, but it's difficult. He and Valeria are extraordinarily attractive and seeing them side by side, vulnerable to me...*ah fuck. Focus, Rey!*

His fingers are laced together on top of his wide chest, and I can make out the word *fateless* tattooed across his knuckles in Old English font. Beneath the sleeves of his black and white flannel shirt, I can see that there is more ink on his skin, but I can't make anything out in the dark. As I straighten and am about to turn for the door, the glint of something on the bed between them catches my eye. I reach over the Noah and close my fist around the object before turning toward the window, using the moonlight to see what it is.

I feel my lip curl as I swallow down the angry growl that wants to come out. I flip over the silver Calavera Society pendant, spotting Roberto's name engraved on the back. I've heard the tales of the things he did to reach the position of President. Things that would make the angels cry, but I have no sympathy. I was forced to do similar acts, commit similar sins, and I'm not even close to done yet.

Roberto acts as though he's better because of his power, as though he rides a tall unblemished white horse while the rest of us live in the shadow of his holiness. The truth is, he's just as pathetic and wretched as the rest of us in Coventry, and I plan to prove to him just how fallible he really is.

Starting with his precious daughter.

I place the pendant right back where I found it before reaching further and dragging the back of my finger down Valeria's cheek to ward her lips. Her breath shudders against my fingertips, making me swallow down a groan before pulling away.

Soon, I'll have her beneath me, in power and in bed. Thankfully I've made sure she comes with the added bonus of her sinfully made best friend.

I think I'll play with him too.

I look back at her friend who I now realize isn't her boyfriend at all, I recognize the hungry look in his eyes, the desperate desire...it's the same one my mother's eyes held anytime Roberto called. Unrequited love, it's a real bitch and it's hard to hide.

Something tells me he's going to be a problem for me; I'll need to find out more about him, maybe even pull a page out of Roberto's book.

I walk from the room, and slowly make my way down the hall, toward the stairs. I could so easily slip inside Valentina's room and slice her throat with her daughter none the wiser, but she may be useful to me later, so I ignore the closed door at the end of the hall.

As I take the steps down to the ground level, I eye each of Valeria's yearly school pictures, starting from elementary to graduation.

Her growing phases are easy to see, starting with the typical kindergartener; pigtails and pretty wide smile, to the slightly emo middle schooler and finally the gothic Chicana she is today.

I prefer that look to any other.

She's unique and cultured...it's beautiful to see in my generation. All too often, trends and what's in style is more important to us than where we've come from—unless, of course, it's trendy.

“What a shame.” I whisper as I take the last frame off the wall and make my way through the living room.

I bypass the large *ofrenda*, ignoring the hateful looks I get from the photographs of every one of Valeria's ancestors who have passed on, and make my way to the French doors leading into what looks to be a makeshift library though it seems to

have once been a screened porch. The walls look flimsy, not a single window in sight.

I mindlessly scan the books, noting a lot of them are on criminal law. Some range from autobiographies of past detectives to the criminals to got off on all charges. There's even a whole bookshelf dedicated to criminal psychology written by various criminologists, some who studied serial killers, to some who profiled them.

I wonder if it's Valeria who reads these and if she does, what does she think of psychopaths? I honestly don't know why I'm curious to know her thoughts, but something in me feels like the image I had in my head of who Roberto's secret daughter was, is completely wrong.

Moving back to the large bookshelf, I scan over each of the spines, noting classics like Moby Dick and other nonfiction books such as the ones you see in every grandmother's home, Encyclopedias, *A* through *Z*.

*They still make these?*

"Looking for something?" A deep male's voice has my head snapping to the doorway where Noah stands holding a gun pointed straight at my head.

"I think you and I should have a talk, *sí?*" His grin is wicked, a slice of evil across his face...I've never seen such a smile look so heavenly.

## ELEVEN

---

### ‘NO ESCAPE’ HEALTH

SLEEP HAS ALWAYS EVADED ME; GROWING UP WITH MY MOTHER will do that to you. So, when I felt someone watching me, I cracked my eyes open slightly, I was able to make out a man in a sugar skull mask staring at my fingers. It took everything in me not to reach for the gun under my pillow. I just kept my breathing even, waiting for this fucker to do something I’d make him die for...you know, aside from breaking into Val’s room while she slept.

Only I could do that.

It was my niche and it looked better on me.

Once he left the room, I quickly jumped up from the bed and grabbed my gun. I made my way into the hall, avoiding spots I knew creaked underfoot and watched the asshole leisurely make his way down the stairs, stopping at each of Val’s photos like a fucking creep.

Again, that’s my gig. Who the fuck was this guy?

When he went into what I call the *ghettobrary*, I knew he had cornered himself. There’s no way out except through me and I have the gun.

I take in his casual stance, my surprise not really having the effect I had hoped for. Begging would be nice.



With the barrel of my gun, I gesture to the empty chair in the corner, “Siéntate, vamos a hablar.” *Have a seat, we’re going to talk.*

His broad shoulders show a slight tension, but other than that, he seems calm as he backs up toward the chair in the corner and sits.

Either this *chavala* is incredibly confident in himself or he has no self-preservation. Either works for me, I’ll just bring him down a peg or give him a reason to value his worthless life.

“Are we going to talk, pretty boy, or are you just going to imagine my death the way you imagine having that sleeping beauty upstairs?”

God, his voice is something else. Why I pictured a high-pitched whine as his voice is beyond me, but this guy could read through one of Valentina’s Encyclopedias and make it sound hot as fuck.

Still, his mocking words piss me off, but at least I know that somehow, this bastard has been watching us long enough to spot my weakness for Val. Too bad for him it’s not a soft spot.

I may be gentle and loving with Val, but I’m as cruel as they come to the rest of the world. It’s what happens when you care very little for living...it’s Val who keeps me here. She’s the one who makes me want to kill, to make the world go through me to get to her, she makes me want to bathe her in the blood of anyone who has the balls to fuck with her.

“It’s true, that girl up there is my reason, which makes me very dangerous to you. *Entiendes vato?*” I smile, tilting my head to the side as I eye his neck tattoos, “I don’t give two fucks who you are, who you roll with or even what family you belong to, I will kill you and deliver your heart to your up mother.”

His breathing stops completely. What’s with this guy? He breaks into this house; walks around like he owns the place but yet has a sore spot concerning his mom?

My grin kicks up higher, “Oh, I’m sorry, mama’s boy didn’t like that. Please, act on your anger, I’d love nothing more.”

I watch him as he visibly relaxes, his face dipping to the picture he took from the stairwell wall, but I don’t miss the way his fingers grip the wood.

“A dig for a dig, no big deal.” His voice has a Spanish lilt to it, similar to my own.

“Good. Now, you want to tell me why you’re in this house?”

I don’t expect a liar to be truthful, but with everything I’ve learned tonight, I’m not taking any chances that this vato is from that fucked up Society.

“Not particularly, but seeing as you have a gun, and I have people waiting for me, I’ll go ahead and tell you.”

He leans back, his legs spreading wide in a *no-fucks-given* kind of way with his head tilted to the side like he’s sizing me up behind the mask.

I’m a pretty big guy for my age, a wrestler all through high school and a football player through the last three years. Working out is my way of coping with the shit life I have, making me a gym rat through and through, so I believe I could take this guy in a fight. He’s my height, slightly bulkier build - *unless his black letterman jacket makes him look bigger than he is* - and if his muscular thighs are anything to go on, the guy works out just as much as I do.

Still, I’m the one with a gun and every right to shoot an intruder.

“I’ll tell you what I can—”

“No, you’ll tell me what I want to know,” I interrupt him, “or I’ll shoot you in the chest and be done with it.”

His laugh is muffled, “You shoot me, and my guys will come in and kill everyone in the house.”

I don’t know if he’s bluffing but I’m not willing to risk it, but he doesn’t need to know that. Grinning, I pull the slide

back on my gun and point at his chest, looking through the guide for extra measure.

“Well, you’ve got five seconds to decide if I believe you or if I’m crazy enough to take my chances. One, two, three, four \_\_\_”

“Do you know who I am? And I don’t mean that as some *do-you-know-who-my-father-is* type of douche response,” he leans forward in earnest, “I mean, do you know who I am?”

I want nothing more than to beat answers out of this strange, vague asshole, but I need to keep Val and her mother safe.

“Your silence is answer enough.” He reaches under his chin and slides his mask off revealing stone gray eyes framed in black lashes and - fuck me - black eyeliner smeared in a that fashionable way. He has a scar that cuts down the side of his mouth, the raised scar tissue breaking through his naturally red full lips.

It doesn’t detract from his stunning looks.

He has a shaved head with a snake tattooed on the side, the tongue curling at his temple. When he gives me a slanted smirk, I know his stupid face distracts me.

“I can honestly say, I don’t have a clue who you are.” *I’d never forget him if I had ever seen him before.*

“Well, then you, Noah Cabañas, are blissfully ignorant. I don’t know if that’ll help you survive or be your downfall.”

“How the fuck do you know my name?”

His smile widens and I decide right then and there I hate him, purely based on his ridiculously good looks.

“Because you’re the guy in love with my baby sister,” he bobs his head from side to side, “well, stepsister is more like it since we share no blood.”

My brows hit my hairline, “Rey Calavera?”

His eyes darken when he hears me whisper his name, something raw and feral passing through his features, “I like

the way my name sounds coming from you.”

My eyes narrow at that. I thought I was certifiable, but this guy is completely fucked in the head. He looks back down at Val’s picture, “I wonder how she’d say it.”

“Why are you here? In Val’s house?” He shrugs, soundlessly placing Val’s picture on the floor beside his chair.

“I’m a curious guy. I’ve always been more curious than most and when I found out Roberto had a daughter and he wasn’t my father, well, I just wanted to see what the big deal was. I can see why you’re so,” he grips his cock through his jeans as he lets his eyes rake over me, “hard for her.”

He looks like he knows something I don’t know, but I don’t ponder it because his words strike me in a fucked-up way. Part of me wants to shoot this fuck in the face, but the other part of me wants to hear Rey say filthier things.

I chuckle, “You here to rob, kill or fuck?”

He shrugs, “The night is still young, *guapo*.”

“You’re a cocky motherfucker. You couldn’t fucking handle me.”

“Let’s find out.” he suggests but I ignore him.

“Let’s not. How do I get Val out of this situation with your bitch ass stepdaddy?”

Rey stands from the chair, tucking his mask into his back pocket before holding his hands up in mock surrender when I straighten my arm out.

“*Calmante*, I’m not gonna do shit.” He sighs like I’m being unreasonable, “Unfortunately, I don’t see a way out for her. Roberto isn’t just a Calavera member, he *is* Calavera. He will burn you or anyone you care for in a barrel just bring her out of wherever it is you hide her. She is going to have to go through with whatever he has planned.”

“What are they? His plans.” I ask.

“I don’t know but if you want her to survive it, don’t try to take her away. You’ll only get yourself killed. Coventry is full

of cutthroat leaders and the citizens are no different. It's a dog-eat-dog world there and they will all try to burn your precious Valeria until she's nothing but a pile of teeth and ash."

"And you're just like them, right?" I growl, stepping closer in my haze of rage, the visual he put in my head has my vision turning red.

Rey stares at me, his face becoming a mask of cruelty as a wolfish grin pulls at the corners of his lips.

"No. I'm nothing like them." He moves fast, swinging a book that hits my hand before he tackles me to the floor. The gun goes flying across the room and out of reach. I topple with him over me, his forearm to my throat as his lips hover mere centimeters from my own.

"I'm worse, *papito*."

I can't help it, I laugh, "Me too."

I press my lips to his in a quick kiss that has him freezing. It's just what I hoped for as I pull the hunting knife from my boot and hold it to his ribs, pressing hard enough to say what words can't. Rey lifts up slowly, but I grip his shirt, keeping him in place and smiles before suddenly grinding down on my cock, making me bite back a gasp and groan.

"I can't stop Valeria from being taken to Coventry, but who said you can't go too." He dips his head down and bites my lower lip, the sting making me put enough pressure on the blade to know he's bleeding now.

He groans, "I think I'm going to enjoy playing with both of you."

Then he's off of me, and out of the door before I can even stand.

What the fuck just happened?

## TWELVE

---

### ‘CENTIPEDE’ HAARPER

I WAKE IN THE MORNING STILL FEELING TIRED AS HELL, AS though I spent the last eight hours working out rather than sleeping. I run a hand through my hair only to have my fingers get caught in my twist buns. It’s a wonder I got any sleep with these damn things against my skull...it would explain the massive headache I have. I unravel my hair as I turn to Noah and find him completely dead to the world, the handle of the gun I know he carries peeks out from beneath his pillow. I guess last night and all we learned had him anxious enough to keep the gun within reach as though he feared someone would sneak in and nab me.

I lean down and brush his hair from his forehead, pressing a kiss to his cheek.

“Silly Noah, the danger can’t touch us here.”

He moves and yawns, making me jump back because hell no to morning breath. When he stretches, his shirt pulls up exposing his delicious lower abs and the mouthwatering V with a line of black hair that travels below his jeans. Why does he have to be so close yet so damn out of reach?

“Danger can touch you anywhere which is why I’m going to pull all my money together and follow you to Coventry.”

His deep voice is made deeper with sleep, but it's his words that make me all warm and stupid inside.

I turn my back to him, so he doesn't see how his words—*innocent in their meaning*—affect me in all the wrong ways. I swing my legs over the side of the bed and pull on a pair of pajama shorts before standing.

I've never been able to sleep in anything but a tank top and panties, and it's nothing new to Noah who has slept in my bed more times than I can count over the years. Still, after our bodies began to change, it's been a wreckage on my hormones.

I remember having *the talk* with my mom after she began to notice my lingering stares and heated cheeks every time Noah did something that made my insides harmonize like an audience starved opera singer. After that very awkward talk, one that covered everything I had already learned from porn and the girls at school, I did my best to hide my reactions to my best friend.

It seemed to satisfy my mom and kept her from “just popping in” my room at random moments anytime Noah was over.

“What happened to running away?” I ask him as I run my fingers through my wavy hair.

He rubs his eyes, still laying on top of my comforter, “Running isn't your thing. I've never once seen you back down from a fight; it was selfish of me to expect you to do it now.”

I chew on my lower lip as I take in his words. It's always heart throbbing when I'm reminded of just how clearly, he sees me. Noah knows me better than I know myself sometimes.

“I want you to go with me just as badly, Noh, but I don't know if my dad will go for it.”

Noah stands from the bed and runs a rough hand through his messy hair, “I don't give a fuck what he wants, I'm not letting you go to that fucked up cultist town without me.”

“How has this become my life?” I can’t hide the heartache in my voice, the betrayal I feel toward my mom has broken something inside me that burns with intensity every time I think of her. Noah sees that, probably relates to it more than I realize, and it makes me feel even worse.

Noah’s parents literally hate him, they only keep him around for pretenses, a fucking charade that is cruel and unfair...my dad is a dick of epic proportions, but my mom lied to protect me—I think. Still, what a whiny, asshole I must look to Noah.

His big arms wrap around me suddenly, pulling me to his chest, “I know what your mom did was shitty, but I realized last night that she really does love you, Val. Valentina would literally kill for you if she knew you wouldn’t be hurt by the consequences. Shit, for all we know, she probably *has* killed for you.”

I shove him away, “That’s not even remotely funny.”

He shrugs, fucking *shrugs* like killing is nothing at all, “Taking another life for the sake of the one you can’t live without...that’s a kind of love everyone looks for but never finds. But that’s exactly why I want to go with you,” he moves closer again and cups my face, his penny eyes staring deep into my own as though they are trying to relay the secrets he keeps, “because I’d kill for you too.”

We stand in silence, the scent of weed and laundry detergent filling my lungs with each inhale. Of their own accord, my eyes drop down to his lips, remembering how badly I’ve wanted to kiss him since middle school, wishing for a chance to taste—*what the fuck am I doing?!*

I quickly step back, my face flaming as embarrassment floods my veins. Kissing Noah would be such a foul move, forcing a kiss on someone who loves me like a sister and has no interest in women...I’d be a friendship ruining asshole.

“I-uh, yeah, maybe you’re right. I’ll call my dad today and make sure he understands that I won’t take no for an answer.”



Noah moves to sit on the edge of the bed, totally oblivious to my internal shame.

I snag some clothes and force my feet to carry me out of the room, but when I get to the threshold, I turn back, “I hope you know that I’d do the same for you, Noh. I’m all about justice, about doing what’s right through the system,” I know I’m rambling, but I always ramble when I’m embarrassed, “but I’d throw all my morals away for you.”

He gives me a crooked smile that makes my heart gallop in my chest.

“Don’t worry about it now; we’ll figure it out.”

I give him a curt nod like a fucking weirdo before turning and rushing to the restroom. It’s not even ten in the morning and I’m already stumbling over myself.

---

My mother stayed in bed today, refusing to do more than let me know my father would be calling me to make arrangements. I have mixed feelings for my mom right now. Regardless of everything I learned last night, I know that Valentina is the best mom she could be. She sacrificed for me, continued to fight through the harsh reality she found herself in after my dad left, she made a home for us, strived for us... for me.

But I just can’t seem to truly feel sorry for her. I want to. I want to show my care and love, to be by her side while she cries in her bed, but I can’t.

In all honesty, it should be me in that position.

But I’m taking a page from her book and pushing forward, even though forward means falling into the foggy world my father lives in.

I stare at my phone as it vibrates against the tabletop, my dad’s incoming call daring me to answer. I take a deep calming breath before looking at the door frame where Noah stands

silently, his eyes laser focused on me. He gives me a reassuring nod that encourages me to quickly answer the call.

“Hello, Roberto.”

There’s an awkward silence on his end, as though he fully expected me to be exuberant at his call. What a damn fool. I haven’t spoken to my father since he left, not even the day he left. If I remember correctly, the last thing my father said to me before he blessed me with his absence was, *‘Weakness is cancerous—you and your mother are terminal.’*

If he thinks I’m going to jump for joy at his sudden reappearance in my life, he’ll find himself sorely disappointed.

“Hello, princess.” My lip curls at the endearment. I remember him calling me that, but it was never said with love. It was like a reminder that I was his daughter and that I should strive to be better than perfect, I should strive to be *Calavera*.

After finding out that my father is basically a king, a master manipulator who rules over a secret society, his endearment makes sense.

“Mother caught me up to speed. But I have a few conditions I will not budge on.”

He laughs amusedly, making my blood boil.

“I’m sorry, but I see nothing funny here, so cut the giggling.” I snarl, making him go silent, “You need me, not the other way around. As far as I’m concerned, you and mom really fucked me over. You more so. If you want me to cooperate, I suggest you pull your head out of your ass or—”

“Or what, little girl?” he interrupts me with a snarl, and I can picture the vein pulsing in his forehead. His tone sends a familiar flash of fear through me which only pisses me off.

I’m not that little girl anymore. I’m not a princess and I’m as fuck not his pawn.

I can hear the cruel smile in my voice as I pick up the phone and bring it closer to my mouth, but there’s no amount of humor inside me, “Or daddy’s little princess will finish what mom started.”

I can hear his heavy breathing, his barely contained rage at my threat, but he knows full fucking well I'll do it. Play a stupid game with me, you'll win a cruel prize.

Noah's eyes glitter with something I can only describe as pride, his bottom lip stuck between his teeth as he watches me threaten my father. Maybe it makes me really fucked up, but I like to imagine my threat turned him on, but I can't focus on that or I'm liable to make a fool of myself once again.

"I see you've changed, *mija*, but don't think that my need for you extends to your mother. She's *expendable*."

That word alone sends a strike of fear through me, but the way he enunciates it makes me feel trapped. He may need me, but I also have no control. With my mother's wellbeing under threat, I'm stuck under the thumb of a coward willing to hurt the woman he once loved to keep their child in check.

I look up at Noah, seeing anger written in the lines of his face.

"Estas a pañando chivo." *You're out of line*. I tell him, hating that I'm even shocked he'd threaten my mom. I mean, it's not like she hadn't already told me she owed him a debt for saving her life.

Hearing him firsthand though...it's a furious mix of both rage and terror.

"Maybe so, *mija*, but I'm not all bad. Don't you remember all the good times we had?"

"I'm not interested in taking a trip down memory lane with you. I'll stay in line, play the part of whatever this fucked up game is; I'm just asking for one thing."

I hate how it sounds like I'm asking for permission, but this is me trying to keep me and Noah together. It's selfish, I shouldn't even think of bringing my best friend into my family drama, but I don't think I can survive this without him.

So even though I wouldn't beg Roberto for a crumb if I were starving, I swallow my pride and the bile.

"Please?"

The line is silent, but I can still hear the smug smile in my father's breathing. I've never wanted to strangle someone as badly as I do right fucking now. I pace the room, ignoring Noah's eyes as my face burns with embarrassment and anger. My jaw begins to ache as I clench it shut, biting down hard so I don't say something that could fuck this up.

Finally, after basking in my begging, he sighs, "I will hear your request."

*But I won't give it to you.* He doesn't say that, but I can hear it, nonetheless.

Just as I open my mouth to beg for my best friend to come with me, Noah stops my pacing, his hand slicing across his throat in the universal sign of *stop*.

I can feel my brows folding in confusion, but Noah just shakes his head, making my fumble around for a made-up request.

"I-uh, mom said I'd have to leave for Coventry in a couple of days, but I was hoping it can be extended for a week. I have a life here; with friends I'd like to say goodbye to."

It's a legit request—Rico and Leroy popping in my head. I would have hated leaving without being able to explain things to them.

"One week." Says after a minute, "But don't take my graciousness for granted, *mija*."

He hangs up before I can say anything.

"Fucking asshole." I whisper as Noah pulls a joint out from behind his ear and lights it up before passing it to me.

I watch him as I take a drag, the pungent smoke clouding in the kitchen, swirling and dancing when the air conditioner kicks on. He looks lost in thought, his brows mashed together as he stares down at the floor.

"Why didn't you want me to ask?" I pass him the joint.

Noah looks at me, his gaze holding mine, "Because he's already using your mom to keep you in line. Your dad is on a power high, if he sees even an ounce of weakness, he'll use it

against you and our friendship,” he shakes his head disappointedly, “it’s our biggest weakness.”

“How’s that?” I ask, “Me and you against him? He’d never stand a chance.”

Noah’s eyes snap up to mine, “I have no doubt he’ll find himself biting off more than he can chew with us, but he will no doubt see that we’d do anything to protect the other and he will use that against us.”

“He plays chess with people’s lives.” I sigh knowing he’s right. I’m thankful Noah stopped me, but now what?

“Does this mean you’re not going with me?” I try to keep the sadness from my voice, but there’s no hiding the wobble in my words.

“Fuck no!” He tosses the half smoked joint in the sink before enveloping me in his arms, “We’re lifers, chica. I’m going with you, but we’re not telling Roberto that.”

My mom comes around the corner and stops at the table. Her face puffy and her nose red, but the determination in her eyes is something I didn’t think I’d see again.

She drops an overstuffed yellow envelope on the table with a heavy thud, “He’ll figure out you’re there, and he will no doubt try to get rid of you, but with this, you’ll at least have a head start.”

Noah releases me and picks up the envelope as my mother walks over to me, she reaches up and cups my cheek, her other hand pushing my hair behind my ear like she always does.

“I messed up, my love, and I have no excuse for it,” her tears slide down her face, mirroring my own, “But I *will* make it up to you. I don’t know what your father has planned, but as I told Noah last night, there are too many ways Roberto can hurt you without ever touching a hair on your head. Do everything he asks of you, but don’t lose yourself in the process.”

She turns to Noah and my brows shoot up to my hairline when I see the three stacks of dollar bills all held together with paper bands that mark each one as ten thousand total. “That is

thirty thousand dollars, it's the best I could save up all these years knowing this day would come. At first, I began saving so Val could run when the time came. Obviously, it wasn't enough for her to survive long on—”

“Wait,” I interrupt her, “you mean you planned on me running and leaving you behind?”

She wipes the tears on my cheeks, “Yes. I knew it would have been a hard sell, but I never wanted you to face this. I would have taken you to a new state and left you there if I had to, but then you met Noah and your other friends, and I knew you'd never leave them. But what do we do when shit gets tough?”

She cocks one of her perfect brows, waiting for me to answer.

“We adapt.”

“Exactly. Coventry is filled with cutthroats but there's a few good people there. Make no mistake though, even the good ones have claws so be mindful of who you trust. Never give anyone leverage over you, keep your secrets close but find theirs. Use anything you can to your advantage. Val's expenses are being taken care of, so that money is yours, Noah. Use it in any way that will help you, bribes, buying secrets, even paying for information. Anything to keep Roberto from having a way to hurt you.”

A look crosses Noah's face, his gaze on the makeshift library me and my mom built when I was in middle school and took a heavy interest in criminology.

When he looks back at us, I can see he's already thinking of a few ways to undermine my father, “Tell me everything you know about Val's stepbrother.”

## THIRTEEN

---

### ‘BROKEN’ LUND

THE WEEK I HAD TO SAY MY GOODBYES WENT BY TOO FAST. I spent the time hanging with the guys. I hadn't planned to tell them in detail about everything, shit they didn't even know I had a dad. I mean, technically, they knew I had a dad, but I never went into detail about my life with him. Only Noah knew my story.

He knew all my secrets, all my lies, all my flaws...he knew me.

When we explained to Rico and Leroy what was happening, they freaked, demanding us to stay, to run, anything but leave. I wish things could be different, but it can't, and wishes are for children with their heads in the clouds.

Both Rico and Leroy wanted to join Noah and me in Coventry, promising to lay low and provide back-up if it's necessary. I found it sweet, and it made me realize that my friends were more than that, they're family. But Noah and I turned them down, asking them to watch over my mom while I was gone.

Thankfully, they agreed on the condition that I keep them updated and call regularly. That's a promise I can easily keep. To be honest, I never knew they cared that much. I mean,

yeah, they're almost as close to me as Noah is, but I never realized how much I meant to them.

I drop down on my suitcase, staring at my bedroom with sadness. My mom and I made up, I'm still pissed about things, but like wishes, being angry over something I can't change is wasted energy. Instead, I focused on learning all I could from my mother. I looked my stepbrother up on social media only to find out the guy has no footprint online. I wonder who he is and what he's like. Does he know about me or was he kept in the dark as well? My dad used to leave every summer, going on 'work trips' but once my mom told one truth, the floodgates of honesty opened wide. It almost seemed like a relief to her.

My father's summer trips were actually him going back to Coventry to raise his protégé, Rey Calavera. I also learned that my father is the leader of the Calavera Society, the mastermind behind every evil deed committed since my birth.

Mom doesn't know in detail how one ranks higher within the society, but she said the rumors were that each novice started at the lowest level and was given tasks that could range anywhere from grunt work to premeditated murder—it all depends on which of the council members you're designated to.

Details of anyone's deeds are never known to anyone outside of the Council. They guard every secret and sin committed but not because they care for you. No, they keep your confidence because it's convenient for them. It's a mix of mafia rule and fraternities on steroids.

My phone vibrates in my back pocket, pulling my head out of the storm clouds.

"Hey, Noh." I say pitifully.

I stand from my suitcase and move to the closet where my favorite flannel hangs. I planned to wear it upon my arrival to Coventry because mom says the people there are presumptuous and snobby as fuck, so I want them to meet the new hood bitch on the block.



“Did you talk to your dad at all again? Did you tell him you wanted me to go?” Noah’s voice sounds like a mixture of anger and confusion.

I stop with one arm in the sleeve of my flannel, “What? No! Of course not. Why?”

“Then how did I just get an acceptance letter from Coventry University?”

My words stay stuck on my tongue, my mind running in a hundred different directions as I try to understand the sudden change in our lives, *yet a-fucking-gain*.

“I’m on my way over.” I tell him, shoving my other arm into the shirt and heading for the door.

“No, don’t. My bitch ass mom saw the acceptance and she’s flipping out. I’ll come over later on tonight.”

“I’ll cut that puta if she lays a hand on you.”

Noah chuckles humorlessly, “I’m a big boy now, I’ll lay her out first.”

A thought occurs to me then, “Wait, didn’t she want you to go to some religio college?”

I can hear his cunt of a mom bitching in the background, probably cussing his back out as he walks out of the house ignoring her.

“Yeah, why?”

I rattle off the website I found for the university and tell him to shove it down her throat so she can check it out for herself. She’ll home in on the catholic-like aspects of the school and immediately think it’s a place of Godly worship. She’s a stupid bitch who sees only what she wants to see.

“Alright, I’ll show it to her, but honestly, she can jump off a cliff for all I care. This is an opportunity to finally get away from her with all expenses paid—*if that’s to be believed*—so I’m not going to waste it. What is she going to do, chase me?”

We both chuckle at that, neither of us wanting to admit that we’re almost certain that’s what she’ll do. Noah reads the

entire acceptance letter to me, explaining that he was chosen out of hundreds of students for a full ride scholarship program. His expenses and dorm will be paid for which is fucking fantastic, but something doesn't smell right.

How was Noah chosen when he never applied for such an opportunity? Until very recently, we had no clue CU even existed.

Like us, my mom didn't feel right about it, but the notary stamp and dean's signature were legit. Mom suggested Noah call the number provided and he let us know it was all true. Somehow, Noah had been accepted into the music program because his education records prove he has great promise in that area. He will be able to pick other majors if he so chooses, which is hella fucking odd considering you're usually stuck with the major you were chosen for, especially when it's on someone else's dime.

Was this my father's doing? If so, why would he do that when he doesn't even know Noah, much less my strong bond with him?

With promises to meet up before leaving for the airport later in the evening, we hang up.

"See you on the dark side." I tell him before ending the call and collapsing on my bed.

---

I must've fallen asleep the moment my head hit the pillow because suddenly I'm jolting awake at the sound of my phone ringing. I roll to the edge of the bed and sit up, stretching my neck and groaning when the bones pop loudly. My phone has gone silent now, but it immediately begins ringing again.

"Hello?" I answer groggily before looking at the screen.

"Hello, little sister."

All traces of sleep disappear at the sound of the deep, gravelly voice. I stand and look around my dark room as though whoever this is, is standing in the shadows. I click on

my bedside lamp, doing my best to keep myself from freaking out as I peek my head into the hallway. I can see my mom sitting on the couch, her notebook in her hand and her pen flying across the pages, completely oblivious to the wannabe *Ghostface* on the phone with me.

“Who is this?” I ask, feeling a little like Sidney Prescott.

“I really hope you’re not serious with that question. I mean, I did just refer to you as *stepsister*.”

Three different emotions wash over me in mere seconds, like the wild waves of the ocean on the rocky shore.

Trepidation.

Confusion.

Irritation.

I embrace the last one, setting my teeth on edge and forcing my voice to come out even.

“Well, Rey Calavera,” I sneer at his stupid name stuck to *my* surname without a right to be there, “considering I’ve never known shit about you, nor spoken to you, I’d say my question was valid. I mean, you could have been a mentally unstable psycho who refers to all the girls he stalks as his *stepsister*. Hell, you might still be.”

“Ah, you’re as refreshing as I thought you’d be.” His tone suggests I’m anything but refreshing, “There is a car waiting for you outside of your house. You have thirty minutes to say your goodbyes.”

I quickly run to the window facing the front yard and see that the asshole isn’t lying.

“I look forward to getting to know you and Noah. It’ll be interesting to learn all the ways I can get under your skin.”

What the hell does that mean and how the fuck does he know Noah’s name?

Rey chuckles, “I can tell by your silence that you’re wondering how I know who your best friend is, but as they say, it’s better to kiss and *not* tell.”

With that he hangs up, leaving me wading through a giant mix of emotions. After everything with my parents, my first instinct is to feel yet another betrayal, but I shut that down fast. Noah would never betray me. Rey is just trying to fuck with me, get in my head with games just like my father.

There's not a doubt in my mind that Rey was raised learning my father's scheming ways, so I will not be trusting jack shit he has to say. I rush downstairs and find my mom in a stare off with Rey who leans casually against a beautiful black Rolls Royce parked against our curb.

"I saw the car pull up and I knew it was here for you." Mom's voice comes through gritted teeth as she watches Rey pull a cigarette from behind his ear and lights it with a grin. I move closer to my mother's side and really take him in, and fuck me, the guy is ridiculously handsome.

He's wearing a suit that fits him impeccably. Sharp creases and gleaming cufflinks that I'm sure cost more than every piece of jewelry I have put together. Along his knuckles I can make out black ink that looks like Old English lettering.

I wonder what it says.

His arms are hidden beneath clothes, but I can see there's not an inch of skin on his neck that isn't covered in swirls of black. His head is shaved fairly close to his scalp, but it works on him. Even from here I can see how symmetrical his face is and I can literally feel my knuckles itch with the need to break his nose just so he isn't so fucking perfect.

He's tall, as tall as Noah is, with broad shoulders that make me think of a hockey player. The slacks of his suit are snug against his muscular thighs and the white button up shirt under his jacket looks like it's stretched tightly across his chest.

The light on our front porch illuminates him enough that I can see he possesses clear, light-colored eyes and again, I'm struck with fierce irritation at the unfairness of my stepbrother's handsomeness. He's pretty but in a way that lures the prey into his traps. My lip curls. *Thankfully, I've never been prey.*

He blows smoke through his nose before tapping at his wrist, as though he's reminding me that I'm on a schedule.

I flip my finger at him before shutting the curtain.

"I need to call Noah. He should have been here by now."

My mom turns to me and wipes at her eyes, "He called me while you were asleep. He said the driver called to let him know he'd be picked up after you so he would be waiting."

She pulls me to the kitchen where she hugs me tightly, her nose in my hair and mine in hers. I may be pissed with her, but my mom will always be the only woman in my life I can call my best friend. She's done more for me than anyone ever has and while most people would say, that's what moms are supposed to do, I don't buy it.

When shit got rough, she could have easily given me up. She could have washed her hands of me and moved on without ever knowing a day of desperation, but she didn't. Being a mother is a choice and my mom chose it despite the odds stacked against her. She's not perfect, her choices have proven that, but she's perfect to me.

"I love you, mama. Always and forever."

She sobs once before breathing deeply and pulling herself together enough to pull back and cup my face.

"I love you. Now go show those bastards they picked the wrong girl to fuck with."

## FOURTEEN

---

### 'BLAME' MONTELL FISH

THE ROLLS ROYCE CULLINAN IS A LUXURY UNLIKE ANYTHING I've ever seen. Sleek and midnight black on the outside, complete with beautiful chrome wheels that you'd see in magazines but never in real life, and peanut butter leather interior.

Rey is seated beside me with an empty seat facing us like we're in a limo. There is a driver who sits up front, but the divider is up so I can't see who it is. Hell, for all I know, this beautiful car is driving itself. I want to roll down the window beside me so I'm not inhaling Rey's intoxicating cologne. He smells of leather more expensive than the car with a slight hint of marijuana. The good kind too.

I force my eyes to examine anything but him and his Tom Ford suit, so I continue to gaze out the window, but my attention continuously strays back to the interior of the car. Fuck, I want this car.

Rey must notice my lust over the car, his deep voice penetrating the silence. I wish it didn't go straight to my damn nipples—*thank fuck for cupped bras*.

“Beauty, isn't it? The Black Badge edition is, in my opinion, the best Rolls Royce on the market.”

I'm loath to agree with anything he says, but I have to at least give credit to the designer, so I give him a stilted nod as I run my fingers across the perfectly smooth leather.

I look up at the ceiling, my brows furrowing at the tiny dots that look like glass spread across the black material.

"What are those?" I ask mostly to myself, but Rey answers anyway.

"They're stars." At my eye roll he chuckles and does something that has me gasping.

He's right, the ceiling is covered in stars. The tiny LED bulbs meticulously placed above us, light up like the dusting of the night sky. It's beautiful and whoever thought of doing that inside a vehicle better have the best damn bonus possible. I want this car. There's no going around that. Even if I have to sell my soul and kidney to the devil, I'm going to own one of these.

"Is this a rental?"

Rey doesn't answer me, he just scoffs and shakes his head.

Instantly, the ire that melted away with the beauty around me, suddenly returns in full.

"What? Was that too difficult of a question for you?"

"Roberto owns this car and a warehouse that is twice the size of your home is filled with others he owns titles to."

My mouth drops open at this information, my eyes locked on Rey's which are currently rolling, but I honestly don't care. My father owns this car and along with others...these luxury, overindulgent cars...

"I'd say your innocence is refreshing, but it's not. It's a reminder that I will have to hold your ignorant hand every day, like teaching a baby to walk. You're exasperating without even trying to be. I can see why you've been kept in the dark all your sad little life."

My hands ball up into fists, my fingers begging to be wrapped around his throat, but I force them to relax as I lean back against the door. I let my eyes rake over my stepbrother,

cataloging everything about him, like how my proximity makes him stiff and uncomfortable. He keeps his eyes on the window and away from me, but I can't help but feel as though he's watching me in the faint reflection.

Doing my best to sound like a sex kitten, I give a breathy sigh, "But big brother, just think about how much fun we could have together as you teach me all the ways a lady should behave."

As we pull up to Noah's house, I rest my chin on Rey's stiff shoulder, my lips barely brushing against his ear as I whisper, "Now who's innocently ignorant."

I pull back and let my hand briskly pass over his hardened cock, flirtatiously giggling when he hisses.

I cock a brow at him, schooling my features back to my usual resting bitch face, "I don't know what kind of girls you're used to being around, but don't get it mixed up, Diablo. Between you and me, I'm the *real* Calavera, not the replacement."

The pure fucking hate in his cold eyes does crazy things to my libido, sending my heart into high gear, sputtering like an old car that hasn't gone above five miles an hour in years...I'd love to have his hateful dick ponding inside me.

*Hate fuck? That's child's play, I want a Diablo fuck.*

But that sexy, hateful look also tells me that I hit a wound. My words have twisted him up inside that gorgeous - *yet overly stiff* - body of his.

He leans forward suddenly, pressing into my space and coming dangerously close to touching his lips to mine, but I refuse to back up and cower, so I sit still and breathe in his exhale without breaking eye contact.

"You've woken a beast, *muñeca*." His eyes slide down to my lips before rolling back up, his head tilting to the side like a snake, "Watch how well I *fuck*, your entire world up."

He says the crude word in a suggestive way, leaving me both threatened and turned on.



“Bring it, *chamaco*.” I tell him, doing my best not to show how hard my heart is pounding.

His eyes narrow as I reach behind me and open my door. I slide out of the car and breathe in air not tainted with Rey’s mind-numbing scent of power and dominance. Noah lets out a low whistle in appreciation for the Rolls Royce. As I run toward him, I make a mental note to add the Rolls to my list of demands during my forced stay in Coventry. I jump up as I reach my best friend, and latch onto him like a spider monkey. He drops his bags and wraps his arms around me without resistance.

“You okay?” He whispers as the driver takes his bags quietly.

“Yeah, I’m just so glad you’re coming with me.” I spot his mother coming out onto the porch, her hateful eyes on me like I’m the reason for all of her problems. God, I hope she has a slip and fall in the shower one day—one she won’t recover from.

I turn from her and guide Noah to the car just as Rey steps out.

He eyes the evil woman behind us, clear disdain on his face as he looks her up and down.

“Hello, Mrs. Cabañas. Thank you for agreeing to Noah enrolling into the men’s portion of Coventry University,” he looks to Noah, giving my best friend a look that can only be described as salacious before returning his gaze to the *puta*, “I’m sure he’ll find *plenty* to do there.”

Noah chokes on air as Rey gives an evil smirk to the cunt who stands there looking like a church nun grasping at her imaginary rosary beads.

“How dare you!” She screeches.

Noah steps in front of already speaking Rey and faces off with his witch of a mother, “Save your theatrics, mother. My life is no longer your business and if you try to interfere, I’ll make sure to remind you in the same way you’ve reminded me what an abomination I am.”

My brows shoot up my forehead and get lost somewhere past my hairline as I look between Noah and his mother. I've *never* heard him speak to her that way before. I've seen him fight the urge to lay hands on her, swallow down the curses that sit on his lips, and bite his tongue - *figuratively and literally* - but I've not once borne witness to something quite like this.

Rey clears his throat, drawing the attention of everyone, including the comical looking Mrs. Cabañas.

"We have a plane to catch, so if you'll excuse us." Rey doesn't finish his sentence; he just gestures to the open car door while stepping to the side. As Noah and I pass him, I notice Rey's cold gray eyes still glued to Noah's mother.

In a deep voice that sounds more animal than human, Rey demands of the witch, "Habr  problemas?" *Do you have a problem with this?*

I don't hear her reply but judging by how Rey turns on his heel, adjusting his suit jacket while walking around the car like he's the king of the east coast, I'd say she answered him wisely.

Fucking hell, as loath as I am to admit it, even to myself, Rey is a living wet dream. He's the perfect mix of high class and hood rat, and I fucking hate him for it.

"We're finally getting the fuck out of here." Noah says as he closes the car door behind him.

He sounds excited, optimistically joyful, but all I manage to give him in response is a forced smile.

He may be getting out of this hellhole, but I can't shake the feeling that we're walking into an even worse hole in hell.

Only this new one is covered in a pretty facade.

## FIFTEEN

---

### 'INSANE IN THE MEMBRANE' CYPRESS HILL

IF I THOUGHT THE ROLLS ROYCE WAS NICE, THIS PRIVATE JET just blew all those drool worthy thoughts out of my head. I wasn't sure what to expect when Rey said a plane was waiting for us, but it wasn't this. In my mind, I mildly pictured a giant passenger plane, not really thinking deeper into it, but this sleek white beast in front of me is nothing like I pictured.

Aside from the *CS* painted in gold near the tail, there's no name painted on it like you see with commercial airlines...just one unobstructed view of money and power.

All my life, my mom and me lived as frugal people, spending money like we're living paycheck-to-paycheck, yet here's this Bombardier Jet that cost over five hundred thousand dollars standing loud and proud like the winning rooster after a cock fight, the title under my father's name. Saying I've been lied to is not only an understatement, but it's also incredibly insulting.

I've dropped the extra things in life because I didn't want to financially strain my mom. And I'm not talking about trivial shit like the best clothes or the newest iPhone...no, I'm talking about things that would have actually helped me in life, helped me build a better life for any children I might bear.

The lies just keep piling up. The only good thing that I can see coming from my father's utter betrayal is my skin thickening and my trust in others so low that I'll hopefully never be hurt like this again.

Until then, I'm going to make sure my father's credit and bank account feels my anger.

"So, my dad owns a fucking jet." I state to Noah who looks just as dumbfounded as I do.

"Actually," Rey says as he waits for the driver to open our door, "*dad* owns more than one jet and a few airfields, including this one."

I begin to rebuke him for laying claim to my dad, but the door opens, and the brooding driver stands there with his hand out to me.

I don't know him or where he stands in the new world I'm entering, so I just give Rey a slick smile with my middle finger up before ignoring the driver's hand and sliding out of the backseat on my own. If the driver finds me insulting, he doesn't show it. He dips his head and moves around the car to retrieve our bags, leaving me to move aside as Rey and Noah exit the SUV, both staring daggers at one another.

"Val may not be able to say anything without causing shit for herself, but I don't have the same reservations, *vato*."

Rey tilts his head to the side, a smirk playing on his lips, "By all means, *Papito*, I'd love nothing more than to have you *unreserved*."

He puckers his lips, blowing a sarcastic kiss to Noah before turning to me, with a wink and a lingering stare at my open mouth.

We watch him walk away, the wind on the tarmac pressing his suit jacket against his ribs as he pulls down the sunglasses he left resting on his forehead.

"I really hate that guy." I say.

Noah chuckles, throwing his arm around my shoulders and pulling me in the direction of the stairs leading up to the jet

door, “I think we’re going to have some fun in Coventry.”

My feet practically drag across the asphalt, every fiber is begging me to turn and run, but I force my feet to continue forward.

“I don’t know about *fun*. I feel like I’m walking down death row.”

At the bottom of the steps, Noah spins me to face him, a hardness to his eyes holding me captive, “Never let them see you bleed. Fake it until you completely forget you started out small. Rey and his mind games are only the icing on the shit cake waiting for you, but Val, you’re not alone. If you’re walking into fire, then so am I and I don’t know about you, but I intend on causing some trouble before reaching my end.”

He cocks a brow, waiting for my reply and I can’t help but standing a little taller, “Fuck that, let’s start a rebellion.”

Noah laughs and starts up the stairs, “Let’s just start with trouble, okay *Katniss*?”

I can’t help but crack a smile as I follow him, remembering our absolute tween obsession with the dystopian saga.

Once I’m on the jet however, my laughter snuffs out as luxury slaps me in the face yet again. The scent of top-grade leather has me worried my jeans and belt chains will ruin the material, but then I remember that my rich father owns it, so I make my way down the narrow aisle, ignoring Rey who looks like he’s in his natural habitat, and drop down on a couch without a single care. There’s a stewardess who busies herself with preparations, glasses clinking, and the sound of a bottle uncorking comes from the other side of the partition where she moves about.

As Rey pulls off his suit jacket and settles in his seat with his computer open on his lap, Noah unloads his giant body on the seat opposite mine. He gives me a wink before putting his right foot on the arm rest where Rey is sitting. His big boot knocks into Rey’s elbow which causes his hand to surge forward, almost sending the laptop to the floor, but Rey manages to catch it at the last second.

Such a pity.

He turns and gives Noah a menacing glare, similar to the one he gave me in the car earlier, but my best friend is totally unfazed, air kissing him with a smirk that reflects my own as I watch my new favorite interaction.

Yeah, maybe Noah is right, we'll be the worst kids at Coventry, causing a bunch of trouble for everyone. And hey, if everyone has a giant stick up their asses like Rey does, maybe we'll be able to loosen them up and show them how us hood fellas like to play.

The stewardess moves around the wall that was partially blocking her from view and presses a few buttons on the door we just entered. I never saw our driver enter the jet, so I guess he's staying behind. I watch her as the stairs outside begin to lift and fold into the side of the jet before she leans forward and pulls the door closed, fiddling with this and that as she secures the lock. Just as I'm about to look away, she reaches down and adjusts the hem of her skirt, and that's when I notice her uniform.

She's wearing a stark white button up blouse that has a frilly scarf thing around her neck, there's thin black pinstripes in a vertical pattern with the Calavera name sewn into the breast pocket. Her black high waisted pencil skirt has a split from the hem to an extraordinarily high point on her left thigh that makes me wonder if the uniform came that way or if she added it herself. On her feet she wears red-soled high heels that look way too precarious to wear comfortably on a jet, but to each their own, I guess.

But none of that is the reason my eyebrows are wedged into my hairline.

Not only does this woman have the body of a fucking goddess, the kind that slaps the self-esteem of woman within a five-mile radius, but her uniform—*if it can even be called that*—leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination. It looks like one of two things, a sexy Halloween costume or a porn star's outfit.

I'm not judging her in the least, however. I'm all for women having the right to wear whatever they want, whenever they want. You wanna wear a bikini day in and day out, go full nude or dress like a pilgrim...that is one hundred percent your prerogative and the biased opinions of others can suck a dirty one. But if my father owns this jet, does that not mean that everyone working on it is also his? If the answer is yes, and I'm inclined to believe so, then why does he have this beautiful temptress dressed in a way that suggests she does more than steward a flight?

I probably sound like a judgy little cunt right now, but I can't help but to think that my dad is not just a bastard, but a bastard who uses women for his pleasures. Why that's a surprise to me, I have no clue. After all, he did marry Rey's mother for her powerful name. It sickens me that my father has absolutely no morals when it comes to getting what he wants. He'll fuck anyone, ruin anyone and hurt *anyone* if it gets him what he wants.

In all the time that my parents have been separated, not once did my mother date other men. She never hung out with men, hell, she never even had friendly phone chats with anyone who wasn't one of her many girlfriends. She lived as though her husband didn't leave her with their daughter but was on an extended work trip. Yet here he is with his own private fleet of jets and spank bank worthy cars and women who are possibly paid a little extra to keep a spring in his step.

If you want me to wish you dead, you're going in the right direction, pops.

I breathe deeply, trying to clear my head of all the negative thoughts, and click on my phone. I shove my earbuds in and go straight to my Chicano rap playlist, turning up the volume to max as I force my mind to follow along with the lyrics of *Third Wish* by SPM.

By the fifth song in my playlist, my head is cleared enough to loosen up my tense body. Until, that is, when Noah kicks my foot and jerks his chin at the stewardess who is leaning over Rey, her breasts pushed out and her lips moving. I pull my earbuds out and listen to her airy voice.

“Would you care for some champagne, Mr. Calavera?”

Rey looks up from his laptop, his eyes connecting with nothing but her eager to please gaze, “No thank you, Joyce.” He looks down and continues typing, the clicking of the keys is a clear dismissal.

Noah and me glance at one another, our lips folded inward at the rejection that leaves the woman with a red face.

“Are you sure I can’t do anything for you to make your flight as comfortable as possible?” She asks while fluttering her eyelashes.

My eyes practically roll into the back of my head at the breathy innuendo. I’m not hating on the woman for shamelessly offering herself, I mean, for all I know, the girl could have asthma and can’t help but speak like she’s out of breath...but for some reason, it irks me.

Maybe it’s because she’s already been told no, and the bitch isn’t taking that for an answer, but I suddenly find myself speaking before thinking.

“He said no, lady. Have some dignity.”

Her back straightens and her eyes find mine, the look on her face tells me she didn’t even see me on board.

I can tell she wants to say something back, but professional decorum demands otherwise. She gives me a strained smile, “Of course. My apologies.”

Rey looks over his shoulder, his eyes questioning my motives before he comes to some conclusion for my actions.

“No apology is necessary.” Rey says as he turns back to Joyce, “Just wait for me in my quarters, I’ll be there shortly.”

My stomach turns when I see the triumphant smile on the woman’s heated face. Ugh, the egomaniac probably thinks I’m jealous, so he’s going out of his way to rub what he thinks is salt into my make-believe wound.

Puh-lease, motherfucker. I’m not jealous.



And I'm fucking *not!* If I wanted to, I could find myself five more guys that are way better looking than Rey with personalities that outshine him by miles.

As Joyce passes me, however, I feel my lip curling in anger. *It's only because Rey thinks he's gotten one over me*, I tell myself.

I shake my head and ignore Rey's stupid existence as he passes me. No need to acknowledge him anymore than I already have. I can feel Noah's accusing gaze, but I just slouch in my seat and lean my head against the leather cushion of my seat, replacing my earbuds and pressing play once more. Noah's stare is practically burning a hole into the side of my head, but I don't want to look at him right now...I know if I do, I'll see questions I don't have answers to.

## SIXTEEN

---

### ‘HATEFUCK’ PUSSY RIOT, SLAYYYTER

I FEEL MY IRRITATION BUBBLING JUST UNDER MY SKIN AS I watch Val’s jealousy get the better of her. I know she’ll deny it, but she can’t hide shit from me, her best friend who led her to believe he’s on the other side of the sexual spectrum. Fuck. If I weren’t such a little bitch, I would have told her the truth and she’d be mine by now.

I need a drink, or a pair of lips wrapped around my cock and since there’s no chance of getting my dick wet, I stand and make my way over to the steward station, grabbing the bucket of ice that holds a bottle of some kind of fancy champagne. I’d give a kiss to whoever found me a bottle of tequila and a tray of coke, but this’ll have to do. I don’t think Roberto or even Rey would have such party favors here. I mean, they might, but who the fuck knows.

I grab a glass from the cabinet, pulling it from a clip that holds it and its mates in place so they don’t fall during turbulence or some shit. I pass Rey’s seat, eyeing his still open laptop before dropping back down into my seat. I ignore the words I have no right to spew at Val, and pour a glass of the bubbly shit for her before bringing the bottle to my lips and take a deep drink straight from it.

It sparks on my tongue and down my throat like soda, but the slight warmth lets me know I’m not drinking some bullshit

cider.

“I think you should try and drink like a proper gentleman.” Val jokes, but it irks me, nonetheless.

“What, would you prefer me to be more like your stick-up-the-ass stepbrother?”

Her eyes flare with anger and my dick twitches in my pants.

“Of course not, Noh. What’s your problem?”

Just then, a loud, feminine moan reaches us. Val tenses but quickly covers it up by picking up her glass and taking a drink. Still, I saw it and I can’t help the bitter grin that lifts my lips.

I’ve watched her countless times walk away with another guy, letting him touch and taste her in ways I never will, so I know covetousness when I see it. Every time Val has given herself away, I’ve found myself doing the same with some guy, imagining that he’s her, but there’s no way to fully cover up the hard edges of a man. I think of her soft clear skin, but the rough texture of a man’s stubble ruins the effect. Yes, I like guys, I love their bodies, the way their deep voices sound in the throes of a hard fuck, the guttural growl they release when they reach the heights, I take them to with each stroke, suck and pounding I give, but when I’m using them in place of my best friend, it’s never as fulfilling.

Knowing my grievances, ones that I technically have no right to have, I sit back and watch with joy as Val struggles to hide her bitterness.

“I wonder what he’s doing to her.” I say aloud, wanting to punch myself for the dig while simultaneously savor Val’s blushing neck, “I bet he’s got her bent over, maybe on her hands and knees, while he’s tweaking her nipples with his fingers.”

Fuck, I hate what I’m doing, but my dick is absolutely loving it.

Val eyes me with a mix of anger and lust, her pupils dilating as she tries to cover up how my words affect her.

“I know a fake moan when I hear one.” She says with a slightly husky voice.

I tip the bottle back once more, drinking more than I normally would to get the burn of the alcohol as I keep my eyes on her.

I lick my lips, smirking when her eyes follow my tongue, “Nah, baby girl, Rey looks like the kind of guy who can give it as well as he takes it.”

My words are meant to egg her on, but I find myself having to ignore the pulsing of my cock with each syllable I speak.

Another moan rents the air, followed by the sound of a slap, “Right now, he’s probably kneading her creamy ass cheeks, spreading them as he watches his slick cock slide in and out of her wet cunt while he puts pressure on his thumb over that tight ring of muscles.”

Val’s face heats so red, it’s almost innocent, but I know how dirty Val can get, not firsthand, but from her own mouth. She’s no virgin, not even close, Val is a kink artist, a natural deviant.

Fuck, what I wouldn’t give, wouldn’t do, for a savage night with her.

Proving my point, Val puts her glass down, her eyes lighting with a challenge.

As she slides her ass to the edge of the sofa, she slowly pulls her jacket off, revealing the strappy halter top she has on that pushes her breast together in a way that has me imagining a pretty pearl necklace made from my cum.

“He may be doing all that,” Her voice, fucking demons in hades, is like sex and depravity, “he may even be fucking that tight ass, but that doesn’t mean it’s pleasurable for her.”

She spreads her knees, her feet flat on the floor as she glides a hand down between her breasts and straight to her jean clad pussy. Her belt chains clink together as she traces the seam of her jeans.

I'm going to die, I think to myself, I'm going to die right here with a goddamn boner.

Val flipped the script on me, and I'm now a victim in this twisted game I started. I should have fucking known, no one fucks with Valeria Calavera and gets away with it.

"Oh, Noah." She says softly, her eyes rolling back, "Oh fuck, yes!" She shouts louder. Like I'm pounding that golden cunt of hers. Her hips roll against the air, and I fight to keep my face neutral. I bring the bottle to my lips, watching her as she tosses her head back, her hands landing on the seat behind her as she lifts her hips from the cushion.

She begins moaning faster, louder, more erotic and fuck me, it sounds like the real deal. I just about explode in my jeans until she reaches a believable crescendo and drops her ass back down onto the cushion. Her face completely clear of the pleasure she so perfectly displayed.

"Tell me again a woman can't fake a moan."

I stare at her, my mouth open and my cock painfully throbbing against the zipper of my jeans...he's probably trying to end his life after that amazing fucking tease, and I don't blame him one damn bit.

"You're an asshole." I tell her before standing from my seat, adjusting myself when she rolls her eyes and flips me the bird.

"You started it, so don't be so dramatic."

I tune her out and slide into the restroom just beside the closed door where Rey entered with the stewardess. I can hear his voice speaking in low tones, but I can't make out what he's saying. I drop my forehead against the wall and breathe deeply.

I really need a fucking distraction.

-VAL-

I have no clue what just got into me, all I know is that the combination of Rey fucking that bitch and Noah being an asshole, my nerves got the best of me. Fucking guys. They act so fucking superior sometimes and I can't help but want to give them a little taste of humility.

As Noah walks away, I snatch my glass of champagne from the table, the liquid sloshing around with my angry movement and spilling onto my hand. I hear a door click closed, probably him going into a restroom to get away from the awkwardness I just caused.

I sigh and look for a napkin to clean my hand but I don't see anything nearby so I opt for licking the line of liquid that would no doubt become sticky if not cleaned off.

Just as I push my fingers into my mouth, *Joyce* and Rey come out of the room, the former fixing her skirt and wiping under her eyes where her mascara has run down her cheeks. Her lips are swollen, and her eyes are slightly puffy, the rough rubbing she's giving her under eyes isn't doing shit to help her. Doesn't she know, if you're going to gobble on the cock, you need waterproof 'scara.

I'm just about to tell her this when the intercom comes to life and the voice of the pilot announces that we will be moving. *Joyce* rushes off to do her actual job, leaving me to look back at Rey who glares at me like I just interrupted his sexy time with his latest conquest. I continue to suck on my fingers, folding all of them into my palm minus my middle finger which is still between my lips. I bite the tip and grin at his anger, not giving two fucks about his death stare.

He bends at the waist, placing one hand on the back rest of my seat, "If you ever fuck someone on my plane again, I will personally throw his or her sorry ass out the door without a parachute then I make the rest of our unfortunate time together a living hell. Do you understand me, *muñeca?*"

I give him a wink as I pull my finger out of my mouth with an audible pop, holding it up as I look around me like I lost something.

With a shrug I look back at him, “Sorry, Diablo, I’m all out of fucks to give.”

He tries to lean in further, but my temper is already at dangerous levels, so I stand, our foreheads bumping hard but neither of us flinching. I keep my face inches from his, feeling his harsh breaths on me as I know he feels my own.

“You seem to be under the illusion that I’m just some little pussy that was dragged along on this fucked up family vacation, but let me be very, *very* clear, Rey. I may have been kept in the dark most of my life, but I’m not your little *flonké*. You fuck with me and mine, and you’ll find out exactly what kind of stepsister you have, you feel me?”

We have our stare down, ignoring the beeping of the seat belt sign. His eyes are always cold, but right now, mine are burning with a fire I wish this motherfucker would touch. I’m more than a burn, more than the bubbling of skin, I’m a motherfucking inferno and I’ll reduce this cocksucker to ash before trampling him under my shoes.

Noah comes out of the restroom, stopping as his eyes take in the scene of me and Rey standing toe-to-toe, our fists balled like we’re seconds away from trading blows.

“So, who’s dick is bigger?” He asks, making my anger drop down a level, but not enough to make me break eye contact first.

Noah leans in close to us, both of his cheeks almost touching ours as he whispers, “It may be spiritual, but my money is on Val’s. Don’t worry though, I’m sure you’re well-endowed mr-not-a-Calavera.”

My mouth splits into a full-on smile when Rey rolls his eyes and steps back.

“Fucking childcare.” He says as he moves toward his seat and starts up his laptop once more.

I look at Noah and we both bust into a fit of laughter before plopping down onto the seat together.

Maybe I’m being immature...no scratch that, I am one hundred percent being immature, but the fact is, Rey and this

whole situation I find myself in, has lowered me to levels I've never been before. I've struggled in life, who hasn't, but this isn't just some phase, a simple bump in the road, this is life altering. I'll be damned if anyone knows exactly how they're supposed to properly act under these circumstances.

"What do you think it'll be like there?" Noah asks after the jet is safely in the air.

My eyes are on the city lights outside of my window as I answer him.

"A shit show of epic proportions, I'm sure. But Noah," I turn to him, "if we're going to get through this intact, we need to be seen as a united front."

He looks at me quizzically, his brows furrowed and his penny eyes shining with confusion, "I thought we already were. That was just bullshitting, which isn't new for us."

He's right of course, we've had our heated arguments many times, but whether he'll admit it or not, that was one we've never had before. We both stepped out of line, pushing boundaries we don't have rights to push with one another, and he knows it.

"You know what I mean, Noh. I love you and I can't lose you, especially not now when you're the only person in this new world that I can trust. Another fight like that could cause a rift that neither of us can come back from."

He opens his mouth, his face showing regret, but I stop him.

"No. Don't apologize because I'm not going to either, we just need to promise we won't let each other go. Promise me, Noah."

He takes my hand in his, forcing a smile that doesn't even begin to touch his eyes, "Yeah, chica, I promise."

I kiss his cheek before laying my head on his shoulder, sleepiness pulling on my eyelids as the jet speeds through the night sky.



The last thing I see is Rey's reflection in his laptop screen, his hard eyes locked on mine until they're all I see in my dreams.

## SEVENTEEN

---

### ‘ALL ALONE’ FREDDIE DREDD

I’M USED TO BEING LOOKED AT AS ONLY WHAT I CAN OFFER, BE it status, money, power...anything *but* me. For a long time, I felt disheartened by it. Even in elementary school, if a kid hurt me during a rough game of football on the field, or accidentally did something totally innocent like trip and spill juice on my clothing, I’d be begged for forgiveness. Followed around until I assured them that no punishment would befall them or their families.

It’s sad to say, but as much as it bothered me to receive such attention, I would purposely go out of my way *not* to assure them. It wasn’t because I was craving the fear or salivating over the power my name held, quite the opposite actually.

I did it because that was the only time someone would even look my way, even speak to me and at that tender age, I was hungry for it.

Before I met my best friend, Mateo, most of my life was spent being avoided like the plague. They say it’s lonely at the top...how fucking right they are.

Untouchable, unlovable, un-fucking-friendable.

Of course, as I grew older and the raging hormones of teenagehood invaded my classmates, I was never found alone.

But their reasons for becoming my friends were as cruel now as they were then, only now...I don't give a fuck. I don't need to have a crowd around me in order to feel secure as I once did, but each and every bitch around me acting like they want to fucking know me are nothing but phony. It doesn't matter though, they're all my dogs now. My mules. They want what I have, but I want their servitude, and now I have it.

It's fucking poetic.

But Valeria is different. She's as cruel as the blood in her veins, as sweet as her smiles suggest and yet, she's as vile as her father. She's a walking contradiction. She piques my interest unlike anyone before her. The women in my world are prepped to be trophy wives, nothing more, nothing less. Picturing Valeria as one is ridiculously comical. There is no way in hell that little doll who holds a knife behind her back could ever be the obedient wife.

She'd be a husband killer, a black widow, leaving a trail of lifeless men behind her, men who foolishly thought they could bend her to their will.

It makes me hard just thinking of how well she'd play the part until she plunges that knife into his heart before the ink on the marriage license is even dried. It makes me want to tame her myself, break her in and soil her will. To pluck the knife from her hands and hold it to her slender throat as I fuck her into submission.

My sweetly vile stepsister, writhing beneath me like the hungry whore she is...but I'd make damn sure she'll only hunger for me, for my cock, for my bruising touch, and she'd beg for more.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and look over to where Valeria is sleeping in her seat, unaware that we've landed in Coventry. Noah, her trusted and very faithful golden retriever, makes eye contact with me. He could be a problem, but I have no doubt in my ability to flip him.

In a low tone so I don't wake Valeria, I jerk my chin to him, "You and I should talk alone again. There are things

you'll need to know if you're going to help Valeria get through Coventry.”

I don't wait for him to reply, I just turn and tuck my laptop under my arm before heading toward the exit. Joyce gives me a lustful look as I move past her and down the stairs of the jet, but I ignore her just as I did in the bedroom earlier.

I didn't fuck her—*this time*. You see, Joyce is the kind of girl that gets off on being watched. That's her thing. She gets pleasure from an actual fucking of course, but there's nothing like being watched as she fucks herself. That's fine with me. I have no use for her pussy, absolutely no attraction to her nor the annoyingly high-pitched porn moans she produces. It's mind numbing and is nothing but a complete turn off. It's like being so close to that free fall into sexual oblivion, but then your partner suddenly throws a change up and you're pushed back down that hill, working once again to find your blissful rhythm.

There's nothing more annoying than a shitty sexual partner, hence the reason being audience to Joyce is much more preferable for me.

I tuned her out as I stared at her, seeing nothing except a little petty victory over Valeria.

She tried to help me out with Joyce's desperation, but I'd much rather listen to exaggerated moans than to ever feel even the slightest pinch of a debt owed.

I don't need Valeria's protection; I've had plenty of the Calavera protection to last a lifetime. I'm my own man now and this last name bestowed upon me at birth is nothing but a tool to gain my own power. I'll be damned if I slip back down the mountain because of a rosy lipped beauty who I may or may not have been visualizing while Joyce screamed through her orgasm...until I heard Valeria's wicked moans.

They should have added to the visualization, but they didn't. Instead, a cloud of red almost tainted my vision, but I breathed through it as well as I could. It wasn't until I stepped through the door, finding the air clean of sex, that I knew nothing had happened.

My first thoughts were that she was once again trying to play a little game with me. That perhaps hearing Joyce's voice of ecstasy, she thought she'd make her own sounds and knock me off the high horse she thinks I'm on. But it was a total failure.

Still, my anger got the better of me and let words spill from my mouth that practically showed my inner thoughts.

I shake my head and descend the stairs.

At the bottom, Roberto stands there in one of his many pinstripe suits, his hands folded in front of him. I'm surprised to see him here, but I keep it from showing on my face. Just one of the many lessons Valeria will learn here. Never let them see your thoughts and never trust a smile. Though knowing her, it'll be one fuck of a lesson for her to learn.

"I thought you wouldn't be here to welcome home your daughter." Though my stepfather is only an inch shorter than my six-foot three height, I find it remarkably satisfying to tip my head back a little and look down my nose at him.

"Business settled sooner than expected." He stares up expectantly at the open door of the jet, ignoring me as he waits for Valeria to come through.

Is he kidding himself? Have his lies built up so high that even he believes his bullshit? He acts as though he fully expects the little girl, he left years ago to bound down the stairs and jump into his arms. It'll be satisfactory when his grown ass daughter with the attitude of a rabid viper greets him.

As I step to the side, I notice members of the Calavera Society standing watch. Now that the lost princess of the society has returned, they will be solely focused on Roberto and his actions from this moment forward. Searching for weaknesses and loose threads to unravel him. I can't have that. His threads are mine to unravel.

"Your mask, *father*."

He quickly snaps his irritated attention to me, and I glide my eyes over his shoulder toward the suited men standing off

to the side. No, I'm not trying to protect him, I honestly don't care what happens to this man, but the only target on Valeria's back will be the one I put there. I don't know what game he's playing at with this fake ass dotting father charade, he'll once again fuck things up for me.

People are so troublesome.

Thankfully his mask of indifference slips in place before he turns back to the jet where Noah emerges followed closely by Valeria who holds his hand tightly.

I feel my gut twist with something sour as I watch them. It's the same emotion I had when I heard her moans earlier.

I'm man enough to admit I don't like the two of them cozied up together. I'm not a jealous guy but territorial is a whole other thing and I'm a fucking beast when it comes to my property.

Valeria isn't mine, not yet at least, but she is tied to me, nonetheless. My little stepsister, mine to protect, mine to break. But this united look she and Noah have going on has already shown those who have stood witness to her arrival that she is closely tied to him, if not claimed by him.

I motherfucking digress.

Luckily, their bond isn't something new to me and I'm already forming a way to have them both under my ruling thumb. Hence the reason I've told Noah we'd be speaking again.

He is important to Valeria and that is something I can use to my benefit.

"Welcome home, Valeria." Roberto says stoically, completely ignoring Noah's existence.

"Hello, dad." Valeria says through her teeth while Noah gives the man a stare that would rival my own. He fucking hates Roberto. Good.

Per the Society's demand of propriety, Roberto bends down and lays a barely there kiss to Valeria before giving her a

smile that looks like cracking ice on his face as though the muscles are unused to the motion.

“Welcome to your new home.”

I force back my eye roll as I step away, not wanting to hear him describe the beauty of the golden cage Noah and Valeria just landed in.

Coventry, despite the grandeur of the town, has a sinister feel to it. It’s not something you can ignore and it makes you all too aware of the invisible eyes that watch you everywhere you go.

Built and established back in the mid to late sixteen hundreds, it’s beauty can take your breath away. Older than New Orleans, which is only a town away, and rivals the colorful city.

When Coventry was first established, it was mostly the Spanish who populated it, and as time went on and centuries passed, the population grew and created a whole new world here.

Money, power, sacrifices—*in every sense of the word*—rule this town of the absurdly rich and cold hearted.

It may look pretty on the outside, but it’s nothing but a corpse on the inside.

When you look past the shiny exterior, you can see the black decay of wickedness. Money can do a lot, buy a lot, perfect a lot, but there is no dollar amount that can truly wipe clean a soul dripping in unholiness.

The grass on every property in this town is healthy and perfectly sculpted as though the groundskeepers are the Leonardo da Vinci of landscapers. The houses were built in a time when the designers wanted to match the glory of the White House, resplendent in the eyes of their owners yet pompous and supercilious to anyone not from here. Coventry has everything you could ever want, a public library filled with almost every book written, and if they don’t have it, they can get it. Coventry boasts high end shops and boutiques, cafés and restaurants, shopping centers and malls, but they are as

pretentious as the citizens. The only kind of cars you see around here come with a price tag that can feed a small town.

Anything less is seen as trash. You can have a nice car, something that costs more than most people make in a year, but if you live here, it's considered weak. It's a mark of new money or perhaps *no* money—no matter how wealthy you may be.

Yes, Coventry is filled with self-important pricks living off the power of their names and the power of their bloodline. But don't be fooled. No one here is someone you can consider a rich moron. Everyone is taught how to be a snake hiding in the rabbit cage. From the time we can talk, we are taught the art of persuasion, and no matter what, take what you want.

"Come, sister, there is a lot to show you." I tell Valeria with a mocking tone I can't seem to help.

"Actually," Valeria starts, her eyes ignoring me completely as she stares down her father, "I think *dad* and I have a lot of catching up to do. Maybe you can show Noah around, he'll give me the cliff notes later."

She turns to me looking like someone else entirely, her eyes closed off, detached in a way I wasn't sure she was capable of. The only tell-tale sign that there's life in her is the balled-up fists at her sides.

"We'll catch up later, brother." she sneers before standing on her toes and kissing Noah's cheek.

"*Bienvenido a Coventry, princesa.*" I give her a smirk that has never failed to strike a bit of fear into anyone unlucky enough to receive it.

Swallowing thickly and looking more exhausted by the minute, Valeria turns and gestures for Roberto to lead the way.

"I don't trust you." Noah says as we watch Valeria's hips sway.

Good, I think to myself as I smirk, you really shouldn't trust me.



## EIGHTEEN

---

### ‘GENESIS’ DEREK POPE

THE CAR RIDE WITH DAD WAS MISERABLE. HE KEPT ASKING ME mundane questions in that dead voice. All I wanted to do was jump from the car at highspeed. Dramatic, I know, but I’ve never been good with biting my tongue and detaching from my emotions. I’d rather swallow glass than my angry words. I’m the kind of bitch that will wither if I don’t get the last word.

I look down at the clear skin on the tops of my hands and see that once again I’m dramatizing my thoughts, but you get the point.

When I know I’m right, when the fucking *world* knows I’m right, I’ll go out with the last word...but this situation is bigger than my pettiness, and I don’t have all the facts, only anger.

That’s not enough to fight tooth and nail for. Not yet at least.

Besides, isn’t it the patient ones you should be weary of? I may not be the most patient person on the planet, but I’m a quick learner and that soul sucking car ride to this quiet eatery was just the tip of the iceberg of my incoming learning curve.

A girl around my age approaches us as we enter the restaurant, a practiced robotic smile on her face. Her name tag

says Rose which I'm sure is fitting considering how sweet her smile is yet how cruel her eyes shine, it makes me think of a pretty rose covered in sharp thorns. I bet she's a narcissist with a false sense of superiority.

"Mr. Calavera, miss Calavera." Her knowledge of who I am surprises me, but I keep it from showing on my face. "Will it just be the two of you dining with us?"

"Yes, and we'll take the private room."

She dips her head and quickly picks up two menus before leading us to the back of the restaurant. There're a few people scattered throughout the restaurant, most of them watching us as we pass. Some of the men nod their heads in respect to my father, but it seems like they are demanded to do so, not because they actually respect him. Looks like I'm not the only one who my father has pissed off.

Rose ushers us into the private room which has the same interior design as the public dining area, but in a much smaller setting. There is only one table in the room, but it practically takes up the entire space. It's long and rectangular with fourteen chairs around it and placemats in front of each one. There are lit candles down the center with small floating flower vases between each one. Like the dining room we passed through, there are lots of different shades of reds everywhere you look. From the maroon seat cushions to the red ruby chandeliers...it makes me feel like I've walked into a pretty crime scene.

Once we are seated, dad orders us a bottle of something I can't pronounce and water. Rose leaves us, quietly clicking the door shut behind her.

It's as though the ice melts off my father the minute we're alone. It tells me we're clear of eyes and ears. I picture this room holding secret Society meetings over meals and drinks, you know, planning world domination and the downfall of our fellow man. Still, I sit quietly as I wait for him to begin.

I don't have to wait long, but I wish he had never opened his mouth—every word is forced, his emotions read faked. It sets my teeth on edge and my blood on high heat.

“Valeria, I’m so sorry this has happened. This,” he gestures around us, “is not what I ever wanted for you. I did everything I could to keep you hidden away from this godforsaken town, but it wasn’t enough. All we can do now is play the game as best we can until I can get us out once more.”

I listen to him mutely, my eyes trained on his as I read each lie. I’ve come to learn that my father, Roberto Calavera, is a master manipulator. A liar by trade.

I count in my head and force myself to stay silent.

Silence always makes people uncomfortable and being uncomfortable means filling the awkwardness with words. I just hope there’s enough time for him to tell me everything, or at least something that can actually help me fuck his world up.

His apologies mean little to nothing. Even if they were real, they don’t cure the hurt and they don’t heal the wounds. They most certainly don’t help me navigate this shit bucket he’s thrown me into. His poor excuse of a solution is to run away first chance he gets, and though this morning I would have felt the same - *it was my original plan, after all* - but if the leaders of this cultist town are really as bad as I’ve been told, I’m sure there are precautionary measures in place to keep that from happening again.

No, running won’t work, it’s time to be a Calavera and ruin some lives.

“I deal in facts, dad. You know this. I’m not even hearing your *“apology,”* I air quote, “because all I’ve seen, all that I’ve come to learn, is that you are a man with many masks. A ruthless cutthroat mask, a high school sweetheart mask, a liar, a man who abandons.”

I blink away the angry tears and take a breath, “I know who you truly are, so save us both sometime and just tell me what you’ve gotten me into.”

His face morphs into the snake he really is, lifeless and vile, but I honestly don’t care.

“Start at the beginning.”

Before he can even open his mouth, there's a knock at the door.

My breath catches and my eyes when Mateo walks in, a sharp smile on his face that screams *I know all your dirty little secrets*.

The night of the bonfire flashes in my mind, his mouth and touches whisper across my skin, making heat rise to my face.

“Roberto. Valeria.” He dips his head and again I have to school my features.

I bite my tongue, wanting to demand what he fuck he's doing here but not wanting my father to know jack shit either. Thankfully, Roberto speaks before I can spew anything.

“Ah, I see your father's punishment is working out well.” He chuckles as he moves the silverware out of the way while Mateo places long stemmed glasses before us. While my father isn't looking, Mateo gives me an almost inconceivable shake of the head like he's telling me not to say anything. Fine by me, but I will be bombarding him later.

“If waiting tables is considered punishment for running a gambling ring over the last five years, then yes, I guess it is.” He replies to Roberto.

My brow quirks up. *A gambling ring?* This guy can't be much older than me. Maybe just a year or two.

Dad's slick grin irritates me, “Is waiting tables like a blue-collar citizen not harsh enough for you?”

My father's question has me grinding my teeth. Who the fuck does he think he is? Did he forget blue collar is where I come from? He acts as though anyone with a smaller bank account is somehow less than him.

The fragile stem of my glass snaps in my hand, the champagne spilling all over the table and interrupting the insulting conversation.

My father turns to me with irritation in his eyes, so I shake my hand clear of glass while giving him a sweet smile.

“Whoopsies.”

They both stare at me, my father with a disgusted look and Mateo with a slight grin.

“Mateo, meet my daughter. Valeria, this is Mateo Del Toro. He is your brother’s best friend. I’m sure you’ll be seeing plenty of each other once the semester begins.”

Ah, he’s Rey’s best buddy. I give him a disinterested nod of my head, as I flick glass away from me. I’m sure he and Rey had a good laugh at my expense a time or two.

“Bienvenido a Coventry, princesa.”

Welcome to Coventry, princess.

It’s the same welcome Rey gave to me, only less psychotic and more *I’m going to eat you alive and make you beg for more.*

Maybe Mateo here would be a good way to get at Rey. A little quid pro quo...only, I’ll be the one gaining the advantage. Use him against his friend and possibly get him on my side.

I picture how rattled Rey would be if he were to see his best friend suddenly close to me and a genuine smile curls up my lips.

I hold out my hand, feeling triumphant when he folds his fingers around my hand, “Gracias, Mateo. It’s nice to meet you. Maybe you’ll be able to show me around?”

I let my thumb slide over his rough knuckles, feeling the lift of his skin where scars have formed from either punching bricks or people’s faces.

As though he’s read my mind, his eyes glitter and his smile widens.

“It would be my pleasure.”

My father’s gaze bounces between us before his face morphs back to someone with a fucking agenda. The atmosphere in the room shifts with his mood as he lifts his hand in dismissal.

“You may leave now, Mateo. I’m sure you two will get better acquainted later.”

Mateo dips his head and winks at me when he thinks my father can’t see him, but somehow, he does and when the door once again clicks shut, he’s quick to spell it out for me.

“You are a Calavera, you need to be smart about who you associate with around here, especially the men. We are all like snakes here, only our camouflage is much less threatening.”

“*We?*” I ask him through my teeth.

He slams his hand down on the table, making me and our glasses jump, “Yes! Me and every man, woman, and child in this town are knee deep in the doings of the devil. There is always someone looking to take what you have, and trust me Val, you will soon understand just how much of *you* they covet. Smiles are fake, kindness is an act, remorse is false! Do not embarrass yourself by falling for the traps of your peers. Do. Not. Embarrass *me*.”

He shakes his head before looking deep into my eyes, his words coming out through gritted teeth, “*Love* is weakness, and you are covered in it. Your mother ruined you.”

He sits back in his chair, and I copy the movement, feeling as though I’ve been slapped. Fuck this. Fuck swallowing down my words and fuck his stupid way of thinking.

“Love is not weakness, Roberto. It is the most powerful thing in the world because love does not run, it does not hide, it does not cower. People like to assume that love is fluffy, weak, sugar and sweetness, but they couldn’t be more wrong,” I stand from my seat and rest my hands on the table as I lean into my father, “love will kill, maim, slay, and murder for their other half. A person who loves is the most dangerous one in the room because they will sacrifice everyone around them, innocent or not, for the ones they care for. People in love are not the heroes, they’re the villains, and those kinds of villains always win. You think mother ruined me?” I laugh humorlessly, “You better hope she did because if not, I’m going to ruin you.”

I don't wait for his reply, I just walk as fast as I can out of the door and run face first into a chest, inked fingers wrap around my biceps to steady me.

Mateo's unique eyes scan my face, "Sorry, princess. I wasn't expecting you to come through the door like you're running from a crime scene."

I narrow my eyes at him and step back, his conniving actions back in my hometown still fresh in my mind but I remember my plan to use him against Rey, so I offer him a forced smile...*I wonder if it looks more like a scowl.*

I guess it does because he puts his hands up in mock surrender, "I'm kidding, but if it's true, you can trust me to keep your murderous secret."

*Bullshit, guy. I bet you'd use it against me.* Still, even speaking obvious lies, this guy's voice is so provocative I bet the ladies beg for ravishment from him.

I clear my throat and ignore his joke, "What's your play, Mateo?"

He shrugs, giving me an effortless nonchalant smile, "No play, pretty girl. I was just doing Rey a favor by checking you out. I can't say I was disappointed."

I narrow my eyes, my mouth opening to ask him what he means, but then I see the curious gazes on us, so I change courses, "Wanna get out of here and help me smoke this?"

I pull a joint out my purse and run it under my nose. He licks his lips in that way that guys do so well, "Sure, princess, let's go."

As he walks toward the entrance of the restaurant, he undoes the floor length black apron he has tied around his waist. I watch him amused as he balls up the fabric and tosses it into Rose's face as we pass her.

"Hey! Where are you going?!" She stomps after us like an angry little chihuahua. "You can't just leave! The rush is about to start, Mateo!" God, she's a whiny little thing.

Mateo opens the door for me, letting me go first with his hand on the small of my back like I'm his date and he needs to make a good impression. When he turns back to the barking, red faced hostess, his words are completely contrary to his genteel actions.

“Hey, Rose, how about you go fuck yourself with a cactus, mmkay?”

Yeah, I think I'll get along with Mateo Del Toro just fine.



## NINETEEN

---

### 'ENOUGH' CHARLIEONNAFRIDAY

MATEO LEADS ME DOWN THE SIDEWALK THAT TAKES US TO THE side of the restaurant where my jaw drops to the ground and tumbles into the drainage in the curb.

“Wow.” Is all I manage to say as he hits a button on the FOB in his hand.

Sitting so close to the ground that you'll practically have to crawl in, is the most beautiful car I've ever laid my eyes on.

“It's good to see one Calavera has taste in cars.” Mateo says as the doors of his fine piece of machinery open in a way that makes me think of a seagull hovering gracefully over the sea.

I walk over to the car - if you can even call it that - and admire the beauty. It looks like it would fit perfectly amongst the supercars of the twenty-four hours race *Le Mans*. It's sky blue and almost iridescent as I move with an amazing ground effect under the front bumper for aerodynamics. It's an absolute wet dream.

“What kind of car is this?”

I run my fingers over the side and duck under the edge of the passenger door.

“It’s a 2021 Jesko Koenigsegg. Come on, I’ll show you what she can do.”

I look up from the luxurious interior and into Mateo’s eyes over the roof of the car. Obviously, as children we’re all taught not to get into cars with strangers, but if I’m going to survive this town, I might as well start now.

“If you try anything stupid,” I slide my switchblade out of my pocket and click the release button, pointing the sharp blade at Mateo, “I’ll cut your eyes out. Got it?”

Mateo smiles like I just complimented him, “Don’t threaten me with a good time, princess.”

He drops into the car and reaches across the center console, snagging the joint from my fingertips.

“Hey!” I snap.

“Now you gotta come with me.”

I roll my eyes and slide into the passenger seat, wondering how I’m going to close the door. Thankfully, I don’t have to since they automatically begin to shut once the car is started. He pulls out of the parking lot just as my father comes through the front doors, his eyes tracking Mateo’s car as we drive away. I hope he saw me in here, I hope he’s pissed that I did the complete opposite of his supposed advice...but I also hope I didn’t just hop into the car with a fucking serial killer.

Just because Mateo and I fucked doesn’t mean I shit about him other than what he’s packing below the waist. For all I know, this guy could be the next Dahmer and I’m riding around with him all willy nilly just to spite my father.

I didn’t get anything out of the conversation with Roberto, but it did solidify my plans to do everything in my power to ruin him and his little kingdom here. Mateo’s phone rings and he quickly picks it up without looking at the screen.

“Yeah?”

He listens for a second before speaking in fluent Spanish to whoever is on the other end, but I tune him out and watch the scenery outside my window. The town is quaint and

beautiful, like something you'd see in a magazine or maybe a children's book. I can see the amount of money Coventry has, expensive name brands and high-quality shopping stores, but every building on the main street looks like something straight out of a Christmas village.

"Yeah, yeah, I fucking hear you, *compa*...I'm just taking her through the town, shit."

We come to a stop at a red light as he hangs up and leans over me to reach for the compartment near my knees. He pushes my thighs apart and I arch a brow at him, earning a smirk and wink from him.

"Just grabbing the lighter." He tells me before pulling open the compartment and reaching inside.

When he sits back, he wraps his lips around my joint and lights it.

"Won't the cops be a little upset, or is it legal to drive a vehicle under the influence here?"

Mateo chuckles, the smoke puffing out of his pretty lips as he passes the joint to me, "Nah, the cops here don't bother with the sons," he looks at me with a knowing look, "or daughters of the Council."

As we smoke and drive, I can't help but think about what my life has suddenly become. Sure, I'm pretty much doing the same thing here that I would be doing back at home, only instead of one of my guys, it's Rey's friend beside me. Ugh, I just wish I could change shit, make everything right in the world.

"So, I'm sure you've heard a lot about me then, yeah?" What I really want to ask is *what has your evil buddy said about me?* but I don't want to come off sounding as desperate for answers as I feel. The knowledge that I'll have to watch myself very carefully while living here hasn't been forgotten. I don't know Mateo and for all I know, he'll use anything I say or do as flaming arrows against me.

He side-eyes me, his tongue coming out to wet his lips as his hand grips the steering wheel tightly.

“I’ve heard enough to know that you’re walking into a den of thieves, wolves and vipers completely blind and the only friend you’ve got is just as blind as you are.” He turns to me with a glint in his eye as she slides his eyes down my seated body before returning to the road, “You’re in for quite the ride, are you princess?”

I twist in my seat and rest my elbow on the center console, taking the joint from his fingers as he brings it to his lips. He stops behind a few cars at a light and turns to me while I exhale smoke in his face.

“You call me a princess, but you’ve got it wrong. I don’t carry a tiara, I wear a crown and my only friend here is the king of thieves, the wolves and the motherfucking vipers. I may be the new girl, but I can get down and dirty too, pretty eyes.”

Said eyes flash greedily, the pulse at his neck matching the flutter in his jaw. I smirk and chuckle, passing him back the joint before righting myself in my seat.

“So, Rey sent you to spy on me.” It’s a statement, not a question, but he answers anyway.

“Yeah, he did. I mean, you and he are in line for the crown since your dad is the president. I don’t blame him for wanting to know what he’s up against.”

I hum under my breath, running my fingers through my hair, but don’t reply to that. It’s difficult to get a real read on Mateo. There’s something about him that rubs me the wrong way and I can’t put my finger on it. He seems like a guy with many different facets and none of them lead you to the core of who he is.

Is he a potential friend, or a potential foe? Seems like only time will tell.

The cars in front of us begin to move, but Mat continues to hold the brake down, his indecipherable gaze locked on me.

“Don’t be a pussy, ask what you really want to know.”

I narrow my eyes at him, weighing my words before deciding I don’t really give two fucks what he does with this

question, I just want to hear the answer...lie or not.

“Who are you loyal to?” I watch him as he ignores the cars going around us, the drivers avoiding making any kind of eye contact with us. *Hmm, they must know who the owner of this car is, and they obviously fear him.* Even a cop car passes us without stopping.

“I don’t pray to dead saints, I don’t believe in things like honesty and honor,” I furrow my brows not understanding where he’s going with this, “I believe in myself, I have loyalty to me, and I honor my set of rules. Rey is my best friend, my brother, but even he knows not to trust the devil completely.”

“You consider yourself the devil?” I ask with a scoff.

His multicolored eyes seem to darken as he answers.

“A man with an agenda and no lines he wouldn’t cross should always be considered the devil.”

I feel my brows raise as he turns and hits the gas, tires squealing against the asphalt as we race down the street. Mateo maneuvers around cars, speeding past stoplights and drifting around corners. I laugh and roll the window down, opening my phone’s camera and recording a video. I don’t know if it was Mateo’s intention to scare me into fearing him but if it was, he failed miserably. High speeds and fine ass cars will never make me cower. They hype me up, fill my blood with endorphins and give me a rush of adrenaline unlike anything else.

Mateo laughs and drives under a bridge, the revving of the powerful engine echoes all around us.

We turn another corner and slow down. It’s a neighborhood off the main strip of the town, the houses standing tall. Some are wide and some are narrow with large front yards that are only divided by three feet tall wooden fences. In the front yards are signs dedicating some of the houses to certain fraternities and sororities, others have school campaign signs.

The houses begin to bland the further into the neighborhood we go until we reach what looks like the

property of a church.

“That’s Coventry University.” Mateo says jerking his chin toward the church-like structure in the distance. We pass the football field and track field before entering a gated community.

“This is where the elite dorms are. We call it Skull Valley since this is where all the generations of Calavera Society members dorm for college. Since you are a Calavera, you’ll be dorming with Rey, and your boy toy, in the Calavera house.”

“Noah is not my boy toy, asshole.”

Mateo chuckles but doesn’t argue.

All the dorms—*if they can even be called that*—look like mansions designed by one architect who had only one design in his or her skillset. They’re all cookie cutters. Beautiful, but it’s almost like the designer copy-pasted each one into place. Thankfully, someone decided to change their appearances by painting them differently from their neighbors. Some are solid colors, others have their trims painted different from the siding, others have stone walls to complement the paint.

“This whole place feels fake.” I mumble to myself while watching a few students moving their furniture into their dorm.

“This town is older than New Orleans.” Mat says as he watches a girl around my age cross the street in front of us, winking when she makes eye contact. She rushes off with red cheeks and fear in her wide eyes. The fuck?

“Some of the buildings, like the public library, are original from that time. Coventry University, or *CU* as we lovingly call it, was originally the courthouse. It’s said it has the highest recorded witch executions.”

His eyes widen like he’s telling a spooky story rather than a tragic one.

“Let me guess, it was cursed then later, the building was used as an asylum and now the halls are plagued with the haunted screams of the lost souls?” I try to list every scary cliché known to man with a grin.

“If it were an asylum, I’m pretty sure half the wicked in this town never would have been born, me included, but you’re close. It was actually turned into a monastery but as the population grew, it became an academy back in the late nineteen fifties for junior and high schoolers. It was known as Calavera Academy—”

“Wait,” I stop him from continuing, “That’s my father’s family name. Does that mean—”

“Did you think *princess* was a pet name? You and Rey are the heirs to not only the Calavera empire, but to this entire fucking town. Before it was turned into the private university it is today, our grandparents and great grandparents all went there, but it was your bloodline that founded this town.”

Fucking hell, how many more secrets will I find out? How much more has been kept hidden from me?

My mind jumps back and forth between anger and hurt, making a whole new type of pain in my heart.

“You asked me if I’m loyal to Rey,” Mat says, interrupting my thoughts, “and I am, but that’s because I see him winning the crown. Maybe if you prove otherwise, you’ll find my loyalty at your side.”

I stare at him, keeping my face completely blank of the disgusted thoughts in my head. Thoughts that say, *fuck you, little weasel, I’d never trust a motherfucker like you.* He takes in my cool and closed off demeanor for a second before scoffing and turning back to the road.

“Suit yourself, princess.”

I don’t reply to that, I just shake my head to the last bits of the joint and stare out my window.

If I’m the rightful daughter to Roberto, and there’s no denying it since I’m almost identical to him when he was my age, then that means I’m really the only true heir he has. I don’t want a single thing from my father or his precious fucking empire, but I can honestly say that beating Rey to the throne would be worth the effort entirely.

He sent his buddy to spy on me, to learn my weaknesses and find ways to exploit me...it'd only be far that beat him at his own game.

I drop my head back on the seat and stare at his profile as he smokes, "I'm sure you and Rey had quite the laugh about me after the party."

I try to keep the disgust out of my voice, but there's no hiding my anger. He said I used him that night, but now we both know he used me. They both did.

He smirks, "What's there to laugh at, bonita?" I roll my eyes at his compliment. I'm almost one hundred percent sure he calls every girl *pretty*.

Oh, my fucking hell! I hate how he's acting like he has no damn clue what I'm talking about, acting innocent and clueless. Well fuck that, I'm not interested in being toyed with. If he doesn't want to acknowledge the elephant in the car with us, then fuck him and fuck Rey too.

"Whatever Mateo, I'm not going to play games with you."

Mateo flicks the last bit of the joint out the window as he pulls to a stop in front of a mansion that looks like it's straight out of Salem, Massachusetts. The entire structure is matte black with gloss black window shutters and trimming. There's nothing particularly special about the front door aside from its blood red paint job, but it's the only pop of color on the entire house aside from dark green ivy that's climbing up the pillars of the front porch. There's a sign out front that looks like a plaque of some sort, but I can't read the inscription, only the large, engraved CS on the iron stand. *I guess this is the Calavera House of Skull Valley.*

"Listen, Valeria, this town is filled with royalty, but not a single one abides by a code of honor. You may have been kept in the dark, but that's a good thing. Still, almost every son and daughter here will hate you and they won't hesitate to show you their feelings."

He reaches up and drags a finger down my cheek, making my stomach turn with an uncomfortable feeling. It's like



there's a sudden shift in Mateo, one you can't quite process but feel, nonetheless.

"Why?" I ask as he looks at me up and down in a way that I can only describe as hungry...and *angry*?

I scoot back but there's not much room to work with in the car. His fingertips follow me, stopping at my chin, where he pinches me sharply. His eyes, which were open and welcoming, close off and turn hard, "Because you're just another lamb, only you have the name of a queen. It's going to be fun watching Rey burn your pretty skin, I just hope he lets me have a taste."

The door opens behind me, and I'm ripped out of the seat by two strong arms before tossed into another set.

"She's off fucking limits, Mateo." Rey's angry voice growls out of him, low and threateningly, making my heart tremble in my chest the same way it did when Noah spanked me in the woods.

"Get your screams from someone else or I'll cut your fucking eyes out of your skull."

Mateo's evil chuckles send a wicked chill through my spine, making me shake like a fucking leaf in Noah's arms.

"Thanks for the joint, princess. I'll be seeing you."

Rey tosses something into the car before shutting the door on Mateo's suddenly blank face, his pretty eyes still locked on me.

As he throws the car in drive and peels away from the curb, Rey turns toward me with a hateful sneer on his face.

"You stupid fucking girl."

"Fuck you!" I shove out of Noah's arms and stand as straight as possible, still I have to look up at him and it pisses me off like nothing else, "Don't try to scold me like I'm a child, Rey!"

He wraps his fingers around my throat and pulls me close to his face while Noah just stands there. Fucking *stands* there not doing shit!

“You are a child, *muñeca*. A fucking toddler who doesn’t have a sense of self preservation. You know what kind of man you just got into a car with?”

He shakes me with his anger and pull my foot back, ready to fucking knee him in the balls, but he sees it coming and spins me in place. My back slams against his chest, his fingers still tight around my throat as he growls in my ear.

“He’s a cutter, only he doesn’t do it to himself, and he doesn’t do it for your pleasure. He’s sick and twisted, getting himself off on your tits but only after you’re either dead or close to it.”

My eyes are on Noah who looks as equally pissed at me as he is at Rey for touching me, but still, he does nothing as Rey continues to paint a grisly picture.

“He has killed at least four girls in the last two years, but they are the only ones on record. He’s on medication now, at my coaxing, but even those hardly keep him in check. He hears voices that demand his absolute obedience. He sees things no one else does, hears things you can’t fathom, and follows the orders of his imagined voices.”

Mateo’s words of being loyal only to himself suddenly make a whole new kind of sense to me.

Rey leans into my ear, his lips pressing firmly as he whispers, “He calls them ‘*They*’. You just rode in a car with a murdering ‘schizo because you didn’t like what daddy said. Fucking. *Child*.”

He shoves me away before blowing out a breath and tilting his head, the bones in his neck popping loud as I rub my throat. I can feel my face burning red with anger, but I don’t bother fighting. This day has completely drained me and all I want to do is get to wherever it is I’ll be staying during this fucked up year and go to sleep.

“This is our dorm house. I put your stuff in the upstairs bedroom.” Noah informs me as though he’s reading my mind. Per-usual. I hope he can hear the angry words in my head.

I don't thank him, hell, I don't even look him in the eyes, I just move past him with a glare and shoulder check as I go. I know he's pissed that I made the stupidest decision to ride with someone I don't even know—*even though I've had said stranger's cock inside me a week ago*—but fuck him for not coming to my defense while Rey manhandled me. Yeah, I can handle myself and take care of business, but as my best fucking friend, you'd think the motherfucker would at least speak up like I would have done for him.

“Val!” I hear him call as I enter the house and take the stairs two at a time. I find my room and slam the door shut, locking it behind me and dropping onto the bed.

## TWENTY

---

### ‘THE PERFECT GIRL’ MAREUX

VAL IGNORES ME AS SHE STORMS INTO THE HOUSE AND I FEEL a pull in my chest to go after her, but she needs to cool off. Still, I can't deny that she royally pissed me off by jumping into a car with someone she didn't know from Adam. Val can be a *do-now-think-later* kind of girl, but she's never been so foolishly reckless. At least not without me. Then again, she hasn't faced her father since she was a child and the things, she's learned have shaken the ground she stands on, so I can get the recklessness. Doesn't mean it still isn't stupid as shit.

Rey curses under his breath as he passes me on the walkway that leads to the house, but I stop him with a hand to his chest.

“You're touching me.” He says with a brow cocked, the anger from Val's actions still evident on his face.

“Yeah, and you're lucky that's all I'm doing.” I step closer to him, bringing our faces only inches apart as I stare into his eyes.

“If you ever touch her like that again, I'll break every fucking bone in your body.”

His laugh is dark and humorless, “I see. So, you have no problem with her being victimized or possibly killed by a complete lunatic?”

“He’s your friend,” I curl my lip at the asshole, “of course I have a problem with it.”

He grips my wrist, squeezing tight enough that my fingers grow numb almost instantly, still I fist his shirt relentlessly.

“I’m friends with a lunatic because I’m worse.” His eyes widen a second as he whispers, “Out of the two of us, *Mateo* is the nice one.”

Using my grip on his shirt, I yank him forward, our foreheads bumping hard, “I said what I motherfucking said you dirty cunt. I don’t give a fuck how scary or psychotic you think you are, touch her again, I fucking dare you.”

I shove him and his smiling face away from me before turning away and jogging toward the house.

“Don’t act like you didn’t enjoy it, *guapo*.” I let the door close on his words and do my best to convince myself that he’s wrong. The truth is though, he’s absolutely right.

I originally stood back because I agreed with Rey’s anger, but the moment he grabbed her neck...my reasons changed. Seeing her vulnerable and at the mercy of Rey made me feel a sick power over her, something I’d never seen nor felt before. Val is a tough girl, a woman who will cut anyone down in a heartbeat no matter whether her opponent can beat her or not, Val never backs down, so when she showed submission - *not a trace of defiance in her brown eyes* - it was a sight to fucking behold.

I can’t deny that I wanted to see more, that I wanted to see just how far Val was willing to let someone dominate her. I’ve never considered myself a voyeur but, in that moment, my cock just wanted to watch and salivate at the pure fragility Val had shown. It was no help watching how blasphemous Rey’s eyes wracked me up and down as his lips brushed against Val’s reddening cheek.

I felt like a sick man, born wicked and ready to bathe in the light of Val’s shrine. I wanted to drop to my knees and beg for more, demand more...plead like a sinner for more.

I reach the top of the stairs and walk over to Val's closed door. The house itself is large and very open, more open than I'm used to. There's almost too much space here.

My parent's home was maybe half this size with everything cluttered. It wasn't messy, just packed full of trinkets and pictures of dead family members. Every available space in my childhood home was taken up by this or that. I hated it. I like a simplistic look, clean and tidy yet welcoming and comfortable. This house though...it's too tidy, too uninviting. Just like the rest of this fucking town.

Rey said it used to be a dorm that housed at least twenty students, but Roberto bought it and made it a private home for his daughter. I'm unsure if it was his plan for Rey to stay here with her as well, just the two of them *alone*, but since I'm here now, I don't feel the need to even ask. Yeah, I got turned on by the thought of Rey, Val and I together as he held her her neck outside, but the fact is, I'm a greedy motherfucker and picturing them two alone in the house is almost as irritating as the thought of Val getting in a car with an unknown man.

I blow out a breath and clear my head of those thoughts before lifting my fist and knocking on the wood.

"Val? Can I come in?" I ask with zero intentions of actually waiting for an invitation.

When I get no response, I turn the knob and find it locked. I shake the handle a couple of times.

"I know you hear me, chica. C'mon, don't be like that."

Still no response, but if I know Val like I think I do, all it takes is a little coaxing to get her to talk. And by *coaxing*, I mean antagonizing.

"Don't be mad at me, Val, you're the one who fucked up."

I bite my lip as I hear her angry gasp and count in my head. When I get to three, the door swings open and a pissed off kitten shoves her clawed finger into my chest.

"Yeah, asshole, but you're my best friend and as the great Kevin Hart once said, my bullshit is your bullshit!"

I snag her finger and pull her forward, wrapping my arm around her back and dipping my face down to the crown of her head.

“I know and you’re right, but you really did piss me off. I shouldn’t have stood back and let that fucker push you around though. I’m sorry, okay?”

She pushes off of me and crosses her arms over her chest, “If it were you, I wouldn’t have stood back while some prick treated you like shit, Noh.”

God, there’s so many things I want to say to that, but I honestly don’t have the energy to get into a winded fucking fight over it. Val knows she fucked up with that creepy ass dude, Mateo, but her ego is bruised so she won’t admit it. She will later though, so I just place my hand over my chest and dip my head.

“You’re right, and because you are, I come bearing gifts.” I step into her room and close the door behind me so we’re completely alone. I reach into my back pocket and pull a cell phone free. I smile when I think of how Rey didn’t even notice my sleight of hand. When I yanked him to me, I distracted him enough that I was able to slip his phone from his pocket and into my own. If the rest of the rich snobs in this town are as clueless as him, I’ll be rich before we even end the semester.

“Is that what I think it is?” Val asks, her frown morphing into a grin.

“Yep, mr. stick-up-the-ass lost his phone to a *child*.” I adopt his voice for that last word which makes Val chuckle before snatching it from my hand and dragging me to her bed.

Like a couple of juveniles, we try to guess the password for the phone but give up once it locks us out after too many attempts.

“He probably has like a twenty-number passcode.” I say boredly as I lay back on the pillows and stare at the ceiling.

“We should just drop it in the toilet and let him find it.” She says as she tosses it onto the bed and lays beside me. I hate that I can’t just reach out and touch her like I want to, kiss

her soft skin and inhale her. I've thought about it more than I care to admit, I've even dreamt about it. Hell, I even have it all planned out to how our first time would go.

I'd roll to my side and trail my fingertips from her forehead and down her nose, I'd trace the curves of her lips, groan at the way her warm breath feathers across my fingers as I reached her chin. I'd marvel at the goosebumps that rose on her skin as I slowly moved down her throat. Her breasts would rise and fall heavily as I trailed a feather touch through the valley between them. When her nipple pebbled, I'd find myself scooting closer to bite them through the fabric of her shirt.

Suddenly, Rey is in the picture, his hand slipping beneath the waistband of her panties. Her back would arch and press her breasts firmly to my lips as I'd watch his fingers move languidly beneath the fabric.

She'd whisper our names as we both kissed her neck, our tongues touching each other's tentatively until I cupped his head and pulled him closer for a firmer kiss while Val found her way into our briefs and stroked our hard cocks.

"Did you learn anything about this place?" Val's question bursts through my thoughts, sending images of her moaning writhing evaporating like mist with the morning sun.

I clear my throat and sit up, so she doesn't notice my raging hard on.

"Not really. Rey and I don't share words as much as we share a mutual hatred for one another." I rub my eyes and stare out the window, "But he did say there's a party tonight that the initiates have before the semester begins. It's at the Society club house and we're expected to be there."

Val groans, the sound doing nothing to help my cock go down, "Of course we're *expected* there. Do these people ever just chill?"

"I honestly think it's just you expected to go, so good luck with that." I smack her thigh before squeezing it, I'm a glutton



that way, and jerk away as she squeals and throws a pillow at my head.

“Honestly, Noah, I don’t care what these motherfuckers think, least of all my dad.

We stay quiet a moment.

Just then, there’s a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” I bark, fully expecting Rey’s voice to come through but am surprised when a girl with red hair sticks comes into the room.

“Hi! I’m sorry to interrupt you, I uh-” she chuckles and adjusts the sleeves on her arms, “Rey sent me. He said he was supposed to be your aid but with the initiation ceremony coming and the semester beginning, he thought it would be best if I took care of things for him.”

She blows out a breath and waits for us to respond, but the bitch didn’t even tell us her name during that winded explanation.

“Okay, *chick-with-no-name*, where can I get a twenty and a bottle of Sauza?”

Val smacks me on the arm, “Shut it, Noh.”

She steps closer to the girl and holds out her hand, “Hi, I’m Valeria but my friends call me Val. This is my best friend, Noah. What’s your name?”

The girl smiles and it’s then that I really look at her. She’s the same height as Val, only a slightly bit curvier. Her shiny red hair falls in waves around her face giving her a soft doll-like look, she would look incredibly innocent if it were for the massive tattoo around her neck.

She takes a deep breath and places her hand in Val’s, “Nimona Del Toro.”

“You’re related to Mateo?” Val asks as she pulls her hand free making me inch a little closer to Val. Psychotic has to run through Mateo’s family and if this chick is related to him, I don’t doubt for a second she’s as fucking nuts as he is.

“Ah, I see you met my stepbrother.” She rolls her eyes and pulls the sleeves of her shirt down in nervousness, “My parents died a year ago and being seventeen I would have been an orphan, but Mateo’s parents were my mom and dad’s best friend, so they took me in.”

Well, at least she doesn’t have that cunt’s blood running through her, but I still can’t help feeling bad for the girl. After hearing what Mateo has done and is capable of doing, I’m surprised she hasn’t fallen victim to him yet. Hopefully he doesn’t live in the same house as her.

“Shit, sorry to hear about your parents but also glad you had the Del Toro family to help you out.”

Nimona scoffs, “Yeah, so lucky. Anyway, I will be your guide, aid, or whatever you need while you’re here.”

She stands waiting for something, maybe orders or some shit, “So, about that request,” I start when the air feels awkward, “can you get something?”

I’m only partly kidding. After the day I’ve had, I can use some mind-numbing narcotics and alcohol. Shit, I wouldn’t mind staying completely high during our time here.

“Oh, you were serious?” I cock a brow at her while Val folds her lips inward with a chuckle.

“I don’t do drugs, just say no and all that jazz, you know? But I’m sure you’ll find some at the party tonight. Now, I know you both had a long trip here, so I will leave you to unpack and get settled. I’ll be back around eight o’clock and pick you both up. It’s a casual affair so wear whatever suits you.”

Val and I give each other looks that say, *we would have done that anyway*. This may be a new place, new people and different rules, but you got me fucked up if anyone thinks they’ll dictate to me. I may play the game, walk the thin line between right and wrong, I’ll even offer myself up as the lamb, but I’ll be sharpening my knife too. Everything I do, I do it with my own agenda. Rey isn’t the only clever viper in the den of snakes.

Before Nimona can leave, I stop her and ask about the town and what we can expect here.

She looks at the open door before skirting her eyes to us, something screaming at us through her burning green gaze.

“Coventry, like any place, has its rules, the only difference here is our response to breaking said rules.”

She pulls out her phone and begins typing on her phone as she continues to talk.

“Just make sure you brush up on the laws here, it’s not much different from anywhere else, you know, red light means stop, no stealing, etcetera. The basics are all the same, but with traditions in the town, especially with the council, there are a few things expected of you.”

She hands us her phone as she talks, moving around the room while Val and I peer down at the screen.

This house and every room in it are bugged. There are very few places in town where you can speak without fear of being overheard by devices, but if I were you, I wouldn’t even trust that. There are eyes everywhere, ears around every corner. There is always someone who wants grace with the Society. I’ve heard a bit about you, Valeria, and I know you don’t know anything about us but please, watch your back. Enemies will play the part of an ally and your friends will covet your position to the point of betrayal.

I’m not saying you should trust me because that is your choice to make based on your own judgment, but you honestly can trust me. Rey never would have let someone ruthless like himself get close to you. Here’s my number. I hope you use it; this town needs fresh faces.

As Nimona yaps about certain professors we’ll want to steer clear of, Val and I input her number into our phones and hand hers back.

“Well, you’re right, I’m fucking beat,” Val says once Nimona runs out of words, “and if we’re expected to be at this shindig tonight, we better get some rest.”

I don't speak, I just stare at the red head, trying to find fault in her, some sign that she's a cutthroat like the rest of this town. Logically I know that there has to be at least one redeeming soul in this place, and for all I know, she's that one soul...but I don't trust people.

I don't trust anyone but Val.

Until I see a reason to trust her or anyone else, I'll just continue sharpening my knife.

Nimona said Rey would never let someone dangerous close to Val, but that's only because he wants to be the one who cuts my girl down; I will not offer him absolution.

The sound of a grindstone sliding across the edge of my blade echoes in my mind.

## TWENTY-ONE

---

### ‘DEVIL EYES’ ZODIVK

“MAT!” I BARK AS I SLAM THE FRONT DOOR TO HIS apartment, “Where the fuck are you?”

I hear a girl moan in the back room before a scream and the sound of skin slapping skin. I barge down the short hallway, lifting my leg and kicking the door in. It bounces off the wall as the girl bent over Mateo’s mattress drops unconscious, a belt around her neck and her hands tied behind her back. She’s still breathing so I pay very little attention to her as I rush forward, ignoring Mateo’s dick still rock hard and glistening with the girl’s juices. I grab his neck and punch him in the mouth before hooking my heel around his ankle and push him back. My surprise interruption and attack left Mateo too open and way too easy to take down.

His back lands with a hard thud against the top of his desk, knocking a glass off and shattering on the floor as I punch him hard in the ribs.

He grunts and coughs, wheezing behind my squeezing hand.

“Don’t you ever fucking come near Valeria again, Mateo. I don’t give a fuck if you’re my best friend, I will kill you if you touch her without my permission. Do you understand me?”

My voice is gruff and low, my anger barely contained as I picture all the sick and twisted things Mateo is capable of, shit that makes even my skin crawl, and I'm one fucked up individual.

The girl on Mateo's bed - *which could have so easily been Valeria* - groans and rolls to the side, her breasts bleeding from shallow knife cuts.

Oh fuck.

I look back down at Mat who gives me a bloody smile while showing me the knife in his hand, dangling it between his fingertips. Suddenly his face goes hard, the smile twisting into a grimace before he moves. I jump back in time to dodge the blade that would have sunk into my shoulder. I grab his wrist and yank him down as I kick my knee up to land solidly against his sternum. He falls groaning, his hand up telling me he's done before snapping his arm forward and letting the knife sail from his fingers. It lands perfectly in the drywall behind me.

I arch a brow at him before shaking my head and helping him up.

Mateo Del Toro is a fucked-up man, getting his kicks out of punishing girls who look like the twisted nanny he had as child, but he's my best friend.

Yeah, we have our fallouts, but they never last long, he's my brother in most ways, my best friend in others, but no matter what, I've got his back and he has mine. He just needs an ass kicking sometimes.

He drops in a seat and tucks himself away in his briefs as I move over to the bound girl. I untie her hands and release the leather around her neck. Once she stands, I scoop up her clothes and shove them into her waiting hands.

"You know the rules." I tell her as I push her toward the door, "Keep your mouth shut and get the fuck out of here."

She casts her eyes toward Mateo which pisses me off. There's nothing more annoying than my words not being heeded.

“*Now!*” I snap, making her jump with a whimper before scurrying away, putting her clothes on as she rushes toward the front door.

Once she’s gone and we’re alone, I turn back toward my best friend.

“I meant what I said, Mat. Valeria is off limits to you and your twisted version of cat and mouse.”

Mateo lights a joint and takes a deep drag, his unique eyes locked on me as he exhales a plum of pungent smoke.

“You love my version.” His eyes crinkle at the edges, daring me to deny that statement, but I honestly can’t. Like I said, I’m sick and I motherfucking embrace it.

But I wasn’t lying when I told Noah that I’m worse than my moral-less friend. After all, if the clinically sane helps and guides the clinically insane commit atrocities just for his own ambitions, he must be worse.

When I continue to stare, Mateo rolls his eyes and shrugs as if to say, *whatever, bitch, you know I’m right.*

His eyes were obviously the first thing I noticed about him, but they weren’t what drew me to him. It was his soul’s deep darkness that called to my own the same way a siren called to the sailors in the old tales. Alas, it’s his charming yet unpredictable character along with his eyes and bad guy persona that lures the girls in. Which is why I have to really lay it on thick that Valeria is untouchable, not because I’m protecting her fucking innocence—*if there’s any of that left in her*—but because she’s mine to break and ruin.

Mine and mine alone, no one else’s and least of all my psychotic best friend.

“Dude, fucking chill, okay? I just wanted to see what the big deal was about her. You’ve talked about this bitch for as long as I can remember, hating her guts before ever even knowing her. You can’t blame me for wanting to see what she’s all about. Besides, I’m on my fucking chill pills, so untwist your dick.”

God, I have to put an extra amount of effort into not punching his teeth in. He makes me sound like some fool hung-up on a bitch. Yes, I've talked about Valeria since forever, but never in the way he makes it seem. Revenge. That is the color of my language when it comes to my stepsister and that's exactly what I'll have.

She may not be the exact person who deserves it, but I know her ruination would kill Roberto slowly and that is worth breaking her pretty little spirit.

I breathe in and out, counting in my head in an effort not to pop off on Mateo anymore. That's the thing with him, he really knows how to push a person's buttons.

"And?" I ask him, folding my arms over my chest.

"And I think you've got your work cut out for you." He stubs out the joint before pulling one of the desk's drawers open and retrieving a prescription bottle. Lithium keeps the mind steady well enough, but it only works when he doubles it with a little bit of weed.

For me, there's not a pill on the planet that can cure my brand of lunacy.

"She's intelligent. I'm not talking about classroom intelligence either. She got into an argument with her dad. Obviously, I couldn't hear what the argument was about because Roberto had her in the private dining room, but I could see it written on her face."

I pull a face at my friend's words, "Let me get this straight. Her feelings were hurt so she threw a tantrum, and now you think she's what...Albert Einstein? I think you need to get your head checked again."

Mat rolls his eyes, "Eat my ass, Rey. No, that's the thing, she's really good at wearing the mask that we were born with and for a girl not born in our world, that shouldn't be done with the ease she showed. Not only that, but trust me when I tell you this, she's got some serious plans in store for you. She may act a certain way around you, but this girl isn't one of the airheads you're used to."



I watch him stand and pull his clothes on, before patting my pocket for my phone only to come up empty handed. I never leave my phone anywhere, not in the car, not on a table, no fucking where but my pocket. Yet, it's missing. My mind flashes to Noah and his greedy hands on me. Sure, he was playing the protective best friend, but I'm not blind to the hunger that shines in his eyes every time he looks at Val...and now me. It makes my cock twitch, *usually*. Right now, all I want to do is wring his fucking neck for pickpocketing me.

I should be pissed with myself though since it was my cock that had me completely fooled by Noah's dominant showmanship.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose.

"Ayy, cheer up, buttercup. We got ourselves a party tonight with plenty of booze, blow and warm holes for our cocks."

There's only two holes I'm interested in, and with this little stunt Noah pulled and the anger Val induces by just breathing, I'm going to make sure they both learn who owns this town and them.

"Fuck the party, just make sure you get Valeria and Noah separated. But keep. Your. Hands. Off." I tell Mat with a smirk pulling up the corner of my lips.

He eyes me, his lips mirroring my own, "That shouldn't be a problem."

After deciding on a time to meet up later, I leave him and head back to the boarding house. I can't help but feel like having Mat involved will take a turn that I'm not sure I'll be able to come back from, but I shove those thoughts back.

I don't give two fucks what road we take to get there, as long as it ends in Roberto and Valeria's ruin.

## TWENTY-TWO

---

### ‘COMIN OUT MY CAGE’ BERTIBANZ

AFTER NIMONA LEFT NOAH AND I TO OUR OWN DEVICES, I unpacked all my belongings while Noah did the same, making a couple of calls to the guys back home. Once I was done, I got my ass into bed for a much-needed nap and found my dreams filled with cold stone-colored eyes and harshly whispered words while Noah watched on, a hungry look on his face as his tongue wet his lips each time Rey’s hands dipped into my clothes.

I woke with a groan and a massive headache two hours later only to find Rey standing at my door.

I sit up with my heart pounding and my face flaming as I pull up my blanket to cover my barely clothed body.

“Dreaming of me, princess?”

I grind my teeth and point behind him, “Get the fuck out of my room, Rey.”

He smiles, something dark glittering behind his eyes as he steps further into the room, “There’s no need to cover up, *muñeca*, you have nothing I haven’t seen before.”

My heart rate jumps extraordinarily higher, my pulse beating in my ears as I stand from the bed, letting the sheets and blankets fall to the floor. I march over to Rey, whose gaze

travels from my thin gray tank top down to my panties and stop right in front of him.

“I don’t give two fucks how many girls you’ve seen naked, big brother. I’m not them.” I shove him back, but I might as well be pushing against a freight train for all the progress I make.

On my next shove, Rey grabs my wrists and pulls them behind my back effortlessly, as though he’s done this hundreds of times. My thighs clinch at how dominant he is, but I bite my tongue and try to wriggle my hands free.

“What the fuck are you doing, Rey? Let me go!”

With his body, Rey pushes me back suddenly until the back of my legs hit the frame of my bed. He grips both of my wrists with one hand and uses his free hand to slide around my front, along the sliver of skin between the hem of my tank and the waistband of my panties, my breath catching in my throat as a trail of fire follows his touch.

“I do whatever I please, but if you continue to refer to me as *brother...*” He pushes against my lower stomach, making me sit on my mattress so he can lean into me. He runs his nose from my lips to my ear, lightly biting my earlobe and eliciting a gasp from me that I was too slow to stop.

His chuckle is dark and low, “Let’s just say, the things I’m going to do to you no brother would do to his sister.”

I gulp slowly, fighting the urge to both moan his name and curse him to hell. I’ve been called a lot of things in life, teenagers are probably the biggest assholes on the planet, and middle school left me with emotional battle scars. But in all the names I’ve dealt with, no one was ever able to label me a coward. In the face of any adversary, I will not back down, even if it means I fail miserably in the process. I may end up in a puddle of blood or tears - one that is of my own making - but you won’t walk away unscathed, that’s for damn sure. You’ll know exactly who you fucked with.

Quickly, I lay back against the mattress and put all my weight on Rey’s firm grip on my wrists, trapping his hand long

enough to wrap my legs around his waist and hook my heels. His eyes flare with lust that instantly has my core clenching with need, but I ignore it. Getting off is not exactly what I have planned in this moment, but teasing myself will be the best fuel to the flames my stepbrother induces in me.

“Don’t play a game with me because I like to play filthy,” using my legs, I pull him forward, his hard length roughly hitting my panty clad pussy. I roll my hips against him, allowing myself a moment to feel like a different girl in a different place under different circumstances.

I watch Rey gleefully as he visibly swallows and forces himself to stay unaffected, but that glazed hunger in his eye is not so easy to hide.

I toss my head back I continue to torture both of us, rolling my hips up and down while his breaths become heavier and faster.

“Rey...” I whimper his name biting my lip when he growls and drops his lips to my neck, while his other hand grips my hips but not stopping my movements. I love that I can do this to him, make him lose his cool and aloof attitude. It gives me a sense of power I’ve yet to feel with another guy.

Immediately, my mind wanders to Noah. Would he react in the same way if I were to try? Obviously, he has no interest in me, but I don’t think I’ll ever stop fantasizing the possibilities.

Forcing my thoughts to clear, I arch my neck to give Rey’s greedy lips more access while my own kick up into a grin.

Time to show him how I like to play.

I unhook my ankles and pull my knees toward me, planting my feet on his waist while he’s otherwise distracted by my sexual spell, and push him back so unexpectedly that he slams against the dresser.

I reach under my pillow while standing straight with all of my full five feet four inches. I pop out the blade on my knife and point it at him.

“If you insist on fucking with me, I can and will play dirty, Rey. By the time I’m done with you, I’ll be your new goddess,

but you'll never have a taste of my heaven. Now get the fuck out before I change my mind and make you bleed.”

We have a stare down for a few silent moments, neither of us willing to break eye contact...that is until he throws his head back and lets loose a thunderous laugh. The sound is mocking and is like a bucket of cold water on my heated skin.

He snaps his hand forward and grabs my wrist, squeezing hard enough that my fingers loosen on the handle of my switchblade. The sound of it clattering against the floor is like a death knell to my ears.

Rey cups the back of my head in such a tender way that if he were anyone else, I'd melt, but the blackness in his eyes does nothing but put a tremble of fear in my blood. The light in his eyes goes out and all that's left is a cold and lethal man standing in his place. Detached, emotionless, a man capable of killing without remorse. He is unhinged, depraved and ruthless...I fucking thirst for it.

Why? Because there's nothing quite like the feel of fear pumping through your system to get you on your toes and this motherfucker has me like a ballerina. It's fight or fuck time. I don't know if my next intake of breath is my last, and there's something about that that has my panties wetter now than when I was rubbing against his dick.

“You've just started a dangerous game, sweet girl, and I'm going to enjoy your begging. *Dios no te salvará ahora.*”

He smashes his lips to mine in a brutal kiss, sucking my lip into his mouth before biting hard enough to make me bleed. With a gasp he shoves away from me, my blood on his lip before he walks out of the room, leaving me standing there feeling hot, embarrassed and so fucking needy.

I don't know what I've gotten myself into with Rey and this whole fucked up town, but if he thought that little show of psychotic dominance was going to scare me into submission, he'll find that I'm just as dark as he is.

Walking over to my door, I slam it shut and spin on my heel. I rummage through my blankets and find my phone. I

have a few missed calls from my mom, so I shoot her off a text letting her know I'm good and nothing more. My anger at her has dimmed a little, especially with how my father was this morning; I'm sure she was just following him hoping he was the man we knew, but Roberto proved to be quite the fucking opposite. I'm not sure if I can really blame her for being a loyal wife, she could have been fooled just like me.

After I send the text, I click over to my playlist and let the words and beat of BertieBanz wash over my mood. I pull off an outfit from the hanger in my closet, opting to go with revenge rather than comfort for this bitch ass party tonight, and get started on my hair.

I go with a slicked high pony, taking one lock of my hair and wrapping it around the band of my hair tie before curling the small strands of my sideburns and hair spraying them against my skin.

Next, I pull out my makeup bag and small round stand-up mirror from my bag and get comfortable on my bed. I apply a little concealer, but not too much because I absolutely loathe the feel of it on my skin - and I have a habit of scrubbing my hands down my face when people get on my nerves, which is often - then start on my smokey eyes.

The clock reads seven o'clock and Nimona said she'd be here at eight, so I quickly add some blush before topping it all off with mascara and dark purple lipstick.

I don't know how Coventry parties, but I know from experience that I'll need to eat beforehand, or I'll be sick before the night is even over, so with one last glance at the clock, I undress and pull on my outfit.

Rey talks a big game, but I'm nothing if not a master player.

## TWENTY-THREE

---

### ‘SHE KNOWS’ J COLE

AFTER WAKING UP FROM A SHITTY DAY SLASH JET INDUCED coma, I took a much-needed shower and got ready for the shindig these fuckers have on for tonight. I may not like anyone here, but I never say no to free booze. Fuck, I hope they have alcohol. Val texted me an hour ago, letting me know she was getting ready too, and would be in the kitchen eating once she was done.

I smirk to myself thinking about the reason that has become her ritual now, eating before partying. It was my seventeenth birthday party out on the lake property and Rico supplied the liquor while everyone pitched in for kegs to be delivered. It was a wild as fuck night with lots of random chants for chugging. Val bet three hundred bucks she could out drink Rico and being the cliché douche that he can be, he shook her hand on it.

Neither of them fared well the next day, but Val was three hundred dollars richer. Of course, the money went straight to her mother’s credit card debts, but Val was happy to help her out, even if it cost her a liver.

My smirk disappears when I think of that. Roberto could have easily fixed that with one word instead of letting his kid grow up too fast. Fucking cunt.

Blowing out a breath, I finish lacing up my boots and stand before pulling on my black wool trench coat over my leather vest and black jeans. I leave my hair as it is, haphazard and wet, before tucking my gun in my waist and my phone into my pocket. As I go to open my door, Nimona is standing there with her fist raised to knock.

She jumps in surprise, “Sorry, I was just coming by to bring you your mask.”

My brow arches, “Mask? We doing hood shit tonight, ‘Mona?”

Her face blushes at my nickname for her, but she plays it cool with an amused eye roll, “Nah, no robbin’ tonight. It’s customary for the guys to wear *Día del los Muertos* masks.”

She hands me a black gift bag before asking after Val.

“She’s in the kitchen. I’ll be right there.”

I watch her walk away before pulling the mask free of the purple paper stuffing. The entire thing is a dark gray with black, red, white and yellow diamonds forming flowers around the eyes. Small studded white diamonds line up perfectly around the mouth, making up the skull teeth and stitched smile. The whole thing is cool as fuck and something I could see myself wearing every year for the Day of the Dead.

I pull the harness over my head and settle the mask on my face, loving the mesh netting that covers my eyes. When I look in the mirror, I decide to tie my hair back into a sloppy as fuck manbun, so it doesn’t hang over and cover the badassery that is my new favorite mask.

With my wool jacket on and my hair pulled back into a style I never do; I look like I could be someone else. I smirk under my mask, making a mental note to scare the shit out of Val at some point tonight. Not wanting her to see the mask yet, I take it off and tuck it into the inside breast pocket of my jacket, before releasing my hair and leaving the room. I don’t have a key for this door, but luckily, I know how to pick a lock, so I lock it from the inside and close it before walking over to Val’s room and doing the same thing.



Growing up in the hood like we did means you pick up little valuable life lessons, things that may seem inconsequential at the time, but help you in the long run. Especially during unanticipated times, like say, breaking into the school the night before the first day of senior year. We spent the night super-gluing everything, including but not limited to, every single pen or pencil to the table top of his desk.

I make it to the kitchen and all thoughts of adolescent pranks flee my mind when my eyes land on Val as she blows into the cup of noodles in her hand. My eyes stray to the outfit she's wearing, my cock standing to salute the absolute goth goddess before us.

The entire dress that gloves her curvy body is black, but the intricate design on it just adds to her sinuous frame. Black leather cups barely reach an inch above her nipples and push her breasts up, making my mouth water for a lick of her cleavage. Wrapping around her ribs, stomach and the tops of her hips is black lace that is stitched together in a spiderweb pattern, exposing her tan skin beneath.

The tight leather skirt stops just beneath her ass cheeks, and it takes a fuck ton of restraint not to slap the shit out of Nimona just to cover her eyes from viewing what I want no one else to see, man or woman. Fuck! I want her.

I want her tied to my bed.

I want my name on her lips.

I want my cum on her skin.

I want my tongue in every motherfucking hole she has.

She makes me mad, a fucking lunatic in a constant state of need. I'm frenzied for her, hungry for a taste of her orgasms, fucking *aching* for just one damn night spent with my face buried between her legs.

But I'll never have her, and that's my fucking fault. My own cowardice is what caused this abyss between us. I can't right my wrongs because I'm motherfucking guilty of the falsehood I weaved in her mind about me.

Me, no one else. No one to blame for my fuck up, no one to hate for the loss of what could have been before it even began.

But fuck me if I'll let anyone else have her. It may sound fucking crazy, but if I can't have Valeria, no one else will. I will cut, shoot and motherfucking kill anyone who tries to have what I can't. My fault or not, I'll make every hungry man or woman lusting after Val feel the same bereft longing I feel.

“Uh, you okay, Noh?”

“Yeah.” I try to clear my head, but there's no wiping the look of anger I know marks my face, not completely at least, “Just thinking of all the assholes I'm going to have to bury for getting handsy with you.”

Val's face flushes red before she chuckles, “Fuck that, don't stop someone from giving me a good fucking. Maybe then I won't be so strung out.”

Val turns away, laughing at her own joke, so she doesn't see the dark look on my face, but Nimona does and one glance at her tells me the bitch sees in me what Val doesn't...an absolute slave to the impossible.

---

The party is exactly what I hoped for; woods, kegs, a bar of top-shelf liquor, hell, I even see some people handing out my favorite party favors for free.

I think I just fell in love with rich people. Wealthy love...is that a thing? It should be.

Still, my mood hasn't lifted and the constant glare on my face has caused Val to question me any chance she thought Nimona wasn't listening, but I can tell that little creep—*albeit a hot creep*—listens in on everything. She said Val could trust her, but I don't believe that for a second.

“Where should we start first?” Val asks me. Though she's kind to Nimona and tries to keep her somewhat included in conversations, I can tell she's unsure of the girl as well. Still,

Val has one of those hearts that won't allow her to make someone feel uncomfortable just because she doesn't know them.

It's annoying as fuck.

"The bar is always a good place to start." I snatch up her hand and begin walking, but of course, Val stops when she notices Nimona isn't following.

"You coming?"

She gives us a seemingly genuine smile, "Nah, go ahead, I'm waiting for my date to get here." She blushes before looking around nervously, "He's one of the elites. I didn't think he even knew my name, but he asked me to accompany him!"

Accompany? Who the fuck talks like that in real life?

Call me pessimistic as fuck, but I don't trust anyone who is labeled an elitist. They're usually pricks and after learning that Nimona was adopted, I don't have the best feeling about it. Hearing the stories about Roberto, Helena, the Navarros, hell, even Rey's parentage and adoption, I'm beginning to learn that being taken into a family of important people in this town isn't all it's cracked up to be.

"Um, yeah, that's great, 'Mona.'" Val says, using the nickname I coined the girl with, but her tone suggests she's suspicious of this elitist guy.

"Thanks. Anyway, he told me to meet him by the old church building so we could hang out before joining everyone for the ritual ceremony. If you need me, call me."

"Where's the church?" Val asks.

"There's a trail behind the makeshift bar. It goes through the woods for about two hundred yards." Nimona turns after giving us a wave, but something has me calling out to her.

"Mona! Are you, I mean, how well do you know this guy?"

Her brows furrow, "Everyone knows him, Noah. His father is on the Council and he's Quarterback of Coventry's high

school football team.”

“Is he a good guy?” Val questions.

Nimona chuckles darkly, “Coventry doesn’t have good guys, but don’t worry, I’m not a good girl.” She gives us a wink and walks off, reminding us to be at the clubhouse before midnight for the ceremony.

We watch her walk away before turning in the opposite direction. Fuck it, can’t do anything about it. It’s not like we know anyone here to say she’s putting herself in a shitty situation anyway. Hell, we don’t even know her. She could be a serial killer for all we know.

“We’ll take two Coronas with lime and two Jose Cuervo gold shots.” Val says when we reach the bar.

The guy tending is looking down at his phone, wearing a bored as fuck facial expression as he scrolls through social media.

“Got IDs?” He doesn’t look up as he asks the question. Fuck me, even the help is snobby as hell around here.

“Hey, shitface, get off your phone and get us our fucking drinks before I break your fucking thumbs.”

His head snaps up at my not-empty-at-all threat, “Who the fuck—” his words turn into sputtering once he takes in Val, “I mean, I apologize. I shouldn’t have been on my phone. Let me just get those for you. On the house.”

Val and I glance at one another, both of us asking the other silent questions as the bartender quickly but proficiently gets our drinks. Once he sets them down in front of us, I open my mouth to ask him how he knows her, but Val shakes her head and takes the shot glass in hand.

“I don’t even want to know. It’s been a shitty day, lets just get fucked up.”

I smile at her, and she grins back at me as we clink our glasses, chasing the burn of tequila with the cool beer. I drop a twenty in the practically empty tip jar, blowing the guy a kissy face as we walk away to sight see and people watch.

We get similar reactions from the party goers. Some look at us like we're a couple of goth kids at a barbie tea party, while others whisper behind their hands. Most of all though, there's not one kind glance from these people, but no one has the courage to say anything loud enough for us to hear.

That is, until we pass a group of pretentious looking bitches.

"I bet she's a homewrecker like her whore mother."

Val spins on her heel and walks right up to the bitches with her head held high and her hips swaying with each step. I stand back to watch my girl show these cunts how to put up or shut the fuck up.

I bring my bottle up to my lips as Val eyes the four broads, "Which one of you STDs said that shit?"

I chuckle into the bottle, the evil cunts glaring at me like I'd be wounded by it. I just smile broader and wink. The one who is obviously the ringleader in this glitter band, is a blonde in a bright pink cocktail dress with knee high white boots, not very sensible for the woods if you ask me, but what the fuck do I know about prissy fashion? Her backup girls look like a group of carbon copies who took hammers to their collective faces. All Botox, all fake as fuck.

"How dare you insult me!" She all but shrieks as her little puppets mumble their agreement. "I am Charlotte Dubois—"

Her words are cut off by the gasps and ooo's from the crowd around us when Val quickly flips her pocket knife out like I taught her, pressing the flat part of the blade to the surprised bitch's face while leaning in to whisper conspiratorially.

"I don't give a fuck who you are, *sucia*. Your father could be God himself and I'm still better than you. So, listen up and listen closely, you can run your mouth about me," she raises her voice so everyone can hear her, "but say one thing about my family again, and I'll force feed you thumbtacks."

She pulls the knife away, leaving a thin slice down the bitch's face, but to her credit, she doesn't flinch. It's actually

kind of impressive...and creepy. I mean, who doesn't flinch at a papercut let alone a slice from a knife? A sociopathic barbie, that's who.

I make a note to keep my eye on her.

Val moves away from the four and comes back to my side before pointing at me, "And this guy right here, his name is Noah and he's off limits to any of you skank ranks. *Like, got it? Okay!*"

Those last words were said like a preppy bimbo, and they have me chuckling as I toss my arm around Val's shoulder and kiss her temple.

"You're such a vicious little girl." I whisper into her ear, both me and my hard as fuck cock impressed with her actions and feeling like kings over her claim.

I try not to look too deeply into Val's off-limits proclamation, but I can't help the puff of my chest when I repeat her words in my head.

*She thinks you're gay, asshole,* my mind cruelly whispers to me, dashing every bit of warmth I had for a moment.

We move away from the crowd and continue walking through the rest of the area. The party is held in a large clearing between trees with a wide path that leads to a building I can barely make out in the distance. I can see a large ornate fountain through the fog, but not much else is visible.

Eventually we find a spot surrounded by a crowd of guys and girls who seem to be the outcasts. They're alone in a crowd, standing out like the lone black marker amongst the more colorful ones. One of them looks up from an old leather-bound book that has seen better days, her brown hair is shaved on the sides, but the top is long, pushed to one side with the ends reaching her waist. She's dressed mostly in black but has splashes of different colors on the patches that are sewn into the ripped skirt she's wearing. Her arms, chest and legs are covered in tattoos.

Her friends are dressed similarly, nineteen nineties grunge. She stands up as we come to a stop, "Nice show putting bitch

Dubois in her place.”

“Should have cut her tongue out.” One guy in a beanie says as he plays with a zippo lighter, he looks to be the youngest in the crowd, like a freshman in high school.

“Shut the hell up, Miko, you know who her dad is.” She says to the kid who shrugs in reply, “Her dad is known to be the most ruthless council member, *off record*, so I’d watch my back if I were you. It was still a pleasure to watch, definitely spank-bank material.”

I can’t help it; I grin at this ballsy bitch.

“Uh, thanks. I’m—”

“Valeria Calavera, the bastard child and her pet, Noah.” All my thoughts of actually liking her fly out the window with that, “We’ve heard all the rumors, and none of us believe them. Fuck this town and the ever-flowing grapevine. I’m Rina.”

She proceeds to introduce us to the rest of her crew, two guys and three girls which she informs us are all the black sheep of the town. Old money castaways.

“We’ve all been forced to enroll at CU but with the money our parents have, we don’t even have to actually study to get a degree. Corruption knows no bounds.”

Everyone gets to talking once a blunt comes out of nowhere, but I’m not much for social interaction like Val is, so I stand and tell her I’m getting us more drinks before making my way back to the bar.

I get Val needs the low down on everyone who’s anyone here, but I’d rather find out on my own. I’ve come to learn that the true colors of a person aren’t revealed through words, they’re found when that person thinks no one is watching.

I order a drink and leave another tip before making my way toward the woods surrounding the party. I want to know who these people are, so I’ll do it from my favorite place, the shadows. I find a decently covered tree and drop to the ground with my beer and joint, leaning my back against the trunk as I watch the kids of Coventry.

I'm not sure how much time passes with me standing in the woods cataloging everyone, but my legs grow weary from sitting on the ground, so I stand and move around.

Seems like everyone here is a backstabbing asshole. I witnessed more than one guy and girl cheat on their partner, sneaking away from dates to fuck off with someone else only to come back like nothing happened. I watched manipulation at play, strategic and well worded lies be told...basically I witnessed a town no moral bound person could survive in. Thankfully, I know how to adapt.

“Stalker, huh?” I turn to the sound of a voice behind me only to find Mateo, the guy Val was with earlier.

“I could ask you the same question. You following me or just stalking in general?”

I casually take a step away from him and lean against a nearby tree. He doesn't miss the move, his crazy as hell eyes following my movements.

“Relax. I'm sure that asshole Rey painted a colorful picture of me, but I'm not that bad.”

He holds out his hand, so I slowly grasp it, firmly squeezing as he smiles like he just won a prize, “I'm actually worse.”

I feel my own smile tugging up the corner of my lips, “Good, cause the rest of this crowd is boring as all fuck.”

He continues to smile at me like a total creep before it drops from his face suddenly, making me feel like I'm suffering whiplash.

“Did Rey warn you about why you and the princess were ordered to be here tonight with the rest of us?”

My back straightens at the implications of his words, “No, what is it?”

“If I tell you, which you will want to know, you'll owe me one favor, Cabañas.”

What a fucking cock face prick! Who the fuck does this kind of shit to people?



“Fuck off.” I turn to leave but Mateo stops me, his face wiped of all mischievousness.

“Fuck it. No favor, I actually liked the Princess. Tonight, they pick from the next generation Society members, the females. She will be picked. I overheard my dick of a father talking. Seems only her *brother* can step in for her.”

My mind races with this information but something doesn't make sense, but I can't put my finger on it with this fear rushing through me.

“Picked for what?”

His eyes glaze over as though he's slipping inside his mind, his voice comes out as a whisper.

“For La Muerte.”

Fuck.

## TWENTY-FOUR

---

### ‘DISSOLVED GIRL’ MASSIVE ATTACK

RINA SEEMS LIKE A COOL GIRL, ROUGH AND BLUNT, BUT I LIKE that. She seems like she’s incapable of being a two-face because she gets too much joy out of telling you straight to your face what she really thinks of you. I can appreciate that.

Still, I remind myself to be weary. A backstabber is meld from a lifetime of pain and betrayal. It’s a slippery slope to navigate when you’ve been duped back-to-fucking-back, and most people just succumb and become the deceiver rather than play the victim again. Can’t say I blame them, but I don’t respect them.

I’ll never respect a person who intentionally betrays someone they claimed to love, no matter how much shit they went through in life. Like a cheating husband or wife? Shit, I’d be friends with a rabid bat over them. If a cockroach like that can’t even respect the person they will grow old with, bare children with, and give a lifetime of whispered nothings...no one can convince me they’d have even an ounce of loyalty to me.

I’m living proof that you can be betrayed by the one person you never suspected would ever do such a thing, and still have respect for yourself.

I'm morally disobedient, I have the mouth of a drunkard, the mind of a succubus, and the drive of a scorned woman... but I will never stoop as low as my father has.

"Hellooo?" Rina's voice pulls me from my thoughts.

"Shit, sorry, I was thinking...never mind. What were you saying?"

"I was saying I think Noah got lost somewhere. He's been gone for a while now."

I look toward the bar, but there's too many people in the way, so I take my phone out and dial. As it rings, I notice that while I was deep in thought, someone must have handed out masks to all the guys. Skull masks cover every guy's face, even Rina's guys have their faces covered.

Noah's phone goes to voice message, so I hang up and text him before standing and looking around.

"Did the party turn into a *Day of the Dead* celebration?"

One of Rina's guy friends - I can't remember his name - walks over to me, his bright pink skull mask has turquoise flowers at the corners of the bone-smile with glitter and jewels placed perfectly all around.

"Something like that. On ritual nights like tonight, every guy wears a mask, so the one chosen isn't biasedly picked."

Something dark slithers down my spine at his words.

"Picked for what?"

Everyone looks at one another in a *is-she-for-real* kind of way.

"Blood sacrifice." The guy and Rina say in unison.

"What the fuck? Like they kill someone?!"

"Shhh, lower your voice!" Rina hisses as she looks around us, "They don't kill anyone, they just cut them. Five slashes on the back for the five leaders in the council. The offering that is picked is from the pool of next generation Calavera Society prospects Their blood is an offering to La Muerte for wisdom and guidance. Didn't your dad teach you anything?"

I snap my eyes to her and something in my expression has her putting her hands up in surrender. Meanwhile, I'm frantic inside. My stomach sinks, my heart climbing into my throat at the thought of Rey being subjected to that horrifying situation, all in the name of what? My twisted family legacy?

He chose this life, Val. He has enough brains and money to leave, yet he stays despite the possibilities.

I know what my mind whispers is true but call me ridiculous because I still can't stomach the idea of someone cutting him open...no matter how egotistical that asshole is. Without wanting to let anyone know my worry over anyone in particular, I word my question carefully.

I clear my throat, my eyes still sweeping the crowd for Noah, "So, who are the next generational picks?"

Rina shrugs before turning away, "Every guy between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one."

What the fuck?

Rina may act cool and aloof like I'm acting now, but the way she laces her fingers with the guy next to her tells me she's anything but. This whole town is nothing but a dark act. A fucked-up play where there are no heroes, just masked villains and the next scene is a bloody one.

Wait, does that mean Noah could be picked as well?

"Yep," Shit, I hadn't meant to say that out loud, "he may be an outsider, but he's under your dad's name, therefore he can be chosen as well."

Rina gives me a pitying look before turning away and speaking with her boyfriend in low tones. I can't see his eyes through the mesh that covers the eye sockets of the mask, but I can feel them on me over Rina's shoulder.

My lip curls in response to the vile slithering I feel on my skin. I turn from him, still feeling his eyes on me as I search the grounds for Noah. I reach the bar and ask the guy behind the counter if he's seen Noah, but he just shakes his head, claiming he didn't watch what direction Noah went after ordering himself another drink. With a sigh and a thank you, I

leave him. I decide to go back to Rina and ask her where he could have possibly gone, but Rina is nowhere in sight, only her boyfriend who still watches me through the crowd.

I flip him off before looking down at my phone. It's fifteen minutes from midnight. Fuck! I need to find Noah and tell him we need to leave. I'll steal someone's fucking credit card just to give us a headstart, but there's no way we can stay here. Not with the threat of his life or wellbeing on the line. I knew this place was shit on morals and boundaries, but blood sacrifices?

That's a whole other level of hell-to-the-no.

I call Noah when I reach the woods, ignoring people who seem to be pulling their clothes on and making their way back to the party before the fucking lamb is picked for the slaughter. Damn, these people are so screwed up. No one seems to be totally against it.

Rina's clenched jaw and gripping fingers flashes in my mind. Maybe people do care, but they can't do shit about it. Maybe my comment about starting a rebellion wasn't so off the mark. No, fuck saving this town, I just need to save Noah and get the hell out of this living graveyard of a town.

I move through the trees, following a small pathway that's lined with rocks on either side, making it look like a trail rather than the road to hell it feels like. I'm sure during the day, these woods are as harmless looking like the rest of the town.

The sounds of people partying begin to fade enough that I decide I'm too far - *no way would Noah be out here* - and turn back, but there's a sound of someone whispering down the trail, so I decide I better just keep following the path. I really don't want to get caught alone by a group of cunts like the Barbie bitches.

I reach the end of the path and come to the old church Nimona talked about. I want to turn back, but I can still hear people talking down the darkened path that's grown considerably darker now that a cloud has moved in front of the full moon. The two male voices sound almost familiar, but I can't hear them well enough and I'm too nervous to yell out to

strange men while in the middle of an abandoned property surrounded by woods.

Yeah, I totally just set myself up for a horror movie death.

Moving closer to the church, hoping to find a spot to hide, I call Noah's phone again. It continues to go to his voicemail making me growl under my breath.

"Where the hell are you?" I whisper into the phone while I glance around for a place to hide. "Meet me at the old church, we need to talk. There's a small trail behind the bar that leads right to it."

I hang up and stare at the old stone structure that seems to be hugged by the drooping branches of the weeping willow trees. I move closer to it, hoping Nimona is still out here but everything is quiet except for the frogs who sing their haunting songs to one another.

Shivers run up my arms as I stare at the building that I'm sure was *never* home to a loving god a day in its life. Why did I tell Noah to meet me here of all places?

"Valeriaaaaa." I hear someone unfamiliar singsong from the surrounding woods.

More voices join in as my breathing hitches before turning ragged, my head becoming a swivel as I try to find the people hiding the shadows.

"Come play, little whore." One says followed by laughter from somewhere else.

"I can make you scream."

"Scream for us, let the devil hear your song."

"Come here, little girl."

I pull my knife free and steel my spine, but before I can open my mouth to challenge these hidden cowards, a leather gloved hand wraps around my knife wielding wrist while another shoves my scream back into my mouth.

I'm going to fucking die and I haven't even lived.

I kick my legs out like a wild animal as I drug backwards, but it's no use. Whoever is holding me is much stronger than I am, their grip is like steel. The voices no longer taunt me, but I can't be sure they've gone quiet because the sound of my pounding heart and rushing blood sound rage in my ears like a war drum in the middle of a forest fire.

Through my peripheral vision, I see us moving toward the darkened church and I scream as loud as I can behind the hand, trying to elbow my captor and kick his shins. I scratch and pull at the wrist holding my face as we enter the church. The bastard kicks the door shut before slamming me face first against the rickety wood.

"I told you, little one, you started a game. Now we're going to play." Rey's cold detached voice has my eyes widening and my lungs freezing before my whole body heats up with my suddenly boiling rage.

Feeling me stiff in his arms, he chuckles against me, grinding his hard cock against my ass before he whispers brokenly.

"Don't freeze up now. You've been chosen, but you have to come willingly." Fuck me, I'm one sick and twisted bitch because that hungry voice coupled with those words has my core throbbing. I've always had strange and devilish tastes in foreplay, things that no sane woman wants, but I can't change who I am and what I want.

Not that I've actually tried to change.

Kidnapping, forced, even drugged are all kinks of mine... of course I'll only take it as role playing. Still, getting a somewhat real deal just unlocked a new level of kink.

When I don't melt in his arms like I'm sure the cocky bastard is expecting, I'm yanked away from the wall and turned to face the room. The moonlight spills in through the old stained-glass windows, casting a crazy kaleidoscope against the wooden church pews. Suddenly, my knife appears in front of my face before he places it against my throat.

I lift my hands on instinct to fight back, but Rey's tsking stops me.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." He slides the tip down, leaving a burning sting of pain in its wake as beads of blood roll down to my cleavage, "Besides, I can practically hear the lust in your heartbeats. I bet your pussy is dripping, isn't it? So eager to be my helpless victim."

I whimper at the pain of the shallow slice and the hard throbbing of my clit.

His laugh is dark, "Yeah, my little muñeca likes dirty danger."

My fingers clench at my side before the scent of burning wood and weed hits my nostrils. Someone else is with Rey, but who? I pretend not to notice the newcomer as Rey continues a path down my chest with the knife as he pulls the back of my head to his chest.

"I'm going to let go of your mouth. You're not going to scream, are you? No one will hear you, but you'll still be punished for it."

I swallow thickly, my mind warring over fucking or fighting. One part of me begs me to make a break for it, but the other, more dominant part of me is hungry for whatever this is. For whoever this stranger is standing beside my stepbrother as my second captor.

I shake my head and I swear I hear the bells of hell tolling for my lost soul.

"Good girl." Rey whispers into my ear.



## TWENTY-FIVE

---

### 'BULLY' JAY.F.K BEATS

THE DUST MOTES DANCE AROUND US, BEARING WITNESS TO THE knife slicing through the leather fabric of my stepsister's corset top. The light of the moon gives praise as her breasts fall free, her nipples puckering in the cold stagnant air of the church.

It was all too easy to get Noah on my side, one little promise of protecting Valeria and he was under my thumb like I knew he would be. I watched him tonight, how his unease and antisocial demeanor put him apart from everyone, even from the outcasts. I knew he and Valeria would find themselves with the outsiders, being as they, themselves are the outcasts.

Little did they know, Rina is Mateo's ex-girlfriend, and that bitch is beholden to me until I say otherwise...which will be until her usefulness runs dry. She royally fucked over Mateo about a year ago and I caught her in the act. Rina begged me not to tell Mateo, after all, she knew he'd have no problem killing her manipulative ass. In favor of keeping her treacherous secret, Rina broke up with Mateo - *which helped me in convincing him to get back on his medication* - and has become my little slave.

She's my victim and I wield the axe over her head. She was her father's tool in a deadly game against the Del Toro

family, and she lost...to me.

An eye for an eye.

I met up with Rina after leaving Mateo's house and told her she would befriend Valeria. If she didn't, she knew the consequences. Defying me is never a safe option.

I made sure Rina had the correct lines to feed Valeria's fears and worry for her friend's life and the rest, as they say, is history.

Getting Noah here was basically the same, only it was Mateo who passed along the message of the ritual picking from a pool of females. When Noah found me, it was too easy to confirm what he was told. He went from threatening my life to begging for hers. It was pathetic, yet it still twisted the lifelong bitter blade in my heart.

Not even my mother would have ever begged for my life.

I shoved those thoughts aside and made Noah an offer he would never refuse.

'Do what I say for the rest of the night, and I'll make sure she won't be called tonight.'

His eyes narrowed, his Adam's apple bobbed, 'What is with you people? Doesn't anyone here give a fuck about anything besides their agenda?'

I shrugged, 'You don't have to take the offer, I can just stand back while they cut into Valeria's skin. Hell, maybe I'll even help them.'

Noah pulled his gun on me, 'Or I can just kill you and get her out of here.'

I smirked, 'you'd be doing me a favor, but none for her. She'll still be called, still be bled, and you'll have wasted time arguing with me.'

After a moment, he growled and shoved me away, 'Fuck, fine. I'll do it, asshole.'

My smile was victorious as I lightly touched his throat, my thumb moving across his clenched jaw as his pulse beat

rapidly, 'Be careful with promises, the devil is listening.'

Noah has good instincts, but Coventry and his love for Valeria will be his downfall. This is my town, and everyone plays a game I lead in, whether they realize it or not. The only one coming out on top is me because I always get what I want.

And what I want is standing in the light of the moon, half naked and looking like an ethereal goddess.

"Turn around." I tell her, knowing Noah can't speak or he'll give away his identity.

I watch as Valeria slowly turns in place, my breath holding in my lungs as I wait for her to recognize her friend. Her eyes rove over him, his mask covering his face. Thankfully the wool jacket he came in is nowhere in sight and his hair is pulled into a low man bun making him look like a guy who slicks back his hair. While his shirt covers his skin and the done up top button of his collar blocks the view of his tattoos, I can still see the wheels turning in her head.

Does she recognize his clothes? He's wearing gloves like my own, but does she spot Noah's mannerisms in the way his fists tighten at his sides?

When her eyes reach his hard cock beneath his jeans, her pupils dilate like she's high on LSD and all weariness melts into submissive hunger. It makes my mouth water with the need to take them both.

"Take the rest of your clothes off." I tell her, my burning lust evident in my husky voice.

She hesitates, her eyes bouncing between me and the stranger at my side.

"If you're worried about my friend here, I assure you," I roughly grab the back of Noah's neck and force him to his knees, "It's me you should fear. Do as I say, or I'll make sure your Noah suffers for it."

"You fucking prick." Valeria snarls but she shimmies out of the dress before kicking the fabric aside.

Left only in her buckle strap boots and black thong, I'm struck with a beauty I've never seen in another person before.

I'm not a man of religion, unless you count my worship of power as an affiliation but staring at the glaring and heavy breathing woman before me, I feel like a man on the verge of bending a knee in fealty. A bit bold, but I'm nothing if not straight to the point.

Her body trembles, whether from the cold or fear, I do not know nor do I care. I simply want more.

More of her shaky breaths.

More of her flushed skin.

More of her defiant eyes.

I want more than Valeria is willing to give and that alone makes me salivate to just take it from her.

"I said take the rest of your clothes off, did I not?"

"Who is he?" She asks rather than follow my order, and though I want to be pissed, I'm relieved she doesn't recognize her best friend. I smile at that thought.

"He's no one worth mentioning."

I can feel Noah's rage, but he knows what's at stake, so he continues to stand on his knees like the good boy he is.

*My* good boy and *my* good girl. Oh, what a blessed night it has become.

"Make me repeat myself again, and I'll be sure to call Mateo. He's watching over Noah at the moment. Seems your friend got a little caught up in the ritual night festivities."

I look down at my watch before arching a brow, "Five minutes to the choosing. I suggest you do as I say or your Noah will be bearing the marks of a blade."

Noah's head snaps to me, the pieces clicking into place, my lies making themselves known in his head. I wink at him but before he can stand or retaliate, Valeria's panties hit my chest.

I'm surprised Noah didn't speak out when he realized he'd been caught in a spider's web, but the object of his silent longing distracts him with her nakedness. I watch him as he watches her. His chest rising and falling while his hands open and close like all he wants to do is grab Valeria and take her beneath the cross.

Once Valeria kicks her shoes to the side, I bend down to Noah's ear, "Don't think the threat is nonexistent. Move from your spot or speak a word and I'll slit her throat then fuck you over her corpse."

He looks up at me and though I can't see his eyes, I can feel the promise of retribution. It makes my dick even harder.

I walk over to a seething Valeria and grab a hold of her long ponytail, wrapping the cold silky strands around my fist and yanking her head back. Her chest has small beads of blood from where I cut her with her knife, so I dip my head and lick her soft skin, lapping up the almost dry blood wishing I had done this when it was fresh. Her whimper is barely audible, but I hear it nonetheless. Unable to stop myself, I move to one of her breasts, swirling my tongue around her pointed nipple before biting it.

"Oh, fuck!" She hisses but doesn't stop me.

"Soon, little one." I promise as I stand, cupping her bare mound, "soon I'll be fucking you."

I slide my gloved finger toward her entrance, circling it but not penetrating her, "Then I'll fuck Noah while he fucks you."

Her eyes are delirious, her words barely coherent, "Noah is gay, dipshit. He wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole."

My brows raise in surprise as honest to God shock rushes through me. She thinks Noah is gay? I know he likes men, that much is plainly obvious, but does she truly believe he has no interest in her? Is she that blind or just plain stupid?

I turn to Noah who tilts his head to the side, his shoulders stiff as a board. Hmm, Noah led this girl on, but why? I store that information for later.

“So, Noah has never touched you?” I swirl my finger again before sliding up to her clit. Even through the gloves, I can tell how wet she is.

“No.” She whimpers.

“Do you want him to touch you?” I reach back down to her entrance, barely penetrating her only to stop when she only nods.

“Answer me, little one. Use your words.”

“Yes! Damn you, yes, I want him. But he doesn’t feel the same so leave him out of this.”

I arch a brow over my shoulder, watching Noah as I plunge my finger into his walking wet dream. She gasps and grips my wrist as I pump into her tight heat, the sound of her arousal making me want to grip my weeping cock.

As much fun as it would be to get Valeria off in front of Noah, allowing him nothing but voyeurism, I need to stick to my plans.

I pull my finger free and suck it into my mouth with my eyes on hers. She tastes clean and pure though I know she’s anything but pure. What I wouldn’t give to kill the guy who ripped through that innocent veil. I thank my fucking luck it wasn’t Noah, or I’d feel obligated to kill him in his sleep.

The shock of this possessiveness snaps me out of my musings. Valeria isn’t mine to keep, she’s mine to break, and I’ll use her best friend to do it.

I yank her behind me as I walk toward Noah, shoving her in front of him.

“Put your foot on his shoulder so he can have a taste of your sweet cunt.”

Once again, she hesitates but before I can threaten her, she steps forward, her pussy barely an inch from Noah’s mask, before placing her left foot on his shoulder.

I reach down and lift Noah’s mask enough for his mouth to delve into Valeria’s dripping flower. And delve he does. Wasting no time, like a man starving, Noah wraps his arm

around his clueless best friend's thigh while his other hand slips between her legs.

I watch transfixed as Noah's tongue slides between her lips, swirling around her clit as his finger slides into her. I notice a glove on the floor, and I make a note to punish Noah later for removing it. I can't say I blame him, I wanted to feel Valeria's wet heat on my skin as well, but it seems out of the two of us, it's Noah who can't be bothered with anything that doesn't give him what he wants.

I slowly unravel my hand from Valeria's hair as she closes her eyes, giving in to the sensations Noah supplies her. With her eyes closed, I quickly take out my new phone and snap a picture of the three of us.

Blackmail is my favorite game.

I hear Noah growl as he licks, sucks and finger fucks her. I can hear his desperation to bury himself inside her, but he won't get that reward tonight.

I step behind Valeria and cup her breasts, pinching and rolling her nipples. All I want to do is rip my jeans off and replace Noah's finger with my aching cock, but I'm a patient man.

Valeria rolls her hips, her head dropping back against my shoulder as she reaches for Noah's head, but I grab her arms and wrap them around my neck.

Her nails scratch my scalp, making me growl and grind against her ass, needing even the smallest bit of friction to soothe the painful ache of my cock. It doesn't help.

"Does that feel good, muñeca? Does his tongue and fingers satisfy you?"

She bites her lips, her moans and heavy breathing echoing around the open room.

"Answer me." I growl into her ear.

"Yes. Yes!"

"Good girl, now cum on his face."

She screams, my words the key to the floodgates and Noah doesn't let one drop fall to the floor like her release is blessed holy water. It'd be sacrilegious to let it go to waste.

When she drops against me bonelessly, I reach around her and adjust Noah's mask to cover his face as he stands.

"Go." I tell him, he doesn't move right away, but he knows if he follows my rules, all will be well.

I help Valeria to the pew near her clothes before stopping him from leaving, "And be sure *no one* learns what took place here, I'd hate to ruin a pretty face."

He stares at me for a second before walking out the door, letting it slam behind him.

"You're a real piece of shit, you know that?"

Valeria's voice is raspy, breathless and utterly musical to my ears.

"That may be true, but you're my little whore now, aren't you?"

I laugh at her barely controlled anger before kissing her cheek, "Next time, it'll be my cock you cum on."

I place her knife on the bench beside her before turning away. As the church doors slam closed behind me, I reach into my pocket and grip her panties in my fist.

She may not have marked me as she did Noah, but there's no doubt in my mind that Valeria will be both a curse and a blessing to me.



## TWENTY-SIX

---

### ‘SINS’ RED LEATHER

WHAT THE FUCK DID I JUST DO? WHAT IN THE FUCK WAS I thinking?! Fuck, Val can never find out from Rey it was me who did that to her.

Dammit, if I was worried about ruining up our friendship before...

“*Fuck!*” I roar as I pace back and forth in my room back at the dorm house.

I hear the sound of a car door closing and since I never bothered to turn the lights on when I locked myself in, I peek out the window and see Val waving goodbye to Nimona. She walks like she’s in a daze, her boots gripped in one hand as she slowly makes her way inside.

My mind wars with itself as I lean against the window and run my fingers through my hair. Do I hide away or man up and face her?

I lick my lips, my mind wandering back to the church where I committed a great sin against Val...a sin I don’t think I’d have the strength to repent of.

I may have royally fucked up with Val, but no matter how pissed she is, she’s never getting rid of me, not with the taste of her sweet pussy still on my lips.

I fucking hate Rey for the lies he fed me, but if I'm being completely and one-hundred percent honest, I subconsciously knew he was full of shit. I knew the society is a misogynistic group of rich men, no women allowed and all that archaic jazz, but Rey knew exactly how to play on my fears...and my lust.

Fucking asshole.

I hate to admit it, but a part of me wants Rey too. I can't help but be drawn to him. It's an act that leads to damnation for a sane person to fall for a guy like Rey Calavera. He'll rip your heart out and keep it, so you'll be his little pet doing his bidding for scraps...and the fucked-up part about, I'd enjoy every second of it.

It's not lust, it's perversion. Fuck me, I'm hungry for more.

I grip my aching cock through my jeans, squeezing painfully to give myself some relief, but it doesn't work.

I sit up and rest my elbows on my thighs, gripping the roots of my hair as I replay everything that happened tonight. The sounds of Val's heavy breaths, the way she shuddered under my hands as she ground against my face. Her whimpers play on repeat torturously. It was agonizing not to be able to knock her foot off my shoulder and make her sink on my cock.

I growl before standing and deciding a cold shower is needed. I can't hide from Val, I won't, but I can't be in the same room with her while this feral need claws its way through my body.

Tomorrow will bring its own set of problems, but for tonight, I just want to stand under the spray and jerk myself to the taste of Val on my lips and her moans in my ears.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

---

### ‘SHUT UP AND LISTEN’ NICHOLAS BONNIN

MY NIGHTLY DREAMS WERE FILLED WITH IMAGES OF VAL AND Rey. Sometimes it was Val standing before me with my face between her legs, other times it was Rey whose lips were wrapped around my cock. Needless to say, I didn't get much sleep.

I want them both, but I can't have them...*yet*.

After my deceiving actions last night, I don't think Val will ever forgive me. No matter the reason. Even I know that would be a bullshit excuse because Val knows as well as I do that, I don't do shit I don't want to do.

It's true that at the start, I didn't know Rey would have me on my knees worshipping the girl of my fucking wet dreams, but that doesn't mean me giving into him wasn't for my own benefit as much as it was to protect Val.

I can't explain it, not even to myself, but something in me wants - no needs - to get close to Rey. Giving into him was just a small step toward that. But what a fucking blow up that was.

I have two choices now; tell Val and risk her hating me or keep it my own dirty little secret and hope to God, Rey doesn't tell her. Ever.

But Rey is a Jekyll and Hyde. One minute he's a normal human being, albeit still an asshole but sensible like when he was pissed for Val getting into a car with Mateo, but the next minute he's getting off on your fear.

I groan and sit up in bed, wishing I could just lay back down and sleep for the rest of my life. I've never been scared of anything, never feared the unknown, but I do fear losing Val. I couldn't live without her. I couldn't bear to spend a life separated from her, whether we're friends or not.

And fuck me, last night, she confessed wanting me. Wanting me to touch her, do filthy things to her...*me*. But it's all for nothing. I blew that possibility right out of the fucking universe with my deception.

Still, as far as Val knows, I wasn't there last night... "Shit."

I whisper hoarsely before rushing to the restroom and cleaning myself up for the day.

Val went through something last night, something I know for a fact she's never gone through before...with a stranger and her crazy stepbrother and in her mind, I wasn't there for her. I left her like an asshole.

I sigh as I finish shaving. She's going to be pissed.

I wonder if she'll tell me what happened. Yeah, she will, Val tells me everything.

---

She didn't tell me. Thirty minutes after knocking on her door and being welcomed inside with accusations about leaving her all alone at the party and fucking off. I bite my tongue, not wanting to let it slip that the only thing I was fucking off was her sweet little cunt while her stepbrother watched.

But my hands are tied. I can't out myself but with the glares I'm getting, I know I'm better off not saying shit. I mean, if this is how she reacts to being "left alone" at a party,

then I know how she'll be if she were to know who was tonguing that pretty little clit of hers.

We're sitting on her bed now, my eyes straining not to stray to her nor flash my hunger for her, but one taste already has me looking at her differently. I'm not talking about how she looks to me, nah, Val has always been the apple of my garden, but I know without a doubt if she were to stop and really look at me, she'd see something new in me.

Currently, she's pissed enough to not even want to look at me, but I think that's because of the stranger between her legs while Rey commanded her to cum.

I adjust myself, knowing that I will be in a constant state of this possessive need. I can tell she wants to tell me something, but something holds her back? Maybe it was the fact that she confessed to Rey how much she wanted me. I bite back my smirk as I watch her huff and glance at me.

"It's not funny, Noah. You left me all alone and I was scared."

*Bullshit.* Fuck, I want to call her out on it, but I can't. Still, it doesn't mean I'm rational enough to not be a hypocritical bastard.

Putting on my most contrite face and matching tone, I dip my head and lock gazes with her, "I'm sorry, *hermosita*. It won't happen again," I tip her chin up and force my eyes not to stray to her lips, but I fail and end up making my promise to them, "next time you'll know exactly where I am."

My fingers stray back, making a feather touch trail toward her neck. Her eyes wander my face, her pupils dilating with lust but also mixed with confusion.

Her lips peek out to wet her lips and I don't realize just how close we are until the cold bucket of watery reality splashes into my face when Nimona rushes in, the door crashing against the wall in her frantic haste.

Val and I jump from the bed when we see Nimona's battered face and bruised neck.

“What the fuck?” Val says cupping the red head’s face, “What the hell happened?”

I quickly look out the door, hoping she was running from someone so I can kill the cocksucker, but I unfortunately don’t spot anyone. I close the door as Val pushes Nimona down to the reading chair by the window.

She tells me there is a first aid kit in the restroom, but I’m already on my way to get it, my room has the exact same set up as this one, including the handy dandy aid kit. As I come back out, I catch Val’s hard angry stare as Nimona sobs through what happened.

“I-I was with Santino Herra last night, at the church talking and fucking around, but it felt weird, like it was one-sided. I’ve had the biggest crush on him since middle school, but he didn’t know I existed even when my status was higher than it is now.”

She shakes her head and cries some more, but my mind keeps hearing the word church and I am on edge thinking she saw us. Did she? Did Rey catch her and hurt her to keep her quiet?

My fists clench at my sides, the plastic box in my hand cracking with the force. “I asked him about the tension, about why it felt like he didn’t actually want to be there, but he blew it off saying he was just distracted. I tried to believe him, but I’m not into anyone enough to deal with pity company so I got up and said I was leaving. He got mad and said I had to stay there, that it wasn’t right for me to be hanging out with the Calavera castaway because my reputation was already low as it is.”

“That fucking cunt.” I growl.

Nimona looks up at me, and through her busted lip and swollen cheek bones, I see the accusation in her eyes. Shit. She saw me, she knows something.

But how could she, Rey said he made sure the area was cleared of anyone...

“Did he say why you had to stay there, at the church?”

Her eyes narrow minuscule, “He said something about being ordered to make sure no one wandered into the area because the ritual was planned for the church.”

“I’m sorry, did you say the ritual?” Val asks and I busy myself opening the box and getting the things I need to clean up Nimona...fuck, I wish chloroform was in here, I’d use just enough to knock the girl out and keep her lips shut.

She nods her head and Val sucks in a breath while I hold mine.

“Rina said the ritual was for La Muerte and that the offering was someone from the next generation of the Society members, that the person picked would be a male between eighteen and twenty-one. Is that true?”

*No.* I think to myself as I mentally write Rina’s name on to my list of future kills.

“No,” Nimona echoes my thoughts, “The person who chooses the ritual offering is from the highest family name in the Calavera Society and they get to pick whoever they want and do whatever they want, so long as they get proof of it. It has to be a grievous sin or betrayal done under the full moon. The person chosen has to be willing, and it works because the victim never realizes they’re chosen until it’s too late.”

Val stands from the floor and backs away until she drops onto the edge of the bed, her gaze far away. My heart constricts painfully in my chest. I did that to her. I helped Rey use her as a fucking offering to their sick and twisted leaders...one of which is her own father.

I swallow thickly as I squat in front of Nimona and dab at her cuts, her face full of disappointment, never flinching even as alcohol burns into her wounds.

I don’t want to ask, but I know I have to, even if it’s just for more rope to make my noose.

“Who was the person who picked the victim?”

“I think you know, *Noh.*” I hear the sharp blade of her sarcasm. I deserve it, I know, but I’m two seconds away from jabbing the alcohol-soaked cotton ball into her eye.

Val hears it too, “What does that mean?”

With my eyes I convey my plea, mouthing the word *please*, as I hold my breath and watch her eyes bounce between both of mine.

Just when I feel like I’m about to pass out, she sighs, her shoulders drooping, “Because Noah was with me last night. The reason you couldn’t find him was because he saw Santino grab my arm and try to drag me back to the church. He stepped in and made that asshole leave. Once he was gone though, Santino found me again and did this.”

She points to her face. Her eyes tell me I’m in yet another person’s debt.

Fuck. My. Life.

“Why didn’t you tell me this Noah? You let me bitch you out for now reason.” Val tries to hug me, but I pull away from them both, rage and self-hatred flowing through my body.

“I don’t know.” I tell her, sick of the lies and sick of playing the bitch because I couldn’t get a footing in this fucked up town. But no more. Fuck that. I’m no one’s bitch.

I’ll owe Nimona, that’s no problem. After all, a person who kept a secret though it was obvious she was torn about it tells me she’s one of the decent ones around here. Besides, I can already guess what she’ll want in return.

“Where does this cunt Santino live?”

Mona’s smirk tells me I guessed right. “He lives in the Herra house a block away, but it doesn’t matter,” the look she gives me tells me it really does matter to her, “He’s out of town.”

I nod my head. I may not be able to get this motherfucker now, but there is someone else who I should pay a little visit to.



## TWENTY-EIGHT

---

### ‘I WALK THIS EARTH ALL BY MYSELF’ EKKSTACY

AFTER LEAVING VAL BEHIND WITH NIMONA, I DECIDE TO HUNT down Rey. That motherfucker has turned me into a goddamn slave to him, a dog at his beck and call because of this bullshit sin hanging over my head.

Maybe I should just tell Val the truth...but truth be told, I'm too chicken shit to do it.

My mind battles over my selfish desires and the truth.

What if she's so pissed that she cuts me off?

But she said she wanted me.

Does that even matter when I lied to her and touched her without her knowledge?

A good man would own up to it, admit to what he did, but a good man wouldn't have found himself diving face first into his best friend's sweet pussy either.

I want to place all the blame on Rey, to hold him irrevocably responsible for my actions, but the truth is, I had a choice. Once I knew the ritual story was all bullshit, I could have easily announced myself and told Val we'd been set-up, but the perverted fuck inside me didn't want to. I was weak and hungry for a taste of that which I've coveted for years.

I could have walked away clean, instead I stayed and dirtied my soul.

I wish I could say I sincerely regret my actions, but I don't—I only regret that my actions are now held above me like the blade of a guillotine with Rey as my executioner.

Just as I walk out of the Calavera house, I spot Rey driving up the street on his black motorcycle. I quickly crouch behind a bush out front and watch as he climbs from the bike. He pulls his helmet off and pulls free his cellphone which was tucked into one of the pockets of his leather jacket.

“What the fuck do you want Rina?” He growls in a frustrated way as he holds the phone between his shoulder and cheek while pulling off his riding gloves.

Of course, that bitch would be calling him, probably sucks him off when he's in a pissy mood too. I ignore the hint of jealousy coating my thoughts of Rey fucking Rina.

Yeah, I'll admit it, Rey is one fine piece of ass, but he's also the devil's spawn through and through; touching him is equivalent to damming your soul. I don't know about the rest of the world, but if I'm going to hell over ass, it better provide me with an earth-shattering orgasm before I'm lost to the pits of hell and there's no way Rey could match up to my standards.

I should probably test the theory though, for scientific purposes of course.

“I already fucking told you,” Rey's frustrated voice pulls me from my musings, “I'm not interested in helping him, not even for a debt. If your pussy ass boyfriend can't get through his novice levels on his own, then he's not worthy of becoming a Calavera member.”

He goes to hang up but decides to throw one more dig at Rina before hitting end. “And stop offering yourself up like you're some sort of prize; your pussy couldn't hold a watermelon, much less my interest.”

He hangs up and shoves the phone in his pocket before walking toward the door with all that annoying swagger he

possesses. God, I want to trip him just to knock him down a peg or two on his ego ladder.

His phone rings just as he about to open the door and he angrily yanks the phone out, answering before really looking at the screen, “What the fuck do you want—”

His whole-body tenses for a second before he lets out a gravelly laugh that goes straight to my treacherous groin.

“Fuck off, Mat, I thought you were someone else.” His voice fades as he enters the house. I follow after him, watching through the window beside the front door as he makes his way down the hall toward the back of the house where his room is.

I enter and move quickly to the wall where the hallway starts, my eyes glancing toward Valeria’s door as I listen to Rey speak to Mateo.

“I’m just going to take a shower and head that way in an hour. I’ve got some bullshit to handle with Roberto then I’m free after.” He quiets a minute as he unlocks his door.

When his door closes, I rush toward it and press my ear to the wood.

“Yeah, he’s under my thumb now. He can’t do shit about shit if he doesn’t want his precious Valeria to find out it was his greedy mouth eating at her buffet.”

My jaw aches at how casually he talks about last night. How easily he can try to ruin people’s lives or relationships for his own gain. The guy may set my skin on fire and turn my core into an inferno, but he’s one evil cocksucker. I hate that he’s such a predictable asshole, yet I can’t seem to stop the shock from rolling through me each time he does something despicable.

I hear him end the call before the sound of water running through the pipes in the walls greet my ears. I stand in silence, testing the doorknob quietly and finding it unlocked. Of course, the untouchable Rey Calavera would leave his door unlocked while leaving himself vulnerable in the shower. That shouldn’t make my dick pulse, but it does.

Just as music begins, bass thrumming inside his room, Val's door opens. I quickly step across the hall and crush myself to the wall behind a shelf, feeling like the *Wish* version of a cat burglar.

I roll my eyes at myself as Nimona bids Val goodbye and walks out the front door of the house. Val's door closes and I stand still for a second, listening for any sounds that she's outside of her room. I let out a breath when I peek around the shelf and don't see anyone. I quickly step to Rey's door and open it, letting myself in before closing it softly behind me.

I can hear the shower running, water dripping onto the tiled floor in unequal measures like he's washing his body.

Too bad the asshole can't wash off his sins.

I move to his dresser, keeping my eyes on the door of the restroom which sits wide open, and slowly pull open drawers. I find nothing inside each one and I can't help but think he just recently moved here as well. Surely this room isn't his real home, and if that's the case, he wouldn't have anything incriminating here. Still, if I want out from under his thumb, I need to find something on him. Val's mom said to find secrets and use them and that's exactly what I plan to do with Rey.

I look around the room, spotting another smaller dresser by his bed, a nightstand with a phone charger sitting on top and a lamp. There's a book there as well, the cover is gray with the title printed in gold straight down the middle. *War* by Robert Greene. Of course, he'd be into Machiavellianism.

I wonder which personalities of the Dark Triad he possesses, probably all three. I mean, I'm not really one to judge, after all, I have been told I show signs of psychopathy, but an *undiagnosed* diagnosis doesn't count.

I pull open the drawer and find it empty except for a box of condoms, leather handcuffs and a bottle of lube.

Fuck, just seeing these items has images of Rey and Val flashing through my mind. What would it be like to have both of them at the same time? I've never taken from a guy what I've given, never even considered it, but the images in my

mind tell me I'm willing to add it to my bucket list. Rey in me, me in Val. Fuuuck. Would Rey be in the middle, would Val?

Whoever said imagination was a curse was probably suffering from the same throbbing pain I'm currently feeling.

I grip my humming cock through my jeans, squeezing until I feel a sharp bite of pain, but it does nothing to help soothe the ache.

Reminding myself that I'm here for some dirt, not to add more to my dirty mind, I close the drawer and reach for the mattress. It comes up empty as well.

I run my hands through my hair in frustration, scrubbing over my jaw; I know I'm running out of time. I move to the closet and slowly pull the French doors apart but before I can even rummage through the perfectly organized walk-in, I hear the shower shut off. I quickly move toward the door, pausing before crossing in front of the open restroom door where I see Rey stepping out onto the floor mat. I can't cross the open doorway without him seeing me, so I simply decide I don't care if he finds me in his room.

Hell, it's not like he cared very much when he hovered over Val and I while we slept in her old bed.

I move forward, stepping into the threshold of the restroom door and lean against the frame—the picture of cool, calm, and collected, when in fact, I'm anything but.

I watch through the reflection of the large mirror over the sink as Rey wraps a towel around his tapered waist. He hasn't noticed me standing there, but I sure as fuck notice every bit of him, my cock has too.

I adjust my suddenly raging hard-on as he moves a small towel over his face and head, his muscles flexing with the movement. Rey is a big guy, a definite Dom, but so am I.

*What would we be like in bed?* I can't stop my cock from throbbing as I think of how that would play out. Both of us would fight for dominance would only end in a brutal fucking, but who would win?

Is it fucked up to say I hope I do but at the same time, I hope he does?

His body glistens with water that rolls down his tanned skin, blending into the swirls of black ink on his chest and over the hills and valleys of his abs and down into the line of dark hair that starts below his navel and ends somewhere beneath the towel.

I let my eyes greedily roam the expanse of his back, taking in each muscle that moves from shoulder to shoulder. Fuck he's beautiful. I hate him.

As if he's suddenly aware that he's being watched, his eyes snap up to the mirror before he turns around so fast, I barely have time to move away before his fist collides with my jaw. I step back as he advances, his eyes furious while my lips kick up into a grin.

“What the fuck are you doing in my room, *chavala*?”

“Oh, I'm *chavala* now.” I mock before jerking forward and chuckling when he flinches, “What happened to, *papito*?”

He growls, moving toward the dresser and blocking my exit, but that's okay, I wasn't planning on running.

“If I have to ask you again, I'm going to start cutting off pieces of you.”

My brow arches at the threat, but it's my cock that takes more notice, rallying in my jeans just as hard as it had when I watched Rey towel dry.

“Threats and promises, nothing but good times, baby.”

I jump forward, my forearm going across his chest and catching him off guard. I slam his back to the dresser, knocking it into the wall and sending items from the top to the floor. Our hips meet in a painful crash that has us both grunting in pain—we groan in unison.

“I came here for some dirt on you, something I could use against you.” I grind myself to him, loving how he can't hide how hard he is beneath his towel, “Instead I found you.”

He licks his lips, his eyes locked on mine as he languidly rolls his hips, “What do you plan to do now that you’ve found me?”

I dip my face into the crook of his neck, inhaling the scent of his body wash—sage and cedar with a hint of juniper.

With my lips against his skin, I whisper exactly what I intend on doing.

“I’m going to fuck you like I hate you, *papicito*.”

I get the desired effect. Rey shoves me off him, the guy who arched his neck to give me more access to his skin is no longer present. In his place is the stone-cold Rey I know and begrudgingly want.

“If you want me, you’re going to have to make me bend.” he spreads his arms wide, challenging me and all my lustful imaginings come to the forefront of my mind.

Fighting Rey into submission, taking his perfect ass as my reward...what could be better.

“Ah, uh,” he stops me as I move toward him like a predator locked in on his prey, “we play on even ground.”

He gestures to my clothing then to his towel and I know he’s right.

Fuck me, we’re doing this.

I came here with one objective in mind, to fuck Rey’s world up, and now? Well, now I’m just going to fuck Rey. And I will be the one doing the fucking because there’s no way in hell I’m going to let this bastard win yet another challenge.

I rip my shirt off before kicking my sneakers off, grinning when Rey’s gaze turns hungry as I undo my jeans. Once I’m standing in nothing but my tented briefs, I crack my neck and tick my chin.

“Ready?” He asks sarcastically.

“A paña lo, cabron.” Come get it, asshole.

Rey rushes me, his towel miraculously hanging on with his movements, and throws the first punch. I move my head in time to dodge it but catch his other blow to my mouth.

I blow his next hit and deliver one of my own, both of us now sporting matching split lips. I grab his wrist and put my years of high school wrestling to work by quickly dropping low, but Rey mimics me, and we both end up in a spar. He pushes my head down, making me drop, but I catch myself and hook my right hand around his right knee and pull while using my left upper body to shove him until he lands on his back with a gush of air from his lungs.

I quickly jump over him, but he's fast too...too bad he doesn't know shit about grappling like I do.

He rolls with me and leaves himself vulnerable to a rear naked choke, and when I say naked, I mean it in every sense of the word—or at least I will mean it once I get him to yield.

I pull him back against me, my elbow wrapped around his throat, and fall to the floor. He's a heavy motherfucker but kill me now because his weight on top of me is pure fucking heaven.

"I win, *papito*." I breathe in his ear as my blood drips down my throat, "Concede so I can fuck you raw.

His voice is garbled, "Fuck. You."

His elbow lands on my ribs hard enough to knock the breath from me and loosen my hold just enough that he can roll off me. I follow him and just as he's on all fours, ready to jump up, I jump on his back and knock his elbow loose making him fall flat on his stomach.

"Fucking yield, Rey," I grind my painfully hard cock against his ass, loving his responsive groan, "I'll make it so fucking good for you."

I lick the side of his neck, lightly biting his earlobe, "Your sweat tastes like heaven mixed with my blood."

"Show me." he demands, turning his face to mine and fusing our lips together.



## TWENTY-NINE

---

### 'FANTASIES' LLYNKS

FUCK, HIS BLOOD MIXES WITH MINE AS PERFECTLY AS OUR tongues tangle together. It's a mixture of adrenaline and lust colliding in an explosion of euphoria.

Noah groans against my mouth and I swallow it down greedily looking for more.

He lifts a little, never breaking the kiss but allowing me to roll onto my back so that I have more access to his hungry mouth.

One of his knees separates my legs as I turn my head, my tongue delving deeper into his mouth. He grinds down on me, or aching cocks only separated by two easily removable scraps of fabric.

Fighting Noah had to be the most erotic foreplay I've ever been a participant in, and I can admit that he has ruined any form of foreplay from this day forward. Sex has always been about mutual need for me, nothing more and nothing less. I've never been like Mateo, never interested in finding my person, and while I can't say Noah is suddenly breaking that barrier within me, I can say that I could potentially see myself wanting more of his brutal lust.

He growls in frustration, biting my tongue as though he means to hold me in place while he rests on his forearm and

reaches between us with his free hand. His penny-colored eyes seem to brighten as he rips my towel open before reaching for his briefs. I knock his hand away, yanking my tongue from between his teeth and hiss in pain as he tears through my skin.

It's fucking animalistic how that makes my cock pulse.

"I didn't yield, asshole. You're not in charge here." I slip my hand into his briefs and grip his thick cock in my fist, swallowing my groan when he fucks up into my hand like he needs more of me.

"Fuck, that feels good." he mumbles as he wraps his hand around my girth.

Yeah, it feels like sin and heaven.

He dips his face to mine, our lips colliding once more as we both thrust into each other's hands. His exhales become my inhales as we explore one another.

"Fuck, move your hand." He says as he trails his lips down my jaw, "Let me feel your cock on mine."

I groan and do as he says, groaning when our skin touches. He lifts, his weight leaving me as we both watch our cocks glide against each other, both of our precum dripping onto my stomach.

"Fuck, I need more." I hear myself saying before pushing at his shoulder until he reluctantly rolls off of me. I stand from the floor and move to the side of my bed where my nightstand sits, removing the bottle of lube I keep inside.

"I'm going to have that virgin ass one day, Rey." Noah says confidently.

I look over my shoulder, finding him standing and removing his briefs "I never said I was a virgin, guapo, I just said you'd have to make me bend."

Noah moves toward me like a predator, but this time I don't fight him. My dick is too hard for another round of foreplay; I'll just end up coming too soon.

Noah's cock slides between my cheeks as he reaches around me and take the bottle from me. He bites my shoulder

hard enough to sting before swirling his tongue over the mark.

“Don’t tempt me.” God, I love how raw his voice is, how hungry I’ve made him.

Noah Cabañas is a Dom through and through and while I am as well, I’ve never been averse to playing sub. Of course, I’ve never found someone worth trusting before, but Noah makes me reckless. I don’t trust him, yet I still want him to wreck me.

He squeezes lube into his palm and grips me once more, stroking me like it’s his fucking job to send me to hell via orgasm. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I hear the bottle of lube being squeezed again, but all I can focus on is Noah’s hand finding my balls, his finger trailing to the space behind them.

“Get on the bed.” He demands, “On all fours.”

My instinct is to throw my head back and break his fucking nose—

“Please, *mi Rey*.” Fuck me, Noah may be a Dom, but he’s got a hidden pleaser in him too.

I throw a smirk over my shoulder, loving how confused he is by his plea, before following his instruction.

“Fuck, you look good like that.” His hands run up the back of my thighs, his hand kneading the part where my cheeks meet my legs.

Just when I can’t take another second of this anxiety, the flat of his tongue laves across my most sensitive part.

“Fuck, Noah.” I groan as he eats me like a man with a mission.

He hardens his tongue, penetrating me in small sharp thrusts that has me panting and my fingers curling into the sheets.

“Stop fucking around and just fuck me.” I ground out, feeling almost angry at myself when the warmth of his mouth leaves me. I look over my shoulder and see him pulling his wallet out.

Knowing what he's looking for, I ask, "I'm negative and on PrEP."

A smile forms on his lips, "Thank fuck because I don't want anything between us."

He moves over to me, grabbing the bottle and pouring lube over his cock before laying on the bed beside me.

I feel my brows furrow, especially when he avoids my eyes as he speaks, "You didn't yield."

I don't question him nor the unfurling I feel in my chest at the fact that he's putting me first as though he really believes I'm uncomfortable with being bottom. I just climb on top of him and angle him at my entrance. This isn't about emotions and fuck him for pulling on brick out of my well-built wall.

I slowly drop down on him, his hands coming to my waist as we both groan at the sensation.

I lied when I said I wasn't a virgin. I am, but I'll never give Noah the satisfaction of knowing he was my first. Noah may be an enigma, a handsome guy who is unlike any other I've ever met, but he's still my enemy.

Yeah, he's loyal and real where everyone else is fake and always looking for a weakness to exploit, but I can't have him as more than a good fuck.

And a good fuck is exactly what he gives.

Before he can fully seat himself deep inside me, he pulls me down for another brutal kiss as he thrusts upward. I hiss into his mouth, doing my best to power through the searing pain that takes my breath away. With each thrust, the pain intensifies no matter how much I try to ignore it.

"Relax, guapo," Noah says against my lips. My eyes open and I see the concern in his gaze until it dawns on him.

"You are—"

I press my lips to his, shutting up his words and he takes the hint. Now he knows...he's my first.

He pushes me back, rolling us over until he's on top. He grips my cock his hand and stokes me but keeps himself still inside me. He licks across my pecs, his tongue swirling over my left nipple, making me groan and relax before he moves to my other one. He gives it the same attention before moving up the column of my neck, licking, sucking and biting until he reaches my mouth.

He never moves his hips and it both irritates me and makes my wall break just a little more. Who the fuck is this guy? How in the hell has this become my day? Never in a million years would I have thought that I'd be letting my stepsister's crush fuck me, much less would I expect him to be careful with he as he does so.

With all his touching, stroking and kissing, I find myself rolling my hips, needing him to move and give me more.

He slowly pulls out and slides back in, turning the pain into pleasure with each careful thrust, but now that I've relaxed enough, I don't want this soft shit. It may have been a surprise to me at the start, but I still want Noah to wreck me.

No, I need him to.

"Fuck, you feel so goddamn good." he says digging his face into the crook of my neck where his hot mouth latches onto my skin.

"Then fucking give it to me, guapo." My voice sounds like a plea and fuck me if it's not.

I hook my legs around him and yank him toward me, turning his languid thrust into a hard one that has us both panting.

He stands straight and hooks his elbows beneath my knees, "Fuck your fist, let me see you come for me."

He sounds so fucking good all worked up over me.

I do as he says and watch as his stomach flexes on his next thrust. He doesn't stop, his hips jerking forward as our mouths drops open in pleasure. Each slam against my prostate brings me closer to that blissful cliff and I find myself jerking myself

harder, matching Noah's rhythm until I'm chanting almost incoherently.

"Fuck, I'm close, I'm going to come."

He doesn't stop, his brows furrow as though he's holding himself back, his eyes locked on mine.

"Come. Milk my cock."

That's all I needed to hear.

"Fuuuuck!" I growl as my cum shoots out in hot ropes across my stomach.

"Unf—" Noah groans, his hips jerking erratically until he slams into me one final time.

He drops head back as his cock pulses inside me and the sight of his inked chest glistening with sweat is almost enough to rally my softening cock.

Once our mutual highs have cleared our minds, both of us lock eyes and in his gaze, I see my own thoughts reflecting back at me.

We just fucked up.

## THIRTY

---

### 'RIGGED' THE PLOT IN YOU

IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS SINCE RITUAL NIGHT, AND REY HAS made himself scarce. When I do see him, it's either in my dreams or when he's coming back to the house late into the night looking worse for wear, as though he spent the entire night either fucking or just recovering from a bender.

My stomach clenches at the former thought, but I push it out of my mind.

We haven't spoken, but the tension between us is almost too much to handle so I keep myself busy with preparing for classes and avoiding my father.

I'd like to say I've spent most of my days with Noah, but I haven't been able to really face him. On the car ride here, I made it plainly obvious that we are a united front against Coventry, but mostly Rey and all his cronies, but did I follow my own fucking rules?

No, this bitch did not.

Facing him while holding this hidden secret close is emotionally draining. I should just come clean with him and deal with the outcome. Noah's incredulous face flashes in my mind, making my stomach sink.

For the past two weeks, I've mostly been with Nimona. She has helped me pick my college courses, though I hadn't decided what I want to major in.

During one of my more desperate days—*a day of pure loneliness and confusion*—I called my mother. I still feel painfully betrayed by her, but in comparison to my father, I kind of feel like she's in the same boat as me. She's the one I've always turned to when anxiety and depression hit me and she's the one I turned to this time.

When she answered, I straight up told her I didn't care to know about anything from the past and all her attempts at apologizing would fall on deaf ears. I needed to get that out before I heard her sob through her remorse. After breathing through her emotions and clearing her throat, we moved on and blissfully pretended to be a normal mother and daughter speaking about a normal college and what I should choose as my major. I went with criminal justice and readjusted my courses to fit the major.

I could tell she wanted to ask me questions, to bombard me with endless peppering. It reminded me of the time I went on my first date. When I got home, mom was there to bombard me. Still, aside from the nostalgia, I'm thankful she contained herself because if she had asked, I know I would have opened up about what happened on ritual night and right now, I don't think it's wise to completely trust her. I may be a daughter in need of her mother, but that's as far as I'm allowing my need to go.

We hung up and I spent the night in Noah's arms crying. It was awkward, but when I cried, everything melted away and he drew me into him. We smoked, talked about the past and what majors we're debating with ourselves...It felt like old times, when things were simpler.

Though I could tell the conversation was on the precarious edge of turning down a path I know neither of us wanted to travel, we were careful not to comment on how our friendship has begun to pull in two separate directions...at least that's how it feels.



When I woke the next morning, he was gone and didn't show his face for the entirety of the day. It makes me tear up even now.

I lean in close to my mirror and will my tears to dry before I ruin my make-up on the first day of classes. I want to skip it, but I doubt that'll look good on me, no matter who my father is. After all, according to Nimona, Coventry sees *me* as the Calavera bastard child. No one knows Rey isn't even of the same blood as my father, and I won't be the one to tell anyone...unless it suits me.

Rey said I started a game, but the thing is, I never start shit, I only end it, and this will be no different. I just hope I come out with my heart intact. With the way things have gone so far, I have my doubts I won't be broken at the end of it all.

I straighten and pull my shoulders back, breathing deeply and reminding myself that broken or not, I'm never letting these fuckers knock me down and keep me there.

"Why do we have to wear uniforms in college?" I mumble to myself as I gaze at the unknown woman staring back at me.

I'm wearing black knee-high socks with the typical red and black plaid uniform skirt - *which is shorter than one would call appropriate* - and white a stark white button up shirt.

I was dumbfounded when Nimona brought a week's worth of uniforms to me. Hell, they even came a with a fucking manual printed on the extravagant tag safety pinned to the fabric.

Apparently, there's a proper way to wear these ridiculous porn movie outfits.

My self-respect demanded I set the rules on fire, and I happily obliged.

I have the black vest with the school's crest richly stitched into it and the blood red tie, but decided to leave the vest open and leave the tie in a loose knot so I could have the top button of my blouse undone. I took one look at the shiny black bricks they called shoes and threw them into the deepest part of the closet where no one would be subjected to their hideousness

ever again and grabbed my black Devon Heart Doc Martens instead. The last two weeks, I went on an online shopping spree, purchasing things for both me and Noah like Cher in *Clueless*.

Noah wants to major in music, so I ordered him the guitar he's always wanted but could never afford unless *he sold a kidney*. The beautiful white Steve Vai Signature JEM series Ibanez beauty has yet to arrive, but I cannot wait for him to see it. He's going to lose his mind.

I also bought a shit ton of clothes for us. When he said it was too much, that I shouldn't spend my money on him, I simply smiled and said, "It's not my money."

After the millionth delivery, he gave up and just started accepting everything.

Like I said, it may be immature as hell, but I'll make sure my father's bank account feels my presence.

He's called me a few times, but I just don't have anything to say to him. Well, I mean I do, but I don't have the energy nor the inclination to deal with him right now. I just want to ignore his existence while I fulfill my 'obligations' here until I turn eighteen.

I pull my hair up into a high pony, leaving a few curled locks down to frame my face and apply some lip gloss before deciding I'm ready to go. I grab my satchel and snatch up my phone, noticing I have a text from the scarecrow himself.

Rey: Check under your pillow, muñeca.

What the fuck? I changed the sheets last night before I went to bed, even the pillowcases; there was nothing there.

Goosebumps rise on my skin as I walk over to the bed and cautiously lift the pillow, preparing to make a break for it if a snake slithers out. I honestly wouldn't put it past the asshole to be that childish.

The corner of something black comes into view and I toss the pillow to the side, revealing a key fob with the Rolls Royce image embedded into the leather rectangle.

I snatch up the key, but my excitement for the car I drooled over is overrun by the realization that Rey was in my room while I slept. I know he's expecting me to call him out on it, hell, he's probably excited for me to yell at him.

With a grin, I text him back.

Me: Thank you, diablo. I'm sure daddy dearest is pleased with how well you do his bidding.

I click off my phone, feeling high on my petty behavior for a second before remembering that I'm off to college and not grade school. Then again, the creep did sneak into my room while I slept so, eh, I'm not sorry.

With my new car keys in hand, I take one last look at myself before opening my door and walking out into the hallway, excited to tell Noah about the new ride. When I step through the threshold, I spot Mateo, that pretty eyed demon, walking away from Noah's door.

He sees me and turns, giving me an appreciative look, his eyes sliding down my body, pausing on my open blouse where my cleavage shows, before coming back up to my face.

"Damn, *princesa*, you clean up nicely. I hope you're dressing for me."

I cock a brow, "I dress for me, *pendejo*." *Asshole*.

"Aw, c'mon, don't be like that, Valeria. I'm not such a bad guy." His wicked wink says otherwise.

I curl my lip at him before turning to face my door and reaching inside to twist the lock like Noah told me to do. I know it won't do shit, after all, I had my door locked as I slept, and I still woke up to keys suddenly appearing under my pillow.

When I turn back around, I almost scream. Mateo is standing only a foot away from me, breathing me in like a creep. With my heart in my throat and my eyes wide, I step back and press against the closed door.

"I really *am* a nice guy." His face is eerily blank, the kind of look you'd picture a hitman wearing just before he slits

your throat. His multi-colored eyes are dilated like two black holes leading to the depths of hell as he continues to speak in a psychotic, monotonous voice, “But people have a bad habit of flipping the switch in me. That’s not my fault though, is it Valeria? I’m really *not* a bad person, even though *they* say I am.”

Who is he talking about? What the fuck do I say?

Rey’s words come back to me in an instant, *he hears voices. He calls them ‘They.’*

Suddenly I can see Rey wasn’t just trying to scare me, he was warning me. I can see there’s something different about Mateo, something I hadn’t picked up on before, but I’m not one hundred percent sure.

People suffering from mental illnesses are never the same as one another, even if they have the same type of illness. I’m no doctor, nor am I an expert on schizophrenia, but if I had to take a guess, I’d honestly say Mateo suffers deeply from it.

Just as I’m about to open my mouth and try to soothe him, tell him he’s not a bad person and whoever said these things to him are wrong - *though I have no fucking clue if that would help or make the situation worse* - Mateo places both of his hands on the door, one on either side of my head so that I’m caged in, and all my words lodge in my throat as fear takes over. Just as I’m about to scream for help or knee him in the balls and run, Rey’s loud and furious voice cracks through the hall, making me jump and yelp. Mateo just stares at me.

“Mateo! Get the fuck away from her, *now.*”

Mateo’s scary, blank face melts into his usual smile, erasing the disturbing look from his features, but I still don’t move, determined not to make sudden movements.

“I wonder what’s been *shoved* up his ass.” His words feel like it’s an inside joke I should get, but I don’t. Maybe if my heart wasn’t trying to breakdance inside my chest, I’d question him, as it stands though, I just want him to leave.

He pushes away from me, tapping the bottom of my chin with his knuckle before walking with psychotic swagger—*yes,*

*that's definitely a thing now*—toward the front of the house. Rey's eyes take me in from head to toe, as though he's checking me over for wounds, before he too leaves as though nothing happened.

Seconds after Rey disappears, Noah steps through his door, his ear buds in and his uniform on. He pulls one out when he notices me still standing frozen against my door, my heart still rapidly beating. I can't explain what just happened, only that Mateo is one scary motherfucker. Rey has nothing on him.

"You okay, Val?" Noah looks down the hall, finding it empty before coming to me and taking both of my shoulders in hands, the warmth of his nearness envelops me, and the coldness of fear quickly thaws. I close my eyes and blow out a breath.

"Val, what happened?"

His fingers tighten on me like my silence is physically hurting him.

"Nothing, I promise I'm fine. Mateo just freaked me out."

"Mateo?" Noah asks confused, but I could have sworn Mateo was just leaving his room when I came out. I look at my best friend and watch him swallow before speaking again. It's one of his tells. He's lying to me. Why is he acting like he hasn't seen Mateo or even knows the guy?

"Yeah, you know the guy that came out of your room?" I deadpan before walking away, needing air and an excuse not to look at Noah who suddenly decided to start lying to me.

He grabs my arm and pulls me to a stop as we exit the house, my eyes landing on Mateo's sky-blue car peeling away from the curb while a black motorcycle follows.

*Hm, Rey drives a crotch rocket?* If I didn't hate him, I'd say that's sexy. Okay, fuck it, that is hella sexy, but he doesn't need to know my thoughts.

"Val," Noah growls, snapping my attention from Rey's retreating form, "you seriously think I'd be talking to that motherfucker then lie to you about it?"

“Your words, not mine.” I try to step around him, but he moves with me.

“Hold the fuck on. Don’t pull that bullshit with me, Val. I’m not one of those pricks that you can’t seem to keep your eyes off of.”

I feel like I’ve been slapped. I toss my head back and scoff, “What the fuck is it to you? You’re not fucking me; you have no interest in me. You’re my best friend but you’ve already kept two things from me since we got here. Now you want to act all high and mighty, judging me for window shopping the ass around here? Nah, fuck that, *you* don’t pull that bullshit with me.”

I throw his words back at him, and his eyes lower before he tilts his head to the side, our gazes locking through the tendrils of his hair over his brow.

“You’re not keeping anything from me?”

I do my very fucking best to keep my face straight and not show what a hypocritical cunt I’m being, but he knows me as well as I know him, so I turn my head and step around him.

“Yeah, that’s what I fucking thought. But that’s okay, *mi vida*, just don’t throw rocks.” He calls to my back, my legs not carrying me fast enough to my new car. A car I couldn’t even tell Noah about because I’m a fucking asshole.

I climb into the driver seat and peek through my lashes only to snap my head up straight when I see Noah sliding behind the wheel of my a blacked-out BMW i8.

Seems like that’s our thing now, lying and keeping secrets.

My heart breaks when I watch him pull away.

## THIRTY-ONE

---

### ‘YEAH RIGHT’ JOJI

I ARRIVE AT THE CAMPUS AFTER FOLLOWING THE GPS directions and realize the party from ritual night was on the property of our education institution. I can't really say I'm shocked. More like *disappointed*.

I pass the area where the bar and crowd were, my eyes immediately finding the trail that led me to the old church. I feel my stomach clench with both anger and lust as memories I've tried to keep away come floating back. The way it felt to have Rey's hands on me while some strange guy with the tongue of sin made out with my pussy flutters through me, making my heart tremble annoyingly.

Ugh, get over it, Val.

Still, I can't. There was something about the guy, the way he touched me as though he knew my body and all the right ways to torture me. I don't believe in love at first sight, but I'm a firm believer in love at first fuck. Not that I got fucked that night, but you get the picture.

Looking at the place now, you'd never know there was a party here a couple of weeks ago. Everything looks clean and tidy as I drive through the iron gates and past the giant water fountain.

My brows arch as I take in the depiction of a large breasted woman with a golden skull for a face. She wears a black robe with the hood pulled low over her brows and a staff in one bony hand. The top of the staff has a golden star that looks like it's melting. Her other hand points down toward the dead man below her. In the middle of the dead man's back is her left foot, the bones of each toe showing beneath the floor length robe. In the water around her are orange marigold flowers floating, giving the whole thing a sort of ethereal look.

*La Muerte*, I think to myself.

I circle the fountain, still following the street that leads me to the parking lot along the side. I can tell it goes all the way around the huge gothic-like building to give students and professors alike more parking space. Every car I see around me is just as expensive as the Rolls. Luxury slaps me in every direction and one thing is very clear to me—I've come a long way from the hood.

I follow the line of cars, including Noah's, which is three ahead of me, toward the side of the building. There are more modern-looking buildings toward the back of the campus, and I can just make out the track and football fields just beyond the last building.

I pull into a parking spot a few slots down from Noah, making a note to tell him I'm sorry for how I acted this morning and how good he looks behind the wheel of that car. My dad had one exactly like it, but never suited him in my mind. He always gave off the mid-life-crisis energy when he'd drive it—*wait, is that my father's car?*

As if my thoughts conjured him, my father's name pops up on the radio touchscreen. I decide I might as well answer and tell him to stay the fuck away from Noah. I don't want him trying to worm his way into my best friend's life. I don't believe for a second Noah is shallow; he wouldn't become best buddies with an asshole like my dad just because he gave him a nice car.

No, what I'm worried about is Noah being in Roberto's debt.



I hit the button on my steering wheel as I put the car in park, my eyes on Noah as he looks down at his lap, probably reading his registration papers once more.

“What do you want, Roberto?” I ask without neither love nor hate. He gets nothing from me.

My father’s chuckle greets me. I just want to punch something. I squeeze my eyes closed when images of the past flash before me. The belt gripped in my father’s fist, the bruises on my back that matched my mother’s face.

“I just wanted to wish my star good luck on her first day of classes. Is that so wrong?”

I scoff, “Right. Stay away from Noah. He can handle himself just fine, but if you think for one second, he owes you for the fucking car, I’ll send it back to you as charred remains.”

Roberto stays quiet long enough that I have to look at the phone to see if the call dropped.

“Everyone is in debt to me, *mija*. If you haven’t learned it by now, let me spell it out for you carefully. I am Roberto Calavera.” He pronounces each syllable like I’m a fucking idiot. My teeth grind as I listen, “I am the king of this town. If someone owes, they pay. Luckily for Noah, I gave him that car out of the kindness of my heart. There is no debt where the car is concerned.”

My anger reaches a point that my vision wobbles with angry tears, but instead of hateful words or curses, manic laughter bubbles out of me. This cocksucker thinks he’s my father and my ruler? He’s got me motherfucking twisted if he thinks even for a moment that I’m the type who is gonna bend a bow to anyone. I’m not that little girl anymore.

When I compose myself, I sigh, “That was hilarious, Roberto. Let me tell you how it’s really going to be, yeah? You’re going to leave Noah alone, no matter what he takes from you. If he wants your fucking house, you’ll give it to him, and he’ll owe you shit in return. Why? Because, pop, I

own this motherfucking town and everyone in it. That includes you and every other misogynistic cunt in the council.”

Valeria—” he hisses like I’m going to tremble in fear.

“Nah, *mira, papa*. I don’t give two fucks how important you’ve convinced yourself you are, just remember who the I am, and it’s a hell of a lot more powerful than you. I’m only going to say this once, I answer to no one because it’s *me* who was forced to be here. I didn’t beg to attend this pretentious college or live in this fake ass town. I’m the one holding the cards because *you* need *me*. You think you’re the king? No, daddy, I am.”

My father growls into the phone like a madman, probably wishing I were there so he can backhand me like he used to. My smile widens.

Noah steps from his car, his eyes on me as I discreetly wipe a stray tear. He hesitates for a second before turning around and walking away. I don’t blame him. It seems he’s always picking up after me. Cleaning up the mess I continuously find myself in and what did I give him in return? Accusations and a fucking attitude.

“Your behavior will make everyone pay for it; your best friend, your new girlfriend, your *mother*.”

I suck in a gasp at my father’s veiled threat, “*Estas a pañando chivo.*” *You’re out of line.*

“The only one who is out of line is you, Valeria. I suggest you get back in it like the obedient girl I raised you to be.”

He hangs up before I can retort.

I growl and yank my satchel from the passenger seat, shoving keys inside and yanking the strap over my shoulder, all while mumbling a series of Spanish and English curses.

“Whoa, who pissed in your cereal?” Rina’s voice makes me freeze.

I’m about to whirl around and knock this *sucia* on her ass when I think better of it.

Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, such a cliché, but no less true.

I let go of the breath I was holding and turn toward her while keeping my emotions in check. I decide to let the anger I feel for her and the balls she has to even speak to me be used in my irritation for my father. Besides, it is all his fucking fault I'm here dealing with this *chavala*.

“It’s just one of those mornings I guess.”

She eyes me for a moment, probably trying to see if I know about her shitty two-timing act the other night, but I just shrug and start walking toward the main building where I see students lined up in front of tables that have been brought out for sign ups and class information.

Today is a simple syllabus day, and since I already know my major, I just need to sign-up for the classes.

Rina catches up to me, the unbuckled straps of her boots clicking with each hurried step. I glance over at her and catch a glare in her eye before she quickly covers it up. If I didn’t know what a sorry piece of shit, she is I would have thought I made it up.

“Have you signed up for your classes?” I ask her as I look down my nose at her. I may want to keep her close to fuck with her and feed her false information, but that doesn’t mean I have to treat her with friendliness. Hell, for all she knows, I’m only nice when I drink.

“I, I mean, yeah, I have. It’s just, well, I don’t have many friends and I figured since we chilled the other night—”

“Ritual night, right?” I interrupt her as I stop behind a few of the students lined up at a table marked for General Courses.

“Well, yeah. I mean unless we met before that, and I don’t remember...”

I scan the crowd as she trails off waiting for me to reply, but I’m already having a difficult time not smashing this cunt’s nose, so I’m not about to answer half-assed questions. If she wants something from me, I’m going to make her ask for it.

Humility would look nice on her and I'm all too happy to dress her in it.

When she doesn't elaborate, I turn to her and arch a brow.

She bites her lip before sighing, "I was just hoping you'd let me hang with you."

I smirk at her, loving how uncomfortable she is. I don't know if it's because she had to ask *me* of all people to be her friend, or because of my cold, unfriendly demeanor. Either way works for me.

"Sure, you can tag along. It's not like I know anyone here anyway."

She nods and visibly relaxes, going back to the cool and uncaring bitch I met the other night. We move up the line, neither of us talking despite her pretty little show of being a lost puppy. It makes me wonder if she's only doing the bare minimum of whatever Rey told her to do. I can picture his full lips in a straight line as he glares at her, moving sinfully as he demands her to be my friend and make sure I don't do or say anything that can ruin his precious plans for world domination.

God, I hate him.

I still wanna fuck him though.

Finally, I'm at the front of the line, Two-Time Rina still beside me as I smile at the cute guy sitting behind the table. His eyes widen as he takes me in. My face heats as I wet my lips.

"Hi, I'm Valeria Calavera."

Rina scoffs beside me, "Dude is looking at you like you're La Muerte's daughter. I think he knows who you are."

The guy quickly schools his face and fumbles with the paperwork in front of him while I turn a glare to Rina, snapping in her face.

"One thing you need to know about me is this—do not disrespect someone who doesn't warrant it. It's not impressive and I don't put up with flattery in the form of bullying, *comprendida?*"

Her back straightens and her eyes flare menacingly at being spoken to in such a way, but I don't give two fuck yous. I'm the kind of person who doesn't put up with bullshit. I make sure motherfuckers aren't comfortable talking shit or bullying someone in front of me.

"I apologize. It won't happen again."

I smirk down at her, realizing this *puta* can't leave my side no matter how much I fuck with her, Rey's got a tight leash on her...I may not be cool with fucking with an underdog, but no one said anything about bullying the bully.

Turning back to the guy, my smirk turns sweet as I whisper conspiratorially to him, "Besides, I am La Muerte's daughter."

His cheeks heat but his laughter is what warms me. It's rich, deep and confident despite the flush of embarrassment on his handsome face. Rina huffs next to me before looking down at her phone and mumbling that she'll catch up with me later.

"Aw, c'mon, Rina, don't run off. I thought we were homies, or are you too busy being someone's little bitch?"

She stops and whirls around, her face red and the facade of friendship completely gone. I'm finally meeting the girl she really is beneath the act, my skin pebbles with adrenaline as she stomps back to me like she's going to scare me.

I smile as she gets within reach of me. Her arm lifts like she's going to deliver a slap, but I block it before grabbing the chain around her neck and slamming her down onto the table. The cute guy leans back in his chair as a crowd of students surround us, but I ignore the whispers and catcalls.

"*Si, carbona*. I know all about your little stunt."

She swings and kicks, but I ignore it all, my anger at everything blocking any pain I should be feeling as I grab her jaw in one hand while still holding her chain. I lift her a little before slamming her back down, the table groaning in protest.

"I will break every little fucking bone in your body, and if the word on the street is to be believed, no one will miss you. I suggest you stay away from me." Her lips are squished in my hand, her arms and legs no longer flailing.

I lean in further, my eyes bouncing between both of hers, “I’m that *ruca* you don’t fuck with.”

I pull her up and shove her away from me, a look of disgust on my face as she stumbles backward. My fingers left angry red splotches on her face that I know will turn into bruises.

“You made a big mistake.” she growls, trying to save face in front of everyone still watching us.

“Yeah, I fucking doubt that. Now run back to your master and let him know you failed.”

“You’ll—”

Noah appears out of thin air, stepping in front of Rina with his strong, wide, muscular back facing me. He runs a hand through his hair and by the fearful step Rina takes backward, I know he’s giving her a look that promises pain.

Man or woman, Noah will cut a hoe down if that person fucks with him and his.

“You heard my girl, vete ya cabrona.” *Get the fuck out of here, dumb bitch.*

When she runs off, Noah turns and walks over to me. Neither of us acknowledge our fight earlier, we just continue on like we always do. That’s what me and Noah are, tighter than the Church and its priest.

## THIRTY-TWO

---

### ‘CRUSADER’ STEVIE HOWIE

THROUGH THE TENDRILS OF SMOKE, I WATCH AS VALERIA shoves Rina away from her and I can't stop my cock from hardening at the beauty of her dominance. In Coventry, girls are raised to be trophy wives, which means they're taught to act like a lady. A lady doesn't strike with her hands, she lashes with her words. Rina is the exception apparently. Still, she has no clue how to even slap someone. What a pathetic display from such a powerful family and I'll be sure to let her know just how weasel-like she looked just now.

Valeria is a woman cut from a different cloth. She's not from a background such as these prissy ladies around here, she's from the other side of the tracks, a girl who was raised on laughter and love. She was taught to knock someone down or get knocked down and she just showed Rina in front of everyone that she's never the one who gets knocked down.

I'm hard at the thought of being the first one to have her beneath my boot.

“And here comes her knight.” Mateo mutters beside me and he takes the joint from me, his keen eyes watching the way the crowd parts for Noah.

They only do that shit for us, the two *matons* of Coventry. Technically, I'm not on record as killing anyone, but the things

I've done for Calavera Society means my hands are as red as anyone on death row...it also means my hands are clean in the eyes of the law.

Watching the ease with which Valeria violently defends herself has easily become my newest addiction.

Just when I thought I couldn't get any harder, my cock throbs painfully at the sight of Noah. He runs a hand through his hair, the black strands curling behind his head as he gives Rina a wicked look.

Flashes of getting that same look from him swim through my mind, but I push them aside. Fucking Noah was a one-time thing. At least, that's what I tell myself.

From this distance, I can't hear what he says, but the way Rina—a *bitch who never backs down*—fearfully steps away, I can tell his threat was heard by everyone around them.

Mateo's fists clench at his sides and I know he's having a difficult time not rushing to Rina's aid. I should just tell him what a sorry excuse for a girlfriend she really was, but at the moment, it doesn't serve a purpose to break him that way.

I put my hand on his shoulder as I whisper to him, "Remember *carnal*, Rina's nothing but a cheating whore. Not even *They* like her."

He knows I mean the voices he hears and not the people watching Valeria and Noah. Mateo doesn't speak or give any indication that he heard me, he only smiles as though he wasn't just glaring murder at poor, unsuspecting Noah.

I look toward what he's smiling at and find Valeria looking at Noah like he just pulled all the stars down to make a necklace for her.

Before I can stop myself, my fingers tighten angrily on Mateo's shoulder.

He shoves my hand off, his voice mocking as he whispers, "I don't blame you for looking so gloomy, *carnal*, it seems that look will never be reserved for you."



I turn a glare at him, but he steps out of our spot near the west entrance of the main building near the student parking lot.

“Where are you going?” I snap at him.

He turns and walks backwards, his uniform in pristine condition and his perfect boy next door smile on display, “To say hello to my newest friend, we didn’t get to finish our conversation earlier.”

He turns and saunters toward Valeria and Noah who both walk in my direction, meeting him halfway. He says something, which must’ve been about me because both of their eyes lock on me.

Valeria’s burning with something. Noah’s as sharp and the miniscule smirk on his lips.

Just as it did when I first saw Valeria in her uniform, my cock jolts to attention, only it’s even harder now that Noah is beside her, looking equally enticing. They look like two students I want to paddle into submission.

Giving them both a wink, I toss the end of the joint to the ground and turn my back on them before I end up doing something I shouldn’t.

I step into the building, the main one where most of the classes are held. It’s a huge building with countless corridors and doors that lead to places most have never been. Of course, I know this school like the back of my hand. Having been in the Society as long as I have been, I’ve learned all of the rooms and paths better than the original architect. Of course, this place was built ages ago, modern electricity and plumbing demanded updates but it was only done in the areas where students would spend their days in. For us Society members, we get the raw bones of this place.

I turn down multiple halls, entering rooms that to the untrained eye would look like I’m just playing a guessing game for an exit. The truth is our main Society room is hidden within the labyrinth that is Coventry University.

I could take the quickest path through the Dean's office, but I'd rather avoid the curious eyes of students. Plus, as her mother, the Dean is the older version of Rina and I'm sure I'll end up killing her if I'm alone with her.

Once I reach the part of the school where torches are still used to light the underground tunnels, I make sure to have all my emotions in check, my steps even and unhurried, my eyes sharp and my pulse steady. It won't do to have the president of Calavera Society to see me frayed at the edges because of a sinuous girl and her dangerously tempting best friend.

I make the final turn in the cobblestone corridor and come to a stop in front of a large wooden door with black metal hinges that look like they belong in a medieval castle. There're two skulls, one on each heavy door, with large metal rings hanging from their mouths. The skulls themselves are created in the same way our crests and pendants are made. Only, these look like they're not quite dead nor quite alive. Down and across their jaws, the artists created what looks like skin and tendons still clinging tautly to the bones.

I lift the ring in one hand before slamming it down in three quick knocks, followed by a pause then two more. It's a code knock but if someone happens to find their way down here, which is highly unlikely, and guesses correctly on the knock, they'd still have to face the robed men on the other side.

The doors open with your typical groan, something you'd hear in a horror movie, and allows four silent men out to search me. I lift the sleeve of my left arm, showing them the branding of the crest on my skin. I keep my eyes forward, not bothering to look at the gruesome scar. It healed just fine, but it's a scar that will forever be hideous in my eyes.

I remember the day I received it. Under the watchful eye of my stepfather who smiled as though I was an adult getting his college degree rather than the child I was. A boy hungry for love and too afraid of the shadows.

My jaw grinds as I'm respectfully nodded to before allowed inside. I fix my sleeve, crossing my hands behind my back as I walk into the large room. This is the room initiates

are brought to. Above my head is a round balcony where members of the Calavera Society stand with their masks and robes watching the novices tell us their most sacred secrets. Though we are far underground, the ceiling is tall and dome-like, with a twisted painting created by an old master who was once a member of this society.

You see, there are rumors of Calavera Society, whispers of a brutal and twisted fraternity on campus, and while they're close to the truth—well, they couldn't be further from it. We don't have applications for novices, we don't have parties and a Greek inspired name. We are old money from old times. We are powerful but secretive.

We are Latino men and women and everything in between. We hold our traditions close to our shadows, never letting in outsiders and never trusting new money.

“Ah, here is my son now.” Roberto says as I come to a stop near his desk.

Mateo's father, Cain, sits beside him as the parents of potential members sit across from them. Everyone but Cain turns to me. I keep a straight face as I nod my head.

“This year, my son will be a senior member in line with three others for the chance of taking my place as President of this Society. It is imperative that the bloodlines of this brotherhood stay as pure as possible. Leaving outsiders exactly where they belong. *Outside.*”

I want to grind my jaw. I want to grab the golden pair of scissors sitting on his desk and jam them through his throat... but I don't. I simply stand there and take his words—words I know were directed at me.

I'm not from one of the founding families like Mateo is... hell, even Rina has more blood standing than I do.

Unfortunately for him, he wants the world to think I belong to him. That it was his loins who gave me life.

“That's correct, *father*. No pure blood makes such foul and impulsive decisions behind the Society's laws. We must keep the pool pure.”

Roberto's trained eyes slide over to me, his mask firmly in place as the husband and wife before us nod in total agreement with my statement. Basically, they just unknowingly agreed that their current president is a foolish man, unfit to lead and his polluted *son* is the prime example.

Roberto stands from his seat, buttoning his suit before slapping my shoulder with his hand, his fingers squeezing hard.

“And this is exactly why my son will most likely be chosen to lead. No offense, Cain. Mateo is a smart boy, but it's my son I believe the Society will choose.”

The pain in my shoulder sears through my system, daring me to speak without being spoken to first, but Roberto doesn't know pain only turns me on. Physical pain does one of three things to me, hype me up for a fight, silence me into a plan, or fuck the brains out of someone. In this case, it's planning.

He lets me go and continues his meeting with the parents, letting them bargain for his favor on their son. It's typical for members whose child will be entering the first round of initiation, to come in, strutting their feathers and trying to bargain with the devil of our society.

They want his favor on their son. The father should know better. As once a novice himself, he ought to know that there are no favors nor favorites in the pool of initiates. I myself was spared no grievance, and I'm believed to be the son of the president. But that won't stop Roberto from accepting the bribes—he just won't fulfill his end of the bargain.

Once his bullshit meeting is over with and the room is empty except for Cain, Roberto and myself, my stepfather turns and backhands me. My head snaps to the side, but that is the only movement on my part. I continue to stand in place, my hands behind my back, my fingers wrapped tightly around my forearm to keep myself in control. I feel warm liquid slipping down my chin, his insignia ring having split my lip open with the blow. I make no move to wipe the blood now dripping off my chin and onto the marble floors.

Cain sneers at me, his pupils dilating at the blood dripping from my mouth. I give him a wide grin. I wish that motherfucker would try and get away with that shit. Roberto is only standing because his ending is not due for quite a while. I have his downfall planned beautifully and I won't let something as trivial as his bitch slap get in the way of those plans.

“You do not ever speak unless you're directly spoken to,” Roberto growls, stepping into my space, “even then, boy, you better speak the correct words, or it'll be your tongue I cut out next.”

Cain opens his mouth, showing me his severed tongue as though it's something to be proud of.

My eyes slide back over to Roberto, my head slightly tipping so he knows I heard him. I'll let him believe he *put me in my place* because it truly means nothing to me to stay silent. You see, people tend to believe that in order to be confident in yourself or your capabilities, you must make everyone around you see and hear it. And maybe that's how it really is, I have no clue, but for me? I don't need someone's respect to have respect for myself. I don't need to peacock around showing everyone how powerful I am. As long as I know it, everyone else can believe what they want. In the end, they'll all know the power I have.

Satisfied with my cooperation, Roberto retakes his seat, “Now, son, what was it you wanted?”

I ignore his endearment; we both know its bullshit.

“Just to let you know that Valeria is on campus and seems to be finding her footing well enough. She chose Criminal Law as her major and I have her class schedule right here.”

I pull out the papers I have rolled up in my back pocket and hand it to him, ignoring his grumble about how I shouldn't fold documents.

I move toward the wet bar set up against the wall and pour myself a glass of tequila. I use the back of my hand to wipe my mouth when I taste my blood. Fuck what I wouldn't give

to break this glass on Roberto's face, but that'll have to wait. I remember wanting him to love me as I was growing up. I thought he truly was my father. He never showed me any affection unless I was doing something morally wrong, like blackmailing a kid in class to do my homework for me.

I was a smart kid and got my own straight A's, but Roberto taught me to never waste an opportunity. Looking back now, I hate who I was. I hate the stance Roberto takes. Using whoever he can for his own agenda. Though it may seem so to everyone else, I'm not a hypocrite. I have an agenda, yes, but unlike the younger version of me who wanted a father in Roberto, I now pick and choose who I target with careful thinking.

I don't randomly pick a weak person to bend for my own gain, no, I go after those with just a little too much power for my tastes.

I reach into my pocket and pull a small baggie out, pinching my fingers against the zipper lock seal to open it. I pour out the contents of the white powder into my drink, swirling and mixing the coke and tequila before shooting it back.

The burn of the tequila and the sting of the cut on my lip are quickly subdued by the numbing drug.

I never knew what drugs were, not until that fateful day years ago when I learned two very important things.

Roberto wasn't my father, and my mother was a broken drug addict.

I was just fourteen when he left my mother's room, bending to look me in the eye and tell me I needed to make him proud. I nodded and promised him with all my youthful ignorance that I wouldn't let him down before watching him drive away as I always did when he'd leave on business. He didn't come back for some odd weeks. Once he was out of sight, I went to check on my mother, but when I walked into her bedroom, I found her on the floor crying as she pushed a needle into her arm.

Fear like I'd never felt before, pressed down on me as I watched her.

“¿Qué estas haciendo mamá?” *What are you doing, mom?*

I had never seen my mother so sad. Sure, she walked around most days looking more heartbroken than happy, but that day seemed to have broken something inside her, and it's never been fixed since.

I never knew what caused her to flip the switch - what Roberto said or did that made her want to leave me so cruelly - but I watched helplessly as she pressed down on the plunger, sending clear liquid into her veins. It was a lot, but I thought maybe she wasn't feeling well and needed medicine.

Seconds after she finished, she looked up at me with her pupils so dilated you couldn't see any of the gray stone color we share.

“Él no es tu padre. Vengarme hijo.” *He's not your father. Avenge me, son.*

Those were the last words she spoke before her body began to violently convulse. I ran from the room and called my grandfather who lived in the west wing of our home.

Time seemed to fast forward after that, just blurred images of doctors coming and going. My mother was revived during the chaos, but only a piece of her was ever truly there. She was broken beyond repair, but it was her words that killed me and birthed the person I am today.

My mother used drugs to keep herself numb to life, to her pain, and eventually to end it all, but I use them to remember. To feel the lashes I've been given, to fuel me and give me a sense of control. The thing about drugs, at least for me, is they have their uses so long as you do them instead of letting them do you.

I pour myself another glass without the added cocaine. I dip a part of a cloth napkin into the cup and use the tequila to wipe off any remaining blood on my face before turning to face Roberto.

“I assume you have signed up for each of her classes as well?”

I run my tongue across the swelling of my lip before answering, “You assume incorrectly. I’ll be taking the classes her pet takes.”

“Noah?” Roberto asks like he doesn’t know who I’m talking about. It honestly pisses me off that he has an odd as fuck soft spot for the guy, but I’m curious to know why.

“Yes. After all, she’ll do anything if Noah is at stake. May as well get closer to him than her.”

Roberto’s eyes darken as he remembers exactly how well I know his precious daughter will bend to my will.

“Yes, well, see to it that you don’t fail, Rey. I didn’t bestow you King Skull for no reason.”

He waves his hand in dismissal before looking back down at his desk. I turn and catch the silent Cain Del Toro leering at me like the sick fuck he is. I shoot my drink back before placing the glass down carefully, my eyes never leaving Mateo’s father.

If he were smart, he’d know the danger he’s in.

Quicker than he’s prepared for, I lunge for him, my pocketknife already out with the sharp tip pressed against his lower eye socket.

“Keep giving me *ojo*, and it’ll be your eyes cut out next. Tú no eres nada para mí, hijo de tu perra puta madre.” *You’re nothing to me, son of a dirty whore.*

He curls his lip, but he can’t hide the fear in his eyes. I chuckle and shove off him, giving him a quick slap as I step back.

Roberto grins at me with pride, a look that would have made me proud a long time ago. Now though? Fuck that.

I give him a look of disgust before walking out.



## THIRTY-THREE

---

### ‘THE LIFE WE LIVE’ PROJECT PAT

SYLLABUS DAY IS A REAL SNOOZE FEST. I BITE BACK THE millionth yawn and force my mind to focus on the droning voice of the professor. I bet Val’s class is much more interesting than this. I decided to major in music, but I still need to have a plan B so I’m taking business as well. I’m rethinking it now that I’m fighting to stay awake in this fucking lecture. I look around at the other students, noticing some are doodling or fucking off on their laptops.

These silver spoon kids can afford to screw off, mommy and daddy will just pay for their way through life. I on the other hand have no one to fall back on, not that I’d do that anyway, it’s not in my nature to depend on anyone but myself.

I want to text Val, but after how things went this morning, I decided to just leave her to her own devices when I walked her to her first class. Hell, I was pissed as all fuck this morning when she spouts off on me. It was completely uncalled for and made me want to choke her with my cock or my hand—either would have worked for me. Instead, I decided to leave the situation before either of us said or did something we couldn’t come back from.

I was telling her the truth about not having spoken to Mateo. I honestly had no clue the guy was even at my door since I was in the shower, but the fact that she didn’t believe

me shocked me. Her and I never lie to each other, especially not about little shit like that. Never.

The only secrets between us are the fact that I've allowed her to think I'm not interested in women, and her attraction toward me. We've added on to the pile since we got here and I fucking hate it.

I shake my head of those thoughts and look down at my notebook, reading over the list of books I'll need for the year when the doors swing open and in steps Rey.

I place my pen down and lean back in my seat as the professor turns to him. I can tell there's a reprimand on his tongue but when he sees it was Rey who interrupted his monologue, he quickly swallows and continues on like nothing happened.

Rey scans the room, taking in every face as he walks toward the stairs. When he spots me, he gives me a smirk, making my cock jump. I hate that my body reacts to him like this, warring with my mind over this asshole. My eyes catalog the cut on his lip, making me instantly pissed that someone obviously hit him, but then I remind myself that I don't care, and he probably deserved it.

I feel my jaw ache from the pressure I put on it, but it's the only way I know how to keep myself from doing something I know I will regret.

Again.

I try telling myself that I don't regret fucking him, and while I don't think that's where the regret really stems from, I can't help but feel the weight of it.

It's probably because it's just another thing I'm keeping from Val. It's obvious she both hates and wants Rey. If she were to know I fucked her stepbrother...I don't even want to think of it.

I force my thoughts on who might have given him that cut on his lip, but images pulling him by his shirt and running my tongue over the split skin takes up residence in my mind's eye. I want to taste the tang of his blood to see if it's as bitter as I

remember. I clench my fist, my writing becoming chicken scratch in my notebook as flashes of blood and moans swim through my mind in vivid details.

I breathe through my nose and pretend there's no one sitting beside me, but it's difficult, especially when Rey's tequila and cigar scent wafts over me.

I get looks from other students; some give me glares while others just seem curious as to who it is the king of Coventry decided to grace his presence with.

I ignore them all including the cocky fuck beside me.

"Hello Noah."

I don't reply.

"So, you're just going to ignore me?" He chuckles as he gets comfortable, he leans back against the seat with his knees spread wide. The side of his left calf presses against mine, sending a static like sensation straight to my groin. I'm tempted to step on his brilliantly white Jordans.

"I didn't take you for a petty person."

My head snaps in his direction, "Petty? Fuck you, prick."

People turn toward us when they hear me. Fuck my life right now.

He smiles triumphantly, "Don't worry, we'll get to that part again."

The fucking balls on this guy.

"Nah, I think I'll pass." I tell him as I look down at my watch.

There's only fifteen minutes left, and I've already copied all the notes, so there's no need to stick around. I close my notebook and reach for my backpack, but Rey snatches it and stands, pulling the strap over his shoulder.

I stand as well, our bodies only inches apart as I stare at this fucker, "I don't know what you're trying to do, Rey, but I'm not one of your fucking puppets. Give me my goddamn bag."

His eyes scan my face, lingering on my lips as he wets his own.

“Anger looks good on you.” He steps back and jerks his chin, “We have a free hour, let’s go.”

He doesn’t wait for me; he just turns with my bag and descends the stairs leaving me no choice but to follow. I pinch the bridge of my nose with a sigh before snatching up the stupid uniform blazer and following the same path Rey took.

As I pass the professor, I get a disapproving look from him. Ain’t nothing new for me.

“If you continue to interrupt my class, perhaps you’ll do better in another.”

I scoff at him, “Maybe you can’t see through those coke bottle glasses, professor, but maybe you’ll do better with another pair.”

I walk away as his face turns beet red with my mocking tone. Fuck that dude. I didn’t do shit to cause an interruption, he’s just too much of a coward to say anything to Rey. Well, fuck him and fuck this class, I’ll just stick with music. I step out of the room, the doors closing behind me with a bang as I look up and down the hall.

I see Rey turn down a corridor, so I jog to catch up to him but just as I round the corner, I’m grabbed and slammed against the wall.

Rey’s chest presses against mine, sandwiching me against the wall as his breathing comes out harsh and angry.

“Don’t you ever speak to me like that again, do you hear me?”

I grin, “I didn’t take you for a petty guy.” I mock.

He pulls me from the wall and slams me back, my head banging against the brick, sending stars across my vision, but my smile still doesn’t slip.

Rey’s eyes are furious as he glares at me. “You’d do well to remember who fucking runs this town, Noah. I may have let you fuck me, but that’s because I wanted it. You’re still just a

*nobody* unless I say so. How high you reach is completely up to me.”

I chuckle, loving how pissed he is that I’m not giving him the reaction he wants.

“And what do you say I am?” I ask him as I slowly reach for his waist, his anger distracting him from my movements. When I have a hold of his belt loops, he leans into my face, his lips brushing against mine as he growls.

“My bitch.”

I yank his hips forward until he feels my hard cock pressed to his, grinning when I feel the effect, I have on him. I grind against him, giving myself a bit of relief before slamming my forehead to his. He staggers back, a wicked smile slicing across both our faces.

“I’m not a submissive, Rey, I’ll never give you that honor. If you ever try to threaten me or use me against Val, I will fucking end you. Hurt her and I’ll show how well I play this game.”

He spreads his arms wide, that fucking grin widening until the cut on his lip splits open, blood quickly dripping down his chin and staining his white uniform shirt.

I can’t help but notice how well he fits it. The cotton stretches across his toned chest, making me remember what he looks like underneath it.

I fucking hate how hungry he makes me.

Hungry for a fight.

Crazed for pain.

Fiendish for another hard fuck.

“I’d love nothing more than to see you try, *chamaco*. I’ve always been a sucker for a pretty face like yours, but if you talk to me like that again,” he drops his arms and the smile disappears, “I won’t care where we are, I’ll bend you over and fuck that tight ass in front of everyone.”

“The only one taking a dick will be you, Rey. And trust me, you’ll be begging for another ride.” I don’t take my eyes off him as I reach down and grab my backpack, “Stay the fuck away from Val. Neither of us are good enough for her, but especially not you.”

I turn to leave him, but only a few steps away, his voice laced with venom stops me.

“Unlike you, I have no desire to be good enough for her. I take what I want without asking, and since you’re bent on being her knight, I think I’ll enjoy dirtying up your white armor.”

Students begin to pour into the halls as I count in my head for control. The sounds of their shoes and chatter are like a buzz of static, but it does nothing to silence Rey’s dark laughter. I look back as I turn the corner to exit the building, but he’s nowhere in sight.

I don’t have another class for an hour, same as Val, so I decide to text her and see if she wants to eat with me. Maybe go out to one of the little cafés around town.

Val: Yeah! Give me ten minutes, I have to talk to my professor. I’ll meet you at the fountain.

I tuck my phone away and head toward the front of the building. I spot some of the guys who were with Rina at the party near a classic Camaro in the parking lot. One of them, who I’m pretty sure is Rina’s boyfriend, leans against the shiny black fender. His friend says something to him, and he turns toward me, his eyes narrowing like a snake.

I tip my chin up in a *you-got-a-fuckin-problem* kind of way, but of course the little bitch just stares. I smirk and continue on my merry fucking way.

“*Pinche chavala.*” I mumble as I pull a cigarette out and light it. There seems to be nothing but little bitches around here.

I eye the group of jocks—*football players to be exact*—running plays in the grass. *Well, at least they’re nice to look at.*

Dropping my bag down on the ground in front of the fountain, I take a seat and flip open my notebook and read through the shit I need to go on the hunt for this week, making a mental note to find the wrestling coach this week.

I sigh and look up at the building.

This fucking school is gigantic with its crazy gothic-like spokes and sharp rooftops. The outside looks like it could have been the mansion to a mythical monster back in the *very* olden days. When I first drove onto the property this morning, my attention was on the architecture of the building, the steep slopes of the roofs, the towers in the four corners—all that was needed was an alligator infested mote. Then the fountain, which I had somewhat spied the night of the party, took up full residence in my mind.

Even now, as I sit here before it, I know I'll never get enough time to truly take in the beauty of it. Closing the notebook, I spin on the fountain edge, putting my left boot up on the cement as I stare at the craftsmanship and creativity.

Sounds of laughter and whistles happen all around me as more and more students come out from the building, but my focus is on the statue.

On other fountains that I've seen, especially the ones that have been around for longer than most, there's usually moss or algae growing on the stone beneath the flowing water, but that is not the case for this one. I'm sure this overly wealthy university has their own statue cleaners.

I lean back on one arm and look up at the statue, blowing smoke through my nose, as my fingers brush against something cold within the cement. I stand and step closer to it, inspecting the very ornate plate.

'Humanity spoke and La Muerta answered.'

"Creepy, right?" Val's voice pulls my attention from the plaque. She rubs her hand up and down her arms as she looks at the face of the dead man at the bottom of the statue.

I look up at La Muerte, taking in her golden skull face. There're no eyes within the black sockets, but it still feels as

though she's watching me, searching my being for worthiness. It reminds me of how Val looks at me sometimes. It reminds me of my hidden sin, and I find myself wanting to leave.

"I wouldn't say creepy. More like *powerful*." Val doesn't reply, she just continues to stare.

My mother's *ofrenda* had the statue of *Virgen de Guadalupe*, but she refused to ever put up La Muerte like my father wanted.

He comes from a long line of zealous believers, but my mother called them death worshippers because his family were cartel soldiers, making runs across the border into the United States with drugs, weapons and humans. For them, La Muerte was supposed to keep them and their illegal goods safe from authorities.

It's difficult to comprehend when you weren't raised in the culture as he was.

I never tried to understand it because I honestly wanted nothing to do with what either of my worthless parents believed in, but standing here now, I feel as though I have some sort of kinship with the goddess of death.

What does she represent to Coventry, to Calavera Society?

I wrap my arm around Val's shoulders and pick up my backpack, steering us toward the parking lot. I'm determined to learn as much as I can about Coventry's beliefs but mostly, I want to know who their society worships.



## THIRTY-FOUR

---

### 'LION' SAINT MESA

IT'S BEEN A MONTH SINCE CLASSES BEGAN AND SEPTEMBER has brought with it a bone deep chill. Sometimes, I think it's Coventry that settled this unrelenting iciness within me. There are traces of evil everywhere I look. Sure, it's all covered up with wealth and designer names, but every breath I take feels like I'm breathing in thick smoke laced with unholy corruption.

I shake myself from those thoughts, doing my best to ignore how the air seems to be getting heavier the closer we get to Halloween.

Football season is at its peak and Mateo has invited us to watch him play. And by invited, I mean demanded. I wouldn't say we're friends, but I've noticed he likes to do whatever Rey hates, and apparently getting as close as he can to us is how he does it. How those two are friends is beyond me since it seems all they do is fight each other on everything. Sure, they're not about airing their dirty laundry in front of people, but I see it. It's similar to how Noah and I were for a minute there, but we got past it before we began alienating one another. Though I have to say it's pretty fucking telling that we even came that close to becoming frenemies.

On the upside, Mateo hasn't had an episode like he did on the first day of classes, but once in a while, especially when

Nimona is around, he seems to turn into someone else. Someone ruthless, evil and on the verge of snapping. Nimona is about as unhinged as he is because she has literally no hesitation to antagonize him like having her life threatened is nothing but a game to her.

Nimona goes to his games like it's her religion, only she goes to purposely cheer for anyone but her stepbrother. It makes me giggle when I think about it. Unlike Mateo or Rey, I've grown quite close to Nimona. She's still in high school but that girl is probably the most chill *ruca* I've ever hung out with and she's sure to become CU's next queen B.

I'm unsure what Rey is into. Noah told me about their little hallway tango weeks ago and how Rey seems to be in every class as him, but I've heard little else. That's best though. I want nothing to do with that prick. Besides, I'm a lot more interested in seeing Noah practice for the wrestling team. He's been trying to get me to join him in the gym, and like the weakling I am, I give in to his pleading. My legs burned for two weeks straight, and it felt like I was on the verge of fainting every time I stood up. Needless to say, I quit soon after.

I'm not a gym rat, more like a gym bum. I go to listen to the machines clink and clank as I study in a corner where I'm out of everyone's way.

I pull my throw blanket around me tighter, holding the two sides with one hand as I press play on my phone. As the deep dark hounds of Saint Mesa fill the room, I lay back against my pillows and pick up a book. We've got tests coming up and though I feel like I know my shit, I'm not a very good test taker so I want to burn this shit into my mind while I can. I should probably sleep since I've only allowed myself around six hours a night to sleep, but I can't. I need to just stock up on more energy drinks and coffee. At least until these damn tests are over with.

After what feels like hours, I suddenly feel like someone is watching me, a presence that is not meant to be here. My skin pebbles beneath the blanket, making me burrow deeper. I place the book down and press pause on the music so I can listen for

sounds. I know there's bugs listening in, but thankfully after a thorough search, I've not found any cameras in my room, so this creeping, crawling feeling must mean there's someone outside my door. Well, I mean, it could be the fact that paranoia has set in with sleep deprivation but I'm not chancing it.

Slowly, paying careful attention not to step on the floorboards that groan or pop, I make my way to my door, making sure none of my shadows can be seen in the space between the door and the floor. I get to the wall and put my ear close to the wood, listening for movements or breathing. Mateo's blank face and harsh breaths flash in my mind making my stomach sink with dread.

No, it can't be him, he had a game tonight and he usually has a party afterwards, no way he's sober enough to be outside my door. Looking for a weapon behind me, I quickly snatch up the heavy Virgin Mary candle, but before I can swing the door open, an envelope slides under the door.

It looks old and made of delicate paper, but it's the wax seal that captures my attention.

I squat to get a closer look and see my name written in perfect calligraphy with a felt pen. The seal above it is red with the Calavera Society skull front and center. With a shaky hand, I pick the envelope up, feeling the weight of the paper as I replace the candle.

What could this be?

Deciding to treat it like a band-aid, I rip it open. Pieces of the wax fall to the floor as I read the words written in a similar fashion to the outside. The cursive, written with confident strokes, sends a slithering chill down my spine.

Bienvenida a la Coventry, Valeria Sinclair Calavera.

Tonight, your attendance is required at the great hall for the final ceremony of novices. It is a semi-formal, black attire event. You have twenty minutes to get into the car waiting for you outside of your dorm house. Tell no one of this invitation, leave all electronic devices at home, and give this letter to

your driver. If you fail to follow these instructions, the consequences will be on your hands.

Fear like I felt the night of the ritual settles deep in my heart, making my breathing come in short gasps. First instinct is to call Noah, but the threat glares brightly at me from the letter. My next thought is to hide or run, but where? I'm in their territory, and if I run, there's a very big chance I'm being watched, therefore I'll be caught and I'm not willing to find out what these consequences are.

Fuck it. I want to know who the bastards are, and they just invited - *or demanded* - my presence, so I might as well dive face first into the den of these wicked men.

I'm about to drop the letter and get dressed when a thought comes to mind. They said leave my phone home, but they never mentioned taking a picture of the invitation. I quickly grab my phone and snap a clear shot before hiding the image in my locked folder.

I drop the note and blanket, embracing the cold detachment I feel washing over me like an ocean wave. It coats me, smothering my fear until there's nothing left. No fear, no courage—just nothing. I'll take that over fear though.

I pull a deep red dress that Nimona picked out for me on one of our shopping trips. It's my favorite of all the dresses I have. I've never been much of a dress girl, but that's only because I never had a need for them, I wasn't into events that would require one so why bother buying them?

I quickly get dressed, zipping up the side and pulling on my fishnet stockings before pulling on my knee-high boots and long black overcoat. They wanted all black, but I'm nothing if not a rule breaker. Besides, I'm a grown ass woman—the last time I let someone dress me was when I was eight years old.

I only have a few minutes, so I quickly run a comb through my wavy hair but decide to leave it as it is. These fuckers gave no heads-up, so they'll get what they get.

With my shoulders pushed back and my head held high, I leave my room and make my way toward the front door. I cast a glance at Noah's door, hoping he hears me and comes out, but that's highly unlikely as it's almost three in the morning.

There's a blacked-out SUV parked against the curb with a man standing beside it. His face is blank and unreadable as he holds out his hand but makes no move to open the door for me.

"The letter." he says monotonously.

Once I pass it to him, he opens the back door allowing me to slide in and come face to face with my stone-faced guide, Rey Calavera.

This ought to be a fun night.

## THIRTY-FIVE

---

### ‘DISPOSABLE FIX’ THE PLOT IN YOU

I MAY NOT HAVE BEEN RAISED IN THIS LIFE OF WEALTH AND secrets, but I’ve never been one to back out of a challenge. This is my father’s world and he wanted me in it, I just hope he’s ready for the sleeping beast he woke up in me. I’ve been labeled a lot of things in my young life, wild, untamed, reckless, stubborn but only one of them is more core embedded than the rest—*determined*.

It’s why I chose law as my major. I’m not one to sit and let an injustice be swept under the rug, and if you weigh the actions of my father, good versus bad, you’ll find that the bad has broken the scales of balance. I’m wholeheartedly determined to set those scales right again. He may be my father, but his deceit proves to me that I am nothing more than a pawn in his life. There’s no real fatherly affection from him and I know that if I look deeper into the memories, I’ll find the dark spots and red flags my daughterly mind chose to ignore.

Not anymore.

“Why was I invited?” I ask Rey as I stare at him in the dark cab.

“Were you?” He asks cryptically.

I scoff and look around the cab, “I guess I must be dreaming then.”

His stupid grin makes an appearance, but I turn away from it, eyeing the dark scene passing outside my window. I should have known this prick would be here.

After a few moments of awkward silence, Rey hands me a glass.

“Here, drink this so your anxiety will level out.” His voice sounds almost genuine but I’m genuinely sure Rey doesn’t have a kind bone in his body.

Still, I know he’s right, especially when I reach for the glass and notice my fingers are shaking.

“Thank you.” I say softly, lifting the glass to my nose and sniffing before tipping my head back and swallowing down the frigid drink. My eyes water and I shiver as I hand the glass back.

“I thought Jose Quervo was your favorite.”

I keep my face from showing my surprise, but I’m thrown for a loop that he knows a detail like that, especially that I’ve drank twice in front of him but neither time did he see me drinking liquor.

I clear my throat, “Jose is my sancho for sure, but I prefer it at room temperature.” I give him a playful wink, making his brows shoot up a second before his eyes narrow like he’s trying to figure out why I’m not slapping him with a snarky reply.

To be honest, I’m just tired of the bullshit already. Rey is in the same boat as me whether he’ll admit it or not. He got dealt the same hand as I did when it comes to my father. Our situations may be different in some ways, but where it matters, we both got the short end of the stick. We’re both jaded, slightly fucked in the head, and have a life worth of anger embedded into our souls.

Still, I’m as surprised as he is. Setting aside the fact that we somewhat mirror each other’s fucked up-bringing, flirting with the king of pricks was not on my to do list, but it somehow feels natural. Eh, I blame the lack of sleep, the stress of this whole fucking town and the tequila.

“I just mean it hits harder - *better* - when it’s warm.”

When he doesn’t reply to that and the tension becomes awkward once more, I return my attention to the not so fascinating view outside the window. I have so many questions, but I know Rey wouldn’t be forthcoming with answers so I’m not even going to bother. Besides, I’m sure the awareness of our comparable situations is one-sided. It would be a miracle if Rey pulled his head out of his ass and came to the same realization I did, but I’m sure that’s asking for far too much.

“Do you purposefully speak that way?” He asks with a rougher voice than normal.

I cock a brow at him unsure of what he means.

“Everything you say sounds like an innuendo, so I’m wondering if that’s something I should expect from you or is that how you speak when you’re nervous.”

I scoff at his clarification, “First of all, I’m not nervous and secondly, no I don’t. You just have the mind of a gutter rat, despite having the looks of a hellbound god.”

That last part wasn’t meant to be said aloud but again, tequila. No sleep. I’m stupid.

His bark of laughter surprises me, making me jump and causing him to laugh more.

With a growl that sounds more like a pissed off kitten, I lean forward and grab the bottle along with the shot glass, but Rey’s hand wraps around my wrist stopping me.

“I think you’ve had enough,” I’m about to tell him to fuck right off when he speaks above me, “besides, it’s my turn for a shot.”

His eyes slide down my neck to where my cleavage shows in the heart shaped halter top of my dress. He licks his lips, turning my core into a ball of fire that not even God would be able to extinguish.

“Then take one.” My voice comes out surprisingly strong.



His eyes come back up to mine, “Oh I will, I’m just trying to decide the best place on your sinful body I should lick the salt from.”

I’m still leaning forward, my wrist in his firm grip and my chest rising and falling as he lifts a finger to my lips. I can’t help it, and fuck me I try not to, but the second his finger touches my red stained lips, my tongue peaks out to touch him.

A thrill runs through me when his eyes darken as he clenches his jaw.

“Should it be here, on these perfect lips?”

He drags his fingers down to the erratic beating of my pulse along the side of my neck, making my eyes roll closed, “Or here where I know you’ll be most sensitive.”

When his fingers drop to feather touch across the swells of my breasts, I’m fairly certain I’m about to pass out from all the blood dropped out of my head and straight to my throbbing clit.

He opens his mouth, but I beat him to it, using my free hand to press his hand firmly to my chest, “Here...or you could do all three.”

Desperation colors my words brightly. but I can’t find it in me to care right now. All I care about is shutting him up and hoping to get some relief from this ridiculous need in my body. If this leads to nothing, I can’t guarantee I won’t rip someone’s eye out.

I’m unprepared for Rey to yank me forward, so when he does, with eyes as hungry as I feel, I land on my knees in front of him. He frees my hand only to grab my jaw, tipping my face up toward him, “Desperation looks delicious on you, muñeca.”

“Why do you call me that?” My voice sounds husky to my ears.

“Because you’re my little doll.”

Before I can reply to that asshat response, the door beside me opens, letting in the cool air for a second before Rey lets me go and grabs the handle. He yanks it shut and as if the

driver knows what's happening, he moves to stand on the curb near the back entrance of the school.

What the fuck are we doing here?

My eyes widen as he pours himself a shot.

“Shouldn't we—”

“The president can wait.”

“The who?” I move to sit back on my seat, but Rey stops me with his hand on my throat.

“If you try to move from that spot again, I will rip that dress off you, fuck you until everyone can hear your screams then let you walk inside with my cum dripping down your thighs. Do you understand me?”

Lust and indignation flare in me, but I swallow down the words I want to throw at him and just nod because lust wins the fight.

He pushes down the top of my dress, freeing my breast before moving to the other one, but he stops before he can give it the same air.

“*Words*, muñeca. I need your words.”

“Yes, diablo, I understand.” I speak with a sultry voice that isn't completely faked.

“Buena chica.”

His smirk is utterly breathtaking but add in his Spanish and I'm practically mewling at his feet. My breath stalls as he dips his face down to my chest, wasting no time to lick my right nipple. His tongue swirls around the pointed bud before his teeth meet the sensitive skin, making me moan as he bites me hard enough to leave a mark. He continues his onslaught while his hand rolls and pinches my other nipple, and just when I think I'm going to combust, he pulls back and grabs the salt, coating me with the white grains.

“Open your mouth and stick your tongue out.” He says with a voice so deep I feel it in my aching clit.

I do as he says, and he licks the salt up before shooting back the shot but instead of drinking it all, he brings his face to mine and spits the rest into my mouth.

I barely have time to swallow the salty liquor before his lips smash to mine. His kiss is as hard and greedy as he is. He shoves his tongue into my mouth, sliding across mine in a dance that no one knows but us. His hand grips the back of my head as he maneuvers me so he can deepen the kiss to his liking, but despite his earlier words, I'm not the doll he thinks I am.

I rise from my knees, never breaking the kiss, and force his back against the seat. His hands come up to my hips as I instinctively search for friction and grind down on his very large, very hard cock. We groan into each other's mouths, our kiss becoming even more frenzied until he shoves me off of him before roughly turning me around until I'm on all fours.

I hear the clink of his belt as his hand comes down hard on my ass. He doesn't bother to rub the sting out before delivering another burning slap, but fuck me, I love pain.

I'm the kind of girl who begs to be choked, revels in fingerprint bruises and moans for my hair to be pulled.

I don't want to be soothed; I want to be used.

"I'm clean and on the pill." I hear myself moaning when I'm given another slap, this time on my other cheek.

"I know," He yanks my hair by the scalp until my head burns and my neck is arched back, "now shut up while I fuck you."

It's all the warning I get before he yanks my panties to the side and slams into me. I scream as he relentlessly pounds into me like he's trying to beat my insides until I'm nothing more than a bag of broken organs. There was no pause to make sure I was okay, no questions about how I felt, just pure animalistic fucking.

It's perfectly rotten and wonderfully devilish.

He forces my head to the seat in front of me, holding me down as he fucks me like a madman, delirious and maniacal.

He growls under his breath as his pelvis slap against my ass with each pounding stroke. In mere seconds, my orgasm slams into me with all the frenzied rampage of a starved wolf. I cry out, my pussy fluttering and squeezing Rey's hard cock but he's not done with me yet. He reaches around me, gripping my neck and yanking me up until my back meets his chest. His teeth find my earlobe and I moan as he bites down hard enough to draw blood, making my pussy clench tighter and my scream to rip through the cab.

“¿Por qué has venido aquí muñeca?” *Why did you come here, doll?*

His words are hushed and low as though he doesn't want anyone to hear him, not even me. I want to reply, but I can't because his fingers find my clit as his hand tightens around my neck.

My vision swims as I'm overcome with a sensory overload of pain, pleasure and closed airways.

“Cum for me, Valeria, cum on my cock while I fill you with mine.”

His words unleash another spasmodic release from me, my juices gushing as he slams into me one final time. He spills his hot seed in me as he releases a low rumble from his throat.

As we both breathe heavily, he withdraws from me and fixes my panties, his fingers sliding through our combined releases before coming up to my face.

“Open.” He commands and I listen. He slides his glistening fingers into my mouth, giving me a taste of our heady mixture. I suck on his fingers as he adjusts my breasts, covering me as though nothing happened.

He pulls back, taking his greedy fingers with him and sits back against the seat. I do the same, my eyes glancing out the window to find the driver still standing where I last saw him. Reality begins to set in as I watch Rey fix his suit. *What the fuck did I just do?*

I realize I said that out loud when his eyes glitter with cruelty before he opens the door and steps out, holding his

hand to me.

“You just got fucked by the devil, stepsister.”

## THIRTY-SIX

---

### ‘YOU MAKE ME SICK’ ASHNIKKO

MY MUSIC BLASTS IN MY EARS AS I DROP DOWN ON THE BENCH inside the campus gym and rest my elbows on my knees. The wall of mirrors in front of me show me how absolutely exhausted I am, but I can't quit, not yet at least. If I stop now, I'll lay awake for hours begging my mind to turn off.

Lately, the war between telling Val and keeping my lies has been screaming louder and louder. I'm not a good liar, not when it comes to someone I love and respect, and it's been eating at me, but today was the day I decided I'd just tell her. Consequences be damned. I'd rather take her anger at me when I reveal the truth myself rather than take her hate when she finds out through someone else, like Nimona or worse, Rey.

Classes were filled with the usual tension between him and me. We don't talk, like literally no conversations between us, but the unspoken words hang so heavily in the air that you can practically feel them as they settle on your shoulders.

We pass each other glances, intentional glares that only prove how far we're willing to go to hide our true thoughts. At least that's what it feels like. I don't know what Rey feels or thinks, the guy is a complete enigma, a complex human with calculated words and premeditated actions. Nothing he says or does, as far as I can tell, could ever be trusted as genuine.

Expecting anything real with him is like believing there really is a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

Still, I can't shake him or how his mere presence affects me. Rey is like a magnet, one that has been flipped over and won't allow any others to get close, but I know that's intentional. He does it purposefully, acts like a total prick that's too broken for anything deeper than the shallow end of a pool. It's a cover up for his internal hunger for real connection. I'm not a therapist, but I know what I see in him because it's in me as well. The only person who was ever able to break through the prison walls around my heart and mind was Val.

You can dress up trauma all you want, but it'll always be a neon sign to anyone who dresses theirs as well.

I tried to tell myself it's none of my business, and I've done well for the last month, but today I happened to be side eyeing Rey - *per usual* - as he sat next to me in class, and I caught a glimpse of the scar on his lip. The same one that he had that first day of classes, and I couldn't stop the question that slipped free.

"Who hit you that day?" I jerk my chin to his lip.

He looked at me, his eyes sliding over my face before replying, "Why? You gonna defend my honor?"

His laugh was humorless as he turned back to the droning professor, something in his response pulled at something in me, reminding me of myself after one of my parents heavy handed life lessons.

"I don't know about that," I chuckled thinking there was finally a window opening up between us, "but if you gave me the name, I wouldn't let a bitch slide."

And I wouldn't have. Honest to God, would have found the cocksucker and gave them a few scars in return, but Rey fucked that all up with his answer.

"Really?" he turned to me, a dark malicious look in his gray eyes, "What if it was your mommy, huh? I mean, it's not like you did anything to that pinche puta when she beat you in

front of your daddy? So, tell me, mister protector, how can you defend me when you couldn't even defend yourself?"

My pen snapped in my hands as I began to shake with fury. I leaned into him, my eyes bouncing between his while venomous words and comebacks raced through my mind, until I realized exactly what he's doing. Deflecting because he doesn't want pity. Well, the fucker definitely has zero pity nor sympathy from me.

"You think you got me all figured out. Well, I'm here to tell you, you're right. You're so right that it's like you personally experienced it. So, tell me, mister bullshit, which one scarred your insides? Was it daddy or did mommy enjoy your tears too?"

I knew my words hit their mark when his hands balled up and he was ready to attack, but I didn't stick around. I grabbed my bag and left just as the bell rang, getting lost in the crowd as I made my way here to the gym where I've been almost all night.

I don't know what Rey's end game is or what the point of his actions are, but I'm not going to play the pawn in his infuriating games anymore. I'm going to tell Val the truth, all of it. Whatever comes after that, I'll deal with it, but I am not going to let Rey, or any other motherfucker hold a knife over my head.

Deciding I should just text her now and ask her to meet me tomorrow, I take a swig of my water bottle and catch a glimpse of someone in a mask standing behind me. Before I can jump into action, the asshole stabs me in the neck with something that takes effect almost immediately. I fall to the floor, my muscles lock painfully as though rigor mortis has set in. My water bottle goes rolling across the floor along with my phone, but it's not like it matters anyway.

As I lay paralyzed on the gym floor, I count the rapid beats of my heart while watching rivulets of water flow from the nozzle of my bottle, until Rey's voice reaches my quickly fading consciousness.

"See? You couldn't even defend yourself."



The last thing I see is a black bag sliding over my head.

---

I don't know how long I was unconscious for, but once I return to the land of the somewhat living, I realize I'm no longer in the gym. Rey's voice echoes in my head, the last words he spoke repeating themselves like a broken record meant to torture.

I groan as I blink open my eyes. I can't quite make out where I am since the room is spinning like a top, but I can tell I'm seated in a plush chair, like one you'd find in the corner of a bookshop. My stomach rolls violently as I lift my head and try to look around, spotting no one but red walls and black curtains hanging. Sluggishly, I pat my pockets for my phone but come up empty. I'm in my workout clothes, so I know I don't have any weapons on me.

"Welcome back, sunshine." Mateo's voice pounds through my skull making my stomachache even harder, but I swallow down my sickness and force myself to sit up.

"Where the fuck is he?" I manage to get out through clenched teeth.

"Where's who?"

If I didn't feel like the floor was about to roll beneath me like an ocean wave, I'd break this sarcastic fuck's neck.

"Rey." I growl as I push myself off the chair, "Where the fuck is he?"

My stomach rolls as I step closer to Mateo, but thankful the spinning has slowed to a wobble. Just as I reach him, he puts his hands up in mock surrender. He's dressed like he's about to walk the red carpet; black suit, white button up shirt with the top three buttons undone, exposing the ink on his chest. His hair is as it always is, feathered at the sides with the curled ends folding back. He honestly looks like a drummer from the eighties.

The clown like tattoo under his right eye seems to stand out more tonight as though he touched up the ink recently, but I force myself to keep my eyes locked on his as I wait for his answer.

“He went to run errands for his pops, but Roberto asked me to be here when you woke up.”

I stare at him with my brows furrowed as confusion floods my mind, “I—Roberto? Forget it, I don’t have time for your shit. Rey fucking kidnapped me like a psycho—”

“He is a psycho.”

I ignore his interruption and continue on, “Drugged me and brought to wherever *here* is—”

“The president’s suite in the Calavera Society house.”

“Mateo!” I bark when he interrupts once again, “This may be a game to you, but it’s not. I’m leaving now but if you see Rey before I do, let him know I have a bullet with his name on it.”

I push past him and reach for the door handle, but it’s locked...with a key? There’s no deadbolt, no button, knob, latch, there’s nothing on the door that would indicate there’s even a way to lock it from the inside like a normal room, but no amount of twisting and yanking makes the door budge.

I spin in place, my heart rate beginning to pick up, and begin looking for other exits, but there are none, not even a window. Stone walls painted red surround me in what looks like an old gothic master bedroom. There’s a four-post king size bed with red and black gauze hanging from the ornate chandelier above it. What is that even called?

The headboard is shiny black wood carved intricately with red velvet plush for comfortably sit back against. The duvet and pillows look as soft as a fucking cloud; I just want to drop on it and sleep until my bones no longer hurt and this pounding in my head leaves. But I have more important things to worry about—like getting out of this room for one.

“If you’re done playing Houdini, I think we should talk. Then you can leave.”

Mateo moves to the mini bar, running a hand through his hair as he checks himself out in the giant mirror before pouring two drinks.

He offers me the second glass and I feel my anger rise. What the hell is it with these entitled fucking cunts? It's like kidnapping and drugging someone is just a regular Tuesday for them.

“How about I shove that drink—”

“Val's life is about to change.”

His words cut off my own. But then I remember ritual night and remind myself that Rey and Mateo are both manipulative pricks who shouldn't be trusted. I cock a brow for him to continue.

“Depending on your cooperation from this moment on, this life altering situation can turn out to be good for her. She'll have a set future, wealth like never before, she'll never know a day of struggle, you know, all the good shit people covet. But, if you fail to cooperate, fail to do as you're told,” he tilts his head from side to side and he steps closer to me “*tu sabes.*”

“Why?”

His brows fold inward as he sips his drink, “Why what? Why does it depend on you, why does she have this opportunity, why does your dick get hard? There's so many *why's*, my friend. You'll have to be more specific.”

I give him a hard stare, imagining the most colorful ways I can wipe that smug look off his face. Before I can decide on one, the sound of the door unlocking behind me has me freezing for a second. I turn around and brace myself, fully expecting to come face-to-face with Rey, but it's Roberto who walks through instead.

“Hello, Noah. Thank you for being here tonight.”

I scoff, “I didn't think I had a choice in the matter seeing as Rey drugged me to get me here.”

Roberto's eyes twinkle like he just witnessed his child winning their first award. My lip curls in disgust. I can't

believe Valeria came from this sadistic fuck.

“Ah, yes, my son really knows how to get a job done. It’ll make this year’s election quite interesting, wouldn’t you say, Mateo?”

I forgot Rey’s best friend is still behind me. He steps around me and practically slams his glass down on the bar. He swaggers his way toward the door, pausing beside Val’s dad.

“Sure, Roberto, whatever you say. Although, I don’t think it’ll be interesting in the way you think.”

Mateo turns and gives me a wink before strutting out the door, leaving me and Roberto alone. Ignoring the bastard who obviously orchestrated this whole night, I move to the mini bar and grab a bottle of water I find.

After cracking the seal, I turn back to Roberto, “Don’t call Rey your son, it’s fucking weird and we both know he isn’t.”

Roberto moves to sit in the chair I woke up in, sighing loudly as he sits. I read somewhere that manipulators, particularly those who are male and in the older caliber of age, have a tendency to present themselves as harmless by making subtle noises of discomfort when doing simple things—hence, this fool acting like his bones hurt as he sits. He’s presenting himself as frail, harmless, tired of the games and eager to let life pass him by peacefully, but I’m no fool and his lies won’t work on me.

“You’re right Noah, Rey is not my child which is why tonight needs to go as smoothly as possible. For Valeria’s sake.”

I cross my arms over my chest, the plastic bottle popping under my grip, “That’s the second time tonight I’ve been warned about Val’s safety. Maybe if you hadn’t been playing these fucked up games with your daughter, she wouldn’t be in any kind of trouble.”

“Everything I did was to protect both Valeria and Rey—”

“Them or yourself?”

I place the bottle back down on the table and spot a wooden mallet that's used to break up ice sticking out from behind a gold bucket holding some brand of champagne from the early nineteen hundreds. If I need to, I'll use it on Roberto until someone decides to save his worthless ass and let me the hell out of here.

I need to find Val and get the hell outta dodge.

“Protecting myself *is* protecting them, Noah.” *God, what a shitty fucking answer, huh?* “But tonight, isn't about me, it's about Valeria and how you can help her make it out of this alive.”

A lifetime of moments passes through my mind, times when Val's smile brought a little life back into me, moments when her fingers brushed against the ridges of my scars along my arms. The late-night visits when she knew something was wrong and climbed through my window just to be the anchor I so desperately needed. It was Val who pulled me out of every emotional hole I fell into. Hell, she even bailed me out of jail using money she saved up during a summer job.

Maybe it's a foolish decision to do this, but Val never weighed the consequences versus the actions when it came to helping me.

“What do I need to do?”

Roberto's eyes gleam like a cat who has finally caught the mouse, too bad for him that I'm a rabid beast. He may think he's got me cornered, but I've got more knives up my sleeves than he has tricks.

“In order to help Val, get out of this, you must become her Judas and join the Calavera Society. Full-fledged initiation. You passed ritual night and from that sinful act, we now have a secret you want hidden. So, by the Society bylaws, you've already begun your novice stages. But I must warn you, the tasks ahead of you will not be easy.”

My hands curl into fists, but I keep them tight under my arms, repeating a mantra in my head. *This is for Val. Roberto will pay for this.*

He stands and walks over to me, his hand out, “Do we have a deal?”

The moment my hand grips his, I know I’ve lost Val forever.

## THIRTY-SEVEN

---

### ‘STUPID’ ASHNIKKO FT. YUNG BABY TATE

AS SOON AS WE’RE OUT OF THE CAR, THE DRIVER OPENS THE door to the main building and lets us in without comment nor acknowledgement, which is just as well since I can feel the heat on my face. I’ve never really cared about being watched, much less being heard, while I’m getting a good fuck, but this feels entirely different.

For one, people here think Rey is my actual brother, so if the driver is a *chismoso*, the news will spread like wildfire. Gossips are the worst but add in the fact that everyone here is a rich snob from hell, my life will undoubtedly become far worse than I can imagine.

The other reason this feels new to me is because of the feelings swarming my body and mind every time I cast a side glance at Rey. Outside of Noah, I’ve never felt a modicum of interest for anyone. Sure, I find a lot of guys sexy and yeah, I’ve fucked my fair share, but it’s always no-strings-attached. No feelings, no emotions, just pure carnal desire.

What happened with Rey just now feels as different as water is to oil.

“The driver.” I say as our footsteps echo down the empty hallways.

From what I can tell, no one is here. Most of the lights are off, while the ones lighting the way for us are dimmed. I'm sure the night guards appreciate that, hell, I know I would. This place is freaky enough during the day, but at night it feels even more ominous. The hairs on my arms stand as my eyes slide over the old portrait paintings on the walls.

I could lose myself in their frozen gazes, in fact, I have, but that's only during the day when nothing can hide in the shadows. Now though, I feel like they're watching me, judging me, finding me guilty of something worthy of a slow death.

"What about the driver?" His deep voice has my stomach sinking and my heart beating faster. Whether because of the eerie feeling of the dark halls or because of the traitorous emotions swimming through me, I don't know nor do I wish to think deeper on it.

My brain is slow to catch up to what he's asking, but finally I remember my question.

"Well, everyone here thinks we're related..." I don't need to elaborate; he knows what I'm asking.

"Trust me, he won't speak a word." My eyes narrow on his profile.

"How—"

"This way." he interrupts me, pulling me down an even darker hall.

and into one of the rooms that looks like it was once an old library with floor

to ceiling windows on the left and walls of empty shelves everywhere else. Dust

covers every available surface as we move toward what I assume is a closet.

It's not, it's yet another downward spiral staircase. When we reach the bottom, he reaches for my hand and pulls me closer to his side as he leads the way through what feels like a



labyrinth of halls, doors and rooms until the modern lights begin to fade and wall sconces light our path.

I'd ask him to stop, but I can say with nothing but honesty, this whole fucking place has me skeeved the fuck out. Stopping would make me feel like a sitting duck and I'm not about to be that bitch in a horror movie we all despise for her stupidity. So, I slide closer to him, keep pace and grip his hand like my life depends on it.

I breathe in his scent, thankful the lights don't expose my creepy behavior, but fuck me, his scent of whiskey and cigar smoke has me completely enthralled. I could sniff him like a hound all day and not grow tired for his unique scent. Hell, I didn't picture him a cigar smoker, nor did I picture myself a person who would love the smell of them, but on Rey it just works.

Like Noah with his weed and leather scent. Totally unique to him. I could smell it on someone else, even Rey, and it wouldn't be the same. It's Noah's and his alone.

The temperature drops and I feel like I'm underground, as though I'm being led to my own tomb. From what I can see while we pass the burning torches—*yes, I'm pretty sure we traveled in time with all that walking and landed in Dracula's castle*—the walls are made of old stones like underground tunnels.

“Are you sniffing me, *muñeca*?” Rey's voice has me jumping and straightening. Fuck, I didn't think I was all up on him like that.

“Pfft, don't flatter yourself,” I mentally fumble around for a second, “my nose is like an ice cube, I'm just trying to warm it up.”

I mentally slap myself.

He chuckles and the sound does stupid things to my head and heart. He stops and shrugs off his blazer before swinging it around me and pulling it over my shoulders. I slide my arms into the holes and hug myself.

He stares at me for a minute looking up and down my frame as though he's trying to find something I'm hiding. Without saying anything else, he retakes my hand and pulls me.

I pull to a stop just as we turn yet another corner. Rey's cold eyes turn to me, as I yank my hand from his firm grip. I ignore the loss of his strength and warmth, my eyes trained on the two giant doors that sit forebodingly fifty yards away.

“What is this, Rey?”

He tilts his head as he folds his arms across his broad chest, “Don't tell me the princess is scared.”

I feel my lip curl of its own accord, “Only a fool would claim to know no fear. I know fear, and it's not the boogeyman or the dark, it's you and every other fucker in this damn town. Now tell me, what the hell is going on?”

He steps closer to me, and I move back on instinct, but a look of hurt those flashes through his eyes stops me from moving further away. *My eyes have to be playing tricks on me.*

“You got the invitation; you know what's going on.”

“Oh, you mean that vague as fuck letter demanding I be here or suffer the consequences? Yeah, that cleared everything up for me as well as *manteca* on a car windshield.”

My sarcasm is thick and dripping with anger, making Rey sigh like I'm being irritatingly unreasonable, “It's a *secret* society, Valeria. Now come on, we're wasting time.”

I try to pull my hand back when he reaches for me once more, but he predicts it and snags my wrist before I can get far. My heart climbs into my throat as he pulls me toward the doors that look like, but nothing prepares me for the four robed men who come out after Rey does some coded knock. Stupidly—*because I know he wouldn't do shit to protect me if I were in danger*—I make myself as small as possible against his side. I'm scrappy as fuck and I know how to throw down or run if I need to, but neither of those options will work here. For one, I have no clue how to get the fuck out of here since I lost track of where we were about fifty corners ago, but also

because there's no way in hell I'm going to win a fight against four grown ass men.

Rey pulls his sleeve up revealing an intricate scar on his forearm near the crook of his elbow and I gasp at the sight. It's a fucking branding! I gaze down at it as one of the robed men grabs Rey's arm with unnecessary force and roughly rubs his thumb across it making Rey hiss. It was too low for anyone else to hear it, but I did.

On instinct, I grab the asshole's wrist and rip his fingers away from Rey before bringing my knee up. I connect with the bastard's balls before anyone can stop me, but there's no need, I'm done.

"Don't fucking touch him." I snarl down at the groaning bitch before sliding my eyes across the other three who stand back, watching me within the shadows of their cowls.

"Easy, *princessa*. They're just making sure it's real."

The robed goons allow us to pass through as the punk I kned stands on shaky legs, head bowed as I move past him.

"How many times have you been down here, Rey?" My voice shakes as adrenaline courses through me, but I welcome it. Fear is far more debilitating; I'll take anger over it any day. The doors close behind us, and I look up at Rey whose face has once again closed off.

"I bet you've been down here more times that you can even count," I pull his arm toward me, and he allows it, not speaking a word as I gently touch the burn scar. It's identical to the pendants of Calavera Society, bust, mask, horns...a wicked and ungodly emblem burned into Rey's skin. "I have no doubt they knew this was real."

I look up into his eyes and though they watch me as though I'm a newfound flower that needs to be studied under a glass, I can see the pain and confusion I feel within myself. But I don't care. I don't have a single care that Rey doesn't like me, that he'd rather me be dead or gone than to spend another second in his presence, all I care about is the pain I see

woven deep into his soul. Pain that this Society—*my father*—has brought upon him.

“Did he do this to you? Did he hurt you, Rey?”

As though my words flipped something inside him, Rey yanks his arm out of my hands and grabs the nape of my neck. Pain shoots down my spine as I feel strands of my hair rip out of the base of my scalp.

“I don’t need your pity, little one. I don’t need your care. All I need is for you to cooperate like a good girl, if you don’t, it won’t be me getting hurt this time.”

“Why would you care?” I hiss through clenched teeth, “You’ve made it clear you don’t give two fucks about me, so why the sudden worry about me being the one who gets hurt?”

He leans into my face, his angry gray eyes bouncing between both of mine, “I don’t care about you, Valeria, I only care about what I want and to get that, I need you out of my way, so you don’t fuck things up. *Caring* fucks things up.”

We stare into one another’s eyes as hot tears of anger burn a path down my face, that last sentence hanging in the air like toxic fumes. His eyes follow one of my tears down my cheek, both of us breathing shallowly as we stand mere inches apart. Suddenly, he lets me go, his hand ripping from the back of my neck like I burned him. I wish I could.

“Just—” he’s never stuttered before, but I don’t comment as he busies himself by fixing his sleeve and covering his scar, “Just stay quiet, speak when spoken to and do not try to stop anything you see no matter how morally wrong it may feel.”

I don’t get a chance to ask him what his definition of *morally wrong* is because he swings the next set of wooden doors open revealing a room filled with masked men in robes and at least twenty younger guys wearing nothing but white long shirts on all fours before them.

“*Bienvenida, princesa!* The Calavera Society has been waiting for your arrival.” My father’s voice pulls my attention from the trembling men in white to a balcony above me on the second floor.

I spot his smirking mouth—*unique with the shiny gold cap just to the side of his front left tooth*—but the rest of his face is covered in a golden mask. Everyone else in the room is either in a black, red, or silver mask.

Beside my father is another man who hungrily rubs his fingers across his bottom lip, but I can't tell who he is because the black mask he's wearing covers his eyes. By the aged, tattooed skin of his hand and the way his back hunches just slightly, I'm pretty sure he's much older than me.

On the other side of my father is Mateo. He's wearing a black mask, same as the older man, but there's no mistaking that crazy as hell smile of his. Especially that coy dimple in his chin.

I ignore him and watch my arrogant father who stands like a man suffering from a God complex—chin up, shoulders back, arms spread as he looks down his nose at everyone. The mask he's sporting is the only one that stands out amongst the rest. It's gold and carved to look like the eyes and nose of a human skull. It's almost identical to the La Muerte statue in the courtyard. There are horns protruding from the top, bent backward like a ram's horns, and curl back toward the base of his skull.

The top few buttons of his shirt are undone, making the fabric pull apart as he rests his hands on the rail of the balcony, and it's the first time I've ever seen ink on my father's skin.

La Muerte peeks out from his shirt as he twists his head to the side, a sick smirk on his mouth as he watches me. I don't know this man. I thought I did, but as I think back to every memory I've had and measure it to the man before me, I see now that it was nothing but a play.

His mouth opens and I can feel the final act beginning, the bullet that kills the main character and leading to the dramatization of love and loss, of pain and betrayal...of lies and deception.

“Valeria Sinclair Calavera, your initiation begins now.”

## THIRTY-EIGHT

---

### ‘COME UNDONE’ BAD OMENS

I’VE SPENT MY LIFE LEARNING HOW TO TURN OFF MY emotions. How to keep my face from showing my thoughts no matter what they are, but in all that time, all those arduous days of learning what consequence awaited me if I showed my hand even a little, nothing prepared me for Valeria.

She feels like *déjà vu*. Like slow falling snow on a sunny day. She makes me feel more than a drug can induce.

She simply makes me feel.

I’m not talking about some romantic nonsense, like I can suddenly see the light now that I’ve looked into her eyes and tasted her skin...heard her moans.

No, I mean she makes me feel like I’m close to death. Like my last breath will be in any moment; the clock on my lifespan is ticking but I don’t know the time of my end. She makes me feel more alive than being alive does and I can only compare that to coming close to death. After all, a man never feels more alive than he does knocking on death’s door.

But it’s more than that. So much more and I can’t even begin to explain it.

When I first laid eyes on her back in her hometown, I knew she was breathtaking. With her thick thighs, flared waist

and long black hair...but the way I feel has nothing to do with gaining entry into her forbidden garden, no, it's the way she looked at me. The way she protected me though I didn't need any. It's the way she heard a small sound of inconvenience hiss through my teeth and took it upon herself as though she were the one with an unwanted touch on her skin.

Who has done that for me?

No one but myself. Yet this girl, whom I've been cruel to, stood in front of me. She had nothing to gain from it, but that didn't stop her. I can almost guarantee that had it been her arm that was being touched, she would not have done anything about it, but she didn't stand idly when it happened to me.

And to an outsider, what the guard did was nothing!

Not to Valeria though.

Still, I must keep my plans in order. I cannot be swayed; I will not be moved which is exactly why I tried to rip any leftover care for me out of her by once again being cruel. It's not difficult to do, because despite being shocked at her unprovoked kindness, I find myself wanting to hurt her just so I can watch those precious tears fall one more time.

God, how immaculate those crystal drops looked against her tan skin.

How utterly breakable she felt in that moment.

Sweetly submissive in my grip at her neck.

All I want to do is pull her apart piece by piece. To watch her come undone each time she pulls herself together again. I want to see how many times she can pick herself back up, how long it takes until her chin drops in defeat, how many chips and cracks can she take before her armor falls in shattered pieces?

But watching this woman as closely as I have been, I have no doubt that she'd only rest once her adversary was bleeding out at her feet.

“Bienvenida, princesa! The Calavera Society has been waiting for your arrival.”

Valeria's eyes shoot up to her father who stands like the Calavera ruler he is on the balcony above us. Standing beside him with masks covering their faces are Cain, Mateo, and a few of the top-ranking members and their wives. There are more of us here than I anticipated there would be, but I've learned to expect the unexpected from Roberto. Perhaps he wants to show his wayward daughter his true power.

I pull my eyes from the arrogant bastard and focus on Valeria, forcing myself not to show my worry.

Damn this woman! Damn her and her ability to break what I have painstakingly trained for. Quickly reaching for my back pocket, I pull out my mask and the timing couldn't be more perfect because just as I get the skull over my face and the latches in place, Roberto says something that has everyone gasping and my blood turning cold.

"Valeria Sinclair Calavera, your initiation begins now."

Her fists clench at her sides as she stares down her smirking father, but instead of saying anything to him, she turns her glistening gaze to me. It occurs to me—*realization that slams into me like a bag of bricks*—that my stepsister who has been blindsided from the moment we met, sees me as the only person who can save her from this wretched world.

But there's no saving anyone from the Society, for the damned cannot bring salvation, we can only offer gold for your soul.

I can see the questions in her honey eyes, the hurt and the anger shining in her hardening features, but I can do nothing about it. I had no prior knowledge of Roberto's plans to initiate his daughter into an *all-men's* society and even if I had, he is the *presidente*—his word is law.

Still, it makes no sense to me.

I knew Noah would be brought here tonight. I was, after all, the one who drugged him and carried him here like a sacrifice. He will be one of the twenty initiates, but that was supposed to be for show. Noah has no bloodline tie to Calavera so he cannot join without the full and unanimous



vote of every member. Since I remember no such vote, Noah would only be the ace-up-the-sleeve so to speak.

It's the same technique I used on ritual night, threatening her best friend will never fail to make Valeria fall in line like wild mares following their caught stallion. But witnessing the turn of events just now, what if Roberto truly plans to initiate Noah? What would be the purpose of such a decision? Fuck me, if my guess is correct and Noah is forced into the society, it'll be on my head and neither he nor Valeria will forgive me when they face the sick and twisted trials that await them.

Wait, when the *fuck* did I care about forgiveness?

"A woman? In Calavera Society? We had no vote for this, Roberto!" Someone yells angrily.

As others yell out their agreements and concerns, I move to Valeria's side, keeping my gaze locked on Roberto's calculating stare. As he watches his daughter and I stand side-by-side, something comes over me. My plan was to take Roberto down, to ruin him until there was nothing left for him to fall back on. I wanted to take his precious daughter down; I thought she was his weakness, but I was wrong.

Without breaking the stare, I reach out with my fingers until mine and Valeria's skin touch. Warmth spreads through me as she responds by turning her hand and sliding her fingers through mine.

Roberto's mouth turns into a grin that looks part anger, part glee; a game has begun for him.

The fucked-up part is...I welcome it with sick pleasure. A macabre enjoyment no sane person should ever feel, but I've never claimed sanity.

My plans may have been altered to keep Valeria at my side as Roberto falls from his throne, but I have no doubt it will be a glorious moment to bear witness to, to have a hand in. What a bold and ironic justice it will be; Roberto's own daughter plunging the knife in his regime. With Valeria beside me, the bloodline for Calavera will be fully intact, now we just need to get Noah with us.

Seeing as I fucked him over royally, I'm sure it will be a feat.

Finally choosing to address the onlookers who have quieted down now that they've noticed mine and Valeria's locked hands, Roberto spreads his arms wide.

"With only one name, I soothe your worries, ladies and gentlemen. *La Muerte*."

I growl under my breath at his answer, knowing exactly what he's talking about. I can hear others around me whispering their confusion, but they didn't spend the time I did studying our society of blood, morals and soulful sacrifices. Roberto walks between the people, making his way toward the stairs that will lead him down to us.

Valeria squeezes my hand, "What does he mean?"

Her shaky voice penetrates me in a way that none ever has before. Instead of the power or joy I normally feel when someone I've fucked is scared, all I feel is this fucked up need to beat the shit out of Roberto. Why? Because it's only I who has the privilege to put such fear in my sweet and tempting stepsister.

"Rey?" Valeria whispers harshly, bringing me out of my ridiculous musings.

I look down at her and am shocked at the instinct I have to reach out and cup her face. My thumb whispers across her bottom lip as I do my best to articulate the answer to her question.

"The Calavera Society lives and breathes one rule book: *La Ley de La Muerte*. In it there is a century ceremony called *La Estrella de Medianoche* or *The Midnight Star* event. It's not a natural event in anyway, it has to do with the—"

She interrupts me, shocking me with how easily she puts the pieces together, "It has to do with the only child of the current president. Right?"

I hate the dead sound to her voice, but I don't bother to sugar coat it. Valeria is a tough girl and as weirdly as I want to shield her, I know only the truth will help.

“Right, and this year will be the two hundredth celebration, and it’s your father who is *presidente*. La Muerte’s favor on us must be sustained.”

“What does he plan to do?” She asks mostly to herself.

There’s only one option, only one plan that could possibly be in her father’s mind, but I don’t want to tell her. I don’t want to speak it aloud for fear of making it true.

Roberto reaches the bottom of the stairs and walks toward Valeria and me as he pulls the mask off his face. He hands it to Cain who follows him down and adjusts his suit jacket. I want to pull Valeria behind me as he nears, but it’s bad enough that I showed him my feelings when I took Valeria’s hand in my own. Instead I squeeze her hand and stand taller, my chest swelling when she mimics the movement.

Roberto stops before us, his eyes going from our joined hands to our faces before he stops on me.

“Need I remind you, *son*,” He gives me that disapproving look that I received on many occasions as a child, “You may not realize it now, but you both stand to lose or gain in these trials.”

I chuckle, not giving two fucks whether I get a smack for it or not, he can get fucked by a cactus for all I care.

“Need I remind *you*,” I step closer to him, my chest hitting his as I speak low enough that Valeria can’t hear me, “you stand to lose a lot, and now you’ve just put your *only* legitimate child in the ring with me.”

I move back and smile broadly when his eyes bulge in their sockets, his hand raising like he’s going to deliver another slap.

“Don’t.” Valeria growls at her father, trying to step forward but I hold her still. No way I’ll allow a bitch like Roberto to hit her, even by accident.

Her voice is deceptively sweet from my side, “We wouldn’t want you to look like an easily angered child, would we? Especially not in front of your flock.”

“Such brave words for being a sheep yourself.” He tells her with a sneer.

She leans in with a smile, her words whispered between clenched teeth, “If you lay a hand on Rey, I’ll show you what I am beneath my sheep’s clothing.”

She doesn’t let Roberto speak again. She stands straight and lifts her chin up in defiance as she looks at everyone in the room, her voice coming out clear and confident.

“Humanity spoke and La Muerte answered. I am honored to prove my worth to the men of the Calavera Society.”

## THIRTY-NINE

---

### ‘JUDAS’ GEMYNI

AFTER MAKING A DEAL WITH ROBERTO, I WAS ESCORTED OUT of the room and through a catacomb of tunnels and stone archways until I was deposited to a room filled with twenty or so guys. All of them looked to be around my age, with a few of their faces standing out, including Rina’s bitch boyfriend and a couple of his ass kissing friends.

“What is the stray doing here?” Rina’s boy toy asks no one in particular, gaining obedient chuckles from his friends.

I scoff, “Could you be any more of a cliché? It’s giving off small dick energy. What’s your name, Kenny? Danny? Don’t tell me it’s *Chad*.”

That earns real laughter from the rest of the group.

“It’s Santiago Herra, dick.”

I cock a brow, that last name making Nimona’s bruised face flash before my eyes.

“You wouldn’t happen to be related to Santino, would you?”

The douche looks around like I’m such an idiot for not knowing who the fuck they are.

“He’s my older brother, why?”

I laugh. Of course they're brothers. The guys around the room all raise their brows, their attention riveted on the exchange. I can almost guarantee they're anxious to see what I'll say next. Fuck them and fuck this cunt.

"I was right about the small dick energy. Your brother is a little bitch too. I bet your whole family is filled with micro dicks and little man syndrome."

His eyes water with anger, his fists balling up at his sides and his breathing coming in fast like a *burro*. "Watch your fucking mouth when you speak of my family."

I spread my arms wide, a smile on my face, "Fuck. Your. Bitch. Family. You *fucking* fuck."

He takes one step forward, but I'm itching for a fight. A chance to feel some pain and deliver some of my own. I rush forward before he can reach me, catching him by surprise. I punch him once in the nose and take one of his surprisingly hard hits to the collarbone. I'm unfazed as I grab the collar of his shirt and block another blow before hitting him again, this time in the cheek. I slam him into the wall, punching him in the face once more before slamming the back of my forearm to his throat.

"Today has been one hell of a day, *Chad*. I've been drugged, threatened, and so fucking hard for two people that I'm pretty sure my dick is going to fall off if I don't fuck one of them soon. I've had my best friend's life threatened and just made a deal with the devil, so unless you have something useful to say, shut the fuck up before I snap your little weasel neck. You feel me?"

I'm breathing hard and I know I'm choking the life from this pussy's body, but I don't give a fuck. The blood on his face drips onto my arm and I shove off him, letting his pathetic ass drop to the floor.

"And tell your bitch ass brother to stay the fuck away from Nimona or I'll be coming for him too."

Just as I step away from him, returning to the group of onlookers including Chad's cowardly friends who didn't back

their boy up for shit, the doors open, allowing four robed men to enter. All of them have masks covering their faces, but I spot Mateo instantly. No one can radiate psychotic energy quite like him. Especially when he lifts his hand to his cheek and gives me a two-finger wave with a cheeky smile.

*Este vato*, he takes *loco* to a whole new level.

“Mr. Herra, what happened to your face?” The leader of the robed men asks.

Everyone turns to Santiago—*I still think Chad suits him better*—who pulls off his shirt to wipe his face. His eyes glance at me angrily before he resets the bone in his nose, blowing out clots of blood and making everyone in the room just a little sicker of his presence.

“I slipped.”

I fold my lips inward and duck my head as someone coughs to cover up their chuckle. This whole night has become a twilight zone worthy episode, but I have to admit that Chad offered me just enough distraction to get through the crazy.

I can tell the robed men don’t buy his answer, especially Mateo whose eyes drop to my knuckles at my side, but no one questions it.

Another one of the mysterious men moves around the room slowly while the first continues to talk. The quiet steps of the man circling us makes everyone uncomfortable with his masked stare. For me, it makes me anxious to escape. It makes me feel like I’m back home with my mother and father, suffering another one of their lessons.

“Remove all your clothing except for your undergarments. Everything else must be left on the floor for retrieval. Remove all jewelry, devices and anything not attached to your natural bodies.”

“Why?” Someone across the room asks. The man circling us stops near him, delivering a hard whack with a long flat stick. *Was that a fucking ruler?*

“Unless you are directly spoken to, you are not to speak. Break this very simple rule and your punishment will grow in

severity each time. Nod your heads if you understand.”

Everyone nods while I hold my head still and defiantly, my teeth grinding as I stare at the bastard. I wish a motherfucker would try that shit with me.

The speaker jerks his chin in my direction and the man with the ruler makes his way toward me. As he nears, I brace myself to fight, but Mateo steps between us tsk-ing his tongue.

“Ya escuchaste al presidente.” *You heard the president.* “Noah is untouchable. If he causes issues, you go directly to Roberto.”

Slowly, the stick happy man leans to the side, his masked face coming into view over Mateo’s shoulder. I give him a grin before he turns and continues his circling, passing me with a stare as the leader drones on. I may act like nothing has fazed me, but in all honesty, I haven’t felt this much anxiety since leaving my parents. I’m just good at hiding it.

“You all have passed your tests, bringing you up from level three novice to level two. But even if you make it through this level, you must still achieve level one, and as you know, each level gets progressively harder. According to the bylaws, you can be rejected for any reason and will have to return to your families as a failure. Not only will you suffer for this, but your family will as well. Shame and humiliation will be your legacy. To avoid this, you must follow each directive to the very last detail, no matter how wrong it may seem to your preconditioned minds.

“Though he comes from no one from nowhere, Noah Cabañas is one of you, a potential member of this brotherhood. It is expected of you to give him your warmest welcome and guidance...we don’t want him to suffer any *accidents*.”

Based on the sneer in his words and the sinister gleam in the eyes of a few of the guys around me, I know I’m going to be a major target for *accidents*.

I send the speaker a kissy face before pulling my shirt off.

Fuck these assholes. I may be a no one from nowhere, but I sure as fuck have no issues cutting a throat and turning one



of these somebodies into a nobody.

Once we're all standing in our briefs—*I'm surprised Chad isn't wearing whitey tighties*—we stand in silence. I feel like a fucking idiot walking willingly into the slaughter.

*This is for Val. For val, the girl who secretly wants you, openly loves you, would do the same for you.* I quietly repeat this to myself as I watch another set of men enter, their masks are different from the original group. Where the first set of assholes had black masks, these guys have red masks, and their robes are dark brown rather than black. They look like evil monks.

“Stand in a line side-by-side.” The speaker commands, and everyone lines up shoulder-to-shoulder beside me, leaving me at the left end. Mateo lightly shoulder checks me as he moves to stand with the men he entered with. Two red faced monks walk through the room collecting our clothing, shoes and other items, dropping everything into a sack and leaving with it.

Chad, who stands one guy down from me, is the only one dumb enough to ask what we're all wondering. “Where are they taking our stuff? My phone is in there.”

Mateo rushes him, sending his fist into poor Chad's rib with a sickening crack, “Speak only when spoken to, *runt*. You think that because your daddy is leading this little band of welcomers, you get some sort of pass, hmm?”

My eyes flash to the speaker, noticing how rigid his stance now is, yet he makes no move to stop Mateo from hurting his son. Shit, my parents would have fit right in with the worthless fucking sperm and egg donors.

Mateo moves back, his lips moving rapidly but his words can't be heard. Mateo is snapping, his control is slipping and it's Chad taking the brunt of it.

Chad's groaning turns into a high pitched scream when Mateo snaps his arm forward and grips his broken nose between his thumb and finger. Mat grins widely as he watches Chad's tears stream down his face.

“You know, I’ve always liked the sound of little piggies squealing. Squeal for me, piggy.”

Chad bares his teeth, forcing himself to stay silent. I gotta hand it to Chad, he’s got some willpower not to fight back, not to give in and do whatever it takes to make the pain stop. Strings of spit move in and out of his mouth as he breathes rapidly through clenched teeth. Still, he doesn’t make a sound.

“I said *SQUEAL!*” Mateo screams like a caged animal in his face, the charm he normally displays to fool people is completely gone and replaced with the demon beneath the smile.

Chad full on squeals and fuck me, even I feel bad for the dude. My eyes stay locked on the scene while some guys squeeze their eyes shut. None of the men Mateo came in with step forward to put a stop to it, they just stand in silence. They watch as I do, allowing the brutality to go on like it’s all part of the show.

“Tell Santino he’s going to squeal for me too.” Mateo whispers before leaning in, licking blood off Chad’s cheek before letting him go with a shove.

Once again, as though nothing happened, Mr. Herra moves on, ignoring his son who shakes violently as though he’s having a seizure.

“Tonight, you will bear the mark of the Calavera Society. This does not mean you are full-fledged members but are owned by those of us who are. You will be given to one of the five council members. Your *Masters*. Yes, that is what you must address them as that until you are deemed worthy enough to be inducted officially and stand on even ground with us.

“They will be the one who gives you your tasks. Upon completion of these tasks, you will be given pendants that will stay in your family for generations to come. Unless of course, you fail.”

My mind wanders back to Val’s old house where we first saw her father’s pendant and I can’t help but imagine how many he had and what sort of tasks he completed. I look

around me, noticing how the other guys—*minus Chad who looks like he's on the verge of passing out*—and see that they're bored with the details. They have the advantage, the ability to barely pay attention to Mr. Herra's words, whereas I wasn't raised learning this shit.

I'm at a disadvantage and these guys know it.

"If you fail, you will be shunned, a plague that not even your coffin will want in its embrace. So, do not fail."

He spins in place, his stupid robe billowing behind him like he's some sort of fucked up princess. After he exits, more red face monks enter. Two of them carry a large wooden post across their shoulders, an iron pot holding brightly burning coals between them. Sticking out of the pot are iron rods, and when Mateo pulls off his mask, his eyes wild with mania, it registers to me what's about to occur.

I look toward the only exit, the same door the men came in from, but they're guarded by more of those ruler wielding bastards. One I can take, maybe two, but definitely not four. That's not even counting any of the novices who might look for extra points by helping to stop me.

My attention comes back to Mateo but now he stands in front of the first guy, leaving for last. His crazy eyes are trained on me as though he knows that I'm planning to escape the first chance I get.

He shakes his head slowly, his jaw clenched hard as one of the red masked men hands him the handle of a rod. He breaks eye contact with me to roughly pull the guy's left arm forward. As though he enjoys this, he brandishes the bright orange glow of the burning rod, and slowly, *torturously* slow, he presses the hot rod down onto the guy's arm.

His scream is loud, but not loud enough to block out the sound of his skin sizzling beneath the burning metal as two more monks hold him steady. When the rod cools, Mateo rips it away, eliciting yet another scream from the guy as he drops to the floor like a sack of bricks.

One-by-one, Mateo moves down the line, burning the Calavera Society emblem into the arms of each novice, spending a little extra time on Chad. The scent of burning skin, fear, sweat and vomit permeates the room, and just as I've decided to fight my way out of here, Mateo stops before me.

“What a shame. There's no more left.” He says humorously as he gestures to the empty pot, “It's too bad, I've been wanting to scar up your pretty, pretty skin.”

With that *Buffalo Bill* comment, he turns and opens the doors, “Everyone out! You will be dressed and presented to the Calavera Society for the ceremony in one hour.”

Everyone begins to file out, but once I'm at the door, Mateo holds me back.

“Sorry, *carnal* but you'll have to wait here since you're the prez's *untouchable liege*.” He says it mockingly, but I can tell it's directed at Roberto rather than me.

He hands me what looks like a sacrificial robe, the white material resembles Scrooge's nightshirt.

I throw it to against the wall before stepping into Mateo's space, “What the fuck is with the show? I already agreed to do this shit.”

“Yeah, that's right. You agreed to this so do what you're told to the very last detail or it's that pretty, little friend of yours that's going to take the heat.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?” I shove him back, but he doesn't fight me.

“*Me?* No, *chamaco*, you got it wrong. Roberto has been planning this shit. You're just another one of his puppets. Play the game right and she might just win.”

He walks over to the robe and snatches it up, fisting it hard at his side, “I know you don't believe me, but none of this was part of anyone's plan, least of all Rey's.”

He turns to leave, but I stop him, “Why are you helping? What is Val to you, cause from what I could tell, you guys hated her since day one. What changed?”

With his hand on the handle of the door, Mateo turns back, sliding his mask back in place, “Ain’t shit changed, I just have my own plans. Be thankful you at least have me on your side.”

With that and leaves me alone, the doors slamming closed behind him.

He’s right, I did agree to do this, to follow along and do whatever it takes to help Val. But that doesn’t mean I’m okay with everything I’ve witnessed, not to mention the thick atmosphere that raises the hair on your skin. It’s evil and an all-consuming sense of damnation—there are no words that can adequately describe the feeling I’ve had since shaking hands with Roberto.

But this is for Val. All I have to do is get through tonight and then I’ll be able to get her out of here. We may not be able to go back home, but I know if I called Rico and Leroy, they’d help us get as far away as we can. With that in mind, I take a deep breath and close my eyes, letting visions of Val flood my mind until the wild beating of my heart settles.

After what feels like hours, the robed men return and escort me out and I feel confident in my choice. I honestly believe I’ll be able to get Val out of here, I just have to get through this night.

With four men—two in front and two behind me—we walk through tunnels until we reach a narrow path that leads to a red curtain. We all come to a stop, as though this has all been planned out. I wait impatiently, eyeing the masked men around me. They’re all shorter than me, giving me at least an inch more to look past them and toward the curtain.

I can hear muffled talking as though people are speaking over one another. But then I hear her voice and all logic seems to flee as I listen to her voice filled with false bravado.

“Humanity spoke and La Muerte answered. I am honored to prove my worth to the men of the Calavera Society.”

Without thinking, I push forward, shoving past the men in front of me.

“Va—” My yell is cut off when someone sucker punches me in the temple, sending stars across my eyes. My legs buckle under me, but I’m caught by two sets of arms. *So much for being untouchable*, I think just as my arms are restrained. I blink some clarity into my sight just as searing hot pain radiates in my left forearm.

Even to my own ears, my voice sounds like an animalistic roar, but it’s Val’s scream that has me fighting off the cunts holding me. All I can think of is that someone is hurting her, burning her as they’re doing to me.

Finding my feet, I rip my arms free, shredding my melted skin in the process before swinging my elbow back and smashing someone’s nose. I move as fast as I can, ignoring the white-hot pain in my arm and the pounding in my head as I shove one robed man into another. I dodge a swing as they fall to the floor in a mess of masks and robes.

I can hear a commotion somewhere, Val screaming above the shouts of men. I try to run to her, but the bastard wielding the hot iron blocks my way.

“You’re dead, boy.” He sneers before swinging the rod in a downward arch.

I grab ahold of his wrist and shove him hard against the wall, kneeing him the nuts before slamming his wrist against the rough stone until he drops the rod. I slam my forehead against his mask, feeling hot liquid drip down my face as we both drop to the floor where my fingers find the iron. I grab it and swing it downward as hard as I can, beating the bastard who foolishly tried to stop me from getting to Val.

When I stand up, I’m covered in blood, a mix of my own and someone else’s.

I just took someone’s life...but I can’t find it in me to feel remorse.

“La muerte vino por ti.”

Death came for you.

## FORTY

---

### ‘BLACK SHEEP’ SXMPRA

THINGS MOVE IN FAST MOTION AFTER VALERIA ANNOUNCES her acceptance into a brotherhood that has never once seen a woman bear its ugly mark. The moment of shock was short lived as Noah’s painful screaming turned Valeria into a one-track mind.

She rushes toward the tunnel where her best friend’s voice echoes out of. It’s a tunnel that is used for ascending novices once they’ve passed all their tests.

Why is Noah in there?

I rush after Valeria, but someone gets to her before me. Cain’s unworthy hands overlap at her stomach as he pulls her back to his chest and suddenly, I see nothing but red. I could be shot right now, stabbed in the chest, set on fire and I wouldn’t even notice it. All I see are Cain’s hands touching what is not his...touching what I’ve decided is *mine*.

Valeria thrashes in his arms as I rush toward them, grabbing a hold of one of Cain’s fingers and snapping it back quicker than he can move.

He lets Valeria go and she quickly jumps out of reach. I don’t feel his hits to my ribs as I punch him over and over again until I’m suddenly being pulled off the unconscious

bastard. My knuckles throb and I'm fairly certain I've broken one or two on Cain's gold mask, but the pain is well worth it.

"*Calmaté, carnal.* He's down." Mateo's rough voice penetrates my clouded mind before I shove him off me.

"*Yah!* I'm done." I say, looking around the room and see all eyes on me and the person who rushes out of the curtain behind me.

"Looks like I missed the party." Noah says as Val gasps and runs to him.

He's covered in blood, wearing nothing but black briefs showing his toned body covered in blood. His eyebrow is bleeding and looks about as painful as my knuckles feel. I feel a knot I hadn't realized was in my chest, unraveling at the sight of him unharmed...that is until I see his bleeding forearm.

Valeria's hands hover all over Noah's body, fearful to touch him and cause him more pain, but he cares very little about himself.

He cups her face, his eyes sweeping over her before giving me the same attention, gaze cataloging me as though he's looking for wounds.

Satisfied I'm fine, he returns his attention to Valeria, "Are you okay? I heard you screaming."

"That's because she heard you—" I tell him before Roberto interrupts us.

"Gentlemen of Calavera, please welcome our newest full-fledged member, Noah Cabañas. He stands on equal footing with our members, side-by-side with my own son, for like Rey, he has shed human blood, sacrificing a life for La Muerte."

At the same time, Noah and I pull Valeria between us, moving our bodies to stand protectively in front of her.

My lip curls at Roberto's words, knowing full well my bloodshed was orchestrated against me and now Noah has been subjugated in the same manner. The murder he has



committed will be held above his head like a noose just as my crimes are held above me.

Noah barks out a humorless laugh, using the bloodied rod to point at Roberto, “La Muerte? No, puto, that was for the only queen I worship.” He spits a glob of blood and saliva at Roberto’s feet before continuing.

“And I’ll kill anyone for Val, including you.”

The room fills with gasps and whispers as Roberto fumes, his body shaking with fury. Ah, what sweet joy it is to watch this cocksucker’s plans turn against him.

I step forward, placing my hand on Roberto’s shoulder, earning a proud smile from the man and a mix of angry and hurt looks from Noah and Val.

I ignore them and address the room.

“El Presidente has called upon the Midnight Star ritual—the sacrifice of the first-born female of the Calavera Society. Val is the oldest living female—her blood would bring power and favor upon our dear president.”

Valeria gasps, her eyes wide as my words penetrate her heart. Yes, her father was going to sacrifice his only daughter to keep his power. It’s a play I should have seen coming, but I failed to see it.

Noah growls and moves forward but Mateo steps in front of him, a gun pointed at his head as I continue, this time my words directed at Roberto.

“You brought Noah in, used his bond with your daughter to keep her in line. It was a very good plan, but you failed to take in one small detail.”

“And what is that my son?” He looks so fucking proud, so fucking full of himself that he doesn’t see his own downfall mere moments from arriving.

I lean into his face, my knife sinking deep into the side of his ribs, “*I’M NOT YOUR SON!*”

Shouts sound around the room, Roberto grabs my shirt as his eyes bulge in his sockets. Blood seeps from between his

lips as he slowly sinks to the floor.

The room is deathly quiet. Members of the Calavera Society witnessing their president's final breaths as I stare down at the man I once loved.

"I call the Vow of Mine," I look to Valeria, her father's blood on my outstretched hand, "I pledge loyalty to La Reina de la Calavera."

END OF BOOK ONE

# PREVIEW OF UGLY TRUTHS

---

## PROLOGUE

Lexi - Five Years Ago

*My fingers shake as I try to knot my husband's tie for him as he asked, but I can't seem to keep calm enough to get it tied correctly; I'm repeatedly having to restart which causes his annoyance to rise higher and higher. It's a cycle of fuckery. He makes me nervous and so I fumble once more, his anger increasing by the second. Frustrated and done with my slowness, he shoves me away hard enough to make me trip and tumble against the base of a display in the hall. We both watch as the stand tilts to one side, causing the vase that's been in my husband's family for years to fall to the floor.*

*As if in slow motion, the crystal pieces scatter across the marble floor, each tinkling sound is like a death toll for me. Too bad death isn't coming, no, that would be too kind.*

*My husband stares at the broken glass as the pieces bounce along the tiles, his tie hanging loosely from his neck, as fury fills his murky brown eyes. Eyes I thought looked at me with love instead of the hate and disgust I see now.*

*"You worthless bitch!" He grips me by the back of my neck as his fifteen-year-old son, Giovanni, quietly pokes his head out of his room. "Get down there and pick up each and every fucking piece with your hands. NOW!"*

*I flinch as he screams in my ear, shoving me down to the floor. I ignore the burning pain of the glass stabbing my knees; after all, cuts are easier to bear than what's to come.*

*I hear the belt sliding out of his pant loops as I begin picking up the pieces of glass. I lift my eyes to my stepson, slightly shaking my head and begging him not to intervene on my behalf. I'll gladly take a thousand whippings than to see him beaten like a dog.*

*Gio's eyes stay on mine, not flinching once as he watches the belt slap down on my back, and my cries echo down the hall to his young ears. Still, nothing can drown out my husband's vicious words.*

*“You’re my doll, aren’t you?” Alan sneers, calling me the degrading nickname he’s coined for me as he draws his arm back for another strike.*

*There’s no questioning ‘when did he change? Why did he change? What happened to the loving man I married?’ because Alan has always been this cruel beast, but I fell for his trap. I fell for the charm and persuasion, the flowers and the gifts, the fake displays of affection... my desperation to be loved and wanted made me blind to the evil right in front of me.*

*I brace myself for another blow, my fingers squeezing around the glass, the sharp edges cutting into my palm as I take another whip across my back, part of the thick leather hitting my head.*

*I stop crying out, stop begging for mercy, biting my tongue, and keeping my tears to myself. I will not beg, I will not plead, I will not give him the sick satisfaction. I just tuck my head low and let the feel of the glass in my palms ground me.*

*Over and over again, Alan whips me, his words spewing like a forked tongue demon, but I stay silent. The blood that pooled in my hand splashes against the wall as Alan fists my hair and yanks me back. His arm is raised to strike me in the face with his belt but still, I stay silent and refuse to beg him to stop.*

*My silence enrages him, but I just squeeze my eyes shut and take the blow. The belt lashes down onto my face in a way that I know will leave a long red welt from my forehead to my breast.*

*He shoves me away, striking me many more times until I can’t think straight and drop to the floor. Glass bites into my hairline as my head bangs against the marble floor.*

*Still, he doesn’t stop. He continues whipping me until my vision blackens and my body gives out.*

*I fall to my side, ready to give up, but just before darkness takes me under, I spot my stepson running down the hall with*

*his father's belt swinging from his fist while Alan barrels after him like an enraged bull.*

*"No!" I think I scream out loud, but I can't be too sure because I quickly fall unconscious.*

*When I come to, the house is quiet, but I spot Gio's hand at the end of the hall, the rest of his body around the corner and out of view. I slowly get to my knees, the sticky blood on my palms making me slip slightly. I hiss when I flex my back, I can already feel the bruises, so I must've been unconscious for a long time. I place a finger to my hairline above my right eyebrow and pull out a piece of glass before rising to my feet.*

*"Gio!" I whisper-shout, afraid Alan is nearby.*

*I get to the corner and drop down beside my stepson, cupping his battered face as tears fall from my eyes. He's not my son, not my flesh and blood, but he's my best friend in this house of horrors. He's the kid who tries to protect me like I do him and look what it has caused. Look at what his own fucking father did to him!*

*Gio coughs, then groans as he tries to open his eyes.*

*"Don't move, sweetheart," I tell him. "Let me check you over first."*

*His right eye is swollen shut, but he opens his left – bloodshot – to look at me. "Are you okay, Lexi?"*

*He breaks my heart. He's such a good kid, doing everything possible to make his father proud of him, but it never works. His father is a piece of shit and always will be.*

*"Don't worry about me, G." I don't bother wiping my tears, I just cup his head and feel for lumps, and thankfully I find none. I move his arms and legs, squeezing here and there but find no broken bones. His ribs could be broken though, so I stand up and pull him to his feet.*

*"Breathe as deep as you can," I tell him and he does.*

*"Just bruises," he says as I wrap my arm around him and help him to the bathroom.*

*He sits in silence, the tears he hasn't let fall in years roll down his cheeks as I ring a towel out. I wipe dry blood from his brow and mouth, his good eye lifting to look at me, but still, he says nothing. I ignore the physical pain I'm feeling and focus on the heartache. I can't help but feel like this is all my fault, though logically I know it's not.*

*Gio doesn't deserve this life, no one does but certainly not him. He deserves to be happy and free like a normal teenager. He should be out getting into trouble with his friends, laughing and making memories, not here having to watch his stepmother get beaten or step in front of her and take the hits.*

*"Never try to protect me again. I've made my choice to marry your father and I will live with it," I tell him earnestly.*

*"I'll always protect you, Lex."*

*I run the back of my hand across his wet cheek. "One day, we'll both be free of him, G. I promise you."*

*He nods his head, determination settling in his eye as he looks between both of mine. "I know we will, I'll make damn sure of it too."*

---

[Available on Amazon](#)



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hey! You made it to this part of the book!

I just want you to know that I am incredibly thankful for you! Having you make it this far means you actually got through my book. Whether you enjoyed it or forced yourself to finish remains to be seen, but I sincerely hope it's the former reason.

I wasn't sure I'd write again after going through some tragic things recently, but its because of you readers that I came back. I pushed through some of the most horrific moments in my life to be able to reach this point.

I always save my acknowledgments for last because I want my gratitude to show from the page. And trust me, the gratitude is immense!

Colby Bettley, you're the kindest, most genuine and loving person I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. Your list of amazingness could go on for days. I love you and to have you in my life as you are means more to me than I can express with words.

My street team ladies, I freaking adore you! My V. Doom Gals, you all are literally the best the book world has to offer. Thank you for sticking by me.

Last but not least, my family. Thank you for driving me to the brink of insanity everyday and helping me write the most insane scenes possible. My ludicrous mind wouldn't be possible without you heathens. Especially you, Gabe. I love you.

Want to read more from me, follow me on insta @author.v.dom