

HOSTILE KINGDOM: SOUZA CARTEL



HOSTILE
KING

TOMÁS & CARINA, DUET TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

autumn archer

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About the Author

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AUTHOR NOTE



Hostile Kingdom is a Dark Romance world which includes the Jungle Oasis series and the Souza cartel series.

Hostile King is the conclusion of Tomás and Carina's haywire love affair. Like Hostile Heir, you'll find murder, gore, references to suicide, drugs and physical assault.

Please read responsibly and know your own limits before diving in.

Don't worry, once you've finished their duet, André Souza will invite you into his Miami kingdom.

Misfits...

*You're the shining light at the end of your
own tunnel.*

Step into it and lead the way.

PROLOGUE

CARINA



My heart is like the night sky.

In the past, it hid beneath a veil of unforgiving clouds that kept the secrets of the universe at bay. And when the day dawned, inky darkness switched to a facade of happy sunshine.

That was before.

Lately, the constellations shine brighter, and the incandescent moon lights up every uncharted corner of my thriving heart. The once deprived organ has grown and matured. Hated and lusted. Wished and surrendered.

Because Tomás owns the stars in my universe.

He *is* the moonlight.

An anomaly of supreme power, presence, and dominance.

Unfortunately for me, I've suddenly found myself on the cusp of twilight, alone in the notion of his betrayal and slipping back into obscurity.

Evil words mask the airglow, keeping Tomás out of reach while I'm lost in the mayhem of humiliation.

He had lied to me.

Or did he?

We had an agreement, nothing more than a handwritten pledge burned to ashes. I thought it would be an easy arrangement to survive. Be willing and available to him for four days and then seek refuge in my freedom thereafter.

Except something had changed within me. It wasn't just my body that had forfeited its principles—my tortured heart did too.

I had started to fall.

Stepped out of my comfort zone and embraced the woman I desperately longed to be.

For the first time, I proudly wore my own skin with his ownership branded over the blushing flesh. It felt good.

I felt fucking alive.

The darkness living in me matched the darkness seeping from him. Or so I'd thought.

Except I'm just a fool—a hapless girl who romanticized a villain. Tangled in a web of deceit where the Souzas and their new king have underestimated me.

Now a storm brews under my new skin. The clouds suffocate the moon and the far-off stars no longer fit in my cosmos.

So, which one of us will snuff out the light first...

TOMÁS



Shane turns his attention to the door, his eyes drilling into the solid wood. His laced boots scuff the tiles before he yanks the handle and peers into the hallway.

“Thought I heard someone.” He shrugs and swivels back around to face my father’s desk, inhaling smoke from a freshly lit cigarette.

I push up from the armchair, remove my jacket, and twist my cufflinks clockwise until they sit just how I like them. “There’s an army of vetted serving staff walking the halls this evening.” My sigh escapes with a slow shake of my head.

Swiping two short glasses from the belly of a globe drinks cabinet, I fill them to the throat and hand one to my best friend. The one guy who’s been tight to my side for years. He knows this mania is out of character for me.

“Here.” I nod at him when he stops in front of me. “*Salud.*”

“*Salud.*” He mirrors me.

We down the liquor at the same time and take a moment to let our previous conversation about Carina not belonging in our savage world settle in silence.

“I shouldn’t have brought her here,” I finally admit. “When she returns to Bogotá, I want a team watching over her day and night.”

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes for those fuckers out there to lose interest in her.”

He sets the glass on the oak side table beside him and stubs out his cigarette. “Understood. I’ll personally pick out a team.”

I tear my gaze away from him and stare at the exit, craving her closeness and feeling off-balance in the knowledge she’s not really mine. Not when I have to let her go.

Knowing she’s with Matheus fires up unwanted demons. If this is how I feel when my brother is minding her, how the hell would I react when she finally takes her money and leaves. And worse, when she meets another man—holds his hand, kisses his lips, sucks his dick.

He’d die a horrible death.

Fuck, I’m a pathetic mess.

I never thought this obsessive behavior would happen to me. Not over a girl. Only now it has, and I’m more mentally destitute than I was before. Death is so final, so cut and dry. The person no longer walks on the same plane. Their existence is erased. Here one minute, wholly absent the next.

But to watch someone you care for exit your life with the air still filling their lungs, to know you can never touch them again, and that you must adore them from afar—that’s the worst head fuck of all.

I’m itching to stand beside her, to run my fingers over her heavenly skin, and feed off the flying sparks we create.

“I need to get back to our guests.” I head for the door.

“No worries.” He glances at his mobile phone. “That’s weird...”

My brows snap together. “What is?”

“Spitfire wants a word with me on the helipad.” Shane’s eyes drift upwards. “Something’s up. The pilot only messages me when he’s confirming times and routes.”

My spine straightens instantly, a twinge of danger pinching my gut. “Take Gio. Have him stay on the periphery with a

rifle. Phone me the second you find out what he's after." I move into the hallway. "I'll check in with Dré and Matheus to give them a heads up."

Carina.

Storming through the home I can't wait to leave, my shoes clip the solid floor welcoming a fast echo. Shadows move with me, suddenly appearing as threats. The distance separating me from her feels like miles. Harmonious music irritates me like a rash, the discord of each note a tragic melody for my pitiful state.

I check my gun is still in place behind my back and realize it's fully showing now that my jacket is sitting in Papa's office. It won't go down well if I burst in on the party with my golden revolver on display. I should hide it from sight, but I don't.

My instincts are buzzing, warning me of trouble.

I stride into the room searching the faces, but I don't see her. I stop at the doorway, my heart thumping and my breathing heavy. Shane appears behind me and without saying a word, goes straight to Giovanni. While they talk, I scan every corner until my panic-stricken gaze picks out Matheus.

He looks up, glances behind him, and then starts walking my way.

"Where the fuck is she?" I demand, fisting my hands.

He shrugs lightly, unsure why I'm so highly strung. Yet mentally preparing his response to placate my pending eruption.

"She went to the ladies' room, Tommy."

"Alone?" My voice frosts with annoyance. "It was a simple fucking request, Mat."

My brother scowls at me. "I told her to come straight back. You know how long women take to sort out their makeup, brush their hair...and remove their panties." He chuckles briefly trying to lighten the mood, oblivious to the tightly wound knots in my stomach.

I don't hang around to determine how long she's been out of sight, rotating like a tornado and storming back the way I came.

"Tomás?" Matheus shouts after me.

I glare over my shoulder and find his brow furrowed like I've lost my mind. If I can't find her, I swear I'll lose more than my sanity.

"Get André," I bite out, refusing to stop. "We need to talk."

Rolling out the tension in my shoulders, I aim for the restroom like a launched rocket locked on target.

"Carina..." I don't knock, simply barging inside, not caring for anyone's privacy. She's my only concern. My priority. So, when all I find is a porcelain basin, an empty claw foot bathtub and a toilet, my heart momentarily forgets to beat, and my body heat freezes to glacial.

Fuck!

By the time I've slammed a ruthless fist into the wall and kicked the door open into the hallway, André and Matheus are waiting.

"What the fuck, Tommy?" André drags a hand over his scruff and pats his jeans to locate a pack of smokes.

"She's not in there, is she?" Matheus pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fuck! I'm sorry, Tommy."

I'm beyond incensed. Tonight was meant to run without a hitch. We were in control and now every guest is a suspect with a life sentence wrapping their treacherous necks.

I have to find her.

To keep her safe.

To protect her from the very people I'd flaunted her in front of.

What else did I expect?

She's fucking stunning. Every man here wants to touch her, to claim her, to hack off her wings and chain her to the underworld. Not on my watch. I would murder every cunt here if a single hair on her hair has been ruffled by any of them.

"Find her," I growl. "Spitfire asked to speak to Shane. He took Gio for back up. Let's go."

"Well, fuck." André checks for his gun. "So much for a show of faith. I'll kill these motherfuckers if they've betrayed us."

With me leading the pack, we march towards the entrance hall, each of us exuding an aura of murder. We pass efficient waiters who tell me they haven't seen her. My thoughts spiral out of control, leaving the realm of rationality and soaring straight to the worst-case scenario—she's been kidnapped.

No one can leave without my say so. The whole plantation is on lockdown as of right now.

"Tomás."

When I hear my name being called, I slam to a halt, spin on my heels, and face a guy I haven't met in person yet. General Herrera's new sidekick.

He's a few inches shorter than us with a casual attitude that flares my hackles. If he's responsible for fucking with Carina, or even setting a single finger on her, I'll squeeze his damn throat until his eyeballs pop out.

"You're Paco, right?" My voice stays ice cold. "You're here with the General."

"Indeed." He cricks his neck, crossing over the tiled floor until he's beside André. "Are you looking for that girl of yours?"

My girl.

My heart levitates. "You got something to tell me, Paco?" The words grind between my teeth. "Start talking."

Reflexes have me reaching for my gun, my mind scrambled with fury. Rather than show him I'm armed, I graze

the cold steel and seek refuge in the fact it's there ready for when I need it.

Silence chokes me before he confesses, "I saw her. She asked if I knew how to get to your father's tomb. I thought it was an odd thing to ask." He raises an eyebrow and contorts his mouth. "Maybe you should look there?"

I don't trust the fucker. Matheus catches my eye, clearly sensing the same bullshit as I do.

"If you've hurt her, I'll snap your neck and shove your head so far up your ass that they'll have no choice but to bury you like that." My sharp tone cuts through the heated atmosphere like a razor blade. "Dré, don't let anyone leave this house." I keep my glare fixed on Paco. "Mat, find Mama and stay with her. Shoot any son of a bitch who tries to get near her."

A lance of worry spears my chest. It makes my hand jolt, curling my fingers around the revolver. Bringing it into the mix of testosterone and adrenaline, I jab the air in front of Paco. "You're coming with me."

He holds his hands up in fake surrender. "I don't know what you think I've done, Tomás. The girl approached me."

"Move," I hiss, prodding his ribs with the fully loaded weapon.

Ignoring the sensation of fear I've somehow found buried inside me, I keep my eyes glued to the man with lies burning his tongue. Carina wouldn't go near a scumbag like him, let alone ask for directions to my father's grave. She knows where it is and paying her respects to the man who had wanted feed her to the tigers, is absurd.

A recent rainstorm has drenched the stones under our feet and the canvas tunnel sheltering the wooden walkway has taken a beating. I nudge him along the path, heading towards the disassembled marquee where the ceremony was held.

Streaks of gold slash a dusky sky, the sun sinking behind thick mountainous clouds. "You know something..." Paco

begins, his boots thudding out a rhythm that irritates me. “I recognize her.”

The helix in my gut pulsates, twisting up my instincts. “Go on.” I tighten my fingers around the handgrip.

“Yeah...she was in Rio. Seems like she worked out well for you.” The temperate climate drops to sub-zero. “How was Elias murdered again?”

My hand lashes out like a whip, grabbing his hair from behind and dragging him backwards. “What the fuck are you saying?” I snarl into the side of his face.

He scrambles to stand upright, held securely in my ruthless grip. “Surely Tomás Souza knew the risks of welcoming a stranger into his home?” The mocking tone to his raspy voice scrapes my course of thought to ribbons. “She had a purpose, and it seems like you fell for it.”

I swallow a wave of fury. *How does he know she was in Rio?*

She had arrived at the plantation drugged and beaten. From the second I had seen her the world appeared brighter. My tortured mind eased. There’s no chance in hell my instincts were wrong about her.

Dragging him by the hair, I keep walking, marching towards the tiki torches that would be kept alight until the house is vacated.

“She’s a traitor, Tomás.”

“Shut the fuck up, asshole.”

Out of the corner of my eye, flickering light catches gemstones. A pair of sandals were abandoned under a jaggy leafed plant, the fat stalks swaying in the earthy zephyr. All the energy drains from my body. Not long ago those sexy heels were on Carina’s petite feet.

My blood scalds me like liquid fire. In a rage, I shove Paco away and slam the heel of my hand to my temple. I take aim as he flounders on the wet planks. “Who the fuck sent her here?”

Paco rubs his head where I had fisted the roots close to his scalp. “Maria sent her here,” he pants.

“Why?”

“To finish *you*. Not Elias.”

I want to kill him for breathing, for having the audacity to suggest such an outrageous lie. Shane and I had watched the security footage of Carina leaving the bar that night. I witnessed the shock on her sweet face when my father hit the ground. She wasn't armed and the second she was, she didn't shoot me.

I fucked her in the shower and cleansed away my sins. I let her fix me. There's no way I've been played by a bewitching executioner.

No fucking way.

“She knows about the arsenal of weapons in Elias' tomb. If you ask me, she's on a mission.”

My heart collides with my ribs, knocking the air from my chest. What if he's right? What if my unruly dick had screwed with my instincts? What if her tight pussy really was my destruction?

Christ.

“I didn't ask for your opinion, motherfucker.” I try to pretend I'm not shaken up.

Rather than drop my guard and reveal the confusion poisoning my veins, I hold a pretend, unfazed mask in place, showing him nothing. All of a sudden, my chest feels hollow, a cavernous hole where my defrosted heart once held court. Now, it's diminished beneath a deadweight of doubt. “You're full of shit.”

“I guess time will tell.” The fucker actually smirks at me.

Instantly, my self-control dissolves. I launch right at him and smack the side of his head with my gun. My pulse goes haywire, and my legs start to move, my feet pounding the slippery path to reach her. Where the hell is my barefoot beauty now?

Nightfall carries with it a chorus of restless wildlife, bringing the shadowy vegetation to life. Flames tease the muggy atmosphere, the seductive shimmer of orange light enchanting winged insects, so they flit and flee. They're enamored by the glow, risking it all, drawn to the heat for a thrill or because they're defenseless.

Uncertainty claws up from the inside of my chest making it impossible to catch a breath. For all I know she's dead and this is a trap to lure me into the jungle to join her. Maybe Paco dumped her exquisite body in the undergrowth, her youthful life ended too soon all because of me.

Nausea squeezes my stomach until I feel like vomiting. If she's gone, I honestly don't know how I'd react. My brain might malfunction into the worst possible glitch I've ever experienced. Or my mind would break completely, welcoming an overflowing bloodbath in my vengeful wake.

Heavy footsteps follow me. "I'm not your enemy, she is," he calls out the second I see a dreamlike silhouette lit up like a sublime angel.

A goddess wrapped in hydrous gold.

A powerful spirit with flowing strands of hair, pouring over rigid shoulders, the color so dark it matches the black heavens, suffocated by crooked trees.

Her malefic eyes are ablaze, helplessly dragging me into the firestorm she exudes.

Before me stands a dangerous woman with unique looks to slay me and a cocked rifle, the aimed directly at my chest.

"Don't move, Tomás," she says breathlessly. "I know everything."

CARINA



“Carina?” Tomás’ throaty growl captures me in a flaming noose.

I freeze before him, my mouth completely dry. My stomach flutters when he takes a slow step forward, his own gun pointed away from me. Brilliant white teeth gleam behind snarling lips as if he’s demented.

The blazing torches scattered along the wooden walkway cast an unlawful veil over his handsome face, darkening his expression to ferocious.

Through the pain of maimed trust, all I see is him. I notice how his eyes glint with flecks of fire and then darken to a shade more carnal than the desire he somehow emanates. He no longer wears a suit jacket, his shirt tails untucked, and his once immaculately presented tie hangs loose around his neck.

If I didn’t know better, I would say he’s tumbling from the very throne he was perched upon.

My resolve crumbles a little when his gaze settles on the rifle in my hands, his forehead furrowed like he couldn’t possibly understand why I would want to hurt him. Pointing a gun at this man isn’t really what I want to do.

It’s a crime to fire a gun and an atrocity to wound the man I have destructive feelings for. But I heard it myself and Paco had dropped in the missing pieces.

“Lower the rifle, Carina. We can talk about this. Whatever he told you is bullshit. I don’t give a fuck if you were really sent here to kill me. I know you won’t go through with it.”

I exhale in a blast and shake my head. “Are you serious? Do you still think I’m your enemy? After everything we...”

I stop myself short, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much I’m dying inside from his deception.

“You know I was thrown into this world without a damn clue about cartel wars and mafia business. If I was sent to assassinate you, don’t you think I would have tried already?”

After I had heard the truth about a wedding from Tomás’ own lips, I ran from the house alone and kicked off my sandals to help me move quicker over the moist planks. Memories had drowned me in a flood of torment. I had recalled every moment we shared and how precious those times felt to me.

And that’s the problem. I honestly believed there was something palpable developing between us, something real.

I dared to believe the king actually cared about me, in his own way, in whatever way a bloodthirsty killer can embrace compassion and desire.

I’m a fool who thought she’d found the edge of Heaven, that such a place existed. We both knew a happily ever after was never on the table. It was never even implied. What I’m most devastated by is the closeness I began to treasure. The rough and the smooth. Now, I know it was only a make-believe illusion.

He’d duped me—to protect another woman.

My heart jumps against my ribs when he casually slots his golden revolver into the waistband of his trousers. Panic lifts my lungs with every quick inhalation, the shortness of my breath making me lightheaded.

“I’m not armed.” Tomás holds out his hands. “Let’s talk. Just you and me. I trust you, Cari.”

“Don’t call me that.” I shake the gun at him. “Was this your plan all along? To make me trust you...so I wouldn’t pull a gun on you?”

We stand at the periphery of a dense jungle, our eyes locked in a disconcerting standoff. He looks worn out, his corded neck misted in a sheen of salty sweat, and his thick ebony hair unusually tousled where a rightful crown should sit.

The doting girl who still lives inside me would happily lick the tanned dip in his throat just to savor the very essence of him. I yo-yo at the thought of it, sucked into a wishful thought where he admits our time together wasn't meaningless.

“Do *you* trust me?” he asks with a low growl, taking a quick look over his shoulder where Paco is watching us like a hawk, his arms crossed.

When Tomás looks back at me, his brooding countenance vibrates with an emotion I've never seen him display before. It makes me shiver with both terror and longing. My faulty instincts scream at me, identifying it as a hunger, a suffocating need that consumes us both.

Behind his lustful eyes, an unsecured temper brawls for control. He looks destroyed and the more we stare at each other, the more I tap into his psyche and feed off this unhealthy infatuation of mine.

“Are you engaged?” I manage to ask, my raspy voice cracking like brittle bark.

His head nods. “Yes.” The truth breaks free without elaborating on the details. “Did he tell you that?” he grits out.

I square my shoulders and suck in a ragged breath. I'm holding the gun with no way to know if I'll use it. The flimsy speck of pride I've fostered during our time together disintegrates before me.

I'm simply the pitiful girl haunted by a mirage of a man and the woman who needs to survive him.

“He did. And he told me I'm a decoy for your wife. Someone to take the heat off the woman you care about. Is that true?”

The growl scraping out of his throat startles every living creature in hearing distance. It chills me right through to my

soft bone marrow, making my skeleton freeze even though my heart pumps faster.

“And you believe that?” he hisses. “He’s playing us off each other. Remember what I told you in the car.”

I hear what he says—loud and clear. But this tragedy has too many thorns to catch me with. Too many scratches over my dignity and slashes to cut through my self-respect. I had willingly surrendered to him.

Absolutely. Wholly. Shamefully.

And in return, he’d made me feel alive, night after night.

“He’s right about one thing, Tomás. You’re getting married, aren’t you? It explains why you brought me here and why I had to tell everyone I was only your assistant. You knew they’d read between the lines and figure out we were fucking. This dress was just the icing on the cake.” The vintage fibers tighten around me like claws. “A little bit sexy and special enough to turn their heads away from your wife. That’s the fucked up part...that I wasn’t a distraction for you. I was a distraction for her.”

A deadly snarl catches me off guard, the growl so raw it twists my veins. His cold-blooded persona slides into place shuttering me from his humanity.

In a beat he seizes his handgun and points it right at Paco’s face. “You’re a lying motherfucking bastard,” he roars. “Tell her the truth.”

I rush forward, my aim on Tomás unwavering. “Don’t,” I cry out, my voice all breath. “Don’t move, Tomás.”

Paco shifts in the borderline of my vision, instantly dragging my gaze to where he lurks like a viper ready to strike.

I have a choice to make. A path I must travel alone and make peace with the outcome of my decision.

Kill or be killed.

I could accept the feelings unraveling inside me as destiny and live with the consequences of trusting my gut—of

believing the bond we forged was genuine. Or choose to become a person who disregards her emotions, who wallows in the darkness of her soul—who murders men that humiliate her.

“He’s a fucking liar, Carina. Look me in the eye for fuck’s sake.” I refuse to fall into his hypnotic abyss and lose myself in the hurricane we had created out of our afflictions. “Look at me, not him. I fucking order you to look at me.” My arms lock in place, but my chest heaves with adrenaline. “Let me kill him,” he spits out, strangling the muggy air in his fists.

Finally, with my soles anchoring me to the planks, I stare at Tomás’ tortured face and swallow the palpitations going crazy in my neck. My tongue skates over the landscape of my lips, my core begging for his brutality to claim my dark side.

It terrifies me how his predatory stance turns me on, even now in the midst of our inevitable war. Our synergistic energy steals the air from my lungs. It feeds my veins with toxic lust and screws with my irresponsible heart.

“Did you feel anything for me at all?” I whisper.

“Do it, Carina.” Paco interrupts. “Kill the king and take back control of your life. Do it for your family.” His taunt triggers a memory, so deeply embedded it could be mistaken as a bad dream.

Groping fingers fist my hair until my aching head reaches gritty cement. An unbearable weight crushes my lungs.

“You’ll never see your family again. Stop fucking moving or you’ll never see the light of day either.”

I wrestle wildly in retaliation, helplessly wriggling like a wretched fish dying on the pebbly shore. I’m overwhelmed by the group of men manhandling me into the rear of an old transit van. My ankles are duct taped and my wrists wrenched behind my back, secured with unbreakable cords. The sharp scratch of a needle penetrates my rigid bicep, a familiar sensation I’ve become accustomed to over the years.

“That’ll stop you fucking wriggling about, puta!” I crash onto a plastic sheet and a boot to the ribs forces all the air from my lungs in a pathetic scream. “Make another sound and I’ll cut your throat. You’re a dead woman anyway.”

My veins run ice cold. Dread seeps into my bones and the blood coursing through my limbs tingles with poison. A cruel chuckle is hidden behind the leader’s hand as he tweezes the short layer of scruff on his weak chin. The poorly detailed lion tattoo, faded with age, roars as his thumb and forefinger move. I see it. And he sees me.

My temper flares to nuclear.

I knew there was something off about the stranger with a hand tattoo. André displays hands of ink, but when we met there was never a whispering thread of familiarity, not like the shiver of revulsion I got when Paco had confronted me.

At the start, I had chosen not to believe him. I inwardly begged the universe for his villainous insight to be false, until I heard Tomás confirm it himself. Both of these men are emotional terrorists who’ve used my weakness against me. I inch towards Tomás, rolling the dice, drawn to the devil I know, waiting for his answer to my question.

“Did you feel anything for me?” I repeat behind clenched teeth.

“What do you think?” he growls, stepping his dress shoes forward to reach me. To take control over the hapless girl he thinks I am. “I’ve never lied to you. Not once.”

“Stay where you are.” I blink at him, aware of the sweat trickling down my spine and the deadly cold steel trembling in my hands. “You didn’t tell me about her.” He swallows before his mouth opens as if he’s about to speak. “It doesn’t matter, Tomás. None of it matters anymore.”

My heart pounds as he drags a hand down his face, his expression torn. The untouchable sovereign stares at me, not with the eyes of a hateful destroyer, but with the eyes of an all-

powerful man who made my existence shine once upon a time. The bittersweet truth tastes better than regret.

My eyes catch his, the bond between us harder to fight when his inky pupils spear me, his gaze hiding something that whispers right through me. Call it a gut reaction or a blazing sign from the universe, but it unequivocally connects us.

“The day I met you, I landed in a nightmare.” I begin as every part of me shakes. “You held me against my will, to fulfill your appetite for power.” Tomás flinches, his trained reflexes twitching to grab me. His chest rises as he listens to my gutsy voice. “You pulled my hair, kicked me into submission, and drugged me.” I continue, gazing up at his sudden frown. “But then I met Tomás, and he turned those nightmares into fantasies. He saved me. I never knew anyone until I knew him.”

My aim jumps left, fixed to Paco who had silently crept up beside us gripping a flaming torch. As if reading the chemistry sparking between the king and his mistress, he takes a swipe. The fire only narrowly missing us when Tomás shoves a shoulder into him. Paco stumbles, his ankle giving way, so he crashes to his knees.

“You tied my wrists and transported me here as a worthless whore for Elias. Not to assassinate anyone.” The rifle wobbles, but my aim remains fixed. “*You* assaulted me. *You* drugged me. *You* didn’t care. Which makes you the real monster, asshole!” I hiss, the words sharpened like razors to cut his devious plan to tatters. The second the final word passes over my lips, I don’t hesitate.

“You all underestimated me.”

I squeeze the trigger and witness a whoosh of lead soar through the air like a missile. Except the bullet tunneling into Paco’s skull isn’t from my rifle. I had aimed at his chest. The one I freed is a fraction of time slower than the bullet Tomás fired.

Paco’s defunct body sinks to the planks, brain goop seeping between the wooden slats and glossy blood spilling from the hole I’d made in his heart.

Heavy footsteps sound in the distance. Voices yell. The hem of my dress catches under the soles of my feet, the golden sheen dulled by shadow. Grabbing a handful of material, I pivot to find Tomás frozen. He stares at me for the longest second, his expression morphing from man to beast.

I helplessly observe the transformation, how anger ripples through his tense form and his beautiful features darken ready for a rampage. The richness to his glorious eyes turns a hue so strikingly evil it's horrifying. He doesn't emerge from darkness—he becomes it.

The temperature dips to below zero, his polar disposition colder than arctic ice caps.

He's spattered in blood, fragments of gore had sprayed across his trimmed scruff, and dappling his pristine dress shirt. The carnage decorating him with the one thing I know has switched his decency to diabolical.

Wild eyes drill into the fingertips dabbing my mouth in panic. His lungs rise and fall in bursts. Whatever happens next would be cataclysmic for all of us.

“She's got a rifle.” Armed soldiers burst from the darkness, climbing out of low-level bushes, and clattering along the wooden pathway towards us. “Hands up!” I spin around where I'm pinpointed as a target who's still clutching a murderous weapon.

It happens in a blink. There's no hesitation. No second thought. Just a surge of strength knocking me off balance. Tomás' mighty weight crushes my stomach from above, the sensation overbearing. The rifle falls from my hands and skids into the undergrowth.

“Don't shoot,” he howls, the texture to his voice so cut up it feels like he's bleeding from within. “She's off fucking limits. Do not shoot. I'll punish her for having a weapon.”

I momentarily freeze, unsure if the man I know exists behind the monster wrestling with me.

Punish her.

That comment could mean so much. Unadulterated pleasure after erotic pain or something far darker that I'm not prepared for. Either way, the masculine soul unraveling under twisted vines and flickering flames isn't a gentleman. He's out of his mind.

"Get off me," I wriggle and kick, bucking my hips into his and finding his dick rock hard.

When merciless fingers hollow my cheeks, I notice the flare of his pupils, the quick intake of muggy air, and the moisture saturating his now translucent shirt.

"Carina..." A snarl snaps past his white teeth. Cold eyes gleam as if he's begging me, pleading with me to help him. "I'll fucking ruin you." His nostrils widen as he fights for air. "I can't promise I won't hurt you."

It's not a threat of death, it's a promise of something neither of us can contain—the brokenness of him and I. Still warring with him, my struggle weakens ever so slowly, my insides responding to his turmoil. Need spills from his hot gaze, melting me beneath his strength. The traitorous rush of our bodies writhing together is too intense, too convoluted.

It's a dangerous belief to accept the violence keeping me prisoner won't truly destroy me.

It will.

He will.

The second his gaze darts to the men surrounding us, I shove my knee into his groin and roll out from under him when he coughs. My lungs barely expand to inhale the earthy air, even though my pulse is hammering. Crawling on hands and knees, I glance over my shoulder to watch his predatory physique rise with thinning limitations. But I won't wait for his spine to straighten.

There's no reasoning with the madness inside of him.

"Detain the General immediately," I hear him snarl as my pace quickens. "Get that fucker out of the main house and away from my family. Tell my brothers he's a snake who planned an assassination."

Goosebumps shower my sweat -laden skin when he howls my name like his lungs are on fire. His gravelly tone explodes with a thousand missiles, all of them attacking my retreat.

This time, I don't hesitate. I listen to my instincts and not his crazed demands to stay still. I scramble, bouncing to the pads of my unsteady feet and bunch the majestic material wrapping my hips in fists.

My heart thumps, the erratic pulse jumping in my throat. He doesn't relish softness, or leniency. Handing myself over to him and facing whatever consequences he deems fit terrifies me. So, I do what I have to do to survive.

I bolt.

"DO. NOT. DISOBEY. ME," he yells after me, his tone torn up to match his chaotic appearance.

Then all I hear is the determined strike of his leather soles against the damp planks, beating out a tempo like drums before a crusade behind me.

TOMÁS



She runs from me, and it all goes to shit.

My limited self-control snaps. The tight leash to tame my irrational temper gets away from me. And the lust I've tried so desperately to curb scorches my veins.

I've felt the pull of destruction a thousand times before. It's a swirling dark fog that steals my soul and turns me into a mindless monster. An uncontrollable man who's missing a kill switch.

But chasing her has my pulse pumping faster, harder, and hungrier. The possessive urge to rip the dazzling dress to tatters and sink my teeth into her sweet flesh poisons the distant whisper of humanity. Desire blends with violence, the combination so intoxicating I can't see straight.

All I know is that I want her so badly my jaw aches, my stomach knots, and every grain of my existence burns for her.

Chills flounder over my hot skin, not knowing how to react. My feet move like my legs have a mind of their own. Carina ducks left, following the man-made path to my father's tomb. I run faster to close the distance, maddened by her swiftness.

She doesn't need to look back to know I'm chasing her. My pounding strides echo through the vine twisted tunnel, every strike a harsh warning that I'm getting closer.

When she scurries into the concrete burial chamber Papa had constructed, I laugh out loud, my sanity lacerated by this

need to fill her tight little cunt with my cum. I bound in after her, the predator trapping its prey with a dead end.

Prowling through the dim passage lit only by a soft haze from the belly of the tomb, the air changes, the jungle fracas ceases, and the temperature drops.

I rake my hands through my hair to gather some sort of decorum. Failing when my fingers clash with slimy spatters of another man's blood clinging to the short tips. It's all over me—fucking everywhere. I can sense the gore smothering my shivery skin. Smell its revolting coppery odor and taste the bitterness of death in my mouth.

The excruciating sensation of blood has thrown me into a realm where inflicting death is the only way out...or burying my dick inside Carina.

My stomach heaves, forcing me to buckle until my knees hit dirt. I try to fight the aversion and harness my disgust, somehow shoving myself to my feet again. Staggered steps carry me further down the passageway, craving the one thing I know would save me from myself.

Her touch. Her smile. Her scent.

Simply *her*.

But I can't think clearly. I'm slipping from humanity. Drenched by thunderous rain clouds that have darkened my existence for too many years.

The minute my gaze finds hers, the fog swallowing my mind thickens. She's panting, doubled over as she inhales, arched over the camouflaged box of guns I had placed in this very tomb under my father's instruction.

"Stay away from me, Tomás," she chokes out when I kick off my shoes. "Let me go."

My nostrils flare in response. "No fucking way." I bite her suggestion to pieces with gnashing teeth.

Sable curls, now looser than before, stick to her heaving chest and cling to pastel pink cheeks. The subtle glow of

recessed bulbs fixed within the floor, illuminate her figure-hugging dress so she's lit up like an Egyptian queen.

"Please..." she pleads. "You're scaring me." And that confession right there should make me back off, instead it excites me unlike any impulse I've ever had.

The enormous hand-poured cement casket which houses Papa's lavish coffin is the only thing separating us. Just like before, even in death, he's getting in my way. Except, I had disregarded his request to kill her once before, and tonight I won't let his interference stop me from claiming her.

Only she had shot the lying motherfucker too.

She would have killed Paco herself if my bullet hadn't won.

She is loyal to me.

And she put herself in danger.

My men were about to wipe her out. The fear of that alone interrupted my glitch. However, it didn't mend the flaying rupture in my soul. How landing on her warm body electrocuted my senses.

My balls tighten with fire, the ache to claim her so deeply ingrained in my psyche that she'd never be able to refuse me. The excruciating need to have her eats me up until I'm choking on the lust she's feeding me.

She shuffles backwards, a little weary of my next move. Delicate shoulders roll, ready to confront me at any second. Her ass brushes over the bronze plaque, the etched sign with my name on it. The cavernous empty hole above it is my personal grave. A parting gift from a father who lost his mind in the end. And now I'm following in his footsteps.

Each of my brothers have their own resting place in this fucking creepy bunker in the middle of nowhere. I shudder, an odd thought of eternal loneliness frosting my tense muscles.

Carina licks her lips and straightens, pressing a hand over her heart as if it's broken. Her lithe body vibrates with the same undeniable need I've seen in her countless times. So

much so that her nipples strain against the fabric of her tight dress and her eyes glaze with filthy fantasies.

But her hesitation...it slays me.

She's unsure—scared. Yet I'm too far gone in no man's land where whistling memories trigger fatal deeds.

The celestial sight of her through the haze makes her dreamlike. Carina isn't my enemy. She's the unknown password to soothe my inner hell, and the only gift of purity I've ever had.

I don't deserve her.

And she doesn't deserve this.

An impulse to thread my fingers through her hair and force her to kneel almost cripples me. It tests my self-restraint and argues with the hunger to punish her peachy ass.

"Come here," I command, my throat so dry the words crack and splinter.

"No!" She shakes her head. "I'm not your fiancé."

Fuck!

I'm up, then down. Raging, then capsized. Powerless, then energized. If she's not careful I'll trip into the dark hole I'm so desperately trying to scrape my way out of.

My teeth bare at her, so she flinches. "It's a tactical move. Business. Nothing more than that."

She traces her old scar with one hand and hugs her stomach with the other. It fires up every possessive cell in my body, so the concrete mass between us can't shield her anymore. When the black mist I know so well finally catches up with me, I dart forward, my pace quicker than hers when she tries to get away.

Grappling with her waist, I spin her around, so our chests collide with such a jolt we both gasp. She wiggles and squirms, doing her best to push me away.

"I want to go home." Her little voice activates something feral within me. "I'm done playing games."

I grab her chin, pinching either side and suddenly notice dried blood stains on my fingers. My throat works as I stand before her, a fucking psychopath caught in a sexual snare. This won't end well if she tells me to stop.

I'm seconds away from giving in to the demands of a disturbed soul. My ribs tighten until they almost puncture the lungs fighting to move within their bony cage.

"We're not done until I've stuffed your pretty pussy with my dick, and it leaks my cum," I bark into her face. "I need this...more than ever." With a quick jump, my other hand sweeps her thigh and grips one side of the split in her dress. "I need *you*." I admit, tearing the material to get better access to her.

"Tomás..." She grabs the hand cupping her chin. "Tell me the truth. Tell me I wasn't a decoy. Tell me some of it was real." Her whimper sets my heart on fire.

I can't control it any longer. I'm powerless to fight it off. My hand dives to her bare ass cheeks and my lips crash over her sweet tasting mouth. She mewls, falling victim to the punishing kiss.

"Answer me," she breathes into my mouth. Trapping her against the wall, I grab a fistful of material and tug. "Stop it! This is your mother's dress."

"I don't give a fuck. The dress is hers, but what's underneath it is mine."

The obsession to feel her hot skin next to mine is all I can think of. Not the feel of her silky flesh when she's defenseless and asleep next to me, or the crazy way she makes me feel when she challenges my authority, or even the softness of her pretty mouth when I'm simply kissing it.

None of those important moments break through the mania, only fucking, touching, owning, and coming inside her.

"You agreed to this," I snarl. "This is why you're here. To let me fuck you when I'm falling apart."

A barbaric grunt escapes the back of my throat when I tear at the dress, yanking harder to destroy the very thing keeping

us apart. When she's naked, I rip open my shirt, scattering buttons and unbuckling my belt.

In a blur my trousers are puddled at my feet and my hand is choking my dick to give me some sort of relief. Running my hand up and down, I step out of the shackles trapping my ankles and stare into those fiery eyes of hers.

Rather than surrender, she tries to scamper away, and I drop my unsatisfied dick. I seize her wrists and get off on the fluttering, bold pulse under my grip. Overpowering her only makes me hornier.

A hand skates to the apex of her clenched thighs. I kick her legs apart before shoving my hand there. She tries to pretend she doesn't want me, but her pussy gets wetter and her tiny fists weaken.

Our gazes lock in the dead air. A moment where I recognize her desire to be controlled by me. Gentle hands cup my grimy cheeks, and her sweet voice penetrates the whirlwind of black mist.

“Was any of it real?” She persists.

Her nudity presses against mine, and the tips of her hair whisper over my flexed muscles. I shove my hands under her armpits, heave her upwards, and drop her bare ass on top of the granite slab covering Papa's cement box. She winces from the cold, her skin visibly reacting with goosebumps.

“It was real,” I grit out through clenched teeth, staring her in the eyes. “Every torturous second of it.”

Placing a hand to her solar plexus, I push her backward and she willingly falls. Desire coats her inner thighs, glistening and ready for my brutal consumption. I climb onto the platform to join her, my cock painfully heavy, my balls ready to combust.

Urgency reduces the capacity for foreplay. The need to be inside her is my only driving force. With her flat on her back, I hitch her legs high and thrust in deep.

When she screams, it echoes off the four walls designed to contain the Souza family tree. I fill her so deeply; it makes my

heart pound with ecstasy. For some unknown reason, this madness is only tolerable when I'm connected to her...when I'm with her.

I've only ever fucked women. The concept of making love had never entered my mind. In the beginning I'd fucked her, because my curiosity outweighed the consequences. This brutal attack isn't love.

It's a vicious addiction I can't live without.

I know exactly who I am. A broken man running from demons. I'm hard to fucking handle, but somehow, she's the only one who can do it.

Her pupils blaze fire and gold, the flames of her desire more potent than narcotics.

My knees bruise on the shiny surface as my hand reaches for her throat. Each uncivilized thrust makes us grunt like wild animals, the noise amplifying to raise the dead.

Thrust after thrust, I fuck her harder than the thrust before. Every time I spear her tight pussy, my chest echoes with savage growls. I don't recognize myself in this moment. How I'm devouring her—biting her tits, her shoulders, her neck.

Filling her full of my dick with every punishing piston of my hips. My weight pins her to the stone as the sacrifice to save my soul.

While I'm barely holding back my release, she suffers her own full body decimation. Her screams match the violence of her jerking body, giving me permission to hunt my own.

There's no way she can escape from the chokehold I have around her throat now, not even when her eyes roll back, and she gasps for air.

Her hands fly to my shoulders, scraping and punching as the disorder within me shifts up a gear. I'm too engrossed to pay attention. Too hungry for the wetness sucking me in every time I pull out. And that she is.

Wet.

For me.

Her arousal coats my dick like silk. Pure fucking liquid addiction.

“Tomás...” Her whimpered begging storms through me with a monstrous need, hitting my entire body with a spurting climax.

When my heart-stopping, blinding orgasm finally eases, my grip does too. The demonic smog I was consumed by evaporates and all I see are frantic wide eyes. Carina coughs and wheezes, rubbing the crimson bruising I’d left on her windpipe. The marks of a man who’d lost control.

Fuck, I could’ve fucking strangled her.

It’s not my enemies I need to worry about, it’s me.

I had broken her trust.

Took it too far.

I almost killed her.

My father’s taunting laugh plagues my conscience all the way from the flaming underworld he resides in. It sticks to my veins as toxic acid and charges through me with shame.

We’re both panting, sucking in the same oxygen when my forehead drops to hers, my voice gravelly. “I’m so sorry.”

I squeeze my eyes shut briefly as regret, guilt, and eternal damnation powders the aftermath of this ungodly fuck with unforgivable ashes. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

My fingertips trace the delicate flesh I’ve bitten and bruised while she just lies there beneath me perfectly accepting of my deplorable deeds.

She doesn’t flinch or scramble away from the beast who mauled her. Instead, she swallows a few times and blinks up at me.

“It’s okay. I understand...” she whispers, her voice hoarse and laden with the same clusterfuck of confusion that’s needling me.

She might understand, but I’m even more lost than ever. It was never my intention to hurt her like this. However, I try to

disguise it—the addiction, the compulsion, the desire—it's more than that now. An inner flurry of realization washes over me in a disarming wave. I feel it in my frozen bones, my tingly flesh, and every flexed muscle braced for the worst possible outcome.

I'm cursed.

Finally pulling my dick out of her, I watch the creaminess of my cum seeping out of her raw pussy. I've found Heaven in the most unforgivable way.

She covers her mouth with shaky fingertips, her eyes glistening. Not with tears, but with the same complex gaze of adoration she's always given me. It crushes me harder than any emotion I've ever experienced, because I know something she doesn't. I have unusual feelings for her.

It's a wicked atrocity how fate brought us together when happiness would never be ours. Together, we'd be responsible for mass destruction. Separately, she'd live a beautiful life without fear.

After brutally ravaging her, I may as well crawl into the vacant hole above my name plate and let death swallow me whole. I'm a sick bastard, damaged beyond repair, and undeserving of her trust.

I just fucked Carina, because I needed her more than my lungs needed air.

I, Tomás Souza, kingpin of the most powerful cartel in the world, *needed* this breath-taking woman.

No one else. Just her.

My Queen.

The ruler of my cold heart.

And I nearly fucking killed her.

The only thing I can do to make it right...is remove her from my life forever to keep her safe.

Love is death.

CARINA



I swallow hard, conscious of the burning skin around my throat.

Tomás runs his fingertips lightly over the glistening bite marks on my breasts one last time and exhales a controlled sigh. The intense look in his eyes suddenly shutters, his emotions flipping from eternal remorse to completely unreadable.

Every inch of his nakedness gleams in sweat. He arches over me, his heavy dick still furious from punishing me so hard. I want to lick it, to taste his saltiness like I've done countless times before.

It shouldn't arouse me, not after he took the breath from me and refused to give it back until the very last second. My uneven pulse trips, unable to beat at a regular tempo.

Without saying another word, he carefully climbs off my prone body and jumps down from the black granite slab marbled with golden threads. The carved ridges of his back muscles flex in sequence with every movement. His blank expression lurks in gloomy shadows as his mood freezes under a rock-solid layer of ice.

I know from experience how his mind betrays him. When he had busted André's nose there was only a speckle of blood to deal with. Somehow, I was able to reach him, to find his whirlpool and replace the plug. Only this time, there was treachery, lies, fear, and a threat to his sovereignty in the mix.

Blood sprayed across him like the paint technique he'd used in his abstract artwork. It's no wonder he freaked out. I would have too. He might have lost control, but he eventually found a sanctuary within me, just as I've located mine in him.

"We need to go," he says gruffly, stepping into his trousers and fighting with a haphazard leather belt. "Wear this." He grabs the bloodied shirt off the ground and offers it to me. "I've ruined the dress. This is all I have. I'd rather you didn't wear the filthy fucking thing, but I won't parade you about naked for anyone to see. A chopper will take you back to Bogotá once you've showered."

A visible shiver runs over his shoulders. My mind races, unsure of what this means for us now and what his plans for my future would be.

"Tonight?" I snatch the grubby dress shirt and throw it over my shoulders. "Are you coming with me?"

He shakes his head, standing there before me bare-chested, arms folded, and his wild gaze honed in on my neck.

"No. You're free to go."

"Free to go?" I scowl at him.

When I swing my legs over the edge of the rectangle box ready to jump, he suddenly stalks forward and scoops me up like I'm a weightless doll. With one arm behind my shoulders and the other under my knees, he silently carries me away from the chamber and into the passageway.

"Tomás?" I stare at his soiled complexion and stormy eyes.

My lungs struggle even though we've left behind the suffocating tomb and entered the lush landscape teeming with life.

"Don't," he mutters, dropping me to my toes on the damp planks near the tombs entrance. "Your contract of employment is officially terminated. I don't need you anymore."

Frustration and hurt gloss my eyes. Rogue flutters of anger burst inside my chest and push their way into my mouth. My

pride takes a beating even though he eyes me with the same hunger as always.

I'm not the silly girl I once was. Experience has turned me into fiery lava capable of destruction. A raging ocean that could sink sea vessels and welcome monsters. I'm a survivor and a warrior fit to take on any king, even him.

My temper surfaces like a jumble of spitting hot rocks. "I hate you."

As the curse rushes out, my hand sails through air, and connects with the unsullied side of his tortured face, taking us both completely by surprise.

He blinks, taken aback by my audacious move. I turn icy as Tomás goes rigid. My toes dig into the wood, sprouting roots to give me strength.

"Do it again." His command strikes like a bolt of lightning.

My belly clenches, caught in a loop of regret and justification. Slapping him the first time was a reaction. To do it a second would be premeditated violence.

Tomás crowds me, using his height to threaten without our bodies touching in any way. "Do. It. Again," he bites, the order much slower this time.

"No."

"Do it."

"No." I fist my hands by my hips, keeping my arms tight to my sides.

"Fucking do it." He seizes my hair, the strands looping his ruthless fingers like he's the puppeteer in a distressing circus.

I wince at the sharpness and grit my teeth at him. "Why should I?"

Tomás' nostrils flare. "Because I deserve it. Now do it again."

A deranged laugh bubbles from my chest, almost betraying me as a sob. "Maybe you do deserve it, but you've just told me we're done. So, I don't have to listen to you anymore. If I

don't want to do it, I won't." I paste a scornful smirk on my face to hide from the heartache.

With a sudden change in his gaze, he drags me into his chest and kisses me in a mindless move, so viciously. He attacks my lips until they sting from his coarse hairs. He yanks my head back to deepen the pressure, until I whimper breathlessly.

I drown in his power.

Suffocate in his taste.

Lose myself in his ultimate control.

Only this time, his hands aren't noosing my sore neck. One hooks my nape and the other curls around my bicep to stop me from bolting again. I should hate this man for everything he's done to me. Though the truth is, it hasn't really been anything I haven't secretly craved.

The two of us are complicated. We're bridged together with so many strong strands. Lust. Defiance. Understanding. Tragedy. Loyalty.

No matter how much my insides liquify from the heat of his kiss, it won't alter our circumstances. He's planning a wedding and I've got my own future to consider. Common-sense arms my instincts with lashing claws. I feel too much for him, already forgiving him for everything.

I want to be his.

Squirming, I manage to break contact, our lips no longer warring.

"Tomás," I say, panting. "You're telling me to go and you're kissing me like you want me to stay. But you're engaged to someone else."

His forehead furrows. "I've never met her," he admits, his voice cracking like a stone under a hammer. "She means nothing to me other than being a cunning business deal. And for the record...you were never a decoy." He shakes his head. "But now that I think about it, that's exactly what *she* is now. Bianca is the woman who'll step into the limelight as my wife,

and by doing so she'll be a target for all my enemies. Not you, Cari."

Holding his stare, I watch his hardened expression in the hope I'd see the truth unfold. "So, you're going ahead with it? You'll marry her?"

My throat thickens at the thought of his rejection.

He nods as if it's all perfectly simple. As if my feelings are paper thin and he's the flames ready to incinerate every emotion inked onto my heart.

"Yes...it's for the best." A nasty trickle of pain leaks from my heart. "You'll become insignificant to those who'd kill the people I'm close to, and I'll gain more leverage in Mexico. It's the right choice for us."

His shoulders round. A veil of darkness clouds his eyes blocking me out with one sinister blink. His mother was right. Tomás is a strategist who'd willingly sacrifice our bond for money and power.

"Sir?" A soldier dressed in combat gear rounds the bend. "Is everything okay?"

Tomás' posture instantly straightens, his expression slipping to a scowl. "Where's the General?"

"We have him, sir. Apparently, he tried to pay off your pilot once Paco recognized the girl. They recruited her to assassinate you and wanted the pilot on standby, so your brothers didn't have time to retaliate."

More men arrive, circling us like a swarm of busy ants. "They tried to recruit her and failed." Tomás corrects. "She's loyal to us. Take her to my suite and lock the door on your way out." Tomás' disgruntled gaze cuts to mine, his handsome features softening until his attention glides to the collar of red skin around my neck. "Do not touch her, look at her, or let anyone else near her."

He swallows hard as if he's contemplating his actions. The bruises he gave me still throb. However, my nipples, the shirt chafes them holding the very essence of his masculine

authority. Another man's blood stains the fibers. Not Tomás'. He's the king for a reason.

“By the time you've showered and changed into clean clothes, I'll escort you to the chopper to finalize everything.”

I fold my arms with brazenness, letting the self-hug give me fleeting comfort. “There's nothing to finalize.” My voice builds with strength. “I understood the agreement. You'll never ever see me again, Tomás. I promise you that.”

Holding my chin high, I do a swift one-eighty, praying my legs won't fail me, and stroll through the parting of soldiers who respectfully clear a path for my exit.

As much as I want to look back, I can't.

I won't.

It's over.

I stay on the walkway, my knees aching with every hurried step. They might be stiff and sore, but it's nothing compared to the seething cracks in my beliefs. We had screwed like animals, him pounding his pain into me and me loving how it made me feel alive.

Whatever Tomás' battles, he'd brought me along on the journey with him. Our faith in each other surpassed loyalty. It evolved into a beast more terrifying than hate. His misery is bittersweet.

It's what bonds us and will ultimately tear us apart. I've always felt safe with him. Call me young, stupid, and fucked up...it's a true fact...until his fingers nearly crushed the bones in my neck.

I was scared of him then, even though I'd wanted him to keep on fucking me. And that says more about me than it does about him.

My thirst for him is toxic.

Beneath giant twisted trees, I ignore the squad of armed men trooping a few yards behind me. My mind is everywhere and my foolish heart bleeds over the wooden boards by his feet, where I'd left it.

Fairytales are bullshit.

Villains can never be heroes.

He was never going to pick the defective girl who can't help him climb the power play ladder to a throne gaudier than his father's.

The faster I walk, the more my temper escalates, and my pride begs to rebuild itself. If he had taught me anything, it's that my instincts don't lie. Even though he'd lost control, it was me he wanted. No one else. Not even the woman he's meant to marry.

I press a hand to my chest, dizzy and exhausted. Tomás told me it was real—he admitted it. His mind might be damaged beyond repair, but he cares about me.

He saved me.

He was patient with me.

He kissed me like I was his last sip of oxygen before he drowned.

He let me into his heart, but only for a moment.

And now I'm leaving his protection for a life where danger isn't a constant and the mundane is a reality.

Through the mindless attempt to make myself hate him; a mechanical whir grabs my attention. My gaze hunts the choppy sound. Beyond screening trees, a fleet of helicopters are lined up on a tarmac airstrip to the side of the Souza residence. Reaching a fork in the pathway, I deviate from the route I know would lead me back to the main house.

There's nothing to keep me here other than the promise of a warm shower and designer dresses. Which means more pointless seconds spent with a family I need to get far away from. And more importantly, the cruel monster I've helplessly fallen for.

We're no longer bound by the verbal agreement, or held captive by the pretense it had cloaked us in. It was a fabricated illusion meant to keep our emotions in check.

Now, we're further apart than ever. My stomach lurches, ready to vomit from the mental anguish I'm suffering. In reality, all he had promised me was money.

My strides gather momentum, quickly turning my stiffened pace into a jog. The further I run, the harder my pulse slams.

"Wait!" A guy from the ranks yells at me, his boots hammering in my wake.

I don't listen. Why should I? Tomás wants me out of his way. The timing of when I go is irrelevant, it's just another thing he has control over. So, I take back my power and bolt towards the only helicopter with its blades churning up the navy sky.

Closing in on me, a large hand seizes my bicep forcing me to slow. "Stop running. You won't get anywhere. The pilot is under orders to wait. We have to load the chopper with your bags." The bearded guy holding my arm pants, out of breath.

"I don't have any bags." I argue, shirking out of his uncertain grip.

"Your bags of cash. The money he owes you. Come inside. I'll escort you upstairs so you can get cleaned up before he loses his shit. You have thirty minutes until take off."

The blood drains from my body and my knees go weak.

"The money he owes me..."

TOMÁS



After everything that's happened, she must hate me.

I know it.

And rightly so.

I'm not the man she deserves.

Or the villain who'd end her life.

The woman brave enough to tolerate me isn't a hapless subject who bows to a blood-thirsty king.

So, I'll simply send her away with a tidy fortune and cut all ties.

That's the magnificent, grand plan where invisible boundaries exist and too much space keeps her from me.

But it's a huge lie—there won't be anything simple about it.

The second she had stomped away from me with a promise of never ever on her lips, my heart exploded into pieces. Each mangled sliver formed its own pulse, collectively combining a rhythm so intense the beating almost cracked my ribs.

I gambled with her life by inviting her into my world—a selfish risk. A flutter of butterfly wings that caused monumental consequences days later. The sex we had was more than just filthy. It had her searching in my darkness for answers and me floundering in an emotion I tried to fight off.

A crackled voice comes through on a walkie-talkie. “Are you still with Tomás?”

My eyes cut to the soldier walking with me who promptly answers the radio. “Yeah.” He glances at me. “We’re on our way to the hangar. Shane and Gio have the General hung up on a hook by his boxers.”

There’s a distant yell over the airwaves. “Tell him the girl bolted. She’s at the airfield trying to board a chopper.”

Fuck!

I’d given her the order to shower. My men were instructed to take her back to the house while I grilled the General about my father’s murder and then hacked his traitorous head off like the snake he is. I had planned to have time with her before she left for good.

We had time. Even if it was brief.

“Give Spitfire the order to stay grounded until further notice,” I bark, the soles of my feet slapping the path until I’ve broken into a sprint.

She’s trying to leave before we officially say goodbye. Before I can kiss her lips one last time and give her the money she deserves. Not for her company, or even the sex, as a gift from a guilty beast to his forgiving beauty. To make freedom that little bit more comfortable.

My hurried strides eat the wooden slats until I no longer have them beneath my heels. Hurling off the path towards the hangars, I cover the manicured lawn surrounding the airstrip with predatory speed.

It doesn’t take long to pinpoint Carina under the floodlights, still wearing the bloodstained shirt I’m dying to incinerate, and surrounded by security. Messy tendrils spill over her narrow shoulders, her golden eyes wide with anger.

Get the shirt off her.

Strip the revolting garment from her tortured frame.

Make her stay whatever the cost.

My hands twitch the closer I get, maniacal thoughts of punishment rebel against my better judgment. Water jets wouldn’t erase teeth marks or red welts dappling her flesh.

Dried blood is easily removed, but the threat of death can never hide.

“I told you to get a shower.” I dig my nails into my palms the tighter my fists clench. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going? You’re not flying anywhere dressed like that. Get inside, Cari.”

She freezes on my approach, her fingers instantly grazing her scarred mouth. “Stop calling me that.”

I hadn’t noticed the transition from sweet little liar to Cari. It’s a thoughtless changeover or a significant shift. I doubt I’d ever say her name out loud again after today.

Prowling towards her, the revulsion I have for the blood drying on my face doesn’t affect me, not in the same way it used to, not when I’m consumed by this woman’s close proximity. She stands in front of a black chopper refueling for the planned journey to whisk her away.

The oversized shirt she wears skims her mid-thighs. Four buttons were accidentally fastened out of sequence, one side higher than the other, the collar gaping wide. Her hair is disorderly from rough sex and her lips still hold ruddiness from my harshness.

My stomach knots into an agonizing ball. Not with need, but with the prospect of loss—the insurmountable pain of letting her go. Of never having her next to me or calling her mine. When I had claimed her virginity, I thought it would be enough of a title to own.

Yet, it’s not.

I want to own her mind, body, and beautiful soul.

“Apparently I can’t leave until I’ve received payment for my services,” she almost laughs, her eyes glistening with a sheen of hurt.

It’s that threat of liquid bitterness that guts me. The snarl of her fascination morphing into loathing. I clear my throat, doing my best to stand firm when all I feel is broken inside.

She has to leave.

“Not for your services.” I scrub my eyes and bat away the weakness creeping in me that begs to bathe...with her...just us. “It was our agreement. I won’t go back on my word.”

She swallows slowly when one of my guys moves in and dumps two duffle bags at her dainty bare feet. “It’s yours as soon as you take the shirt off and get in the shower,” I say coolly. “I can’t let you leave wearing that filth.”

Carina scowls at the cash peeking out at her from beyond an open zipper, her gaze suddenly flicking to mine. “Is that so?” She drops to her haunches and dances her fingertips over the stacked paper notes. “Well, I want to leave right now.”

“No.”

“I’m not going inside that house again.”

We stare at each other, rivalry common in this usual dynamic. “And I’m not letting you leave while another man’s blood touches your body.”

The waft of Marlboro cigarette smoke drifts in on a gentle breeze. André appears by my side, his knuckles bloodied and eyes dark. “Is she actually leaving?” he asks, cocking a thick black brow at her, then at me. “You’re letting her go? What if she—”

“Don’t worry, she won’t say a word.” I halt him with a raised hand. “Give me a minute alone with her.”

André hums as he exhales a plume of smoke. “No worries. The General wasn’t involved in Papá’s assassination, but he did try to orchestrate yours. How do you want me to deal with him?”

“Kill him.”

“You sure, brother? When word gets out, they’ll think you planned it.”

“Kill the bastard. Now give me some fucking space, Dré.” I pinch the bridge of my nose not giving a fuck about the General’s deception at this point. “I have something far more important to deal with.”

Carina folds her arms, as if sensing the conflict twisting in my heart and head. Our gazes weld together, unspoken wishes firing like rockets.

André scratches his head and quietly saunters over to the men obediently waiting for my next order.

I take a deep breath but notice how it doesn't satisfy my tight lungs. "You're not going anywhere until I've given the pilot permission to fly. Now, come with me. I'll take you to my suite. Spitfire will store the money in the chopper ready for your departure."

She pads towards me, her light footsteps not making a single sound. Her gait portrays confidence, except for the turbulent pulse thrumming in her regally poised neck.

"I'm going to hop into that helicopter right now and you're gonna give the pilot permission to fly."

The dark chuckle rumbling from my bare chest warns her of my frayed patience. "I think you're enjoying this." I taunt with a misplaced smirk. "Would you rather have my dick shoved in your mouth? Is that it? Huh? You want my brother and these men to see what a good girl you are? How you like to take orders."

Her chin hitches, her blustery gaze spearing me in place. "How would your fiancé feel about that?" She challenges, her tone riddled with indignation. "Does she know you paid to fuck me while she wears your ring?"

My temper flares. "Enough of this shit." I growl, muscles braced and my stomach churning. "The only thing I've given that woman is an acceptance of marriage." A heavy sigh deflates my lungs. "You need to leave, Cari. Get as far away from me as possible. Bringing you here was a mistake. You and I were a mistake. And giving you the impression we had a connection, that was a fucking mistake too." The torturous lies immediately gnaw at my insides, making me sick.

My hands lash out to cage her cheeks in brutal fingers. The revolting stench of copper and death lingers between us, but it's the subtle scent of Carina that turbocharges my libido. The

smell of our fierce coupling only moments ago crackles with perversion and sizzles with corruption.

Tipping into her face, I ignore the deep-seated longing I have to make her mine and pull down the ferrous armor I've worn for most of my life. I'm aware of the pilot cautiously preparing the helicopter for its next voyage and my brother lingering a few steps away, curiosity keeping him captivated.

This isn't a usual occurrence. In fact, it's unheard of for me to tolerate this amount of disobedience.

"You're coming inside with me." My fingertips dig into her flushed cheeks to make my instruction more pressing. "Take a shower and give me the fucking shirt, so I can burn it."

I can't quite fathom how her fiery eyes galvanize me. The crown of amber circling bottomless pupils fluctuates its molten appearance like nothing I've ever seen before. She makes a noise in her throat that competes with the scorching blood whooshing through my veins. It's a whimper of need, a grunt of disgust, or a groan so confusing that we both freeze in its wake.

My eyes snap closed to block out the heat of her stare. In that beat of a reprieve, she catches me off guard, shunts my chest with her body weight, and shoves me backwards. My fingers tangle in her tousled hair, the strands tugging between us like blood vessels joining her heart to mine.

She huffs with anger. "You're an asshole. I will never obey you again after this." Her lower lip wobbles ever so slightly until she sucks it into her pretty little mouth and pushes back her shoulders.

Both of us inhale hard, my self-discipline tested beyond the realms of sanity. Before I can retaliate with words or actions, she darts towards André who's leaning against a black, safari jeep. Jealousy stabs me in the gut, slicing my finely tuned instincts with worry.

Lifting to her tiptoes, she silently steals the ashy tipped cigarette from his lips, and bites the butt between her teeth, but

doesn't inhale the smoke.

André's brows drift up to the night sky. Somehow, he stays silent for the first time in his life. Instead, he side-eyes me with an uncertain smirk plastered over his cocky face.

Her quick return to the waiting cash makes my locked jaw twitch with temper.

"What the hell are you doing?" I growl, low and foreboding, hating how utterly sexy and rebellious she looks with a cigarette and only an unclean shirt hiding her nipples and perfect pussy. She's a goddess of war, primed for revolt.

Ignoring me, she drops to her haunches, grabs the bag, turns it upside down, and shakes two million dollars out onto the tarmac. I flinch, unsure of what the hell she's doing, until she holds up a brick of the paper notes. She pinches the cigarette between her fingers and waves the wad of dollar bills in my direction.

"I don't want your dirty money." She pings the rubber band holding the bills together and drags it free to loosen the bundle. "I agreed to your terms, because I was fascinated by you. I secretly craved the man who held me hostage with threats and promises."

For a split second, I don't see the fluttering paper hit the breeze like ticker tape. But then my heart explodes when she rushes to the left side of the helicopter and yanks the fuel pump out of Spitfire's hands. Tugging the black hose, she squeezes the nozzle to release a downpour of aviation kerosene all over the duffle bags and the tumbling mound of dollars.

Without a second to reflect on the consequences or consider how I'd react; she pings the lit cigarette and jumps back to watch the satisfying eruption.

An inferno of fire and smoke rises between us like the eternal flames of loneliness. It forms a deadly barrier to split our paths in two. A holocaust to burn my initial plan to ashes.

She belongs with me.

But I'm a curse.

Through the flickering blaze, I pocket my hands and watch her slowly unfasten each button, crumple the shirt up and toss it into the fray.

Completely naked and brazen, she flips me the bird. “Fuck you, Tomás Souza.”

Her hair dances in the light wind and her eyes dance with flickering flames. My throbbing dick turns to stone and my icy veins run hotter than the millions burning in a costly pyre.

I couldn't give a fuck if she blew up the whole damn fleet of helicopters, because her insurgent outburst is what makes her devastatingly unique.

Her chaos is my sanctuary.

Her anarchy is my happiness.

Her touch is the cure to my affliction.

Her body is my deepest fantasy.

Her tortured soul echoes my own.

It's all *her*.

“I can burn the shirt without your help,” she continues to back up, almost reaching the passenger door. “And I'll decide whether I want to shower or not.” With her bare ass hitting the chopper, she glances over her shoulder at the dumbstruck pilot.

Sable strands whip across her face and settle in place over her blemished breasts. The sheer sight of her tempting bare flesh alone causes mayhem within me, never mind the branding left by a mad king.

I struggle to contain my unnatural craving for her, to stop the cracks forming in my superiority. Until she yanks open the door, whirls to face me in all her naked glory, and nails me to the spot with a gaze so full of emotion it stabs my rapidly beating heart with a thousand darts.

“I never wanted your money, Tomás. All I wanted was you.”

That honest declaration is all it takes for her to show me I'm human after all. It sears our future with white-hot solder, binding our paths together in an incomprehensible way. To sacrifice my feelings for her would have the worst repercussions.

I may as well be destitute, powerless, and insignificant. I should renounce my title and return to the family crypt.

The truth is, I'm worthless without her. But my father taught me how to defy emotions and focus on building an empire. I'm a mastermind at strategy and planning—that's all I know.

Carina climbs into the helicopter's cabin, expecting the pilot to take his seat in the cockpit, which he does once I signal to him five minutes before takeoff. The thought of her leaving wraps my chest with chains and tricks my heart into believing it will never beat again.

Can I really let her go?

Or could I keep her and my family safe while she stands beside me?

One monumental decision outweighs the rest. Fate had brought us together and now we're struggling to grapple with the aftermath. Now I understand why she happened to me. Her bittersweet journey showed this hardened criminal that love is more potent than narcotics, that it's equally about survival as much as it is death.

It's a coveted, bone-deep emotion that surpasses all boundaries.

I had forced her away the first time she unexpectedly dropped into my life...it wasn't random how she reappeared again. It was a second chance to do the right thing, to mend my soul—to fall in love.

I stagger towards my brother, shoving shaky fingers through my hair in an attempt to establish some sort of flimsy decorum. The serious look in his eyes winds me. He understands Hell is one decision away—either my personal misery or my entire family's.

Reaching him, I extend my arm. “Give me your shirt, Dré.”

“Fuck, Tommy, I can see why you’re crazy about her. The girl has grit.” He drags his black shirt up and over his head, the top three buttons already undone to speed up the process. “I like her.” His playful chuckle haunts my rankling temper, mollifying it with a wash of pride.

This isn’t a laughing matter, not when I’m wrestling with such an unknown emotion and a possessive surge so strong I could easily punch my brother in the teeth for admitting he likes her. As if sensing the pain in my chest, he grips my bicep, his firm fingertips burrowing into the tense muscle.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?”

I take hold of his cologne-drenched shirt and peer over my shoulder at the helicopter. “Don’t question me. Carina and I had a temporary arrangement...and now it’s over.” My skin prickles with the weight of my conclusion as my eyes settle on Carina’s self-hug in the back seat. “I have to marry the Mexican girl. Business is business.”

I start walking away from him.

“But you don’t love the Mexican girl. You love her.” He points at Carina.

“What’s love got to do with it?” My voice cracks like the eternal flames of damnation. “I don’t know how to love, Dré.”

Without waiting to hear his response, I storm towards the open passenger door and climb in after her. She shuffles over, making it obvious she doesn’t want our bare skin to touch. It takes every last drop of willpower I have left to keep a measure of distance which is proving exceptionally difficult in the back of a small aircraft.

My mouth dries, knowing what I’m about to say will be the hardest thing I’ve ever had to express. Even more difficult than ending my uncle’s life when he was already dying and finishing my father’s reign with a dutiful bullet.

“That money could have set you up for life.” I swallow down the impure urges taking control of my tarnished soul.

She sucks in a slow breath as if gathering the courage to speak. “Cover yourself up before I do something I’d regret.”

Her head rotates sharply, bringing watery eyes, and an expression so fierce it makes my pulse stutter. “Regret?” she hisses with as much venom as she can muster.

“Carina...” I sigh heavily. “The only thing I’m going to regret is sending you away.”

Her brows snap together. “Then don’t do it.”

“And kill you?” I offer a sad smile feeling sick to the pit of my stomach. My lashes lower, drawing my gaze to the fresh bruises marring her fragile neck. “I’m a dangerous man, Carina.” She shivers when my fingers skate from her chin to her shoulder blade. “You need to forget all about me.”

“So, you expect me to go back to the city and pretend nothing ever happened?”

I swallow the hard truth and punch the leather seat in front of me, my thinning temper dangling by a solitary thread. “Carina...that was always the plan.” The words bite out with remorse. “I was upfront about my intentions from the beginning.”

Her eyes glow in the darkness. “Fine.”

I clamp my hands on her cheeks and stare into glistening rings of blazing amber. “I’m the head of my family and the fucking cartel. We come from different worlds. Mine is dark and destructive...whereas yours will be so much brighter without me.”

She cuffs my parallel wrists, the grip so arresting it sparks dangerous impulses from her body to mine. It’s a magical energy I’ve surrendered to countless times and one I’d easily give in to again. A rare connection we’d kindled from the very second our eyes met.

When her lashes lower in sorrow, I cover her beautiful lips with mine and kiss her. I kiss her knowing it’s the last time we’ll ever see each other. So, she’d never forget who I was to her, or what she’ll always be to me.

Lust prickles down my spine and coils in my core when she moans into my mouth, releases my wrists, and wraps her arms around me. With this meaningful kiss, I breathe her in, deepening the pressure with a hunger so unsatisfied I could die from starvation.

Every muscle braces beneath her roaming hands, the scraping sensation of her nails tests my tightly reined desire. She curls into me, hitching up her knees until we're more skin to skin than apart, more slippery, wet saliva than oxygen.

I wedge my forehead to hers, our lips begrudgingly separating. "Time to go." Inhaling hard, my fingers bite into her cheeks, locking her pretty face before me so she reads the sincerity in my eyes. "I won't put you in any more danger than I already have. Not from my enemies and not from me. Go home and live the life you deserve."

"Tomás." Her eyes spring tears. "You're the only one who understands me. *You're* my home. Leaving you means I'll be homeless...I'll be that girl again. A lost soul searching for her place in the world, when I know it's right here, with you."

I attempt to smile, forcing myself to be the invincible king everyone expects me to be. To walk away from her even though my heart tells me to lock her away in a tower and never let her see the cruel world again. This path we've taken would either destroy us or eventually reunite us.

"It's not up for debate." I break away, giving up the thrill of her warm skin and shunning the taste of her devotion. "This is my choice to make."

"What about my choice?" she snaps, her sadness chasing danger. "Surely I have a say in this too?"

I draw back my shoulders and let her arms fall away. Ripping my greedy stare away from her nakedness, I collect the fallen shirt by my feet. The comfortable darkness I know so well covers me like an intimate friend, resurrecting my exalted position on the throne I'd toppled from, fixing my callous crown in place, and tainting my veins with black ice.

To survive this brutal rupture, I abruptly shut myself off and close down the cyclone of emotions making this unbearable rift difficult.

“Put on the shirt. That’s an order,” I mutter under my breath, angling away from her harrowing gaze.

She reaches out for me in the empty space I’ve created, but it’s too late. I wince on impact, my bare feet hitting the tarmac. I’m sending her away, because misfortune brought us together. Now she has an element of freedom, albeit under the watchful eye of my armed soldiers.

The next time I see her it would be under happier circumstances. That’s the belief I’ll carry with me when she finally rises into the starless sky and disappears from sight.

“Tomás...” I do my best to ignore her, aware of the wall I’ve erected around her and how I’d bulldoze through it in a selfish heartbeat.

She’s living proof that life is unpredictable. My wretched heart wins the onslaught of back and forth. I spin around to watch Spitfire slam the passenger door, cutting her off from the cold world I had sucked her into. The very same desolate plantation where she first arrived wearing filthy denim shorts and innocence.

And now, after all this time, I finally understand why she had turned up in my life.

Carina is my queen.

Which means I’d always put her first, even if it means I have to be without her. I grit my teeth at our reality, swallowing pain and justification for this cruel move.

What am I doing?

This is fucking insanity.

I need to focus.

No distractions.

I’ll figure out a strategy to mend the rift with my rivals and win her back.

I will succeed—or I'll die trying.

“Are you okay, Tommy?” André appears beside me, his concern penetrating my inner turmoil. “Where the fuck are your shoes?”

Nausea flips my stomach and a bead of sweat trickles down my spine like an icicle. I'd been so preoccupied; I had even noticed I wasn't wearing my dress shoes. Christ, I'm a mess.

“It's for her own good.” Intentionally, I stuff my hands into my pockets and keep my back to the helicopter. “Fuck!”

An ache spreads across my chest, it's either a heart attack or the ice-covered organ has finally shattered. What if they go after her once they've killed me?

“Dré...” My breathing is all over the place. I seize his arm and instantly catch his full attention. “Go with her,” I growl, scraping at rationality. “Stick to Carina like glue for a few days to make sure she's safe. Protect her with your life. I need this from you as my brother.”

His hand swathes my nape, butting our foreheads. “You've got it, Tommy.”

He nods, taps the side of my face affectionately, and jogs towards the chopper. I drag both hands down my face as jealousy, fear, and loss trips the switch in my head.

Everything goes hazy. A second of vulnerability. A moment of despair.

I love her even though I don't want to. I'll never admit it. Not to anyone.

My scalp prickles. Memories of her roll in the mist. That sweet-as-sin smile she always gave me, even when I'd just fucked her raw. How the touch of her warm skin rocketed shivers over my scalp every damn time. How she stared at me with curiosity, not fear, accepting the bad guy with a crooked crown. She understood my defective mind like no one else on earth.

After a beat of hesitation, the downdraft whirls around me and coaxes me back from the brink. I spin around, my eyes darting skyward where blurry blades slice up a rich, inky sky.

She's gone.

I focus on the intermittent flash of a red beacon until the aircraft becomes a distant speck. Fisting the exact location of where my heart bleeds, I try to inhale and exhale through the excruciating pain. Already the devil inside me is lonely.

“Sir?” A waiting soldier calls after me.

I ignore him and storm towards the house, my mood a destructive hurricane. I'm alone in the dark, roaming in the safety of shadows unable to find my way out. I'm not equipped to deal with distorted instincts or the inner howl of a guilty conscience. Every whisper and thought within me warns of the wrong decision I just made.

My thoughts travel to the wretched second I had understood what loving someone meant. How my terrified heart burst out of my chest the instant I pulled the trigger and watched my uncle's eyes forfeit a glassy sheen of pride before drifting to vacant.

Too many years of suffocating guilt hisses under my skin with blistering heat. History and evil deeds, all shrouded in blood and destruction haunt me until I'm all but a shell, no good for anyone—no good for Carina.

It tears me to pieces until my headspace is adrift and my powerful muscles have diminished to skin and bone.

Sending her away isn't the worst thing I could do—it's stealing her priceless life, because I hit my limit. We both know I more or less strangled her in a sadistic, passionate hysteria. I'm all for a bit of rough play, but that was on the wrong side of fun.

It wasn't my intention to unravel, or to let my self-control get away from me.

However, she brings out a side of me I don't understand. A man floundering outside of his torment, who commands ownership of a human life, and the acute necessity to belong to

her. I demand to be the only man she'd ever feel inside her mind, body, and soul.

As an uprising of acid threatens to make me vomit, I stride towards the soulless home I've always hated. For her safety and for my sanity, our threaded paths have split ways yet again.

There's no place for weakness and no way I'd reveal it to anyone. I've chosen the life I was born into and the burden of a death-dealing crown I rightfully wear. That is my destiny. Not chasing women.

Angelo had foreseen my future. He knew I'd be a legendary ruler, and now it's time to step the fuck up to the throne and take my seat. A headache crests with each thunderous footstep, the doubt of my life ever being the same is a cruel fable.

I've had enough of quarrelling with the out-of-control emotions broiling within me. It's time to let go. I don't appreciate the distraction Carina causes, or how her feminine presence inflames me with compassion.

Mentally stepping into my father's demonic shoes, I slip into the mindset he had cursed me with. Ruling our kingdom is the priority. A life outside of it is pointless.

"Tomás?" Mother stops pacing the instant I cross over the threshold. "Son..." Her tone changes from fierce mafia queen preparing revenge on the General to placating mother. "Where's the girl?"

My feet keep moving, my tense body on a crash course to hunt out hot water and decontaminated clothes. "I sent her away," I mutter, unsure if this is really a nightmare and I'll wake up with Carina plastered over my chest. "Our agreement ran its course. Now you can help the Mexicans plan a wedding."

My veins thicken with poisonous regret, the toxicity reaching my heart, and destroying its rhythm. It would be impossible for her to love me in this darkness.

“Where’s Shane?” I bark, my heart turning to stone as I reach the foot of the stairway I’ve climbed too many times to count.

My gaze sweeps the empty stairs where the ghost of Carina pauses mid-way, all alone, her exquisite figure gilded in gold, wearing the dress I’d ripped from her hips like an animal devouring its prey. A slight smile dances on her pretty lips, her fierce eyes blaze and her posture exudes regal elegance.

The blood drains from my limbs, my emotions are haywire. I’m bonded to the cold tiles with zero energy to take one more step. Debilitating remorse flips my stomach, the acidic bile torching my decision.

A gentle hand settles on my shoulder and powdery perfume weaves through the insanity I’m lost in.

“Oh, son...sometimes the right decision isn’t always the obvious one.” Her caring voice drags me away from the stunning hallucination.

I swallow against the hammering pulse in my throat, grit my teeth, and let go of the stirring memory. “It’s done now, Mama. If she stayed, I’d only end up killing her. After the wedding, things will return to normal.”

Fuck normal...

CARINA



“This isn’t my apartment block...”

I lower the aviation microphone on my headset and press my nose to the window as the helicopter I’ve been cooped up in for too long finally hovers over a landing platform on the roof of a high-rise tower.

The slow rising sun colors feathery clouds with a fresh new break of sunlight, slashed with periwinkle and gold.

“Where are we?” I ask, not recognizing the skyline.

André speaks to the pilot through his headset and pats the man’s shoulder from behind once we touch down. None of us have spoken since he jumped in beside me, buckled up, and gave the order to takeoff.

For the entire journey my mind was astray. I’d swallowed back the painful lump in my throat, doing my best not to cry, while André’s knee bounced as he fidgeted with his family signet ring.

I didn’t want comfort or pity. Not even a single glance of concern. I just wanted space to figure out what happens next. A place to hide away and face my ultimate dread of being alone again. Tomás didn’t complete me—his damaged mind complemented mine.

The wicked pain he offered fed my appetite for a passion I never believed could exist, and now I’m cut free, spinning out into the universe without an anchor.

The engine noise cuts out. “We’re in *Chapinero*,” Spitfire answers in the new hush. “This is a Souza-owned hotel. Tomás gave the instruction to bring you here.”

My tired pulse fires to life again. “Why? I have an apartment. What about my clothes...my personal stuff...my job?”

He ignores my rant. “The entire top floor is completely closed off to make it private. The presidential suite is all yours.” Spitfire twists in his seat and offers me a keycard. “This will give you access to the building. The passcode to enter your suite is your birth date.”

“Are you joking?” I fist the hem of the buttoned shirt drowning me in material softer than silk. “A hotel...”

“Thanks, Spitfire.” André cocks a bushy brow at me. “Better than a sicario popping a cap in your skull while you sleep in your pokey apartment.” He chuckles as he rips the headset from his ears. “I need a fucking drink.” Alcohol is already strong on his breath as he sighs, and dark crescents of exhaustion bruise his under-eyes. “Let’s go, Carina.”

He shoves the passenger door open and leaps from the helicopter, raising his arms over his head to stretch.

“When can I go back to my apartment?” I shuffle out behind him making sure to keep my legs discreetly squeezed together as I swing my bare feet out first.

“Never,” he snaps impatiently. “It could be worse. Get used to it.”

“So, why are you here?”

“To make sure you stay out of trouble.”

When he offers his ringed hand to help me, I shake my head and jump down unaided. “I can manage on my own. And I’d rather not have an in-house babysitter either.” I smile tightly when he narrows his eyes in silent assessment.

“If I’m the babysitter then that makes you the baby, right?” he mocks, his voice hoarse and thick as he pulls a squished pack of cigarettes from his jeans’ pocket and shakes out a

cigarette. “And by the way, little fire starter, keep your hands off my smokes.” He winks as a small flame blazes the tip. “Tomás might give you his last breath, but I’m not in love with you. So, don’t start any more fires.” Smoke billows from his nostrils as he exhales.

Love.

My scalp tingles at the mention of such a small word with life changing complications. “He doesn’t love me.” I fold my arms over my chest and stare back at him.

André shrugs, ruffles his fingers through messy ebony hair and scratches his unshaven jaw. “Look...you’re stuck with me until Tommy says otherwise.” His torso angles around bringing his gaze with it. “Which means I’m stuck with you too. You’d better get used to it or I’ll chuck you off the top of this ten-story building and tell Tommy you jumped.”

As he smirks, I see the devil dance inside him. He’s not really threatening me, but his warning stings of danger. The wind whips strands of hair across my face like protective bars, oddly easing my vulnerability.

“You’d better think of another way to get rid of me. He knows I’d never willingly jump.” I hold up my wrist to the powerful sun rays warming the early morning mist clinging to the heights of my new prison. André’s gaze settles on the silvery scar, his face deadpan. “However...he’d probably conclude that you got blind drunk and fell over the edge with me.” I draw my lips to stave a smug smile.

Coal-colored eyes sparkle in the change of light, an undercurrent of immorality flashing with speckles of sunny humor. A faint smile dances on his lips.

“Okay, Carina.” The way he says my name, all husky from too many cigarettes and late nights has my skin prickling. It sounds just like Tomás after he’s emptied himself inside me. I shiver. “Let me think of a better way to kill you, and then I’ll run Plan B past you for critique.” He juts out his hand. “Deal?”

“Deal,” I agree, endorsing our handshake as a truce.

His phone buzzes from his jeans' pocket. "What now?" He inhales a lungful of smoke. "All I need right now is a bottle of liquor and a bed for an hour," he says with the cigarette butt nipped between his lips.

He swipes a finger over the screen and scrunches up his forehead. After a beat, he sighs heavily and shouts to the pilot who's tipping a canister of fuel into the tank.

"Change of plan, Spitfire. We're going to *Mag Mell*."

I frown. "Where?"

"Don't worry about it." He jerks his head in a gesture to follow and strolls back across the helipad. "We'll be more comfortable there."

Moving ahead of me, I notice the revolver tucked into the waistband of his jeans, next to inked skin. The sight of it makes my pulse spike. I should be used to weapons by now. Tomás never goes anywhere without one, except when he's fucking me.

A shiver rattles my bones at the thought of André needing to use it or turning it on me one day.

I take my time, rather than walk with him. It's an awkward situation being close to a man whose bulky build, masculine features, and effortless swagger are so reminiscent of Tomás. Despite his rugged sex appeal, there's no chemical reaction or tingly tug from him to me, only familiarity.

André glances over his shoulder. "Come on," he barks, his baritone cracking like he's spent a lifetime partying without any sleep.

"Are we staying in Bogotá?"

He yanks open the passenger door and waits expectantly. "Can't tell you that. We're going somewhere that's only accessible to a select few." Then he drops his mobile phone onto the tarmac and slams the heel of his boot on top until it's smashed up. "We need to leave now."

"Is something wrong?" The hairs on my scalp lift like shield maidens preparing to defend themselves against a

Viking ambush. “Will Tomás be there?”

“Get inside the chopper, Carina. You know Tomás has a business deal to fulfill. He trusts me, and right now, so should you.”

“Not yet...let me call my brother first. He worries about me. I’ll call him from the hotel room.” I inch away from the aircraft.

I have to speak to Sal. He’d go out of his mind with worry if he doesn’t hear my voice. Or worse, he’d get *el Fantasma* involved. With his resources, he’d figure out the truth. They’d finally figure out that I’m woven in a web so thick it would take a truck full of explosives to reach me.

Just one call would let him know I’m okay—even if I’m a broken jigsaw, far beyond repair.

It only takes one more step for his patience to crumble like a stick of ash. Pinching the cigarette by the butt with his thumb and forefinger, he draws in one final inhalation and flicks it into the light wind. As smoke leaves his lungs, he reaches for his revolver and checks the clip.

“You’re safe with me, Carina. Unless you continue to piss me the fuck off. Now let’s go.”



I stare out at the Andes mountains as the helicopter banks over the plateau, leaving the sunlit city behind.

If it’s really over, then why am I sitting next to his brother, traveling to a place called Mag Mell? My instincts tell me to trust André, but he’s cartel too—he’s a Souza.

I want to ask him why I’m not allowed to go home. Tomás had promised I’d return to my old life as soon as our arrangement ended. André’s thick black lashes are lowered as he sleeps and the mind space of not having a conversation is welcomed.

It gives me time to dwell. To rethink everything I've been through and most of all, accept how Tomás had lied to me.

Even though my heart aches for him and the warped ventricles squeeze for his deviance, I'll never trust him again. He's gone too far this time. I'm not free when I'm soaring through the air, flying north of Colombia next to a man I know nothing about.

Tomás had willingly picked power and glory over us. Just like Matheus had told me he would, and Teresa spelled it out. They all knew it would happen like a far-off thunderstorm with flashing lightning bolts and torrential rain.

Each of them offered me pitiful smiles and subtle warnings. Whereas I had pretended I wasn't falling for him, that the inevitable expiration date would be easily survived.

Most of all, I had lied to myself.

I'm lost in thought when the bird's eye view changes from crowded streets to dense vegetation. We cover miles of rainforest where a body could easily be disposed of without ever being found. I hate how my mind slips to the macabre, but that's who Carina Ferreira is.

Who I've always been.

"We're here," Spitfire speaks through the headphones, his voice startling my somber contemplation and making André flinch awake. Razor sharp reflexes have him reaching for his weapon.

"Christ..." he mutters, dragging a tattooed hand down his sleepy face. "That was quick."

"We've been in the air for well over an hour," I mutter.

The helicopter swoops over wild terrain, its thwapping engine whipping up the hazy mist clinging to jungle dense hills. Skimming the forest, we break through clouds where an azure ocean stretches to the horizon, dotted with tiny far-off boats with colorful sails.

Pure white sand hugs a rugged coastline and proud palms stencil the tropical landscape.

With my forehead pressed to glass, I take it all in—every sweeping sandy crescent and frothy white wave rolling to the undisturbed shores. Up here, I feel like a spoiled goddess watching over the earth from her first-class seat.

For the Souzas, this is an everyday occurrence, an unplanned flight path of many. They must travel to unreachable destinations on a whim, flitting from one beautiful retreat to another, places that are unknown by mere mortals like the working class.

But what they don't know is how I'm used to helicopters and flying under the radar. Even though I'd only flown over the Amazon rainforest, it was still a breathtaking adventure. I'm well-aware of jungle hideaways and secrecy.

My stomach lifts when we tip right, moving inland a few miles until the aircraft levitates over a remote colonial manor house with dome-shaped structures on its silvery slate roof. Giant evergreen trees screen the epic circumference of real estate making it the ideal hideaway for any smooth criminal.

A boundary fence comes together where a set of mammoth iron gates sit closed at the end of an extensive driveway.

“Who owns this place?” I ask weakly, utterly exhausted and broken from the recent events. “It's miles away from where I'm supposed to be.”

“It's a family safe house.” André unclips his seatbelt as the chopper sinks lower to a private helipad adjacent to the house. “You'll have room to move around here. It'll be more comfortable. Better than being stuck in a stuffy hotel. I know I'd go fucking mad being cooped up there.”

I glare at his side profile. “Who lives here?” He stays silent, refusing to answer my alternatively worded question. “Is Tomás...”

“Nope.” He interrupts, his grin wolfish. “He has no idea you're here.”

I look to my left at a barricade of bowing branches, then right to a picture-perfect clearing that reveals the Caribbean

Sea blending with the wispy blue heavens. There's no way out of this paradise by foot.

Every muscle tenses. "Why did you bring me here, André?"

"You'll see."

Adrenaline kicks my veins. I'm suddenly very aware of the seclusion, the risk, and the foolish decision I'd made to board a helicopter on the rooftop of a city hotel. What if André *can't* be trusted? What if he's conspiring against his brother? What if he's the one who killed Elias?

"Carina..." André frowns at me like I'm insane. "It's only a temporary precaution until the wedding is over. You're a guest here. Come on." He jumps out of the chopper and starts walking, fully expecting me to join him.

"You can't keep me here as a hostage. I have a life to live, André—a family who worries about me," I yell out at him, frustration hacking at my tone.

Glancing over his shoulder, he slows his pace and stops briefly. "You remind me of a girl I once knew. She was just as gutsy as you are. Pretty as sin. Strong-willed and feisty as fuck. You even have the same hair color. She trusted me, like you should do. I love my brother and I'll do whatever he asks of me. Babysitting included."

"Oh yeah, and where is she now? Did you push her off a multi-story building?"

He shrugs. "I've no idea where she is. I fucking hate the bitch. If she showed up tomorrow, I'd most definitely consider murder."

"Oh wonderful, if that was meant to make me trust you, it failed!" I yell after him when he marches away.

I sigh heavily, unclip the safety harness and eye the pilot still in the front seat. "What would it take for you to start the engine again?"

Spitfire chuckles. I don't. "Run along kid. I'm not stupid. If I took to the sky without Souza permission, André would

shoot the chopper down with both of us in it.”

In a temper, I chuck the headset onto the leather seat André had occupied and scabble out of the small cabin. These people might pretend I’m a guest, or think their honorable actions are for my benefit, but I see them for who they are.

Those qualities are a flimsy film covering something far more sinister. I sense it in the warm breeze blowing through my hair, how the winds have changed and the decay of devilry is at work.

Why would André bring me to a Souza safe house without telling Tomás?

I storm up behind him, my hands curling to fists. “Tell me why I’m here! I should be in Bogotá.” My pace quickens to keep up with him. “I want to go home, and I *need* to call my brother. Tomás promised me.”

“Stop being so dramatic,” he murmurs, casually strolling towards a pathway where flourishing purple flowers edge neat paving.

Staying a purposeful stride behind, I follow the quaint trail through a wild garden bursting with chaotic rainbows of color and exotic species of flora. Where the plantation grounds were kept neat and tidy, this landscape has unfettered freedom to grow without rules or rigid expectations.

As much as I want to hate this new residence I’ve landed in, I’m finding it difficult to pick out a flaw. The exquisite two-story dwelling reminds me of a quaint European cottage only on a grander scale.

André stops on the wrap around paving by a set of twin doors and peers over his shoulder to find me. “You should know something, Carina.”

My heart suspends in my chest, his tone laden with seriousness. “I’m listening.”

“Tomás told me to protect you with my life. So, believe me when I tell you that you’re safe in Mag Mell...but I have no clue why we were summoned here.”

TOMÁS



It's noon.

The day after I pressed the evacuation button and released Carina into my brother's custody, I'd boarded a chopper over an hour ago. Now, I'm sitting with Shane in a blacked-out Escalade.

He quietly supports the business decision I've made. Even when he believes the marriage would be a catastrophe. He knows it and so do I.

What the hell have I done?

Normally, it wouldn't faze me, but Carina had thawed my heart, ripped the beating organ out with her small hands, and stolen it away. The queen-sized hole behind my ribs aches like a bitch and constant knots contract in my gut. I'd swear I was dying if I didn't have a clean bill of health.

Sunshine bursts through leafy trees, dappling the road outside my comfort zone. This city is warmer than we're used to in Bogotá, so I pop out my cufflinks and roll my sleeves to my elbows.

"Why couldn't they send the prenup documents by courier? This is a waste of my goddamn time," I growl as the barrier rises, permitting access to the law firm we use in Medellín.

Shane sits forward when the vehicle circles the small parking lot and reverses into a spot, so the hood points towards the exit. Who knows when we'd need a quick getaway.

“This is your opportunity to meet Bianca in person.” He cocks a brow at me. “A dinner date would be slicker than flirting over the signing of a legally binding contract, but you’re the one who refused to meet her any earlier.”

“Flirting?” I grunt, well aware I’ve put this moment off until the last minute. “It’s not a speed date. And we definitely won’t fuck over the desk.”

He shrugs. “You might change your mind when you meet her.”

“I won’t,” I snap, having very little patience for small talk.

When the driver turns off the engine, I stay seated and stare at my phone. Waiting for it to ring, but it doesn’t.

I’m still trying to convince myself that I’m doing the right thing when Shane speaks. “There’s Bianca. She’s brought her brother with her.”

Mikel Morales, a cartel playboy with a ballsy attitude and an inbred passion for the New York party scene. I knew he had a sister who attended a private boarding school, which meant she was never around.

Now, a few years after graduating, she’s strolling towards the glass doors of our law firm wearing kitten heels, a figure-hugging dress, and a Souza promise of fortune and marriage.

And still, I feel nothing. No heart-stopping buzz, no adrenaline rush, and no thirst to fuck her, or any other woman in the vicinity. My deviant lust runs deeper than that, it burrows under my skin with miniscule hooks and rages through my veins with a toxic perversion—for one woman.

I stare at the back of her head until the entrance door shuts behind them, feeling nothing but resentment for the unwise decision I’d made to piss off my father. Anarchy detonates a surge of adrenaline. I shove the useless phone into my blazer pocket and run a hand over the coarse hair around my mouth, doing my best to stay levelheaded.

My usual cavalier diplomacy has gone to shit these past few days. I constantly feel wound up, my nerves jittering, and my stomach twisted.

“Let’s get this shit over with and get the hell back to the helipad,” I mutter. “If this all goes to plan, we’ll be airborne within the hour. I don’t want to see her again until she’s walking up the aisle.”

Shane balks, his fingernails running the length of his jawline. I cock a brow at him when he sighs, low and slow.

“Tommy, you know these guys are big on tradition. This is only the start of it. They’ve planned a wedding rehearsal dinner. The groom has to attend.” He almost laughs when my jaw drops. “You read your emails, don’t you, *cabrón*?”

“A *rehearsal*?” I clench my fists. “Are you fucking serious? What the hell are we rehearsing? Isn’t once more than enough?” This must be a sick joke.

“Sign the prenup, marry the girl, and then all this bullshit will be over before you know it.” Shane tries to placate my viperish mood. “After it’s done and dusted, we’ll take a trip to Vegas, or Miami...or Dublin. Just me and you. Like nothing has changed.”

But everything has changed.

My chest aches. How can I forget about Carina? I’m ignoring the principles my uncle drilled into me—to listen to my instincts. I’m obsessed with one woman and preparing to recite false vows to another.

Angelo was notorious for putting business first and women second. To him they were simple—sexual entertainment. Even his ex-model wife was a show pony who lurked in the background wearing skimpy bikinis and inhaling bricks of cocaine.

Becoming the biggest narco in Colombia was his priority, not finding a fitting queen to rule his kingdom by his side.

That was his path. His choice. His gut instincts.

And they were once mine.

Opening the passenger door, I step out into the sunshine and shield my eyes with a pair of sunglasses. This sham of a

marriage will be a shitshow from the get-go. Despite the humidity, snowflakes powder my shoulders as they roll back.

My posture straightens adding a few more inches of height. It's time to stop letting my weakness get in the way of my reign. This is a tactical business move to benefit everyone.

Feelings are too messy.

Emotions are a distraction.

Love ends in death.

Sucking in humid air to steady my whirling chaos, I glance at Shane and nod. "I'll sign the papers and then we're out of here."

Together, we enter the modern building, him pushing the buzzer to open the door ahead of me while I pocket my hands.

"Tomás." Esteban strolls into the airy reception area wearing a pinstripe power suit.

Behind him framed photographs of celebrities and wealthy clients litter a bright blue wall. Curly hair scattered with threads of gray shows signs of the lawyer's years and round tortoise shell frames rest on the bridge of his sharp nose.

"Good to see you again." He offers me his hand. "I've already had the pleasure of meeting your stunning fiancé." His salt-and-pepper mustache twitches as he smiles up at me. "Lucky man."

Hostility and decorum play tug-of-war behind my tight ribcage. This particular lawyer has served my family well over the years, loyal and helpful at every turn. It's not his fault my soon-to-be wife is an inconvenience.

He looks at me with silvery blue eyes, unsure why I haven't spoken. "Can I offer you a drink, Tomás?" His leathery brow creases.

I clear my throat, finger the button on my shirt collar and return his handshake with a solid grip. "A whiskey."

"Of course. Bianca is waiting in my office with her brother." He waves an arm behind him to usher me further into

the building. “Please, go through.”

“Can you give me a few minutes alone with the Morales’?” I take the lead, doing my best to play it cool. It’s difficult when my pulse thrums with anger. I’ve known this man for a long time. However, I’d rather not have an audience when I meet Bianca for the first time.

“Certainly. You know where the liquor is.” He nods in my direction and takes a left, whereas Shane and I continue to the end of the short corridor.

I don’t knock before entering. I’d learned a long time ago that I didn’t need to, unless I wanted to enter Papá’s office.

That was a whole other experience.

The second we stroll into the bright conference room, Mikel’s brown-black gaze hunts out mine, narrowing as it meets my business-like countenance.

“Souza.” He nods respectfully and stands from the seat that faces a minimalist sheet of glass curved at either end to create a sleek boardroom table.

Just like my brothers and I, he was born into excessive wealth and raised with a gun in his hand. We’re of the same respected breeding, run the same illegal businesses, and by the look of it, lift the same weights.

Except this guy is a twenty-something-year-old pretty boy who I wouldn’t trust to look after my dogs.

“It’s about time you met my little sister,” he deadpans, with those chocolate-colored Morales family eyes taking me in.

Seated beside him, Bianca flicks jet black hair over her shoulder so the ends skim the backrest. She straightens, doing a one-eighty to look me right in the eye.

“Tomás.” She blinks, a big smile reaching her eyes the color of mysterious obsidian. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” I reply cordially.

All the rumors I'd heard were true. Bianca Morales is striking with fluttery lashes, symmetrical features, and brilliant white teeth. Her glossy red lips are full and sexy curves sit in all the right places.

The end.

She'd be the perfect princess for some other guy, but for me, she's a consolation prize.

Second best.

Average.

I'd spent years in a world of inner chaos, buried under a blanket of darkness that no one could lift. I had hardened myself against the taunts of a father who demanded perfection from a son with a flaw. More or less believing I'd never be cured, that I'd remain forever broken.

There were no fanciful dreams of an elaborate white wedding. No wishes for a bond with a woman who'd be strong enough to handle me. So, standing here with the prospect of a wife I don't even know, makes my skin itch under my expensive dress shirt.

Not because she's Bianca Morales—because she's *not* Carina Ferreira. The woman I didn't know I needed until I had pushed her away.

And now it's too fucking late. I've made my bed and the wrong woman would end up sharing it. Or...I could watch the world burn at my feet and hold Carina hostage in a cage filled with ashes and bad mistakes.

"Maybe you two should have some alone time?" Mikel's voice penetrates the awkward silence of regret.

"No," I say quickly before I'm trapped in a room with only her. "I've got urgent business to take care of back in Bogotá. My pilot is on standby. We'll sign the prenup and talk more at the rehearsal dinner."

Bianca nods, her long ebony lashes batting wildly. "I'm picking out my wedding dress this week. We should talk about

the color of your suit. Which of your brothers will be your best man?"

Wedding dresses. Suits. Best men. Fuck!

I exhale with frustration. "My mother will confirm the details with you. However, a black suit seems fitting for the occasion." I offer an unimpressed smirk.

"Good choice." Bianca licks her lips and rests a hand on her belly. Still nothing. No urge to fuck and conquer. "You look good in black." She adds, her eyes turning to liquid like she's into me.

Mikel claps twice. "You both agree on something. Your new relationship's off to a great start." He muses.

The cocky asshole.

Anger shoots through my icy veins. If I was a terrible poker player, I'd mistakenly reveal my cards. I'd let him know how close I am to snapping. How my jaw almost spasms from clenching so hard to bite back the truth.

Instead, I saunter to the glass fronted drinks cabinet at the far end of table, pour myself a bourbon and down it in two long gulps.

The irony of this otherwise austere decorated room isn't missed, it's designed for formal mergers—arranged marriages. A legally binding business deal. Not declarations of undying love and togetherness.

Christ, I've turned into a miserable bastard.

"You're right, it won't be long until Bianca belongs to me in every way. And then she'll figure out how our relationship will work." I pivot on the wooden floorboards and pin him with a no-nonsense stare. "I like my women to behave themselves in public and be obedient whores in the bedroom."

My bare-faced lie catches his full attention, sending a ripple of disorder over his expression. But what's meant to rile him, only serves to annoy me more. I don't want anything from this woman. And the longer I stand here debating it, the more I'm tempted to unleash mayhem.

I've endured heartache before. Perhaps that was only a test run for the real thing. I was foolish to think I could handle it again without the cracks of my heart hemorrhaging.

Mikel's face reddens with anger while his fists open and close. Bianca glances over at me, her sad scowl more telling than her brother's visible wrath. It pinches my last nerve, so I actually feel guilty for being an asshole.

She's not much older than Carina. Maybe a few years at most and I'd kill any fucker who disrespected her. Once we're married, I'd ultimately defend Bianca too—because I take care of family.

I refill my glass, pour a second and reach her in four strides. "I hope you know what you've got yourself into."

Hesitantly, she accepts the hard liquor and ignores her brother's threatening stance. "I hope we can make it work. I'm willing, if you are."

She tilts her head to look up at me.

I study her for a long minute, aware of the distinct vibrations ordering me to run and astutely conscious of the fact she's not the one for me. I almost laugh at the cruelty of my awakening. This isn't going to work.

"Or you could walk away." I suggest, raising the tumbler to my mouth and noting how her eyes follow the movement. "I'll understand. There's no bad blood between us, Bianca. We'd remain allies."

Mikel folds his arms, his mouth contorting to a grimace. A snort shoots down his nose. "You'd be lucky to call my sister your wife. If she walked away from this, I'd be the guy picking her body parts out of a trash bag. Our uncle would kill her."

CARINA



Teresa Souza isn't just any mother.

She's the woman who raised four cartel sons and stood beside the late kingpin. There's no doubt she's from a fine pedigree in her own right. It shows in the way she carries herself, how she exudes silent authority, oozes fortune, and emanates femininity.

She sits on a padded ivory chair, positioned at an oval table set for three people, in a contemporary kitchen where high ceilings are met with carved roses and four-leaf clover cornice.

André walks ahead of me, moving towards his mother who rises to greet him. He dips to kiss the side of her face, not out of ceremony or respect—because he clearly adores the woman. Her stature, although regal and fierce, seems petite and fragile next to his solid physique.

“You look tired, André,” she fusses, patting the coarse hairs on his square jawline.

A lazy smile curls the corners of his mouth. “It's not the first all-nighter I've pulled with a good-looking girl, Mama.” His throaty chuckle flames my skin; the wink he shoots at me makes the blaze worse.

“Wait...it's not like that. We're not...” I step closer, unsure why I'm justifying myself. Yet not wanting to drop a match into the vipers' den until I know all the facts. “It's Tomás I wa
—”

A combed eyebrow drifts higher the second I cut myself off from revealing something utterly absurd. A truth so

devastating no one would believe it. I'm in awe of a man who saw no future with me.

I'm guessing it's a temporary infatuation or a fleeting obsession. Either way, the potent emotion was bashed between boulders and ground into particles smaller than grains of sand the instant his dominant figure turned into a speck from the air.

"You wouldn't be here if I thought you were fucking both of my sons separately," she replies without bitterness or hostility. It's more factual and to the point, giving the impression that being with them at the same time is acceptable.

André grunts, his lips quirking to a smirk. "He'd never share her."

Her head rotates like an owl. "André, you don't need to share with your brother." She scolds playfully. "Out of all my sons, you get more sex than any one man deserves."

As he snatches a bread roll and rips it apart with his silver clad fingers, Teresa leaves the table. She passes the vast marble top island where a large basket crammed with pale pink flowers and woody eucalyptus sits as the centerpiece.

Three dazzling chandeliers hang midair, reflecting a soft radiance to compete with sunlight streaming through the windows beyond an informal sitting area.

"Welcome to Mag Mell." Her warm smile reaches the corners of her fascinating green gaze.

Her pale complexion is free of makeup, yet thick ebony lashes frame her eyes like a natural liner. A knee-length silk dressing gown, the print bursting in exotic flowers, is casually pulled in at the waist with a matching belt. The mini heels of her furry slippers thwack the tiles underfoot.

Teresa takes a silent second to blink in my grubby toes, bruised throat, masculine shirt worn as a dress and crimson streaks decorating my legs with random flare.

"You've had quite the night." She extends her arm, gesturing towards a nook beyond us. When she walks, I follow

like an obedient puppy dog. Although rather than lick her hand, I'd bite her, not understanding what she expects of me.

Reaching a beveled door, only a few steps from the kitchen, she stops.

“There's a bar of handmade French soap by the faucet. It's my favorite. Please, freshen up a little before sitting with us. You can spend as much time as you like in the bathtub once we've eaten.”

I nod and walk into the powder room, happy to have a moment to myself. The blood that had tipped Tomás over the edge had dried to crusty brown and the distinct musk of our hedonistic, unruly sex still clings to my salty skin. I resist the urge to strip and climb into the deep white basin, rather than simply washing my hands in it.

Gathering the lavender-scented soap, I lather it to a milky lotion and flick the lever with an elbow to rinse the filth from my murderous hands. The act of cleansing awakens reality. I'd shot a man with the intention of killing him.

Not simply for justice, or revenge for what he'd done to me—for Tomás. To prove my loyalty and adoration. Not that it mattered to him in the end.

Once I'm finished, I wander back the way I came, skirt the large circumference of creamy marble and stop next to his mother, folding my arms over my chest as a barrier from her stare.

“Join us for breakfast before you retire to your suite.” A featherlight stroke caresses my shoulder, then she pivots back to André. “Here...” She drags out a chair, its backrest pintucked with miniature crystal buttons and beckons for me to join her. “I'm sure you're starving.”

Floral perfume mixes with the aroma of fresh blooms and warmed pastries. The trickery of scent does its best to give me homely vibes. If this was my own family, I'd perch on the countertop cross-legged and drink milk from the carton while we chatted.

Instead, I slip my bare legs under the table and rest clean hands on a linen napkin.

André pours steamy yellow liquid from a teapot, serving his mother first.

“Thank you,” she croons. “Oh, by the way, there’s a new burner phone for you, Dré. No doubt Tomás will be in touch. It’s best not to tell him you’re here.” She locks eyes with him. “That either of you are with me.”

I frown. “I guess now would be a good time to tell me why you brought me here.” My voice sounds tiny in this large kitchen.

In the silence that follows my sudden question, Teresa lifts a fine china teacup, the diamonds in her platinum rings glittering with the movement. Her long lashes bat slowly, conjuring a thoughtful moment of etiquette while she sips.

“You surprised me,” she announces. “I didn’t think a young girl like you would be capable of sacrifice, let alone surviving my eldest son. You pulled the trigger and ruined your virtue.” China tinkles as it meets the complimenting saucer. “I’ve been with that boy of mine through all of it. Helplessly waiting for an answer to his issues. Proudly watching him become the man he is today and knowing he’ll be a better role model than his paranoid father. And then he stumbled upon a special gift...” Her lashes flick up and she snares my gaze with eyes so green they appear supernatural. “And threw it away.”

Fingertips trace the curve of her neck as she slips into silence. I don’t respond, my gut telling me she’s faced her own source of brutality.

Despite the fact I’m no longer with Tomás, I desperately want to unearth every memory she has of him, every tantrum he pulled as a boy, every smile he offered his family, and every burst of carefree laughter he expressed before the weight of an unknown trauma stripped him of inner peace.

Then after Teresa’s own blip of remembrance, she pinches a grape between her finger and thumb, pops it into her mouth

and chews.

“I’m a mafia princess who married a cartel leader destined for greatness. I’ve seen more bloodshed than you can imagine. Witnessed terror flash through the venomous eyes of hardened criminals, seconds before their brains hit the walls. I’m used to violence, underhanded tactics, and cruelty. But this place is my private sanctuary—our peaceful home.

My boys aren’t just my blood; they are my life. We needed a place to call home. A retreat to find our way back to. So, when I welcome you into our little piece of heaven, it’s not as a threat, or as a prisoner. You’re my guest.” Her mouth quirks to a faint smile. “I owe you a debt for saving my son. And I don’t mean with a bullet, I’m referring to your astounding ability to reach him.”

As if she hadn’t just said something sincere, she gathers a three-pronged fork and spears a bold red strawberry sprinkled with grains of sugar. “I’d like you to stay with us until the wedding is over as a show of my gratitude. It will give us time to get to know each other and keep you safe.”

I shake out the fresh napkin folded into a triangle and pretend this is normal. But it’s not. Then again, Tomás taught me that normal is underrated.

“You know he suffered a great trauma as a boy.” She continues.

André takes a swig of black coffee and sits back, his muscular inked torso catching the daylight, so the images come to life.

“I know. He told me about his uncle,” I reply, pinching a piece of artisan bread from a shallow basket.

Her forehead creases. “He told you?”

“Yeah—.”

“What exactly did he tell you?” Her light tone changes from welcoming to sharp and cross-examining.

Once I finish chewing, I swallow the doughy mush and answer, “He went to a business meeting with his uncle after

school. There was a bomb blast and his uncle died protecting him.” I keep it short and factual without letting the most devastating detail slip. “That’s all he said.”

Teresa glances at André, who keeps his eyes lowered as he chews.

“He never talks about it.” She sighs, pushing her cup and saucer away. “That eight-year-old boy didn’t speak for almost a year afterwards. He didn’t even confide in his grandfather, Don Hennessy, when I took the boys to live with him in Dublin until the threat of war had passed. Angelo and Tomás were inseparable. Tommy followed that man around like a he was a god of war.” Her lips cut to a rough-edged smile. “He worshipped Angelo more than Elias. I guess that’s why his Papá was so hard on him.”

André grunts. “Papá was hard on all of us—because he wanted to create monsters to protect his kingdom.”

Teresa’s eyes crease at the corners. “And I wanted my sons to care for each other. That’s why I built Mag Mell, Dré. To give you back your humanity after he beat it out of you.”

She inhales slowly and plops a sugar lump into her teacup, stirring it clockwise in the silence. A clock ticks out the seconds they remain contemplative together and then Teresa glances over at me.

“My poor baby boy was unrecognizable when the paramedics arrived at the bomb scene. His sweet little face was plastered in so much blood they thought the blast had ripped off his skin. None of it was his.

“Miraculously, he was unharmed, except for the invisible scars he now hides. Apparently, he begged the medical team to stitch his uncle’s leg back on even though the man was dead. They said it was a piece of shrapnel to the brain that killed him. He wouldn’t have known a thing about it.”

Nausea crashes over me in a wave. Teresa shudders as if recalling the trauma in vivid detail and André clears his throat as he cracks his knuckles.

“I need a cigarette.” He looks to his mother for permission to leave the table. “Then I’m going to crash for a few hours. I’ll check in with Tomás later. Okay, Mama?”

“Aren’t you hungry, son?”

He sets his large, inked hand over the top of hers. “I’ll have something later. It’s good to be home again.” The cocky, self-assured cartel prince pushes his chair out from under the table and simultaneously leans over to kiss his mother on the cheek. “Love you loads, Mama.”

“I love you, too, André.” Her whole face brightens as she declares her motherly love for the towering beast of a man with a revolver stashed in the waistband of his jeans. “I wish you’d come home more often. Maybe the next time you fly in you could bring a woman you’re interested in settling down with?”

He swipes his bottom lip with his thumb and chuckles. “Come on, Mama, you know that isn’t going to happen. There are too many blondes out there to tempt me. I have no intention of picking one woman for the rest of my life.”

She sighs lightly and shakes her head, all the while smiling at him.

“Show our guest to Tomás’ suite.” Her zesty gaze cuts to mine. “I’m sure you’ve a lot to process. Take your time, Carina. I’ll be floating around if you need anything.” Teresa folds her napkin in half and drops it onto the table. “I have to check on the flamingoes at the reserve.”

I bite my lip as the contradiction of violence and peacefulness washes over me. Where Elias had pet tigers to clean up corpses, Teresa mothers glorious pink birds. However, I’m not fooled by her show of cordiality. While she was married to a murderous kingpin, I’m sure her own hands weren’t kept clean of blood.

A maid bustles into the kitchen and begins to tidy the breakfast dishes away once Teresa clip clops away from the table.

“This way, Carina.” André jerks his head.

He quietly leads me through the many corridors lined with family photographs of the Souza brothers as handsome teenagers and an array of oversized potted plants. Eventually we reach the belly of their home like I've been swallowed by a whale.

Grand archways reveal rooms for every occasion, each one decorated to match the feminine spirit of their mother. A gleaming tiled floor stretches beneath my feet, sprawling towards the rear of the property where creamy carpeted stairs flow downwards and splits a misleading airy foyer in two.

Sunlight floods in from a glass roof, the beams catching a waterfall of crystals hanging from an exquisite chandelier.

It's quite unlike anything I've ever seen before, as if the property was erected on mountainous terrain and built to fit the landscape with natural light as the muse.

"Tomás' room is at the bottom of this hallway." André yawns and scrubs his face. "If you need anything, dial zero and the housekeeper will get whatever you need—like clean clothes. You can wander about the grounds if you feel like it. The border is guarded better than *La Modelo* prison. No one can get in or out unless Mama gives her consent."

He stops at the double doors.

"Mama expects us to join her for supper every night. That's the only rule here. Seven o'clock sharp." Then he pivots on his heels and starts to walk away.

"Do you know why I'm really here, André?" I call after him. "We both know your mother wouldn't look twice at a woman who wasn't a fitting princess for her eldest son."

His pace slows and with his back to me, he says in a husky, exhausted timbre. "She's not interested in a princess, Carina. She wants him to marry his queen."

TOMÁS



I check my phone again.

It's the latest habit I've acquired since Carina left for Bogotá. André hasn't returned my call from earlier, after I left a voicemail telling him to give the rehearsal dinner a miss. I'd rather he didn't leave Carina alone with the guards.

Maybe he's not the best guy to lie low with her until the spotlight shifts to Bianca. But I'd prefer to have him on board than some asshole I don't trust, even if my brother is a horny son of a bitch.

He's already reassured me that everything is *fine*, that Carina is *fine*, but knowing he gets to spend time with her while I'm stuck in a fucking pantomime is slowly killing me. Evicting her from my life has been the hardest task to endure.

I knew it would be difficult. I just never expected it to be this mentally challenging.

Yesterday, I'd asked Dré to take a few photos of her while she was sleeping. He laughed out loud until he realized I was deadly serious. Half an hour later, a gut-wrenching photo popped up on my phone screen. I had no idea it would rip me apart like it did.

Carina was submerged in pool water with only her freckled face in the shot. Those fiery eyes of hers drilled into the camera lens, her lower lip nipped between her teeth as she paddled alone, deep in thought. I'd pay a million dollars just to know what she was thinking.

From a distance, he'd caught her off guard and zoomed in. She was oblivious to my underhanded spy tactics through my brother's eyes. When I asked him if the presidential suite was to her liking he answered with a vague comment about women and luxury.

"Tomás?" Bianca's pale pink nails skim my elbow. I move away immediately, the gentle sensation unwanted. "Look...I get this is weird. We don't even know each other, but can you at least pretend this is something you want while my family is here?" She leans into me, smelling like coconut and hairspray. "I asked you a question."

I hide the screen lit up with Carina's contemplative expression and make a mental note to send it to my personal data cloud should I need to dispose of the phone in a hurry.

"You're right. I don't want this. It was something I agreed to before my father died. Things have changed." My gaze drifts to Bianca's. "But we'll figure it out."

She closes her eyes briefly so glittery green lids hide her look of disdain. "I'd like to make it work. I asked if your plans include children." The chatter of guests grows too loud, their frivolous conversations swallowing her next statement. "I'd love to have kids."

The shirt collar around my neck tightens. I fiddle with the top button until it loosens and then sit back in my seat. Our long table faces the guests, its position representing a stage so we're on display like two trapped creatures in a grim circus ring.

"I'm not interested in kids." I push my uneaten meal away and sense her entire body recoil at my candid revelation. "Why would you want to bring a child into this? It's a marriage of convenience, not a love story."

Her lustrous hair, straightened like sheets of black glass sways when she pivots on her seat to face me head on. "So, you really are a heartless bastard? Your reputation precedes you, Tomás. I'm a part of this setup as well. This is my future too." She crumples the linen napkin on her lap with a tight fist.

“I’m sick and tired of high and mighty men trying to rule my life. I was hoping we could develop an understanding.”

I shrug, completely ambivalent at this point. With the way I’m feeling, I’d happily kill a few fuckers to see if it helps ease the pain in my chest.

“You’re a good-looking man.” Her tongue skates between her lips. “It won’t be a challenge to be the strong wife you deserve. However, that works both ways. I’ll have your back, if you have mine.” The heat of her suggestion does nothing to warm the icy skin under my suit. It hasn’t felt blazing heat since I’d fucked Carina on top of Papá’s burial chamber. “A war would not benefit either of us.” Bianca continues.

“You’re right.” I rotate my cufflinks. “Let’s not forget why we’re doing this. I’ll never fall in love with you, Bianca. And fathering a child is not a priority. In fact, it’s not even on my radar right now.”

I can’t bring myself to imagine having a child with a woman I feel nothing for.

Her forehead furrows as her mouth contorts to a thoughtful grimace. It’s not her fault a legion of gargoyles surrounds my blackened heart. I’m not trying to be an asshole, but the woman needs to know where she stands...miles behind the woman I’d pushed away.

“Perhaps we should focus on respect first. We can offer each other that at least,” she suggests, forking a slice of beef.

I nod. “Agreed. When you become a Souza, you’ll have all the respect in the world.”

A violent shudder jangles my bones when I think about our wedding night and the physical act of screwing my new wife. Normally it wouldn’t be an issue, but that was before I proposed an indecent situation to a young woman, and she accepted.

I clear my throat to hide the resentment simmering under the surface of my cold demeanor. While I’d tried to become Carina’s unforgettable first, the roles somehow had reversed, and she became mine in so many ways.

A rowdy commotion from outside the room has my men twitching for their weapons. When the doors fling open, I look into the carpeted hallway beyond the guest tables to watch my mother strut towards the banquet hall in her high heels.

Her glitzy silver gown is nothing short of lavish, and her arm is locked onto the bodyguard she's kept close to her side for years. Behind them, I catch a glimpse of André, dressed in a three-piece suit with a bold mustard yellow shirt.

My pulse catches fire as my family draws closer, almost lifting from my seated position to see whose arm is linked with his. Shock freezes me to the spot beside the wrong girl.

He's with my woman—*my Cari*. She's here.

Every man in the room notices her arrival. They all stare, in awe of the goddess on my brother's arm. My heart rate goes berserk, and my dick turns to steel. Her fierce eyes glimmer under showy chandeliers with an unblemished complexion radiating ethereal beauty.

She's stunning.

Fucking gorgeous in the flesh.

I go to stand, but I can't feel my legs. The sight of her spears my ribs, punctures my heart, and forces the liquid in my veins to pump faster, so my scorching blood blazes to my skin. I've fucked the innocence from her soul and yet she's risen from the embers as a mesmerizing creature.

An angel, so desirable that she brainwashes these monsters into believing she's sacrosanct.

Carina strides into the room, shoulders back and her chin high, wearing breathless confidence and a classic ruby tiara where a crown should sit. Smooth sable hair is fixed into a high ponytail, the long lengths pouring down her spine in a hydrous flow.

My eyes are all over her, awestruck by the strip of black silk encircling her neck as a gothic choker to hide my unforgiving fingerprints. It leads to a web of filigree lace that covers her arms and chest. The snug fit clings to the curves I know to be bruised beneath the fabric.

The flesh I've feasted on and still crave more.

No one, except for Bianca, witnesses the wind leave my lungs in a gust when Carina's tongue thoughtlessly skates between her lips. I cough into my fist to garner a degree of composure, doing my best to hide the chaos running riot within me. When Bianca rests her hand on my arm, I shirk it off immediately.

I'm a mess.

In the stillness of time her presence has created, amber eyes lock onto mine as if she senses a monsoon building from the opposite side of the room. Those pretty lips I adore so much are stained with blood red lipstick. It's out of character for my good girl, but so painfully sexy.

Her throat bobs as our gazes connect and then she looks away from me, her attention drifting to my brother. I'm left bereft all over again.

My fingers grip the edge of the table as I try to play it cool. The carnal impulses within me are hard to fight. I want to march across the room and snatch her away from André. To fuck her over the head table, so everyone knows she belongs to me. It would be that easy to claim her in front of these people and pull out my gun to protect her when the bullets start flying. Except I can't breathe or even move.

I've literally lost the ability to think straight, and she's the only thing ruling my mind.

Mother nods over to me, her wry smile not missed. Why the hell did they bring Carina to my damn wedding rehearsal? André winks, acknowledging my scowl as he weaves around the tables behind Carina who walks unaided in silk flowing to the floor, the very temptress to lure me further into Hell.

"Teresa," Mikel strolls towards my mother and kisses her cheek once, then moves to the opposite side for a second peck. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you in person." When he turns to André and shakes his hand, I feel my insides convulse.

In a beat, his sole attention moves to Carina. "I'm Mikel. The bride's brother." After a wolfish grin, he slowly gathers

her hand, lifts her knuckles, and places his lips to the skin like Prince fucking Charming.

I instantly shoot to my feet, blinking away their interaction, unable to see anything else other than her returned smile. My temper ignites, short nails stabbing into my palms as my hands ball. How dare he touch her, kiss her...make her smile.

“What’s wrong, Tomás?” Bianca’s voice doesn’t soothe my demons, nor does her presence anchor me to her side. “Who is that woman talking to my brother?”

I don’t reply, sucking in a steady breath instead and tossing my napkin on the seat I’m about to walk away from. The speakers screech and echo around the room.

“Is this thing working?” Morales steps into view and taps the microphone. “Now that our families are together, I’d like to welcome the Souzas. Especially Tomás. The man who has vowed to marry my niece and join forces with us—to become *familia*.”

I plaster a tepid smile on my face and nod in his direction. Bianca appears close to my side and snakes her cold hand around my bicep.

“May your marriage last a lifetime,” Morales continues. “And your love grow stronger each and every day you’re together.”

My lungs burn dangerously, holding in a howl of dissatisfaction. From across the room, I catch Carina’s fluttery stare and find myself frozen when she slowly turns her back to me.

“We’re expecting a nursery filled with babies.” The fucker clutching the mic chuckles. “Let our families unite, our blood blend, and our kingdoms prosper. Raise your glasses and celebrate the happy couple...to Tomás and Bianca.”

The crowd repeats his toast, and a champagne cork pops. Glasses reach skyward and a collective cheer rings in my ears.

“Tomás?” Bianca whispers into my ear. “Now would be a good time to kiss me.”

I'm drowning under the sound of the celebration when all I want to do is grab Carina and run. "I don't kiss...or show affection. Now stop fucking touching me. I need to speak to my brother."

I shirk her hand off and put distance between us. Through the uproar, I search for Carina, my gaze finally settling on the buttons lining her spine amidst peekaboo lace. While André knocks back a whiskey, Mikel rests his hand on her lower back, millimeters from her ass.

My vision blurs from red to black.

If his hand doesn't move by the time I round the table, I'll blow a hole in his entitled skull.

Leaving my fiancé to clink a glass with a bridesmaid, I move into the melee. I'm aware of the gun tight to my backbone and resist the urge to drag it free. It won't take much for me to snap the trigger. Not now when there's a siren in the room silently calling me to her sun-drenched shore and a duplicitous shark circling her for fodder.

I ignore the barrage of well wishes from curious guests and focus on my mission to either murder or maim. Whatever it takes to get the Mexican cartel's prince away from Carina. As my determined strides eat up the plush carpet, I'm yanked by the arm, my tornado halted before it could wreak havoc.

"Tommy." Shane bustles tight to my hip, angling me away from Mikel. "Do not lose your shit in front of these people." I can barely function behind the rage clouding my better judgment. The more I resist his grip, the harder it becomes. "If they think she's standing in the way of your wedding, they'll eliminate her. Think about it clearly. This isn't how *you* deal with business."

I bare my teeth at him, knowing he's right. Not only is he my family, Shane's my best friend too. He knows the worst thing that could happen to me is to become my father. "Why the fuck is she here?"

His face contorts. "It doesn't matter why she's here, because she *is* here. Tommy, you need to calm the fuck down.

It's either that, or a bloodbath with Teresa and Carina in the middle of it."

I shirk out of his grasp, my fists curling tight. "Distract Bianca while I talk to Carina. Give me enough time to speak to her."

Shane nods and turns away as Carina's voice slips over my shoulder. "No, I'm not with André. I'm one hundred percent single."

"Good to know. So how did a gorgeous woman like you fall in with the Souzas?" Mikel probes.

I rip my head around to find her, to hear what she has to say. Except my brother answers for her as she looks over at me, her frosted gaze chilling me like I'm nothing to her.

"She's a family friend," André replies, smashing the wind from my sails.

Mikel goes to touch her arm, but I'm in their space faster than a bullet. I snatch his wrist quicker than a viper bites and hold it in the air. It takes a second for him to respond, his eyes narrowing on my vice-like grip wrapped around his pale pink dress shirt sleeve. His brow cocks and the corner of his mouth cants to a smirk.

"Who did you say you are, *chica bonita*?" Mikel ignores me, his cocksure expression directed right at her.

My head pounds with violence and the whispering promise of destruction.

"I briefly worked for Tomás. It was a short employment," she replies with bitterness biting each word. "A temporary arrangement that suited us both."

"*Temporary?*"

"Temporary..." She repeats. "I no longer work for him, however I'm currently on the lookout for a new job if you know anyone who needs a loyal personal assistant." Her lashes flutter as she smiles like a good fucking girl, the intention to piss me the hell off.

And it works.

I can't help flinching from the hit of her sucker punch when the truth winds me. Jealousy blazes through me with so much force I'm vibrating with it. I could shoot Mikel in the face and not even bat an eyelid for the premeditated murder.

André immediately sets a hand on my shoulder, patting it gently as if he knows I'm ready to destroy this fucker.

"Mikel, Teresa would like a proper introduction to your parents." He positions himself in the middle of our standoff, so the grasp I have on Mikel falls away. "She knows Morales well, however none of us have met his brother, Bianca's father."

Mikel smooths out his sleeve and pockets the hand in his fitted suit trousers. The smarmy fuck is the same height as me. Handsome, wealthy, and has a certain amount of power, but nothing that rivals the Souza global authority. I'm at the top, and he's simply a pawn playing the cartel game.

Carina deserves to be a queen not a princess.

"Carina." He bites his lower lip and smiles right at her. "I think I have the perfect position for you. Stop by my suite later and we can talk about it over a drink."

The second he winks, I seize her lace clad arm and drag her closer. Our shoulders collide, sending an unmistakable shiver right through me.

"I'd like that, thanks Mikel," she says angelically while staying next to me, either knowing her place, or playing the game.

"You're flying home soon Carina," I grit out. "Mikel, don't keep my mother waiting, she has less patience than I do."

I didn't mean to snarl at him or manhandle Carina with so many eyes on us. Nor did I mean to reveal my temper to the crowd. It just happened.

"Relax, Souza. You're marrying my little sister. We'll be family soon. Practically brothers." He slaps my bicep and laughs with a menacing rasp. "Once you're a happily married man you'll be able to take a back seat and let the single guys hunt for love...over and over again."

His throaty hum turns deep and dirty when he switches his attention to Carina again.

“Can you believe your bachelor boss will finally be a married man with a ring of ownership on his finger? My uncle expects a kid within the year.”

I smile tightly, doing my best to disregard his sneer, until she holds out her hand and waits for him to accept. “Ex-boss.” She confirms. “We’ll talk later, when Tomás is preoccupied with his fiancé.” Carina squirms when I unintentionally strangle her forearm.

“Mikel...” My mother joins us, air kissing his clean-shaven cheek, her timing impeccable. “Surely you don’t expect me to introduce myself?”

“Of course not, Teresa.” He angles away, taking one last look at my woman before escorting mother to the next table.

“Go with them,” I bark at André, my eyes drilling into Carina’s side profile. She won’t look at me. It’s like I’m unimportant and our time together was insignificant. “Why are you here?” I lean into her, instantly spying the fast-paced pulse in her neck, while violet and vanilla shoot up my nose from her freshly washed hair.

“I’ve been with Teresa and André at a safe house by the coast while you were fucking Bianca,” she murmurs, her gaze settling on the bridal party. “That’s her name, isn’t it? I can see why you’d agree to marry her. She’s perfect. A well-groomed bride to compliment your high standards.” Her tone is firm, but her voice holds a chill of sorrow. A sadness that threads with my own. “Looks like she’s a few years older than me too. She’ll have way more experience than a nineteen-year-old girl who let you fuck her virginity to smithereens.”

My thoughts immediately conjure images of her slippery wet, naked body pinned to the tiles, water sluicing over peachy ass cheeks and my dick ramming into her tight little cunt from behind. All the blood in my veins rush to my rock-solid erection and I swear a trickle of pre-cum dampens my boxer briefs.

“I bet she’s well-trained on how to lick that sweet spot behind your balls and drag her tongue the length of your hard, liquor tasting dick. A mouth is a mouth after all, isn’t it?”

Her description casts an unbearable spell of arousal around me, so turbocharged I could roar. When she struggles to get away, I clamp my fingers around the delicate bone in her arm with so much vigor she whimpers.

Dipping closer to the shell of her ear, I trace the length of it with my nose and feel my stomach clench. “I enjoyed fucking your virgin holes. Be careful what memories you invite me to remember, or I’ll reenact them, right here, right now, in front of my wife to be and her pussy hungry brother.” Her breath catches. “Something tells me you’d like that very much. You’d get off on these people knowing what you do to me.” I straighten before my sexual confessions mix with my libido and I lose control. “You were supposed to be in Bogotá. Where did André take you?”

Her gaze cuts from the main table to mine, the icy look on her face indicating a blizzard cold enough to ice me out for eternity. “A place called Mag Mell where your childhood photos haunt the walls. Your mother told me I was under her protection. Then this morning she asked me to attend a function. Had I known before I stepped inside the private jet that I was attending this event, I would’ve worn something more celebratory.”

Her nose wrinkles as she offers a tight sugary simper.

“I didn’t come here to see you, Tomás. Or to echo your sexual conquests. I’m not pining for your dick or hoping for another night in your arms. Not at all. You made your decision. This evening was a set up.”

She shrinks away from me.

“Excuse me. I need to use the washroom. And please don’t follow me or I’ll make sure your wifey knows the essence of my virginity still lingers on your tongue.”

I could grab her wrists and drag her from the room kicking and screaming. It wouldn’t bother me at all. In fact, I’d get off

on it. And I'd probably fuck her mouth to put an end to this charade, because I'm practically panting, and my skin is alight with lust.

Instead, I let her walk away to give me a measure of space to collect my sanity and consider the next move.

She bypasses the occupied tables and glides to the rear of the room with the grace of an elegant movie star. Looking over at my empty seat, Shane entertains Bianca and her two bridesmaids with my kid brother, Matheus.

He arrived ahead of our mother to talk over business with me. The suave punks have the women eating out of their hands, and probably off their dicks later.

The second Carina vanishes into the hallway, panic sets in like a blinding smog. I recognize the armed soldier who slips out behind her—one of the guys on my payroll. Even still, she shouldn't be here. Mother should have never meddled in my affairs. André needs to be taken outside and reminded who the boss is.

It's too late though. I'm already in hot pursuit, marching toward the washrooms to hunt for her.

It takes longer than I can bear when I'm accosted by a lean woman who claims to be Bianca's dance teacher. Nerves wobble her high-pitched voice when she asks if I'd be interested in a few couple sessions. She withers when I tell her it won't be necessary, that Bianca can have the first dance with her father.

Apparently, that statement was worse than blasphemy. Only I don't give a fuck right now. My patience for small talk is threadbare when I'm hunting out the one person who anchors me to the world.

As expected, waiting outside the ladies' room like a burly doorman is the guard called Costa. His folded arms quickly unravel when he sees me storming towards him.

“Sir...I checked the washroom before she entered. She's in there alone.”

“Good.” I nod curtly. “Stay right here. Don’t let anyone in. Stall them...and if they try to push past you, shoot them dead.” Costa blinks at me, understanding the undercurrent of my violent streak. “And ignore anything you hear. Even if she screams.” I add ramming the door with my shoulder.

When I cross over from bouncy carpet to glossy cream tiles, my new shoes clip out each stride. They echo in the squeaky-clean environment where low lighting edges an extensive mirror hung over four stone basins. On the wall before me, a floor to ceiling mirror reflects my tailored navy suit and snow-white shirt beneath a fitted vest.

My short hair is fixed into place with a little product and the diamond studs in my earlobes twinkle like stars. The attire I’m struggling to breath in is just like all the other exclusively stitched suits I’ve worn over the years, except this one depicts a man on the verge of making the biggest mistake of his life.

The toilet door flings open. “Go away, Tomás.” Carina glares at me from the cubicle, her hand clutching her belly. “This isn’t a game.”

I cross my arms over my rising chest and stare at her. This woman is everything I could ever desire in a female, and more. She surpasses perfection, reaching the highest pedestal available to the human eye. And even then, mortals like me can see how she shines.

“Come here.” My demand unwinds like a fishing reel, waiting for her decision to bite.

Carina stiffens, her eyes narrowing to portray seething anger. “No.”

“Carina, come here.”

“How *dare* you!” She hisses, moving from the false safety of the stall and into the open space.

Poker straight strands swish over narrow shoulders that are hidden beneath midnight colored mesh. Insignificant gems nestled in her tiara wink with each confident step she takes, begging me to replace the unfitting tiara with a queenly crown.

“You don’t have any authority over me, Tomás.”

I snarl inside, battling uncontrollable hunger mangled with rage. One emotion I'm completely comfortable with, the other is an anomaly. "I think you're mistaken."

Her brows drift upwards. "Oh, really?"

"You arrived here with *my* family. You're at *my* event as *my* guest. If I tell you to fucking gag on my dick, Carina, you'll do it." I'm losing a handle on my self-discipline.

"I'd sooner kneel in front of Mikel than have your hands on me again. He'd be a worthy replacement to test your brittle theory." Fingertips reach for her scarred mouth.

"Theory?"

"That you'd be the best sex I'd ever have. So, while you're screwing your soon to be wife, I'll worship her brother and see which one of you comes out on top."

Suddenly the temper I thought I could contain snaps. My veins run black with fury, a cloud laden with rain and thunder swallows me whole. Jealousy eats me alive like a flesh-eating virus. Without any degree of decorum, I lunge at her.

My left hand swathes her throat, and my body drives her backward until her ass hits the reflective surface. "If he touches you, he'll die," I growl, thick and menacing. "I promise to shoot the motherfucker the second his hands land on your skin."

A gust of air shoots down her dainty shaped nose. "So, you can give her *everything* and I'm not allowed to suck a guy's dick?"

She shunts her pelvis to push me away. Except the sensation of her struggle, the flutter of her pulse under my palm, and the threat of being with another man—breaks my temper.

The opposite hand slams into the wall beside her head, the force sending shockwaves through my arm and shattering the mirror into a trillion shards of regret. Pain slices the skin on my palm and a smattering of blood covers the point of impact.

She flinches and her hand flies to my wrist, gripping the palm I have tight to her neck. “I don’t belong to you, Tomás.” Rings of fire halo her pupils. “After tonight, I’ll be out of your life for good. You picked *her* over me, so you don’t get to control me.”

Destruction swirls in my chest, combined with every vicious word she bites out. It leaves me nauseous. I know I should release her. I should let her go. She’s not safe with me, but I physically can’t remove myself from her.

I won’t.

I try to breathe, the air not filling my lungs as I inhale. “In the beginning it was just sex...and then everything changed.”

“Yeah, then you realized you were cheating on that poor woman out there. Although, something tells me she knows exactly what sort of man Tomás Souza is.”

Her remark welcomes my cruel laugh. “So did you. Right before you agreed to let me own your virginity. Yet, it didn’t stop you from spreading your legs to take all of me. You fucking loved it. Every single time I filled that mouth of yours and your tight little pussy, you came for me.”

Carina sucks in sharply. In the electrified beat of silence, her hand leaves my wrist and sails through the air, finally connecting with my jaw. “I hate you! I’ll never let you touch me like that again.”

It’s not the sting of her slap that makes me step back. It’s the venom projected from her glare and how her voice cracked like an ice-thin bridge from her soul to mine.

Glancing down at my injured palm I notice a trail of blood seeping into my crisp white cuff. Another clean shirt ruined. My shoes crunch over pointed fragments as I shirk out of my jacket, hurry to unbutton my waistcoat, and rip off the soiled shirt, inwardly chanting that it’s my blood.

Carina pauses for a second, then takes the opportunity to step sideways with an escape route planned out.

“You’re not going anywhere,” I mutter under my breath, freeing my heaving torso. “This isn’t over.”

“Yes, it is,” she hisses while hitching up her dress to plow through the glittering shards. “I’m getting the hell out of here.”

I bare my teeth at her and catch sight of my broken reflection. I look wild and tortured. When she hurries toward the exit, my arm lashes out to stop her. Blood smears sexy lace and fires up my soaring libido. She struggles to wriggle away from me, always the survivor and strong-willed.

However, I’m too strong, buzzing with this surreal perversion I’ve developed. I clutch her arm with a silent promise of never letting go, then swing her around so her back slams into the wall.

“Get your hands off me,” she growls.

My stomach twists to match her anger. I need to bury myself inside her and take refuge in the solace her body gives me.

I won’t hold back.

I’ll make her understand how important she is to me.

My grimy fingertips dig into her cheeks, puckering her lips before me. With her face this close to me after days of starvation, my heart pounds so hard I almost black out. Her head shakes against my grip, the wildness of her fight diminishing when my mouth crashes over hers.

I kiss her without reservation.

Without barriers.

She whimpers into my mouth, briefly forgetting our vicious war and temporarily giving me what I need—her taste—her permission—her desire. Gentle hands rest on my pecs, the touch so magical I fall under a turbulent spell. And just like that, after a racing heartbeat of blissful submission, she batters my chest with her fists and squirms.

We wrestle, our bodies colliding with so much explosive chemistry it drives me crazy. She can’t deny the energy thrumming between us, not when her sweet grunts feed the mania and her incandescent eyes beg me to take control.

And that’s what I do.

I clamp her wrists and pin her reluctant body against mine. Her flushed cheeks wear patches of smeared blood, so pretty and chaotic.

“Enough,” I snarl, the primal urge to fully claim her taking over.

“Get off me...” She shoves her body weight into me. “Let me go!”

“It’s too late for that, Carina. You came back into my life for a third and final time.” A wildfire of power charges through me when she licks her lips.

With as much force as she can muster, she yanks her hands hard and breaks away, simultaneously wobbling on pencil thin heels. “I had no choice!” Our hungry gazes never waver. “Your brother took me to Mag Mell, because your mother thought I deserved her time. I’ve been in some mystical Irish paradise for days.

“And you know what, I don’t feel guilty for what I did to that bastard, even if your bullet killed him, mine was meant to do the same. I was always the misfit until I found you. I picked *you*.” Her voice trembles. “But...this is the end of it. I’ll never be anyone’s second best,” she pants. “Let me go, Tomás.”

Carina sways, her palms skimming the fractured mirror in a bid to steady herself. “Shit!” she curses.

I stagger a few steps, my eyes drinking in the fresh gash lining the heel of her hand. Her lacey cleavage rises as blood drips to the debris scattered underfoot, then she swallows and looks up at me with an uncertain crease in her forehead.

Prowling into her space so we suck in the same hot air, I snare her delicate wrist and inspect the crimson cut to check for lodged particles.

“You’re not afraid of me.” I point out. “You never have been.”

She tugs her hand away and holds it close to her chest. “For some reason, I trusted you, like no one else. I stupidly believed your dark veneer the world sees was translucent to me. But now I don’t trust you anymore, Tomás.”

Corruption inches over me, a weighty curtain to suffocate what decency I have left, and to tip the scales of my integrity. I do my best to trap the violence hissing through my veins. She bites her lower lip as if she's said too much, then runs her gaze over my bare chest. I can't deny how the red tracks trickling down her arm doesn't make me tingle all over.

It's not the usual feathered hostility that consumes me. It's blinding lust. A palpable hunger that her trembling body reciprocates with every quick sip of oxygen she takes.

I want this woman more than I've wanted anything in my life. Carina's throat works as we stand in silence, waiting for the fallout of her blood meeting my skin. So, I give in to my urges and listen to the fine-tuned instincts that have served me well so far.

It's a calculated risk. A heart-stopping act to prove she's my personal anchor.

I slap her bloodied palm to my bare chest, clench my jaw tight, and press my hands over top so she can feel the erratic rhythm of my thumping heart. Runny blood sticks to my prickled flesh, glossy and warm. My lungs stutter at the exact moment her pupils flare.

Our furious gazes clash like lethal blades, mine slicing through her shocked expression. The twitch in my jaw warns her of the untamed beast within me grappling to break out of the underworld.

"You...are...mine," I manage to spit out with burning lungs. "My hell is better with you in it. Those people out there..." The mist descends. "...can go to fucking Hell."

CARINA



He pierces me with an unraveling stare. The undeniable glare of a man transforming into darkness.

His head cocks and his muscles visibly vibrate. I suck in a tattered breath, conceding to his unyielding posture.

Chills scurry from the roots in my scalp to my painted toenails. I'm on fire. An absurd reaction to a gruesome declaration of ownership and frozen under an avalanche of apprehension.

He could fuck me or kill me.

Or both.

Syrupy blood sticks to his smooth chest beneath my trapped hand he refuses to let go of—or can't.

The psychological battle to retain control of his mind is evident from pitch black pupils engulfing moonless irises. They widen like mesmerizing holes of perpetual wickedness. I wince when he snarls, grappling with the stinging sensation of a raw wound clutched tight to his feverish flesh.

An unbreakable chain lassos his volatile mood to keep him in check, even though he's taken the stance of a ruling predator ready to destroy. Sweat glistens on his temples, his lungs expand with a ragged motion, and his jaw works as his teeth clench the declaration to dust.

We gaze at each other for the longest, most painful moment. It gives us a transient truce wherein I cherish the man

I've fallen for and resent the egotistical beast who threw my devotion away.

My knees go weak under his unsettled intensity, but I do my best to keep my spine straight and my stance solid.

I've witnessed this kingly man stroll through crowds where men practically bow at his presence and his formidable actions strike fear into the hearts of those he slaughters. On the flip side, I've survived against poorly stacked odds and withstood his volatile temperament when others believed it would be impossible.

Yet this stirring sight before me is unlike him.

He's different.

Unhinged, but seemingly anchored.

The moment he nudges his hard dick into my pelvis, my nipples instantly harden. His smoky aura swirls around us—not just him. It envelops us both. Together, we tumble through his blackout, linked by blood cells, heartbeats, and unspoken wishes.

Somehow the goriness of our situation has become a rare and impossibly humbled token of love. Rather than shame him for smothering me in his blood, I feel oddly blessed.

He bleeds for me as I would for him.

Except in the carnage of euphoria, I see through the lusty haze to where he had handpicked his perfect bride. His destiny is a cartel princess, not this peculiar bond we've unearthed.

However, beyond the realms of my sanity and the boundaries of self-pride, an unfathomable arousal grips me in Cupid's chokehold.

I still crave his rough touch.

I'm still burning up under his mastery.

Only hot breath and blinking lashes move in this standoff between a damaged girl and her dominant king, cruelly making me wetter, hungrier, and more responsive than ever. I

could live a lifetime without Tomás and never feel as alive as I do when we're together.

"I would have stayed with you, if you'd asked..." I whisper regretfully, quickly sliding my hand out from under his.

A smudge of blood glides in the movement, striping his tanned skin like war paint. It pains me to point out the errors of his ways. Emotions of distrust and hurt stab my chest until I no longer breathe for him. I breathe for myself and my honor.

"You terminated our contract earlier than agreed and cut me off. Business comes first for you, Tomás, and Bianca, she has your commitment. The only thing you promised me was freedom, and that's exactly what I want."

When the shaky truth escapes me, his eyes narrow as the crack splitting my heart in two could be heard in my broken voice. Despite what he did to me in the airless tomb, I would have considered a forever with him.

I know what he's capable of and what he's not. Perhaps there was a second of doubt when my cramping lungs ached for air, but ultimately the man had resurfaced from the monster.

He saved me from himself. That much I know.

For days now, I've vowed to myself to move on from us and learn a lesson that heart-stopping sex isn't everything. Except, no matter how I try to deny it, I'm aware of the relentless threads tugging at every cell in my body. The connection we had shared ran deeper, surpassed limits, and traveled past fantasies.

It was real.

I brace myself for his crazed reaction to our dead-end situation. Tremors quake the world when he growls, "I'm not pushing you away now." He captures my cheeks between his large palms, so I have nowhere to look other than into the sincerity blazing in his eyes. "I'll fix this, Cari."

My lungs expand, desperately trying to inhale a measure of courage. "You can't." I swallow the hard lump in my throat,

wounded by the past and fearful of a false future. “You’re angry, because your royal ego is dented. You don’t want that guy to fuck me, because there’s every chance...he could be hotter, harder, and better than you were.”

His voice slips into darkness, dragging my accusation with it. “That’s bullshit and you know it. He doesn’t see you like I do. He doesn’t give a fuck about Carina Ferreira.”

Unreadable thoughts pass over his features, the powerful admission he offers claws its way into my armored heart making it hard to resist the forbidden touch of a man preparing to wed another.

“And you do?” A blast of air shoots free of my nostrils. “I obeyed you, Tomás. I worshipped you. I understood everything about you. I even *cared* for you. And it still wasn’t enough.” I push my spine back and take a solid stance against the gritty cracked mirror, the walls of my bravado threatening to shatter like a sheet of wafer-thin ice

Tomás stiffens, his eyes glazed in chagrin. “I almost strangled you, Cari. You deserved better than to live in fear of me—you deserved to live a full, happy life.” His lashes lower, bringing his forehead to mine. “I eliminate people who get in my way. I’ve even assassinated people close to me. I pulled the trigger on us for *your* sake. For *you*.”

My heart lurches. A defensive laugh bubbles from my throat, harsh and hollow.

“Tomás, you pulled the trigger because Bianca was waiting for you. A woman who’ll enhance your family’s business. That’s the truth.” I squeeze my eyes shut to block out his stern gaze, then try to refocus on the sparkly diamond stud in his earlobe for grounding. “Don’t try to disguise it any other way.”

Before I can argue further, his mouth brushes over mine with temptation. Once his silky lips settle, he kisses me with strained tenderness. His entire body goes rigid from the effort taken to show gentleness where violence exists.

Feathery puffs of air caress my skin, so the hairs on my nape rise up like pillars to support me from his delicious

torture.

“You’re wrong,” he mutters into my mouth, the rumble reverberating through me.

Using his solid torso, he cages me against the broken mirror where this singular explicit moment multiplies into hundreds of visible mistakes. I almost choke when he deepens the pressure and slides his tongue down my throat, unable to help himself. He devours me like he’s dying of thirst and I’m an endless flow of water.

It’s a divine force of nature, an animalistic instinct born from dark desires. A need for him to conquer and for me to sanction it. I writhe against him, caged by his masculine body with no way to escape and secretly hoping he’d never stop trying to tame my temper.

Our tongues clash. I liquify from his roaming touch and turn glacial at his attempt to win me over—because he let go of me at the plantation while I tried to hold on. He had consented to a wedding, even days after we parted company.

He could have changed his mind. Chased me with an apology. Hunted me for a future together. Instead, he had planned a family function with his beautifully flawless fiancé.

Ensuring Mikel stays out of the picture is his way of proving he’s the lawless drug lord who can have it all—a wealthy kingdom, gorgeous wife, a young mistress. But it won’t be me who takes that role.

“You made your decision. I’d rather die alone than live in your wife’s shadow.” My body weight pushes into his, pitifully unbudging him.

I gasp when he captures my scarred lip with his teeth and grazes the plump flesh. The wicked scent of his liquored breath makes me shiver.

“Her shadow isn’t impressive enough to cover a woman like you,” he mutters into my mouth, his lips clinging to mine.

Our toxic kiss is my undoing.

My pulse skitters with familiarity. His musky cologne conjures fiendish memories, and a telltale grunt of sexual gratification rolls to the echoey corners of my heart. It's his closeness, the hazy heat of attraction that makes the need unbearable. I'm battling the desire to give in to him while searching for a shred of self-discipline to serve my pride.

It's reckless to enjoy the sparks and even more unwise to stand up to him. But I do. "Why are you doing this, Tomás?" I inhale him into my lungs. "You have everything you could ever want."

Without tenderness, his forehead butts into mine. His nostrils flare and his lungs expand, chasing the oxygen we both share.

"Carina..." his voice rasps with possessiveness.

In the silence of the room, amid sharp edges and a chill of air-conditioned air, he locks his torrid gaze with mine, snakes a firm hand to my ass, and roughly scoops my pelvis into his groin like he needs the closeness to exist.

"*You're* all I want."

I blink up at his tortured expression, dazed and drunk on the sizzle of his taut torso tight to my breasts. Something whispers through the lonely avenues of my lost soul and sends out a bright flare to guide me home. Home to him.

"Don't lie to me," I say breathlessly. "This isn't a game where you control all the pieces and make a move when it suits you."

My skin burns hotter than lava. The flesh aching for his control. Irrationally, I sink my fingers into the short lengths on top of his head and brush my sensitive lips across his. Desire flames through me.

The untamed need is worse than physical torture. It's more ravenous than an eternal starvation, more misunderstood than the endless grip of a childhood depression, and more salacious than the indecent urges I've encountered with him to date.

Down the corridor, there's a ballroom filled with dangerous men and women. Yet here we are, spellbound and

confused in sinful feelings. Feelings that shouldn't have evolved and have no place in this dynamic.

His solid erection grinds into my core. I shiver with my own arousal. But it's the vision of crimson stains tarnishing his tense chest, a temporary tattoo to ignite mayhem, that sends me into a spin. The imprint of life covers the very place where his thumping heart pounds like battle drums.

I'm suddenly aware of how he hadn't reached for my throat or fallen victim to the merciless blackout curtain that cuts off the light—he's in control—albeit threadbare.

The tempest within my soul relents, my flesh and bone melting into the only man who knows exactly what I crave. He senses it, reads the change from defensive to compliance.

“You're right, this isn't a game, Carina...” he growls. “... but fuck I love how you challenge me. Nothing about this is a lie. Not the goosebumps on your neck, the quick rise and fall of your breasts, or the wetness coating the inside of your thighs. You want me to stuff my dick inside your sweet pussy and fill it full of my cum—and I want to lick it out, because I'm addicted to the taste of you and me together.”

I shouldn't groan when he skates his expansive hand to my thigh and bunches the silk to find bare skin beneath, but my body responds to him even now. Even when I know it's wrong to give in to his demands while another woman thinks she's claimed him. Even when I envy her role in his life to the extent I could cry.

Except her warm blood isn't decorating his skin. Her perfect lips aren't tasting his. Her long legs aren't parting to allow his fingers to enter her.

My body trembles as he works between my legs, my clit throbbing like a hellish heartbeat caught in his trap. Our bodies collide, mine too eager and his incapable of stopping.

With every greedy moan that slips free of my throat, he matches it with a sexy deep groan. My insides clench, craving more of him.

All of him.

He'd been the very first male to introduce me to orgasms, to make me come without inhibitions. It would normally build within a few hot minutes. Until now. I buckle as he takes charge of me. His fascinated eyes matching my lust.

"Tomás," I breathe his name, past the point of caring for my moral code. "She could barge in here at any minute."

"The door is guarded. If anyone tries to enter, Costa will shoot them."

"Even her?"

"Even her." He repeats, his hoarse voice thick with sex. "She can't get in, and you can't get out. You know how this goes, Cari. You're the only one who understands. You give me what no one else ever could." His baritone slips through the layers of rabid lust we're both drowning in. "So *not* fucking you isn't an option."

And then, before either of us considers the weight of our indiscretion, our willpower to resist disintegrates all over again. I shamelessly hit the end of my limit and surrender myself to the hurricane of mixed emotions, all of them focused on him.

He devours me like he wants to rip me apart, to consume me—to kill me.

We don't unite with caution or sweet affirmations of love, just forceful strokes of his tongue, groping firm hands, and ownership of my every breath. And in the moment, having found my place beside Tomás again, I let him conquer the battle I'd tried so hard to win.

Taking a second to part, he watches the hem of my dress glide to my toes. My breasts heave with every air hungry breath. Biting his lower lip, eyes now trained to the silk around my neck, he unfastens his belt. The buckle jangles against his thigh as he unzips his suit pants and frees his cock with speed.

The tip oozes pre-cum signifying his readiness to fuck and the glossy shaft bulges with angry looking veins. I can't keep my eyes off it.

He clearly doesn't have the patience to push his boxer briefs to his ankles, because his hands are on me again, wrestling with the length of my dress until it's gathered at my waist.

It feels so good to be in his masculine arms and huddled against his protective height. Victim to his manliness.

My forehead drops to his chest, savoring the delicious musk of his salty scent. "You're killing me, Tomás." I clutch his biceps. "I can't stand by and watch you marry someone else."

He makes a pained noise, the rumble tangled with torment. "I've never had the desire for a wife. All this talk of weddings and new family makes me sick to the pit of my stomach. Loving a woman isn't something I know how to do—or consider it possible. But hear me when I tell you this, Bianca is of no consequence to me. You, however...you're different. You're the woman I'd go to war for."

My heart stops, shocked he wants me so desperately.

Grabbing my leg, he raises it high and angles himself to my entrance. We're face to face, a breath apart, his ebony eyes bloodthirsty and his grunts starved.

"No one else will ever fill your sweet little cunt full of cum. Not while there's still air in my lungs and blood in my veins. That's my vow to you."

And then he thrusts in deep, giving me no room to wrestle or argue. My wet insides quiver from the stimulus of his dirty words and feral invasion. I'm beyond ready for his fated abuse, to be used as his personal vessel of agonizing pleasure. Blustery shivers run out-of-control when his hand collects mine.

Palm to palm, our fingers link. His blood emulsifies mine. A white-hot chain loops the cracks of this furious reunion together.

I let the crest of passion drown me, inhaling him into my lungs, caressing his silky muscles, and feeling him move

inside me. A small part of me quells tears, while the other part voluntarily surrenders.

His throaty roar of satisfaction tingles in wicked waves. Ruthless fingertips dig into my hips as he takes me harder. Together, we reach a united plane, joined together by sex and blood. The hardness of his cock punishes me without remorse and stretches me wide.

My spine grinds into the wall behind me where shards sporadically dive to the tiles like icicles. If it weren't for the lace clinging to my shoulders, my flesh would be torn.

“Holy...shit.” I breathe into his mouth, completely consumed by his possessive control over me.

He both hurts and pleasures me, but most of all, the boundary between his soul and mine blurs from existence. With each forceful thrust, he tunnels in further, inscribing his delicious torture within me.

“You always know what I need...your body is my therapy, Cari.” He confesses with a breathless grunt.

Coaxing me higher and higher, he snarls with the furious movement of feeding every hard inch of his cock in deeper. I gasp, on the precipice of an orgasmic release. My body sizzles from his harsh punishment, forgetting we're in Mexico, in an unknown territory where his reign has threats.

“Fuck, I missed this,” he mutters into the side of my face, rutting in faster. “And that's a big problem.” I'm barely balanced on one heel when he heaves me upwards. Both legs now clamp his hips, incapable of doing anything else other than gluing myself to him. “Come for me while I'm buried so far inside of you that the tip of my dick can feel your heart beating.” Hungry teeth sink into my neck, the choker slipping away.

“Come for me, Cari. Set me free,” he hisses.

My core catches fire, the sparks flitting between us in the form of disastrous embers, clouding the washroom with a white light that I've never seen before.

All my life I've searched for a place, a feeling, a chance... for acceptance...for *this*.

My eyes roll into the back of my head and an extraordinary climax rips through my core, rendering me awestruck. His breathing is heavy by my ear, the rhythm becoming a rope to stop me tripping into insanity. He ravages me with ecstasy.

After a few floundering heartbeats, he growls like a savage animal captured in the callous teeth of a trap. His muscles go rigid, and he falls headfirst into bliss, coming inside me and pumping me full of his virility.

Together, we blend breath, quietly connected in the sticky aftermath. I could stay like this forever. Neither of us require confessions of love or proposals for marriage. We simply need to exist in the other's presence. Two lost souls who are inexplicably entwined in a depraved universe.

A starry explosion had sucked us into a vortex and left us confused and raw. But right now, facing him, I catch a glimpse of the chronic brokenness he suffers and feel blessed that he's found his medicine within me.

Messy fingers dig into my cheeks, our lips close enough to kiss, only far enough away to tease.

"I can't let you leave again. I won't." His lips tease. "You're in my bloodstream now, and I'm in yours." Dark disbelief strangles the tone he uses.

I jerk at the sincerity he uses to bite out the claim. My insides flutter with chaotic fireflies, the sensation bursting with sunlight as his ebony eyes flash.

"Prepare yourself for what's going to happen next."

I frown up at him. "What are you going to do?"

Withdrawing, he staggers a step backwards, bends to snatch his shirt and dabs his face with a clean section of material. His shadowed jaw clenches while he continuously wipes his hands.

"I thought walking down the aisle with a stranger would be straightforward." The edgy laugh scraping free of his throat

meets a vicious smile. “But I don’t want her anywhere near me. Never did.”

“Tomás!” Bianca calls him from the corridor, her voice shrill and angry. “What’s going on in there? Are you with that woman? I know you’re in there. Let me in or I’ll shoot your goddamn soldier in the face with his own gun.”

“Christ,” he groans, immediately dragging his phone out of his back pocket. Tapping the screen, he presses it to his ear. “Shane. Gather a team of discrete soldiers in the corridor by the women’s restrooms. If anyone asks where we are, tell them Bianca and I are getting to know each other.” He listens, his posture reverting to kingly as it was the very moment I’d met him. When he decided I was worth protecting from his father—worth defending.

“Not yet. Act cool,” he requests with deadly calmness.

Ending the call, he returns the phone to his pants’ pocket and blinks at the devastation we’d created. My heart races. I move a little closer, scared by the diabolical aura snaking around him like a cloak of death.

“What’s happening?” My skin prickles, his unhallowed mood no longer vibrating with lust. “You can’t murder all these people. You’ll end up in prison...or worse. They’ll kill you, Tomás. Please...think of another solution.”

In one powerfully dominant stride, firm hands cup my cheeks, and heartfelt lips press lightly to my forehead.

“My men will detain Bianca, so she doesn’t run to Morales. I’ll escort you to my suite where you’ll wait for me until we’re ready to leave.” The discord to his tone seizes my heart.

“While you do what exactly? At least tell me what you’re planning.”

Impatient nostrils flare, his bare-chested torso stained like a bloodthirsty Viking fresh from a victorious skirmish. His godliness reaches all four corners of the room—the air he breathes is colder, the stance he takes is superior, the expression he offers me switches to ruling.

“This is business. The Souzas are at war.”

I close my eyes and take a slow breath. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t.”

“You’re a strategist. There must be something else you can offer them without putting everyone in danger.”

His eyes drill into mine—black and imperial. “Don’t be so naive, Carina. You know better than to expect a truce. I listen to my gut and make informed decisions. That’s exactly how I intend to rule my kingdom. Bloodshed is unavoidable.” The soft haze of light daring to touch his skin can’t change the shadows haunting him. “You’re the piece of me I wish I didn’t need. But I do.”

He rubs his hand over his heart.

“This is who I am. If you decide it’s not the life you want, then you’d better get as far away from me as possible.”

He pushes back his shoulders and fixes his essence-soaked dick into place, the zipper making a hateful sound in the thick silence. A brewing snowstorm whirls behind his alarming gaze.

“But the second you reappear in my territory, I’ll snatch you away again and punish you for thinking you could leave me. When I join you in the suite later, you’ll give me your answer.”

Between my legs throbs from being so utterly ruined. My limbs are weak, bruised, and stricken, a vision of violence that’s actually battle scars of salacious passion.

How can I tell my brother I’ve fallen for the devil himself? That the devil’s sadism could cost me my life or set me free.

Am I ready to trip into the rabbit hole and fully embrace his world?

“Tomás!” Bianca fists the door, her erratic thumps persistent. “Get your hands off me.” She argues with the man guarding the door. “If you shoot me, my uncle will hack off your ugly head.”

Tomás blinks at me for a beat then marches towards the exit, flinging the door open.

“Sorry, Tommy. She’s your woman. I couldn’t shoot her.”

“She’s not mine,” he snaps.

I crunch over dagger-sharp edges in thin heels and rush up behind him. Eight men assemble in the corridor, all of them dressed in black suits. Bianca’s complexion pales when her wide eyes settle on our incomprehensible state. No one could possibly understand the depths we had sank to find euphoria in each other’s arms.

“What the hell did you do?” Her gaze cuts from him to me, a sprinkle of compassion darting over my sullied complexion. “Are you okay?” She frowns and my insides recoil.

“Shane,” Tomás barks. “Make sure Bianca doesn’t return to the party.” He seizes my bicep, uses his body to shield me, and drags me into the hallway. “I’ll be down in a few minutes. Watch her.”

“What the hell is this?” the dark-haired beauty refuses to stand at peace.

Immediately, suited bodies gather around Tomás and I like plates of armor slotting into place, trapping us in a circular prison.

“Bianca,” he snarls, looking over his shoulder as we move towards the lobby elevator. “When I come back down, you’ll meet the real Tomás Souza.”

TOMÁS



My soul is a turbulent ocean, fatal and unpredictable. And Carina is the moon casting brilliant light into the shadowy depths.

The wrung-out pain in my gut no longer resists the absolute decision I've made—because this time, it's the right one.

Bianca's ass hits the wallpaper, never taking her eyes off us as armed soldiers escort us to the elevator. Being so close to Carina tests me in ways I never expected. Nothing could have prepared me for the woman who melted my ironclad defenses with a red-hot flame of destruction.

Our fingers graze as we stand side by side, then part just as quickly as if we'd been caught. I rein in my anarchic impulses, not wishing to reveal these feelings to anyone else. My enemies are everywhere, and Bianca would soon be the newest of them all.

Carina sucks in tattered breaths, subconsciously lifting two fingers to her defined lip line, the edges of her nails tipped in blood. A mind-fucking combination of my life source and hers in one bloodied mess. The sight of it should create agony in my mental prison, but it doesn't. Rather, it magnifies the affection I have for her.

The weakness within me needs her beyond reason, risk, or selfish reward.

Together, we ride the elevator to the top floor all the while studying each other's disheveled appearance, quietly aware of

the cosmic collision we'd survived and the wall of guards surrounding us. Once we're finally alone, safely behind the locked doors of my suite, I glance at my slashed palm and blink away the inexorable snare of a maelstrom.

Her tiny voice drifts into the chaos I'm fighting against, its sweet tone unintentionally intrusive with sexual provocation.

There's too much at stake for this to be my ruin. Responsibility twines with my newly placed crown. Its heavy burden gives me the strength of mind to keep walking through the regally decorated room fit for a king without crumbling. Heavy drapes and a thick carpet complement each other in boring shades of taupe. Nothing impresses me these days—except for Carina's beauty.

I keep going until I'm in the adjoining bathroom where a free-standing bathtub sits in front of a gleaming window that highlights the cityscape. Stopping at the polished marble top vanity, I glance at a duo of snow-white bathrobes hung on a hook next to the shower and blow out a breath.

His and hers—a reminder of what could be. How we'd fuck in the tub and wash away our sins together.

I've created this situation. While my family celebrates with the Morales cartel, I'm sinking under the ridiculous notion of a thing called love.

Immediately hunting a fresh bar of soap, I flick up the gold lever and plunge my hands under a waterfall of boiling water. It stings the cut and burns my skin. Yet I repeatedly rotate the soap to lather up a citrusy, cleansing foam to eradicate the signs of my madness.

After sixty mind-numbing seconds, the water runs clean. Next, I wash my face and blot it dry with a soft face cloth before studying my haggard reflection under the recessed lights. My torso still wears contaminated dried streaks. I swallow hard and make a spur of the moment decision not to erase them from the very spot where my heart thumps out of sequence. I want her hemoglobin to fuse with my flesh.

It's a screwed-up fantasy, a crazy way to own all of her.

“Tomás...” Carina pauses in the doorway, the straightened lengths of a high ponytail snake her regally poised shoulder like a pet serpent waiting to attack. Extraordinary rings of fire halo dark discs that hold me under a staggering spell. “Would you like me to wash it off for you.” She approaches with caution, her sexy thin heels tapping the slate gray tiles.

I shake my head and exhale slowly. “That won’t be necessary.” She nods in acceptance and watches me dab the wound on my hand until I’m certain it’s stopped bleeding. “The only thing I need is an answer about your future. Whether it’s with me or not.”

The uncertain look she gives me builds like the blocks of a skyscraper, soaring high enough to keep me at a safe distance. It’s that barricade she wraps around herself that fills me with fear. An unease I’ve never felt before, not even from the threat of death.

Long black lashes lower. “That depends on you,” she says softly.

A shudder rattles through me that has nothing to do with the inevitable destruction ahead. The thought of never seeing her again gnaws at my backbone until it weakens.

“I understand,” I growl in a shredded voice I hardly recognize. “I’m not going through with the wedding, if that helps you decide.”

A tiny speck of my dark soul could easily abandon the mother who raised me and the loyal brothers who were tortured by our father just as much as I was. He had wanted ruthless leaders more than he desired sons and that’s exactly what he got.

I could run away with Carina and spend my days nurturing an emotion I never craved, but suddenly can’t escape. Except this life is where I belong. It’s etched into every cell in my body and ingrained in my psyche.

I’d change for her, do whatever it takes.

However, I can’t outrun my destiny, or my fate.

I scratch the stubbled edge of my jaw and force myself to move past her, prowling to the closet where the hotel staff have unpacked my overnight bag. She follows a step behind, silent in her observation of me. I sense her every move like the flightpath of a missile ready to wipe out its target.

There's no way I can wear a white shirt, so I grab a black one to cover the arresting claret branding and make sure each button is done in order. My head is well and truly fucked, this is something I'd never do, let alone survive.

The knowledge of my unclean chest doesn't welcome the unruly darkness like it normally would. Rather, I like it there, as if it's eternally binding.

When I turn into her, she swallows hard and stares up at me with amber eyes of sheer courage. "I either stand beside you, Tomás, or not at all." She folds her arms across her midriff. "I'll never agree to be your dirty little secret or become a second thought."

A muscle spasms in my jaw. She's been at the forefront of my mind since I saved her from my father's paranoia. Even then my instincts had told me she was special. "You're too headstrong to be anyone's mistress," I muse, the edges of my mouth remaining tight. "I choose you, Carina."

"Prove it," she whispers.

"That's exactly what I intend to do. Now, stay in this suite. No answering the door and don't leave."

Before my mind has time to reprogram itself, I thumb her cheek in a gesture so unexpectedly gentle, it sends volts into my chest. "I'll be back soon."

"Okay..." she murmurs, her face tilting into my touch.

I won't be held accountable for my actions if anyone hurts her. If she decides a life with me isn't what she wants, then controlling the nuclear devastation would be impossible. It's not even a viable option.

And if she stays, I'll do whatever it takes to protect her, even if it means giving her a gun to use against *me*. For the mindless moments when my dysfunctional brain glitches and I

lose control. Eventually, in an almighty cluster fuck of sex, lust, and power, I could do the unthinkable.

Our lamentable ending is written in the heavens with the stars as our witness and the gods as our authors. The inevitability of history is destined to repeat itself.

I would kill her.

So, she'd have to kill me first.

Without a millisecond of hesitation, I'd take a lethal slug into my flesh to save her. All because these coiled, abnormal, obsessive emotions ruling my head and heart must be love.

Leaving her alone, I make sure the suite is guarded by two armed men and swiftly return to the ladies' restroom where Shane babysits Bianca.

He eyes me in silence, his judgment not important as he gives us the room. His unconditional acceptance is all I require.

"Tomás...what did you do to that woman?" Bianca stares up at my immaculately pressed shirt, unaware of what lies beneath it.

"Don't play coy, Bianca. You know what fucking is, right?" I chuckle to sound cavalier.

"Is that what you call it?" She sneers, edging the vanity, a hand settling on her stomach. Confusion contorts her fine features, her scrunched forehead heavy over searching eyes. "It looked like she'd been assaulted. Did you do that to her? Is that what you meant by meeting the real Tomás Souza? You're one of those sick bastards who has so much power he has to make women bleed just to get a rush."

Little does she know it's the complete opposite. It's the very thing that makes me powerless, until now. I rub the sullied spot over my heart and tingle from my scalp to my toes.

"It was consensual." I swallow the truth and fold my arms to anchor me in place. "I didn't hurt her. The broken mirror did that. She's just some girl André brought to the dinner."

Her brows snap together. “Bullshit!” I stay silent even though her show of disrespect shouldn’t be ignored. “I saw the look on your face when she arrived. You have feelings for her. And whatever the hell’s between the two of you is fucked up.”

“And that’s the problem. It *is* fucked up. But it’s *our* fucked up. No one could possibly understand it.” My veins run hot and cold. “The wedding is off, Bianca. I’ve decided weddings aren’t my thing. I’m telling you first before your uncle starts a feud with my family.”

“He didn’t start the war, Tomás. The Souzas did. Elias murdered one of our men. He broke confidence. And now you’re embarrassing the Morales family name by calling off our engagement on the night of the damn rehearsal.”

“It’s nothing personal.”

“Of course, it’s personal. They all expect the most powerful man in Colombia to take *me* for his bride. A Morales princess uniting with the Souza king. My uncle offered peace, and you’re sticking up your middle finger at him.”

“He wanted this wedding for his own agenda.”

“Does it matter? He’s a cutthroat pig who’d force his own niece to marry a man she’s only seen in photos. We can make this work, Tomás.” She glances at the mess underfoot. “You have choices, whereas I’m told what’s expected of me.” She swallows a breath. “The men I’ve grown up around put their business first and their dicks into any girl they want. We can come to an arrangement about the woman.”

My hand shoots out like lightning. Her eyes pop wide when it seizes her throat, not harsh enough to strangle, just to get her full attention. “You’re not listening to me,” I growl into her face, tingling with savagery. “Marry a man who’ll appreciate you. Who’ll understand how to feed your soul. Not a man who’s incapable of loving you.”

“He’ll kill her,” she chokes out. “He’ll kill the woman *you’re* in love with.”

My skin goes cold, her warning a noose to hang me with. “I pity fools who fall in love. It weakens their power and steals

their self-respect. I'm not that fool. But if Morales wants to fuck with my people, I'll kill everyone in his circle before he gets the chance to shit himself," I deadpan.

Her eyes close briefly. "Then you may as well put a gun to my head now, because once he finds out what I've done...he'll kill me too."

"What did you do?"

A solitary tear swells in her gaze making my hand relax a fraction. "You're not a fool. I know you aren't. But that girl, she means something to you. I'm not blind. She's important. She shines in your dark eyes and lives in your thawing heart." She gulps. "So, you'll understand the pain in your soul when you think about losing her forever..." Her voice wobbles. "Are you certain you want to risk it all for her?"

"One hundred percent."

She blinks away liquid fear and pushes back her shoulders. "Then I'm begging you...please, help me. You're the only one who can."

CARINA



Exhausted body parts ache, yet that's not what troubles me. Nor is it the nasty slice absorbing microscopic traces of his criminal blood.

I peel off the borrowed silky gown and let it slump to the warm herringbone tiles. The dreadful female returning my gaze in the ensuite mirror is covered in crusty blotches and has an overwhelming decision shadowing her tainted aura. A matured woman in a young body, harboring a warped heart.

I still look like an innocent nineteen-year-old, even if that girl has been well and truly fucked.

I remove the silly headpiece Teresa had gifted me with and recall her odd statement as she carefully placed the intricately crafted crown on top of my head.

“Women aren't born as queens, we are created from the choices we make, the experiences we endure, and the instincts we honor.”

Yet she failed to mention we were flying to Mexico City where her eldest son was dining with his flawless fiancé. So, when I'd entered the splendid ballroom amidst tables set for royalty and saw Tomás beside a beautiful woman oozing of femininity and sex appeal, my pulse flatlined.

Reality sank in like bitter acid. We'd flown north as guests of the Morales cartel for *his* wedding rehearsal dinner. I'd bitten back resentment with every guided step and silently cursed his mother for tricking me—or whatever manipulative game she was playing.

Assessing eyes followed André and I everywhere, my own clashing with Tomás' shocked gaze for a heart-stopping second. He clearly hadn't added me to the guest list himself.

And to make matters worse than embarrassing sweating palms and wide eyes, the hurt little girl inside of me felt something other than humiliation and rejection. I was captivated by him all over again. Enthralled by his immaculately suited physique and all too aware of his hungry gaze stripping me down.

Even when I looked away our chemistry crackled. Rogue sparks shot off like fireworks and my heart thundered.

However, the symbolic jeweled tiara gave me strength. Its gentle weight reached into my withering composure, offered robust heart beats, and subdued the sweet burn for his attention. I tried my best not to look at him after that, even though it was damn near impossible. But I had to prove I was worthy of so much more than second place.

And then he revealed himself to me.

He kept his glitch in check.

Unknown planets aligned in an alternative cosmos; a solar system so far removed from my expectations.

You're in my bloodstream now, and I'm in yours.

Three times fate had thrown us together. The universe had declared him the master of my heart and soul. But I must be honest with myself...can I stay with a man who doesn't relish tenderness? Can I live without it? His molecular makeup breeds cold-heartedness as a primary trait.

As time passes, will I yearn for more than the all-powerful king who churns out orders and commands? Or would he eventually show me the other side of his personality, the rare paradigm of a monster practicing compassion. A hidden gentleness I've merely glimpsed upon.

I rotate on the balls of my feet and pad across the heated tiles underfoot, the lifelong haze of empty nothingness no longer haunting me like it used to. Even though Tomás had shunned me at the plantation, I couldn't escape the feeling his

words were deeply sincere—if a guy of his prime caliber and callous breeding knows such a concept.

Hissing through clenched teeth, I step into the deep tub positioned in the middle of a picture window bringing the twinkly city view into the stately bathroom. Warm water laps at my tense muscles. It soothes my stiff spine and overused pussy, quickly turning muddy brown as dried blood mingles with the smokey sandalwood-scented suds.

Is this the life I want to live?

Time passes, submerged up to my chin, alone in a five-star hotel where cartel men guard the door, waiting for Tomás to find me again. My skin prickles at the thought of it. The toxic rush I get from his presence is my kryptonite. Isn't that love? A crazy, foolish, heart stopping rush that grows every time we're together.

Even enveloped in soothing liquid, I can feel him under my skin, feel the cells of his blood mutate with mine to create a beast so eternally damned I'd never be able to refuse him.

Yet he threw an ultimatum at my feet. A heavy choice to make on my own—to either escape the country with my life or take up residence with him in the underworld where he rules with guns and violence.

Is that what I truly want—to be by his side as a permanent target for his enemies, or would freedom taste sweeter than his undivided attention?

I think about my big brother and his loyalty to *el Fantasma*, how he's found a satisfying place in the world. Then there's my parents who are devoted to each other, not needing riches to embrace happiness or love. They have each other and their love.

Where does that leave me? The teenage girl afloat in her obsession with a kingpin who prioritizes business. A breathtaking man who's protected me from the day and hour we first met.

After washing my hair under a handheld shower head, I crawl from the tub and slip on a soft bathrobe. Finally clean, I

rough dry the sodden lengths with a towel, use the comb that's squarely placed beside a bottle of Creed cologne, scrape my hair into a topknot, and wander into the bedroom where a full moon strikes the carpet, declaring the end of a tiresome evening.

Bedside lamps brighten the rich cotton bed linen and muted gold furnishings only to cast shadows into the unlit edges of the room.

Flashes of him come and go. The thrust of his commanding hips, the unforgiving pressure of his hot mouth, and the gravelly tone of his declarations, so broken and harsh that the words cut his throat.

Your body is my therapy.

You're the woman I'd start a war for.

Are those the ramblings of a man lost in lust, consumed by the power of sex?

Exhausted, I clamber onto the feather-filled duvet, roll to my side, and draw my knees in tight. The silence created by double glazed balcony doors and soft furnishings, drowns me under the influence of my desires. My heart thrums.

Is he bailing on the wedding?

For us.

For me.

I don't realize my weary limbs sinking into the pillowy mattress or how it coaxes me to sleep, but the jolt of my awakening pounds right through me like horses' hooves on a racetrack. I breathe furiously and blink at the doorway where Tomás locks the door behind him.

A charcoal garment bag is draped over one arm. I fist the bathrobe at my chest and suck in a breath, frozen on the bed by the sight of him.

Although dressed like a handsome devil in all black, subtle crescents crease his under eyes, fatigue paling his usual sunny complexion. Rebellious scruff is now darker, coarser—untrimmed from too many hours spent awake.

“Are you okay?” he murmurs, not waiting for my reply as he comes closer.

“I’m fine.”

“This is for you.” He raises his arm and smiles tightly. “André is on his way up with a pair of those boots you wear.”

I promised myself I wouldn’t let my heart rule my emotions. That I needed to clarify his intentions before making any decisions. However, seeing his tall physique and smelling his divine cologne has my nerves on edge.

“Thank you.” I smile back at him, frustrated at how gorgeous he appears in the sunlight of a new day dawning.

Tomás drops his gaze to the garment bag as he lays it out on the bed. His formal reaction makes my heart fold in on itself. “We don’t have much time. I need to get out of here in a few minutes. Are you in, or are you out?”

I frown up at him. “Did you finish it with Bianca?”

When his eyes meet mine again, they’re haunted with dark desire and secrets. A raw expression that makes my lungs stall and my stomach tighten. He rubs a hand over his mouth like he’s holding back. “There’s a car waiting outside to take you to the airfield. The jet is refueled and ready to go. I’ll join you before it takes off.”

Squaring my shoulders, I glare right at him. “Is that a, no?”

Tomás sighs heavily. “Carina...I need you to trust me.” He glances at his chunky gold watch. “We can talk on the flight back to Colombia.” I flinch when he reaches across the mattress, snares my wrists, and heaves me into his solid torso. “I told you already, I’m not marrying her.” His height makes him so tall, more so with me upright on my knees. Chest to chest, he brushes a messy lock of hair from my lashes. “What’s your decision?”

“I...want...”

How can I leave when Tomás Souza’s touch feels like my sanctuary—home. He’s the reason I’m still alive today. He’s my felonious hero.

Featherlight fingers untie the cord at my waist. My heart races at the thrill of it. He traces the contour of my bare breasts, skimming my belly button. Wicked shivers send flares of goosebumps down my spine. Every time our skin meets, I'm helpless to resist the charge of energy from him to me. The gentle pressure of his hand against my stomach reaches right through the skin, scorching my core.

“What are your instincts telling you to do?” His tone is both coarse and smooth like silk gliding over grit.

My hand skates to his and settles there. “I want to be with you.”

A rare grin dimples his left cheek, the sight of it chases my pulse into purgatory. It's truly a gift to see this god-like man pleased by my announcement.

“Good girl.” He pinches my chin, raising it high to hold my stare.

“But my head is ringing with alarm bells...what are you not telling me?” Our gazes clash, my eyes searing his with a wish to catch the information he's withholding.

His jaw ticks and I sense his fraying self-control. The close proximity of my nakedness next to his expensive attire sets off sparks.

My insides clench, wet and needy.

His dick hardens, thick and hungry.

With a firm squeeze of my jaw, he runs the tip of his nose along my hairline. “I'll meet you on the jet. We'll have the whole flight to thrash it out in private, but right now, I have a time sensitive matter to take care of.”

His disciplined lips brush against mine and he inhales deeply through his nostrils. I copy him, closing my eyes to breathe him in—sweet liquor and manly musk.

“Be honest with me,” I plead, my gaze flicking from his eyes to his mouth. “How are you getting out of it? Tell me the truth. That's all I'm asking of you.”

“You want to hear the biggest secret of all?” I unintentionally moan when his thumb drags across my bottom lip. “No matter what decision you would have arrived at, I’d never let you leave me, Cari. I wanted you to come to the right conclusion by yourself. To prove your allegiance to me. You thought I’d pushed you away at the plantation. Fuck...I even believed it myself, but I’d sent my own brother to watch over you. I used his eyes to capture your every thoughtful look and his ears to hear your voice.”

He pulls out his phone, unlocks the screen with a few taps of his finger, and brings up a picture. A simple photograph of me in natural light wearing a troubled frown.

“You were spying on me this whole time?” I jerk away and frown when he slips the phone into his back pocket. His posture isn’t threatening even though he’s confessing he’s a stalker with the desire to snatch me away. “And if I’d asked to walk away?”

Dominance ricochets through the muscles I know to be glorious beneath his designer shirt. “I would have haunted your wet dreams. Cursed your depraved nightmares. Prowled in every dubious shadow. I would *never* let you breathe without me, because that’s how important you are. Happy endings aren’t a reality for my family. They never have been, and never will be. All I can offer you is me, in each moment we’re together for as long as that lasts.”

He reaches for my injured hand, raises the inflamed skin to his lips, and presses a light kiss to the clean slice. His neck cords as he swallows, the restraint so thick I could claw it apart with my nails.

I should be utterly disgusted by his admission. By the trickery of deceit and the unhallowed decree he offloaded, but I’m not. It wasn’t an easy gesture to make. To kiss me like a gentleman, when the very element of his downfall is so visible on my palm.

My mind has forever been homeless. In this moment, as sunshine spills into the opulent suite of a high story hotel, he becomes my bricks and mortar. My solid foundation and my

pillars of steel. But it's missing one important factor. The nuts and bolts to hold everything together—an oath of forever—of love.

The door handle rattles, startling us both. Tomás releases me, does a sharp one-eighty and stalks to the door. A fisted thump follows.

“Tommy. Open the fucking door,” André calls from the corridor. “I need to take my girl home.”

I freeze. He spins around to where I'm kneeling upright amidst a downy duvet. Our eyes lock, the rich ebony of his gaze flashes for a fleeting second, the depths of his stare obscure. His expression morphs to murderous.

“You arrived with André.” Stretching his neck, he straightens his spine, authority consuming him again. “You'll leave with my brother and get in the car downstairs. No looking back.”

Hurriedly, I tug at the opening of my robe to cover my breasts and scramble off the bed, too late to demand more information when he unlocks and opens the door. A blur of leather and energy barrels into the suite. André is wearing aviator sunglasses indoors, a supple biker jacket, and ass fitting jeans, no longer the polished power player from last night.

Shane checks the corridor before closing the door behind him and joining us. “Tommy.” He cocks a knowing brow, clearly aware of his next steps. “You ready to rock ‘n’ roll?”

Tomás nods, smooths out his sleeves and rotates his cufflinks.

“Here's your boots.” André winks at me. “Didn't think you'd be a utility boot sort of woman. I'd put you in studded Valentino heels or patent Louboutin's.”

I take the box from him and hug it close to my chest.

“She can wear whatever the fuck she wants,” Tomás growls. “Do you want heels?” He looks right at me.

André chuckles. “I'm just saying, she looks good in heels.”

“These are fine,” I mutter, aware of the three sets of eyes all focused on my messy hair and roughly cinched robe. “My wish list isn’t that big.”

“What’s on your list?” Tomás frowns.

“Christ, Tommy.” Shane drags a hand down his face before checking his Apple watch. “We don’t have time for this. She needs to get dressed. The car is leaving any minute.”

The whole time Shane addresses him, Tomás’ gaze never leaves mine, holding me prisoner in a silent cage forged with lust and secrets. His eyes dance from syrupy molasses to the color of the deepest ocean where air is nonexistent. “Is it something you’ve always desired, but could never afford?”

I shake my head and scrunch up my nose. “This might come as a shock to you, Tomás, but it’s not all about money.” Grabbing the garment bag from the foot of the bed, I start to walk to the bathroom.

He’s behind me in a heartbeat. The voice in my ear is gravelly and impatient, his looming height dominating my senses. “What is it? There’s something you want.”

“Tommy...we need to go. You’re stalling...” Shane urges, his tolerance fading.

“Wait a fucking minute,” Tomás hisses under his breath, his solid build tight to my spine. “I’ll ask you one more time. What’s on your wish list?”

The scent of his musky cologne whispers over my shoulder. I sigh heavily and lower my lashes to the boot box in my arm. “Trust,” I reply simply. “Implicit trust without question.” I pause for a beat to savor his hot breath on my scalp. “And acceptance of the person I am today and the woman I’ve yet to become.” Taking a step forward to grant myself space, I glance back at him to meet his hardened expression. “But most of all, I want to be loved...by you.”

Creases furrow his brow like I’ve asked too much of him. His feet shift, ready to move in any direction. He clears his throat and fingers the collar around his neck. My heart thunders when he sighs. “You seem to understand me better

than anyone, Carina. You should know I trust you. Acceptance isn't even up for debate. What do you think all this is for?"

I laugh icily, fear charging through me. "But I don't have your love?"

His eyes turn wild. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly," I whisper. "Which makes you a coward."

A slow and low whistle draws my gaze to André. He winces in the aftermath of my forbidden slur. My staunch show of disrespect.

I should know better than to challenge him. However, he admitted to offering me a false sense of freedom. He had lied to me. In reality, there was no decision for me to make.

Tomás wanted my verbal commitment and now I demand his.

I want his truth. His words. His declaration of real love.

He scrubs his handsome face out of frustration, followed by a slow swipe of his top teeth with his tongue. His posture remains rigid. His indecipherable stare locked on me for a silent eternity.

"Get into the bathroom, Cari," he orders, painfully controlled as if he's clipped to a leash for my protection. I stand tall before him, purposely disobeying his command. I won't back down.

"Tommy!" Shane urges. "We gotta go."

Tomás pulls his lips back, so pristine white teeth bare. But it's the hand flying to my throat that catches me out. My knees weaken in regret, aware I've pushed him for the impossible, but I'm not sorry I did it.

We're both mentally scarred, yet neither of us are immune to love. I have to hear him say it, to prove to me this can work. That he's true to his word and called off the wedding for a reason so pure it will bind us together.

I never thought it would happen to me. And now that it has, it's a cruel slap in the face to love a man with no room for

such an emotion.

Love has seeped into my flesh and bones. Turned my demons to smoldering ashes. Flashed an x-ray to reveal my emptiness and offered me substance beyond dreams and wishes.

I love him. I'll never tell him.

And right now, in this moment, I'm afraid he doesn't truly love me back.

I'm terrified his blood savage fantasies are simply a weak thread temporarily stitching us together—an obsession, nothing more. That he'll grow bored of us in time.

Seconds trickle past. He stares at me with his jaw twitching as unspoken thoughts stay hidden. I stare back at him, adamant I won't wither. Neither André nor Shane says another word. Behind his eyes, I see relentless torment and a ghost of adoration.

Once his thick lashes lower, he slowly releases my neck. The same hand hunts out mine, carefully gathering it within the expanse of his. When he revolves my palm upwards, the cut stings, making me flinch a little. His throat works in the silence, our fingers linking to knit our flesh together in a simple, gentle gesture.

I'm breathless from the synergy of our inflamed skin binding, the thrum of our pulses colliding, and the impact of such a genuinely innocent act being sinfully sensual. It makes me sway into him, my heart nudging into the cage of bone protecting it from scorn and ridicule—from rejection.

This is the best response I'll ever get from the man whose heart has spiky sides and whose soul is entombed in unpickable ice. He's offering compassion, hunger, acceptance, and a chemistry so explosive it could extinguish the human race.

I swallow the lump in my throat and take in the sight of his honest unity. He strokes the back of my hand with his thumb, catapulting a trillion chills like tiny darts aimed at every molecule in my body.

“I don’t know what the hell this is with us,” his voice rumbles like a roll of thunder. “But not being with you isn’t an option. You’re mine, Carina Ferreira. And today, I’ll prove it to you.”

TOMÁS



I stare at her pretty pink lips and flushed cheeks.

Her touch alone soothes me in ways she'll never understand.

It takes every shred of my self-discipline to move away, to break the connection I cherish more than life itself. My lungs burn to scream the truth, admit how her soul blends with mine. Not only to compliment it, but to offer it strength.

She knows our darkness speaks a language that no one else knows. We crave the same things, desire the same salvation, and hunt the same carnal satisfaction in each other.

But to say those words out loud.

To make my feelings official would be a fool's errand when I know the universe awaits another sacrifice. I'm a bad man, who does very bad things. And payback for those murderous deeds would be the death of her, or the death of me.

"Tomás...you only have fifteen minutes," Shane points out, his voice breaks in the doldrums of my agony.

I suck in deeply and put a safe measure of distance between the woman I love and my fraying impulses. "Get dressed as quickly as possible, Carina. Stay close to André and do exactly what he asks of you. We have a plan."

Her chest rises with furious breaths while her exquisite amber gaze darts from André to me.

"Is it dangerous?" A little crease wrinkles her brow.

I want to grab that gorgeous face of hers and kiss her fuckable mouth, hard. Revel in those sexy as fuck moans that rocket straight to my dick. Most of all I want to admit to her how I've got love on the brain—a compulsive, obsessive feeling that's given me someone to worry about.

“If everything runs like clockwork, only a few people will die.”

Her eyes pop wide. “A few people?”

I shrug. “Yeah. It won't be any of us if we act quickly.”

Despite the longing to hold her close and never let go, I have a lethal plan to seamlessly execute. A pivotal plot that would finalize this bullshit with the Morales cartel once and for all. After that, I'll hide in her harmony and rest in the inner peace she blesses me with.

Until then, I'd rather she was safely out of the picture. Not a witness to the carnage her hybrid kingpin could create.

I take a measured stride towards Shane, my dress shoes not making a sound on the thick carpet. “Let's go.” I nod to him and keep walking. “Dré...get her to the car safely. If something goes wrong—leave. Don't wait for me. Get Carina and the rest of the family out of this city.”

CARINA



I clomp out of the bathroom, wearing a midi hem dress and a pair of Doc Martens.

Even though there's a discrete layer of sock lining the unworn leather, they're really stiff against my ankles since I've only worn dainty shoes of late. It's a replica styled outfit to the one I wore the night his father was gunned down. The same fateful night Tomás unofficially made me his.

How fitting.

"Tell me what he's planning." I glare at André pacing a track by the doorway, chewing gum at the back of his mouth. "Will they try to kill him? Here, in this hotel?" My lungs implode, forcing a trembling hand to my chest. "I deserve to know what the hell is happening."

Worn biker boots that appear to be his favorite pair, continue to scuff the thick pile carpet with every heavy step. "Stop talking about it. I'm not going to tell you shit. Not here." When his phone beeps from his pocket, he pulls it out, reads the screen and starts to type a reply.

"Who are you texting?"

He finishes the message and sighs. "Why do women have to ask so many questions? If you must know, I'm checking in with my friends, Letterman and Reno. They were keeping an eye on things in Miami while I was babysitting you. They're wondering what trouble I'm getting myself into today."

The dull ache in my belly turns to queasiness. I pad my lips, feeling a wave of unease. "This doesn't feel right."

Something bad is going to happen. I can feel it.” He stops dead and runs a tattooed hand over his gorgeous face.

“Christ, you’re just like him. Mama was right.”

“Is that why she brought me here? To start a war?”

André cocks a brow at me. “Tomás Souza will do whatever the fuck he wants. We don’t control him. No one does. A war with Morales won’t benefit any of us. All it will do is prove to the world he’s a crazy bastard.”

“Tell me what sort of plan you’ve concocted.” I persist.

André watches me, his unhallowed glare spearing me against the opulent furnishings. “The plan is to get *you* the hell out of Mexico—alive. Take a good fucking look, Carina. This is what you’re up to your eyeballs in when you’re with us. Cartel business. Souzas always have targets on their backs. Our enemies walk with us, and right now you’re standing in their fucking hotel. So, get your shit together and let’s get the hell out of here.”

“Okay...” The pounding beats in my chest bounce off each rib. “Give me a sec.” In a panic, I rush back to the vanity and grab the spindly tiara, then hurriedly follow André out of the suite and into the empty corridor. “Has he called off the...”

“Carina...” I’m suddenly uprooted, my shoulders slamming into a wall of pearly wallpaper. “Don’t say another word about it,” André growls, low and bullish.

As if we’ve known each other for a lifetime, his face brings ticklish whiskers to my cheek. It’s coarse and scented with sandalwood sending a shock of arousal right through me. He smells just like Tomás. Not only do they share the same DNA, but they also use a similar cologne.

To any passing guest or surveillance spy, it would look like he’s about to fuck me, but we both know better. Liquor and peppermint shoot up my nostrils when he speaks, low and hoarse.

“...the less you know the better. Morales has eyes and ears in places you’d never think of. The second we left that suite, we’re wide open.”

His broad leather clad torso presses into my chest as if we're a newlywed couple getting hot and horny near the lobby's elevator.

“They already think you're a Souza whore. *My* sexy guest. Not my big brother's. The second Morales' men suspect our relationship is a farce—or that you mean something to Tomás, you're dead,” he whispers. “Understood? Now behave yourself. Pretend you're here to serve me and let's get the fuck out of Mexico.”

A strong hand hooks my waist nudging me neatly into his sturdy hip. When we reach the lobby, he punches the button for the elevator, both of us quietly watching the counter tick until the doors ping open. Once we step inside, they close us in immediately. He lessens his grip but doesn't let go.

“A word of advice...” André scratches his scruff. I get the impression he has something important to offload when he blows out a minty breath. “Don't push the lovey-dovey bullshit with him. You won't get what you're looking for.”

Panic blooms slowly at first, then it rises and rises to a shrill response. “Are you saying he'll never fall in love?”

“I'm telling you he'll never say that word.” He checks out his reflection in the mirrored walls, knowing he looks every bit the disheveled explosion of filthy sex and wicked sins. “It's not his thing. Never will be. Tommy doesn't even tell his own mother he loves her. We just know he does.”

I shrug, feigning nonchalance. I'd rather not let on how my insides are flip-flopping. “I won't hold my breath then.”

He snickers. “You'd be fucking blue if you did.”

Weightlessness plays havoc with my belly when the elevator descends at speed. I slip into the safety of my mind where I've lived for so long. Numbness snatches the dread and weighs up my fear.

Tomás has his scars, and I have mine.

Perhaps words are just that—frivolous whispers without substance or meaning. What if he never surrenders the four-

letter word and shows me the power of it instead? Giving me more than just words.

Being his queen, standing by his side—feeling his love surround me—isn't that enough, rather than a spoken sentiment which could easily be hollow.

A ding announces our arrival on the ground floor. When the doors slide open, a cut glass chandelier dazzles with daylight and mingling guests' chatter. The noise reminds me of squawking parrots. I immediately look for Tomás, but he's not here.

André takes the lead with me nestled next to him, casually passing high class couples checking in at the reception desk. The hairs on my nape do their own thing. Some quiver and others rise like hackles.

“Play it cool. If I kiss you, kiss me back.” He smirks, trying to make light of my antsiness.

He knows there are eyes on us from every corner of the reception. I can feel them eyeballing us too. It could be Souza soldiers or their enemies.

“Kiss me, and I'll bite your tongue.” I bat my lashes at him, playing the game even though my pulse is out of whack and any second, I could vomit on his sleeve from nerves.

“I'd like that.” His arm squishes me against him. I almost trip over his boots as we keep walking. “Nothing beats hardcore foreplay.” He rasps the last word, practically buzzing sex as we move from one end of the reception to the other.

It's not the worst place to be, pride of place beside a rebellious Souza. Except it's not where I belong. We don't gel like lubed up body parts or slip into a natural thrum of naughtiness. He's like a mischievous big brother who also happens to be drop dead gorgeous.

“It's been a pleasure to have you stay with us, Mr. Souza.” A smartly dressed concierge bows politely when we reach the main doors. “Please come again.”

“Oh, I'll definitely come again,” André chuckles. “Hopefully in the car ride to the airport.” He tightens his arm

around me playfully.

The concierge smiles as if he likes the idea. “Very good, sir.”

Muggy hot air and honking horns replace the relaxing piano concerto from indoors. I stumble outside with my mouth wide. We’d arrived at nightfall, disembarked the private jet, and jumped straight into a waiting car that pulled up at this hotel. I could have been in any city in any country.

I’ve only ever travelled through descriptive words, pictures, and movies. Hungry for adventure and starved of living, I swore to myself I’d experience life and all of its destinations. Bogotá being the starting point of my journey. And look where that got me.

Now, I’m in a different city with limited time to take it all in. I let André usher me through the rotating glass doors while I gawk at the sundrenched neighborhood.

A golden statue stands out from the skyline, dominant in the bright blue sky. André catches me staring at it.

“That’s the iconic *Ángel de la Independencia* with the golden goddess of victory on top,” he says like the perfect tour guide. “Take a good look, because you won’t be back in Mexico after today.”

“What the fuck kept you?” Giovanni appears beside us. Up close, his eyes are like a tropical lagoon, profoundly green. He smells like eucalyptus and sunshine even though his expression is hard and stern. “Matheus is in the car with Mama. You’re fucking late as usual, Dré.”

“Chill out, Gio,” André palms his twin’s jaw with a light tap. “We’re here now. No need to get your silky boxers all twisted around your strung up balls.”

Giovanni folds his arms over the plain t-shirt he’s wearing. “How about I wrap them around your puny neck?”

“Jeez...that’s kinky as fuck, brother. I always thought you were the vanilla twin.”

Giovanni grunts, almost breaking into laughter, but not quite reaching the momentum. “Shame you’re the twin with a *cucaracha*-sized dick.”

He shrugs, unphased that he just compared his brother’s dick to a cockroach.

“We all know I used up the good stuff in the womb. What’s the name they call the second born?” His forehead creases, pretending to think. “Runt—yeah, that’s it. Runts are generally smaller, weaker, and dysfunctional. I’d hate to be all cliché, but if a pig grunts—it’s a pig.”

André shakes his head in response while Giovanni continues. “Just so we’re clear, *little* brother, the girls use my dick to scoop up all that creamy vanilla.”

“My dick gets no complaints from the *señoritas*,” André nudges me and uses his strength to manhandle me along the street.

Giovanni frowns. “They don’t? Fuck, I get complaints about how big my dick is all the time.”

The two of them chuckle in tandem. It’s a quick melodic appreciation, oddly sexy and terribly wicked.

“Now, hurry the fuck up.” Giovanni’s mood changes like rain clouds covering the sun and glances at his watch. Out of all the brothers, his timepiece has a digital face and jet-black wrist band. It’s more covert than bling—no ritzy diamonds and not showy.

As the three of us head away from the main doors and onto the crowded pavement, a wave of silence creeps over the street. It’s like the busy passers-by have all fallen under a spell or they’ve dared to look at a god. I glance back to where we’d come from, sensing spine-tingling danger.

Instantly, my heart suspends in my chest as Tomás exits the hotel, his untouchable divine presence leaving me awestruck. That dominating dark aura of his sucks me into a whirlwind and leaves me breathless.

Black sunglasses guard his straight gaze. A three-piece navy suit fits his body perfectly as if every single stitch was

thoughtfully placed in line with his masculine physique. Jeweled ear studs twinkle in the sunlight casting an aura of godliness around him. He doesn't smile or acknowledge the photographers who've suddenly popped up out of nowhere.

"Aww...fuck. We should've left by now," Giovanni grumbles.

An entourage of discreet soldiers linger a few steps behind him. It's not just him the paparazzi are fawning over. Bianca Morales is hooked onto his arm. The woman he's apparently not tying the knot with grins up at him, hanging off his every word.

Blood red lips stretch wide as she speaks to him and then she smiles when his lips move in reply.

"Come on!" André tugs at my waist, but my heart is too heavy to move. "The car is waiting down the street."

"He lied to me..." I hiss, my demons breaking free within me.

My knees go weak when he turns into her, takes her hand in his, and escorts her to a blacked-out SUV at the curbside.

"Christ, Dré, get her to the car." Giovanni's sharp tone fails to stir me from the betrayal.

I struggle against the strong arms tugging at me, doing my best to understand this cruel deception. Even in Prada heels, Bianca still has to stretch up to place her full lips on his. It's a chaste kiss where passion is amiss—no demanding pressure or slippery, wet hunger.

Either way, I die inside. My veins run cold, so the tiara locked in my fingers freezes. If he wants me to be his queen, I'd be like ice and stone.

Bianca fists his lapels as she gazes up at him, then thumbs off a smudge of shitty lip gloss left on his lips. My stare burns into her face, melting the flesh from her skull until there's nothing left but dusty old ashes.

I'm jealous. No, scrap that, I'm incensed. My heart rate shoots up, so all I can hear is the rush of blood around my

brain.

A suited man opens the car door behind her. She nods respectfully at him and returns her gaze to Tomás. I strain to hear what she says, her Mexican accent drowned out by André's displeasure at my disobedience. Fuck obedience. I'm my own damn woman and this is bullshit.

When her lips move, she mouths the words, "See you at the wedding."

Despite the tremor in my body, I manage to hold it together until Tomás lifts her knuckles to his lips and kisses them with tenderness—and offers a genuine smile.

I can't breathe.

My lungs cramp.

My knees go soft from the lack of oxygen. Giovanni latches onto my elbow and André tucks my ass against his groin to steady me.

"Get off me," I snarl.

Lies and blatant rejection wound me too deeply. Hurt morphs into physical pain. I'm adrift in a turbulent ocean, refusing the twins as my safety jacket. I jiggle and fight to break away, ignoring the watchful eyes of ignorant pedestrians.

Crushed in an avalanche of bone chilling ice that's blocked out the sun's rays and pushed me back into the darkness—where I truly belong.

André's nose butts my ear, his hissing growl hot like Satan himself had won the bet to spend time in his soul, "He doesn't want you to see this, Carina. Move it."

Without conscious thought, my feet move as I'm dragged a few meters away from the scene by both brothers.

"Fuck him," I snarl with a dented pride. "Fuck all of you! Let me go! I'm not getting in that car."

"Too fucking late," André bustles me towards the waiting vehicle holding my hand so tight my fingers feel bruised.

“You’re a part of this family now.”

“I have my own goddamn family,” I grit out. “And they wouldn’t lie to me.”

I didn’t want to witness her overly familiar interaction with him. It hurt too much. His treachery digging deeper than the blade I’d used to slice a track in my arm when I was fourteen. It wounded me more than any childish bully with acidic eyes and a forked tongue.

Yet, I couldn’t not look. I couldn’t turn away as it unfolded like a bad romance, except I’m glad I saw it all. Every single second, because I’d manipulate those painful memories to flip my love for him to a hate so strong it would blacken my heart for ever more.

Giovanni opens the car door and stands behind us like a shepherd overlooking his flock. “The shit is about to go down any second, Dré...” he urges.

Swinging me around, André’s eyes are no longer playful. They’re shadowed and lawless, battering me with so much irritation it makes me go rigid. He grabs the revolver tucked neatly in his waistband and rams cold steel into my tight ribs. “Do you love him or not?” He crowds me.

“Yes...”

“Then trust him. Now get in the fucking car before...”

Boom!

CARINA



“What the...”

I shirk out of André’s arms and face an enormous mushroom of evil in the azure sky, its breadth engulfing ornate buildings at the far end of the main street. Charcoal smoke chokes the atmosphere with villainous darkness.

A skin crawling silence captures every breath in a vacuum and then spits it out in a blast. Sirens, horns, screaming—It’s a cacophony of destructive misfortune.

My lungs cramp from trapping a shocked gasp in my lungs. It’s fearful energy gusts free when my thoughts switch to Tomás. I push up on my tiptoes to hunt for him, desperately trying to catch a glimpse of his face in the crowded chaos. My intense worry for his safety crushes my insides and my heart slams faster than a shot of adrenaline.

Finally locating his impassive gaze, I witness his hands clasp, cupping the back of his head with elbows wide and jacket splayed open. Men I’ve never seen before rally around his rigid posture as he stands perfectly still on the pavement outside of the hotel, thoughtfully watching the tail end of a car bomb in the distance.

“What the hell just happened?” I whisper on a shaky breath, my gaze locked on Tomás who’s too far away to reach.

“Not bad, Gio.” Matheus pops his head out of the black SUV parked on the curbside. The vehicle André and Gio ushered me towards. “I’d give that explosion a seven.

Could've used a bit more Semtex." He taps the screen on his phone and answers, "Yes, Mama. We're leaving now."

Giovanni sighs like he's dissatisfied. "Yeah. Maybe a six and a half. The flames were mediocre. I expected them to have more oomph."

I catch André's eye the second a wild expression passes over his face. "Could've been better. It's too close for comfort though, Tommy needs to get the fuck out of here, and so do we."

Chills scurry down my spine. "What are you guys talking about?"

"Bianca's bomb," Matheus deadpans. "Fuck, that's a good name. André, you should create a cocktail later to celebrate. Instead of a Dark and Stormy, we'll toast with a Bianca's Bomb. What liquor did she like?"

The trio laughs. "He killed Bianca?" My words rush out in a single short breath of panic. "You guys murdered her?"

"We didn't do anything. The bomb blew her fancy Mercedes-Benz to smithereens," Matheus says matter of factly, before speaking into the phone that's still pressed to his ear, then looks up at André. "Mama wants all of us in the car and on the highway. Now—so let's go."

I stay deadly still and stare, temporarily paralyzed, stuck to the pavement as innocent people ramble past us, hurriedly moving away from the creeping gray smog. My hands tingle and my chest tightens. Amidst the mayhem, I no longer see him.

It's a free-for-all.

Fear and pandemonium swamp the city workers and street vendors.

"You assassinated her?" They most absolutely freaking murdered her. They actually blew the woman to pieces in broad daylight. In Mexico, a city they don't rule over. A woman who posed a problem. A young girl like me.

Only moments ago, I'd held my breath as Tomás had kissed her knuckles like she meant something to him, and a minute later her body was incinerated by a blast so significant it set off every alarm in the entire street.

The visual havoc twisting my stomach to knots is disturbed by raucous gunfire. Putters and pings startle my dark thoughts where Tomás' demons live. Bullets spray the halted vehicles on the road beside the Souza's SUV. Terrified passersby wail, duck, and crawl over the pavement to seek cover.

A large hand crashes on my skull from above as Dré forces me to lower. "Get down, Carina." He orders, using his body as a temporary buffer.

I mindlessly obey, sinking to my hands and knees on the dirty sidewalk. Matheus jumps out of the vehicle with the vigor of a tornado brandishing a revolver while the twins pull out their weapons.

"Who the fuck is shooting?" Gio hisses, his aim jumping to the top of a building. "A street war wasn't part of the plan. Where's Tommy?"

"Security will take care of Tommy. We need to stick to his plan and meet Mama on the jet." André growls, pushing Matheus back into the SUV as the driver starts the engine. "Move it."

With his attention focused on a shooter, I mentally run over all the reasons why I should get into the SUV and all the reasons why I should run away from the cartel. Maybe one day I'd meet the same cruel fate as Bianca.

Do I believe Tomás would kill me—no—but is a life with these dangerous men my destiny—I don't know.

Another round of bullets sails through the electrified atmosphere, revving my survival instincts and propelling me to run. I scramble around the SUV's hood and dart onto the road, weaving static cars and trucks that have formed a mile long traffic jam from the bomb site.

Hunkering behind a transit truck, I press my hand to my racing heart and consider my next move. How could I go with

a family of psychos after they joked about stealing Bianca's life—and then critiqued the harrowing event.

They'd actually rated the explosion like it was worth a star sticker.

The Souza brothers orchestrated the unthinkable scheme, but it was Tomás who'd thought of it. He's the mastermind pulling the strings, the delicious monster incapable of love. The mighty kingpin who desires an obedient queen. A queen who could possibly lose her head eventually.

No wonder he didn't tell me what he was up to. He knew I'd loathe everything about it, and now all these innocent people are at risk.

My life is at risk.

I'm dizzy with fear and overrun by helter-skelter emotions. Bullets continue to spew from reloaded machine guns, busting up everything they hit. Unsure of where the hell I'm heading, I navigate a few more cars and glance over my shoulder to the Souza SUV in the distance and catch a glimpse of André firing at an armed guy who takes cover behind a streetlight.

I crouch by the wheel of a station wagon to plan out my escape route, but when I peer through a window to assess the area, two kids peer out at me from the passenger seat. Their worried little faces blanch.

My fingers tremble as I tuck flyaway strands behind my ears to look a bit more presentable and then slap on a silly grin. My forced happiness doesn't fool them. They just stare at me, chaos reflecting in the squeaky-clean glass separating us. I'm almost sick with worry for the young girl and boy, which forces me to keep moving in case I've got a target on my back.

There's nothing I can do to help them when I'm unarmed, broken-hearted, and having a shit start to the day.

I manage to steady myself, despite a whimper leaving me when the floppy haired boy places his small palm to the inside of the window in solidarity. He couldn't be more than eight. A sweet, caring soul with so many adventures ahead of him.

The glaze to his troubled eyes makes my heart pinch for Tomás, for the young kid corrupted by a fucked-up cartel code of honor. How his childhood was stolen and his future damned.

“Watch out!” the boy yells, his palm now curled into a fist and thumping the glass, eyes wide with terror.

I automatically rotate to face the danger, the lengths of my hair whipping through the air and my pulse tripping. Under the sporadic sound of gunfire, I freeze, my heartbeat racing as I helplessly watch Tomás sprint in my direction with his arms stretched outwards and his gun aimed, firing a few rounds as his torso twists left and then right.

“Get down, Carina!”

I don't listen to his orders. It's too late to obey. I'm already on the move, leaving behind the scared kids on a mission to hide from Tomás. Not only do I have rogue bullets to contend with, but he's chasing me like a prime bull.

“What the fuck, Cari? Slow down!” His voice booms inside my chest, powerful and ferocious.

Still, I ignore the warped instincts begging me to wait for him. For some crazy reason, they always guide me to him. But this time, I won't surrender to the madness. Instead, I keep running, left then right through a maze of vehicles leaving the Souzas behind.

Under my heavy breathing, I hear his dress shoes pound the road behind me and more shots are fired in retaliation to the constant barrage of bullets. Momentarily, the noise stops making me think he's taken out the closest shooter.

In spite of my desperate, half-baked attempt to escape for freedom, I'm clipped by a rogue cyclist who's trying to do the same, to get out of the line of fire. I stumble and lose balance in an undignified dive, whacking my head on the cement when I hit the ground like a sack of shit. On impact, everything goes black for a beat of time.

The next thing I know, a mass of sinewy muscle wrapped in sandalwood scented fabric crashes on top of me. A loud

whip-like crack follows and a repetitive tinny squeak.

I'm dazed and woozy. Pressed into the road under the weight of a powerful king and unable to focus on the rest of the world. Tomás coughs, slowly moving to his hands and knees. His brow furrows as he arches over me, his suited physique blocking out the sunshine.

"Are you okay?" He scans my legs first. "Your knees are scraped, they're bleeding." His voice splinters like the dull ache on the side of my skull. "Jesus fuck!" My scalp tingles at the tattered texture of his voice. "You've been hit. That motherfucker shot you."

While he furiously pats my winded chest, my gaze slides left to the upturned bicycle, front wheel spinning and the owner crumpled in a heap with a small, but deadly bullet hole in his temple. Tomás smooths his palms over my stomach, hips, pelvis...nothing. No pain. I squint in the bright sunlight when he dips lower, offering a thorough manic search of my pelvis.

His usual tanned face is pale and the more I stare up at him, the more his dark eyes look like bullet holes. Panicky, wide holes that search me limb by limb with blood smeared hands.

"Fuck, no. Jesus. Not again. Please. No. No. No," he chants, almost broken in his pursuit to find the source of leaking blood on me. "Talk to me, Cari. Where are you hurt? There's blood everywhere."

My head spins when I try to sit, awkwardly hitching to my elbows. While he's frantically checking me over, my fuzzy vision clears, and my veins run ice cold. "Tomás," I gulp, my mouth turning Sahara dry. "*You're* bleeding. It's not me. It's you."

He jerks, his spine going rigid and drags his searching gaze from my belly to his navy waistcoat clotted in crimson. The more it seeps into the fabric, the bigger the stain becomes.

"Thank fuck." He makes an odd sound like a sigh derailed by deranged laughter. "Christ. I thought he'd shot you." His

shoulders slump, decreasing his height.

A slippery hand envelops mine and the other gathers his revolver. We're painted in blood like victims of a vigilante massacre. He glances over his shoulder and scouts for high up snipers, his breathing quickly becoming labored. "We have to get off the street...the roads are gridlocked." As he angles into me, he winces. "There's no point going back to the hotel and the convoy won't be on the move anytime soon."

"You're losing blood, Tomás." I blink at the fluid spilling out of him. This is bad. Fatal. Fucking cataclysmic. "Where's the nearest hospital?"

A bullet soars, whizzing overhead like a killer wasp on steroids. Another follows. His teeth bare, not from anger, but from sheer agony. "No hospital. That's the first place they'll look for us."

My lungs cramp when he uses his body as a human shield and positions himself in front of me, snarling like a beast at the effort. "You need medical assistance, Tomás."

Darkness descends over his tortured features. My pulse pounds so quickly it deafens all the external noise. All I see is him. All I hear are his strained breaths and witness his pained grimace.

"Fuck, Cari..." he mutters in a low voice. "All this time...I was trying to protect you from all of this." His lashes flutter as power and energy oozes out of him. "Maybe it's my turn to die...for you...this is payback for all the bad shit I've done," he grits out through clenched teeth. "There's a private jet waiting for us at Toluca International airport. If I don't make it, get to the aviation ramp and board the plane. Mama will take care of you."

What's left of his strength urges me backward, so we're nestled between two vehicles. "Why did you do it?" I choke out, scooting to my elbows and watching him crawl above me, acting as buffer for danger. "Why did you kill her...like that...in front of her family?" The lump in my throat grows harder, making it difficult to swallow.

Sunshine catches in his villainous eyes, flooding into the dark depths. Tiny flecks of light disguise all sorts of crazy thoughts and justification for violence. A shadowy figure in the distance darts from hood to trunk. I'm too preoccupied with worry, busily heaving him closer and hugging him against me to consider the movement a threat.

"They had to see it...but this street war... this wasn't us... someone else planned it...you're in danger, Cari. We need to find my brothers. They'll help you get to the airfield."

Sweat glistens on his brow, his skin ashen even though my hands are glued over the hemorrhaging hole. Inside of our bubble, my gut screams at me. He's dying like a stray dog, right here in the streets of Mexico, and I'm helpless to save him.

If I screamed our enemies would descend on us like a horde of thieving ants. They'd swarm around the fallen king and pop a bullet in his precious brain without a second thought.

Outside of the sphere, my instincts tell me we're sitting ducks. That he needs an ambulance, or he'll finally meet his maker. The mercenaries are everywhere, readying themselves to close in on us. If they haven't pinpointed our location already.

It's move or die. Fight or fall.

His blood-streaked face is so close to mine, making it easy to count every inky fluttering lash. My skin prickles when the weight of him sinks on top of me, his mighty organs struggling to function as his veins weaken. He moves his head side to side to shake off dragging exhaustion.

"I'm sorry," he whispers into the side of my face. "I'll go down fighting to protect you."

"Don't say that. I'll get us out of this," I palm his stubbled cheek. His sigh whispers over me in a gentle breeze, the last dregs of his breath a careful caress. A pause settles between us. "I promise you, Tomás."

My tone doesn't elevate to fear, nor does it spike with adrenaline to show how petrified I am. I'm not terrified from the carnage around us.

I'm scared he'll die.

When he attempts to stand, his knees give way. A bullet hurtles through the air above our heads. His temper quickly darkens. "Motherfucker!"

He drops low, covers me completely, and unintentionally butts our heads together. "Don't move," he mutters, his voice raspy in a fight to ward off unconsciousness. "I'll kill that bastard. When I start shooting, you run..."

Another slug of lead pelts the ancient brown car beside us. Tomás growls from the depths of his chest with so much ferocity I swear he's slipped from humanity and turned into a satanic beast. He pushes up onto all fours, his body caging me within his limbs. I stay still because the expression on his shadowed features is so determined, his smoky aura evil.

My heavy heart hammers against my ribcage like a boxer walloping a punchbag.

He swipes a hand over his face and steadies himself in a hunched position with his knees bent. Every inhale denies him satisfaction. But his eyes, they're lit with the challenge of taking out the target.

I want to tell him I love him. I really do. Except now isn't the time to offload secrets and I'm still trying to process the cruelty this king is so easily capable of.

Tomás takes a shot, staggers a step, and slides down the car door we're hiding behind. He swallows loudly, his head lolling and his eyelids straining to stay open.

"Fuck..." He wavers on his haunches, tips forward and spreads his hands on the ground. "Get the hell out of here Carina. I can't keep them back for much longer," he snarls, spittle flying with every forced word.

Another bullet clips the side mirror, this time a warning shot to tell us the mercenaries are too close. He angles around, dives on top of me again, and imprisons me beneath him. I'm

at his protective mercy, and he's at the mercy of his fatal injury.

My heart stills as his ebony eyes lose their starry sparkle and the wind leaves his lungs in a gust. He just lies there, perfectly still while blood loss takes its toll.

He's in no state to fight, and I'm not about to let the bastards take him from me either.

I maneuver myself out from under him, carefully lower his upper half to the ground and pick up his gun, fully aware of the heaviness of the flashy revolver in my hand. It doesn't belong there, however the cold steel settles in my fingers like it should. It's not the first time I've handled a weapon and undoubtedly won't be the last.

The fine craftsmanship is exquisite as if carved by death itself. I do my best to focus, to block out the high-pitched alarms and wailing sirens, and hold back the wave of panic-stricken nausea taking control.

Beneath all the distractions, a muted yell follows a battering drumbeat. I scurry on hands and knees to the rear of the car. I chance a peek, setting my sights on the station wagon in the distance where the young boy fists the window again and mouths out the words 'over there.'

Drawing my gaze to where he's pointing, I catch a glimpse of a rifle poking out from the side of the trunk opposite his.

It's pointed right at us.

I hold my breath, fingers curled tightly, heart pumping, skull aching.

I count every wild heartbeat to keep me in the zone while I squeeze my left eye shut and take aim with my right.

One. Two. Three.

As the shooter dips out from his hiding place, I snap the trigger. The speeding bullet misses, puncturing a thick tire instead. Only I'm not put off by my crappy aim. Practice makes perfect after all, and I need to get Tomás to safety before it's too late. There are too many unanswered questions,

knotted feelings, and disturbed emotions. Too much love to unleash.

Despite what he did to Bianca, he's saved me too many times.

And for that, I owe him my life and my loyalty.

My finger squeezes continuously, shooting sonic booms as precisely as I can at a jack-in-the-box target. Luckily, I clip the guy's shoulder, halting him briefly. Until I pull the cold hard steel again and nothing happens. No fatal shot speeding across the battlefield. No winning bullseye spearing his evil heart.

"Shit!" I growl under my breath and pivot back around to face Tomás.

He drags a bloodied hand across his jaw, tries to haul himself upright and hisses through clenched teeth when his abdomen muscles move. "Get over here," he barks, eyes dark and teeth bared.

I land beside him on my torn-up knees, not caring how grit digs into my bare shins or how tiny stones scuff the brand-new leather of the Doc Martens he'd bought for me, because this wounded man is my savior. Our warped universe had a plan all along. Tomás Souza would be my biggest challenge of all.

The man I give my fragile heart to.

Tomás reaches up and pinches my chin, digging sullied fingertips into the flesh, hard enough to make it seem uncaring. I shiver at the harshness. Even now, he takes control with only his skin on mine, and I love it.

A ferocious gaze latches mine, melting me into the hot cement. I swallow the flutter in my throat and relish the wicked burn of his touch. He quickly draws my face lower and catches a kiss, tasting me for an endless moment in the midst of war.

"You're a fire starter, baby," he mumbles into my mouth, his breath hot. "You've started a fire inside of me, and I fucking love you for it." Tomás swallows the confession like it pains him to admit it. "You're not just a ray of sunshine splitting through the darkness—you're the whole sun. Your

light reaches me here.” He throws his hand to his temple and taps lightly. “But most of all, you’re in here.” Crimson colored fingers slide from the corner of his eye, down his pale cheek until his palm settles over his heart. “You think you’re the only misfit out there. Truth is...the whole world is broken, and none of the pieces fit together.”

He thumbs my cheek. “Now get the fuck out of here and never look back.”

CARINA



He actually *loves* me.

I'm overwhelmed by his statement, and completely shocked. I had pressed him to say it in the hotel, to say that little *big* word, except when it finally left his tongue, the truth saddened me. Maybe it was the way he spoke, how his tone reeked of defeat as if he was in a confessional booth offloading his vices before death.

Or maybe I'm just not sure how to deal with it.

How do I stand beside a ruthless man who steals lives without thinking twice?

I understand the logic of an eye for an eye in war. But premeditated murder for the whole country to see? That's unpredictable, psycho shit. The shock of it hurts my heart, but the reality of him dying—that crushes every fiber of my existence.

No matter what unforgivable deeds tarnish his soul, I'm stupidly and uncontrollably in love with him.

"You're wrong..." I nuzzle my forehead to his and blink away the tears I won't let fall, feeling fuzzy and confused in my obsession for him. "Some of the pieces fit together. They just need a bit of glue." He moves his hand to my nape and fists my hair to keep me close, our breathing heavy on the precipice of a disaster. "I'm not running from this. Not yet," I whisper.

Voices yell against the backdrop of screaming emergency service vehicles. Another bullet burrows into the silver

aluminum passenger door beside us. Immediately, Tomás slams into me so we tumble backward, limbs entwined and chests colliding.

“Don’t...move. Stay still,” he hisses under his breath, straining to get the words out, his eyes rolling, the effort to stay conscious becoming a hopeless battle. “Whatever happens, don’t move. If he shoots, play dead.”

This can’t be how it all ends. I didn’t travel through endless darkness to only peek at the light I finally found inside of me. I want to figure out if he really is the jagged toothed puzzle piece that interlocks with my rough edges.

Yet, I’m trapped under his weight, my huddled form screened by the man I love. Worst of all, he’s mortally injured, and I’m jinxed having dodged death twice already.

This time, I won’t be so lucky.

When I hear the air crack, I squeeze my eyes shut waiting for the fallout. I’m begging inwardly and clawing at his jacket to move him out of harm’s way. He won’t budge. Steadfast in his mission to become the sole target.

Instead of one clean shot, lead rains. Every loud bang makes me flinch. Tiny missiles pelt the jammed vehicles like insects clad in plated armor.

Innocent by-standers flee their vehicles.

Car doors slam. Children cry.

I close my eyes briefly, to think, to breathe coppery tainted musk into my lungs. Tomás’ muscular physique bares down on top of me, motionless, all of him safeguarding me completely. I raise my head a little and steal a look at the gunman from over his shoulder.

The bastard is slumped on the road in a creeping dark red puddle, mushy brains melting into the white striped paint of a pedestrian crossing like spilled ice-cream. The stench of death hits me as the hot sun coagulates his blood.

My heart rate spikes. Someone else took him out.

“Tomás...” my soft whisper carries in the brief hush. “We can make a run for it now...time to go...come on.”

He doesn't respond when I shake him.

“Tomás!” My tone raises a notch to panic-stricken.

I cup his jaw, the coarseness of his scruff unable to hide clammy, cool skin.

The air grows thicker, and my breathing grows faster. I nudge him again, but his eyes don't open. He feels empty, drained of life, stripped of strength. And with that hollowness within him, I choke back my terror.

My heart thumps like crazy, trying its best to burst out of my chest and support his. A temporary armistice ends with a rattle of bullets. It's a living nightmare. Shivers of adrenaline crash over me in mighty waves.

I'm patting his sallow cheek, searching his sinewy neck for a pulse, and grappling with his weakened muscles. I'm too distracted by the blood he's losing to give a shit about anything else.

The power-hungry Colombian drug lord is at my mercy. He's offered himself as a sacrifice to save the young girl he found in an alleyway, tarnished with his father's blood.

And now I'm drenched in his.

“Over here!” A masculine voice bellows. “Follow me.” Pounding footsteps move closer.

My lashes flick upwards, terrified his enemies have found us. The dazzling sunlight burns my teary eyes. Perhaps it's the hope in our combined darkness, shining on us both, promising something more than anarchy. I squint at the silhouettes charging our way. Armed mercenaries wearing black facial scarves approach in a quad formation. Only their eyes are visible.

I won't go down without a fight.

“Tomás...” I angle his weight to the right and watch long inky lashes flutter.

“Leave me here, Cari...run,” he mumbles. “Get to the airport. Steal a fucking car if you have to.” I ignore his order and run my fingers down his thigh, traveling to his shin bone. “Now’s not the time to get horny, baby. The Feds will be here any second.” He grunts from the back of his throat in a delirious half laugh. “Although, I’d die a happy man if you rode my dick to the pearly gates and left me there.”

“Pearly gates? Don’t you mean the infernal elevator doors to Hell,” I joke as a distraction, even though I’m anything but amused. “I’m not leaving you anywhere, and if you leave me, I’ll never forgive you.”

Emergency services’ sirens scream in the backdrop of chaos. Adrenaline injects my survival instincts. I unclip the small knife I know he hides under his trouser leg and fist the bone handle, chanting a silent oath to use it without fear. Masked gunmen close in, their psychotic eyes like stoic terminators lock on our coordinates.

They’ve found us.

I take quick sips of oxygen to prepare myself for whatever happens next. It won’t be pretty. I’ll stab these guys in the jugular if I have to. No regrets.

All I feel is slippery, warm blood seeping from the bullet hole in Tomás’ gut and worry he won’t make it to safety in time. One man ducks behind the hood of a cherry red truck, aims a sniper rifle and takes a pop at a shooter positioned on the roof of a building. The next guy keeps low, practically crawling towards us with his firearm raised.

The paltry blade in my shaky hand is no competition for the revolver in his. I blink away the scattered dots in my vision and try to push to my feet.

“Get down!”

The guy with boots just like André’s launches at me. We wrestle, him on top smothering me on the concrete and me trying to get a full range swing with the small blade.

“Carina, fucking hell, it’s me.”

He manages to slide the handkerchief down his nose, revealing his identity—André. I immediately come to a peaceful halt, relief washing over me until Tomás roars. He's too far gone in a mind glitch to realize it's his own brother. He twists, growling in agony, and hurls himself forward, his large hands wrapping André's throat.

I witness the unquenchable thirst for blood in his ferocious gaze. "Get your fucking hands off her. She's not going anywhere. I'll break your neck with my bare hands, motherfucker."

Even now, weakened from excessive blood loss and reeling in agony, he's blindly protecting me, unable to recognize his own flesh and blood from the carnage in his mind. The brothers buck and thrash. Tomás sinks into feral depths while André throws out desperate blows to tame the out-of-control beast strangling him.

They fight like a pair of rabid dogs, teeth gnashing and their brawn colliding as they wrangle. He roars with pain and savagery, the diehard sound a gruesome battle cry amidst intermittent bursts of gunfire all around us.

"Tommy...it's me...for fuck's sake..." spittle sprays from André's snarl. "Don't make me...shoot you...*cabrón*."

The venom of Tomás' wrath is impenetrable. Not even his sibling can reach him. He's depleting every drop of adrenaline in an unnecessary skirmish. For me.

"Tomás. Let go of your brother." I move quickly, ducking as more shots tear up the fatal atmosphere. "We need to get out of here." My fingertips wipe his sweat-laden brow in the hope our connection will banish his demons. "They're still shooting at us. I need your help."

The reverse psychology works. It's only when he thinks I need him, that his murderous mood calms. His vice-like grip unravels, his arms flop listlessly when he rolls onto his back drained of power, and his eyes look at the bold blue sky. He forces himself to swallow and dabs the crimson flow oozing from his torso.

“Fuck,” he says lucidly, acknowledging the damage.

“Christ, Tommy. It’s me—Dré.” He rubs his neck. “You’re still a psycho fucker, but now she’s the reason you glitch. Come on, get your ass up. Time to go”

His eyes roll in the back of his head. “Dré...Jesus fuck... get her out of here...don’t let them get her or I really will fuck everyone up.”

Matheus and Giovanni create a shield with their bodies, keeping guard and shooting back at the enemy. Tomás hisses with each movement, his attempts to sit upright a failure every time.

“It’s okay...I’ve got you.” My palm is pressed firm on his torso warm and sticky with blood like a bolt of lightning to spare every last drop.

A tremor racks my skeleton even though it’s baking warm under the high sun. I want to throw my arms around him and hug him close. To latch onto him and never let go.

Without lies and deceit, ungodly plans, and cash payouts, he’d revealed something pure and genuine. The ruler with a hardened heart had exposed the impossible.

He gave me what I needed to hear.

Honesty. Acceptance. *Love*.

After he murdered his bride.

In the background, his brothers continue to fire off a few more rounds. Shane bustles into our space and hunkers to eye level.

“Are you okay, kid?” I recognize his Irish brogue even with a face covering hiding his identity. His gaze tightens, scanning the mess I’m. “Are you hurt?”

“I’m okay. It’s all his...” My small voice wavers. I watch him assess the macabre painting my thin cotton dress. His eyes soften for a beat, a look of anguish creasing his green eyes that have darkened to a shade more lethal than poison ivy.

“Good, then you can run like fuck. We won’t make it to the airfield by car. There’s a chopper flying in. When I say run, you fucking run and keep going. Get on board, buckle up and stay there.”

He fixes me with a flinty glare, a look that tells me to obey without question. That would be easy to do, if Tomás wasn’t dying beside us.

“Cover him.” He nods to André who responds with a muted nod and a crick of his bruised throat. “Matheus, you go with Carina. Both of you get in the helicopter and wait for us. If we don’t make it in time, get the hell out of this city. Teresa is waiting in the private jet. The chopper will be here any minute. We’ll look after Tommy from here.”

“No,” I say breathlessly, the urgency electrifying my muscles. “I won’t leave him.”

“Get the fuck out of here, kid,” he bites out. “Move it. Go.”

“I’m not leaving him behind.” I stare him right in the eyes, my nerve plucky and my expression deadly serious.

“This isn’t a fucking game. It’s life or death, kid. We’ve got him. Head that way...” He points down the street. “Wait for the chopper to land in the parking lot a few blocks down.”

Beside us a glass window is blown to smithereens. André does a sudden one eighty, lowers to his knees and narrows his dark eyes. “We’re running out of time.” He angles his gun and points it at my chest. “It’s not safe for you here, Carina...For any of us.”

Thwapping blades whir in the distance, an incoming helicopter approaching from the far-off skyline.

“I can’t protect both of you. Do as you’re told and get the hell out of here. This is your chance to break away from all this. You don’t belong in the cartel. Go home, *señorita*.”

My insides coil with frustration. I press my ribs into the hard steel of his weapon. “Shoot me then, André. And I’ll see you in Hell when Tomás sends you there to find me. I’m not a

fragile little girl who needs saving. And I won't leave him until I know he's okay."

"Fuck this. If you get killed..." André bares his teeth as the honorary pack leader while the king is wounded. "None of us want that. Our guys can only hold the bastards off for so long."

"I can look after myself from here, Dré."

My fingers curl around the bone handle in my sweaty palm as my courage builds. I've stared at death's unhallowed face before. I'm not scared of dying, but I am terrified of losing Tomás.

"Let's face it, a sniper could hit me while I'm on the run, or right this very second, standing here debating this. You're the one who pointed out this would be my life with him. I'm not a spineless coward who bolts in his darkest hours. So, let's focus on an escape together. It makes more sense for you guys to cover *us*. You're holding the weapons. He can lean on me."

I glance over at Shane. "Help me get him to his feet."

This ambush is karma laughing at the Souzas for executing Bianca and every terrible thing they've done in the past. It's the universe warning me with ear splitting bullets and ferocious flames—these guys are dead men walking. Eventually, their heinous crimes would catch up with them.

The Reaper would steal their souls to pay their callous debts.

I've witnessed their relaxed countenance flip to lawless beasts and how easily they could revert back to mere men again, wearing gilded masks of charm to hide their nefarious deeds. I won't say it terrifies me, because somewhere in the mix of it all, lies a moral code. An intoxicating decree of honor whereby each of the Souzas would die for the other, and somehow, I'm privy to those standards.

I'm in their circle. Under their care.

Protected by the Souza cartel.

As disconcerting as that revelation may be, I'm no longer the outsider looking in—I'm part of this terrorist pact and that sense of belonging excites me. It feeds my innermost desires for acceptance and inclusion.

For years I hovered on the side lines of life, an outsider gazing at the glamorous girls who hung out in their sly gangs. They systematically annihilated the rest of us with cruel gossip and made us watch as they trapped the popular boys using their infinite good looks and empty souls.

If they saw something they wanted, they took it by whatever means was necessary. There was no integrity in their methods. Only selfishness and the privilege of confidence.

After my corrective surgery, they saw the darkness smolder within me. Dumbasses are notoriously confused by things they don't understand. Eventually, they'd kept a safe distance and slipped into the background.

Looking back, I appreciate the suffering for what it was—preparation. I wasn't meant to fit into their egotistical lifestyle, because I was nothing like them, and never would be.

All the screwball pieces don't have to fit together—it only takes one deviant shard to create a liberated woman. A woman who could step into her own light and handle a possessive monster. A man whose sharp edges balance my own until we're a mess of blood and flesh, heart, and soul.

Or perhaps I'm disillusioned and my instincts to survive have blurred from a severe case of Stockholm Syndrome, having spent so much time with the Souza organization and their superior leader. His sinful touch and sexual commands are all I've ever known, and they aren't something I'd choose to let go of easily.

All I know is that Tomás cares about me, whether it's love, lust, or the invisible chains of ownership. The hard-hearted villain still feels something for me, his body still reacts to me, and his actions still shelter *me*.

And when we're together, just him and I, the burdensome shadows we've harbored since we were children fade to gray.

His presence brightens my black and white world with psychedelic streaks. Our passion feeds the starved creature within me and makes me believe he's starved too.

However, seeing this newly crowned king of absolute power, so vulnerable and finite, reminds me how he's simply a mortal man. And it's all too easy to forget the devil lives inside of him.

Shane and André glance at each other for a wisp of time and then step into place, silently accepting my plan. Tomás mutters under his breath and curses the movement of being heaved to his feet and fighting the hateful weakness. Even in pain, he's stunning in the way he forces himself to stay stoic, trying his hardest not to appear fragile in the very moment he's exactly that.

Sunlight captures his physical distress. Whereas the shade carves his stern expression like his features were structured by immortals. He's fascinating in a way that portrays limitless danger and godliness. I doubt I'd ever stop loving the thrill of our attraction.

I hook one of his arms around my neck and Shane does the same. With him supported on each side, we ramble as a trio through the narrow maze of vehicles.

Intermittent gunfire explodes in echoey cracks and the hovering helicopter circles over the parking lot in the distance struggling to find a risk-free spot to settle.

My pulse pounds and my breaths become heavier. "We need another plan." I point out, the exertion taking its toll on me. "We'll be sitting ducks waiting for that thing to finally land. It's taking too long already. They'll watch us get on board and blow it out of the sky the second we're in the air."

"She's right." Tomás grunts. "They'd take out every Souza successor with one blast. We can't all be in the same place."

His right knee gives way, almost pulling me down with him as he stumbles. I force myself to stand strong and take some of the weight, sweating with the effort.

"We're fucked if we're together. Split up."

“Christ.” Shane takes a beat to steady Tomás before we heave him away from the lines of cars and veer over to the sidewalk. “We gotta get out of sight,” he grits out. “Don’t stop, kid.”

Beyond the green trees lining the length of the pavement, there’s a narrow avenue and a set of traffic lights. I stagger forward, tripping up the curb while doing my best to keep my hand on Tomás’ leaking wound.

It’s not easy sharing the weight of him, with me being so much smaller than the two men, but my cortisol levels are sky high giving me strength.

“Over there.” I nod to the street sign, panting from exertion and feeling my knees turn to jelly. “This way Shane. Keep up.”

A sharp whistle from behind has Shane glancing back over his shoulder. “Dré wants us to turn back,” he bites out.

“No. We can’t.” I shake my head, feeling lightheaded yet keeping my feet moving. “I’m sure they’ve spotted the incoming helicopter by now. We’d have a better chance of getting out of the city if we go this way.”

“We don’t have a backup plan. Tommy needs a fucking paramedic.” Shane snarls, his breathing labored. “He’s not dying on my watch.”

“Trust me,” I pant. “I’ve got a plan.”

And I do, even though the thought of it makes me sick to my bones.

The light changes from sunny to shady, dropping the temperature with it when we stagger around the corner and leave the main street in the sunshine. Parked alongside the sidewalk is a faded bubblegum pink and lime green postal service truck clearly not used for delivering parcels anymore.

“If you’ve got skills, Shane, now’s the time to use them. Can you hijack that truck?”

One corner of Shane’s mouth lifts. “Can I?” he questions in a sarcastic guffaw as he hauls Tomás over to the rusty truck

and helps me prop him against the roller door at the rear. “I stole my first BMW when I was fourteen. I can hot wire anything. It’s my party trick.”

His eyes glint, quickly moving from Tomás’ pale face to follow through on the challenge I’ve set him. I raise my brows when he shoots the lock, twice, and rolls the door open. “Get in,” he deadpans.

I expect to find letters or parcels stacked within built-in shelves, instead it’s an empty shell with only a hot musty aroma of decay. The floor space allows Tomás to sprawl on his back and gives me room to work on the bullet hole.

Shane secures the shutter, plunging the small cabin into wishy washy darkness. After a heart palpitation, he throws open the driver’s door, jumps inside and checks the sun visor for keys.

“Give me a second,” he calls out. “I’ll have to work my magic on this old fucker. She’d better fire up like a hot little kitty and not choke on us.”

His voice is a distant warble under the rush of blood coursing through my veins and deafening my thoughts. Tomás flits in and out of consciousness, his lashes fluttering as he wars with himself to stay vigilant.

My dress is already saturated in blood and there’s nothing else around to use. When the engine sputters to life and the truck rattles violently, I peer through the front headrests to the large windshield where Shane is seated.

“I need your shirt. If you have a belt, take it off too. It might come in handy.”

“So, what’s this plan of yours, kid? Teresa will rip my balls off if something happens to Tommy. Please tell me you’re not winging it?”

He acts quickly, drags the mask off his face, rips his T-shirt over his head, unbuckles his belt, and tosses it all over his shoulder.

“Of course, I’m winging it!” I snap. “No one told me you guys were going to blow people up.” I fold his sweat laden t-

shirt a few times. “And by that, I mean Bianca. Is that how you treat every inconvenience? You stick an incendiary device under their vehicle.” My belly cramps with the sheer cruelty. “So yeah, Shane, I’m trying my best to get Tommy somewhere safe given the circumstances.”

My fingers feel numb even though they’re moving, and my lungs burn from every quick inhale of dry, stuffy air. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think I was having a panic attack. Those aren’t something I’ve ever really known, not until now.

Sweat trickles from my forehead, the beads catching in my eyebrows and rolling down my temples. What if I fail and he dies like this? The truck rattles and suddenly my synapses jolt, causing waves to crash through my system. It awakens my instincts and propels me back into action.

He needs my strength when he’s weak.

He needs my protection when he’s defenseless.

“Tell me where the fuck I’m driving too, kid.” Shane’s Irish lilt tugs at my fear.

“Just get us as far away from here as possible and onto the highway.”

When he slams his foot on the gas, the truck reverses at warp speed. My body jerks and swings before my ass bangs into the metal interior. I can’t see anything other than a stream of bright light from the front, cutting the shadow shrouding Tomás majestic body.

Once we’re hurtling forward, my brain slips into gear. It’s like old times in the hidden oasis medical facility where I enjoyed being the surgeon’s apprentice. Only this time, I actually care if the criminal I’m trying to fix doesn’t wake up. The comparison winds me with a punch to the gut.

I get to work ripping open his shirt and locating the bullet entrance on the right side below his ribcage. Sliding my hand under him I check if it went right through. It did. Thank goodness the ounce of lead isn’t inside him doing more damage than necessary.

I pad out the exit wound on the underside, press my knee over the leaking hole and bare down to seal it with my weight. I'd thought of using the belt to cinch his abdomen except he needs drastic measures if we're going to be traveling any distance.

"We're on the move." Shane barks into his mobile phone. "He's bleeding out, big time." He goes silent for a beat. "The chopper didn't land on time, Dré. Look...it's too late now, we're in a decommissioned postal truck heading away from the city. He needs a hospital. We'll quadruple security and make sure his room is cordoned off until he's ready to fly to Colombia."

Only that's the last thing we should do. It's not safe for us in Mexico, never mind in a public building where people come and go at every hour of the day. Despite that, surgeons could be easily paid off and nurses bribed.

My fingers brush over the scar on my lip as I debate the risk I'm about to take. There's only one feasible thing to do. I search the inside pockets of his expensive suit jacket, the rich silky lining haunting my senses with his cologne. When I find his phone, the locked screen comes to life and illuminates the dim light.

I hover it over his face for facial recognition and swallow a gulp when I see his background image—a photograph of me, freckle faced, pool drenched lengths stuck to my cheeks and an expression of faraway thought.

Out of curiosity, I tap on the photo album app and scroll through the photos.

Me sleeping in his bed.

Me getting into his Audi thinking I could escape him.

Me at the edge of his infinity pool at the compound before he made me lap up tequila from his dick.

Me in Mag Mell.

I'm the sole content of his library.

My heart hammers wildly, the density of the phone seemingly non-existent as my hormones go haywire. What man captures so many pictures of a woman he's fucking, right from the very start?

I stare at the fiery eyes of myself, eyes that sparkle with life and adventure, and finally figure it all out. These men are terrifying killers when it comes to their enemies. They are living, breathing, catastrophic nightmares. But they aren't my nightmares.

I punch in the digits I was forced to memorize long ago and press the phone to my ear while my bloodied hand shakes.

"It's Carina. I'm in Mexico. I need your help."

CARINA



“Are you hurt?”

“No.” My voice cracks at the sound of his deep-rooted worry. This isn’t what I wanted—involving my brother in Colombian cartel business. To save the man who captured me. “He is. The guy I’ve been spending time with. He was shot. We can’t go to the hospital, because it’s too dangerous. We’re on the run, Sal.”

“Hey...kid...who the hell are you talking to?” Shane glares at me over his shoulder and then cuts his stormy gaze back to the highway.

Our gazes catch briefly in the rearview mirror. “It’s okay, Shane. I’ll explain later. I promise. Just keep driving.”

“Carina?” My brother’s patience frays. “What the hell is happening? Who are you with? Who the fuck is the guy you’ve been spending time with, Cari?” Sal’s sharp tone reaches my ear with a rebellious shiver. “Is he a pathetic cartel minion? Some small-time narco who promised you the world? What’s his name?”

“Tomás...Souza.”

The line goes deathly quiet.

“Souza?”

“Yeah.”

“Christ...” His savage growl blasts through the airwaves and pelts my ear with shocked disbelief. “You’re involved

with the biggest drug lord in Colombia? Please tell me it's not the same guy." Sal half-shrieks, half-freaks the fuck out.

I lift Tomás's hand and stroke the inside of his wrist. "It's the same guy."

Sal makes a pained sound from the back of his throat, his exhale of dismay swirling between us. "Of all the guys in the fucking world, Carina." The sharp bite of my full name shows his utmost anger. "All these years of thinking the countless sessions with shrinks had helped, and yet you're still caught up in destructive behavior. Was this your plan all along—to hunt out the worst possible danger and grant your death wish that way?"

"Sal...that's not what this is." I swallow the lump forming in my throat. It pains me to think he's disappointed in me. "I don't want to die anymore. I haven't been that girl in a very long time. I've no desire to die. This is something deeper."

"So what, you're an adrenaline junky now—" His voice splits in two. "Oh fuck, please tell me you're not snorting shit or shooting up—"

"No!" I rush to defend myself, my body violently crashing into the interior when the truck rounds a tight bend. "Look—he saved me, Sal. When I was kidnapped by the pirates at the oasis, that bitch of a woman sent me to his father. Tomás let me go even when Elias Souza ordered him to kill me. Don't you see, I'd be dead if it weren't for him."

"Guys like him don't let anyone go." Sal snarls with so much venom that I feel the sting of every word. "He's played you like a cheap ukulele. The fucker knew you'd be indebted to him. And now look. You're in *Mexico*, in the middle of a feud. Drug deals and street gangs aren't you, Cari."

I finally snap, sick and tired of this merry-go-round of guilt and justification. "How would you know who the real *me* is? Jeez, Sal, I've been disgusted by my shadow for too long, a pitiful recluse for nineteen godforsaken years. I may as well have been dead. The smiles were all for show. I quickly learned how they lit up your world and eased mom and dad's

worry. So, I forced them out and slipped into the role of a happy sister even though I was numb inside.”

A raw confession pours from my heart without a buffer.

“From the second I met Tomás, it felt like he plugged my soul into an electrical current and switched me on. I can’t explain it, but these days, I’m *alive*. My heart beats, its arteries pulsate for adventure. My cells are on fire and my thirst to witness every sunrise is a mission I’ll never stop fighting for.

“The only chemical I’m hooked on is dopamine. I’m learning how to follow my instincts every day. You can say what you want about us, about him...but right now, he’s all I care about. I’ll save his life with or without your help, but I’m begging you...please, do this for me.”

Sal grunts. “You’re *nothing* like them and don’t be fooled into thinking he won’t cut your throat when he’s done with you. Those guys don’t give a fuck about innocents. They’re predators who flash dollar bills like winning lotto tickets. They play with your mind and pretend you’re valuable, until you’re not.” The line muffles and I hear him mutter as if he’s talking to someone else. “Stay on the line; we’re close to tracking your coordinates.”

“Sal...” I take a deep breath. “He’s in a bad way. We need somewhere close by before he loses too much blood. I’ve patched it up as best as I can, but time is one thing we don’t have a lot of. If you love me, you’ll help him. You both will. I know what *el Fantasma* can do. So please, let me repay Tomás a debt for saving my life. Let me save his.”

Shane glances over his shoulder. “Tell me who the fuck you’re talking to, kid before I follow the signs for the hospital.”

My wide eyes hunt out his. “Look, Shane...I need you to concentrate on driving. I told you I had a plan, so let me figure it out. If we take him to the hospital, we’ll expose him to whoever was shooting at us. You’re not in Colombia now. They’ll search the closest medical facilities first. We have to think outside of the box.”

“Cari...” Sal’s voice comes back strong as he speaks again. “I’m sending you an address. The Vet knows you’re coming.”

“A veterinarian?” I slide sideways as the truck swerves. “Are you kidding me? He’s not an animal, Sal.”

“Really? You have no idea what Tomás is capable of,” he practically laughs with disdain. “Clearly he’s blinded you with money and sex.”

“Don’t—,” I hiss. “Now isn’t the time to argue. I love you, but you have to understand, this is important to me.”

“Fine. We’ll talk later. And believe me, we’ll fucking talk.”

My spine tingles with unease. I’ve never heard my brother so angry before.

“Enrique, as he’s called now, is a local veterinarian. He lives in an eco-lodge by the national park outside of the city. He’s like a hybrid park ranger who fixes creatures and arranges tours of the forest.”

He continues. “The guy has crazy surgical skills. He used to remove organs after death for donation. That was before the cartel picked him up as a viable asset. They made him pack out the empty cavities with bags of cocaine for storage, as well as hiding it in the refrigerated organ transportation compartments. In basic terms, they paid the guy stupid money to become a drug trafficker and then he got busted. Those fuckers didn’t give a shit about him, Cari. Then they sent a *sicario* to take him out after the DEA swung by with a search warrant.”

My belly flips with the risk of trusting a butcher to save Tomás. “Are you sure he’ll help him? What if he decides this is the perfect time for revenge?”

“He knows better than to get involved in the Colombian underworld. This is a massive favor between allies. Even though Enrique doesn’t want trouble, he’s indebted to *el Fantasma*, so he’s on our side. Don’t expect a warm welcome though. He detests the cartel and everything they stand for.”

At that second, the phone in my hand beeps. I pull it away from my ear and check the message with a link to Google maps.

“Got it...thanks Sal. I love you.”

He blows out a long sigh. “Keep your eyes open. I don’t trust any of them, especially the bastard you’re trying to save. He doesn’t deserve you. Take his gun while he’s out cold and don’t let go of it. If someone comes at you, pull the trigger, Carina, because they sure as fuck won’t think twice about shooting you. And do not tell anyone where you’re going or who gave you his details. Promise me?”

“I promise.”

When he hangs up, I take a steadying breath and wipe my salty brow with the back of my hand. “We have directions to a safehouse nearby.

“There’s a medical guy called Enrique, who’s waiting for us. He’ll be able to help Tomás,” I call out to Shane, and waggle the phone at him.

“What guy?” He takes a hand off the wheel to throw it behind him and stretch for the phone. There’s a foot of empty space between us. He can’t crawl into the back and if I move, blood will erupt like a volcano.

“Incoming...” I toss the phone at him, bypassing his waiting hand, clipping the headrest, bumping his temple, and sinking out of sight.

“Fuck’s sake,” he complains. “You’re lucky I like you kid, or I’d dump your ass on the side of the road.” He lifts the phone and glances at the screen. “Do you know him?”

“Not exactly. He’s a friend of a friend. The less you know about him, the better.”

“Don’t play me, kid.” He spies me intently in the rearview mirror, his lucid green eyes narrowed and suspicious. “I’m not driving anywhere unless I know who this clown is. Does he know there’s a Souza on board? I’d never walk into a building with my eyes shut. *Never.*”

I understand his unease. Even I'm skeptical about the park ranger who had operated on cold corpses, but time isn't on our side and my brother wouldn't send me headfirst into a viper's nest.

"Tomás trusts me, Shane. Now you have to do the same. You know the hospital isn't an option. He's bleeding out and neither of us wants him to die. So, you need to drive us to that meeting point."

"It's a national park. Do you know how many people go missing in those creepy as fuck woodlands?"

I know only too well. The Amazon rainforest was my sanctuary where I both hid from the world and healed from the damage it did to me.

"It shouldn't take too long if you put your foot on the gas and stop whimpering about it. The guy comes highly recommended."

His spine goes rigid. "I'm not fucking whimpering, kid."

We're already breaking the speed limit on a federal highway, the rattly engine heating up from all the action.

"Then stop driving like an old lady." I goad him knowing he'll take the bait and focus on the challenge rather than the destination.

I actually don't mind being with Shane. The guy looks mean and terrifying with his thread thin facial scars, but that's what I like most of all. He's unapologetically imperfect, straight to the point, and zero fucks given like my boss at the jazz bar.

They'd be a good fit together if he wasn't a homicidal bodyguard for the—bloodthirsty capo I've fallen for. How ludicrously ironic.

"Who recommended him?"

"A ghost."

He shakes his head. "Fuck, kid. Are you always this cryptic?"

“You have your secrets, and I have mine.”

“And you’re certain it’s not a trap?”

“I’d stake my life on it.”



It’s been the longest fifteen minutes of my life. We’ve long since left the highway and dodged any sign of the cops. They must have been busy with the chaos unraveling outside of the hotel, creating a clear route out of the city.

The truck reduces speed to a steady crawl and comes to a stop. “This must be your guy. He looks wild as fuck.” Shane mechanically lowers the window half-way.

“You lost?” A deep, husky baritone carries into the dead air.

“Enrique is expecting us.”

“Where’s the girl?”

“I’m back here,” I call out, reluctant to climb off Tomás even though my legs are cramping.

Birdsong catches my attention in the eerie lull until there’s a squeak and a shudder. Metal rubs on metal and blinding light blasts in on us as the shutter door whips upwards. I squint, my blurry eyes focusing on the bulky figure inspecting the bloodied mess he’s found us in.

Alpine trees surround him like vigilant soldiers, densely packed together in a natural wall that tames the high Mexican sun. He leans inside and scans the entire space. At the same time, clean air mixes with the dry heat that had baked us in here for far too long. It’s cleaner than the city smog and less humid, yet still sweltering.

“He looks in bad shape.”

His brittle honesty sprinkles chills down my sweat laden spine. I dab my brow and inhale his pine fresh scent.

“Before I take you to my place, you should know that I detest organized crime gangs. He ain’t no god of the streets when he’s in my territory. If you choose to follow me and he dies, it’s on you, not me. Understood?”

A layer of scruffy hair covers his strong jawline in a casually messy beard and blends into darker lengths pulled back and secured at his nape. Rich coffee-colored eyes clash with mine, the intensity fierce, his bitterness unmistakable.

“This has nothing to do with the cartel. Right now, he’s just a man who needs your help. *El Fantasma* told me you have surgical skills. I believe you’ll do whatever it takes to keep Tomás alive.”

He folds muscular arms over a navy blue shirt scattered with white palm trees. Its buttons are mostly fastened, except for the top three which give me a peek at his swarthy skin and ink adorned chest, the designs creeping out from beneath the sleeves ending above his elbows. The tails hang loose over his army green cargo shorts.

There’s a crazy resemblance to *el Fantasma’s* style, but this guy doesn’t look at me like a friend. His eyes hold hateful secrets I’d rather not know.

“There’s only so much I can do. Looks like he’s lost a lot of blood already. He’ll be lucky to make it to the lodge.”

My heart dives. “Please...you’re our only hope. Take a look at the injury first. The bullet went straight through. We can cauterize it at least. I’d be forever in your debt.” He thumbs his full lips and nods slowly, his stance growing somewhat predatory on that thought. “Cauterizing won’t work if there’s internal damage. I’ll check his organs. It’s risky as fuck, and I don’t want a drug lord’s blood on my hands.”

“It’s not on your hands,” I say in a rush, time ticking quicker than my racing pulse. “This was my decision. If something goes wrong, it will be my fault for not taking him to the hospital.”

“What is he to you, girl?” His thick voice offers non-negotiable authority, because we all know he has the upper

hand.

“I love him.” The beat of my heart skitters on my admission, the audible declaration odd as it leaves my throat.

I’ve never loved another soul on this earth aside from the people I’m lucky enough to call family. So, this is a revelation. An anomaly. The harsh truth.

He shakes his head and gives me a scowl that depicts pure disgust. “They don’t deserve love, or compassion. If I do this, it’s because of our mutual friend. I won’t hesitate to put a cap in your skull if I see any of those cunts sniffing around my property. Are we clear?”

“Crystal.” I swallow hard, my throat so dry it feels scratchy and swollen.

“Right then. Give me your phone.” He rubs a hand down his face like he’s frustrated with his decision. “That includes you too, big guy. No phones and no guns.”

“No fucking way...” Shane snarls from the driver seat. “You think I’ll hand over my piece and deliver my people into a fucking ambush set up by some feral fucker. Think again, Tarzan.”

Enrique shrugs, his hefty boots scuffing the gravel as he takes an uncaring step away from the truck.

“No worries,” he says absentmindedly. “The nearest hospital is an hour away, back down that track. I’d say your boss has less than ten minutes before his heart gives up and his brain fades to shit.”

Stone cold nonchalance meets his unempathetic monotone. He grips the strap slung over his shoulder making the rifle attached to it dance behind his back.

“Nos vemos en el infierno, big guy.”

See you in hell.

“Wait!” I lunge forward, the rapid movement breaking the seal I’d secured over the wound with my knee. “Take them. They’re all upfront with Shane.” My head rotates towards the windshield where I face Shane’s highbrow, exasperated

expression. “Shane. Give the ranger what he wants. My eyes dart to Tomás’ golden revolver tucked neatly against my shin, out of sight. Sal had told me to keep it close, and if I can, I would hide it somewhere. “This is the only way he’ll comply. You heard him. Tomás won’t survive another journey. It’s all or nothing.”

“Bastard,” Shane mutters. “Just so we’re clear, I don’t need a gun to cause fatal injuries. If you come for us, I’ll rip your jugular open with my fucking teeth.”

“Christ,” Enrique chuckles darkly. “And you think I’m the undomesticated one. I have a three-legged coyote with more class than you. Bitches bite and slap. Men use their fists.”

He reaches up and grabs a hold of the shutter.

“Anyway, I was raised with manners. You respect me and stay the fuck out of my business, and I’ll let you leave with all of your body parts intact.”

His eyes settle on my chest where Tomás’ blood nestles against my breasts.

“And hopefully your short vacation in the park will be worth it. Watch out for the snakes though.”

He winks and my stomach lurches.

CARINA



It was a short drive through the woods, descending over uneven slopes where deep potholes made the wheels grind. Eventually, we rose higher into the mountains.

The entire time, I had focused on Tomás' shallow breathing and the way his pale skin misted, salty and distressed as his organs struggled to function. The constant *thump, thump, thump* of my heart escalated to a gallop when his lashes flickered.

Despite his battle to win, he was unreachable.

This has to be the stupidest thing I've ever done. We're miles from civilization and in the hands of a terrorist who'd happily set alight the earth Tomás walks upon.

Except I've learned to listen to my instincts, which I did, and now I'm wondering if it was a monumental mistake.

But I trust *el Fantasma*. He wouldn't drop me into the ocean to play with sharks without buying a speedboat for a quick exit. And I'm not sure which scares me the most. His vengeful temper or the stranger whose four-wheeler flew over the rough terrain with a convoy of canines in hot pursuit.

After a few uncertain, panicky minutes, we arrive at a sprawling lodge that ate up a clearing on the otherwise wooded hillside. It's discreetly hidden beneath ancient trees and verdant landscape which shelters an aged wooden exterior and tall stone pillars linked to a boundary fence disappearing out of view.

I could scream at the top of my lungs and only the wildlife would stir.

Shane had pulled up behind the pack of excited dogs, close to a flagstone path fronting the property and waited until Enrique banged his hand against the side of the truck, signaling for us to get out.

Together, the three of us carried Tomás inside, navigating steps to a wide front porch and a tree trunk framed doorway. Our elbows had bashed into walls as we shuffled along, the narrow corridor lit only by the natural light following us from outside. After a few staggered steps taken in silence, we took a sharp left where sliding doors led to an impressive surgery.

Now we're fuck knows where in the natural world, lost and one hundred percent dependent on Enrique. My heart shrivels. This is a moonshot. Hope woven into a spiritual prayer to the universe.

“Out.”

Enrique stretches his hands into a pair of blue latex gloves, his clinical, well-equipped treatment room an unexpected backdrop for a rugged man who clearly spends most of his time in the wilderness.

A central operating table gleams under the bright lights of a round lamp screwed into the neighboring wall on a moveable arm. There are wires connected to mounted monitors, oxygen tanks with tubes, and breathing apparatus stashed by the window and a weird rubber-like flooring underfoot.

“Let me help.” I search Tomás’ wrist to feel his pulse scarcely beating.

“Both of you need to get the hell out of here.” Enrique glares at Shane who stands by the doorway, filling it with his broody presence. “This is a sterile environment, and you’re a breeding ground for contamination. If I go to all this hassle of saving this fucker’s life, the infection you give him would send him to his grave. So, do the guy a favor and wait outside on the porch.”

An overhead fan thwaps, its jaunty angle makes the blades click. He jangles surgical instruments onto a steel tray, fixes a circular magnifying glass to his forehead and pulls the cord to tighten it.

“And no fucking snooping. My security camera’s will pick up your movements. Go back out the way you came and stay outside until I come for you.”

“Wait...I’ve assisted in operations before—,” I plead. “I know how to—”

“Are you medically trained?” He interrupts while tying a plastic apron around his waist. “A surgeon? Or even a nurse?”

“No...but I—,”

“Close the door on your way out.” Enrique jabs a finger at the exit. “You’re wasting time. His—and mine. Get out.”

Out of all the emotions I’ve endured, I hate feeling helpless. It’s not the same as relinquishing control to a man who offers pleasure and pain. That’s fantasy, my dirty desires. Helplessness is when you’ve no control, no power, no authority, and only an empty feeling in your chest.

And right now, I’m putting faith in a man who won’t give me the opportunity to help. I may not be a medic, but I’ve got experience and a level head, and I know Tomás.

Shane reluctantly pivots away from the gut-wrenching scene where his best friend is being cut out of his shirt. He stomps along the wood-paneled corridor and out onto the wraparound deck. His big boots create deafening thuds to match his heavy temper.

I follow, hot on his heels. The rhythm of my pulse is all over the place and the dried blood on my skin looks like I’ve taken a break from shooting a horror movie.

Earthy air catches me off-guard. I hadn’t noticed the aroma when we’d moved from the truck to the indoors. I was too fixated on Tomás to take in our overgrown surroundings. It’s a familiar, homely scent, not much different from the jungle I used to visit all the time.

Thoughtful ravens watch us from bouncing branches and the distinct call of a hawk drags my gaze to the treetops where it circles. Delicate butterflies flit from the wildflowers scattered through long grass. It's an idyllic location, given the city is on its doorstep.

The best of both worlds.

Shane sinks onto a log bench and props his elbows on his knees, hunched forward with exhaustion. The sky is cloudy now, no sign of azure blue.

"This is fucking surreal." He runs a hand over his scalp and exhales slowly. A dog barks and a flock of birds take flight. "...Can't believe he took my gun."

Then I remember how I covertly covered Tomás' gun in Shane's blood-sodden T-shirt and put it to the side.

"Back in a second." I ramble down the steps, jog to the rear of the truck, jump in, and grab the dark material, thankfully feeling the weight of steel beneath it, even if it's not loaded. Backtracking, I stuff it behind a big boulder close to the front deck.

"Have you got any more bullets?" I say in a hushed voice, joining him again.

"Aye, a few. Not that they'll do any good without anything to load them into...unless that was..."

I press my dirty finger to my lips and nod. "Load it up and leave it there. If he finds either of us with a weapon, he'll likely kill us with it. At least we have something if he turns."

It's only now, in the stillness that I realize my skull is pounding from bashing it on the pavement earlier. My muscles are tense as my head and heart ache.

"Why did he have to murder Bianca? Surely there was another way to prevent a bloodbath." I blink in the lush greenery and playful dogs rambling freely along a pebbled pathway snaking into the forest. "All this could have been avoided."

“I need a fucking drink.” He shakes his head and sighs heavily.

“Makes two of us,” I mutter, pressing my hands to the carved pillar holding up the roof.

Shane leans back and kicks his ankle up to rest on the opposite knee. “The old Tommy would’ve married that girl and not given a fuck. He’d carry on with business as if nothing had ever happened. But something did happen. You twirled into his life like a tornado.”

I turn on the spot to face him, every bit of me shaking.

“I’ve never once heard him question himself until he had to sign the prenup agreement. That shitshow was like trying to castrate a lion without sedatives. Grumpy fuck kept staring at his phone, waiting for Dré to send him another photo of you. Don’t get me wrong, kid, he’s not gone soft. He’s still a ticking time bomb with a short fuse, but somehow, he’s managed to contain his psychotic tendencies since you came on the scene.”

He pauses, his eyes finding mine.

“The woman isn’t dead.”

I cross my arms over my midriff, my knees softening and my mind looping. “I saw her get into the car—we all saw the bomb go off.”

“Yeah, we saw a bomb go off alright. Her car took a sharp left a few seconds before the actual bomb was detonated. We paid the morgue good money for secrecy, a John and Jane Doe, and the rest was a perfectly executed smoke screen. Her family will mourn Bianca Morales’ death, because that’s what she wanted.”

My brows pinch together. “I don’t get it. She wanted to fake her own murder?”

Shane scrubs his face. “Tommy will fill in all the blanks when he’s patched up.” He stands. “Do you think Dr. Doolittle is a hippie weirdo who drinks his own piss for health benefits, or do you think he’d have a stash of hard liquor?”

My mind is reeling.

Bianca isn't dead.

Tomás didn't kill her. He gave her another choice.

"Either of you two this guy's family?" Enrique appears, his gloved hands crimson.

My heartbeat stutters. "Why?"

"He needs a blood transfusion."

"Christ..." Shane fists the bench.

I rush forward. "I'll do it. Test my blood for compatibility. He'd want mine."

Enrique nods. "Fine. You'll save his life if I can get a pint or two out of you."



The blood transfusion gave Tomás' ghostly complexion a healthy flush and made his temperature soar. Enrique and Shane had transferred him to a single bed in a decent-sized room where I carefully removed his slacks, leaving him in snug boxer briefs. Then Shane headed outside to guard the entrance and clear his head in the fresh air.

Our accommodation isn't fancy, but it's clean and somewhat reminiscent of a cute log cabin. There's a wooden rocking chair, flimsy roller blind, and clean flannel sheets on the single bed.

The slim door on the far wall leads to a tiny closet. I checked it earlier when I was looking for blankets and only found a few hangers.

I'm used to seeing Tomás in expensive suits and luxurious properties. Nonetheless, lying here with his sinewy physique eclipsing the mattress, I'll never get used to his effortless edge—even in these austere surroundings, healing from surgery he still oozes superiority.

He's the riotous flame I'm drawn to.

An all-encompassing presence I'll never tire of.

Enrique had hooked him up to a heart monitor and pricked a strong vein to fill him up with pain relief and antibiotics.

I've been sitting here, waiting for him to open his eyes. He hasn't yet. Despite the fever, Enrique assured me there was minimal internal damage. Thankfully, the bullet had only grazed Tomás' lower intestines which he easily repaired before swaddling him in gauze and bandages.

The rickety chair opposite his bed has a green cushion for my lower back and a picture-perfect view of misty topped mountains. Neither of which mean anything to me when I can't hear his voice or meet that rogue glint in his eye.

Although I'm comforted by the steady bleep of his heart rate, knowing he's finally out of the danger zone—and deeply relieved he didn't assassinate Bianca. Despite knowing fragments of the truth, I still deserve answers. I need to understand why they planned an elaborate and final exit for the woman. What about her parents—her brother?

While I watch him wrangle the inferno burning from within, a combination of emotions I've never experienced before are eating me up. My love for him blends with stomach knotted anguish and insistent worry warped by gnawing fear.

All the courage I had earlier seems to slip from my soul. I'm overcome with flashes of emotion, each one cutting me to pieces.

What will happen when those dark eyes reopen, and he sees me again? When Tomás realizes I had disobeyed André, brought him to a remote destination, and pumped his dying organs full of my blood. The very substance that feeds his monster.

“You need a shower, girl. There's nothing you can do for him while he's recovering. The bathroom is down the hall, second door on the right.” Enrique hovers in the doorway, looks me up and down, and holds out a bottle of water.

He's changed his clothes from earlier, a closely fitted sage green shirt with stenciled palms repeated over the fabric hangs

open so the rippled landscape of his abdomen is on display. An obsidian necklace drapes his smooth chest with effortless style. I reach out and accept the drink with a tight smile.

“Thanks.”

“You should eat something after donating your blood. I don’t particularly want two patients to look after. I’m a busy man. I’ll get you a clean shirt to wear. Grab a few cookies from the kitchen when you’ve cleaned up. You look like you went toe to toe with a bear.” He smirks, making his eyes sparkle. “And that Irish goon is on the porch drinking my *Cerveza Sol*. I hope he’s not an even bigger dick when he’s drunk.”

There’s a slight thawing to his otherwise icy bluntness.

I go to stand. “Nah, he won’t drink that much. Shane can sink a bottle of tequila and still walk in a straight line. It’s been a long day; you can’t blame the guy for unwinding.”

And he’s watching the wooded lane like a hawk, trusting me to take care of his cousin. My heavy sigh matches the weight in my heart.

“I know why you hate the cartel.” I straighten so we’re face to face, albeit I’m much shorter in stature and he’s built like a caveman. “I get it. I really do.”

“You don’t know shit, girl.” There’s a cruel edginess to his voice that raises my hackles. “Unless your morals are equally as rotten as theirs. Although, I’m thinking a sweet little thing like you hasn’t seen the ugliness that comes with all that greed and domination.”

A flashback of Paco interrupts my thoughts, the brutality that had surrounded the situation and what followed. My skin flushes from the memory of Tomás rutting into me like a god fallen from grace.

“I’ve seen it.” I sound unaffected when tingles cause me to shiver. “However, it’s not just men like them who have ugly, black souls. At least they’re upfront about it. They don’t pretend to be anything other than what they are.”

His eyes narrow, the soft brown turning muddy. “No point talking to a woman who’s been glamorized by it all. You’ll hear what you want to hear and justify their behavior all so you don’t feel bad when they come home with blood on their hands.”

I don’t need to explain my reasons for standing by Tomás, especially not to this guy, however I’m driven to defend him.

“I can see what’s under his skin, what he hides from the world. He has a heart, especially when it comes to the mistreated dog he rescued and nursed back to health. Kind of like what you do here.”

Enrique pushes off the doorjamb. “We’re nothing alike.”

I shrug. “We’re all capable of doing bad things. Our upbringings were very different—being raised by a psychotic criminal creates high expectations. And you know what—not all monsters carry guns. They wear pretty dresses and fake smiles too. What makes a childhood bully any less cruel than a man who’d take a bullet for me?”

I glance over my shoulder at Tomás in slumber. Even laid out on a narrow bed, muscles glistening with sweat, he still captures my breath.

“Or should I say, who *took* a bullet for me.” I correct myself, falling deeper into the spell of him and I.

Enrique’s hum reverberates in his chest, lifting all the hairs on my scalp. It’s not threatening, more a show of his annoyance.

“The cunt doesn’t deserve your loyalty. I know who Tomás Souza is. Don’t you think it’s odd how his fiancé was blown up this morning, and here you are, covered in his blood and defending his honor like the good little girl he wants you to be.”

I’ve said enough about us. All this talk about my personal life is giving him ammunition when I know zilch about him, aside from the story Sal had fed me. My chin hitches high in defiance.

“How come you’re out here, all alone?”

His mouth quirks at the corners, his dark hairs twitching with amusement. “He’s taught you well, girl. Maybe you’ll go the distance with him, if he doesn’t fuck up your life first.”

He saunters into my space, a mountain of a man with an uncaring swagger. I brace for what he plans to do next. Rather than touch me, he closely skirts the very spot I’m standing on and moves to Tomás where Enrique’s brawn crowds his prone form.

“Who said I’m alone?” He adds.

“Aren’t you?” I watch his casual movements, how he’s methodical in his surveillance of his patient, regardless of his opinions of him. “Animals don’t count.”

“We’re all animals, aren’t we?” Enrique chuckles from deep in his chest, the sound verging on illicit. “I guide tourists through the park and tell them all sorts of interesting information. They eat that shit up like candy, especially the groups of women.” His lashes flick upward as he angles into me. “I get my fill of human interaction when it suits.”

He winks and laughs with a smoky darkness that oddly makes my core quiver.

“Just because I choose to live out here, doesn’t mean I’m a loner. It gives me the freedom to pick and choose who I deal with. If you decide you’d like to hang around for a while—when he goes back to Colombia—I’d happily teach you a few things.”

The wordplay isn’t missed. Over the weeks, I’ve grown accustomed to the single-minded train of thought some men seem to indulge in. Given the slight creases around his eyes, he surely matches Tomás in age, and with those years of experience he’d be an excellent educator for someone—I’m not that girl.

The thought of another man touching me is horrifying.

My gaze falls to Tomás’ chest rising with every shallow breath he takes. My belly aches from the distance separating us. He’s lost in his own mind, healing from within, while I have to witness his gruesome journey.

Rather than appear rude, I opt for a charm offensive to drive home my point. “You could have turned us away back there, but you didn’t. I’ll never forget what you’ve done for us. How you saved his life. I know my close friend *el Fantasma* is grateful for the diligent care and warm hospitality you’ve shown us. None of us will forget it. I promise you.”

He cracks his neck from side to side. “When you leave, do me a favor and forget all about this place.” His expression becomes serious. “I won’t be as accommodating the next time you people land in my territory. My debt to *el Fantasma* is paid in full—and then some. I won’t welcome those bastards again for anyone.”

Enrique watches me closely, thick brows nipping together in a scowl.

I swallow and push back my shoulders to stand taller. His pensive brown eyes swirl, a sandstorm brewing. I feel it in the air, the danger lurking under his inked skin like poison. The vibrating urge to do something depraved and the threadbare self-restraint to keep himself in check.

“Until then—” His tone switches to silken and smooth, toxic and seductive. “Hang out for a while. Shower. Eat. Pray—for a happy ending.”

The corners of my mouth twitch to an indifferent smile and I do a one-eighty, strolling out of the room with as much confidence as I could portray.

“Come and find me when you want that clean shirt. You’ll find a towel in the bathroom,” he calls after me.

We have no way to reach André or his other brothers. The only available weapon is hidden, tucked next to a boulder beyond this man’s porch. Our phones were destroyed and Tomás’ survival depends on Enrique’s flimsy goodwill. My rib cage squeezes the air from my lungs, each step putting distance between Tomás and I.

Glancing over my shoulder, I narrow my eyes at the sight of Enrique slouched in the chair I’d vacated. When he air salutes me with two fingers, I smile tightly.

“I’ll be right here, girl. Five minutes. After that, my bedside manner goes to shit.”

I nod and continue walking, passing a steel, wall-mounted locker secured with a padlock. Maybe it’s a gun cabinet. A safe place to store the rifle I saw him with when we’d first met. What man would live in the wilderness without a decent arsenal of weapons? He doesn’t strike me as the sort of guy who would take a chance with only one gun.

I open the second door on my right as he instructed and enter the naturally styled shower room. It’s surprisingly clean for a guy who lives on his own. Whitewashed planks clad the walls, and a creamy slate floor leads to a sliding glass door where an open-air shower awaits on the other side. It’s framed by thickset bushes and a tall, discreetly hidden panel to control the water flow.

Turning the faucet welcomes a hypnotizing waterfall from a large shower head. Jets stream, dancing over the natural rock base and its slatted wooden platform. Finally stripped out of the filthy dress, I tiptoe into the chamber and inhale a lungful of eucalyptus. The soothing sensation is bittersweet bliss.

Murky water rolls from my nakedness and disappears beneath the boards under foot. My bruised body trembles from being in a constant state of fight or flight. I wish I could stop feeling, and tap into the numbness I used to drown in.

That way my swollen heart wouldn’t be so damn sore. Fate had dropped me into the criminal underworld—I’m now an honorary member of—and even though I barely landed on my feet, it’s changed me.

I’m not a pitiful young girl anymore or the pathetic withering soul who’d let the world crush her. I’m stronger. Painfully aware that life is the most treasured commodity we will ever own.

So, when flashes of death come rushing in and I revisit the moment when Tomas was shot, when he put my life before his own, an overwhelming rush of love and gratitude shakes me to the bone. Tears fall in tandem with rolling water droplets and I

palm my stomach to settle myself, holding my other hand over my mouth to mute a sob.

He did that for *me*, as I would do for him. No hesitation. No questions asked. Even if I had to pull the trigger to protect him. I would morph into a monster too.

I am that monster now, and I wear the battle scars to prove it.

We're all built for something, our destiny mapped out with soaring highs and wretched lows from the day we take our first breath.

I couldn't be more certain of anything—I belong with Tomás, no matter how ugly our love appears to the world. His distorted soul lives in every part of me.

Despite my newfound sense of self, death isn't something I'd thoughtlessly inflict upon others. I'd rather save a soul than be the one responsible for watching it perish. Certain things are out of our control and being helpless during Tomás' operation is my hardest regret. I could almost cry from the helplessness I felt.

It's a caustic reminder for a woman stepping into her true self that she's only human.

The taste of his blood is in my mouth, even though I'm lathering my hands with a minty soap, so the dried blood settled under my nails washes away. I don't waste any time, hurriedly rinsing the day's violence from my messy strands and wrapping up in a clean, air-dried towel, a little crispy and rough.

Dogs howl from outside, the spine-chilling sound making me think a pack of wolves are circling. A shiver runs through me. We need to leave this place as soon as Tomás is well enough to travel. I swallow the ball of saliva formed in my throat and push out into the hallway only for my feet to come to an abrupt stop.

“Holy fuck!” I gasp, gripping my towel the second I freeze.

Ferocious sharp fangs bare at me from a white-faced Husky, lowered and ready to lunge at me. Brilliant blue eyes narrow in on my shocked expression, unwavering in their assessment of my wet skin. It's not alone. A shadow moves in my peripheral vision.

My pulse skyrockets, thumping in my chest so damn hard that I feel faint.

I take a sip of oxygen and suddenly find the most mystical, vibrant ocean eyes I've ever seen. They drag me into the current and sweep away my speech in a deadly tide. The stranger wears no T-shirt, his tanned, bulging arms are covered in animal tattoos.

On quick inspection, there's a snarling lion with a proud mane. A 3D snake is slithering the length of his forearm, a solo wildcat primed for attack, its sharp claws creeping onto the back of his hand and the crowning spot on his broad chest goes to the face of the husky waiting to rip out my throat on his command.

I'm dumbstruck by his masculine features and logic-defying cosmic eye color. His dark disheveled hair is lightened by golden streaks of sunshine and high chiseled cheekbones give him the sort of facial structure the model industry scouts for. He's hauntingly striking.

"Call off your dog!" My voice is a wisp of air. "Enrique knows I'm here."

He doesn't speak. Although I find him remarkably attractive, my skin isn't fiery from lust. It's hot from the eeriness of his silence. His extraordinary aquamarine gaze communicates for him as he studies my face first, ever so slowly examining the water droplets rolling into the towel covering my breasts.

The wolf-like dog with similar ethereal irises continues to show its bright white teeth until the guy, not much older than me, sets a large palm on its fluffy head. The instant contact tugs an invisible leash and the growling stops immediately. It transforms from savage soldier to docile pet in a missed heartbeat.

I expect him to question me, instead he gives me one last look, his celestial eyes dawdling on my throat—on the faded bruises I'd forgotten about. Then, in silence, he pivots in his dusty work boots, his thick sinewy legs decorated in the same ink as his arms and wanders off.

I dismiss the mystery of him and bolt back along the corridor, my breath coming hard and fast. Thankfully, the heart monitor still beats out a strong rhythm. I grab Tomás' wrist and instantly notice his body heat has reduced to a more comfortable temperature.

Enrique obviously had reached his boredom threshold and left. It pleases me that he did. I'd hate for Tomás to wake up in this bed, in this unknown lodge, and not have me there to explain.

I lean over him and kiss his lips, those soft, destructive lips I adore so much.

“Please wake up. Come back to me, I need you more than ever,” I whisper into the side of his face, savoring the waning hint of cologne in his short hair.

Before I settle beside him, I want the clean shirt Enrique had offered and a pair of shorts, preferably track pants. Anything to deflect the attention away from the fact I'm the only woman surrounded by hot-blooded males. Except, I can't quite figure out if the guy I just met has arctic blue blood in his veins.

This towel is the only thing I have to wear right now, so I make sure I'm tightly mummified from chest to thigh and hurry along the corridor going in the same direction as blue eyes.

A hushed mumble comes from the clinical room I was banished from earlier. I pause by the doorway, listening to Enrique's deep, smoky rumble. The dominant voice of a man in control of every aspect of his life.

“They won't be here for long. A day or two, then they're outta here. I promise.”

I peer around the doorframe where blue eyes energetically polishes the operating table and shakes his head stiffly, a long exhale deflating his broad chest. He still doesn't speak, not one word.

“Look...Fletcher...I had to help him. I was given assurance there wouldn't be any kickback. The girl has connections. And now she's with that fucker, she's untouchable.”

He slowly wanders around the operating table towards blue eyes—Fletcher—yet keeps a measure of distance. The husky shifts in its seated position, gaze fixed on the brawny man hovering on the periphery of his master's personal space.

“Once I've followed through on my side of the deal, that cunt on the porch and his crooked king will be gone.”

I know Shane is guarding the entrance so no one else arrives. Although, I'm not sure how Fletcher got in here without being seen.

The fact Shane is mere steps away from the loaded weapon we've stashed gives me peace of mind. He won't hesitate to shoot these guys now Tomás is in recovery.

Fletcher stops cleaning and quirks a brow, still choosing to stay silent.

“The girl isn't our concern,” Enrique continues. “Like I said, she's untouchable. Anything happens to her, and all this goes away. We'll be dusting ashes from our shoulders in hell, and the animals won't have anyone to help them.”

All the saliva in my mouth dries, the reassurance of our safety thrumming inside of me. Fletcher nods once, combs his long fingers through the sun tipped lengths on the top of his head, and ruffles the hair. A dispassionate shrug is followed by a subtle curl of his lips.

The soles of my wet feet make a squelchy noise on the wooden floorboards when I finally leave them. As the sound of my movement breaks the stillness, the hairy guard dog growls, low and menacing. Pretending I wasn't snooping, I

push back my shoulders, take a deep breath, and force myself to enter the room.

My gaze darts from Fletcher to Enrique. Nerves crash behind my ribcage, the sensation like chaotic butterflies. When I go to speak, the invisible flutters rush up my throat and carry the words.

“I’ll take you up on the offer of that shirt now, please.”

Both men stare at me, their eyes burning through the damp bare flesh on show at either edge of the towel. Fletcher palms the dog’s head, soothing him with touch while his glacial gaze fixates on the faint bruises he had found intriguing before.

Enrique clears his throat and rubs the coarse hairs on his chin. It’s only then when I notice the dull, chunky silver skull ring on his index finger.

“Those are pretty marks on your neck, girl. Does our mutual friend know about those or are you into kinky shit with your lord and master?” His eyes glimmer with unreadable thoughts.

My fingers fly to the discolored skin where they continue to stare.

“Mind your own business,” I say sharply. “That’s personal.”

On my last word, the atmosphere changes, making my skin tingle in a way I can’t explain. A noise from behind pricks my ears. The husky bares its teeth, the vicious snarl foreseeing a war. My pulse surges and every hair on my body stands to attention. Both men visibly straighten, their broad chests lifting a fraction higher as if they are in the presence of royalty.

I spin on the spot, the soaking lengths of my hair whipping the air. The instant my wide eyes settle on him, I forget to breathe. Any trace of uneasiness I might have felt dissipates at the sight of Tomás, his supremacy eating up my attention.

He stands at the opposite side of the clinic, both fists clenched, his left shoulder pressed against the doorframe to offer support while his feet are rooted to the floorboards.

Aside from his heaving chest, he remains motionless and stone-cold in his wordless assessment of this unusual scenario.

My head tips to take in his exposed muscular legs, showing no sign of weakness. Sweat gleams on his golden skin, the color gloriously full of life. His usual immaculately presented hair is tousled and wild on the top of his head.

He's alive—his veins flowing with my blood, his eyes ferocious like a raging furnace.

It's not only Tomás who's come back to life; I also feel the blaze inside of me. The brightest light following the darkest hours.

Our gazes clash. The mishmash of emotions I'd felt from the beginning swarm around me, our combined energy more fulfilling than a spoken word. For a nanosecond the murderous shadow in his soulless eyes unravels as he stares at me.

A spike of recognition and a flash of desire strip away his homicidal tendencies. My belly flutters, the intensity of our connection dazzling my senses until I no longer know how I'd survived the past few hours without him.

He's my real-life fantasy.

My everything.

Relief flares in my heart, along with a spiked awareness of belonging. His enigmatic presence hits me like a ten-ton truck, slamming into my chest, my heart, and my soul. The effortless power he exudes, even after a near death journey, grips me in a choke hold. There's no questioning how he consumes every element of my being.

Love is a feeling, but this is something more. It surpasses emotions and claws beneath my flesh, crawls around my organs, and embeds into my DNA. The potency of it leaves no doubt that I am his.

Our silent moment of remembrance crumbles at my feet when his teeth bare and the hue of his irises flicks to baneful, engulfing pinprick pupils. A trickle of blood runs the length of his forearm where he's ripped out the cannula that

administered intravenous fluids. His posture vibrates, predatory and primed for attack.

I unstick my feet and smile, the sincere sentiment failing to appease the demonic glare he now projects to the men behind me.

“Carina.” The way he says my name, riddled in the current of a hellish temper electrocutes me with desire, propelling me towards him.

I feel his anger slicing the air with razor sharp blades.

“Where the fuck are we? And why are those motherfuckers daring to stare at you like they don’t know who you are to me?”

TOMÁS



I died and went straight to Hell.

Or so I thought when a frigid wind blew through me, its arctic glaciers freezing my veins. I did my best not to let go, to close my eyes and leave her behind. Carina needed me, and as it turns out, I needed her more.

I'd sank deeper, dropping from the earth she graced, drifting to the barren plains of the afterlife where my girl wasn't allowed to visit. It was fucking lonely without her—my new personal purgatory.

From the depths, I fought to reach her, battling the whisper of a death so final it would suck out my infernal entity and hang it beside all the lost souls I'd stolen.

I wasn't ready to leave her alone in a world she hated. Nor did I want my enemies near when I wasn't around to fight for her. Even sprawled out in the back of a shitty truck, my psyche was trained to defend, protect, and kill, but my treacherous mortality had failed me.

As time blurred, flames made light work of melting the frozen chamber I was imprisoned in and soothed the teeth-jarring shivers. The sub-zero no-man's land I found myself in caught fire.

Scorching heat had replaced the formidable arms of a frozen tomb. I felt the essence of her soul seep into every part of me, taking up residency in the innermost parts of my being.

When my eyes opened and I found myself in a strange bed, flat on my back wearing only my boxer briefs, stuck to a

bleeping machine with a long tube siphoning clear liquid into my hot veins and Carina was nowhere in sight—I glitched.

I didn't care how my eyes stung from the dying daylight, how my head spun when I stood, or how my shoulder crashed into the wall when my knees gave way. I had to find her. The machine flatlined after I tore the sticky pads from my chest.

When I violently ripped out the needle stuck in the crook of my arm a crimson spray covered the bedsheet.

As I staggered along an unknown hallway, my hands went numb and my feet prickled, a thousand invisible needles and pins jabbing the soles.

My heart had levitated when her sweet voice sang in my ears, so close, so fucking desirable. Finding her in a room with two men I've never met, covered in a simple towel no less. Well, sanity all but left me.

Once upon a time, I was a man who believed I could walk the earth without a significant other—without a woman to share my fortune and passion. Why have one girl when many could offer temporary satisfaction, and feelings would have nothing to do with it?

Since finding my girl, I no longer have any sway in that belief. She'd arrived in my kingdom and stolen my full attention, bringing with her the unforgettable notion of ownership.

Those were the ideals of a foolish man. A traumatized asshole who associated love with death. And having survived the claws of death, I'd rather love her than lose her.

She could hate me, and I would always chase her—always—because the breath-taking woman walking towards me like a Grecian goddess, wearing dulled fingertip bruises around her neck belongs solely to me.

It's an unnatural reaction to want to wrap my hands around her throat again. But I do, just to feel her racing pulse and know it's me who made it happen.

The facts are, I will never share Carina Ferreira with anyone.

Each footfall of her dainty feet carries her exquisite form closer. She steps elegantly into my personal space and places a soft, calming hand on my cheek, her head proud on her regally poised neck.

I swear my heart jostles when her big eyes drink me in with complete adoration. It pleases me more than the billions hanging off my family name to know I'm still holding a firm grip on to the number one position in her life.

Ebony rich hair shines under a damp sheen, the minty fragrance of clean, smooth skin completely dick stirring. She means more to me than she'll ever know. The warmth of her touch soothes the gnawing pang in my chest, the agonizing worry I have for her safety.

Where the fuck are we?

“Did they touch you?” The words burn my throat, but the mental torture of such a possibility almost blinds me with rage. “Are you okay?”

“No.” Her eyes catch halos of light. She shakes her head slowly. “It's okay.” Her sweet voice, although bold in its delivery, wavers slightly. “We're safe here.”

I notice the verbal tremor when no one else would and how she pats her upper lip and then quickly stops.

“I've missed you so much,” she whispers.

Saturated material hides the glorious parts of her no other man will ever see. Yet while I stand here for a silent heartbeat, I imagine tearing the cotton free to reveal her fine breasts and marked alabaster skin. Time spent away from this woman has been a journey I never want to travel again. I'll ensure it never happens again.

A silky tongue peeks free, and she captures her fleshy lower lip between her teeth, inhaling quickly. Liquid fire swirls in her blazing stare, a gaze so hungry it lights me up from within.

Her desire for me matches the need I have for her. The thrust of it in my core only makes me snarl. I try to contain it. But the carnal noise scrapes from my throat, its roughness

competing with the wolfish dog at the feet of a bare-chested on-looker.

His watchful turquoise gaze is nothing short of chilling and the older guy beside him narrows his eyes on our reunion, his expression twisted with disgust.

I slide my hand to her nape and press my forehead to hers. “Tell me you’re okay.”

She nods. Then for the longest moment, none of us speak. A clock ticks out the seconds and a balmy breeze blows in on us from an open window, unable to cool the heat of my burning skin. I’m liquid fire and shivery at the same time.

Blinking away dizziness, my hands jump to her biceps, to hold her, and drag her closer—to feel her thrumming pulse full of life. Our closeness does exactly what I’d hoped, it feeds my hemorrhaging energy while simultaneously stoking the unbearable impulse to take care of her.

My heart pounds hearing her gasp, not out of fear, but from the sheer satisfaction of my control.

Inky pupils flare as our chests collide. Her exhales tingle over me in a squall of satisfaction. The immediate contact is my ruin—she’s my weakness, now and forever. I struggle with dissolving self-restraint, so relieved to see her and thirsty for that pretty mouth of hers.

The more I think about claiming her in front of our audience, the more my dick suffers a rush of blood so extreme that I sway. Concentrated emotions of love, lust, and vexation crack my strained countenance as beads of sweat roll the length of my spine.

How dare those motherfuckers sniff around my woman.

With a surge of strength, I push off the doorjamb to stand unaided, exerting the adrenaline pumping through my veins. Somehow, they feel thicker, robust—unbreakable. Her lips part, the grip on her arm growing more ruthless as my temper builds.

“Where the hell are we?” I mutter, the sound of my voice hoarse and gravelly as if I’ve swallowed grains of time

without water and choked on the hours spent fighting off the Reaper.

She looks me square in the eyes, controlled, queenly, and astounding in her tenacity.

“We’re at a safe place outside of Mexico City.” Her fingers graze the broad dressing tight to my gut, the corners of her eyes creasing as if she’s recalling a nightmare. “Enrique is a local veterinarian.” She angles her shoulders and nods to the older guy. “He saved your life, Tomás.”

A tremor in her voice punches the air from my lungs. My pulse becomes chaotic as she tells me how we had ended up in this cabin, and I discover the extent of what she did for me. Even the predatory dog in the background takes a break from threatening me when its watchful owner settles a hand upon its skull.

“I thought I was going to lose you.”

Salty tears glitter in her wide gaze, but they don’t extinguish the raging flames of courage and fortitude. The very qualities I love most about this woman. Her fighting spirit against all odds.

“I brought you here instead of taking you to a hospital where the Mexicans would find you. Your brothers are safe; they reached the private jet. No one knows we’re out here in the forest. I listened to my gut like you taught me and brought you here. Shane’s outside on the deck.” She lifts to her tiptoes, her lips so close that my sanity stretches to capacity. “It took a while to get here. Enrique had to operate, and...” She hesitates a beat before whispering. “You needed a blood transfusion.”

My entire body braces, horror slashing through my composure until I’m gripping her fragile bones in her wrist with so much force they could easily break.

“I gave you my blood, Tomás. I’m sorry—”

I can’t inhale. My lungs capsize and a surge of dots scatter my vision. I close my eyes and focus on the soft caress of her breath, the arousing scent of her skin, and the wild rhythm of

her heartbeat next to mine. I feel the power running through my veins, getting stronger, hotter, and energetic.

It's not disgust, or a cataclysmic clash of revulsion. We bleed the same. It's like an explosion of starlight in a night sky, brightening my tortured mind.

Her admission pacifies the insufferable drive to murder and maim the men who are still staring at the woman I love. She's the one who'd saved me. We've blended blood and connected on a deeper level.

I don't hold back, shoving my possessive hands into her wet hair and stealing her lips with a kiss so full of appreciation it welds our broken pieces together and solidifies my claim on her.

There's no denying it.

I'm hypnotized by her.

Truly, madly, ferociously in love.

"I've missed you too, baby," I mutter into her mouth, then thrust my tongue inside and relish those soft lips I'm obsessed with, my roughness fueling her exhilaration to a whole new level.

She'd be helpless to fight against me, not that she does, we've sailed past the point where either of us pretend this isn't real. My aching body dominates hers, angling her out of view so I'm buffering my girl with all that I have left.

I kiss her without control, aware my demons are poised to play should these fuckers try to come between us. I might be unsteady and bone-tired, however the ounce of lead that had tunneled into me couldn't keep us apart and neither would they.

When her sexy little groan vibrates, it shocks my tired muscles, tugs at my gravity, and forces me to crush her curves hard against me. The closeness takes every last shred of self-discipline I have not to slam her ass into the wall and fuck the life out of her.

Rather, I fuck her mouth with my tongue, share her oxygen, and offer a ravenous promise of what we'd do in private.

The potency of our ruthless desire is interrupted by shuffled footsteps. It penetrates the lustful haze I'm not ready to surface from. The intrusion skims across my shoulders in a wave of prickles—a warning—animal sharp instincts kick in.

It's time to figure out what these men want as payment for taking in a cartel kingpin. Of course, they know who I am.

Everyone does.

Once I'm certain she understands how I feel about her, I step back and stare down at her beautiful lips, left swollen and perfectly pink. My thick grunt causes her pupils to swallow me whole. Our kiss, a waxen seal securing her fate and anchoring Carina beside me for eternity.

I'll never let her go.

Not now.

Not ever.

I slowly pivot on the spot, turning towards the bearded guy whose arms are folded. He stands on his own, hip dipped against a steel cabinet and his unforgiving gaze watching my every move. I hadn't noticed the younger one leave, probably because the world ceases to exist when I'm touching her.

We face each other in a silent stand-off. He appears cold, impassive with no emotions on show. Instincts tell me that even though this guy had stitched me up, he'd just as quickly put a bullet in my skull. This isn't a situation I'm familiar with—waking up in unknown territory.

I'm always organized, on the front foot, and most definitely never weak. So, the fact my stomach is burning, and my ribcage feels as though it was crushed in a vice, I need a second to process everything and a beat to determine if this guy is actually a threat. For all I know, he's a rat—an informant who's already given up our location.

“I’m guessing you know who I am?” I tilt my head, watching his shoulders shrug in a casual response. “I’m sure I don’t need to point out that this woman is off-limits.”

He chuckles lightly. “I know who you are, Souza, which is why I’m surprised you’re more concerned with pissing over the girl to mark your territory rather than hearing how you lost a section of your intestine, or how you have two bullet holes. An entrance wound and an exit. Or how about the fact you’ve ripped out the IV of antibiotics and pain relief. The longer you stand up, the harder you’ll fall. As for the girl, I already knew she was off-limits. And not because she’s fucking a guy like you. That one right there is more untouchable than any cartel scumbag.” My knees lock. “But I guess you already knew that.”

I narrow my eyes on his confusing smugness. “What do you mean by that?”

“Wait...” Carina slides her tiny hand into mine. There’s a hint of panic in her voice. An uncertainty that ignites all sorts of grisly emotions within me. “Enrique, you’re a vet right, and you did us a massive favor. We’re indebted to you.” She links our fingers and holds on tightly. The warmth of her body heat draws me in like a magnet. It’s taking all my strength to remain upright; the minimal energy reserves I have are depleting quicker than my temper.

“Tomás, once you’re up to it, we’ll leave here and let this man carry on with his life. It’ll be like we never met. He deserves his *privacy*, as do we.” When she stresses the last word, her eyes lock in on the vet.

“How do you know each other?” I ask through clenched teeth, my hooded eyelids difficult to keep open. Something isn’t right and I’ll get to the bottom of it.

Carina strokes the back of my hand with her thumb. I’m acutely aware of every dove-like sweep, the softness catapulting tiny thunderbolts up my forearm.

“I don’t know him. We’ve never met before.” She palms my chest and angles herself into my chest, gazing up at me

with pleading eyes. “Tomás, let’s go back to your room. You’re burning up again.”

I try to swallow without any saliva, adamant to stand my ground and not reveal how fatigued I’ve become, except the pain detonating from my abdomen is making me nauseous. I blow out a steadying breath and focus on her eyes like blazing comets soaring through the atmosphere.

“If you don’t know him,” I say on a rasped breath. “Then how did you know to come here?”

She blinks up at me and nips her pillowy lower lip between her teeth before confessing, “I phoned my big brother. He knows about you now—about us. He gave me the address of a guy who could help with your injuries.”

I frown, unable to piece all the information together when my brain is literally thumping against my skull with the force of a jackhammer.

“This guy knows Sal?”

Enrique runs short nails through the bristly dark hairs on his jawline. “You could say that. I’m guessing you don’t know who her brother works for?” The fucker smiles, lapping up his enjoyment of this mind fuck of a conversation. “Well, well, if you weren’t on his radar before, you sure as hell will be now and with those bruises decorating her skin, I’d hate to be you. I love how karma kicks in eventually. Even powerful men like you can disappear without a trace.”

The sides of my desert-dry throat stick together making it tricky to inhale and then the space around me starts to move, the disconcerting sensation similar to the motion of my yacht on the rolling ocean.

Carina’s voice becomes misty and distant, her bold presence the only thing I sense, her seductive fragrance the only scent I smell, and her wild pulse the one thing I can focus on.

“Tomás, come with me, you need to lie down.”

My legs begin to move, albeit in a stagger. “What the fuck is he talking about, Cari?”

CARINA



I'm torn.

My iron-clad loyalty to *el Fantasma* clashes against my unfailing devotion to Tomás. The two worlds can never meet. My past must remain in the shadows where I was stolen from, and my present is where the light shines on new growth.

Asking Sal for help had exposed my relationship with his covert employer who flips lives and controls them from afar. *El Fantasma* is the destructive ghost you'd never see coming with endless resources, unlimited funds, and an unbreakable requirement for trust and seclusion. There's nothing he couldn't or wouldn't do for those he cares about.

And one of those few people in his close circle is me.

He has the mastery to delete a life, not only in its physical form, in its entirety—both your identity and history. So, telling Tomás that my only true friend in this world, aside from my big brother, is an ex-cartel monster living in a hidden oasis in the jungle—that tidbit of information is strictly confidential.

I can't reveal his identity—I won't.

I've sat here in this chair watching Tomás sleep since he more or less collapsed onto the mattress. His mercurial mood rapidly switched from mighty god to sweat-drenched warrior. As we moved, he locked me next to him in a spurt of rabid stubbornness.

I've never met a man—or any living person—who could possessively cage my every step, even when their own limbs are heavy.

Before his slitted eyelids finally closed, he made me promise not to leave this room. He had tried to get me to lie with him, however the bed was too narrow and given his manly size, it was impossible.

Enrique swung by, and without uttering a word, had pricked a vein in Tomás' arm again to administer another dose of pain relief. A few minutes later, he returned and tossed a sunny Hawaiian shirt at me to replace my damp towel, then skulked off.

I haven't taken my eyes off Tomás, lost in the hurricane that is him and I.

A silver glow blankets his magnificent form, so the color of his skin appears ethereal, saintly even. It looks so light and paper thin, the unblemished complexion I'm used to admiring struggles to regain its dominance as he rests.

Shadows darken the perfect outlines of his bare torso giving him a lethal edge of risk and danger.

If he wasn't recovering from a near-death experience, I'd touch myself just to ease the constant state of arousal siphoning through my veins. There's a powerful force growing within me, from protection to a deep-seated need for his dominance.

My hooded gaze skims his sweat-glistened torso as my brain conjures all sorts of filthy scenarios. Perhaps I'm only good at being bad and he's the only one who appreciates it. Despite the trauma we've both endured, my temperature is off the charts and my mind wanders to dirty, dark places.

I visualize how impressive his solid dick would look in the moonlight. The fleshy weapon, in a state of repose, safeguarded under the flimsy material of his boxer briefs. The secret fantasy quickly plays out in my mind where I'm sponging his chest with warm water to cleanse his regal physique and fondling his dick until it rises for me.

My heart flurries, the awareness of my clit swelling shoots tingles all over me. A delicious shiver makes me moan into my fist.

There really is something wrong with me.

As much as I want to taste the saltiness of him mixed with the muskiness of me, I crave his leadership too. Tomás knows exactly how to control my body and bring out the hedonistic side of me. So, watching a deity like him sleep without even a cotton sheet to hide his masculinity plays havoc with my common sense. I'm shocked how after everything he's done; he still has this unorthodox effect on me.

Most of all, I hate how simply being in the same room as the man makes my moral code go wonky.

I've suffered so many mixed emotions since arriving in Mexico. Anxiety being the clear leader, an ugly festering emotion that won't leave me alone. I'm not afraid of him—I'm worried about the pain I'll suffer and the grief I'll endure when the colorful spectrum of light he offers me disappears.

Even now, kissed by moonlight, he's still a rainbow, albeit a gothic version of muted, tenebrous tones—each shade varying in complexity.

Part of me doesn't care what unholy acts are camouflaged within that sunless aura of his. However, can I truly forget the carnage we barely survived and the explosion he had engineered that put innocent lives at risk?

Hours later and my blood pumps through his arteries, imprinting all my hopes and dreams into every cell within him. We're fused together on a magnitude neither of us anticipated. I can't hide my unabated fascination for him.

My body talks for me, and my heart repeats the echo of his untamed pulse. A pulse that had slowed to such a fatal pace that I swear the stressed tempo of my own would kill me too.

Tired from the day's events, my eyelids creep closed. I sigh slowly, sleepily aware of my head lolling. Eventually the sun would shine on our complex situation. We'd have to face the truth and figure out what happens next. Until then, we both need time.

Him to mend and heal.

Me to replenish blood cells, cortisol, and build the courage to decide how my next chapter begins.

I close my eyes and let the exhaustion drag me under.



My body jolts.

I'm jerked out of an unsettled sleep. Sweat sticks to my skin, and my muscles brace in defense.

A firm hand covers my mouth to stop the scream trying to escape from my parched throat. The muffled wail is trapped under a leathery glove clamped across my face. It takes me a second to focus on the moving shadow.

My heart gallops, slamming against my ribs with a fight or flight decision to make. I swallow hard and meet dazzling glassy eyes lit up under a silver streak of light.

A set of eyes I recognize.

The man crowding me over the rocking chair is dressed in black, his lean physique towering over me. He quickly positions his index finger to his lips, motioning for me to stay quiet, which I willingly do.

With his eyes fixed to mine, he takes a stealth step backward. His narrowed gaze cuts to Tomás and then he silently points to the door and beckons for me to follow.

I pat my lip, feeling the weight of this moment in my bones, right through to the marrow. There are consequences for everything.

The soles of my bare feet pad over worn floorboards until the cool midnight air tingles my salty skin and showers me with a flurry of goosebumps. It's both energizing and exhilarating. Something I've felt a lot lately.

And now that I've tasted it, I never want to be that unhappy little girl again. A tortured child who's past had chipped her edges and made her too rough to get close to.

I want to be adored.

I crave it.

I damn well deserve it.

From the corner of my gritty eyes, Shane lingers on the porch, broad arms crossed over his dirty T-shirt. He wouldn't clean up on the off chance we were ambushed while he bathed. An uncertain scowl slashes his unfriendly moonlit expression.

“What’s going on, kid? You didn’t tell me your brother was coming in the middle of the fucking night.”

Sal’s hands clench into unforgiving fists. I creep further into the earthy breeze, tiptoeing closer to the man whose unconditional love has been my savior. The brother who made it his mission to fix his damaged little sister.

“Sal?” I say softly, altering my tone to warm the icy temperature of his glare directed right at Shane.

He marches the breadth of the decking, back and forth, not speaking, only inhaling and exhaling with forced control. I let him pace, my heart thumping louder than the restless wildlife in the surrounding forest.

A natural orchestra of singing cicadas and hooting night owls plays in the background, their familiar melody reminding me of home. Of family. Of the two men who’ve played such a monumental role in my life.

“It’s time to go, Cari,” he finally orders.

My brows snap together. “Wait...you said we’d talk?”

“Now’s not the time to talk. Let’s go.” He turns away and drops to the top step, stomping heavily onto each plank until he’s on the pebbly pathway. His boots crunch gravel as he pivots, fully expecting me to follow him.

Shane steps into me, his jaw set and his expression serious. “You think you’re leaving him?” The tone he offers is hoarse, almost regretful, but most definitely harsh in its deliverance. “If he wakes up and you’re not here...he’ll be fucked up like never before. I don’t need to tell you what he’ll do. You know

we'll find you eventually. There's no hiding from Tomás Souza."

I glare at him, jittery from nerves and shaking from the decision I have to reach. "I'm not Tomás' prisoner. It's up to me what happens next. If I decide to leave, he'll *never* find me. None of you will. I'll become a ghost—as if we never met."

"Except we did meet. Whatever you think you can do to disappear—it won't erase our memories, unless we get amnesia." His head cocks. "And I don't think your brother works for the Men in Black who use flashy devices to wipe a person's short-term memory."

Of course, he's right. *el Fantasma* can expunge my existence, but he can't obliterate the passion, the intoxicating desire—the love I have for Tomás.

"I have to speak with my brother. This is my decision to make. No one else's."

"Carina!" Sal spins on his heels. "They aren't your friends." He scolds, sharp and direct. "Get in the chopper. We're going off grid."

It's only then, when my gaze slides behind Shane that I see the helicopter, its blades stationary, the sleek obsidian shell blending into obscure shadows, camouflaged like its owner—*el Fantasma*.

The vein in my neck goes berserk and my little heart levitates, the expanse of it swelling as the man himself disembarks the waiting helicopter. He wears his signature dark baseball cap to hide a ferocious gaze, head to toe in camo combat attire. His hair scattered jawline makes him barely recognizable as he stalks through the twilight, heading my way.

But I see him.

And I know exactly what his vengeful capabilities are.

I close my eyes for a beat and then draw back my shoulders, embracing my newfound inner light. "Stay here, Shane. Please...don't wake him up. This is a family matter."

He grabs my arm as I go to walk away. “I’ll stay put for now. But the second I think you’re making a run for it; I’ll sound the alarm.”

I nod at him and continue walking when he releases me. If I board that chopper, it doesn’t matter how many flares Shane shoots into the sky. Our paths would never cross again.

My pace gathers momentum when I near Sal and *el Fantasma*, both of them staring at my disheveled state. Tangled strands drape the bold yellow print of an ill-fitting shirt that belongs to a complete stranger and my legs that are uncovered, but confident in their strides.

As soon as we reunite, a dysfunctional trio of raw emotions, I hitch to my tip toes and fling my arms around *el Fantasma*’s sinewy neck. He cradles me in his strong arms and nuzzles the side of my face with his beard.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” I choke out, aware that things are different now. That I’m different.

“I’d never give up your identity.”

He unhands me. “I know. I don’t give a fuck about that right now. I’m here for you. It’s time to come home, Carina.”

He orders me with no hesitation, no room for argument, no questioning if that’s what I want to do.

The power of his statement winds me. All it takes is for Sal to drag me into him and secure me tight to his chest, and I almost burst into tears. I love these men. They live inside my heart rent free.

However, the problem is, Tomás owns the heart they reside in.

“The only way to get out of the cartel is to vanish. You know that, right?” Sal cups my cheeks. “They’ll look for you everywhere, but Carina Ferreira won’t exist anymore. It’s the only way. They’ll never find you again, Cari. I promise.”

I swallow the truth of my predicament and feel it spread. Not with fear or dread, with sadness. “I can’t go with you, Sal.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose as *El Fantasma* lashes out and snares my wrist, whether his intention was to startle me or drive home his authority, it works. I instantly hone in on how his mood has switched from brotherly to volatile in the bat of an eye.

My heart sinks to the dry earth beneath my bare toes.

His hellish gaze snatches mine, pouring the intensity of his tragic past into the words he bites out. “I won’t let them drag you into their shitty fucking world of cocaine and butchery. It won’t happen while Sal and I walk this earth to protect you. Those cartel scumbags won’t steal another member of my family.” *El Fantasma* takes a quick breath, his composure slipping, until the hand around my wrist squeezes harder. “We’re not leaving here without you, even if that means I have to walk over their corpses on my way to Hell.”

My ribs cinch, restricting my breath. No one crosses this beast of a man and lives to brag about it. He’s the king of his jungle—the world is in the palm of his hand. And Tomás, he’s the king of Colombia—his domination reaches across the globe.

They’re parallel rivals. A match made in Hell, brandishing weapons of red-hot steel and ropes of fire.

Only one of them would come out on top if this becomes a war of hearts.

Then it hits me, the cold hard facts. They’re the same—fiercely loyal and unquestionably ruthless. Psychotic and compassionate, both of them wrapped up in the guise of immortal gods.

I brace my shoulders in preparation for what he has to say next, blinking in the fiendish whites of his eyes. “There were photos of him and a Mexican girl all over the internet, Cari. He was going to marry her. Is that what you want, to be some guy’s whore?”

“No!” I protest. “The wedding was a business deal.”

“Bullshit. Funny how that same woman conveniently went up in smoke. I watched the footage from every surveillance

camera in the area. There's no way it was a different car. You've got no clue what he'll do. He's unpredictable and off-the-wall crazy."

"It's not what you think."

"Tell me then—tell me why he welcomed gunfire on a busy street where innocent people were going about their business. Why did he set off an explosion that blew a car to smithereens and risked many more lives?"

"The Souzas didn't instigate the shooting—he told me himself. He was calling off the wedding—" I begin to make an excuse, even though I don't know why he created an illusion of death that started a war.

In the seconds it takes for an insect's wings to flutter, my world grinds to a halt. Chills scurry from my scalp down to my toes. The vegetation scented breeze ceases to exist and all I hear is the rasp of Tomás' voice rumbling through in the hush.

"Carina." I spin around to face him, my wrist still clamped by *el Fantasma*. "Who the fuck are these jokers?"

My lashes hit the tops of my brow bones. He fills the doorway, feet apart, muscles flexed, a track of blood trailing the inside of his forearm and the aim of a stolen rifle pointed at my brother.

The sudden threat ignites *el Fantasma's* killer reflexes, forcing him to effortlessly swing me behind his vibrating body, buffering me from view. But the most terrifying movement is when he pulls a revolver from the waistband of his combat trousers.

It all happened in a flash.

Now I'm shoved onto the periphery of a catastrophe.

TOMÁS



“No—Tomás—they’re my family.” She pants, her gaze meeting mine with incomprehensible worry.

My muscles jerk, painfully aware she’s out of reach in the coldness. A full, round moon shines brighter than usual tonight, kissing the treetops around her, highlighting fine cobwebs like they’re threads of finely woven silver. I notice it all.

Everything comes alive when I’m with her. The wooded landscape becomes vividly magical, because she’s graced the view with her provocative aura, capturing my attention as she always does. It’s like we’re in a dream—or a nightmare.

Although stuck behind a camouflaged soldier, who’s taken a risk by touching her in the first place, she stands tall against him with her spine rigid, dainty shoulders drawn back, and her posture superior in its regal stance. It doesn’t matter that she’s wearing an ugly shirt with its shapeless cut suffocating her glorious curves, because I know what lies beneath it.

I’ll take great pleasure ripping it off when these assholes leave us alone. Nor do I care how her glossy hair is tangled from a shower I wasn’t a part of, when I’m certain I’ll take my time with her silky flesh before I claim her as my queen.

“Why the hell are they here?” I question, eyeing Shane on the worn boards to my left. “I’m not getting the vibe they’ve flown all this way to welcome me with open arms.”

“She’s coming home with us.” The guy with a stern expression and a slight resemblance to my girl takes a step

closer, disregarding the rifle I have aimed at his chest. “Time to say your goodbyes, Souza. You’ll never get within a mile radius of my sister again.”

Perhaps now would be the perfect occasion to show her family that I’m an honorable gentleman worthy of her boldness and inner strength. To gallantly watch the girl with a delicate soul and diamond rich exterior board a helicopter and leave my side for the second time. However, I’ve made that mistake before. I’d never repeat it.

Letting her go isn’t that simple.

I no longer own simple emotions. They’ve advanced into a cyclone of feelings, the sheer complexity incomprehensible.

And I’m not in the mood to negotiate.

“No can do.”

The man wearing a cap chuckles darkly. “It’s interesting how you think you play a part in this decision. You have zero say in the matter. And don’t try to look for her. You’ll just be wasting your time and all that drug money. She’s a ghost now, Souza. This is the last time you’ll see her beautiful face.”

My temper surges to nuclear. This high and mighty fucker thinks he can steal her away from me, that he can ruin my life and blow a hole in my heart. It’s not going to happen.

“Come here, Cari.” I demand, flicking my seething glare to her big watery eyes.

The second they clash with mine my heart oscillates, every beat pounding behind my ribcage with an untamed tempo. We’ve been running from the same ghosts all these years and it’s only since we found each other, that we’ve accepted them. I’d rather not start a war with her family.

That outcome would either lead to my demise or theirs, however Shane is unarmed and useless for the first time and I’m out numbered.

“Tomás...” Her anxious tone sticks an arrow in my heart, the agonizing sound making my stomach flip.

“It’s okay, baby, I won’t let them take you away from me.”

“Please—” She tries to inch closer, only to be halted after two steps. “Please, put the rifle down.”

I feel the punch of her alarm deep inside of me, so profoundly intrinsic it confuses me.

Within the dark corners of my distorted mind, I’m fighting the impulses to kill. Suppressing the character-building training my father had forced me to undertake throughout my teenage years. He told me it would make me superhuman like him, when we all knew it was his tyrannical attempt to break me—to take the credit for destroying my curse.

He had failed.

If only he knew all it would take was this woman. Her serendipitous seductive smile, intoxicating soft skin, and damaged soul. A soul so broken it weaves and binds with mine in a powerhouse of sublimity.

Fuck you Papá.

I could easily take a pop at these motherfuckers, one by one. But I’m afraid I’ll fuck up her life beyond forgiveness. Instead, I resist the strength of my cartel roots and tap onto the psyche of my mafia blood, showing an imaginable degree of tolerance.

It wouldn’t last.

Not while she’s so far away and her face is fucking miserable. I should rip my eyes out, so I don’t have to witness her turmoil. Our combined blood surges through my veins with force, I swear she physically lives within each of my organs and every skin cell.

“I’ll lower my weapon once you’re back where you belong. Right here, beside me.”

As she takes another step away from the asshole holding her hostage, her brother pulls out a revolver and jabs the air with it, his expression stormy.

“Stay the hell back motherfucker,” he snarls at Shane over my shoulder who’s now joined my side, sensing this predicament is about to get out of control. “You’re a selfish

bastard, Souza. You want to drop my sister into the criminal world and put her life at risk every day?”

“Sal!” Carina chokes out his name. Her plea wraps barbed wire around my aching heart and punctures the valves until it bleeds pain. “Don’t do this—”

Her brother ignores her plea. “How about you go home and forget all about her.”

“That’s impossible, Sal—your sister *is* my home.” I say simply. “She’s the fucking air I breath. How could I forget about her when she’s everything I never knew I needed, and now I’ve experienced a life with her in it, I can’t, and won’t live without her. So go ahead—shoot me. I’ve already stared death in the eyes and fought the fucker to reach my girl again.”

Sal shakes his head and simultaneously claps his hand against the one holding the gun aimed at Shane.

“Wow, what a brilliant performance, Souza. I guess with having all that dirty money while growing up you could pay for drama classes. You should be on the stage, the crowd would love your bullshit, whereas we don’t give a flying fuck how you think you feel about Carina. She’s leaving with us. Go find yourself another girl to ruin. She’s not yours.”

I guess I had to live on the dark side to fully understand how the light would feel when Carina split through my heart like a laser with her light. The compulsion to pull the trigger charges through me, the intensity chaotic. For her, I grapple with my impulses and reign them in—to save her brother from my cataclysmic temper.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I know her aching heart and adore her battle scars. She’s not just my girl in the common sense of the term, she’s, my queen. Her blood literally flows through my bloodstream, while her dark demons have befriended mine. It’s not a matter of letting her go anymore. Nothing could replace my love for her, not even money, drugs, or power. She belongs with me, right here...” I tap my hip. “... beside me. It’s that simple, and you, Salvador Ferreira will become my family one day too.”

We all witness Sal's short fuse ignite with rage and how it detonates seconds later. His back goes poker straight and his aim jumps from Shane to me again.

"I have no qualms about putting a bullet through your fucking cold heart, asshole. Don't fill her head with your shit."

"Stop it, Sal!" Carina yells at him, but he's too lost in the storm of his pure intentions to hear her.

My eyes cut to hers, intuitively sensing her panic. Her forehead creases, a deep-rooted concern twisting her face. She violently shirks out of the grip she's been held in up till now and darts to the boulders at the side of us. Falling to her knees, I catch a glint of gold and swivel away from her brother's evil glare when I realize it's my gun.

I suck in a quick breath and hold up my hand when she reveals the weapon. "Carina."

She ignores my sharp tone, forever the rebel and always unpredictable. Agitated wildlife hold their breath and even the moon takes a brief reprieve from powering the oceans as it slips behind a wispy cloud to hide from the bullet she fires into the sky.

A daring breeze dances with her hair and disturbs the flimsy material licking around her narrow waist. My dick goes rock hard in the presence of a goddess so unafraid of the men bartering over her future.

The way the light catches her scowl, it makes her eyes glow like comets with her skin supremely flawless. Under the moon, lost in the wild, in front of her family, I fall deeper in love with her than I ever thought possible.

I take a short stride towards her until she fires into the atmosphere again. Startled crows take flight, escaping the mayhem we've created. If I'd ever been concerned about losing my mind before, it was nothing compared to this insanity.

Enrique bolts onto the decking, a firearm raised and seconds later, blue eyes and his vicious wolf join the crowd. The six of us witness the unbreakable character of this

disarming young woman—the girl who’s managed to do the impossible—to own my heart and command the attention of trained killers alike.

“Enough!” She yells, bringing her wild gaze to mine and just as quickly hunting out the men who’d come here on a mission to help her escape from me. “None of you have asked what I want. This is my life. No one has the authority to tell me what I should do with it, except for me.” Her throat bobs, but when I reach for her, that liquid fire in her eyes burns me to ashes when our gazes clash. “Stay back, Tomás. All of you, stay the hell away from me.”

Tiny stones dig into the bare soles of her feet. Yet she still moves with grace, her elegant lean legs carrying her that little bit farther away from us.

“Do you want me to shoot my family to show my allegiance to you, Tomás? Huh?” Even though she asks the question, she doesn’t wait for a reply. “Because I won’t. I love them and I’d die to protect them.”

The power of her words hits harder than a rogue slug. I’m suddenly left bereft when she cuts herself off from me and looks at the two men behind me.

“Do you want me to shoot the man I love to protect the both of you?”

I angle around to watch her brother’s posture deflate. However, the second man remains emotionless and solid like a monolithic statue. If I didn’t loathe the fucker for trying to sneak her away in the middle of the night, I’d possibly respect his fortitude.

“Tomás has continued to protect me from the first day we met—he even took a bullet for me. Isn’t that what any brother would want for his sister? A man who values my life more than his own. I could walk away tonight and never replace the feelings I have for him. He’s slowly shown me how to live on the edge of darkness and look to the light. This is my decision to make, Sal. I want your blessing to chase my heart’s desires, even if it means I could fall down in the dark one day. If you force me to disappear, then I may as well be dead.”

“Carina!”

I toss the rifle to the grass, uncaring for the threat I’m in, because the immense fear of her closing words is too painful to hear. I’m before her in the tremor of a heartbeat, my hands on her face, firm and unforgiving.

“Don’t say that—” I shake my head. “I’m not afraid of anything, baby—except losing you.” Stars twinkle beyond the feathery, inky canvas overhead, reflecting in her teary eyes like precious diamonds. “I’ll go anywhere you are. It’s non-negotiable.”

The scent of her skin tests my restraint, the saltiness of her anxiety mixed with that natural essence I’ve become addicted to. When she licks her lips to speak, a burst of adrenaline jolts my stiff muscles. Her avid stare focuses completely on my face, ignoring the audience around us. Having her sole attention makes my blood mutate into a beast that only recognizes her, the feeling unlike anything I’ve experienced before.

“I’m in love with you, Tomás.” The admission hijacks my soul, surging through my body with unlimited energy. “I know I shouldn’t be—but I can’t help myself.” She gives me a soft smile, oddly shy for the woman who’s taken control of her own destiny. “These men live in my heart, too.”

Carina glances at the beast of a man lowering his weapon.

“Please, don’t make me choose Sal.”

CARINA



Three weeks later

In a cold world, he is my comfort.

My home.

My monster.

My king.

My *everything*.

Even when life has other plans, the universe chooses a path you couldn't predict or plan for. I've accepted my past as the lonely journey I had to travel, so that one day I would welcome the darkness of another and understand its complexities. It had given me what many will never accomplish.

Love.

The sort of breath-stealing, heart-spearing passion that lives within every aspect of your being.

I was lucky to find him.

The humidity of the Amazon jungle clings to my damp skin. The rich evergreen foliage of never-ending trees is a sight I've missed, the hidden destination I'm living in, the place where I will always have a home. Fate took me like a hurricane wave, the force of it catapulting me to this new life.

A life where I will never be the same.

Tangerine splashes of a new day dapple the planks where I'm suspended close to the ledge of a platform that welcomes abundant rainforest leaves. My legs are crossed, cocooned in a jumbo rattan basket seat, gently swinging.

I woke up early, my skin drenched in sweat from a horrifying nightmare and my throat dry. An overhead ceiling fan in the luxury cabin dutifully whirling on a mission to whip up a breeze. Rather than shower, I shunted the floor-to-ceiling glass door open and stepped into the natural surroundings lit up by a dazzling dawn.

I slipped into the crystal clear pool and silently watched pomegranate shards of sunlight sparkle across the surface in ripples. It was paradise, with only one thing missing. Then I'd wrapped myself in a bold printed robe and curled up in this very spot with a thick book.

It's times like this, when I'm alone, that I reflect. I think about what my life was like before I met Tomás and how he had changed me—for the better.

He didn't just safeguard me from danger, he saved me from myself. If he was beside me, I'd tell him how much I don't recognize myself anymore.

I don't mourn that girl; I pay homage to her crusade.

Nothing can erase the past, but I've forged a woman from courage and determination. I'll carve out a future with untold adventures and the love of a man who would challenge Heaven and Hell just to be with me.

"Have you finished it?" Tomás' husky voice never fails to make my belly flip.

I peer around the woven edge of the chair to find his healing torso lit up by the soft rays of daybreak. His unkempt hair is ruffled, the sexiness of it fizzling through me. I adore this man's immaculate and precise appearance, however hidden in the wild with me, his hair has grown a little messy and a thick scattering of coarse hairs cover his strong jawline.

The diamonds in his earlobes glisten as he moves, reminding me of his wealth and status. Sunkissed muscles flex

as he stares at me, in the same state as when he fell asleep—completely naked.

How could I ever leave this man behind when just the sight of him casts me under a spell I'm powerless to break free from.

"I've a few more pages left," I say on a feathery breath, my lip dents when I bite it, his predatory approach my undoing.

"Shift over." He bustles in and effortlessly heaves me onto his lap, so my spine flattens against his solid chest. "Hmmm, you smell like sex, baby. I fucking love knowing my cum is still inside you." My core clenches at the same time as my toes curl. I'm still not used to his filthy talk and how it sets off fireworks inside of me.

Every time.

I chose not to wake him after my recurring nightmare. The one where carnage reigns. Four corpses lie motionless in the dirt with eyes as black as coal and skin colder than the highest ice caps—Tomás, Sal, *el Fantasma*, and Shane. All of them struck by the horrifying hand of death.

It's the silence that breaks me. How they never respond to the soundless screams scraping the raw skin of my throat. How I'm left alone in the darkness with only a gun in my hand and the moon to light up their fateful destruction.

I let him sleep rather than wake him early, given he fucked me under the stars like a wild animal the night before. Jackson, the trusted surgeon from *el Fantasma's* secluded medical facility, here in the jungle paradise resort where we've been lying low for a couple of weeks, had instructed Tomás to refrain from physical activities.

The same talented heart surgeon who had operated on my lip when I was fourteen doesn't understand my stubborn man's unquenchable impulses, nor does he appreciate that Tomás doesn't listen to anyone—except for me.

"Right, let's make a deal..." His sleepy voice rumbles into the shell of my ear, inciting a delicious shiver.

Our skin-on-skin contact makes my temperature soar. The bond we share is stronger than bolts, nails, or adhesives. It makes me thirsty for him all over again.

“I’ll read to you, and you’ll get a reward for finishing it.”

Flashes of his dirty desires sends my brain into a spin and my body goes all tingly, the rush taking over in a hedonistic shudder. “What sort of reward?”

“It’s a surprise.”

I tilt my head up, savoring the roughness of his scratchy chin. “I won’t be able to concentrate.”

“Patience. If I could wait a few days until I had the stamina to fuck you right, you can wait until I’ve read aloud the final pages of the journal. How else will you become a medical genius?”

“No pressure,” I laugh lightly, happy to have finally chosen nursing as my profession.

It won’t happen overnight. Of course, Tomás has connections in the National University of Colombia and enrolled me in the program, stating he can’t wait to fuck me while I’m wearing the uniform.

El Fantasma had offered to pay all my school fees, but Tomás wouldn’t hear of it. Those two may as well beat their chests like gorillas.

When we get back to Colombia, Tomás has arranged for me to move into the hillside compound with him. He bought my apartment from Sal, giving him double what it’s worth. Now, Sal has a decent nest egg, and I get to live with this man.

As much as our new chapter excites me, it also scares the hell out of me. I’m more or less relinquishing my independence by moving into a home where I don’t pay the bills. It’s playing on my mind these past few days, festering in my brain until the idea has dulled.

I know he cares about me. To the point of obsessiveness. But what happens when he eventually gets bored and wants

me out of his space? The thought of his rejection makes me sick to the pit of my stomach.

“You’ll smash it, Carina. I have so much faith in you. You can do anything you put your mind to. Money only opens doors and resources can get you a place at the table, but your potential and proficiency are what make you a success.”

He kisses my temple and starts to read a passage. The sultry cadence of his manly baritone reverberates through me in glorious waves. They coax me to his sundrenched sandy shore where fresh blue water laps over my daring toes and dazzling rays give me warmth. He’s my safe place and my happiness.

A prismatic butterfly, full of intrigue, perches on a soft green corrugated leaf by the edge of the decking. It’s equally as entranced by his gesture, lulled under the same spell as I am.

Large plops of water drip from above to create a metronome beat to match the rich gravelly flow of his speech. Not only do I love his power over me, I adore how he pronounces every word, how his eyes light up when I challenge his authority, how the proud vein in his neck thrums when I unintentionally lick my lips, but most of all, I’m privileged to meet the compassionate, warmhearted side of a man who has no limits.

“I’ve been thinking...” I reach for his fingers, threading them with mine. “How about I rent an apartment closer to my campus? That way—”

He doesn’t let me finish. “Is this some roleplay fantasy thing of yours? Where I sneak into your dorm at night to fuck you in a single bed while your half-naked roommate watches me rail you against the headboard.”

My skin flushes from my neck to my scalp. I hadn’t thought about it in that context, and now the idea of it could quite possibly be a new thing. I ignore the clench of my arousal. “It would give you space and me time to study.”

It happens in a flash. A strong arm around my waist, the other scooping under my knees. Then weightlessness and a growl so savage that the colorful butterfly takes to the air in haphazard zigzags, vanishing in the thickset foliage.

“You’ll have to try harder than that to get rid of me, baby.” Tomás carries me indoors, his back rigid and posture predatory. “Perhaps I haven’t made myself clear.”

He bows forward and plonks me on the disorderly bedsheets, staring at me until I can’t breathe properly. He stretches his broad shoulders and hisses a little from the niggle of pain he must be ignoring. There’s no attempt to cover the firmness of his erection, the satiny tip of his dick bobbing against his navel as he steps back to quietly assess me.

Then he confidently strolls to the other side of the room, slides open a drawer and lifts out a maroon velveteen box. It’s not a trinket-sized box either, the base of it covers his entire palm, and then some.

I don’t know where to look. I’m intrigued by what he’s presenting me with and finding it hard to stop my mouth from watering at the sight of his toned physique.

He brushes a strand of hair free from my lashes and smirks. “Happy birthday, Carina Ferreira.”

My brows pinch together, tentatively accepting the gift from him. “Wait...it’s my birthday?”

His sultry chuckle reaches places within me that aren’t used to feeling so much radiance and peace.

“You were so focused on nursing me back to health in our private sanctuary that you’ve lost track of the date.” The look he gives me steals the air from my lungs and causes my heartbeat to falter. “Open it.”

Tomás’ dark gaze swirls brighter, waiting for me to lift the lid. With a shaky inhalation, I crack open the box and stare down at the most exquisite crown I’ve ever seen. Finely woven spindles of gold twist and turn around hundreds of cherry red jewels.

For a second, I stay perfectly still, in awe of it, a rare treasure unlike anything I've ever seen before.

“You're my queen, Carina, with or without that thing, but I thought it would be a fitting present for your birthday.” Then he reaches out and gathers the delicate headpiece from the silky lining and positions it on the top of my head. “I'll enjoy watching you suck my dick while you wear it.” The husky grunt he offers is pure sin. “What I'll enjoy most of all is having the woman I love sleep beside me every night of my life in our bed, in our new home—with her new name.”

Tomás drops to one knee and spears me to the mattress with a feverish gaze. “Look under the silk.” He nods to the box.

The moment I peel back the satiny material, a feminine vintage-styled ring glints in the rising sun streaming through the vast windows. A solid black gold band encrusted with a layer of matching dark jewels sweep upwards to a rare blood red oval diamond. It's gloriously unusual and looks as though it was made just for me.

“My wife won't rent an apartment near campus, so she can pretend she's free of me.” His eyes narrow, hinting a squall.

“That's not what I meant—”

“You'll live *with* me, in the house we'll pick out together, and I'll personally deliver you to the door of every single class, for as long as it takes you to understand how much I can't—and won't—live without you.”

My pulse goes crazy when he cups my face with firm hands. Our skin sparks on contact. The sensation of his touch a flaming rope tying our demons together now and forever.

I swallow hard as his mouth lowers to mine and pauses. “I'm in love with you, Carina and if at all possible, my love will grow even stronger when you become Carina Souza. My wife. Mine. Now get on your knees and show me how my good girl behaves.”

“I haven't said yes, yet.” I witness his pupils flare.

“What will it take?”

“Ask me to be your wife—officially.”

His beautiful lips curve to offer me the rarest of smiles. A smile no other woman will ever witness.

This one is all him.

Power. Temptation. Sin. Devotion.

“Carina, will you marry me and spend the rest of our days together as husband and wife?”

TOMÁS



Five days later

“Congratulations.”

Bianca throws her arms around Carina’s shoulders, the tropical scent of coconuts and wildflowers wafting from her glowing complexion.

I discreetly fix my overused dick behind the cargo shorts that my soon-to-be brother-in-law had given me, not minding the relaxed camouflage style when it fits my surroundings. Nothing beats the neatness of a tailored suit or the feeling of a clean, starched shirt next to my skin—except when Carina’s nakedness is plastered on top of me.

Then I’m alive.

Buzzed.

Ready to take on the world and kill anyone who dares to come near her.

My hold on Carina’s waist slips as I take a reluctant step away, moving across the damp walkway close to a large helipad skirting the rainforest. It isn’t easy to let go since I’ve had her all to myself these past few weeks, nonetheless, I allow her space to show off the engagement ring she proudly wears.

The vintage style I had commissioned fits her dainty finger perfectly, frequently catching my eye when she moves from shade to sunlight.

It’s a one of a kind, just like my forever girl.

That is the epitome of us—dancing with darkness and thriving in each other’s light. Electric lust and endless, warm devotion. She’s not just my sunshine—she’s a collection of flickering flames, my burning sun and the lava filled core of my existence.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like it before.” Bianca splays her fingers over her heart, dropping onto each wooden step, flip flops clapping her heels.

It’s odd to see a cartel princess in her afterlife, looking nothing like the well-presented woman she was when we first met. Baggy shorts and a blouse hide her figure and a long bohemian braid drapes her spine. But it’s that genuine smile she offers Carina that seals the decision I made to not wage a war against her family.

“I hope I’ll find a man who looks at me the way he looked at you at the dinner party in Mexico,” she adds, clutching Carina’s forearm like they’ve known each other a lifetime.

Since Sal and I are on speaking terms, albeit a fragile relationship paved with wafer-thin sheets of ice, we had arranged for Bianca to move from the safehouse she was hiding in to the secluded jungle resort owned by *el Fantasma*. She’s been here for a week now and slowly settling into her new reality of becoming a single parent.

While my brothers had helped to organize the bomb and decoys from the morgue, Shane and I sorted out a bundle of paper notes and a safe place for her to lie low until she could cross the border with fake identity papers.

It was a risk I willingly took, because there wasn’t a chance in fucking Hell that I’d risk losing Carina again. Bianca chose to run from her uncle—she put her unborn baby first. The baby he would have made her abort had he found out about it.

Here, she can reinvent herself and eventually, when the time is right, she’ll pick a country from anywhere around the globe to live in. However, she seems more interested in helping the latest victim who had arrived on site yesterday.

She lowers her voice and walks with Carina to the scattered orchids fringing the far edge of the helipad.

“There was something in his gaze I could never understand.” She pats her blooming belly as they stroll. “When I first stared into his eyes, they were indecipherable and distant—so lifeless for a man who had everything he could ever want. I guess he didn’t have you, because now they shine.”

My girl glances over her shoulder to find me staring, unable to take my eyes off her. What can I say, she’s priceless. The shy smile hitching the corners of her pretty mouth sends my balls into a spasm and makes my pulse beat as if I’m a hunter eyeing the most prized game he’s ever seen.

“Your guy is out there somewhere,” she replies, all the while returning my hot gaze with one of her own, then nips her bottom lip with her teeth and turns her head away.

Some might assume this bone-deep love I have for her is simply an obsession, to fade as time passes. Maybe it is, but my intuition is never wrong. If it’s not Carina next to me in this life, then there’s no one at all.

This *obsession* of mine is undying like ardent coals blazing in an eternal inferno. I can’t get enough of the way she smiles at me with an undercurrent of wicked longing, how she secretly begs me to rip her apart only to put her back together.

It’s not just the tangles of her dark hair, or the softness of her skin against mine, or even the taste of her cum on my tongue—it’s her mind. How her darkness speaks a language that mine understands.

Carina is my curse, my elixir, and my confidante.

I never imagined myself marrying a woman, which is why I’ll wed a queen.

I reposition my baseball cap to shade my eyes from the high sun and swivel towards the helicopter refueling for takeoff. The seconds, hours, days, and weeks spent in this concealed lair in the jungle has given me respite from the brutal world I was raised in.

When Carina and I left the Vet's cabin with her brother and the grumpy fucker, who I now know to be Dante Valez, Shane had drove the postal truck to an arranged collection point where he left Mexico behind. I'd given him instructions to tell my mother I was recuperating and staying off grid for a while.

Without a phone or even a laptop, we had no way to contact the outside world. Although I found it difficult not knowing what chaos our kingdom was in, the break has allowed me the mental clarity to think. Today, I'm flying home, stronger and better prepared to figure out who slaughtered my father.

And when that time comes, my old glitch won't stop me from sparking fucking mayhem.

There's a rich, abundant earthiness to the air here. Sweat trickles the length of my spine, the urge to shower and change out of this damp T-shirt fizzing through me.

As I walk, the tough polycotton of my camo shorts sticks to my groin, uncomfortably rubbing the semi hard-on I'm packing from recalling this morning's activities. I can quite happily admit that before this morning, I'd never showered outdoors with a fiancé, where the wildlife was witness to my good girl being throat fucked. When I finally pumped her full of my cum, the growl escaping me was so feral that even jaguars must have felt intimidated.

I chuckle to myself at the same time as Sal appears to my left. He saunters straight to his sister and drags her well-fucked body into an all-encompassing hug. It doesn't irritate me to watch their interaction, rather it makes me proud that she chose me over the man she once referred to as her hero.

That was his important role in her life once upon a time. I'll be forever indebted to him for saving the girl who was destined to be mine.

Now, it's my opportunity to be her villain and her saint—just how she begs me to be.

Dante joins my side, his eyes sheltered with a pair of aviators and the brim of his cap shading his stern features. His

temperament is ice cold. If the guy sneezed, he'd cover the jungle in a blizzard.

“What’s the plan now then?” he asks on an inquisitive growl.

When he folds his brawny arms, I catch a glimpse of a tattoo decorating the breadth of his forearm. Tumbling corkscrew curls, the color of flames clashes with black lines and shading to form the enchanting, sketched face of a woman—or a wood nymph—or a fiery forest fairy.

It’s a masterpiece, the exactness of expression is uncanny, matching the young girl with porcelain skin and wild red hair who smiles at me in a greeting on her way past us. She holds her palm to her stomach like she’s pregnant too.

“Had I not met Iris and let her into my heart—” His entire focus settles on the red-head. “You’d be dead by now, Souza,” he states matter-of-factly. “You love Carina. I can feel it. We all can. And that ring you had made for her is something else. It’s the very essence of her. But that girl right there—she breathes life into cold, decaying souls. That’s her gift. She’s a rare flower getting ready to leave the one place where she’ll be safe. How can Sal and I let her leave with you when you’re taking her straight back into the criminal underworld?”

I fold my arms too, matching his stance. “I assure you, Dante, she’s every bit the fragile flower you think she is. To me, she’s an irreplaceable red rose. Those fragile petals of hers bloom brighter when we’re together. Where there is fragility, there is also an unbending thorny stem. She’s both beautiful and courageous. Delicate and savage. When my girl can no longer fight for herself, or she loses her way, I’ll be right there to defend her, to catch her if she falls, and to worship her while she rules my heart.”

This beast of a guy has the power to ruin me, however, having lived in his domain means we’re on equal footing. I have the knowledge to destroy him and the very sanctuary he presides over.

Despite our differences, we’ll remain amicable allies. And now—knowing a stealth ghost who has connections and eyes

in the sky—I really will be unstoppable.

My destiny of becoming a legendary hybrid king is on course.

I am that man now.

Dante blows out a slow breath, his broad shoulders relaxing a fraction. “Fine. Iris will be devastated if she can’t go to the wedding. I’m not sure if I’m ready to face the world for an over-the-top cartel ceremony.”

“I’ll give my girl whatever she wants. And if that’s you at our wedding, then...” I pat his bicep and smirk. “Family first, Dante.”

“We’ll see.” He uncurls his arms and shoves a scarred hand into his shorts pocket to retrieve a mobile phone. “Here. You’ll need this. I’ve kept an eye on your brothers while you were recovering. You might want to call André first. I think he needs your best lawyer—the guy beat us all to it.” Dante chuckles and rubs his jaw at the same time.

My brows snap together. “What the fuck has he done now?”

A light breeze runs chills over my scalp and goosebumps speckle my spine. It’s not the sticky air making me hot, it’s my girl. Carina glides to my hip, shoulders back, chin raised regally high, and slides her warm hand into mine. It fits there as if it was molded for me and my hand for her.

She peers up at me with rings of fire burning liquid lust in her eyes. “Are we ready to go house hunting in Bogotá, Tomás?” Her voice licks the hairs on my nape causing a shiver.

A sneaky pink tongue peeks past her lips and my brain malfunctions. It’s the new glitch I’ve encountered, one that can only be tamed by touching her.

I slip the phone into my back pocket and stuff my hands into her hair at either side of her head. A tidal wave made from this crazy, motherfucking thing called love crests in my heart, almost crushing it.

Her lips part as a shocked gasp whispers between us. She stares up at me, a queen waiting for her king's true love kiss.

The tips of our noses brush, until my self-restraint crumbles. Our fervid gazes clash, mine finding its place in the depths of hers. Without reservation, or a care for her close family waiting to see us off, I seal her hot lips with mine and dive my tongue in deep to explore.

Her hunger mirrors mine, even with the fierce way I'm controlling her position, she has unquestionable control over me. The slippery, wet landscape of her mouth offers me inner peace, and when I push my tongue in deeper, the groan she relinquishes tests my patience on a whole other level.

"Let's go," I mutter into her mouth, painfully aware of the merciless hard-on straining against my zipper. "I can't wait to see the look on my brother's faces when I tell them I'm getting married—for real this time."

"For real," she whispers, running her fingernails over my shoulders.

"And forever." I confirm. "There's no escaping this—us."

"I don't want to escape. A queen stands beside her king until the end."

"The end is a far way off, baby. Come on...let's say goodbye to the jungle for now." I dip into her ear, the rough hairs on my jaw brushing over her delicate cheek. "Ever been finger fucked during a helicopter ride?"

She giggles, the naughty sound fueling my unsatisfied hunger for her. "I've never sucked dick in an aircraft before. You up for it?"

In a flash, I scoop her up, throw her over my shoulder caveman style, and spank her ass as we pass our farewell party of four.

"*Adios*, assholes." I laugh when Sal drags a hand down his face. "I'm taking my girl home with me."

The end.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestseller Autumn Archer spends her days romancing the darkness to create delicious, tortured men who deserve to be loved. Not only does she bleed Dark Romance, she dabbles in the lighter side of love with Romantic Comedies written as A. Archer. With all of her books, you can expect high heat, passionate emotions and happy endings.

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“When there is darkness, the light will always find a crack to shine through.”

