



**VICIOUS
LITTLE
LIAR**

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DANIELA ROMERO

BLURRED LINES SERIES

VICIOUS LITTLE LIAR
BLURRED LINES - THE DEANDE CARTEL

BOOK 1

DANIELA ROMERO



CONTENTS

Before you begin ...

Books by the author

1. Leticia
2. Andrés
3. Andrés - Past
4. Leticia
5. Leticia
6. Leticia
7. Andrés
8. Leticia
9. Andrés - Past
10. Leticia
11. Andrés
12. Leticia
13. Andrés
14. Leticia
15. Leticia
16. Andrés
17. Andrés
18. Andrés
19. Cruel Devil - Kasey
20. Cruel Devil - Dominique

About the Author

Vicious Little Liar

Blurred lines - The DeAnde Cartel Trilogy

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN ...

Vicious Little Liar is recommended for mature readers 17+

If you are easily triggered, this book may not be for you as it deals with sensitive subject matter including, but not limited, explicit sexual content and dubious consent.

BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR

Devils of Sun Valley High

(New Adult Sports Romance)

Wicked Devil - Roman & Allie- Standalone

Savage Devil - Emilio & Bibiana- Standalone

Cruel Devil - Dominique & Kasey- Bk 1

Cruel Promise - Dominique & Kasey- Bk 2

Boys of Richland

(New Adult Sports Romance)

The Savage - Gabriel & Cecilia Bk 1

The Striker - Gabriel & Celia- Bk 2

The DeAnde Cartel Trilogy

(New Adult Cartel Romance)

Vicious Little Liar- Bk 1

Hellbound Hearts

(New Adult Paranormal Romance)

Wicked Wolves & Tangled Truths

Savage Wolves & Dangerous Deals

Cruel Wolves & Devious Deceptions

The Pacific Northwest Pack

(Urban Fantasy)

How the books/worlds connect

Boys of Richland is set in the same world as the Devils of Sun Valley High, focusing on Allie's best friends from her home town (Allie is the heroine in Wicked Devil)

The DeAnde Cartel trilogy takes place in the same town as the Boys of Richland series and has some crossover with the Devils of Sun Valley High most notably referenced in Cruel Promise

The Hellbound Hearts series is the Devils of Sun Valley series, rewritten as a paranormal romance at reader request.

LETICIA

“Go. Dance for me.” Maxim pats my ass and shoves me toward a nearby table where several other girls are already shaking their asses in their too-tight mini skirts on several of the club’s tabletops. Judging by the smiles on their faces and the come hither looks in their eyes, they’re shaking their assets by choice, not by force.

Lucky them.

It’s obvious they’re enjoying themselves, eagerly soaking up the attention of the surrounding men. I wonder what that’s like—having the choice to cut loose. What does it feel like to truly be carefree? I doubt a single one of the women in front of me worry about their survival when they wake up each morning. They’re young. Beautiful. And not one of them is related to any of Richland’s three notorious crime families.

Maxim pushes me again, this time more forcefully, and I stumble forward in my red-bottomed stilettos, catching myself on the edge of one of the tables. *Asshole*. Gritting my teeth, I force myself not to look over my shoulder and glare at him.

Guess I’m taking too long.

With a grimace, I do what he wants and fight back the impulse to flip him off and deny him. I wouldn’t win that fight, and

Maxim would enjoy doling out the punishment for my insubordination too much.

I've learned a lot these past months of our engagement. Most importantly, how to pick and choose my battles. I know when to push, and when to back off and save myself the pain and humiliation of Maxim's particular brand of retaliation.

Balling my hands into fists, I use one of the nearby chairs as a stepping stool and climb onto the table, careful not to flash my ass to anyone in the process. The table shifts beneath me and it takes me a few seconds to recover my balance. I was unsteady in these stupid heels to begin with, and being an extra four feet off the ground doesn't help.

Finding my balance, my eyes meet Maxim's as he moves forward. Brushing his thumb along my bare calf, he gives me a satisfied smirk and nod of approval. "Exquisite."

Pendejo.

My lip curls, but self preservation transforms my sneer into a smile. I hate that I've made him *happy*.

Maxim likes it when I listen to him. When I *obey*. The idiot thinks my compliance means I've accepted him as my fiancé. That I've accepted my fate and this life that is not of my choosing.

I haven't. Not even close.

But if I'm going to escape the future that's been carved out for me since I was little more than a child, it has to look that way. Maxim needs to believe we're on the same side. A feat that should be difficult but which has been surprisingly easy.

"Dance, моя маленькая кукла." *Moya malen'kaya kukla*, he says, as if calling me his little doll is some sort of endearment. I assure you, it isn't. But I ignore the slight and do what's

expected of me, offering him a coy smile before swaying my hips as if I don't know the truth of his words.

Maxim, like the rest of his men, assume I don't speak their language, and their ignorance is to my advantage. I had very little freedom growing up and spent most of my time studying to stave off my boredom.

Languages are one of the few subjects I found challenging as a child and, like most obstacles set in my path, I addressed it head on. I'm fluent in Spanish, Russian, French, and Italian. And I'm conversational in both Portuguese and Mandarin as well. Not that anyone aside from my father knows it. "*A weapon is most effective when your enemy doesn't know you are wielding it.*" I don't agree with my father on many things, but I agree with him on this.

"Put on a good show for me, *da?*"

"Of course."

He grins and makes his way to his seat, his men closing rank around him. I snort. All for show. Maxim doesn't need nearly the amount of security that he carts around, especially in a club his family owns within the Sidorov territory, but his ego likes to inflate his importance.

Maxim is a second son, which wouldn't matter to most people, but in our way of life, being the first-born male of your generation grants you the keys to a kingdom. Something Maxim desperately wants to have.

The first born is the heir. The one with all the power and all the control. He inherits both money and title while those born after him inherit nothing and are forced to earn their own wealth.

A second son has status, sure. But he has limited authority. At best, he can be his brother's right-hand man. A figure of support. But a second son is forever doomed to walk in his brother's shadow.

For a man like Maxim, it's a fate worse than death.

But he's found a loophole. One I provided him.

With me at his side, he has a once in a lifetime opportunity to shine. To be the quintessential first-born son. Not of his own family. That ship already sailed. But he has the chance to take control of mine and leave the Sidorov Bratva behind in favor of a chance as the head of the Castro Cartel.

Arms thrown wide across the backs of the booth seats, Maxim holds my gaze and lifts one brow, as if to say, *well?* You'd think he'd be less of an asshole given all that I've offered him.

With my smile firmly in place, I sway my hips to the club's music and ignore my simmering anger.

Maxim gives me another approving nod and the urge to flip him off damn near overwhelms me. I refrain, barely, because while Maxim might not see the action, his men would, and their loyalty lies strictly with him.

It's their job to ensure my safety, or rather, to make sure I don't run away. They watch me like a hawk, their beady eyes tracking my every move. It's obvious they expect me to run at the first opportunity. But I'm not stupid. It'll take time to earn both their trust and Maxim's, and I won't make a run for it until I do. I'll need one hell of a head start when I finally do make a break for it, which means gaining more and more unsupervised time. As things are now, I'm lucky to get ten minutes to myself. But once we're married, Maxim won't have any reason to watch me as closely as he does. He'll have

gotten what he wanted and I'll have proven that I can be trusted. That I'll do as I'm told and always come back.

"Is everybody having a good time tonight?" The DJ shouts into his microphone.

A roar rolls through the club as partygoers excitedly cheer that they are.

It's summer vacation, and the local college kids are living it up, celebrating the end of the semester at *страсть*, pronounced *strast'*— one of Richland's hottest nightclubs.

The word means *passion*. Looking around at the sea of bodies and drunk gazes beneath me, *passion* is fitting. Though lust might have been more accurate. The club sits at the west end of Richland, deep in Sidorov territory. I have no real business being here, and Maxim knows that, but with our wedding fast approaching and my innocence still firmly intact, my father is taking matters into his own hands and praying I fuck up.

Papá is a calculated man. One who won't relinquish his power easily. Allowing me to galavant around the city in enemy territory is his way of affording my fiancé every opportunity he can to claim my virginity before our wedding. Something Maxim would happily do, with or without my consent.

But Papá failed to take one thing into consideration when he plotted out this little arrangement.

Me.

Family is everything, but my father stopped being mine the day he threw my sister away. When he cast my sister aside, he forfeited not only my respect, but my loyalty. So, when he ordered my engagement to Maxim, I played the one and only card I had.

That of my inheritance.

Maxim might have been born a second son and I a second daughter, but my mother had the forethought to ensure that what was done to her could never be done to one of her own. We would never be torn from our family and stripped of our protections. We wouldn't stand by while our birthright was claimed by a cousin or uncle simply because of our gender. No. Mamá ensured that we'd maintain our wealth, despite being women, and that we'd be next in line to claim our family's throne.

There's just one small requirement.

For a daughter to inherit, she must remain pure until her wedding day. *Gotta love being Catholic.*

Everything should have gone to my older sister, Lucia, but she gave her innocence away, not taking into consideration everything she stood to lose.

When Papá found her in bed with one of his men, a man my sister desperately loved, he didn't only disinherit her. He beat the man she loved in front of her, stopping just short of death. Stripped her of all her wealth and belongings. Then cast her out, forcing her to live the remainder of her days hidden away in Mexico where help can't find her.

With my sister gone, I'm next in line to inherit. Being head of the family is not a position I want or one I've asked for, but Mamá didn't only ensure that her daughters could maintain their positions in their homes. She also ensured any daughter of hers, regardless of the order of their birth, would gain access to a large sum of money the day after their wedding.

I can't claim my father's position until I turn thirty-five, assuming I remain pure until my wedding night and stick around long enough to claim what is mine. But I will receive the promised funds.

Five hundred thousand dollars will be transferred into my account as a wedding gift the day after I say “I do.”

It's pennies to my papá, which is why he doesn't care about me getting it, but that five hundred thousand dollars is everything to me. I'll have money no one else can access or control. Money that can be spent on a plane ticket. On food and rent. I need every penny I can get if I'm to escape the life I've been born into, and despite the conditions that come with it, I'm grateful my mamá had the foresight to think of it. Sometimes I wonder if she knew all along that her daughters would need to escape this life, and if the money was positioned in such a way as to provide that opportunity.

As my husband, Maxim stands to inherit everything I do, which explains why I'm here, scantily dressed in a Bratva club, now. And why he hasn't forced himself on me when I know he'd like nothing more.

Maxim knows that if he takes my innocence before our wedding day, Papá will disinherit me like he did Lucia. And thankfully, he won't risk it. For now, at least. There are six months between now and when I'm set to walk down the aisle. Only time will tell.

ANDRÉS

“**H**ermano.” *Brother*. “Think this through,” Adrián cautions. Something he is prone to doing as the eldest of my three younger brothers. Adrián likes to think of himself as my advisor, and in a lot of ways, he is. There are few people I trust in this world, and Adrián is one of them.

But when it comes to Leticia Castro, there is nothing I require him to advise me on. My decision is made.

“I’m done thinking,” I tell him. “I’ve made my decision.” Remaining here is a waste of time. Time I do not have if I’m going to intervene. “My men spotted her less than an hour ago at *Passion*. I won’t get another chance like this, so don’t ask me to waste it.”

I’ve waited long enough to take back what is rightfully mine.

“You say that as though *Passion* is an easy location to infiltrate. It’s in the heart of Sidorov territory, Andrés,” he hisses. “Walking into that club is suicide.”

“Not for me.” If one of my men walked into that club, there’s a good chance he wouldn’t walk back out. But I’m not one of my men. I’m the head of the DeAnde Cartel, and I go wherever I damn well please. Sidorov won’t appreciate my

overstepping, but he's not stupid enough to make an attempt on my life. Not in public. Not even in his territory.

Adrián shakes his head, an exasperated look on his face. "This is a mistake."

"No. It isn't." The mistake was in not claiming her before when I had the chance. I allowed pride and grief, coupled with the misguided notion of doing the *right thing*, to get in my way.

I won't make that same mistake again.

"I'm done talking about this." Shoving out of my seat, I grab the suit jacket that hangs over the back of my office's leather club chair and shrug into it. "Get on board with this, Adrián. I won't change my mind. Not where Leticia Castro is concerned."

His mouth tightens, dark brows furrowing as he climbs to his feet. His body is riddled with tension, as though my little brother is considering an attempt at physically stopping me.

I'd like to see him try.

"Why now?" Adrián demands, frustration clear in his voice. "Why, after five years, are you making a play for her?"

He doesn't understand. Then again, how could he? In high school, Leticia and I kept our friendship secret. Even from those we trusted. To do anything else would have been perilous to both of our well-beings.

After Papá died, I confided in my brother and told Adrián about her.

There'd been copious amounts of alcohol involved on the night of Papá's funeral, and it was the first time I'd been drunk. It was also the last. Intoxicated men have loose lips, a

lesson I've never forgotten given that all these years later, my brother's rantings where Leticia is concerned have yet to cease.

He was surprised, at first, to learn of our friendship. But his shock quickly evolved into anger. An emotion I couldn't fault him for. I consorted with the enemy. A woman whose very family was responsible for the death of our father.

At the time, I believed I was deserving of his disgust. His rage.

And in the face of both, I made a promise I had every intention of keeping. I swore to let her go. It was the right decision, or it should have been. Leticia wanted no part in Cartel life. She'd made that abundantly clear. And who was I to force her into it?

Leti wanted a life of her own. One where she could build a family without risk of violence and bloodshed. She wanted to experience the world. To travel. To go to college. She had so many dreams in that head of hers, and I could never fulfill them.

I was groomed from an early age to take over the family business, and I wanted it. The money. The power. The risk. I knew my place in life. I was born to rule. And I would not walk away from my family or my responsibilities for a girl. An insignificant crush.

So I did what needed to be done—what my brother demanded of me.

I let her go.

It was the decision that worked best for everyone.

Everyone but me.

I'm older now. Wiser. I've had years to come to terms with the decisions I made. To acknowledge Leticia was never

insignificant to me. And to decide the lengths I will go to get her back.

“Is it because she’s engaged?” Adrián asks, interrupting my thoughts. “Are you so proud that you’ll risk your life, your family, because your high school sweetheart is moving on?”

I scoff. “This isn’t pride.”

“Then what is it?” he demands.

It’s goddamn determination.

“She never wanted this life.” My voice remains even, controlled. I’ve had years of practice learning to control my emotions, but Adrián’s eyes dipping to the clenched fists at my sides suggest that perhaps, these past years haven’t been enough.

Uncurling my fists, I flex my fingers and exhale a sigh. “Leticia would not have chosen this.” And she sure as hell wouldn’t have chosen him. Maxim Sidorov is her childhood tormentor. He’s the reason I found myself in her life to begin with. She would never marry him. Not by choice.

“Why do you care?” my brother asks. “You’re not some white knight, Andrés. You can’t ride in on a white horse and save the day. Leave her to her life while you move on with yours. It’s been years. Let it go and remember what family it is that she belongs to.”

“I know what family she belongs to.”

Mine.

“She is your enemy.” His eyes beg me to understand. To do the right thing. But I did that once before. I made the call he wanted me to make, and I sacrificed a piece of my soul in the process.

Leticia Castro is not, nor will she ever be, my enemy. She is so much more.

“You’re wrong. She is no more my enemy than you are, brother.”

His expression darkens, but in his gaze there is also resignation. *Good*. The sooner he gets on board with things, the sooner we can work this out.

“This is a mistake,” he warns.

“Maybe,” I admit. “But it is still mine to make.”

ANDRÉS - PAST

“**W**atch the door. Make sure no one comes inside.”

My ears perk up at the comment and I inch closer to the door, my curiosity grabbing a hold of me. Most of the students at All Souls Academy have gone for the day. I only stayed behind because I needed to discuss the upcoming match with my coach.

Papá wants me on the wrestling team. He appreciates the team building aspects of the sport and says I could use the practice fighting.

But my family obligations conflict with the team’s schedule and I needed to see if I could find a solution before making the call to quit, because while Pápa appreciates the sport, family comes first. Always.

“Ben, grab her arms.” The voice is familiar, and though I shouldn’t concern myself with the problems of others, I lean forward and peer through a crack in the door. Maxim Sidorov—one of the Bratva bastards—and his dogs are clustered together in the school’s gym.

My lip curls into a sneer. I recognize the two guys beside him as his personal lackeys. Always eager to please their master. *Pathetic*. They have no mind of their own. A problem that will

see them killed one of these days because Maxim doesn't think. He's impulsive and quick to react, and the two idiots beside him are only too happy to follow along, regardless of the consequences.

"You don't want to do this," a girl says, piquing my interest even more.

I push the door open a fraction more and catch sight of the girl I previously missed. She's pressed between Maxim and one of his boys, arms twisted behind her back as she's held forcefully in place.

Maxim stands in front of her, his mouth pressed into a tight line while his eyes flick back and forth between her and the door.

He's anxious. Reconsidering his move, maybe. It'd be the smart thing to do in this situation, not that I plan to offer him any advice. But assaulting a girl on campus won't do him any favors. Last I checked, he was on thin ice with his *familia* as it was. If he's caught ... I shake my head. It's a big if. As I said before, the school is all but empty by now, and the only people who know what he's up to are me and his boys, and I sure as hell am no snitch.

Putting up a struggle, the girl turns her head, searching for a way out of her situation when her dark eyes land on me and recognition explodes in my chest.

Leticia Castro.

Shit.

Does he have a fucking death wish?

Our eyes stay locked for several seconds and I hold my breath, waiting for her gaze to turn pleading, or for her to cry out for help.

But she never does.

She knows who I am, just as I know who she is. And given that fact, she doesn't expect help from me. She'll suffer in silence before asking it of me.

A knife twists in my gut at that realization. We've never spoken to one another. I'm a grade above her and we share no classes. She keeps to her friends and I keep to mine. Our paths have no reason to cross, which is as it should be.

But her assumption that I won't come to her aid when she's clearly in distress grates on me. And the next thing I know, I'm shoving the door open and my feet move forward without any consideration for the trouble I'll find myself in. Cartel and Bratva brats aren't meant to mix. Though neither should the Bratva bastard be anywhere near Leticia Castro. It's the one agreement our three families have made. All Souls Academy is neutral ground, and we are to avoid interaction at all costs.

"Look," Leticia turns to Maxim and his friends, her voice low and calm, as though she were talking to a wild animal. Attempting to soothe its temper. Taking in the look on Maxim's face, it's not a far off comparison. "No one wants any trouble here. If any of our dads found out—" I see what she's trying to do, but I've been watching Maxim these past few years, and he isn't someone easily reasoned with.

Smack.

My steps come to a hard stop near the bleachers and my eyes widen as Leticia's head whips to the side, hair flying across her face. Only Ben's hold on her arms behind her back keeps her from falling on her face.

Heat spreads through my chest, fire igniting in my veins. Leticia gasps, chest heaving before she whips her hair out of

her face and spits a wad of blood on the polished wood floor.

Sonovabitch.

My vision goes red. Only a real *pendejo* would strike a woman. My already low opinion of the Sidorov spare sinks to new depths.

I'm going to strangle this asshole.

But I can't storm up there high on emotion. He is still a Sidorov bastard, and there are rules when people like us collide. Nostrils flaring, I reach for the cold, unfeeling part of me capable of smothering my rage. I need to use my head. I can't kill him, not here and not with witnesses.

But later—

“Shut up, bitch,” Maxim snarls. “You never snitched before, and we both know that isn't gonna change now. So stop your sniveling and do as you're fucking told.”

His friends—Ben and Dorian—laugh.

I'll remember that. But for the moment, I block out the noise and latch onto Maxim's words. *Never snitched before?* How many times has this asshole assaulted her? And why the fuck would she stay quiet about it?

The need to put myself between her and this waste of space has me picking up my steps. But, there are three of them and one of me. I'm good in a fight. Great even. Coach says that icy place inside me that I grab onto in a fight turns me into an emotionless monster with brutal intent. I always keep a level head. I make the smart moves because they're the right ones to make.

And I have to do that now, keep a level head, because three to one are never great odds. *Fuck.*

I'll have to reason with Maxim, the unreasonable.

The man has no empathy, so appealing to his sense of right and wrong won't do shit. My mouth twists before an idea sparks in my mind. We're not on equal footing here. I'm the heir to the DeAnde Cartel while Maxim Sidorov is the spare. I can work with that, remind the bastard who I am and the power I hold without needing this confrontation to come to blows.

Adrián is on campus still, waiting for me to take him home. One text to my younger brother and he'll come running. It'd shift things into my favor.

But ... I can't.

Adrián wouldn't understand. Leticia Castro is the enemy. Daughter to the very family ours is at odds with.

I'm on my own.

Leticia struggles to get to her feet with her arms still held at her back, but it's Maxim's hand on her shoulder that pushes her back down, keeping her in place. He uses his other hand to unbutton his pants and lower the zipper on his jeans before pulling out his fully erect cock.

You've got to be kidding me. I mutter a curse. I've seen enough.

I stalk across the gymnasium floor, my sneakered feet silent. Maxim and his dogs are too focused on their quarry to see me coming. But she does. As Leticia rears back, desperate to get away from his raging erection, she catches sight of me closing in on them.

A small gasp parts her lips and I'm so focused on her, I don't see his move until it's too late.

Maxim shoves his cock into her mouth, gagging her as he and his friends laugh and jeer at her struggling form, his hands fisting in her hair to hold her where he wants her.

All thoughts of being strategic about this fly out the fucking window at the sight in front me, and Leticia's tear stained gaze locks with mine. I force myself to look away from her and my fist flies, connecting with Maxim's jaw.

"Fuck, man—" He stumbles back, his cock slipping free of her lips. The next hit I deliver is to the friend, Ben, who's still holding Leticia on her knees.

"Ow! Fuck!" he curses, hands flying up to defend himself.

I grab Leticia from the ground and shove her behind me.

"What the hell, DeAnde?" Maxim curses, tucking his now flaccid cock into his pants.

"Walk away." My voice is deadly calm. If the man has any sense of self preservation, he'll pay attention to the threat in my eyes.

He doesn't.

Chest heaving, Maxim takes a step toward me, his eyes flicking to the girl at my back. I shift my weight, blocking her from his view.

"I won't tell you again, Sidorov. Walk. The. Fuck. Away."

Leticia's fingers curl into the material of my shirt at my back, her body shaking against mine.

The urge to turn around and comfort her nearly overwhelms me, but kindness is a weakness in our world, and I won't show weakness in front of anyone, let alone my enemies.

Maxim looks to his friends and I see the gleam in his eyes the second he realizes what I already know. The odds are in his favor right now. Unfortunately for him, I don't fucking care. I'm in it to win, and I fight dirty.

"Nah, man. This is where we—" He indicates his two friends on either side of him. "—warn *you* to walk the fuck away."

"You wanna go a few rounds?" I ask, keeping my voice low and threatening. I allow the rage coursing inside of me to bleed into my eyes and smirk.

"You're outnumbered."

I shrug. "Your point?" My smile spreads, baring my teeth. "You might take me in the end, I'll give you that."

His expression grows smug, but I'm not finished yet.

"But by the time you do," I tell him, "the girl will be long gone, and trust me when I say, I'll mess up all three of your pretty faces and I'll enjoy every goddamn second of it. So, by all means, try and take me. I fucking dare you."

They'll out muscle me in the end, but I've taken a beating before, both on and off the mat. I'll take one again if it'll buy the Castro girl enough time to get away. The question Maxim needs to ask himself is, can he take a beating?

Maxim strikes me as the type who's never been bloody before. He gets by on status and bravado. A dog that's all bark and no bite. But me, I bite. Hard.

"I'm waiting," I quirk a brow, taunting him. Ben and Dorian shake their heads, neither one interested in getting into a brawl with me.

Ben's older brother is on the wrestling team with me. He's got twenty pounds of muscle on me, but I still pinned his ass to the

mat last week, and Ben was there to see it. Glad to know I made an impression.

Seeing the hesitancy on his friend's faces, Maxim grimaces and takes a step back.

"You're not worth the fucking effort," he says. "But I won't forget this."

It's not an idle threat.

"Good. Neither will I."

Without hesitating, I take Leticia's hand in mine and haul her across the gym and toward the rear doors. She hurries to keep up with me, my longer stride eating up more ground than hers. I need to slow down, have more care with her, but the adrenaline flooding my veins won't let me.

My number one priority is to get her out of here before I do something stupid, like turn around and take those three fuckers on regardless of the odds so I can make them hurt. Later, I remind myself. There will come a time... later.

As soon as we're outside, I release her hand to retrieve my phone from my back pocket. I fire off a message to my brother.

ANDRÉS: I'M GOING TO BE LATER THAN PLANNED. CALL Miguel for a lift. I'll catch you back at the house.

NOT WAITING FOR A RESPONSE, I SHOVE MY PHONE BACK IN MY pocket and head for the parking lot, but come to a stop when I realize Leticia isn't walking beside me.

Brows furrowed, I look over my shoulder. She's stopped ten yards away, arms folded over her chest as she chews on her bottom lip in worry.

"You coming?"

She hesitates, so I turn around and walk back to her.

"What's wrong?" I ask, immediately recognizing how stupid of a question that is. She was both physically and sexually assaulted in the span of minutes. Fuck. What's the protocol for something like this? Should I take her to the front office? Maybe the school nurse. Shit. I don't know.

I lift my hand, intending to cup her cheek but she flinches. I drop my hand to my side.

"I won't hurt you," I tell her.

She swallows hard. It's clear she doesn't believe me.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I look out at the empty parking lot. Why was she here at school so late? Classes got out almost an hour ago. "Do you have a ride, or—"

She shakes her head. "I was going to walk." Her voice shakes with each word and I barely manage to stifle my curse. Why the hell is she walking home? She's the fucking Castro Princess. She should have a driver and a goddamn bodyguard. People to protect her so shit like this doesn't happen. But she has neither of those things, and instead she's fucking defenseless against assholes like Maxim Sidorov. *Fuck.*

Gritting my teeth, I look at her again. I can't leave her like this. Shaking my head, I ignore the fact that what I'm about to suggest is a terrible idea, but fuck it, I've had a few of those already today. What's one more?

“Come on, then,” I tell her, tipping my head across the parking lot to where I left my car. “I’ll take you home.” I’m fifteen and only recently got my permit so I’m not supposed to have anyone aside from family with me, but the chances of being pulled over are slim. I’m glad I told Adrián to go ahead without me so I won’t have to explain to him or anyone else why I gave Leticia Castro a ride home in my car.

I start walking but again, Leticia isn’t moving.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she stammers.

“Lie.”

She bristles. “I’m not lying.”

Huffing out a breath I fold my arms over my chest. “Yes. You are. Come out with it already. Why don’t you want me to give you a ride home?”

Her eyes narrow, and for a brief moment I see a flash of her temper before she douses it. Huh. I like it. Maybe she’s not so meek after all. There’s fire burning inside her gaze now that I’m looking for it, she just needs someone to stoke the flames.

“Why did you help me back there?” She waves her hand at the gymnasium doors.

Valid question. But it’s one I’m not quite sure how to answer.

“Why wouldn’t I?” I ask instead.

She unfolds her arms before tucking her dark brown hair behind her ears. “We’re enemies,” she hedges.

I quirk a brow. “Are we?”

We belong to rival families, that much is certain. But I never decided to make Leticia Castro my enemy. I take another step

closer, curious to see how she'll respond if she truly believes me to be her enemy.

Nostrils flaring, she holds her ground, chin tilting up as her dark brown eyes bore into mine. Determination tightens her lips, and her small hands ball into fists at her sides.

"Our families hate each other."

"I know." Where is she going with this?

"I guess, I'm just not sure why you stepped in to help when anyone else in your shoes would have looked the other way. Especially in your position. Our families are enemies and—" There she goes using that word again.

"Do you want to be my enemy?" I cut her off, letting her hear the edge in my voice, because I'll only ask her this question once, and there will be no going back after she makes her decision.

Leticia shrinks back at my question. "What?"

"I said, do you want to be my enemy?"

She bites her bottom lip.

I intimidate her, yet she doesn't cower under the weight of my stare like I expect her to. Instead, she straightens her spine, and this time it's she who takes a step closer.

"No," she says, her voice firm.

Good. My smile spreads. Not so weak after all.

"No, what?" I'm being an asshole, but I can't help it. "Spell it out."

"I don't want to be your enemy. But our—"

Tsk. Tsk. She just had to throw the *but* in there.

“I don’t give a shit about that. You make the decision. We’re enemies or we’re not. What will it be?” My jaw tightens as the seconds tick past in tension filled silence while I await her response. I don’t know why I allow her the choice. When have I ever given anyone else the power?

But there’s something about her ...

She has to decide what we are to one another, because there is a part of me, one I need to ignore, that wants more from her than she’s willing to give. But if she labels us enemies, I can walk away.

A big if.

“It isn’t that simple.”

“Why not?” I’ll claim my father’s throne eventually, but she won’t. She’ll marry into another family. Maybe leave the cartel life entirely. She doesn’t have to be my enemy, not if she doesn’t want to be.

“It just isn’t.” She huffs out a breath, her frustration evident, but she still hasn’t answered the question.

“Why not?”

Leticia throws her hands in the air. “Our families despise one another. My dad hates your dad.”

I shrug. “That explains why our parents are enemies, but not why we have to be.” My father taught me never to take on other people’s baggage. I’m certain he wasn’t referring to those offenses taken on by the family, but he didn’t specify, which makes his lesson open to interpretation. There’s no reason for me to take on the slights and offenses both taken and volleyed between our fathers. They weren’t my decisions, nor were they hers.

“What will it be, Castro?”

This time, she doesn't hesitate.

“I don't want to be your enemy.”

Good girl.

“Alright. You're not.” I nod and turn away, resuming my steps, confident that this time she will follow.

It takes a few seconds, but she mutters a soft curse and then jogs to catch up to me like I suspected she would.

“Just like that?” she asks, her disbelief still evident in her tone.

I contain my sigh. “Yes. Just like that.” There's no need to overcomplicate things.

“Okay...” She trails off as we get to my car. Clicking the fob, I unlock the door and open the passenger side, holding it open to her. Searching eyes meet my own, and again she bites her lower lip. This time I don't think about it. Reaching out, I tug the abused flesh from between her teeth, gently swiping my thumb over her full bottom lip.

“What now?” I ask, seeing the question in her gaze.

She swallows hard and takes a step away from me.

“If we're not enemies then what are we?” she asks. “Does this make us ... friends?”

Hmmm. Friends. Not really what I had in mind, but I don't hate the idea. Can't say I'm particularly fond of it either. Friendship doesn't feel like enough. But it's a start.

“Yeah. We're friends.”

A small smile curls the corners of her mouth, and she holds out her hand. “Alright. Friends.”

I look down at her proffered hand with a frown before catching the amusement in her eyes.

“Fine.” I clasp her hand with mine. “Will you get in the car now?”

Her smile widens. “Say please.”

I grunt. “Please.”

Slipping beneath my arm, she slides onto the leather seat. The scent of cinnamon and vanilla assails my senses and I breathe her in, waiting precious seconds longer than necessary before I close the door behind her.

I didn't start the day looking to befriend Leticia Castro, but I can't say I'm upset by the day's unexpected turn of events.

LETICIA

“You’re so serious,” the girl beside me proclaims. “Live a little. Finals are over. You can relax now.”

It takes everything in me not to roll my eyes.

“Sorry.” I shrug. “Guess I just have a resting bitch face.”

“What? No. I didn’t mean—“

My lips twitch at the corners and I give her an almost smile. “You’re fine. This just isn’t really my scene.”

She nods. “I get that. You should at least try and have a little fun, though.”

Easier said than done. It’s hard to be around all of these college kids and not feel a little resentment for the lives they lead. I’ll never go to PacNorth—Richland’s local college—or any other university. I want to. I’d kill for the chance to further my education. Maybe study abroad. But it isn’t in the cards for me.

I’ve considered enrolling in a class or two after I make my escape, but college registration means leaving a paper trail, and that’s not something I can risk. In six months, I’ll be free of the cartel life, but I won’t be truly free. Life on the run is its own form of captivity.

Maybe she's onto something, though. I can say *fuck it* for one night. It wouldn't be a bad idea to take advantage of moments like this when I can. Maybe pretend to be one of these carefree college students. Someone without fear or responsibility outside of grades and exams.

God, I wonder what that's like?

"Here. This will help." She offers me one of two shot glasses she's holding and gives me a pointed look. Where did she even get these from?

"What's in it?" I ask.

She shrugs and dips her head toward Maxim's table. "Don't know. The guy at that table that's been checking you out all night just sent them over."

It only takes one quick glimpse at Maxim's face to tell me that taking the offered shot isn't a suggestion. It's an order.

Pinche cabrón. Fucking bastard. Guess he noticed my resting bitch face, too.

"That was super cool of him, huh?" She grins. Not waiting for a response, she raises her shot glass. "Cheers!"

With a grimace, I follow suit, clinking my glass with hers and throwing back the shot.

That asshole better not have drugged me.

Fire races down my esophagus. Coughing, I hand her the now empty glass. *Shit.* That was strong. Blinking hard to clear my vision, I immediately feel my cheeks warm as the vodka courses through me.

She passes the glasses off to whichever of Maxim's men delivered them and shifts closer to me, her lips curving into a suggestive smile. "I'm Jill, by the way."

“Leticia.”

“That’s a pretty name,” Jill says.

I shrug. “Thanks.”

“So, do you want to...” she trails off, canting her head to the side with a suggestive grin. I know what she’s getting at and it’s going to be a hard pass for me.

Pretending to be carefree for the night is one thing. Going off the deep end and putting on the kind of show that look of hers is suggesting, is another.

“Not really into the girl on girl thing for male attention. Sorry.”

She pouts, but accepts my answer without complaint, shifting her attention to the woman dancing on her other side who is much more eager to put on the type of display Jill is after.

Turning my back on them, I swing my hips back and forth, trying to forget that I was ordered to dance so I can lose myself between the mix of music and alcohol now thrumming through my veins. *Positive vibes, Leticia. Be a carefree college kid.*

Havana plays over the speakers and both guys and girls sing along to the Camila Cabello club rendition as they rub against one another in a seductive display. A pang of longing spears me in the chest. I can’t remember the last time I’ve been out dancing. It had to have been Prom, maybe? And that was like, five years ago.

A wistful smile ghosts across my lips. The atmosphere wasn’t all that different back then. Young people, sweaty bodies, and carefree attitudes. The only real difference was the lack of alcohol flowing since we were all underaged, and the formal attire.

But it was fun, and I was in good company, dancing the night away with—

I shake off that train of thought. *Don't think about him, Leti.*

Searching for a distraction, I consider joining the people on the dance floor and losing myself in the sea of bodies where I can forget not only my past, but my present. The heavy bass vibrates through my body. I could—no. That's a bad idea.

Dancing on one of the club's table tops lets me avoid the crush of bodies, the sweat, and the grabby hands that are prevalent in a club like this. Maybe that's why Maxim ordered me to climb up here.

An unexpected laugh escapes me.

He would never tell me to do something for my benefit, only ever his own. The only reason I'm up here now is so he can look up and gawk at me—the pervy bastard. Not that it matters. Moving down to the dance floor isn't going to be permitted. He'd lose track of me, as would his men.

So much for that idea.

The song changes and I adjust my pace, slowing to the tempo of Niykee Heaton's *Bad intentions*. The provocative song and my more languid dance moves have several men stopping close by to watch and stare.

They're paying more attention to me than Jill and her new dance partner, something I find incredibly annoying. Those two want the attention. I definitely don't.

Some of the guys are discreet with their attention, but others—like the small cluster of thirty-something year old guys on my right—are much more obvious about their perusal of my body, openly leering as they angle their heads for a better glimpse up my skirt.

Pigs.

The skirt of my black bodycon dress is short. But not *that* short. None of these assholes are getting a look at anything I'm not willing to show. I slipped on a pair of black boy shorts underwear before I left my house tonight as a precaution. They cover as much of my ass as the bikini bottoms I wear to the beach do. More, actually.

"Yeah, baby. Shake that ass," a man shouts, cupping his hands around his mouth as though he's not loud enough as it is.

I flip him off, and he chuckles before releasing a loud whistle, catcalling me again.

Asshole.

"Don't be like that," he cajoles.

I turn away, ignoring his efforts.

"Why don't you climb on down from there. I can show you a good time."

I doubt that.

With a roll of my eyes, I flick my long brown hair over my shoulder and pretend he doesn't exist. I won't be going home with him or anyone else, for that matter. Not even my date. Though I don't imagine Maxim will be alone after we leave the club.

Not if he sticks to his recent patterns of bringing along a third wheel that he plans to fuck later after he drops me off at home.

It's awkward as fuck, but I can't really do anything about it.

Maxim can't screw me for another six months, and there is no way in hell that he'll sacrifice his sex life until then. He's tried getting me on board to do *other* things with promises and pleas

that if he can have a taste, it'll be enough to take the edge off. That he'll be kinder with me. Softer. If he isn't so wound up around me, since I'm just such a *tease*.

Bastardo—bastard.

Like I care about helping him take the edge off of anything. His promises are bullshit, and I'm not the one at fault for his lack of self-control. Leave it to a man to blame a woman for their own behavior, though.

I made the suggestion a few weeks ago that he find a way to fulfill his needs elsewhere before our wedding, feigning concern that we'd take things too far in the heat of passion. Neither of us can afford for me to lose my birthright and I empathize with him, feeding him the same bullshit he tries to feed me about him having needs and me understanding that of course, he has to ensure those needs are met. Only my solution is that he take care of them with someone else. A proposition no true fiancé would ever suggest, but all he heard was “free pass” and latched on to it.

The notion of celibacy is beyond him. As is the concept of fidelity.

It's funny to think he believes me ignorant enough not to realize he's been sleeping around behind my back since the moment we got engaged. I wasn't born yesterday. I know what men like him are like.

No longer worried about the risk of being caught and upsetting me, Maxim is only too happy to sleep his way through Richland until he can have me. Like being married will change anything.

Even if I bothered to stick around—which I won't— he'd continue with his man-whoring ways.

A guy like him will never be faithful. I've accepted that, mostly because I don't care. Maxim made my life hell throughout high school. He can screw whoever he wants. The way I see it, the busier he is with other women, the less time he'll find to torment me.

When we were kids, he'd corner me in classrooms and force his tongue down my throat or his hand down my pants, claiming he was desperate for me. That he couldn't control himself. *Puh-lease*. Maxim lacks many things, but self-control isn't one of them.

As if he knows I'm thinking about him, Maxim flicks his gaze to mine and smirks before wrapping his arms around a busty blond and dragging her into his lap.

Flattening my lips, I try not to sneer. The asshole would read too much into it. Jealousy where Maxim is concerned is beneath me.

I don't care if he sleeps around. At first, he loved it. But now, my indifference grates on him. He wants me to care. To get upset and cause a scene. His ego is so big, he can't fathom any reason I wouldn't want him.

So like the child he is, he acts out. He makes a public display of his cheating to grab my attention, but I never take the bait.

Instead, I widen my smile and wink, my reaction saying *have fun*.

Nostrils flaring, Maxim turns his head and shoves his tongue down the blond's throat.

A few of his men see that I'm still looking and smirk. What is it with everyone thinking that him messing around gets to me?

As far as I'm concerned, this is a win for me. If he screws Malibu Barbie, he'll leave me alone tonight. He can have his,

and I'll go home to the comforts of my battery operated boyfriend and have mine. I might be a twenty-two-year-old virgin, but I'm well educated on my own anatomy and have zero shame in taking care of my own needs.

Breaking the kiss, Maxim keeps his eyes on me while the blond slips her hand beneath his slacks, cupping his obvious erection in her hand. His eyes heat with challenge as they bore into my own, and he leans back, widening his legs to make room for her as she sinks to her knees on the dirty club floor. Normally, he'd excuse himself by this point. Take the girl to another room and do what he wants with her there.

My indifference must really be striking a nerve if he's going to let her suck him off out in the open. Too bad. She's into him, I can tell. Eager to please and hungry for his attention. She probably knows exactly who he is. The amount of money he has. The family he belongs to. And even if she didn't, I can't deny that Maxim is easy on the eyes.

He has blond hair, green eyes, and the type of bone structure most girls swoon over. But good looks aside, he doesn't have anything else going for him. His personality is shit. His ego is the size of Texas. And years of torment at his hands through my formative years have left a sour taste in my mouth.

If she wants him, she can have him.

LETICIA

Sweat drips between my breasts and my muscles ache, fast on their way to becoming Jello.

I've been up on this damn table for close to an hour now, and I'm more than ready for the night to end. But by the look of things, Maxim is just getting his party started. Why hasn't he left to screw the blond Barbie yet? He didn't even let her follow through with sucking him off.

Narrowing my eyes, I take in the thin lines of powder one of his men is laying out on their table.

I didn't expect to be up here this long, but climbing down to sit beside Maxim, especially when he's seconds away from being high as a kite, is a version of hell I have zero interest in experiencing tonight. I'll have to suffer through the drive home with him as it is. Drunk Maxim is bad enough. I haven't had the pleasure of his company while high, and I'm not looking forward to it.

Slowing my movements, I scan the club in search of the bar. Maybe I can use the excuse of needing a drink to catch a small reprieve. If I'm quick about it, I might even be able to borrow someone's phone and call for a ride home. My father won't like it, but desperate times call for desperate measures. I just need to think of a good enough reason to justify him sending

one of his men out for me. My health and well-being won't be motivating enough. If I tell Papá I need a ride because Maxim is drunk and high, he'll deny me. An inebriated man is more likely to take what he wants, and my father's actions as of late have made it clear that he wants me to be taken.

Hmm... What would make him see reason?

I could develop food poisoning.

No.

He wouldn't care.

Crap.

I'm drawing a blank, but I need to think of something.

Maybe an idea will come to me as I make my way through the crowd. Unlikely, but a girl can hope. Eyeing the bar again, I consider my next move. I can't imagine Maxim would object to my needing a drink of water after being up here this long, but regardless, I'll have to ask permission to climb down from my perch before heading for the bar. And if I do, there's a good chance he'll opt to send one of his men with me.

The idea of asking him for permission to do anything makes my stomach sour. Maxim's not looking my way anymore, and neither are his goons. If I'm fast enough, I can go to the bar, ask to borrow a phone, and be back before he notices I'm gone.

I bite my bottom lip, and indecision swirls through me. What if this is a test? If he's refocused his attention just to see if I stay put. He could be setting me up to fail so he has a justifiable excuse to punish me.

Shit. Shit. Shit. This shouldn't be that big of a deal. I'm a grown adult. I should be able to get off a fucking table and

walk across a club. *Dammit.* The problem is that I know what is expected of me.

I was told to stay up here and dance. Doing anything but that makes me disobedient, something that isn't tolerated in my household. To make matters worse, my father would say my disobedience put my life at risk. Not that I think I'm in any real danger here. But both Maxim and my papá would see it differently.

Reckless. Stupid. That's what they'd say my actions were.

I can't risk it. Resignation settles like a heavy weight across my shoulders and bitterness coats my tongue. I hate that I have to worry about insignificant bullshit like this. Why should I be made to suffer through an evening with my inebriated fiancé and a drive home that is hazardous at best?

Closing my eyes, I exhale a harsh breath, keeping up the lazy sway of my hips while wishing my life were anything but this.

You just have to get through six more months.

A calloused hand slides up my bare calf and I snap my eyes open, jerking away from the unexpected and definitely unwelcome touch. I stumble in my heels, losing my balance and flailing my arms in windmill motions through the air to keep from falling to the ground. I bump into Jill beside me, who thankfully steadies me with a hand on my shoulder before offering me a grin and sashaying closer, mistaking my stumble for me having a change of heart about dancing with her to rile up the surrounding men.

That's still going to be a no for me.

"Thanks for the save," I shout over the music and step back, closer to the table's center.

Her smile dims, but she shrugs before hopping down and picking up a conversation with some guy I assume she's met before. Scanning the people closest to me, I search out whoever it was that touched me, but no one stands out as the obvious culprit, and Maxim is still seated in his booth.

If it wasn't Maxim—?

I bite my lower lip. Well, whoever it was, he's not the first jerk to try and cop a feel. I'm sure he won't be the last.

Setting my frustration aside, I try not to let it get to me and decide to stick to the center of the table where I'm a little harder to reach.

Not wanting anyone to see me shaken, I continue dancing; the song switching from a hypnotic thrum to a sultry beat. I find my rhythm once again and halfway through the song, I start to relax. Maybe whoever it was tripped and accidentally touched me when they reached out to steady themselves?

That must be—

An unwelcome hand wraps around my calf, this time gripping my flesh in a firm hold instead of grazing it.

This time, I don't jerk away. In my peripheral, I see Maxim shove up from his seat. How chivalrous.

An involuntary snort escapes me.

Not needing Maxim of all people to defend me, I ready a glare, preparing to lay into whatever asshole it is that's daring to touch me, and look down.

Two familiar pools of amber meet mine. Eyes such a unique shade of brown that after he walked away from me five years ago, ripping my heart clean from my chest in the process, I knew I'd never see eyes like his again.

Not unless he decided to come back. And here he is.

For several seconds, it's like the world stops moving. The music and the crowd fall away and all I see is him. I've caught glimpses of Andrés over the years on the news or in the papers, but none of it prepared me for what seeing him up close again would feel like.

My words freeze in my throat.

This can't be real—

Longing flares deep in my chest, but that flicker of emotion is swiftly consumed by other, stronger ones. Anger. Resentment. Rage. They smother any feelings I ever had for the man standing before me now and help me recover my voice in the face of his audacity.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I bite out, my entire body stiffening. “Déjame,” I snap. *Leave me alone.*

Andrés DeAnde is the last man I want to see tonight. He's the last man I want to see if it is my last day on this earth.

I hate him. With every fiber of my being I hate him. After everything he's done to me—What is he doing here? And better yet, why the hell is he still touching me?

Unperturbed by my reaction, his hand slides higher up my leg, his thumb brushing dangerously close to the thin material of my panties.

I bare my teeth at him.

“Hey, *mudak*,” Maxim shouts. “Get your hands off my—”

With his free hand, Andrés withdraws a gun from the inside of his dark suit jacket and aims it at my fiancé's chest, his amber gaze not once leaving mine.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. What the hell is Andrés thinking? Does he have a death wish?

“Leticia Castro is not your anything.” He says the words to Maxim, but for some reason, I get the feeling that his words are also meant for me. “Not anymore.”

My heart races in my chest, and I don’t miss the look of determination in my former best friend’s eyes.

Maxim stumbles back a step, hands jerking up in the air. “Woah. Woah! What the hell, man? Do you know whose club you’re in right now?”

If I weren’t so surprised by Andrés’s sudden appearance, I’d smile.

He knows who *Passion* belongs to just like he knows whose territory he’s in right now, and it isn’t his. We all went to school together. Received the same education both in and out of the classroom. What Andrés said just by walking into this club tonight is that he doesn’t care.

Idiot.

Andrés DeAnde does what he wants to, when he wants to, and to hell with the consequences. He’s been like this for as long as I can remember, though I doubt there’s much else of the boy I knew left inside this hard shell of a man I’m looking down at now.

Everything changed the day he left. Andrés changed most of all.

Andrés inches his hand higher up my thigh before boldly stroking his thumb over my center.

My stomach tightens, and I bite the inside of my cheek, but I refuse to show him how much his touch affects me. Not after

he abandoned me. He was my person. It was him and I against the world.

I thought it was real. That we'd somehow figure out a way to be together. That we could have our own forever. He made me believe I mattered to him and like a fool, I fell for each and every one of his lies. Hook, line, and sinker.

His touch should repulse me. *He* should repulse me.

But all I feel as he touches me now is white hot need coursing through my veins and liquid heat pooling between my thighs. This cannot be happening.

The day Andrés took up the mantle as the head of the DeAnde family is the day he forgot I existed. And now, after five years of silence, he dares to touch me.

I don't think so.

Andrés ignores Maxim's remarks, and if I wasn't so angry with him, I'd appreciate the fact that he's made my fiancé stumble back in fear. It's nice to see Maxim sweat for once, and it's too bad I can't give myself long to enjoy it.

Drawing on years of etiquette training, I wrap myself in indifference and stuff everything I ever felt for this man deep into the abyss of my soul.

"Passing through?" I raise a brow and shift my feet, desperate to put space between us.

Andrés glides around the table, lithe like the predator he is. He easily maintains contact with me, his hand caressing my thigh while his other keeps his gun steady, his aim ever so slightly shifting as he keeps Maxim in his sights.

"I didn't figure you for the type to enjoy Bratva clubs, but you should leave now. You're bringing down the vibe. "

His eyes light up with amusement, and he opens his mouth to respond, but I cut him off, remembering his words from a moment ago.

“And for the record, I’m not your anything either.” It’s best to make that clear now. I don’t know why he’s back. Hell, maybe he isn’t. His sudden appearance could very well be an unfortunate coincidence. But either way, I don’t want him to get the wrong idea, like I’m happy about his sudden appearance. Because I assure you, I am not.

His jaw clenches, highlighting the sharp structure of his face, and his nostrils flare. Looks like he still has that short temper of his.

Good.

A small thrill ripples through me. I can work with that.

“That’s where you’re wrong, *princesa*.” His smile is cold. Calculating. “I’ve decided your father and I need to come to an understanding where you’re concerned.”

His words take me by surprise, and for once, I don’t bother to hide it.

The Castro’s and DeAnde’s have been enemies since long before my birth, and my father takes every opportunity he can to hurt or kill those who bear the DeAnde name. He’d never have a conversation with Andrés, let alone come to whatever *understanding* Andrés is hinting about.

“How unfortunate, seeing as my father will never agree to meet with you.” Papá murdered Andrés’s father when we were in high school. There is no understanding these two could come to, and there is nothing about me or my life that Andrés deserves to have any say in.

A small crowd gathers around us. A few of Maxim's men begin fidgeting, almost like they're trying to decide what to do. No one knows how to respond in the face of Andrés's sudden appearance. It's pathetic. A member of the Sidorov family is being held at gunpoint and not one of their lackeys knows what to do to save him?

Do the Sidorovs not bother training their men? It's like the gymnasium scene all over again. Not that I'm complaining. Things worked out to my benefit back then, but that's because we were all teenagers.

And I'm not so sure Andrés being the one in control is to my benefit now.

"He will. You'll see." He hooks his finger under the edge of my panties and tugs me forward. "What was it you once told me? Hmmm." He pauses, but not long enough for me to answer. "Cartel daughters marry for one of two reasons, right?"

I hiss when one thick finger slides between my lips to tease my slit. *Holy—fuck.*

The muscles in my legs tighten, and I struggle against the urge to squirm as desperate need ignites the blood in my veins. I forget what it felt like to be touched like this. To be touched by him.

My breathing morphs into short little pants, and I scramble to regain my composure. I won't let Andrés see how much he affects me. *Come on, Leti. Get it together.* But no matter how hard I try to slow my breathing, or how desperately I fight to smother the desire pooling low in my belly, he knows. I can see the triumph in his hooded gaze. His smug attitude in the way the corners of his mouth tug upward into a satisfied grin.

He knows exactly what he does to me.

“What were those reasons again, *princesa*?” he asks.

My mind is lost in a haze of lust, my body vibrating with desperate need.

“Ah, that’s right.” His smile takes on a cruel edge. “A cartel daughter marries to form an alliance.” He waves his gun at Maxim, assuming the truth of our arrangement. “Or...” his eyes darken, “she marries to settle a debt. Correct?”

Swallowing past the lump in my throat, I nod.

“Your father owes the DeAnde family one hell of a debt. Wouldn’t you agree?”

No. Not if it means Andrés owns me. I am not cattle to be sold and traded before being led to slaughter.

“You should stop trying so hard,” I snap, though my harsh words lose some of their effect with how breathless my voice is when they come out. “I won’t be your prize, so how about less touching and more talking?” On second thought... “Actually, let’s skip the talking, too. How about you just turn around and walk away? It shouldn’t be that hard for you, given that you’ve already done it before.”

A tic in his jaw lets me know that my words hit their intended mark.

Andrés withdraws his finger from my center and a soft exhale slips past my lips, but my relief is short-lived when without warning, he thrust two fingers deep into my core as he pulls me against him, his hardened gaze daring me to deny him.

I gasp, unable to hold in the sound in as he finger fucks me right there for everyone looking to see. Without thought, I

grasp at his shoulders, my nails digging into the expensive fabric of his suit.

My knees shake and my cheeks heat, indignation and desire both warring through me.

“You think that was trying?” he growls, his chin now resting against my breast. “You haven’t seen me *trying, princesa.*”

Someone nearby relieves him of his gun. I assume it’s one of his men because he relinquishes it without a struggle, using his now free hand to cradle the back of my thigh as I fly dangerously close to finding my release.

“Your father has many debts in need of settling,” Andrés seethes, his voice deep and laced with hunger. “His biggest being owed to me after what he did to my father.”

I look down at him, holding his gaze and ignoring the trickle of fear that slips down my spine.

Oh God. I’m so close.

He continues his ministrations, expertly maintaining a ruthless rhythm while he speaks. “His hold on his territory is slipping. The deal with the Sidorovs is a band-aid at best, and your father knows it.”

“Wonderful.” My breath hitches. “But none of that explains why you’re here, or why you think you...” I shudder against his hold. “Have any right...” *Shit.* “To touch me.”

Andrés lost that privilege when he took my fragile heart and stomped it mercilessly beneath the heel of his boot.

“Because you’re wrong, *princesa.*”

I cry out as an orgasm violently tears through me. My knees buckle from the onslaught of pleasure and only Andrés’s firm

grip on the backs of my thighs, supporting my weight, keeps me from crashing to the ground.

He sees me through my release, milking every drop of pleasure he can from me while I shatter beneath his touch, desperately clinging to him through each earth shattering wave.

Tremors wrack my body as I come down, and I blink hard through the haze of my release.

Andrés withdraws his fingers from my core, smearing my release against my skin as he wraps his hands around my waist and lifts me from the table. Drawing me close to his chest, he slides my body down his own, forcing me to feel the hard planes of his muscular frame against my now sensitive breasts. When my feet touch the floor, I expect him to let go, but Andrés makes no move to release me. Instead, his hold on my hips tightens.

His erection presses against my belly. A silent declaration heard loud and clear. He wants me.

Andrés tucks a strand of my dark brown hair behind my ear before tipping my chin up to meet his gaze. “I’ve waited years to claim what is rightfully mine, Leticia. It’s long pastime I came to collect.”

My brows furrow, and I shake my head, not understanding the meaning of his words.

Why now? What changed?

Andrés had his chance, and he threw me away like I was nothing. Worthless. Trash.

What game is he playing here?

I know Andrés almost as well as I know myself. There has to be a reason he's come back for me now, one that goes beyond rekindling things with an almost lover or childhood friend. Andrés doesn't act on impulse. He is not reckless or rash. He never makes a move he hasn't seen through all the way to the end.

So whatever game this is, I want no part in it.

Andrés takes in my apprehension with an unreadable expression on his too handsome face. No man as ruthless and cunning as he is should be this beautiful. It's a crime in and of itself.

Cupping the side of my jaw, his thumb traces along the edge of my cheek in a tender caress, but his next words stifle any warmth his touch might have elicited, instead shooting spears of ice into my body.

"You're my recompense, Leticia. Bienvenida a la familia."
Welcome to the family.

6

LETICIA

“Don’t touch me,” I snap, slapping his hand away from my face. “I am not yours to claim.”

Andrés ignores my outburst, returning his hand back to my face, only this time, he squeezes my jaw. His grip is near bruising as he forces me to hold his gaze. “Answer me this, Leticia.” His tone is laced with intrigue. “Did you miss me?”

“Not even a little.” I grind my words out between clenched teeth.

“You always were such a little liar,” he purrs.

I shove against his chest, desperate to put space between us. But pushing Andrés is like trying to move a mountain.

“Fuck you,” I snap.

He ignores my outburst again and traces his thumb across my lower lip. I catch the smell of my arousal on his skin and indignation flashes through me. Without thinking of the consequences, I snap at the digit, my teeth sinking into the meaty flesh of his thumb.

Andrés jerks his hand away from my mouth, releasing his grip on me.

A surprised look flickers over his face before he masks it with amusement. “Mmm. Vicious, too. I forgot about that.”

Spinning on my heels, I turn to leave, but a man I vaguely recognize steps in my path and stops me. I look up, spotting the resemblance between him and Andrés almost immediately.

“Move,” I demand.

He looks over my shoulder at his brother, but doesn’t respond.

“I came back, just like I promised,” Andrés says at my back.

Back? Is that supposed to mean something to me? I laugh, the sound mocking even to my own ears.

I turn back to face him. “Your promises mean nothing. I stopped waiting for you to come back years ago, Andrés.” He walked away from me. It was a conscious choice, and his sudden appearance after the fact changes nothing about my feelings toward him. “I am not the same naive girl I was before.” I won’t forget how he abandoned me. How I gave him everything. Years of friendship. All my secrets. Hell, the boy he was back then even had my heart. And what did he do with it? He threw it away.

So, fuck him.

He’s back?

I. Don’t. Care.

“Besides, you’re a little late.” I wave the three carat solitaire on my ring finger in front of his face.

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes before he reigns in his temper. His eyes flick toward Maxim and I can all but hear the thoughts in his head.

He nods to one of his men who hands him back his gun. I hear the distinct click of the hammer being pulled back and watch as he takes aim.

My eyes widen. He won't shoot Maxim. Not here in a crowded club. He can't.

I look into Andrés's eyes and see nothing but grim determination staring back at me.

Okay, so he might.

The corners of his mouth quirk as though he's reading my mind, too.

Dare me, his gaze says.

Okay, so he will shoot Maxim.

Why do I bother lying to myself?

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I consider my options here.

If Andrés shoots Maxim, it solves a lot of my problems. But it will create new ones too. Maxim is the light at the end of my tunnel. Six months. I only have to deal with him for six more months before I'm free.

With him out of the equation, I'll be right back to square one.

Papá will find someone else to sell me off to, and I'll have to go through this whole merry-go-round all over again. And who knows how long that will take or what repercussions will result from Maxim's death? What if the Sidorov's blame me? This could incite a war.

No, thank you. Better to be with the devil you know than the devil you don't.

Maxim makes a strangled noise in the back of his throat, and I realize I should say something right about now. He is my

fiancé after all, even if he is one I only begrudgingly want to keep.

Drawing my gaze, Maxim gives me a pleading look.

Urgh. Fine.

Taking a deep breath, I exhale a long-suffering sigh, drawing Andrés's attention back toward me.

“What do you want?” I ask, removing any hostility from my voice.

“Show me how much you missed me. Maybe then I'll tell you about the plans I have for you and I.”

I snort. “I can't show you something that does not exist.”

His eyes narrow. “We've never lied to each other.”

Bullshit. Every promise he ever made to me was a lie.

“I understand I've hurt you. It was not my intention.”

“Alright. Fine. Apology accepted.”

“You want to play this game?” I don't miss the thinly veiled threat in his voice.

“I'm not playing any game,” I tell him. “I don't know what you planned on accomplishing tonight, but if it was to apologize, congratulations. You've done it. I accept. You can go now knowing that all is forgiven and your conscience is clear.”

His jaw tightens, and the next thing I know, he's hoisting me over his shoulder and stalking out of the club.

Blood rushes to my face. “What are you doing?” I all but screech. My hands press against his lower back, and I struggle to steady myself as he walks with purpose out of the club.

Three men close rank behind him. One is the same man who earlier blocked my escape, and it's his stony expression I meet while fighting to shove my hair out of my face. He has to be one of Andrés's brothers. The resemblance is too close not to be. From what I remember, Andrés has three brothers. All younger. But the man in front of me looks close to the same age as Andrés, so this must be — "Adrián!"

His brows rise.

Yep. This is the oldest of Andrés's baby brothers.

"You know this is a bad idea. Get him to put me down."

His mouth tightens, and he looks away, saying nothing. I thought he was supposed to be the level-headed one in the family. Why then is he letting his brother all but kidnap me in the middle of enemy territory?

"Andrés!" I snarl. "Put me down."

His only response is to pat my ass, making my vision go red.

Fuck this and fuck him. I am not some sack of potatoes for him to haul around however he pleases.

"I swear to god, Andrés. If you don't put me down right this instant, I will —"

"You'll what?" he deadpans as he steps through the club's doors. The cool night breeze kisses the backs of my thighs and I push harder against his lower back, levering myself enough to see a black SUV pull up where Andrés has stopped on the curb. The door to the club closes behind us, blocking out the noise, and a man rolls down the window, signaling for Andrés and his men to get in.

Oh no. Hell no.

I hear the doors open just as powerful hands grip my waist. Andrés lowers my feet to the ground, keeping me close as I slide down the hard planes of his chest. My body is flush with his, but as soon as he releases me, I jerk my arm back and swing.

Slap.

His face jerks to the side with the force of the blow, and a red imprint blooms across his jaw. Everyone freezes. The tension in the air thickens with growing hostility, and I know everyone is waiting to see what Andrés will do. How he'll respond to the offense, but not me.

“You have no right—“

“I have every right,” he snarls. “You are mine, Leticia Castro.”

His eyes are blazing, and for the first time since the day our paths first crossed, a trickle of fear slithers down my spine at what he might do next.

“Or did I not make myself clear?” Andrés crowds me, using his size and strength to herd me backward toward the vehicle.

“You are to be my wife.”

WHAT?!

“Giving me every right to do whatever the hell I please where you are concerned. Now get in the car.”

My mouth twists.

“Now!”

ANDRÉS

My cheek stings from the slap Leticia delivered only moments ago. I didn't know she had it in her.

A sense of pride blooms inside my chest. These years apart have not broken her spirit. If anything, they've made her stronger. *Good*. I was worried before, but it looks like I didn't need to be.

Adrián catches my gaze in the rearview mirror, throwing me a look of concern. One I intentionally ignore. He's waiting to see how I react, expecting me to blow up at Leticia and likely debating whether or not he will intervene.

My brother might despise her and the family she comes from, but the need to defend a woman in distress is so deeply ingrained in him by our mother that it wouldn't surprise me if he intervened on her behalf should I cross a line.

It's a worry he need not have.

I've never allowed anyone to strike me and live to tell the tale. But Leticia Castro is not just *anyone*. She is... everything. Leticia has gone toe to toe with me on more than one occasion, proving she is not my lesser, but my equal. I forgot how much I fucking love it.

It's what has always been so refreshing about our relationship.

My own brothers don't even have that privilege and it's one I unknowingly gave her during our adolescence while watching her bloom.

When we met as teenagers, she was a meek and cautious little thing with guarded eyes, reminding me of a dog that's been kicked one too many times. Always braced for the next blow life had in store for her.

But over time, it went away, and I'm cognizant enough to know I was the cause for it.

I never let it be known that I protected her from Maxim and his friends. I couldn't, given the families we belong to. But Leticia understood my position, and she never begrudged me for it. I knew a public display of support would make her life easier. All it would take was a friendly acknowledgement of her existence in the hallways or the reproach of a classmate who mocked her.

I should have done more for her. Been better. But Leticia was grateful for the little I did do, telling me over and over that my efforts were more than enough.

We kept our friendship secret. And when our relationship progressed into something more, our outward appearances remained the same.

I took pains to keep Maxim busy, and I always had one of my boys on her, watching her and keeping her safe under the guise of gathering information on our enemies.

If Maxim Sidorov approached her, I was notified, and my boys and I took great pleasure in foiling his plans. Intervening on Leticia's behalf swiftly became a sport. One the DeAnde crew rallied behind since they saw it as a means of messing with not only one, but two of our enemies. Mistaking Maxim's interest

in her as one she reciprocated. It was an assumption I never corrected.

My efforts at school did nothing to help with Leticia's life at home, and though she did her best to hide the bruises from me, I've always known her father is an abusive man. So at school, I did what I could.

As time passed, she came more and more out of her shell, secure in the knowledge that with me around, she was safe. I would never hurt her, and I would never stand by and let anyone else hurt her, either.

All these years later, and despite my well-earned reputation, Leticia still does not fear me. I'm happy for it. It will make the path forward easier for the both of us.

I meant what I said to her before. She will be my wife. I had no actual plan for what was to happen next beyond stealing her away from Maxim. No part of me could ever stand by and watch her marry that *pendejo*.

But seeing her now is a punch to the gut, making me realize that stealing her away isn't enough.

I want to own her. Claim her. Mark her as mine, and ensure that never again will circumstances take her from me.

What better way to ensure her position at my side than to marry her, destroying any claim another man might try laying to her?

The more I think about it, the firmer my resolve on the matter is. Even in the face of Leticia's anger, I'm confident she will see reason and come around.

Tonight didn't go as planned. This was no happy reunion. There isn't an ounce of appreciation in her body over my interference. Instead, she sits rigid beside me, pressed up

against the door frame to put as much distance between us as possible. I'd laugh if I weren't so offended by the cool reception.

Her bottom lip juts out like that of a petulant child, and she folds her arms over her chest, pushing her full breasts up. It's an unintentional move I take full advantage of as I greedily drink her in.

It's been too long since I last laid eyes on her, and in the years that have passed, she's changed. Developed.

Leticia's always been pretty, but grown up, she is stunning.

Her lips are fuller than I remember. Her body is tighter. She's lost most of the softness in her face that is accompanied by youth, and her figure has filled out, morphing from the reed thin frame of a teenager to the voluptuous body of a woman with curves.

"Are you going to tell me where you're taking me?" she asks, breaking the silence in the vehicle.

"Home."

Her brows pull together, a small furrow forming between them. She assumes I'm speaking of the Castro compound. I'm not. Her home from this point on is the same as my own. The DeAnde estate.

I won't be separated from her again.

"Your brother is going the wrong way."

Adrián shakes his head but says nothing.

"I assure you, he isn't." I don't elaborate, much to her obvious frustration.

She goes back to staring out the window, watching the city lights fly by while pretending I don't exist.

Good luck with that, baby. I tried pretending you didn't exist these five long years and look where that got me.

She glances behind us, spotting my men as they follow close behind in another of my blacked out SUVs. Storming the Sidorov club may have been impulsive, but I'm not stupid. The men behind me will ensure no one follows us, and they'll take care of anyone stupid enough to try—not that I'm worried.

I threw Maxim off his game tonight. His ego took a beating. It will take him at least a few days to recover and come up with a plan to get back at me, and by then, it will be too late.

Her silence grates beneath my skin. “How long do you plan on giving me the silent treatment?”

Leticia bites her lip but doesn't answer. She wears her pissed off expression like a badge of honor. She can sulk all she likes. I'm content knowing that her father will soon have no choice but to speak with me, something he's avoided doing at every turn.

Just thinking about the man has ice filling my veins. It's been five years since my father's death and the bastard responsible still walks free. A sinister smile curls my lips. Until today, Ruben Castro didn't have a care in the world. Why would he? I was an eighteen-year-old kid when my father was murdered. Overwhelmed by my grief, I struggled to keep my head above water in a violent and dangerous world.

I didn't have the time, resources, or the capability to take on someone like Ruben Castro back then. But I sure as fuck do

now, and with his daughter at my side, I'm going to make him bleed.

"I see no point in conversing when every word that comes out of your mouth is a lie."

Unbuckling my seatbelt, I turn in my seat and grip the back of her headrest. "Not once have I ever lied to you." My word is my honor.

"No?" she asks, her voice small. Resigned. "Then where are you taking me?"

"Home," I bite out. Again.

Leticia huffs out a breath and unbuckles her seat belt as the SUV slows to a stop at the light. I assume she means to face me as I did her, but the next thing I know, she's thrown her door wide open and is sprinting across three lanes of traffic.

"*Chinga tu madre,*" I curse, scrambling across the seat.

"Follow us," Adrián tells Rio, my man riding passenger, right before he exits the car only seconds behind me.

"Andrés!" he shouts, his footsteps pounding the pavement behind her

Determination sweeps through me. She ran. I can't believe she fucking ran for it. What does she think this is? The goddamn movies? Who does that? A car could hit her. Or she could fall down on those stupid fucking heels of hers and get hurt.

Reckless. She's goddamn reckless, and I swear to *la Santa Muerte* when I catch up to her, I'm going to bend her over my knee and ensure she never pulls a stunt like this again.

"Do you see her?" my brother asks, both of us scanning the intersection.

“No. She—” I catch sight of Leticia’s face as she weaves between two vehicles without an ounce of concern for her own safety. “There!” I swear, when I get my hands on her—

Rushing through traffic, we track her movements, and I pick up my pace as I close the distance between us. Leticia is fast, but I’m faster. Chancing a look over her shoulder, her eyes widen when they see Adrián and me close behind. She stumbles in her heels, and I take advantage of her distraction, adding a burst of speed right before I pounce.

Arms banding around her arms and waist, I jerk her to my chest as she screams profanities and fights against my hold. Her feet lift off the ground, and she kicks at the air to get away. She catches Adrián in the chest when he gets too close, forcing him back several steps.

“Fuck!” he exclaims.

“Knock that shit off,” I snap.

Leticia spits. Fucking spits.

“Aléjate de mí. Pinche cabrón.” *Get away from me. You fucking bastard.* “Ayúdame! Alguien que me ayude!” *Help. Somebody help me.*

Shock courses through me. Who the hell is this woman? Where is the Leticia I knew? The one that would never make a scene like this, in fucking enemy territory, no less. I swear to fucking god, a demon must possess her body right now.

“Leti—” A warning growl bleeds into my voice. “You do not want to make an enemy of me.”

She barks out a laugh, her voice pitched high and mocking. “Hijo de puta.” *Motherfucker.* “You’re already my enemy.”

My shoulders stiffen at her words, and I wrestle her body closer against mine. “We—“

“No.” She shakes her head, clipping the bottom of my jaw. “There is no ‘we’. There never was. Because if there had been, if I’d meant anything to you, then you wouldn’t have abandoned me.” She stomps her heel into my foot, and I grunt. “You made it look so fucking easy.”

Is that what she thinks?

Adrián shifts beside me, careful to remain outside of Leticia’s striking range. He signals Rio, who parked the SUV close by, and Rio jumps from the idling vehicle to open the back door.

Fuck it. She’s going to keep fighting and screaming at me. I might as well give her a legitimate reason to be angry.

“Grab her legs,” I say to my brother.

With lightning speed, he lunges forward to wrap one arm over the top and the other over the bottom of her calves, sandwiching her legs in his grip as he tucks her against his side. She bucks and writhes against us, uncaring that if we were to release her now, she’d fall to the unforgiving pavement.

“It didn’t have to be like this.” She’s the one acting reckless. Unreasonable.

“Mierda.” *Bullshit*. Leticia reverts to her native language when she’s angry, and right now, she’s furious. But what’s done is done. The only thing left now is to move forward. With staggered steps, Adrián and I haul her to the awaiting vehicle. Her skirt falls back, exposing her black boy short panties and the cheeks of her toned ass.

“Urgh!” she screeches, doubling her efforts when she realizes we’re almost to the SUV.

Daniel and Ricardo park behind Rio, both men exiting the vehicle to watch our struggle with varying expressions of outrage and amusement. I, for one, am not amused.

Ricardo's eyes wander over Leticia's body, and my nostrils flare, seeing the appreciation in his gaze.

"Eyes up," I snap.

Ricardo jerks his attention to me, a look of fear washing over his face.

"Mírala así otra vez y te quitaré uno de tus ojos." *Look at her like that again and I'll take one of your eyes.*

He heeds my warning, averting his gaze before climbing back into his vehicle. Daniel quickly follows suit.

"Breathe, *hermano*," Adrián cautions, catching the apprehensive look on the faces of my men.

Easy for him to say. It's not his woman they gawked at.

The fight drains out of Leticia, her efforts weaker now as we close the last few feet of distance.

"Block the other side," Adrián tells Rio.

He jogs around the SUV and leans against the door, ensuring Leticia can't make the same escape twice.

"Smart," I say.

Adrián grins. "I have my moments."

Shoving Leticia inside, I climb on top of her and press her down into the leather seats, holding her in place.

"You can't do this. Let me go!" she screams. "Help! Somebody—"

I slam my hand over her mouth to quiet her, and Adrián slams the door shut behind me. Leticia kicks out with her feet and shoves at my shoulders, but it's no use. I have a good fifty pounds on her. Rio takes over driving while Adrián hops into the passenger seat, and I make myself comfortable, settling my weight in between Leti's thighs.

"Stop fighting me," I warn. "I don't want to hurt you."

She shakes her head violently, forcing me to dig my fingers into her cheeks.

"Enough!"

She goes limp beneath me, but she's far from giving up. Dark brown eyes narrowing, she holds my gaze, and I can see the gears spinning in her head. This is where she comes up with her next move. But two can play that game, and I quickly devise mine.

Remembering the way she responded earlier to my touch, I grind my hips against hers, not at all surprised to notice my dick already at half mast. Fury flashes in the depths of her gaze, but so does something else. Something darker that the hunger inside me immediately responds to.

Need.

This time, I do nothing to hide my grin. Leti can pretend to hate me all she wants, but her body doesn't lie. She was wet for me back at the club, and despite whatever resentment she might still carry, I have no doubt that she is wet for me now.

"That was stupid," I tell her, licking my lips.

Now that I have her up close, I catalog her features. Even riled up and angry, she is devastatingly beautiful.

How did I ever let you go?

While standing, the skirt on her black dress falls a few inches short of her knees, exposing the sun-kissed skin of her legs, but with the position we're in now and with her continued struggles, the material has bunched higher, leaving more of her smooth, bronze skin on display.

I slide my free hand up her bare thigh, watching as her eyes darken, turning into slits.

Her hair is a tumble of dark brown waves spread out across the seat. My fingers itch to wrap around their silky strands and pull her head back, locking her in place until she relinquishes control and submits to me.

Knowing Leti, it'll be a cold day in hell before she does that. Doesn't mean I won't try.

Like when we were kids, she wears little to no makeup. She's never needed it. Her beauty is unparalleled. But like most beautiful things, she is not to be trusted. A fact I'm reminded of when the vicious little minx bites the fleshy part of my hand still covering her mouth.

"Hijo de—" *son of a*—I rear back, straddling her body as she shoves herself up on her elbows and bucks her hips beneath me.

"Get off of me," she snarls.

It's a weak attempt to unseat me. She needs to be stronger. Put on a little more weight and pack on some muscle if she has any hope of defending herself in a situation like this.

In our world, she can't afford to be weak. Leticia knows this.

Why, then, has she done nothing about it? I mentally add finding her a trainer to my list of things to do once we're settled.

Ignoring the small drop of blood where her teeth broke the skin, I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze. A warning and a glaring reminder of who holds control here.

Pressing her back into the seat, her arms buckle beneath me, and she sucks in a sharp breath.

“You will not run from me again.” I make sure she hears the threat in my words.

There can be no misunderstandings between us. It is crucial Leticia knows her place. My family will not take to her blatant disrespect, and I won't always be around to protect her. She has to behave. She can be angry with me all she likes, but she cannot put herself at risk like that again.

Mouth pressing into a tight line, her eyes flash with mutiny.

Resignation settles in my gut. I should have tied her up to begin with instead of trusting in our former relationship. No part of me expected her to make a run for it. Let alone to do so in the middle of a traffic stop. I underestimated her. I won't do that again.

“Ties.” I hold my hand out over the center console without taking my eyes from hers.

Adrián slaps what I've requested into my outstretched hand, and Leti shifts her gaze, trying to see what he's given me. Only my grip on her throat won't allow it.

“You brought this on yourself,” I tell her right before flipping her onto her stomach.

She gasps at the abrupt change in position, and I make quick work of tugging both her arms behind her back. Not giving her the chance to catch her bearings, I secure the zip-tie around her wrists, tightening the plastic until I'm confident she can't worm her way out of the makeshift cuffs.

With her hands secured, I flip her back over, ignoring her obvious discomfort.

“Is that enough, or do I need to secure your ankles, too?”

She doesn’t respond.

“Leti—“ I growl.

“It’s enough,” she snaps.

Good. Satisfied, I once again settle my weight between her thighs. I could sit back in my seat, safe in the knowledge that she can’t escape me again. But I’m loath to allow any distance between us. This close, I’m able to examine every freckle on her face and smell the heady fragrance of cinnamon and vanilla rooted beneath her skin.

No. Distance is the last thing I need. I’ll stay right here.

Rio hits a bump in the road, and my hard-on grinds against her.

I barely manage to stifle my groan, and from the look on her face, she doesn’t dislike the feel of my erection between her thighs.

Conscious of our audience, I test my theory and shift my hips, this time thrusting with intention against her center.

Leticia sucks in a breath, and her cheeks tinge with pink. But she doesn’t rebuke me.

I repeat the motion, thrusting into her again. And again. All too quickly, memories of us grinding in the backseat of my Silverado as teenagers surface, taking me back to the days when Leticia Castro was enthusiastically mine. We were young back then. I was more innocent than I am now. Though claiming I was ever innocent is a bit of a stretch.

Leticia was, though. She was soft, shy, and sweet. I might not have understood how we fit together so perfectly before. How a girl like her could come to care for a boy like me whose soul was tainted in blood. But neither did I question it. I accepted her love and affection for the gift it was, having learned long before never to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Cartel life means you grow up fast, but I've had to grow up faster. And still... we fit.

Eyes darkening with lust, Leti's plum-colored lips part on a sigh.

A subtle invitation I would be foolish to ignore.

Dipping my head, I nip at her full bottom lip, eliciting a sharp intake of breath. *Santa Muerte*, how quickly my need for this woman consumes me.

"Tell me you still want me."

She shakes her head. A wordless denial.

"I don't believe you."

She might want to pretend that feelings between us are long dead and buried. But her denial is pointless in the face of the blush currently coloring her cheeks and the way her eyes dilate with need with each press of my length against her core.

My thoughts are confirmed when a breathy moan slips past her lips, and I give in to the temptation to claim her mouth. Closing the scant inches between us, I crush my lips to hers, determined to swallow her lies before she can give voice to them.

She's stiff beneath me at first, but it only takes a few swipes of my tongue over the seam of her mouth before she softens, parting her lips and allowing me entry.

The taste of sweet cherries and vodka explodes over my taste buds, and I groan, settling my weight more firmly against her. I plunder Leticia's mouth, determined to take everything she has to give. A feeling she appears to enthusiastically support.

Her lips and tongue tangle with mine in a silent bid for dominance.

Fuck. I missed this.

There were women before Leticia and a handful of carefully chosen ones after. But none has had the power to turn me into a ravenous beast. One who aches to devour and claim.

What I feel for this woman goes beyond mere desire or a need for release. Leticia Castro is a thirst I cannot quench and an addiction I have already decided to give in to.

Skimming my hand down to her bare calf, I hook her leg over my hip, opening her wide and thrusting harder against her heat.

The material of my slacks shifts along my skin, creating an uncomfortable sort of friction. It serves as a reminder of the unnecessary barrier still between us. And while I'd prefer to have her in my bed, I'll have to settle for claiming her here first. I am through, waiting.

Pressing my hand between us, I rub two fingers over her clit, feeling the proof of her arousal through her soaked panties.

"Fuck. I knew you'd be wet." I groan into her kiss. "So fucking wet and ready for me."

The SUV comes to a hard stop, and I nearly roll off of her but manage to catch myself just short of falling onto the floorboards.

I dismiss the abrupt motion, making quick work of repositioning us both. I'm conscious of the fact that Leti's hands are still bound behind her back, but I see no point in releasing her now.

Not when I have her right where I want her.

Without needing to look outside of the windows, I know we've arrived at my family estate. Rio and Adrián throw open their doors before jumping out of the car and slamming them in their haste. Neither man bothers to ask if I'm joining them.

They know what I am about to do. Just like they also know that I don't require an audience.

8

LETICIA

Andrés kisses me like his survival depends on it, and I get lost in the sensations of his touch, granting myself this one moment to give in to the want and need I felt when I laid my eyes on him back at the club.

Despite arguing otherwise, I have missed Andrés. Fiercely. He was my person. The boy who made me smile. Who kept me safe.

And then he was gone. *Poof*. I had no warning. No opportunity to prepare. Andrés vanished from my life without a word, and unbeknownst to me, a part of me went with him.

Rough hands trace the outsides of my thighs as Andrés rocks his cock against my needy center.

Ay! Dios mio—oh my gosh. Why does he have to feel so freaking good?

I need to tell him to stop. Only, I can't find the words through the lust-filled haze. My fingertips tingle at my back, the zip-tie securing my wrists digging into my skin, but even that doesn't help me see sense. Andrés shifts down my body, leaving a trail of rough, wet kisses down my neck and along my collarbone.

“Andrés—“ Come on, Leticia. Make him stop.

“Sí, princesa. Dime que necesitas.” Yes, princess. Tell me what you need.

He drops to the floor of the SUV and turns my hips with him as he wedges his broad shoulders between my thighs. Lifting one of my legs over his shoulder, he shoves the skirt of my dress up, exposing my panties to his hungry gaze.

I open my mouth—to say what, I don’t know. If I could think straight, I would tell him to stop. I’d tell him how much I hate him. How his touch makes my skin crawl and how I will never find comfort in his embrace again.

But any words I might have die on my tongue when met with the raw need reflected in his gaze. Andrés stares unblinking at the apex of my thighs, the expression on his face what I can only describe as that of a man starved and convinced that I’m the sustenance he needs to extinguish his hunger.

He wastes no time in slipping his fingers beneath the fabric of my underwear, brushing the lips of my pussy before pulling the fabric to the side and exposing my most intimate parts to his gaze. Nostrils flaring, he inhales deep, groaning as he breathes the scent of my arousal into his lungs.

Embarrassment heats my skin, but before it can take root, he leans forward and swipes his tongue between my folds, leaving me to cry out at the sudden spark of sensation. Of their own volition, my hips thrust forward, a silent plea that Andrés understands.

With a dark chuckle, he latches onto my clit, sucking hard until I whimper.

“So sweet,” he grunts.

My eyes threaten to roll into the back of my head. We’ve touched one another before, but not like this. Never has

Andrés had his mouth on my pussy, nor has he ever sought to bring me pleasure with my arms bound behind my back at my wrists.

Something about being restrained while he sets his sights on my release shoots an arrow of adrenaline straight through me. I've never felt turned on like this before.

“Please—” I don't even know what it is that I'm asking for.

My hips move on their own, matching the pace and rhythm he sets with his mouth. Another cry tears free from my throat, and tension builds low in my belly. I'm going to come. Fuck. He's going to make me come for him. Again.

My head falls back against the seat and one of Andrés's hands slides up the inside of my thigh, stroking my skin before two thick fingers push their way inside of me.

My pussy clenches around the intrusion, and Andrés growls low against my entrance, the vibration along my sensitive skin eliciting a shiver.

“Fuck, you're tight.” He curses, but he doesn't withdraw. No. Andrés thrusts his fingers as deep as they can go, filling me in a way I've yet to experience before.

My orgasm races toward me, and sensing my impending release, he quickens his pace, thrusting his fingers in and out of me while his tongue continues to circle my clit.

The next thing I know, my back is arching off the seat, and I cry out his name. “Andrés!”

Fireworks explode behind my eyelids and wave after wave of pleasure washes over me, but Andrés doesn't stop there.

“All of it, *princesa*. I want everything you have to give.”

He milks every drop of my release from me until there is nothing left, leaving me spent and unable to breathe.

Chest heaving, my body trembles beneath him.

Slowly, he leans back and withdraws his fingers from my body.

I need to say something. To move. But I'm drained, my mind unable to think.

With a cocksure grin on his too handsome face, Andrés tugs my panties off of me and flips me onto my stomach. I don't register his intentions until he climbs onto the seat behind me and tugs my hips toward him. I hear the distinct sound of his belt loosening, followed by the sound of his zipper being drawn down.

“What are you doing?” My voice is breathless, and I know I'm in a precarious position.

“Fucking you.” Andrés shoves my dress up, exposing my bare ass to his gaze. “And don't lie to me and pretend you don't want this.” He swipes his fingers through my drenched folds. “We both know that you do.”

I bark out a humorless laugh. He's right. I want him to fuck me, but reality is a bitch, and she's making her presence known.

“So, was it always your plan, then?”

I don't bother putting up a fight. What would be the point? I can't stop him. Andrés is both bigger and stronger than I am. If this is how my future is to be stolen from me, so be it. I won't beg or plead with him to release me. I've accepted my fate before. I can do so again.

“What are you talking about?”

How stupid does he think I am?

“You think by ruining me, you’ll stick it to my father?” I close my eyes, readying myself for what he will do. “Go ahead, then. Do it.”

Andrés stills behind me. I don’t know if he hesitates because of my words or because of his own reservations, but I’m not done yet. I want him to know exactly what he is doing. To take responsibility for his actions, knowing the full weight of the consequences I’ll be left to face as the result of his next move.

Andrés may try to sweep his earlier sins aside and make excuses for his absence in my life. But this—stealing the best chance I have of a life of my own—this is a betrayal that cannot be swept under the rug.

Andrés’s bare cock presses against my entrance.

“But you should know that by fucking me, you’re not only destroying my future. You’re giving my father exactly what he wants.”

Hearing my words, he freezes.

“Destroying your future?” he asks, and there is genuine confusion in his voice. Or at least he wants me to believe there is. Andrés is one of the smartest people I know. It wouldn’t surprise me if this was all just some elaborate game and, given the likelihood that it is, I won’t allow myself to fall for it.

“How does claiming what is rightfully mine destroy your future?”

I ignore the possessiveness of his words. The fact that I am most definitely not his is an argument best saved for another day.

With that in mind, I crane my neck to look back at him over my shoulder. Meeting his amber gaze, I take in his position, noting that he's unbuttoned his shirt, exposing his muscular chest. He's already lined up to take me, and I can tell it requires all of his restraint to keep him from doing so.

"You know what life is like for cartel daughters. You know the expectation that I am to remain pure."

His mouth twists into a grimace. "I don't care if you're a virgin when I take you on our wedding day. You'll be mine just the same, whether I claim you now or wait to take you then."

"You truly intend to make me your wife?" I ask. "Despite the fact that you've yet to speak with my father?"

Eyes narrowing, he nods.

"Why?"

I watch him intently, seeing his brows furrow at my question.

Andrés cocks his head to the side. "Why what?"

"Why do you want to marry me?"

Huffing out an exasperated breath, he levels me with an unamused glare. "Because you're mine."

Like that tells me anything.

"Not good enough."

A muscle tics along his jaw, revealing his frustration. "It is for me."

"So what, my feelings on the subject don't matter?"

"I didn't say that," he snaps.

"You didn't have to."

“Fóllame!” Andrés throws his arms in the air. *Fuck me.*

I ignore his outburst, something the Andrés I knew rarely ever did.

“Do you intend to fuck me? Right here and right now?”

Indecision flickers across his face. “Do you want me to?”

Does he care? “No.” My answer is immediate.

Sucking on his teeth, he looks away. Seconds tick past while he gathers his thoughts, the tension stifling between us. My ass is still naked and in the air and under normal circumstances, I’d be embarrassed given my current position, but with everything that’s already happened tonight, I’m finding it difficult to care.

An unwelcome sort of helplessness begins to seep into my bones the longer that Andrés takes to come to a decision. But, regardless of what he decides, I’ve realized there is no win in it for me. Maybe I shouldn’t have bothered stopping him.

If Andrés takes me now, I lose my inheritance.

But if he insists on marrying me, even if he waits to consummate our vows, he will unwittingly sentence me to an early grave.

Papá won’t let Andrés marry me. He’ll see me dead long before he’ll hand his enemy the keys to his kingdom.

There is no happily ever after for me. Then again, was there ever?

With a growl of frustration, Andrés makes his decision. With jerking movements, he tucks himself back into his slacks before righting my dress and turning me into a seated position.

Pressing my back against the doorframe, I take in his stony expression and wait to see what happens now.

“Explain.” Keeping his eyes on me, he hastily buttons his shirt back up.

I ignore the flicker of regret I have in watching him cover himself up.

“Explain what?”

“How fucking you ruins you? How I’m stealing your future?”

Oh. That.

Fidgeting in my seat, I wince when the plastic around my wrist tightens, digging deeper into my skin.

With a muttered curse, Andrés abandons the buttons on his shirt to retrieve a small knife from his pants pocket. “Come here.” Leaning over me, he cuts me free and draws my hands forwards. With a frown on his face, he scowls at the angry marks the zip ties left behind.

“I’m sorry.”

The sudden shift in his tone takes me by surprise and an irrational knot of emotion lodges itself in my throat. No. I will not soften for him. He should be sorry. For the marks on my wrists and for everything else.

Stroking his thumb over the reddened skin, he reaches across my lap and opens my door.

“We’ll finish this conversation inside.”

ANDRÉS - PAST

A purple bruise darkens Leticia's cheek, hidden beneath a thick layer of makeup on her otherwise unblemished skin. With her chin tucked down close to her chest, her dark brown hair falls in waves around her face.

It is a vain attempt to mask the evidence of abuse that mars her delicate skin.

She assumes that I, of all people—the son of her family's biggest rival—won't look too closely. That I won't notice the smudge concealed beneath her skin. But I see everything when it comes to this girl.

Even the things she tries to hide.

Sucking on my teeth, I will the rage coursing through my veins to die down to a simmer, but containing the fury I feel is a hopeless endeavor.

The closer she gets, the more I can see. There are fingerprint bruises on her left bicep and an angry red scratch on her collarbone. Her eyes are red rimmed and watery.

¡Mierda!—*Shit*.

One look at the defeated set of her shoulders confirms what I already know.

My *princesa* was crying.

I can make an educated guess as to the man responsible. The first bell hasn't rung, and as far as I'm aware, Maxim hasn't arrived at All Souls Academy yet, meaning her father—Ruben Castro—is the most likely culprit.

Muscles bunching, I tighten my fingers around the bleacher beneath me, clinging to the cold metal to hold myself in place.

“Hey.” Leticia's smile is small. Uncertain.

Dropping into the seat beside me, she presses her hands to her knees and keeps her shoulders hunched forward. More of her hair falls over her face and my hands twitch with the need to push it away, unveiling the vulnerable girl beneath.

“Everything okay?” I'm careful to keep my tone flat and even, but Leticia still stiffens beside me.

“Mmm hmm.”

Mentirosa—*Liar*.

Grinding my teeth, I remind myself of words spoken to me before by my father. “*When you respond to a situation with anger, you risk hurting the very people you want to protect.*”

Leticia doesn't need me lashing out in the face of her pain. It's obvious she's been through enough. I won't contribute to her suffering.

Right now, what she needs is support and comfort. Though I'm unsure if she'll accept either of those from me.

We've met in secret these past few weeks, but she always approaches with the fear of rejection clouding her gaze. It's as though she's waiting for the other shoe to drop. For my attitude toward her to change and for me to treat her the way everyone else does.

I never paid much attention to her before. But since intervening with her and Maxim, I've taken an interest in learning all that I can about her.

What I've uncovered leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Despite being the daughter of Ruben Castro—the head of one of Richland's infamous cartels—Leticia is treated like an outcast. The girls at ASA glare at her with open contempt—treating her as though she is their enemy. And the boys are no better. They take their direction from Maxim and his friends, catcalling Leticia in the hallways and even going so far as to lay their unwanted hands on her.

I don't like the rumors I've heard about her being cornered in classrooms, or the stories floating around of her being marked and treated like prey. More times than I can count, she's been the victim of hazing. Bullying. The people here have no hesitation in pushing her around.

I knew from the beginning she'd need to be handled with care, but I never expected to learn just how truly beaten down she is. It's a miracle she hasn't broken in the face of all she's endured.

Looking at her now, I question how much longer she will accept the abuse before she does. Break, that is.

How is she supposed to survive in a world as dark and dangerous as ours?

Leticia twists her fingers in her lap. There is a restless energy about her today, and a part of me wants to soothe her. It worries me. I'm getting attached, which is dangerous. But I meant what I said before. Being enemies is a choice. And it's one we've both rejected.

Making the decision to set my worries aside, I allow my instincts to guide me and reach across her lap to tangle my fingers with hers.

She sucks in a sharp intake of breath, and I brace myself for the moment she pulls away.

It never comes.

Seconds pass in silence, and the outside world fades away. My vision blurs along the edges, and a ringing picks up in my ears. This overwhelming sense of urgency sinks its claws into my chest, stealing away all thought and reason.

My heart races. The way my body responds to her touch should worry me. Maybe even convince me to step away.

But I can't.

I am motionless beside her, unwilling to break this new and unknown thing brewing between us. Staring down at our interlocked fingers, I marvel at the softness of her skin against my calloused palm. Her graceful fingers are long and elegant within my grasp, making it appear like I'm holding the hand of a child. She is so much smaller than me.

We sit in comfortable silence, neither one of us bothering to keep track of time. I can't remember the last time my mind quieted this much. When I could set aside my thoughts and worries over duty and family and just... *be*.

"Thank you," Leticia whispers, squeezing my hand.

Turning to face her, I wait for her to meet my gaze before reaching for her again. She flinches when my fingers get close to her cheek, hovering less than an inch above her skin. But she doesn't rebuke me, so after only a second of hesitation, I close the distance to trail my hand against her sensitive skin.

“Does it hurt?”

Her eyes widen, and I can see her thoughts. All but hear the stories she sifts through in her mind. But that’s all they would be. Made up stories. Lies.

Swallowing hard, Leticia’s skin pales. She’s edging close to panic. But why?

“Don’t lie.” Cupping her chin, I stare into her dark brown gaze. “You can keep your secrets,” I tell her, confident that, in time, she will give them to me on her own. “But don’t lie. Not to me. That is the only condition I have for our friendship.” If she lies to me, even once, all of her truths will become questionable.

Leticia swallows and nods, some of the tension draining from her face.

“Okay. No lies.”

My lips quirk into the faintest smile. “Good. No lies.”

LETICIA

Andrés takes my hand, pulling me from the car and toward the iron gates that lead into his family home. Like my own, it is a hacienda-style estate with red clay roof tiles and adobe walls finished with bright white stucco. But even though I am outside looking in, it's easy to see there is a warmth about the home Andrés grew up in.

A warmth that was always lacking in mine.

Needing to collect my bearings—something that is impossible to do with Andrés touching me—I tug on my wrist, trying to pull my hand free from his. A firm squeeze of his fingers is a wordless refusal, telling me what I already know. Andrés has no intention of releasing me tonight.

Rolling my eyes, I try again.

And again, he refuses, this time tightening his grip with near bruising force.

Urgh. With a resigned huff, I abandon my efforts and follow him through a curved archway and past the iron gates into the courtyard. My feet meet terracotta tiles, and my heels click noisily with each of my steps.

“This way,” he murmurs, steering me to our right.

Wordlessly, I follow. We pass by a large fountain, the water making a soft gurgling sound as he takes me deeper into the home.

“I shouldn’t be here.”

“Sí, princesa. This is exactly where you should be.”

Voices reach my ears as we clear the courtyard. Making our way up a handful of steps, we pass through another curved archway into what I assume is the primary living space of the home. I immediately spot Andrés’s brother, who’s taken a position in the far corner of the room. There are a few other men milling around. One I recognize as being the man that drove us here. The others are new, and based on their appearances, they’re members of the DeAnde Cartel, but not blood relations to the family.

“Did you enjoy yourself, brother?” Adrián asks as soon as he notices our arrival. His words are said with humor, but the look on his face is far from amused. Eyes narrowed into slits, he looks me up and down. His disapproval of my being here is obvious.

“No,” Andrés says, not bothering to elaborate. “I have things I need to discuss with Leticia. Clear the room.”

The other men are quick to follow Andrés’s orders, making themselves scarce without so much as a word of complaint at their quick dismissal. But his brother is slower to comply. His reluctance is obvious in the hard set of his shoulders and pulsing vein at his temple, both of which he follows up with a glower my way.

“There are no secrets in this family,” Adrián says.

“No,” Andrés agrees. “There aren’t. But this is both a sensitive and a personal matter.”

Adrián scoffs. “Yet it is still one that affects our entire family!”

Hearing the anger in his brother’s words, Andrés goes eerily still. I doubt he is accustomed to anyone—even members of his family—speaking to him like this. If I’d used that tone with Papá, I’d find myself on the ground, holding a red marked cheek.

“Leave.” Andrés is stone-faced, his body coiled tight with tension. “I won’t tell you again.”

Adrián leaves the room, his angry steps echoing across the tiled floor. If there was a door in the archway that led out of the room, I have no doubt he would have slammed it. Several seconds go by before the sound of his footsteps fade away. When they do, a small fraction of the strain on Andrés’s face subsides, and he releases my hand.

Andrés cuts across the room to an intricately carved wooden bar that is positioned in the corner. He starts to make himself a drink, retrieving a glass, ice, and his liquor of choice.

Uncertain of what I should do, I stay where I am, watching as he pours three fingers of Gran Patrón Burdeos tequila into a glass before taking a small sip.

“I’ll have one, too,” I tell him.

His brows climb up his forehead. “You drink?”

I shrug, understanding his surprise. On more than one occasion when we were teenagers, I swore I’d never touch so much as a drop of alcohol. He never asked me why, but knowing Andrés, I’m sure he knew.

Papá is a ruthless man, but he’s an even angrier drunk. And I never want to become someone like him. But I’ve realized as I’ve gotten older that alcohol doesn’t create vileness or cruelty

in a man. It can only heighten or dull the emotions that are already there.

In this case, I need it to dull my anxious nerves. “Things change.”

Not questioning my response—a fact for which I am grateful—Andrés retrieves a second glass from beneath the bar.

“Do you want anything added to it?”

I stifle a scoff. Gran Patrón Burdeos is not a tequila you mix with anything. At five-hundred dollars a bottle, it is meant to be sipped and enjoyed as it is. “No. I’ll take it neat.”

He nods and pours the tequila into my glass, giving me half of what he’s poured for himself. *Cute.*

Andrés makes his way back to me, a glass of dark amber liquid in each of his hands. Offering me the glass he’d intended for me, I bypass his outstretched hand and instead take the glass he poured for himself.

Without hesitation, I throw the liquor back, wincing at the uncomfortable burn that slides down my throat. Gran Patrón Burdeos is not supposed to be downed like a shot, either. But if I’m going to survive this next conversation, a girl has to do what a girl has to do.

With a grunt, he takes my now empty glass and sets it on the side table before taking a seat in one of the large leather lounge chairs decorating the room. Taking another small sip of his drink, he peers at me over the rim of his glass and indicates that I sit down in the chair seated across from him.

For a moment, I consider denying him. Though what would be the point?

Feeling petty, I do as he asks, but instead of taking the seat he suggests, I sit down in a different one, realizing too late that the club seat I've chosen puts me closer to him when what I want is for us to be further apart.

Andrés smirks into his drink, but doesn't comment on my choice.

"You have the floor." He settles deeper into his seat, widening his legs before crossing one foot over a knee.

Frowning, I fold my arms over my chest and ignore the bulge he doesn't even try to hide beneath the crisp lines of his dark gray pants. "I don't want it." I've already said all that I need to say.

"Too bad." His eyes darken.

"You've gotten grumpy in your old age."

The corners of his mouth twitch. "And you have grown more brazen in yours."

"Sucks for you."

He smirks. "I never said I didn't like it."

Oh.

Setting his glass aside, he turns in his seat and holds my gaze. "We are not at war, you and I." *Well, that's news to me.* "You don't have to treat every conversation between us like a battle to be won."

"Uh huh." I roll my eyes.

He sighs. "Leticia—"

I take in the exasperated look on his face, and something about it makes me just *so* angry. "What?" I snap. "What do you want from me?"

“You can start by showing some appreciation.”

Throwing my hands in the air, I let out a humorless laugh.

“For what?”

He growls. Actually growls at me. “For rescuing your ungrateful—“

“Oh, no. I’m stopping you right there.”

His brows furrow. That’s right. I am not one of your little underlings. I don’t give two shits about interrupting you.

“I never asked to be rescued. In fact,” I shove out of my seat.

“I think it’s time that I leave.”

“Sit down,” Andrés orders in a low, threatening voice.

The hairs on my neck stand up on end and a chill races down my spine, making me shudder. I drop down into my seat, but not because he told me to. I only sat down because I don’t have a phone or a car or any other means of finding my own way home. And these heels are incredibly uncomfortable.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?”

I jut out my lower lip, pouting, I know. It’s not my best look, but I’m beyond caring. Averting my gaze, I allow my eyes to wander across the room, looking at everything except him.

“The silent treatment is beneath you.”

There are a lot of things that are beneath me, yet I still do them anyway. I’m like Rapunzel. A princess locked away in a castle. A girl has to get her kicks somewhere. Besides, I’m not after his—or anyone else’s—approval. I’m a grown woman. So, if I want to behave like a petulant child, I will.

“*Princesa—*”

“Stop calling me that.” I grind my words through my teeth, the pet name hitting a little too close to home right now.

Gritting his teeth, he glares at me. “Fine,” he bites out.

Good.

“Now, can we get back to the business at hand?” When I make no objections, he continues. “Do you expect me to believe that you want to marry that pinche cabrón,” *That fucking bastard.*

“Maxim Sidorov? That you desire to be his bride?”

I scoff. “Of course not.”

“Then what is the problem?”

“You. You are my problem, Andrés.”

He opens his mouth to speak, but I steamroll right over him, allowing years of pent up anger and resentment to pour out of me.

“You can’t just insert yourself into my life after being absent from it for the past five years. That’s not how things work.”

“Why the hell not?”

Is he being serious right now? “You abandoned me!” I yell.

His cheeks flush, and I catch a brief flicker of regret before he masks it, hardening his gaze. “I have my reasons.”

“No. You have excuses.” Potent fury unravels deep inside of me. I know he isn’t this stupid. Andrés was my life raft. The only thing I had that was keeping me afloat. And in the blink of an eye, he took my lifeline from me.

My chest rises and falls so fast it hurts.

“I became a problem for you. An inconvenience. I get it. You had and always will have other priorities because of who you are. But don’t think for a second that you can show up now,

force your way back into my life, and expect that I will welcome you back with open arms. Come on, Andrés. We were optimistic in our youth, believing a friendship between a DeAnde and a Castro could ever work. But neither one of us has ever been delusional.”

“You don’t understand,” he says, his words laced with anger. “Your father murdered my father. I was under a lot of pressure. There were family expectations—” He cuts his words off, shaking his head, and an unreadable look flashes over his eyes.

“I’m sure there was. But none of that excuses what you did.”

His nostrils flare. It’d be funny if he hadn’t broken me so thoroughly before. I’m the one that deserves to be angry. I’m the one that lost everything the day he turned his back on me. Not him.

“For three years, you made me believe I was important to you. That I mattered.”

“You did. You still do.”

“Bullshit.” My voice cracks. “You trained me to rely on you.” I bite the inside of my cheek until the taste of blood hits my tongue. “I was doing fine on my own. I’d learned to survive.” My vision blurs, and I have to blink back my tears. I refuse to cry in front of him. I won’t give him the satisfaction of breaking me again. “And then you came along, Andrés DeAnde, the white knight sent to save the day.” I scoff. “You made promises you never had any intention of keeping, so spare me your excuses. I’ve listened to enough of your bullshit. What happened to *friends don’t lie*, huh? Or is it that we were never truly friends?”

“You know what we have stretches far beyond friendship. Not once have I ever lied to you, Leti. You know that.”

“Do I?” I ask. “Because from where I’m sitting, all you’ve ever given me are lies. Even now, Andrés. You say *what we have* as if there is anything still left between us. Allow me to enlighten you. There is not.”

He runs his hand over his head, fingers tugging at the short, dark strands of his hair. “What do you want? Speak it now, and I’ll make it so.”

I wait for him to lift his head again and stare deep into his amber eyes. He needs to hear the truth of what I’m about to say. Maybe then he’ll abandon whatever stupid game it is that he’s playing and we can both move on.

“Nothing. I want absolutely nothing from you.”

Abruptly, he stands to his feet. “This has been a trying night, and I’m sure you are tired.” As though he summoned her out of thin air, a heavysset, middle-aged woman appears in the doorway. “Maria is the keeper of my estate. She will show you to your room for the night so you can rest. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

Acknowledging that I’ve been dismissed, I rise to my feet. Clenching my fists at my sides, I lift my chin and stare down my nose at him. It’s more difficult than you’d think, given our obvious height difference, but somehow I manage.

“There isn’t anything left to talk about. The sooner you realize that, the sooner we can both get on with our lives.”

I walk to Maria but stumble right as Andrés exhales a long-suffering sigh. Catching myself on a nearby table, I straighten my spine, determined not to let him see me shaken when he says, “There was a time when you and I used to dream about this moment.”

Freezing where I stand with my back still to him, I hold my breath, waiting to see if he'll continue.

"Do you remember?" he asks. "You, here. In my home. We'd play the *what if* game."

Closing my eyes, I fight back the need to turn around.

"What if you'd been born into a different family?" he says aloud, and it's like I'm sixteen again. I'm transported back to the day where we laid on a blanket under a big red maple tree and stared up at the clear blue skies. "*What if you were free to be with me?*"

I shake my head. *Stop, Leti. Just stop. Don't go there.* The *what if* game was one of my favorites that we'd play. It was the only time in my life when I let myself hope.

"What if I were in a position to make you mine?"

I ignore the spear of regret in my chest at hearing his words and open my eyes. "Dream is just another word for fairytale," I tell him. "Neither one of them is real."

"They could be."

No. They can't. I'm not playing the what if game. Not anymore. "I stopped believing in happily ever afters long ago. They're nothing more than pause points in stories that are still being written." Cartel daughters don't get an HEA. For girls like us, they are never in the cards.

Forcing my feet to move, I resume my steps and follow a wordless Maria out of the room.

ANDRÉS

With my feet rooted to the floor, Leticia leaves. Nothing about tonight is going as planned. It's like watching a car wreck in slow motion and being powerless to stop it. What the hell happened to make her this bitter?

Gritting my teeth, I drain the last of my glass, barely acknowledging the burn of alcohol as it slides down my throat. Adrián steps into the room only a moment later, with our younger brothers—Ángel and Aztlán—at his side.

Great. Just what I need. A family meeting.

Without hesitation, Adrián launches right into his lecture.

“I told you taking her would be a mistake.”

I grunt, an almost confirmation of his words, but I haven't given up yet.

“She hates you, Andrés. Don't you see that?”

“She's angry. It will pass.”

“She's hot,” Aztlán adds with a shrug, claiming the seat across from me. “I say she's worth the trouble.”

I smirk and resume my seat as well, leaving my remaining brothers to follow suit. They do, albeit begrudgingly.

Aztlán is the youngest of the three, at only eighteen years of age. If Adrián is the most calculated and critical in thinking, Aztlán is the most carefree. He does what he wants, when he wants to, with little thought of the consequences. It's no surprise he'd find Leticia worth the trouble, seeing nothing beyond her beauty. For him, her beauty is enough.

“Cállate, por favor,” *Shut up, please.* Adrián mutters with clear exasperation in his tone.

“Why should he?” I ask. “You brought him into this conversation to speak his mind, did you not?”

Adrián's jaw tightens.

“Or can our brothers only join the conversation when they agree with you?”

Aztlán snickers and throws me a wink. Adrián should have known better. Our youngest brother is always on my side. How could he not be? I damn near raised him after Papá died and I was forced to step into his shoes and pick up the pieces of our family.

“Do we have to fight?” Ángel sets his laptop on his thighs. The device is still closed, though I doubt it will remain that way for long. It's something I rarely see Ángel without these days.

“We're not fighting,” Adrián and I say in unison, to which both of our younger brothers roll their eyes.

“Whatever,” Ángel murmurs. “It's late, and I have classes in the morning. Can we get on with this so I can get some sleep?” Ángel is attending PacNorth University with a double major in computer engineering and accounting. He takes paranoia to an extreme and has decided it is his duty to be educated in all areas that he believes our family has a weakness in.

I gave him a hard time about the decision in the beginning. He's young and should focus on enjoying his youth—an opportunity I wasn't afforded.

We have people who manage our security and accounting who've been successful in doing so for years. I had no reason to question their abilities. Until now. Ángel is only two years into his degree programs and already he's uncovered deficiencies in both areas. His mind thinks in ways that our more seasoned men are incapable of. And I've come to realize that if my brother wants to master something, it is my job to support him.

“Get rid of her,” Adrián grunts. “You intervened. It was a mistake. Cut your losses and move on.”

“No.”

“No? What do you mean, no?”

Irritation flickers in my chest. “She's hiding something. I intend to find out what it is.”

Ángel's eyes light up, and without provocation, he opens his laptop and begins typing. “Give me what you have?”

I sigh. “I don't need you—“

His dark brown eyes cut to mine. Fine. “She said something when we were in the car earlier.”

Adrián snorts. “Was this before or after you fucked her?”

Aztlán's eyebrows climb up his forehead, and he offers me an appreciative look.

“I didn't fuck her.”

“Sure you didn't,” Adrián grunts.

“Shut the fuck up, Adrián.”

“Focus,” Ángel snaps.

My teeth clench, and I nod. “Fine.” Ignoring the eldest of my baby brothers, I shift in my seat and give Ángel my full attention. “She insinuated that if we fucked—” I swallow hard, envisioning how close we’d been to doing exactly that. If I close my eyes, I can see how fucking perfect she’d been in that moment. Arms bound behind her back, hair disheveled, and perfect ass bared and ready for the taking. “—I’d ruin her.”

Adrián snorts, but says nothing while Ángel’s fingers fly over his keyboard.

“Is she a virgin?” Aztlán asks.

I nod, and he whistles. “That’s why. She was raised Catholic, like the rest of us. Probably wants to hang on to her virginity until her wedding night, like tradition suggests.”

I shake my head. “No. The way she said it...” I press my tongue into my cheek, replaying the bitterness of her words. “It was said with resignation. She’s not a virgin out of some need to be holy, but something is making her cling to her purity, and if I take it...” I shake my head. “I don’t know. It sounded off, but maybe—“

“Got it!” Ángel exclaims, turning his computer around and showing me the screen.

He has a series of legal documents pulled up, dated long before I was born. “What am I looking at?” I ask.

“Marriage contracts.”

“For her and the Sidorov—“

“No. This is the agreement between Ruben Castro and his now deceased wife, Lara.”

My brows pull together. “Why is this important?”

Ángel turns the screen back to himself, finds whatever he's looking for, and then whips it back around to face me. "See this, right here?" He points to a highlighted section of text, and I make quick work in reading it. No fucking way. Mouth parting in disbelief, I read it again, needing to make sure I'm not misreading anything. I'm not. Throwing my head back, I bark out a laugh and turn the screen to Adrián.

"You still think this is a mistake, cabrón?" I ask with a grin. Fuck. I can't believe I got this lucky.

"She—" The disbelief is clear in his voice.

"She inherits everything," I tell him. "Every fucking piece of the Castro Cartel. With her, we can systematically tear down everything Ruben Castro holds dear. Piece by piece." I can't help the grin on my face. "She is the key to that fucker's kingdom."

"Don't get ahead of yourself just yet," Ángel cautions. "We've done a brief skim. I'll need time to go over the contract and make sure there have been no addendums added that may counter this."

I nod. "Do what you need to do."

Steepling his fingers, Adrián gives our brother a considering look. "Where did you find that?"

Ángel leans back in his seat, his expression smug. "Castro's used the same attorney for decades. If you use old systems, you wind up with old security. It was a walk in the park hacking into the law office's security where the digital records are kept on their outdated servers."

"Find the marriage contract between Castro and Sidorov. We'll need to know what was promised in that one as well." A smart suggestion, even if I wasn't the one to make it.

Ángel nods, closes his computer, and rises to his feet. “Will do. If I’m not needed here anymore—”

“Go,” I tell him. “Get some sleep. Whatever you find can wait until morning.”

Without hesitating, he makes his escape.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” Aztlán adds, also getting to his feet. “Hasta mañana.” See you tomorrow.

Adrián is the last of my brothers to remain, but he makes no move to leave. “Out with it,” I tell him, knowing he wouldn’t still be here if he didn’t have something else to say.

“I still think this is a mistake.”

“So you’ve said.” Only now, after what we’ve learned, we both know the family will support my decision. Not that I care about having their approval when it comes to Leticia. But this way, I won’t have to fight two battles at once. I can focus my attention on winning her back, and in the process, take satisfaction in knowing I have everything I need to destroy Ruben Castro.

“You love her.”

It’s not a question, but I answer him anyway. “I do.”

I didn’t think I was capable of loving anyone who was not family. I cared for Leticia. I was drawn to her. But, love?

Impossible.

Only it’s not. What I feel for her borders on obsession. It is not patient or kind. My love is selfish and all-consuming. And it will protect Leticia at all costs. My love will persevere.

He shakes his head, a bitter twist to his lips. “Then think before you do whatever you’re about to, Andrés, because, in

this, you can't have your cake and eat it too."

My forehead wrinkles in confusion. There were women after Leticia, of course. I'm a man. Not a Saint. But beyond Leti, there's never been a woman in my life whose name was worth remembering.

I don't date. I don't have relationships. If a woman enters my life, it is for one night, and one night only. No repeats. No attachments. Leticia is the only exception.

For my brother to insinuate that I'd require the comfort of another after finally having the girl of my dreams, here, in my home. It's ludacris.

"What are you implying?" All I want is my girl and revenge for Papá's murder. With what we've learned tonight, I can finally have both.

"She will never forgive you for destroying her family."

I snort. "You don't know Leticia like I do."

He shakes his head. "No. You don't know Leticia Castro like you used to. She's not the girl you loved before."

Through gritted teeth, I reject his words. The Leticia I grew up with hated her father. A lot has changed in the years we've spent apart, but there isn't any part of me that believes her feelings where her father is concerned are one of them.

"You're wrong about this."

"Maybe," he admits. "But give it some thought, Andrés. Because at the end of the day, he is still her family."

That's where my brother is wrong. I am Leticia's family, and I'm the only one she will ever need.

LETICIA

M aria leads me down a long hallway before stopping at a heavy wooden door. Opening it, she ushers me inside where I find a large, yet comfortable, bedroom. There's an open door to the left that leads to the ensuite, and another that is closed on the right. I assume it leads to the closet.

“Necesitas algo?” she asks, voicing the question in Spanish. Do you need anything?

“Gracias, pero no.” Thank you, but no. “Todo está bien.” All is well.

“Comida?” Food? “Algo para beber?” Something to drink?

I shake my head. It's nice of her to be concerned, but I wouldn't be able to stomach anything she brought me right now. Not after the night I've had. “No. Gracias.”

Having both offers of food and refreshment declined, Maria retreats to the doorway.

“Buenas noches.” Good night. She gives me a small nod and closes the door to my room behind her.

Snick.

I jump.

Did she...

I rush over to the door and twist the handle.

Locked.

Sonova— I should have expected that Andrés would have me locked in my room. Nevertheless, I'm disappointed. What does he think I'll do? Murder his family in their sleep?

I snort

Hardly.

Maybe he expected me to run away? I mean, I'd have at least tried. How could I not? But despite knowing that, this crosses a line. He can't spout nonsense about me trusting him and how he still cares about me and then imprison me in my room like some Disney Princess locked away in a tower.

With a huff, I spin on my heel and take in the surrounding room. It's sparsely furnished. There is a large four-poster bed in the center with end tables on either side of it. A dresser on one wall and a small chaise lounge on the other. But there aren't any photographs or personal touches decorating the room. No artwork. No plants. It's a guest bedroom and likely one that isn't often in use. Not that I'm complaining.

Kicking off my heels, I walk across the cool tile floors to the bathroom and find the usual. There is a toilet and double sink, but what immediately draws my eye is the large copper soaking tub. Pursing my lips, I consider my options.

It's unlikely I'll be interrupted this evening. Like a toy, Andrés has deemed it time that I be put away. There's always a chance he'll come for me, but it's unlikely. Hmm... I'm tempted. Though I don't have any clean clothes.

Walking back across the bedroom, I open the dresser drawers, surprised when I find a few men's shirts and a pair of oversized sweats. This will do. Grabbing a button down white

shirt and the gray sweatpants, I take them back with me to the bathroom and begin filling the tub.

While the basin fills, I make quick work of scrubbing my underwear in the sink with a small dollop of soap. They won't be dry enough to wear tonight, but come morning I should be able to put them back on.

With my underwear clean, I leave them to hang over the faucet and strip out of my dress before stepping into the steaming water. A soft sigh escapes me as I sink down into the tub and am enveloped by the water's warm embrace.

Pressing my forehead to my knees, I blink back a wave of sudden tears threatening to spill down my cheeks. It's been years since I let myself think about Andrés. Since I've allowed myself to miss the ghost of a smile that grazed his lips or the dry sense of humor he seemed to only ever show to me.

Despite the years that have passed since we last saw one another, I'm overwhelmed with a myriad of emotions and unsure of what to do next. I missed him. God, I fucking missed him. But I can't let myself fall prey to whatever trap it is that he has in store for me.

There is no way his reasons for coming back are altruistic, and I can't put myself in a position where he can break my heart again. I won't survive it. Though, if my father learns what Andrés intends, I'm not so sure I'll survive that either.

Sorrow prickles against my skin. I had everything planned out. There was a light at the end of the tunnel for me. But now, all I can see is heartache and despair.

I never explained to Andrés why sleeping with him will ruin me, but I know he hasn't forgotten. I won't give him more

reason to keep me. Not when my very life depends on him setting me free.

ANDRÉS

Linger outside of the door that separates Leticia's room from my own, I hesitate for longer than I care to admit, uncertain of the welcome I will receive once I step aside.

She's pissed. But she needs to let go of her anger and see the bigger picture.

Rubbing the back of my neck, I exhale a harsh breath, my mouth twisting into a grimace.

It's late. For a second, I consider leaving her alone and allowing her time to cool off.

After a good night's rest, she'll come around. I know she will.

I should have stepped in sooner. Maybe then she'd be less... hostile.

Pinpricks of worry vibrate beneath my skin. Is it like she said? Am I too late?

No. I won't allow it. Leticia needs me to fight for her. To show that I am serious about a life with her at my side. She can push back all she wants. But I will not yield.

Fortifying my resolve, I push the door to her room open, but a quick scan of the room's interior shows it is empty.

What the hell?

There is no way she could have gotten out of here without my knowledge, let alone managed it this quickly. Striding into the room, I check first the main door and then the windows, finding both of them locked from the outside.

A strange tightness grips my chest.

If everything is as it should be, where the hell is—

The languid sound of moving water reaches my ears, and my head snaps toward the bathroom door. Straining my ears, I listen for it again. *There*. A breath of relief rushes past my lips. Careful to keep my steps silent, I stalk closer and peer through the narrow crack between the door.

Inside is a naked Leticia, hunched forward in the large copper bathtub.

A molten flame of need drips down my spine, and my heartbeat quickens inside my chest. The air is thick with steam, obscuring my vision, but I'm able to make out the curve of her spine and the water droplets forming on her bronze skin.

She's yet to notice me.

Biting my fist, I stifle my groan when she releases a soft sigh, hugging her knees closer to her chest.

My cock twitches inside my pants, eager for a taste of the woman laid out before me. Does she have any idea how exquisite she is? Unlikely. Leticia's always considered herself an ugly duckling, blind to her own beauty thanks to the mistreatment she's suffered at the hands of assholes like Maxim Sidorov. If she only knew...

Pushing the door open, I step inside.

My steps are silent against the tile floor. Rolling up my sleeves, I remove my watch, tucking it inside my pants pocket, before crouching down beside the copper basin.

Retrieving the washcloth from the tub's edge, I squeeze on a generous amount of soap and dip it into the water before bringing it up to the nape of Leticia's neck.

She stiffens but makes no move to turn. I take her silence as an invitation. With slow and sure strokes, I wash her back, running the cloth up and down the gentle curve of her spine before washing the backs of her arms.

With each stroke of the cloth across her skin, the tension melts from Leticia's body, leaving her soft and pliant. Reaching around her body, I run the cloth with gentle caresses along her collarbone before dipping down to clean first one breast, and then the other.

She doesn't admonish me as I expect. Emboldened, I continue my perusal of her body and move my attention lower, skating the cloth along her abdomen. Still, she does not rebuke me.

Anticipation thrums inside my veins, my need mounting further. Peering over her shoulder, the warm water lapping at the stiff peaks of her nipples transfixes my gaze.

My mouth waters.

Traveling further south, I skate my hand over her mound. Once. Twice. On the third stroke, I cup her center, pressing the washcloth against the sensitive bundle of nerves hidden there.

She hisses, a sharp exhale of breath, but before she can comment, I move, retreating away from her clit to clean between the apex of her thighs.

Blood pounds in my ears.

It's been two hours since I felt her heat against my fingertips, and already I want to feel it again. The temptation to throw the washcloth aside and sink my fingers into her pussy, to find her wet and wanting and know that it's her desire for me that causes it, damn near consumes me.

For a suspended moment, neither of us moves.

“Andrés—“ The sound of my name on her lips nearly undoes me.

But, Leticia's virtue is not only important to her. It is important to me, too.

I've always prided myself as a man of control, but Leticia Castro has always been the one woman capable of causing me to lose it. My need for her is too great for just a taste.

Setting the washcloth aside, I adjust my position, doing my best to ignore the almost painful erection straining against the seam of my pants. With a muttered curse, I reach for the small cup on the tub's edge before pressing my free hand beneath Leticia's chin.

Obediently, she tilts her head back, and I gently rinse the soap from her skin.

Leticia licks her lips, her eyes fluttering closed, only to fly open again.

“Look at me, princesa.”

A beautiful blush steals across her cheeks. She tries to turn away, but my thumb and forefinger hold her chin in place.

“Relax.”

Biting her lip, she does as I've commanded and tilts her head back once again, her gaze tracking my movements while I carefully pour water over the long tresses of her dark brown

hair. With her hair soaked, I grab the shampoo and work it into a rich lather.

The warm scent of vanilla fills the room, complimenting Leticia's already sweet fragrance.

She releases a soft moan, and approval rumbles inside my chest. I want to hear that sound again, only with my cock buried inside her.

Using the cup again, I rinse the shampoo from her hair and repeat the process with the conditioner before forcing myself to my feet to retrieve a towel. There are questions lingering in Leti's gaze. Questions I don't have answers to.

Holding the large towel open, I expect Leticia to take it from me. But she surprises me and instead rises to her feet, arms at her sides as she bares her naked body to me.

My lungs struggle for oxygen. Fuck me. Tracking the droplets of water that drip down her soft skin, I remind myself why I can't claim her. Not yet.

Lifting a delicate foot up, Leticia steps out of the tub. She turns her back to me, reaching for both ends of the towel before wrapping them around herself.

"Thank you," she says, her voice little more than a whisper.

Unable to stop myself, I lift the heavy locks of her hair, moving it all to one shoulder and exposing her neck. "Don't." Dipping forward, I press my lips to the sensitive skin beneath her ear before trailing kisses down her heated skin.

Her breathing quickens, chest rising and falling at a rapid clip.

"Do I make you nervous, princesa?"

"No."

I smile against her skin and wrap an arm around her slender body, slipping my hand beneath her towel to cup one full breast.

“What do I make you feel, then?” My other hand settles on her hip, pulling her against me and allowing her to feel the evidence of my desire.

“Anger,” she says, but there is a breathlessness to her voice that suggests she isn’t being truthful.

“What else?” Scraping my teeth against her skin, a thrum of satisfaction courses through me as goosebumps break out along her flesh.

“Resentment.”

“Mmm... what else?” Massaging her breast, I squeeze the delicious weight before shifting my hold to roll her nipple between my fingers. I tug and pinch the sensitive nub, eliciting a sharp intake of breath.

“Do I not also make you feel hunger?” I whisper in her ear.
“Desire?”

I move my hand to her other breast, giving it the same treatment.

“What about need?”

Releasing her, I slide my hand down her body and over the gentle swell of her stomach until I feel her wet heat against my palm.

“Hmm...?”

Leticia doesn’t answer. Instead, she jerks away from my touch and spins on her heel to face me.

“No, Andrés. I do not feel *need*. Not where you’re concerned.”
Her eyes flash, wariness tinged with lust.

With her towel secured beneath her arms, she scowls to mask the desire she wishes to refute.

“No? Then what is it you’re feeling that leaves this—” I raise my hand, showing her the proof of her feelings on my palm. “—sweet honey on my skin? Is it not evidence of your need, Leticia? Proof of your hunger?”

Her nostrils flare.

“Get out.” Storming past me, she goes into the room, but realizes the clothes she’d discovered and left on the bathroom counter are now behind me.

Spinning around, she attempts to barrel past me, but I wrap my arms around her, bringing her momentum to a halt.

“Let go of me,” she snaps.

My grip tightens. “No.”

“Andrés—“ she yells. The towel slips, exposing her breasts, and she scrambles to cover herself while fighting me to get away.

My control snaps.

With one vicious tug, I rip the towel from Leticia’s body and toss it away.

“Andrés!” she stammers, hands jerking to cover her most intimate parts.

That will not do.

“Let me see you.”

“You’ve seen enough.” She goes to step back, but my hand on her elbow stops her. “Don’t do this.” Her voice is barely a

whisper.

Closing the small space between us, I pull her body flush against mine. “Do what?” With my hand holding her nape, I tilt her head back and force her to look up at me. “What am I doing, Leticia?”

Dark brown eyes stare into mine. Her breathing is shallow, but the fire inside her hasn’t retreated. No. My girl is a fighter.

“You know I can’t have sex with you.”

“Do I, now?”

I back her up, forcing her to retreat until the backs of her knees connect with the bed. Pushing my leg between her knees, I nudge them apart.

My finger brushes against her liquid center.

“Stop!” she gasps, hips thrusting forward to meet my touch.

“No.”

With her nails digging into my shoulders, I rub two fingers over her swollen nub.

“Andrés—“

I groan. “Say my name again, princesa.” I like the sound of my name on her lips.

“Andrés, please!”

I maintain a relentless rhythm on her clit and her small body jerks against mine. Tremors wracking her frame as her orgasm nears.

She’s close.

“Do you still want me to stop?” I ask, knowing that even if she says yes, I won’t. But despite all the time that’s passed. I know

my girl, and I know what she needs. So does she. All Leticia needs to do is admit it.

Sinking her teeth into her bottom lip, her back arches into me.

“Answer me. Do you want me to stop?”

She whimpers, sweat beading on her forehead.

Shifting my thumb to her clit, I stroke her closer to climax while slipping a finger inside her. She’s tight. The narrow walls of her pussy grip my finger in a vice and images of sinking my cock into her cunt fill my thoughts. When the time comes, she’ll need to be prepared. Fuck. I can hardly wait.

Pain is inevitable your first time. There’s no getting around it, but I can be gentle when the situation requires it. I’ll ease her into the act. Teach her how even at the precipice of discomfort, when sensations border on pain, the truest pleasure is found.

Once I finally claim every inch of her body, imprinting myself on her skin, she’ll know who she belongs to.

“Do you want to come?”

The tremors give way to a full body shudder, but she still doesn’t answer me.

“Answer me.” The order floods my voice with steel.

“Yes.”

I slide a second finger inside her, stretching her tight little pussy. Fuck. Curling my fingers, I reach for that sensitive spot inside her while pressing against her clit. She bucks against my hand, forcing my fingers impossibly deeper.

“That’s it, baby. You’re right there,” I say, talking her through her release. “Come for me. Give in to it, Leti. Come on my

fingers and imagine how good it'll feel when I give you my cock.”

Lost to a sea of pleasure, Leticia grinds shamelessly against me. Her pants and moans mingle with the wet sound of my fingers fucking her cunt, and the next thing I know, she detonates.

Head thrown back, Leticia seizes against my body, going taunt as a sharp cry falls from her lips. I milk every drop of her release, wrapping one arm around her to hold her up until the waves of her orgasm subside.

She slumps in my embrace, and I retract my fingers before sweeping her into my arms and lifting her onto the bed.

“We can’t—“ she mutters, but her words lack conviction.

Throwing the blanket aside, I lay her in the center of the bed before drawing the comforter over her still naked body. Pressing my knee to the bed, I brace one hand against the headboard and use the other to grasp her chin.

“Make no mistake, princesa, we most certainly can.”

She bites her bottom lip, drawing my gaze to her mouth. Pressing my thumb to the swollen flesh, I trail my fingers along the seam of her mouth, letting her taste the sweetness of her arousal.

“But I got what I came for tonight. We’ll discuss the rest tomorrow.”

LETICIA

I toss and turn most of the night, unable to quench the insufferable throb between my legs.

God, what did he do to me?

Twenty-three years. That is how long I've gone without this desperate, achy feeling that consumes me. I can't believe I used to want this. Dreamed of it, even.

The thought of desiring someone, truly, deeply wanting them with every fiber of my being, it was such a far out idea that I could hardly wrap my head around it. But if this is what it's like—this all-consuming, visceral need—I shake my head. No, I want no part of this.

Of course, it has to be Andrés. The one person who not only broke my trust but also my heart. Even if I wanted to forgive him—which I don't—I can't keep him.

Papá will never allow it.

A glance at the clock on the nightstand shows it's half-past eight. In the middle of the night, I retrieved the clothes from the bathroom and dressed, hoping that the barrier of fabric would keep me from remembering the feel of his touch on my skin.

It didn't.

But at least I'm dressed while staring daggers into the heavy wooden door Andrés retreated behind after giving me a third mind-blowing orgasm for the night. So, not a closet, then. But an adjoining room.

Worrying my bottom lip, I consider testing it to see if it's locked like the other, but if it isn't, then what do I do?

No. Better to just sit here until someone comes for me. Better to be bored than go looking for trouble. I've had to learn that lesson more than once as it is. Tucking my knees beneath me, I pick at a loose thread on my stolen sweatpants and ponder my next move.

I need access to a phone. By now, Maxim's already informed my father that I was taken. If I could just get a hold of him before—

The bedroom door swings open, revealing Maria in the doorway.

"You're awake. Good," she says in Spanish. "Come." Waving me forward, she turns around and heads back down the hallway. Her actions making it clear that I am expected to follow.

Jumping from the bed, I finger comb my hair as I race after her, my bare feet cold against the tiles.

"Where are we—"

"Apúrale!" Hurry up.

Snapping my lips together, I hasten my steps, following her around the U-shaped house and across the open courtyard. "Aquí." In here.

She leads me into a large kitchen where a butcher block island takes center stage. "Sit. Sit." She mutters, giving me a nudge.

Wordlessly, I comply while my gaze wanders over the busy space. There are two other women in the room. Cooks from what I gather. Though neither one stops what they're doing to acknowledge me. The women bustle around the space, stirring various pots and cutting a large handful of onions and peppers.

Brushing past them, Maria retrieves a bowl before setting it down before me. The spicy aroma brings an immediate whiff of familiarity, and I offer Maria my thanks as I accept the scrambled eggs mixed with chorizo. She gives me a small nod before handing me a small stack of flour tortillas wrapped in a towel, and I thank her again.

“Eat,” she encourages.

My stomach chooses that moment to grumble, and I dig in, savoring the meal as Maria goes to the stove to help the others. No one says anything to me while I eat, but neither do I get the feeling they're talking about me. Their conversation is pitched low, and there are no furtive glances or angry stares.

Once I've finished my breakfast, Maria ushers me from the room, once again ordering me to follow. Since it worked out for me the first time, I see no reason not to listen. We cut back through the courtyard, making our way into the main living area I'd been in last night.

Andrés is already there, and my stomach flip-flops before noticing he isn't alone. His brother Adrián stands beside him. But there are two other men I don't recognize as well, all carrying a hint of familiarity in their features.

Brothers, or maybe cousins?

I flick my gaze between the two I haven't met. Younger than Andrés and Adrián, for sure. Definitely related. All four men have the same dark brown hair, thick brows, and angular jaws.

But it's their eyes that set them apart. Andrés's are a rich amber, where Adrián's are a deep chocolate brown.

"You're up. Have you eaten?" Andrés asks, his words like honey over my skin.

No. Not honey. Get your brain out of the gutter. You do not want him!

Nodding so as not to relay my thoughts, I step further into the room.

All eyes turn toward me, and I fidget under the weight of their scrutiny.

Andrés is quick to offer introductions.

"You met Adrián last night."

With pursed lips, I nod, remembering that he'd been the one to help Andrés haul me back into their SUV.

Dick.

"This is my other brother, Ángel," he says, waving toward the young man seated on his left. He has light, almost silver-colored eyes. A sharp contrast to his dark brown hair and the rich bronze of his skin. "And this is the baby of the family, Aztlán."

"I'm not a baby," Aztlán retorts, shoving Andrés's shoulder before meeting my gaze with a bright smile on his face. His eyes are hazel with more flecks of green than brown. Another startling combination. Aztlán's face is the softest of the four, some of the baby face that accompanies youth still evident in the fullness of his cheeks. I wonder which of their parents each of them takes after? Or at least which of their parents gave them all such unique eyes?

"So, you're the girl," Aztlán says, his grin widening.

Andrés smacks him upside the head, and I choke back a laugh. Amusement sparks, and I wait to see if Aztlán will retaliate, but he surprises me by laughing off his brother's response to his words without so much as a frown.

"Guess so," I tell him. "Unless your brother makes it a habit of kidnapping women often?"

Adrián snorts, but jerks his attention away when I look at him. Looks like someone doesn't have any plans to be social today.

"Am I interrupting..."

"No."

"Yes."

Andrés and Adrián respond in unison.

The two brothers scowl at one another, and the light-hearted mood falls way to mounting tension. I think I prefer being trapped in a bedroom, after all.

"O-kay—" I hedge. "So, if I can just borrow a phone, I'll call for a ride and get out of your—"

"No." Andrés's one word acts as a harsh command. "Sit."

Swallowing hard, I sink into the chair he indicates and curl my feet beneath me. Well, that escalated quickly. I ignore the way the deep tenor of his voice makes me feel as I scrutinize all four men in the room. Each one is impeccably dressed, wearing dress slacks with long-sleeved, button-down shirts in varying shades of gray and black.

Andrés has the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, exposing his muscular forearms and the heavy gold watch on his wrist. My mouth waters. Why are his forearms so sexy? Are all men's forearms sexy and I've just never noticed?

No. Definitely not.

Cheeks heating, I realize that beside them, I am severely underdressed. I'm wearing a pair of sweatpants rolled numerous times at the waist because they are two sizes too big and an oversized shirt that I'm all but swimming in. The sleeves reach my elbows and the hem brushes the tops of my thighs. I could have gotten away with wearing it like a dress if not for my underwear still being wet this morning when I went to put them on.

I don't have an inch of makeup on my skin, and my hair is a mess of finger-combed waves around my face. Basically, everyone else looks amazing, and I look like one of Richland's panhandlers on a street corner. All I'm missing is a cardboard sign.

"Are you—"

"We need to talk," Andrés interrupts.

Straightening my spine, I wipe all expression from my face and meet his gaze. Now isn't the time to be distracted by good looks or wandering thoughts. "So you said, last night." My casual tone clashes with the growing tension in the room. Will he spit it out already?

"Right, so—" Ángel clears his throat, and I shift my attention to him. "We'd like to ask you a few questions about the contract regarding—"

"My engagement?" I ask. As far as my engagement to Maxim is concerned, there isn't much to tell. I'm sure the DeAnde cartel has their own marriage contracts. They're standard in our world, as are arranged marriages. There is a prenuptial agreement built in, of course. But the rest is basic. Our families agree to the union. I am required to produce an heir—

bleh. Thankfully, I have no plans to see that part through. The only thing that's all that different from what they might expect is that in my marriage contract, Maxim agrees to serve under my father, swearing his loyalty to the Castro Cartel in lieu of me pledging my loyalty to that of my future husband's family.

Andrés's nostrils flare at the mention of my engagement. Still a sore subject, I see. A small thrill races through my veins. Why does that excite me?

"Actually, no."

Oh.

My brows pull together, and I turn my confused frown back to Ángel.

"What do you mean, no?"

Resting his elbows on his knees, he leans forward in his seat and steeples his fingers. "The contract your mother had drawn up with your father. The one regarding the inheritance of his heirs, both male and—" my breath seizes inside my chest, "female."

I gape at him, eyes wide and mouth open. "I... what... um..." I clamp my mouth shut and will my racing heart to slow. Shaking my head, I cough to clear my throat. "I'm sorry." I choke on my words. "You caught me by surprise there, but, uh, I don't know what you mean by female heirs. Everyone knows only a man can inherit." I shrug, doing my best to play it off and knowing that I'm failing. Shit. "I'm sure my father will remarry and try again for a son with a new wife, or choose a male relative as his successor when the time comes."

Ángel grins, but there is something cold and predatory in the way he bares his teeth at me. "In that case, let me be the first to congratulate you."

“On what?”

Andrés moves to stand behind me. He rests his hands on my shoulders, and pinpricks of anxiety come to life beneath my skin. I’m not sure if the gesture is intended as one of comfort or if he’s caging me in. Either way, it’s all I can think about for several long seconds, so it takes me a moment to realize that instead of answering me, Ángel is bent over, reaching into a black briefcase at his side.

He withdraws a heavy stack of papers. My stomach plummets. It can’t be.

Reaching toward me, he holds the documents out, and it takes me close to a full minute before I accept them. With shaking fingers, I pull the papers into my lap, momentarily closing my eyes. Please don’t be what I think this is. Please.

Opening my eyes, I look down with resignation as I am greeted by an all too familiar contract.

“What is this?” I ask with forced casualness as I thumb through the pile as though I’ve never seen these pages before.

Andrés’s grip on my shoulders tightens.

I grimace, barely retaining my carefree smile.

“No lies, princesa,” he grunts.

I look up, peering at him through a veil of lashes. “I don’t know what you’re—“

“Enough!”

Coming around to face me, Andrés towers over me in my chair, his body vibrating with some unnamed emotion. “You know what’s inside those documents. Don’t even try to deny it.”

I open my mouth, but snap it closed when I see the warning in his gaze. Is this really why he came for me last night? Has he known all along?

“Why else would you say I’d ruin you if I claimed you, hmm? You have to stay intact—” I grimace. “—until you’re wed if you are to inherit.”

Pursing my lips, I look away. Bitterness coats my tongue. He knew. The whole fucking time. And last night, that wasn’t want or need or fucking passion. He played me.

“Am I right?”

“You have the paperwork. You tell me.” Ignoring the contract, I let the papers fall to the floor as I fold my arms across my chest, still refusing to look at him. I can’t. With the tsunami of emotions I’m feeling right now, I don’t trust myself to look at him and not cry.

Dammit. Why do I keep allowing him to get under my skin like this? Get over it, Leti. He’s never cared about you. Time to move on.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

I stifle a laugh. “Why would I?”

All four men’s gazes are on me, and the uncomfortable itch beneath my skin ignites into an icy burn.

“I spoke with Ruben this morning—“ Adrián says. My head snaps in his direction. “He’s agreed to a meeting. He’ll be here later this evening.”

“Here?” There is no way I heard him right.

“Yes. Here.” Andrés answers for him, taking a step back and giving me a fraction of the space needed to catch my breath.

“Why?”

Aztlán answers this time. “He believes we’ve called him so that he can retrieve you.” There’s amusement in his hazel-colored eyes.

“Is he?” I ask, keeping my gaze on Andrés. He’s the one calling the shots. His brothers and I are just along for the ride.

“No. He isn’t.”

Didn’t think so.

“What are you planning?” If Andrés intends to kill him, he should know my father won’t come here alone. He’ll arrive armed and surrounded by a dozen of his most trusted men. He hasn’t stayed alive this long by being stupid.

“Nothing that you need to worry about.”

Anger ignites inside my chest. “If that’s the case, then I guess this talk of ours is over.” I stand from the chair. “It looks like you have all the answers you need.” I turn to leave and go where—I have no clue. But Andrés’s hand on my arm stops me from having to figure it out.

“Not quite.”

Quirking a brow, I wait. I won’t spoon-feed him the answers he’s looking for.

“Why did you agree to a marriage just to inherit? That’s the one piece I can’t figure out. You never wanted a life like this. The cartel life. Why not sleep with the first boy to catch your eye and save yourself from this future?”

He doesn’t know. Either that, or he glossed over the monetary wedding gift, seeing the figure as insignificant enough not to garner his attention.

“You know what he did to my sister,” I remind him.

“You could have joined her. The idea of being disowned may frighten you, but you forget, I know the abuse you’ve suffered at Ruben’s hands. A life away from him, no matter what that life entails, is better than a life with you at his side.”

He’s wrong. But I don’t owe him an explanation.

Papá painted me a picture of the life he gave Lucia when I was growing up. And he was quick to remind me of the one I’d receive—sold to the highest bidder like the women he traffics—if I bring shame to our family and follow in her footsteps.

Throwing my sister away put him at a loss. If I screw up, he intends to get something out of it. Being able to keep power a while longer isn’t enough.

Yet knowing he’s put the fear of God in me, he still believes me capable of messing up. That a night out with Maxim will make me risk all that he’s threatened and more. *Never*. A small part of me might have caved with Andrés. If he’d pushed. If he’d insisted on more. I’m not proud to admit this. But there is very little I’ve ever been able to deny him. Which is all the more reason I need to get away and separate myself from his path.

When Papá arrives tonight, I’ll find a way out of the estate. He won’t believe me innocent. Not straight away. But his doctor will confirm my virginity, and everything will return to the way it was.

I still have my plans, and Maxim will still want to marry me. I’m sure of it.

The situation isn’t ideal, but it’s the only way I’m getting out of this with my life. A hole forms in the pit of my stomach. It’s unlikely I’ll see Andrés again after tonight, but there is no

other way for me to escape both my father and Maxim, and keep my head intact.

I rub at the ache in my chest. He's just using you, anyway. I remind myself. He doesn't care about you. He wants what you can offer. He's known about your inheritance all along.

For Andrés, it's always been about getting his revenge.

LETICIA

My father didn't show up that night.

He didn't come the day after.

Or the day after that.

A full week passes without so much as a word from Papá, and I can tell his silence is getting under Andrés's skin. I'd tell him not to be surprised but to do that, I'd have to speak to him, something I'm not doing right now.

After having my family's paperwork thrown in my face and realizing the reality of my situation, I was deposited back to my room where I've spent the last week.

Isolated and alone.

At least there is a television equipped with cable. I've had enough time to binge watch the first three seasons of Grey's Anatomy, and damn, that season finale with Christina and Burke's wedding, talk about tearing a girl's heart out.

All things pop-culture are frowned upon back home, so I'm making the most of the time I have and hoping to watch far enough in to see the plane crash episode the commercials keep talking about. You'd think that a channel dedicated to Grey's reruns would hold back the spoilers, but no, they're giving out

all the drama and I have four and a half seasons to go before I get to it.

There's a loud knock on the door. The one that connects my room to Andrés's. Not the main one. Adjusting the pillows at my back, I turn up the volume on the T.V. and ignore it.

Andrés tried talking to me after my father failed to appear the first night, but I didn't want to hear it. He was insistent at first. But after throwing the bedside lamp at his head, he realized giving me space is for the best.

I don't know why he's here or what he wants now. But my feelings where he is concerned haven't changed in the slightest. If it was up to me, I'd never see him again. I'd rather go home to my father. To Maxim. To all of it. Anything to get away from Andrés and the seductive lies he continues to weave.

“Leti—“ The door opens and Andrés pokes his head through the door. “Leticia?”

Keeping my eyes glued to the television screen, I tune him out.

Silence stretches between us. I wait for him to turn away, closing the door behind him like he's done these past five nights when I've refused to speak to him, but this time, he doesn't leave.

The asshole steps further into the room, leaving the door that connects our rooms open as he makes his way to the bed where I am seated.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he gives me this lost puppy dog look that I might have found endearing on him as a boy, but now, all I feel is a cold, simmering rage.

“We should talk.”

I really hate when he says that.

“Pass.”

His jaw clenches, and a vein pulses along his temple.

“Will you just listen—“

Nope. “Get out.”

“Leticia!” He throws his arms in the air. “Think rationally—”

“No,” I snap and throw the remote control at him.

He ducks, and the plastic controller smashes into the wall behind him, narrowly missing his head. It splinters into pieces. *Shit. So much for Grey’s Anatomy.*

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Ha!” I bark out a laugh. “Me? Unreasonable?” If he only knew. “Go away, Andrés. You have what you need. Go plot and scheme with your brothers. Rest assured, I won’t be going anywhere.” *Yet.*

Stalking forward, I realize too late what he intends, and my eyes go wide right before he lunges for me. Using his heavier weight and strength, Andrés straddles my waist, towering over me on the bed. Going into fight-or-flight mode, I writhe beneath him, kicking and punching whatever I’m able to connect with in a bid to get away.

None of it phases him. He’s a mountain of immovable muscle.

Grabbing my wrists, he pins my hands above my head with embarrassing ease.

“Get off of me!” I screech, bucking my hips to unseat him. My head smacks against the headboard, but I don’t let it phase me.

“Dammit, Leti. Calm down. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

Deciding it'll be worth it if it gets him off of me, I throw my full strength into movements, managing to get one hand free. Curling my hand into a fist, I punch him in the face.

He rears back, releasing my other hand to rub his jaw, but he's still on top of me, and from the look of things, I didn't really hurt him. There's not even a mark.

All I succeeded in doing is pissing him off.

Nostrils flaring, Andrés fights me for my hands once more, this time jerking them to my sides and pinning them beneath his knees. *Shit*. That hurts. But I refuse to show him my pain.

Gripping my chin, he forces my gaze to his. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

"Are you kidding me right now?" I bark out a humorless laugh.

"I just want to talk."

"So talk," I snap, blowing my hair out of my face. "Say what you need to say, and then get the fuck out of my life."

His mouth tightens. "What did I do?"

A better question would be, what hasn't he done?

Seeing the look on my face, he clarifies. "This week. Since my brothers and I spoke with you. What did I do? Because you were warming up to me before. You liked what we did in the bathroom."

My cheeks burn.

"You liked when I made you come." Nope. Definitely did not. He must be confusing me with somebody else. "And now you're a fucking ice queen, freezing me out."

“That’s cute. But don’t delude yourself. I was never warming up to you.”

He sucks on his teeth. “Bullshit. I was there.” He presses his forehead to mine, his breath ghosting across my lips. “You wanted me the other night just as much as I wanted you. I could have fucked you then and there, and you wouldn’t have made a single objection.”

My mouth waters at the reminder, but there is no way I am going to admit to his words.

“Don’t bother denying it, *princesa*.”

I grind my teeth together. Screw him. None of what happened proves anything.

Is he hot as hell? Yes.

Does my pussy have a mind of her own and turn into a complete hussy whenever he touches me? Also yes.

But that’s lust talking. Not genuine interest. Not trust. He is the enemy. I’m not going to suddenly forget that. So, no. I was not warming up to him. It was a lust induced lapse in sanity.

“Morning came, and shit changed.” Tell me about it. “I’ll ask you one more time. What did I do?”

He knows it’s his fault. I’ll give him that. Not that self-awareness will earn him any brownie points. But I’m over all of this bullshit. I’m too exhausted to keep playing these games.

“You lied.” Again.

Dark brows pull together. “About what?” There is genuine confusion in his voice. “I would never lie to you.”

Puh-leez. I’m not falling for his act.

Straining against his hold again, I huff out a breath and deflate beneath him. Fine. If he wants to hash this out, we'll hash it out.

Composing myself as best as I can, given the position I am in, I level him with a glare. "You said you came back for me." It takes everything in me to keep my tone even. Indifferent. When inside, I'm brimming with resentment that borders on rage.

"I did—"

"No," I cut him off. "You came back for revenge. You're using me. Using the terms of my inheritance to get back at my father. This was never about me." Not really. And god, why does that have to hurt so badly? I thought I was beyond this. It's been five freaking years. He should not have this much power over me. I shouldn't even care.

Andrés's expression tightens, but he doesn't refute my words, which makes me even angrier.

"Tell me I'm wrong?"

Silences stretches between us.

"You can't, can you?"

I twist my hands in his grip, and he releases me. Pressing up on my elbows, I shove against his chest, aware that him getting off of me now is his choice. Shifting to the side, Andrés turns his back to me and sits on the edge of the bed, head bowed and arms resting on his thighs.

I scoot back against the headboard, putting as much space between us as the bed will allow, but it's still not enough.

Tugging at the strands of his dark brown hair, he makes an agitated noise in the back of his throat. "It isn't like that." He

bites off his words.

“Oh, really?” How ignorant does he think I am? “So you’ve changed your mind, then? You’re not going to force me to marry you?”

Peering over his shoulder, he glowers at me, eyes darkening. “I’m not forcing—“

“Do I have a choice in all this? Is that what you’re telling me?” Because from where I’m sitting, all of my choices, one by one, are being stripped away.

“You want to marry Maxim Sidorov?” He spits out my fiancé’s name like a curse.

“Of course not.” I hate him almost as much as I hate Andrés right now.

Victory flashes in Andrés’s gaze.

“That doesn’t mean I want to marry you, either.”

He scowls. “You have to marry.”

“I’m aware,” I snap. “That doesn’t mean I want to marry. Or that I have any say in who I marry. Stupid men like you and my father are determined to make decisions about my life for me. Even when they’re the wrong ones.”

Something shifts in his expression. Turning his head forward, he nods. “You’re right.”

Tightness crowds inside my chest. I am?

“If I don’t force your father’s hand, if I don’t demand he give me your hand in marriage...”

I hold my breath.

“What happens to you?”

Scrutinizing his profile, I try to figure out where he's going with this.

"I marry Maxim." That was always the plan. Contracts have been signed. Promises have been made.

"But you don't want to be his wife?"

"No." No woman in her right mind would want to bind herself to a man like that. But, it's temporary. A week. A month at most. Just long enough to secure my escape.

"If given the choice, would you rather be his wife over mine?" Now, he looks at me. His amber eyes penetrate mine, and before I can stop myself, my answer falls from my lips.

"No." It's the truth. Yet it changes nothing.

"Neither of us can rewrite your fate."

I know. No matter what, Papá will marry me off. If not to Maxim, then to someone else. Someone he can just as easily control and manipulate.

"Choose me." Andrés's eyes simmer with intensity.

"I thought we established this. I don't get to choose."

"You do."

No. I don't. This is not the land of make-believe. It's not real or true just because he says so. I'm engaged to Maxim. It doesn't matter that I'm with Andrés right now. My father will never let him keep me. And encouraging him to do so is too much of a risk. To both my body and my heart.

"Do you believe Maxim can make you happy?"

I don't bother to answer. My happiness isn't a priority.

"Will he protect and cherish you?"

I snort. Hardly.

“We both know the answer to those questions,” he says.

I close my eyes but the brush of his hand on my cheek has me snapping them back open. “You’re angry. And you have every right to be. But don’t close the door on you and me over pride. A future with Maxim isn’t a pleasant one.”

Does he think I don’t know that? I’m making lemonade out of lemons because this is the hand I’ve been dealt. This is how I survive.

“But we have a future, Leti. A real one. A future of mutual respect. Of understanding. I am the king of this cartel. You won’t just be my wife. You will be my queen.”

My breath catches.

“My equal.”

Emotion lodges in my throat. “You’re still using me.”

“I am.” And there it is. Out in the open.

A moment of silence blankets the room. Tilting my head away, I look down at my hands, chipping at the dark red polish on my thumb. I’m just so ... tired. Of being used. Sold. Passed around.

I had my life figured out. It wasn’t ideal, but it worked. Six months. I only needed to push through the next six months. But to be treated as an equal—

Shaking my head, I worry my bottom lip.

No. It isn’t enough. As though he sees the decision forming in my head, he places his hand over mine and says, “You could go to school.”

“What?” My breath catches, and my gaze snaps to his.

His eyes move over my face. “You always said you wanted to go to school. You wanted to study graphic design, right?”

My nod is hesitant.

An encouraging smile curls the corner of his mouth. “With me, you could.”

Hope blossoms in my chest. “You’d let me get an education?” My duty is to marry someone who benefits my family and to produce a handful of heirs. Men in the life don’t want an educated woman by their side. They want a submissive one. A woman who will not question their decisions and who will accept her place. Quiet and in the corner.

Andrés is younger than other Capos. More progressive. But I never would have believed—

“If that’s what you want. Yes.”

Indecision sweeps through me. Is he being honest, or is this some kind of trick?

“Leti—“ His head dips down and Andrés presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Say you’ll try.”

The kiss is chaste yet my pulse races with nerves.

“I—“

Pulling back, he holds my gaze, his amber eyes searching mine. “If you can’t say yes, don’t give me your answer. Not yet. You can think about it. We have time.”

Except, we don’t.

Cradling my cheek, he leans forward and kisses me again, pressing his lips to mine. The touch is featherlight, but the way he cups my face, both gentle and possessive, makes my cheek burn beneath my skin.

Nibbling on my lower lip, he teases my mouth open with his teeth. I haven't forgiven him. Not even close. I have every reason to push him away. And I will. I'm just still processing what he's said. An education? A chance to pursue my own passions and possibilities. That has always been my dream.

Tilting my head back, he traces my jaw with his tongue.

"What are you doing?" My voice shakes, and a flame ignites low in my belly.

"I'm reminding you of how good we were," he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin. "How good we can be again."

Instead of waiting for me to make a decision, Andrés returns to my mouth. Crashing his lips against mine, my mouth parts on a sharp inhale. I should pull back. Turn away. But his mouth is soft and warm. Yet also strong and demanding. It's an overload of sensation, and when his tongue tangles with mine, I know I'm no longer capable of stopping him.

My resolve to push him away crumbles to dust on the floor. There is a promise wrapped in his kiss. One I desperately want to accept.

My fingers sink into the fabric of his shirt. "Please," I whisper between his kisses. "Don't destroy me." I won't get through the heartache again. I know myself. Even with the knowledge that Andrés is using me, I'll give in. My resolve isn't strong enough to resist him forever. Neither is my heart.

He is the sun, and those around him fall into his orbit. But while others know to remain a safe distance away, I'll be drawn into his gravitational pull.

But you know what they say about flying too close to the sun. No matter your protections, you will inevitably burn.

“Never, princesa.” He tells me. “You will be my queen. I would never destroy someone so precious to me.”

ANDRÉS

The harder the battle, the sweeter the victory. Leticia's acceptance might be the sweetest victory there is.

Her lashes cast shadows across her cheeks as she closes her eyes and surrenders to the moment.

"Trust me," I murmur.

She'd been softening before, but at my words, Leticia goes rigid.

Pulling back, I study the expression on her face and confirm what I already know. I fucked up.

"I can't." She swallows hard and turns away.

Frustration bubbles up inside of me. Now isn't the time to lash out or make demands of her. I remind myself that in time, she will come around. Trust between us will return.

"I know. I'm ..."

Pressing my tongue to my cheek, I force out the word. "I'm sorry."

Leticia's brows pull together.

"It'll take time to repair the bridge between us," I say. "I know that. But we will, baby. We'll rebuild. Just tell me that while we do it, you'll be at my side." Wracking my brain, I search for the words to convince her that this is where she belongs.

“Your happiness is important to me.” Reaching out, I turn her face back to me. “You are important to me. If it’s schooling you want, you will have it. If you want to travel, we’ll go see the world.”

Hope flashes in her eyes, but just as quickly, it’s snuffed out. “Don’t make promises you have no intention of keeping.”

When will she realize I will give her the world if it garners me her favor? “They’re not promises,” I say.

Shoulders slumping, her lips twist into a grimace.

“They are vows.”

Leticia’s eyes widen.

Taking her hands, I weave her fingers with mine. “If you choose to be with me, I vow to bring you happiness. To give you every opportunity to seek joy in life. I will honor and cherish you for all the days that we live. A life with me won’t be an easy one. That is not the cartel way.”

She nods, understanding and anticipation lighting up her gaze.

“But I will do right by you in a way no other man can.” I bring her hands to my lips, kissing the backs of her palms. “I will protect you.” Unspoken is that should anyone even think of hurting her, I will burn them to the ground. “But I will never cage you. These are my vows.”

Holding my breath, I brace myself for her response. Tears fill her eyes, but not a single one of them drops. “He will never let you have me.”

We hold each other’s stares. “Let me worry about that.” I’m close. She wants to agree. But something beyond her anger is holding her back. “What is it?” I ask, sensing there is more she isn’t telling me.”

Leti closes her eyes, and a lone tear escapes to trail down her face. “I’ll be dead before I ever inherit. You see that, right?”

My blood turns to ice. “Explain.”

Another tear tracks down her cheek. My chest tightens. Reaching out, I swipe her tears away.

“You are the enemy.”

I nod, well aware of how her father sees me.

“He’s already encouraged Maxim to claim my virginity.”

My brows draw together. “Why?” The agreement states her innocence must remain intact.

“He doesn’t want me to inherit.”

My surprise must show on my face because she releases a humorless laugh. “It doesn’t make sense, does it?”

I shake my head. Because no, it doesn’t. Leticia is Ruben’s only heir. His wife bore him two daughters, and he’s already cast one of them out. Why would he seek to cast out the other?

“If I do, there is an expiration date on his control. I’m twenty-three now. He has twelve years before he’ll be forced to step down. But he won’t want to relinquish power in twelve years. Which means his best option is to get rid of me.”

My nostrils flare. I see the writing on the wall, and no part of me likes where this is going.

“You think he’d eliminate you?” Fear ricochets through me at the thought of Leticia’s life being taken by her father.

Her smile is sad. “He’d rather disinherit me,” she says. “It’s cleaner that way. And—“ she hesitates before swallowing hard.

Whatever she’s about to say, I won’t like it.

“And he cares enough about legacy that he’ll want a child. One who is of Castro blood. He’ll try with another woman on his own. But if that fails, he’ll ensure that either I or Lucia become pregnant by one of his men. He’ll use us as incubators for the son he never had.”

I pause, waiting for the punchline. It never comes. Shock followed quickly by horror trickles down my spine.

“I’m the convenient option. Lucia is somewhere in Mexico. He’ll retrieve her if he needs to. Or leave her there until she comes to term. But I’m already here, under his thumb. If he can disinherit me, he can cling to power a while longer. Until he decides to step down or has the heir he desires. Either option buys him the time he’s after.”

“If that’s what he wants, why hasn’t he demanded Maxim take your innocence already?” The thought of another man touching her sends fire raging through my veins. Leticia Castro is mine. No one else can touch her.

“Maxim knows about the contract.”

Her words take me by surprise. “How?”

“I told him.”

She what?!

“You know how he is. And I needed him to be on my side. Maxim hates being in his brother’s shadow. A marriage to me would bring him position and power. Two things he could never achieve on his own.”

I nod. I don’t like it. But I understand her reasoning. At least this way, he kept his hands to himself. Even if it was for the wrong reasons.

“Maxim won’t steal my virginity. Not if it costs him what he wants.”

That’s good except...

“So, what? You’ve just been waiting to die?”

“No!” she exclaims. “Of course not.”

Really? A soft growl rumbles through my chest. Because that’s what it looks like she’s doing.

“He won’t rush to kill me. If he can’t disinherit me, he’ll bide his time. I’m not a threat to him until I turn thirty-five. He’ll use the time between then and now to ensure Maxim knocks me up and to see if Maxim is malleable. If my father can manipulate him, there’s a chance he’ll change his mind.”

She shrugs, her expression resigned. “He won’t wait twelve years with you.”

It takes a beat for the implications of her words to sink in. When they do, fury stabs vicious claws into my skin.

“You think he’d try to kill you now?”

She nods.

No!

Jerking away from her, I stride to the other end of the room. Running my hands through my hair, my mind races through scenarios. *Fuck!* I don’t see a solution. But she’s right. Why didn’t I realize this sooner?

“Do you get it now?” She asks, her voice soft and broken. “It doesn’t matter if Maxim is good to me. Or if you’d respect me as an equal. I can’t be with you. Not if I want to live.”

“I will protect you.” The DeAnde Cartel is powerful. Well-connected. I’ve spent these past five years fortifying my

family's businesses and strengthening our men. I can take whatever Castro throws at me, and my men are dependable. They will lay down their lives to protect her.

"You can't. Not twenty-four-seven. One day, we'd slip up. You can't be on alert forever."

Yes, I can. "If it means keeping you safe—"

"You'd be putting me in a cage," she whispers. "The very thing you just vowed not to do."

I grimace. There is a solution to this. I just haven't thought of it yet.

Looking at her on the bed, she looks so fragile and alone. She's pulled her knees to her chest and has her arms wrapped around them.

"If he wasn't a problem, what path would you choose?"

Leticia huffs out a breath. "This isn't the *what if* game, Andrés."

"Pretend that it is. If Ruben isn't a factor, do you choose me? Will you stand at my side?"

Her hesitation is brief before she nods.

Relief sweeps through me.

"Then I'll handle it."

Disbelief flickers across her face. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." I answer her honestly. "But if you're in this with me, I will find a way. No matter the cost."

She bites her lip.

"I need you to be all in with me, Leti."

“Okay,” she whispers, a look of determination stealing over her face. “I’m in. No matter the cost.”

ANDRÉS

I take eleven hours to come up with a plan. And another hour to devise a back-up in case it doesn't work. Normally I'd run it by Adrián, but I already know what he'll say, and I don't have time to argue with him.

I've played out every scenario I can think of, and short of a miracle, this is the only way. With any luck, Ruben will see reason, though I won't hold my breath. Which is why I'm mentally preparing myself for what I will have to do.

Given everything Leticia's told me, there's a chance her father's spent these past five days plotting her death. A possibility I wish I'd known about sooner. Because if I'm right, it means we're out of time.

Ángel walks beside me as I lead Leticia through the courtyard with my hand on the small of her back. Quirking a brow, he wordlessly asks if I see what she's doing, and irritation ripples through me.

Gritting my teeth, I nod. I do.

Leticia scans her surroundings, eyes searching for an opportunity. An escape.

"You won't find one," I tell her, and she startles.

"Find what?" she asks.

“An escape. Remember what you said earlier, princesa. No matter the cost.”

She huffs out a breath, but pink stains her cheeks, telling me I was right. “I know. And I will not run away. It’s just ...” she shrugs. “Habit, I guess.”

Hm. “Your habits will need to change.” Though the idea of watching her run from me has a certain appeal. My lips twitch at the sides, lifting almost into a smile. I’d enjoy catching her. She’s a fighter. Despite the inconvenience, her resistance is something I never want to see diminished. Besides, a man like me enjoys the occasional chase.

Leticia Castro is mine. There is nothing in this world that will make me give her up.

Never again.

She rubs her arms, reminding me of the chill in the air. She’s worn my clothes this past week. A fact she is unaware of, having assumed the clothing she discovered in her room are discards.

I’d never allow her to wear another man’s clothes. To carry his scent on her skin. No. That privilege is strictly mine.

Despite having agreed to remain at my side, she’d reject the idea of wearing my things, seeing it as a display of possession. Which it is. So I took care in selecting the pieces that Maria placed in her room. Choosing leisure items I’d wear while training or at the gym instead of the expensive suit pieces or button downs she’d expect to find in my wardrobe.

Tonight, she’s wearing the little black dress I picked her up in. It’s the only piece of clothing she has here. When she first arrived, I considered sending one of my brothers out to collect a few items for her. Only then she’d have no reason to wear

mine, and I like the sight of her in my shirts. Knowing it's my clothes that rests against her skin.

I'll have to replace her wardrobe, eventually. But for now, my shirts and sweats will suffice.

Three black SUVs pull up in front of the gates. Adrián, Rio, and Aztlán seated behind their wheels.

"You should take me with you." Ángel says.

"You know why I can't." Regardless of the provisions I've set in place for tonight, it'd be stupid to have all four DeAnde brothers in the same place at the same time. It'd leave our family vulnerable. With Ángel left behind, if anything happens to me and the others, a DeAnde will stand, able to step in and hold the family together.

"Leave Aztlán instead. He's the youngest."

The corners of my mouth twitch. "He needs the experience."

Stepping forward, I open the passenger door to one of the SUVs and wave Leticia inside.

"Where are we going?" She pauses beside the door, her expression guarded. She worries her bottom lip, tempting me to tug it free.

"Neutral territory."

Her eyes shoot up to mine, bright with understanding.

"This is bullshit." Ángel mutters, but I ignore him and instead, give in to my impulse to touch her. Pressing my thumb to Leticia's mouth, I brush over her lips. They part. A wordless invitation, even if she's not aware of it.

The things I want to do to this mouth.

"You think he'll show up?" she asks.

Releasing her, I nod. The sonovabitch had better show up. He's put this meeting off long enough while he scrambles to put himself in a better position.

"I gave him an ultimatum. Show up or declare war. When we get there, we'll know what he decides."

Ángel grunts. "And the Sidorovs?"

"Adrián took care of it. They won't be a problem." Ruben thought Maxim's family would come to his aid. That they'd wage war right alongside him and paint the streets of Richland red.

Idiot.

Adrián dealt with the Sidorovs the night I stole Castro's daughter. I might not have known what my intentions were for her then, but I've known from day one that I'd never allow her to walk down the aisle to Maxim Sidorov.

From what Adrián said, Maxim is pissed he's lost her, but his feelings are irrelevant. He's not in charge, nor is he his family's heir.

Dmitri Sidorov has assured us that his son won't be a problem, despite whatever tantrums he throws. His father won't go to war over a woman. Not when a trade agreement with me is more lucrative than a marriage contract that is attached to a sinking ship.

Something Adrián told him all about.

We've been tracking Ruben's business dealings for years now. I have a man inside with access to Castro's financials. He's given us their monthly statements. Copies of his books. All the proof we need to paint the kind of picture that has a man like Sidorov quickly backing away.

Castro is bleeding money. I'm surprised he can afford to pay his men. Though, based on his accounts, his ability to do so won't last much longer. Leticia's inheritance agreement stipulates that she and her husband have no position or authority to lead until she is thirty-five years of age. The Castro Cartel won't survive long enough to see that day. A fact my brother made abundantly clear.

Dmitri is a smart man. With too much risk and too little reward, he's cutting his losses and ensuring he doesn't make an enemy of me. I'm one of the few men in this town who rival his empire, and money and power talk.

I don't like Dmitri. Children reflect their parentage, making Maxim the apple that didn't fall far from the tree. But I respect the choices he makes in business. He isn't a stupid man. He keeps his hands clean. Or as clean as they can be in our line of work.

Holding my hand out to Leticia, I help her into the car.

"Thank you," she mutters.

Leaning over her, I secure the safety belt over her lap.

"I can buckle myself."

I'm aware. "It is my job to protect you. Accept it."

Rolling her eyes, she huffs out a breath. "Whatever."

Closing her door, I turn to my brother. "Hold down the fort. We'll be back in a few hours."

"Are you sure you want to take her with you?" He questions.

"Yes." She has to be there. Ruben isn't a reasonable man, and for what I have planned, her presence is required.

“Very well.” His silver eyes bore into mine. “Don’t die. I expect all of you to come back.”

Nodding my head, I climb into the passenger seat beside Rio. “I have no intention of losing any of my men.” There is always a risk. But with any luck, it won’t come to that.

“I mean it,” he says, worry shining in his eyes.

“I know.” I clasp his hand with mine. “I’ll be back.”

Satisfied, he turns and walks back through the gates.

Rio puts the car into drive and the others pull out behind us. I have three men in each of the other SUVs. Each hand picked for their skills. “Are you sure about this?” Rio asks, keeping his voice pitched low.

Looking in the rearview mirror, I look back at Leticia, catching her gaze.

“Yes,” I tell him. “No matter the cost.” Her eyes flash. “Whatever it takes.”

ANDRÉS

Leticia is anxious. That much, I can tell. Her teeth dig into her bottom lip as she stares out the window, watching the lights of the city pass her by.

She's barely spoken since we left the estate, and I can see that already she's doubting the decision she's made.

There is no going back now. I won't let her.

"No importa el costo," I remind her. *No matter the cost.* Because if things go as planned, the cost will be high. I pray I'll be able to pay it.

Without meeting my gaze, she nods.

We arrive at Spire, a club located on the edge of DeAnde territory. It's strategically positioned to give the impression that it isn't one of my establishments.

I've never made a public appearance here, nor have my brothers, so Castro had no reason to assume it was under my watch when I made the demand that he meet me here. Whether he shows up or not is another story.

The fucker better. And if he does, it won't be up unarmed. But my men and I are ready. I have a dozen enforcers strategically placed throughout the club already, along with the eight men I brought with me from the estate.

Knowing Ruben, he'll arrive with six to eight men of his own, giving me a clear advantage. Castro considers me nothing more than an ignorant boy, but I grew up fast. He's about to see the man I've become. One who is formidable and capable of bringing him to his knees.

"Follow me," I tell Leticia as I help her out of the vehicle. My brothers and our men close ranks around us, and we make our way inside. The overhead lights are low, and there are red under mount lights along the perimeter of the floor, casting the room in a burgundy glow.

Adrián and Rio take the lead, forging a path from one end of the club to the other as we make our way to the private room I have reserved that is set in the back. Leticia keeps her head bowed, shoulders tight. I wish I knew what she was thinking right now, but the music is too loud for me to ask. Pulling her closer to my side, I attempt to offer her what comfort I can, knowing that once Ruben arrives, she'll have to stand on her own.

He can't know what she means to me. Not truly. He needs to believe I'm taking her to spite him. Not to alleviate my obsession.

Parting the red velvet, we step into the back hallway, trailing deeper until we arrive at a heavy metal door. Pushing it open, we step into what is a large conference room with two large rectangular tables on either side.

Taking the table at the back, I position myself and Leticia at the center, with Adrián and Aztlán on either side of me. Rio stands guard just inside the door while the rest of my men take up positions, fanning out on my left and right.

No more than ten minutes go by before Rio signals that Ruben and his men have arrived.

Taking my seat, I pull Leticia into my lap, positioning her on my thigh. "What are you doing," she hisses. Squirming, she tries to stand, but my firm grip on her hips doesn't allow it.

"Stop moving," I warn.

The moment her father walks into the room, she stills. Without seeing her face, I know her skin has paled and that her eyes are wide.

Castro sneers at his daughter's position, his upper lip curled in disgust. Stopping behind the other table, his men spread out around him, and I do a quick count in my head. There are six men with him who stand armed and ready. But there is another smaller man with round glasses perched on his nose who follows closely behind Ruben that looks out of place.

"Who's the norm?" I ask, pitching my voice low for only her ears.

"Doctor," she whispers.

My brows furrow together. "Why would your father bring him?"

Her throat works, and she anxiously twists her hands on her lap. "To make sure I'm still intact."

Sucking on my teeth, I eye this supposed doctor with disdain. His worried eyes flicker to mine, and I let him see the promise in my gaze. This is the man who was responsible for violating my woman. If I find him again without Castro's protection, he won't be walking away.

He wilts under my gaze and takes a step back, bumping into Rio, who closes the door behind him.

"Qué quieres?" *What do you want?* Ruban snaps, now that everyone is settled.

“What I am owed.” I lean back in my seat, pulling Leticia against my chest and allowing him to see the possessive hold I have on his daughter.

His face darkens, hands fisting against the wood top of the table. He hasn't taken his seat. Neither have his men. And from the look of things, he doesn't plan to.

Fine by me. The sooner we settle this matter, the sooner he can leave and stay out of both my and Leticia's lives.

“Te crié mejor que para actuar como una puta.” He barks out his words, each one slicing into Leticia like a knife. She flinches under the onslaught but offers no response. Good girl. She knows better than to show weakness in this room. If not for her being in my arms, I wouldn't feel the slight tremor in her body. She's afraid. But only I know it.

“That's enough. You won't speak to her that way.” My voice is calm but filled with warning.

“I will speak to my daughter however I see fit,” he snaps.

“No.” I tell him. “You won't. Leticia is to be my wife, and you will show her the respect she deserves.”

He barks out a laugh, but I see the moment his eyes flash with barely contained rage. “Your wife? Never.”

Waving Adrián forward, he deposits a contract in front of Ruben, who snatches it from the table as soon as my brother's released it.

“What is this?”

“A marriage contract.”

With a dark chuckle, he throws the contract onto the floor.

My nostrils flare.

“She’s already engaged. Why would I sign this?”

My smile is slow and cruel. “Haven’t you heard the good news?” I ask him. “The wedding has been called off. Sidorov is no longer interested in a Castro alliance.”

“Lies.” He says.

“Go ahead, call him. Assuming he’ll bother taking your calls.” My words hit their intended mark, and Ruben’s face turns a ruddy red.

“Interfering in another man’s business comes with consequences,” he warns.

“As does killing a man’s father,” I retort.

“That is the past. Grow up and move on.”

I’ve heard enough.

“Satisfy the debt you owe my family and sign on the dotted line.” I demand.

“Or what?”

Glaring at the man, I make sure he sees the hatred in my gaze. “Or I will paint the streets of Richland red with your blood and the blood of your men.” Shifting beside him, his enforcers radiate anxious energy. None of them like the threat of my words. Good. If it should come to that, they’ll have to decide if Ruben is a man worth dying for.

If I had to guess, it wouldn’t be a difficult decision for them to make.

“You think you can threaten me?” he reaches into the inside of his coat but not fast enough. Before his gun is out, Rio, Adrián, and half of my men have their weapons trained on him.

Castro freezes, and the tension thickens in the room, brimming with hostility.

“Aztlán—“ My brother jumps to attention. He retrieves a second copy of the contract from a folder and places it before Castro.

“Sign the agreement,” I demand. “Then you can walk away.”

His icy stare slides to mine. “I will not have a DeAnde in my family.” He spits on the floor.

“Good. No sooner would I have you in mine.”

“Then it’s settled. Return my daughter to me and I will forget this offense.”

“No.”

He bristles. “No?”

I shake my head. “No. She is what I am owed. You took a member of my family from me. I’m returning the favor. Leticia is now mine.”

“Have you fucked her?” he asks.

My nostrils flare.

“Answer me.” he demands, shifting his attention to her. “Did you whore yourself out for him?” She shrinks under his glare.

“What business is it of yours?” I ask, knowing exactly why he cares.

“I am her father,” he snaps. “I will know if my daughter has spread her legs for my enemy.” He waves the doctor forward, who moves closer with tentative steps. “I will have her innocence confirmed.”

Over my dead body. My fingers flex on her hips. No man, doctor or otherwise, is touching what is mine.

“I don’t care if she’s a virgin or not,” I tell him. “I will claim what is mine, and you will agree to my terms. I owe you nothing in return.”

“There is a prior agreement you are not aware of.” Only, I am. “Whether I agree to your terms or not is irrelevant. My prior contracts stand. I will know if my daughter whored herself out to my enemy before I give you my decision. Release her now if you want my answer.”

Baring my teeth at him, I glower at him. “I did not deflower her.”

“I won’t take the word of a DeAnde over my man’s examination.”

Fuck this. “I won’t have that *puta’s* grubby hands on her body.”

Throughout our entire conversation, Leticia has remained still but at the mention of him touching her, her body quakes with silent tremors. Cautious of Ruben’s gaze, I squeeze her side, assuring her that I won’t let him touch her.

“That is not your decision to make.”

“She is mine,” I grind out.

“Only if I allow it.”

We’re not getting anywhere. Not that I believed we would. Ruben won’t show his hand because he thinks I’m unaware of it. But I know the terms of his agreements.

“He isn’t touching her,” I growl.

Adrián rests one hand on my shoulder. He doesn’t know the thoughts going through my head. Doesn’t understand why I won’t allow this. But that’s because none of my brothers know what Leticia said.

“Answer me this.” I pause long enough for Ruben’s beady little eyes to flick back to my gaze. “If your man confirms her innocence, will you sign the agreement? Settle this debt between our families? And we can all walk out of here to live another day.”

He takes too long to answer.

“I didn’t think so.” I tell him, ignoring the looks of concern on both of my brother’s faces. “And if she is no longer pure?” Something dark and triumphant flashes in his eyes. “What then?”

He juts out his chin. “She’d be worthless.”

“Not to me.”

He tilts his head, eyeing me with speculation. “What value could she hold for you?”

I need to tread lightly. Ruben can’t know that she’s anything more than a means of settling our debt. “I already told you. You took a member of my family from me. I’m taking one of yours in recompense.” My mouth curls into a sneer. “I look forward to ruining your daughter night after night while I fuck her in my bed. Perhaps I’ll even pass her around.” I let my hand slide up her belly to rest just beneath her breast. “I don’t know how an ugly bastard like you bore such a beautiful daughter.” I ignore the contempt that swirls in my stomach, hating myself as I utter each word. “But my brothers and I thank you. We’ll enjoy everything her hot little body has to offer.”

“So that’s what this is?” He demands. “You think I give a shit about you fucking her? If she’s spread her legs already, she’s no daughter of mine. She’d be nothing more than a whore.”

“Then you won’t mind me keeping her?” I demand. Anticipation simmers beneath my skin. We’re almost there.

“My man will confirm it.”

“As I said, my word is enough.”

“No.” He refuses to back down. The doctor at his side eyes Leticia with hunger. I don’t need to ask to know that at some point he crossed a line. I can see it in the way she refuses to look at him. In the tightness of her shoulders.

“You need proof?” I confirm.

He nods.

So be it. “*No matter the cost, princesa.*” I whisper the words against her ear, and I rise to my feet, forcing her to stand with me. Her nod is barely perceptible, but it’s there nonetheless.

“Lay on the desk.” The doctor takes a step closer, but when he does, her entire body locks up.

“You mean to examine her here?”

Swallowing hard, he nods.

Flicking my gaze around the room, I see Ruben’s men licking their lips and take in their hungry gazes.

A knot forms in my stomach while a vice squeezes my chest. *Fuck this.*

The doctor moves closer, and Leticia stumbles against me. “I can’t—“ she whispers.

“Forgive me,” I murmur, making my decision. “If proof is all that you need,” I tell him. “You’ll have it.” Not allowing myself to think, I press Leticia forward until her hips bump into the desk. But before she can crawl onto it, I press my hand to her back and instead bend her at the waist.

“Stay where you are,” I order the doctor.

Skimming my hand over Leticia’s generous curves, I suck in a breath, and I force myself to ignore the guilt burrowing holes into my chest. She gasps, my ears honing in on the sound. I’m tempted to look at her. To assure her everything will be okay. But if I look at her now, I won’t be able to follow through with what it is that comes next.

We agreed. No matter the cost. Failure is not an option, and this is the only way I can keep and protect her.

Placing one hand on the back of her neck, I pin Leticia in place while my legs press against the backs of her thighs. I know she can feel my erection, but she doesn’t make a sound, save for that first small gasp. Where is the fighter? The woman who threw herself from my car only a few days ago. That she’s frozen like this right now tells me so much more than I could have known.

“Sign the contract,” I demand yet again, only this time, I shove up the skirt of Leti’s dress with my free hand and use my other to tear her panties down her thighs. I’m careful not to expose more skin than I have to, but every man here knows exactly what I intend to do.

“Eyes forward.” Adrián snaps and every one of my men turns their attention forward.

I meet the dark brown gaze of my brother. “Are you sure you want to do this?” He mouths, his expression resigned. He’ll rip me a new one about it later, but he won’t question me in front of our men. He knows just as I do that I’m throwing my shot at revenge away.

It appears he was right. I can’t have Castro’s kingdom and keep Leti. And if I can only have one, I know what I’ll choose.

I give him a barely perceptible nod. *I do.*

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Ruben shouts, eyes wide as he looks from Leticia’s precarious position to me.

Leti, for her part, does not react. Her eyes are wide, mouth pressed into a grim line, but the slight tremble to her body is the only sign she gives that lets me know she’s afraid.

I don’t like what I’m about to do, but I gave up the final dregs of my soul long ago, and when it comes to claiming Leticia, I will not be denied.

“You needed proof,” I tell him. “And I won’t have your man’s filthy hands touching what is now mine.”

Unbuckling my belt and lowering my zipper, I release my cock and ignore the stares of Castro’s men as I guide myself to her slick entrance, stroking my length to grant the sonovabitch a few seconds more time to make the right decision and sign the fucking contract.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

Leti’s hands shake. If I could offer her pretty words and reassurances, I would, but I can’t. She knows this as much as I do. In a world like ours, power is everything and kindness is a weakness I cannot afford in a room shared with my enemy.

Her cheek presses against the wood surface, and she exhales a small sigh. I look down to see her eyes open but unfocused. She’s mentally checked out. *Good.* It’s the best I can ask for.

Pressing myself between her folds, I meet her father’s furious gaze once more, and when it’s clear he has nothing to say, I thrust myself deep inside her. *Fuck.*

I grunt as her body strangles my dick like a vise while I simultaneously groan. She’s so goddamn tight. If ever there

was a part of me that doubted her innocence before, I sure as fuck do not, now.

Leti sucks in a pained breath, choking back her cry. But she doesn't ask me to stop. She doesn't beg.

A single tear slips from the corner of her eye to trail down her nose, and I close my eyes, wishing I could unsee it. This isn't how I wanted to claim her.

Fighting the urge to rock into her, I turn my attention back to her father, ignoring her wet heat as her warm cunt envelopes my length.

Rubin's expression is a mixture of shock and rage. I force my lips to lift into a grin. What's done is done. Leticia is mine now.

“Sign the contract. She's useless to you now.”

“You ruined her,” he snarls, but his indignation is a front. I can see the satisfaction in knowing she can never inherit written within his gaze.

Ruben clenches the contract in his hand before dropping it to the table where he angrily signs it.

“There, we—“

I cut him off. “Not yet.” It's taking everything in me not to pump into Leti's tight body, but I keep myself in control while Adrián retrieves the papers.

Without looking at Leticia, he sets the documents beside her, placing a pen inches from her hand. Beside it, my youngest brother drops another slip of paper. A marriage license I had him acquire earlier today. Sidorov's agreement was dissolved easily enough.

I won't be taking any chances.

“Sign it, Leti.”

I place the pen in her hand and release my grip on the back of her neck. Her thin fingers curl around the pen as she slowly lifts from the table. She doesn't sign right away. Not that I expected her to. She wants to fight me, but what can she possibly hope to win?

This isn't what we planned, but in the end, it leads to what we both wanted.

Her eyes skim the paperwork, and with a visible swallow, she signs her name on the line I indicate before dropping the pen. She braces her hands on the desk, her skirt falling to cover the space where our bodies connect, and I barely refrain from shoving her back down just so I can stare at my cock buried inside her.

With a deep breath, I pick up the pen and sign my name beside hers. Adrián steps forward to collect the papers, but when his eyes sweep over her, I snarl. He shakes his head before backing away.

“I'll have everything filed first thing in the morning,” He mutters.

“Good. Now get out. All of you.”

After only a moment's hesitation, Ruben and his men file out of the room. All of my men, save for my brothers, are quick to follow. “Return to your posts,” Adrián orders, tossing his keys to another man as he lingers at the door.

“What?” I ask. When there are only five of us left in the room, Adrián, Aztlán, and Rio stand stiffly beside one another just inside the door.

“Two of us need to stay with you,” Adrián says, his eyes directed on the floor.

“Not tonight.”

“Family rules,” he reminds me.

I grimace. Since Papá died, no DeAnde goes anywhere without at least two men for backup. It’s a rule I set in place, but given where we are and what I am in the middle of, privacy is my immediate concern.

“Adrián—“

“No.” He’s smart enough not to look at Leticia right now, but there isn’t an ounce of give in my voice. “Rio and I will stand guard just outside the door. Aztlán will return with the others. That is the best I can give you.”

“Fine,” I snap.

With a slight dip of his head, he and the others move to the hallway, closing the door behind them. As soon as we’re alone, I slide myself out of Leticia’s pussy and bite off a curse when I see her blood on my length. I don’t give myself time to dwell on it. Tucking myself back into my pants, I push down the back of her dress before running my hands through my hair and stepping away.

Leti straightens, smoothing her dress back over her thighs. Neither of us speaks, and she makes a point of not looking at me.

A hollow ache forms in my chest.

“Leti—“ She turns, and there is a haunted look in her eyes.

“Are you ready to go home?” I ask.

Still refusing to look at me, she nods.

“No matter the cost,” I remind her.

Mouth twisting into a grimace, she sneers. “Why am I the only one who pays it?”

Not waiting for an answer, she strides out of the room.

“Leticia—“

She doesn’t bother to slow her steps. With a sigh, I follow behind her, quickly catching up to her shorter stride. Adrián and Rio close in behind us but maintain a comfortable distance as I reach for her arm and draw her into an embrace.

“Talk to me.”

She twists within my hold, tiny hands shoving against my chest.

Holding her against me, I tuck her head beneath my chin.

“Let go of me,” she demands, but there is a tremor in her voice.

“He has no reason to come after you now.”

“I don’t care. You...” she sniffs and tries again to push me away.

“It’s done,” I tell her. “We’re free to move forward, baby. We —“

“There is no *we*,” she bites out, sending ice into my veins.

Pulling back, I look down at her before grasping her chin and forcing her to meet my gaze. “We talked about this. We agreed —“

“Not to that,” she snaps, tears tracking down her cheeks.

My heart seizes in my chest. She’s crying. Leticia doesn’t break down like this.

“Leti—“

“Please,” she begs. “Let me go.”

Unable to deny her, I release my hold on her and step back. With a defeated look on my face, I signal Adrián forward, a silent request to lead her away.

He maneuvers her through the club while Rio and I follow at a much more sedate pace. I knew she’d be upset, but I didn’t expect a rejection like this.

“She’ll come around,” Rio mutters.

I glance at his expression and see the lie in his eyes. “No, she won’t,” I tell him.

His words are meant to offer comfort, but I don’t deserve any peace when Leti’s heart remains on the ground.

Shaking his head, he grunts. “No. I suppose she won’t.”

My face slackens, and my heart drops. I have her. Both her and her father’s names are signed on the dotted line. But I feel her slipping away from me. She’s fortifying her walls and will do everything in her power to keep me out.

“Did I go too far?” Not meaning to, I voice my question aloud.

Rio’s brows lift, unaccustomed to me asking his opinion. He shrugs. “Maybe. Maybe not. Only time will tell.”

Time? I can work with that. I am not a patient man, but I’ve already waited five long years as it is. Time is something I can offer her in spades.

Don’t panic. More is coming for Andrés and Leticia in *Twisted Day Dreamer*, book 2 of the DeAnde Cartel Trilogy. The book is available for pre-order now but don’t panic about

the date. It will be moved forward once the book is complete! I am aiming for Spring 2023

IN THE MEAN TIME, ANDRÉS MAKES AN APPEARANCE IN MY Devils of Sun Valley series, in Cruel Promise.

Cruel Promise is book 2 of Dom & Kasey, so be sure to start with Cruel Devil if you're interested in checking it out and seeing some of the trouble Andrés causes!

Turn the page for the first 2 chapters of Dom & Kasey's enemies to lovers, brother's best friend story.

Happy Reading! xoxo

CRUEL DEVIL - KASEY

This year will make me or break me. Personally, I'm hoping for the former. But, as I sit in the back seat of my mother's SUV, I have a feeling it's going to be the latter. There's this sense of foreboding thrumming through me as I look up at the impeccably manicured lawns and twin pillars that decorate where I'll be living this next school year. All one hundred and eighty days of it, plus winter and spring breaks. I'm going to hate every minute.

I'm very much aware that there isn't a seventeen-year-old out there who wouldn't kill to leave the nest a little bit early. And trust me when I say I'm not feeling like my life is about to take a turn for the worse just because I'm moving out at the ripe old age of seventeen. What does have me feeling this way is the fact that I'm joining a sorority. Not by choice, I might add.

Sorority life isn't my scene. And no, I don't have any firsthand experience with sororities, and yes, I'm absolutely judging them based on what I've seen on TV, but let's be real, if you knew anything about me, you'd agree that me and the perfect plastics I see walking in and out of the houses on sorority row aren't a match made in heaven.

When I applied for Sun Valley High's running start program—a program that allows me to attend college courses and earn both college credits and the final credits I'll need for my high school diploma, I thought, *this is exactly what I need*. An escape from the stupid drama that is high school life where I never really fit in. It's hard to relate to the people at school when all they can talk about is how Suzie made out with Jason behind Ruby's back and other stupid nonsense, like who is asking who to senior prom.

Meanwhile, my best friends have all graduated and are planning their weddings and being moms and doing real-life things that matter. It makes it hard to relate to high-school life. Hearing the gossip and then seeing all the back-stabby antics, it's not what I'm interested in. And don't even get me started on the boys.

They're so incredibly stupid in high school. The catcalling and fuck-boy flirting. Urgh. You'd think they'd find a better pickup line than, "You must be an angel, because you look like you just fell from heaven."

Barf.

The guys I go to school with have zero game. Not that I'd be interested in anyone at Sun Valley High anyway. I almost wish I was. It'd make seeing a certain broody asshole on the regular a hell of a lot easier.

Both of us attending Suncrest U isn't going to help, but with any luck I won't see him any more than I have to. Suncrest University is his turf, and here he reigns supreme, not that I'm surprised. Dominique Price and his best friends ran the halls at Sun Valley High as the school's football gods, so of course their reputations would follow them to college as they continue to dominate on and off the field. I used to hate those

three for what they put my brother through, but now we're all friends. Hell, more like family. But I don't need people realizing we know each other, especially with the unwanted attention that will bring, so I'd like to keep our association under wraps.

And since I'm in college now, Mom decided it was the perfect time to accept an out-of-state promotion and force me to join Kappa Mu—her alma mater. Guess that makes me a legacy.

Yay.

Not.

The alternative was moving with her—so not happening. The prospect of uprooting my entire life to move halfway across the country holds zero appeal, even if the alternative is, well, this.

“Ready to braid hair and paint your nails bubblegum pink?” my brother—Aaron—asks from the front seat.

I roll my eyes and flip him the bird. “Ha. Ha. You're so funny.”

He turns to glance at me, pushing the blond hair from his face to give me a wink. “Don't worry, sis. They'll leave you alone once they realize what a prickly personality you have.”

I lunge forward to smack him but he swings open the passenger side door, stepping out, just in time to avoid my swipe.

“Kasey!” my mother admonishes me.

“What? He started it,” I tell her as I unbuckle to follow him. Despite the early hour, the house is already buzzing with activity—what looks to be a party in full swing. Girls in all manner of summer wear are flitting about, socializing,

drinking whatever is in those red Solo cups—and let’s be honest, it’s not water—and carrying boxes, doing exactly what I’m here to do. Move in.

I wrinkle my nose and glance at my mom as she slings her oversized purse over her shoulder and moves to join Aaron and me on the sidewalk. “Not too late to change your mind?” Aaron mutters under his breath. “You know you wanna.”

I elbow him in the ribs. “Are we telling jokes now?”

When mom concocted this grand idea of me joining her former sorority, Aaron, being the protective big brother he is, was nice enough to offer me the spare room at his place. An offer I was quick to decline.

Under normal circumstances, I’d consider it. We were never very close growing up given the four-year age gap between us, but Aaron has always looked out for me. Most brothers would balk at the idea of living with their baby sister after they moved out, but Aaron genuinely wouldn’t mind. He’s pretty chill about stuff like that.

The problem isn’t living with my brother. It’s living with my brother’s very hot, very broody, drives-me-insane, asshole of a roommate—Dominique Price. On the best of days, we tolerate one another. On the worst, well, things can be openly hostile.

“I’ll pass on living with the devil and take door number two, please,” I tell him, and he chuckles.

“Dom isn’t that bad.”

I snort. “Are we talking about the same person, here?” Dominique Price very much is that bad. He gets under my skin in a way no one else can, and the pull he has over me, urgh. I hate it. Sometimes so much so that I think I hate *him*. When we’re in the same room, I want to kiss him and punch him in

the same breath. That he makes me question my own sanity is infuriating.

Aaron gives me a light-hearted shove. “Alright, sis, have it your way. But don’t come crying to me when you realize the grass isn’t greener on the other side.”

A gust of wind blows my hair into my face and I hastily push my blond curls out of my eyes. “I won’t,” I assure him. “The grass on your side is already dead and yellow so the bar is set pretty low.”

He smiles, his eyes scanning past me, and I turn to see a familiar black Escalade roll up beside my mother’s car. The broody asshole I just mentioned parks his overpriced SUV and three doors open, letting out Dom, Roman, and Emilio. Somebody please shoot me now.

“What are they doing here?” I groan.

Aaron throws his arm over my shoulder and pulls me into a side embrace. “They’re being good friends and helping you move into your new place.” The fact that he genuinely believes that should be concerning, but I know better.

“Whose idea was this?” I ask.

Already their presence is drawing curious looks from some of the girls. It won’t take long for them to realize who they are. God dammit, he is such an asshole. It would have been bad enough if he came on his own, but bringing Roman and Emilio is taking it one step too far.

“Dom’s,” Aaron confirms what I suspected and my mother being the weirdo she is, gushes.

“Isn’t that so sweet of them, Kasey? It makes me so happy to know you’ll have such a great support system here. Makes me feel so much better about my baby girl going to college.” She

sighs, the smile on her face wistful as she turns back to the house. If I grind my teeth any harder I'm liable to break a tooth. She cannot be serious right now.

"Yep. Soooo sweet," I tell her while giving Dominique my most murderous glare. Does he shake in fear like he should? Of course not. Instead he smirks like the cruel bastard he is and heads right for me, Roman and Emilio right on his heels.

I'm going to make him regret this. I cannot believe he'd set me up like this.

The guys do that guy handshake bro hug thing as if they didn't all see each other a few hours ago, then Dom turns his full attention on me and I have to force my expression to remain impassive. Age has only worked to sharpen his features, making him even more striking than the boy I met my freshman year of high school three years ago. With his hair tightly braided away from his face, his sharp jawline and full lips stand out in stark relief, and I can't decide if I want to kiss him or punch him—a frequent struggle of mine, so I do what I'm best at and just antagonize him.

"Are you so desperate for female attention that you have to drop in on the girls of Kappa Mu for a little bit of an ego stroke?" I smile in satisfaction when his dark brown eyes narrow.

Dominique has this edge to him that's difficult to describe. He's both regal and rugged; the juxtaposition between the two is likely what makes women flock to him. He has two thin slashes in his right brow that somehow take him from attractive to dangerous, and after graduation he filled out to a full six-foot-five, stacked with all the muscles you'd expect a division one athlete to have. The effect he has on people is hard to miss.

When he scowls the way he is doing right now, he's damn near terrifying to behold. But when he smiles, a real smile that doesn't hold an ounce of malice—and mind you those are rare—his entire face lights up and for a second it's like standing in the sun after months of nothing but rain. God, I hate him.

"I don't need an ego stroke. Not a single woman here can hold my interest," he says, his eyes boring into mine and waiting for a reaction. One I refuse to deliver. *Asshole*. Of course he'd say something like that. Dominique hasn't dated, like seriously dated, for as long as I've known him. He gets around, I'm sure. What football player doesn't when you have an entire fan club of jersey chasers? But the only girl I've seen him with more than once is Tamara Vincent. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting her yet, but she's his date to any event or function that requires one. I don't really understand their relationship, and for my own sanity, I try not to think about it too much, but somehow she's outlasted everyone else and has managed to sink some form of a hold into Dominique where no others before her have succeeded.

When Dominique realizes I'm not going to respond, the corner of his mouth curls into his signature cruel smile. "You worried someone will catch my attention?" He scans the growing crowd. "Not really my type, but maybe I can—"

"Yo, Baby Henderson," Emilio says, cutting Dominique off from whatever he was about to say and cutting through the growing tension in the air. "You gonna show us the new digs? Introduce us to your new lady friends?" He winks, and if I didn't know him better, I'd think he was serious. But Emilio is head over heels in love with his girlfriend, one of my best friends, so I know this is for show and he's just helping me out. The softy. Too bad his little act of kindness won't keep him safe if he and the others don't get the hell out of here

before anyone realizes the school's star quarterback, wide receiver, and cornerback just showed up.

I shake my head. "Hard no. You three need to leave."

Roman smirks and Emilio clutches his heart as though I just wounded him. "Baby Hen—"

"Stop calling me that and go home or I'm going to tell Bibi about your big surprise," I warn.

He sucks in a sharp breath. "You wouldn't. You love me?" He meant it as a statement but it comes out more as a question.

"Wanna bet?" Because today is day one of campus life for me and I'm not going to let these three muck it up.

Emilio backs away, hands raised in the air. "You win. I'll stay in the car." He turns and jogs back to Dom's Escalade. One down. Two more to go.

I turn to Roman and raise a single brow. "You too, mister."

"You don't have anything you can use against me," he says, his voice filled with confidence he should not be feeling right now. Doesn't he know me? I have something on virtually everyone. It's little sister 101. You always find the dirt and horde it to later get your way.

I prop one hand on my hip. "I don't?" I press a finger to my lips as though thinking before letting a wide smile spread across my face. "Hey, Aaron, did I ever tell you about the time Roman and Allie went to Silverdale?"

Roman's eyes widen briefly before his brows draw together. "How do you—"

I pull my phone from my back pocket. "Allie sent me pictures from that weekend. You two were so cute together. The couples—"

Roman jerks forward, pressing his palm over my mouth. His dark brown eyes fill with a mix of disbelief and fury. “Not. Another. Word,” he growls. If he were anybody else, I might be worried by the threat in his voice, but despite his rough exterior, Roman is a big ole softie and his fiancé is one of my other best friends. He wouldn’t hurt a hair on my head. She loves me. He loves her. Therefore, I win. So instead of pushing his hand away or trying to say anything, I wait for him to realize what I already know.

It takes only a handful of seconds.

“Fine. Don’t say anything else. I’ll go chill with E. Deal?”

I nod and he slowly releases me, hesitating for just a second to make sure I’ll keep my mouth shut before he turns, slaps Dom on the shoulder with a muttered, “You’re on your own, man,” and joins Emilio in the car.

“Damn, sis, remind me not to get on your bad side,” Aaron says, as if I haven’t used this exact same tactic on him before. “Got anything on this one?” He nods toward Dominique, who raises a brow of his own, expression smug because, no, I have nothing I can use against him to make him do anything he doesn’t want to do and he knows it.

CRUEL DEVIL - DOMINIQUE

I smile, watching the gears turn in that pretty little head of hers as she struggles to find a way to get rid of me. Not happening, baby girl. Kasey coming to Suncrest U is a disaster waiting to happen. She's seventeen for chrissakes, and her idiot mother thought it'd be a great idea for her to join the biggest sorority on campus. What a joke.

Football and training for football are what I'm focused on, so it's become a habit of mine to avoid all things Greek, but only a hermit wouldn't know Kappa Mu and their frat counterpart Alpha Ze are the two most notorious party houses here. Problem is, when shit goes down, it gets ugly.

There have been plenty of rumors about girls getting drugged and guys taking turns at some of their parties, and I'll be damned if anyone is going to try shit like that with Kasey.

I can't stand the girl, but that doesn't mean I'll sit back and let anything happen to her, either. I'm not a complete asshole, despite what she might think.

It's why I suggested to Aaron that she move in with us. I'm willing to take one for the team if I have to, not that it'd be some big hardship. I'm barely home during the week. Most of my time is spent in class, on the field, or at the gym, and most Saturdays I have games. Half of them are out of town.

I'm home on Sunday afternoons but usually gone in the evening to see my sister. Sundays are the obligatory Price family dinners. My parents made them mandatory when Monique and I moved out for college, and while I managed to find a way out of them, my sister wasn't so lucky. She goes to school out of state and she still has to fly in for those fucking dinners, so I make it a point to at least catch up with her while she's here and take her to the airport for her return flight whenever I can.

Where Kasey and Aaron's parents are damn near absent, mine take overbearing to an entirely different level.

Aaron liked the idea of Kasey moving in. He's protective of his little sister the same way I am of mine, so it should have been a done deal, except Kasey refused to get on board with the program. The pretty little idiot.

When she shot down the idea, there wasn't shit I could do about it, and Aaron wasn't willing to pressure her. Something about her being independent and responsible and yeah, compared to most females her age, maybe she is. But she's still young. Impressionable. Guys are going to take one look at her small body, perfect tits, and seductive mouth and think she's theirs for the taking.

"Why are you here?" she asks like she doesn't already know.

"I'm helping. That's what *friends* do." I put more emphasis on the word friend than necessary, but sometimes I need to remind myself that's what we're supposed to be. Friends. Not enemies. Not rivals. She's part of our crew, which means I'm obligated to look out for her same as I would for Allie and Bibiana—Roman and Emilio's girls.

But fuck, the way she gets under my skin, sometimes it's all I can do not to spank her ass to get her to behave. Kasey

Henderson is a match just waiting to be lit, and I'm the spark that gets her temper roaring. The way we verbally spar with one another, her tongue like a whip intent on tearing me down, it makes my cock jerk just thinking about how she'd be in the sack. Would she be just as wild and unrestrained? Or would she be shy and submissive?

Get your shit together, D. I fight the urge to adjust myself and force my face to remain impassive. I'm not interested. Not really. I'm just also not blind. Kasey's all grown up. Her waist dips beneath her ribs, giving her an hourglass figure that should be illegal on a seventeen-year-old girl. Her tits are full and round and her ass is more than a handful that I've definitely considered squeezing a time or two. Again, not because I'm interested.

I lock down thoughts like that as soon as they occur. Kasey Henderson is one hundred percent off limits. For one, she is too fucking young. Four years might not seem like a big deal to everyone else, but it sure as shit is when the girl in question is a minor. And for two, I don't do relationships.

Between school and football, I don't have time for one, nor am I particularly fond of having someone all up in my business. Women are needy and temperamental. If the urge arises, I'll find a girl to take home for the night, but that's all I'm interested in. One night.

Besides, I'm pretty sure Aaron would have my balls if I made a play for her. There's an unspoken rule between friends. Thou shall not fuck one another's siblings.

He and I are damn near brothers at this point. No way can I cross that line.

After graduation, the plan was for Roman, Emilio, and I to get a place off campus together. But both fuckers had to go and

couple up senior year of high school, so that plan went down the drain real quick and left me with two options. Move into the dorms—not fucking likely—or get my own place off campus. But then money would be tight and I didn't want to ask my parents to cover it. Doing that would lead to trouble. Nothing given was ever given freely, and I didn't want the strings I knew would be attached.

My grandmother set up a trust fund for my sister and I that we got access to the day we turned eighteen. It's not much, but it covers my monthly expenses and would cover rent on a house off campus if I could find a roommate.

The idea of living with a stranger isn't something I could get on board with, so I buried my shit with Aaron and got a place with him since the fucker was the only other one in our crew riding solo like myself.

Since he and the girls are all close, it made sense. We weren't going to be getting rid of him anytime soon. Looking back, it was the right call, even if I didn't love the idea at the time.

Aaron's good people. He fucked up when we were all kids but since then, when any of us need him, he shows up. He's there when it counts, and he's put his ass on the line for me more times than I can count. I won't repay that by banging his sister behind his back, even if there was that one time we kissed, and it still fucking haunts me.

"You good, man?" Roman asks.

I grunt, refusing to take my eyes off the girl in front of me.

"Fucking peachy."

Roman snorts and places his hand on my shoulder.

"Right. Well, while you pine over baby Henderson, I'm gonna go get my girl before Emilio tries to steal her."

“I’m not pining,” I retort. I don’t pine after chicks, least of all a freshman with too much sass and too little sense. What the fuck does she think she’s doing right now? And where the hell is her brother. Shouldn’t he be watching her or something? At the very least, he should be fending off the assholes who just want to take advantage of her. No way would I let guys be all over my sister like that.

He laughs, shaking his head. “Call it whatever you want but your jealousy is showing, man. Might want to get that in check.”

I grind my teeth together, flipping off his retreating back. Rome doesn’t know what he’s talking about. Baby Henderson isn’t anything special. A piece of ass and soon to be jailbait. Not someone I’d be jealous over.

Speaking of Hendersons, Aaron walks up beside me and hands me a Coke. I accept the drink, knowing the fucker is just being nice, and against my better judgement I ask, “You cool with older guys all over your baby sister?” I feign indifference and take a drink of the soda waiting to see how he reacts. It has nothing to do with wondering if the age difference between her and I would matter to him and everything to do with making sure he knows what’s going on with Kasey right now.

As expected, Aaron follows my gaze. His eyes narrow and he mutters a curse. “Shit. I’ll have to drag her away from a fucking harem and I’ll have to deal with her bitching about it the entire way home today.”

I force a laugh. “She’s a handful.”

He shakes his head. “That’s putting it mildly. I don’t know what her deal is, man. Lately, it’s like she’s looking for trouble.” He sighs. “I better go deal with that.”

I thrust a hand out to stop him. “Let me.” I don’t know why I made the suggestion but I don’t try to walk it back once it’s out there.

His dark blond brows pull together. “You sure, man?”

I nod. “Yeah. Let her be pissed at me. Then on the way home when she’s bitching you can pretend to agree with what an asshole I am.”

He smiles and slaps me on the back. “Thanks, man. I owe you one.” I nod like it’s no big deal. Just helping the guy out. I don’t have a single selfish reason for making the suggestion.

Allie calls his name and Aaron turns. “Go,” I tell him. “I’ll get it handled.”

He hesitates for a moment. “You sure, man? Kasey can be—“

I cut him off. “Bro, I’ve got it. Go see what Allie wants.” He walks away, heading toward Roman and Allie on the other side of the yard, and without missing a beat, I head straight toward my quarry. She’s got herself surrounded by some of Allie’s friends from back home. I met the guys earlier, Gabe, Felix, and Julio. They seem nice enough, but that doesn’t mean any of them should be talking to her right now.

When I’m within hearing distance I slow my steps, casually walking closer to the group. Gabe, who’s on her right, is laying it on thick. He’s smiling at her like she’s all that he sees. Not happening, asshole.

As soon as I’m behind her, I pull her back into my chest and wrap my arms around her, pinning her in place with her back to my front. I ignore the way she feels pressed up against me and focus on the miscreants in front of me.

Kasey doesn’t bother trying to twist to see who’s grabbed her. My dark arms banded around her is telling enough. I’m the

only black guy here. She doesn't have to see my face to know it's me, and being the smart girl she is, she doesn't bother putting up a fight to get away.

"You know Baby Henderson is jailbait, right?" I direct the question first to Gabe before making eye contact with the other two. Kasey stiffens in my arms and a beautiful shade of pink creeps up her neck.

"For you, maybe," Gabe retorts with a shrug.

The corner of Julio's mouth lifts into a smirk like he's in on some secret, but he doesn't say anything. He takes a drink of his soda and rocks back on his heels, watching things play out. Felix, on the other hand, gives a hard shake of his head. "Ain't no one trying to tap that," he says. "We're all friends. Just having a conversation. No one's crossing any lines."

Gabe snorts. "Speak for yourself," he tells him, and then looks Kasey right in the eyes. "I have no problem saying I am very much interested." He licks his lips and gives her a heated look that makes me want to punch the fucker in the face. "Wanna blow this place? Go have some fun?"

I can't see her expression, but if I had to guess she's probably eating this shit up, if only to irritate me more. "Why not?"

"She's fourteen," I grind out.

"I'm seventeen. Age is just a number, man." He shrugs.

Kasey squirms in my arms in an attempt to get away, but I shift her around, putting her firmly behind me before stepping up and getting in Gabe's face. "She's too young for you, so knock that shit off. No guy here is going to let you put the moves on Henderson's little sister."

Despite having to look up to meet my stare, Gabe doesn't back down. "Did it sound like I was asking for permission?"

Before I do anything that will land me on Allie's shit list, like beating her friend to a pulp, I turn on my heel and grab Kasey by the arm, pulling her with me as I go.

"Dominique, let go of me," she complains, but her steps follow. A glance over my shoulder shows Julio with a hand against Gabe's chest while he mutters something in his ear. Whatever it is, it keeps him in place and that's good enough for me.

I drag Kasey around the side of the house where no one can see us and press her up against the brick exterior, my arms caging her in on either side and offering her zero chance of escape.

Does she look worried? Not one fucking bit. The girl looks pissed and ready to raise hell.

"What is your problem! You had no right—" she snarls, shoving against my chest, but it's like a kitten swatting at a bull. I barely feel it. "You can't manhandle me like that. You are not my keeper. And you do not get to dictate who I hang out with."

"I have every right," I grind out the words and her eyes widen. Shit. I didn't mean for that to come out. The girl gets in my head. Under my skin. She is so goddamn infuriating.

"What is it exactly that gives you the—"

No answer is a good answer, so instead, I close the distance between us and capture her lips with my own to shut her up. At least that's what I tell myself. She jumps, but I don't let that deter me. I step forward into her space, pressing my mouth more firmly against her own and deepening the kiss while grabbing her beneath her thighs and lifting her into my arms. Her legs wrap around my waist instinctively and I press her

back against the house. A small moan passes across her lips and I want to hear it again, so I press my hardening cock against her jean-clad center and grind my hips against hers.

She gasps, tearing her mouth away and sucking in a lungful of air. I nip at her full lips and trail kisses down her jawline. Her neck. All while thrusting my hips against her, letting her feel how badly I want her right now.

“What are you doing?” she asks with jagged breath.

I don't answer. Instead, I capture her lips again and drink down her soft sighs and sweet moans. If I were being honest with her, I'd say I had no fucking clue what I was doing, but as soon as I open my mouth to speak, all of this stops and I'm not ready for that to happen just yet.

I shake out the memories from that day and focus back on the here and now.

“We're not friends,” Kasey retorts, arms folded across her chest and mouth pressed into a tight line.

I shrug like her words don't affect me.

“We're not even friendly,” she adds.

She's not wrong. Since that kiss, shit between us has gone from bad to worse. Kasey and I are like cats and dogs, or oil and water. We don't mix. When we do, things get heated and not in a good way. It's my fault for the way things are between us, and I'm man enough to own that, but when I pressed my mouth against hers and swallowed her soft cries of pleasure I knew right away it was a mistake.

“I'm friends with him.” I nod in Aaron's direction. “And I'd be a shit friend if I didn't at least offer to help the guy out. We both know he'll do most of the heavy lifting while you and your mom talk with whoever it is running this show.”

Her jaw works and I can tell she's barely keeping herself in check. I love it when she gets like this. All fire and brimstone, ready to raise hell to get what she wants. But before she can say anything else, her mom tugs on her arm. "Kasey, leave the poor boy alone. He's only trying to help. Besides, there are so many things I want to show you before I have to leave." She tugs on her daughter's arm, who reluctantly follows, throwing one last look my way before admitting defeat.

I give her a small wave and her eyes narrow even further. She'll come up with a way to get me back.

I'm looking forward to it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniela Romero is a USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling author. She enjoys writing steamy, new-adult and paranormal romance that delivers an emotional roller coaster sure to take your breath away.

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Daniela is a Bay Area native though she currently lives in Washington State with her sarcastic husband and their three tiny terrors.

In her free time, Daniela enjoys frequent naps, binge reading her favorite romance books, and is known to crochet while watching television because her ADHD brain can never do just one thing at a time.

Stop by her website to find all the fun and unique ways you can stalk her. And while you're there you can check out some free bonus scenes from your favorite books, learn about her [Patreon](#), order signed copies of her books, and swoon over her gorgeous alternative cover editions.

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