



*My protector.
My ruin.*

Rush &
RUIN

PART ONE

USA Today Bestselling Author
CATHERINE WILTCHER

RUSH & RUIN

PART 1

CATHERINE WILTCHER

Rush & RUIN

PART 1

From USA Today Bestselling author Catherine Wiltcher comes the first part to a seductive new mafia romance duet...

My Protector. My Ruin.

Ella:

Edier Grayson is the King of Shadows.

A ruthless sinner. A beautiful liar.

On the eve of my eighteenth birthday, he kissed my lips and painted the stars in the sky for me, but when I woke the next morning he was gone. Now he paints the streets of New York City red, and his heart is as cold as his promises.

Edier:

Ella Santiago and I were raised in this cartel life together. I loved a girl with sunshine in her soul, until her father gave me two choices.

I walked away to spare Ella my fate.

Now she's the one woman I can't have, and the only woman I see.

Years later, we find ourselves in the same city.

I hate her for it.

My obsession is too strong...

I love her even more for it.

But Ella should know that all shadows crave light.
This is my world, and I'll do whatever it takes to have her back in my arms.

The newspaper she works for? I bought it.

That date she made with a colleague? I crushed it.

I protect what's mine—*what's always been mine*—even when she can't
admit it.

Even when my enemies are determined to break it.

Copyright © 2022 by Catherine Wiltcher

www.catherinewiltcher.com

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except in the case of a reviewer, who may quote brief passages embodied in critical articles or in a review. The information in this book is distributed on an “as is” basis, without warranty. Although every precaution has been taken in the preparation of this work, the author shall not have any liability to any person or entity with respect to any loss or damage caused or alleged to be caused directly or indirectly by the information contained in this book.

ISBN: 978-1-7396036-1-8 (E-Book)

ISBN: 978-1-7396036-2-5 (Paperback)

Cover Design: Steamy Designs
Photographer: Michelle Lancaster
Cover Model: Richard D
Edit/Proof: Final Polish Proofreading

Claim your FREE Novella today!

Click [HERE](#).

Sign up to my Newsletter:

Click [HERE](#).

This is for all those who hit rock bottom and found their gold...

CONTENTS

[Author's Note](#)

[Characters](#)

[Glossary \(Spanish\)](#)

[Playlist](#)

[Prologue #1](#)

[Prologue #2](#)

I. [The Curse](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

II. [The Kiss](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

III. [The Promise](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About Catherine Wiltcher](#)

[Also by Catherine Wiltcher](#)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Rush & Ruin Pt 1 is a seductive new *friends to enemies to lovers* mafia/cartel romance that touches on subjects that some readers may find offensive or triggering.

This story is set in New York and Colombia and references the mysteries surrounding *brujería* (witchcraft), and the exploitation of their practices by the drug cartels of South America. This, however, is **not** a PNR story, by any means! If you have your suspicions, I advise you to keep reading... What transpires may surprise you!

Tropes:

- Friends to Enemies to Lovers
- Jealous/Possessive Hero (OTT)
- Soulmate Love
- Sunshine/Grumpy
- Emotional Rollercoaster
- Virgin Heroine
- Serious Touch & Die Vibes / Stalking
- Heat (steamiest book to date...)

Rush & Ruin Pt 1 is the first book of a **duet**. The second book will be releasing in December. It's set in the Corrupt Gods World, but is a standalone

story. There is no need to read any other books beforehand.

Thanks so much for reading!

CW

Rush & RUIN

Characters:

Dante Santiago - Colombian cartel kingpin

Eve Santiago - His wife, a former US reporter

Isabella Santiago - His eldest daughter, half-sister to Thalia & Ella, resides in Russia & Colombia

Ella Santiago - His middle daughter

Thalia Santiago - His youngest daughter

Joseph Grayson - Santiago's second-in-command, Head of all Santiago territories in Colombia

Anna Grayson - His wife, runs a refuge center for women and children in Leticia, Colombia

Edier Grayson - Their adopted son

Rick Sanders - A corrupt politician with strong links to the cartel

Sam Sanders - His eldest son, Edier Grayson's second-in-command

Aiden Knight - A close business associate to the cartel, resides in Monaco.

Gabrio, Armando, Antonio etc - Various Santiago bodyguards and sicarios

Santi Carrera - Son of Santiago's rival, Val Carrera, and married to Thalia Santiago

Gabriela - Works at *El Refugio* in Colombia

'Queenie' Ionescu - An ambitious lawyer
Rob Willis - Editor-in-Chief at *The New York Eagle*
Ivy Sanchez - Reporter at *The New York Eagle*
Mr. Addaman - Hotel Manager at the *Helios*
Dr. Erin Bailey - Rheumatologist

El Alquimista (The Alchemist) - The enemy
Matias Hurtados - Colombian cartel kingpin
Andres Hurtados - His cousin, Edier Grayson's birth father
Amira Hurtados - Edier Grayson's birth mother
Nacio Hurtados - Edier Grayson's brother
Igor Sidorov - New York Bratva Pakhan
Don Russo - New York Mafia Don

GLOSSARY (SPANISH)

Mi Cielo - My Sky (endearment)

Jefe - Boss

Bruja - Witch

Brujería - Witchcraft

Bonita - Pretty (endearment)

Estupido - Stupid

Niño estúpido - Stupid boy

Niña estúpida - Stupid girl

Tonta - Silly

Dios mío! - My God!

Hijueputa/malparido - Son of a bitch

El Refugio - The Refuge

Sicario - Cartel soldier

PLAYLIST

Bad Bad News - Leon Bridges
you should see me in a crown - Billie Eilish
Seventeen Going Under - Sam Fender
Eastside (with Halsey & Khalid) - Benny Blanco
this is me trying - Taylor Swift
favorite crime - Olivia Rodrigo
Play God - Sam Fender
Everglow - Coldplay
Dreams - Fleetwood Mac
All These Nights - Tom Brennan
Lavender Haze - Taylor Swift

PROLOGUE #1

ELLA

Past

“THERE ARE billions of stars in the galaxy, *Mi Cielo*, but nothing beats the sun.”

I stare at the boy with the messy black hair and the strange way of talking. We’ve only just met, but he’s already calling me ‘my sky’ in Spanish, as if a tiny piece of me belongs to him. He says it so carefully though, like it’s a gift he’s scared of breaking.

How many is ‘billions’ again?

At five years old, I can’t count that high, so I imagine a big box of buttons spilling out onto *Mamá’s* navy-blue blanket.

He watches as I run my fingers through the sand, making straight lines and wavy ones before scrubbing them all away. Lifting my hand, I purse my lips together to blow the sticky grains from my skin, laughing in delight at the tickling sensation it makes.

“What’s a galax-ly?” I ask.

He stares at my mouth for a moment, his eyes all wide, like he’s never seen a smile before. “It’s everything above us.”

“But that’s heaven.”

“Higher than heaven.”

“Higher than *heaven?*”

My brain scrambles to make sense of this amazing thing. I’m tempted to look up and see for myself, but *Mamá* told me never to do that, so I think about the tallest Christmas tree with this sun-star at the very top. “What’s so

great about it anyway?”

“Here, let me show you.” Reaching into the pocket of his jeans he pulls out a small, gray stone. He hands it to me, and I gasp. Someone has painted a yellow sun on it—round, bright, and perfect. It’s the second most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, while the first is sat talking to me about skies and stars as if I’m just as interesting. “We can’t exist without it,” he explains, watching me study the stone. “*That’s* what makes the sun special. It gives life to everything trapped in darkness.”

“It makes shadows too,” I say, remembering something *Papá* told me last week.

“It does,” he agrees, glancing sideways at my parents. *Mamá* is in the ocean in a white swimsuit, bouncing my baby sister, Thalia, in and out of the waves. *Papá* is standing on the shoreline, dressed in black, talking to the boy’s new family.

He had another family before them, but *Mamá* says they’re all in heaven now.

Don’t look up, Ella. Don’t look up.

“I hope nothing bad ever happens to the sun,” I blurt out, feeling anxious suddenly.

He smiles, but it’s the sad smile of a boy who has a secret inside him that hurts. “Me too,” he whispers. “And if I keep on running and forgetting, then maybe, *just maybe*, she’ll be okay.”

PROLOGUE #2

EDIER

Present Day

“Are you into foreplay, Señor Grayson, or are you here to fuck?”

The woman skims her palms across the dove-gray satin sheets and juts out her breasts, the neckline of her dress barely covering her modesty. “I’ll keep my heels on, if you like? All you need to do is slide my panties to the side and...*mmm*.” Catching her lip between her teeth, she lets it slip free with another tortured moan, before adding huskily, “I bet your cock is as big as your reputation.”

So is my gun, I’m tempted to add, but I haven’t decided on her fate yet.

Maybe she’ll live.

Maybe she’ll die.

Maybe she’ll open her fucking mouth and give me what I really came here for.

She stretches out her next moan like it’s the purr of a Harley. “I’ve never had a man in that *other place* before and I want *you* to be the first.”

It’s an open invite to take, but there’s nothing about her body I want. So, I ignore her, flicking the lid of an old metal lighter between my fingers as I stay seated in the chair opposite the bed, with a cock that’s as dead as my heart.

No twitch.

Not even a semi.

There’s only one woman who turns me to stone, and she’s not a whore in a hotel suite on the Upper East Side...

An establishment that I happen to own, amongst numerous other businesses, legitimate and otherwise, in the tri-state area.

“You don’t say much, do you?” She pouts playfully, treating my indifference as a challenge. “What if I was to show you what you’re missing out on?” With a coy smile, she flips onto all fours, delivering her ass to me on a plate.

I’ve had enough.

“Stop.” My tone sends a visible shiver down her spine. “I suggest you *sit*, sweetheart, preferably on that ass, instead of waving it in the breeze like a flag.”

She glares at me over her shoulder, forgetting herself, *forgetting her orders*, and then she remembers—panic flooding her expression as she scrambles to obey. She knows who I am and what I’ve done. Most of all, she knows what I’m capable of, and that there isn’t a cop in the whole of New York City who can touch me for it.

“Good,” I murmur, when she’s sitting up all straight and prissy like a churchgoer in the front row pew. “Now, we can talk.”

“Do you mean ‘talk’ as in ‘dirty talk’?”

“No, the other kind.”

I watch her fingernails dig cavities into the mattress. “Don’t you w-want me to suck your—”

“No.”

“That figures.”

“What figures?” I snap the lid of the Zippo shut with a vicious finality.

She stares down at it for a long moment, as though her own thoughts are a puzzle to her. “When you look at me it’s not my face you’re seeing. There’s a woman.” *The only woman*. “Are you married?”

“None of your business.” I push an exquisite memory of black and gold to the back of my mind. “But you’re correct about one thing: when I look at you, I see words, not action.” Slowly, I remove the gun from the inside of my jacket. “Not unless we’re counting blood sports.”

She licks her lips in fear. “*This* is how you get off?”

“I’m not into snuff, sweetheart.” My expression hardens. “But I *am* interested in Colombian drug mules who pose as whores to get close enough to kill me.”

She freezes, the penny dropping.

“Don’t,” I murmur when she tries to stand—my Glock already pointing at

her head. “I suggest you sit down again and tell me who sent you.”

“You know who sent me,” she whispers, her earlier confidence blown to hell.

I see the girl underneath it now:

Scared.

Young.

Expendable.

“I want his real name in ten seconds, or you’ll be learning first-hand how I punish rival rats who make unsanctioned coke runs into my territory... Not to mention those who have the balls to think they can execute me in my own city.”

“You don’t understand.” Her face crumples. “He’ll curse me. He’ll curse my family.”

Curse?

My blood runs cold at this.

“Who will?”

“Don’t make me say it.” She drops to her knees in front of me and clasps her hands together. “Please, God, please, please, I’m begging you.”

Leaning forward, I press the muzzle of my Glock to her forehead just in case she didn’t get the memo the first time around.

“*El Alquimista.*” Her eyes dart to the door in terror as she stutters his name. “In English it means—”

“The Alchemist,” I interrupt grimly, watching her flinch a mile high, as though I just chanted ‘Voldemort’ at a fucking Harry Potter convention. “Yes, I might have heard of him.”

Black magic is the number one religion for our enemies in South America, and *El Alquimista* is their self-appointed dark god. For those craving absolution for their sins, he sells them a lie and a couple of dead rooster feet to make them sleep easier at night.

What they fear the most, they follow blindly.

We ignored him until he started perpetuating his own bullshit. His legend grew, and now he’s a problem. For the last couple of years, he’s been preaching wealth, sex, and forgiveness to anyone willing to help bring down the Santiago Cartel...

The number one Colombian cartel.

The organization the man who adopted me has dedicated his life to.

The organization I’ve pledged my own allegiance to, albeit for less

altruistic reasons.

In short, *El Alquimista* got greedy, and now he wants a piece of our power.

I glance at the girl again. She's one of his disciples. I've been tracking her for months, and I've known about her plan for weeks. There are cameras in every corner of this room, and twelve of my best *sicarios* are right outside the door, but none of them are as lethal as me.

All I need is El Alquimista's true identity from you, sweetheart, and then I can end him for good.

"They say he sent one of his *bruja* to curse you when you were a boy," she blurts out suddenly. "They say she damned you to walk alone. To bring pain and misery to anyone who dares to love you."

The walls spin.

Long-suppressed emotions start slashing at my insides like razor-wire: Guilt. Anger. *Failure*.

I'm back in Colombia again, aged seventeen, stuck in a memory, with my arms wrapped around sunshine.

Twelve hours later, my arms will be full of her screams.

"I suggest you shut your goddamn mouth if you plan on getting out of here alive."

The girl's eyes fill with tears. "It is too late for me, but there's still time to set her free. If not, *El Alquimista* will do terrible things to her."

He already has.

Jesus. *Fuck*.

"Tell me who he is!" I roar, as my past and present collide for the second time in my life.

"He is the fear," she mutters, leaning into the muzzle of my gun, a dangerous calm settling over her face. "He is the destruction of all of us."

She moves so fast I don't feel her finger pressing down on mine until my bullet is exiting her skull. Reeling backward in my chair, I hear her final words as clear as day as the metallic stench of loss and emptiness fills the hotel suite:

"He knows what you promised, Edier Grayson, and he's coming to collect."

PART I

THE CURSE

1

ELLA

Past

Ella, 11, Edier, 17,

“EDIER GRAYSON HAS STOLEN my frog and I hate, hate, *hate* him for it!”

I drag my eyes away from the window as my little sister, Thalia, comes storming into *Tía* Anna’s kitchen, waving her skinny arms about, and breathing peppermint gum fire.

Tía Anna isn’t our real aunt of course, the same way *Tío* Joseph isn’t our real uncle, but like *Mamá* always says, “love runs deeper than blood.”

Besides, *Papá* killed most of our real family years ago.

“He’s not going to hurt him, silly.” Trying not to laugh, I take my younger sister’s hand and squeeze it gently.

“Are you sure?” She wrinkles her nose, as if trust has a bad smell. “I heard some people di-ect frogs.”

“Dissect,” I correct. “And, no, Edier would never do that to Jeremiah.”

“Hmmm.” Unconvinced, she scrapes at her bottom lip with her teeth.

“Thals, there’s nothing to be worried—”

“Yes, there *is*! He might cook him and eat him. Frogs’ legs are a delicacy in some countries.”

“Delicacy.”

“Exactly!”

“Here, let me show you.” Tugging her toward the open patio doors, I lead her out into the bright Colombian sunshine. There, a much older boy is sitting all alone by the pool, hunched over a white sketchpad.

Scooting closer, we spot Thalia's Milk Frog croaking away happily on the shaded lounge next to him.

Unharméd.

Uncooked.

Undissected.

"Jeremiah!" Thalia gasps, her face now beaming in relief.

I wish Papá could see this, I think wistfully. He doesn't approve of us having pets, no matter how much we beg and plead for one. He says that love is wasted on anything that can't swear a hundred percent loyalty to you in English and Spanish.

Fortunately, *Tía* Anna doesn't agree. That's why whenever we come to stay with her and *Tío* Joseph and their son, Edier, in their big estate on the edge of the rainforest each summer, she lets us adopt as many stray cats and dogs and frogs as we like.

She likes adopting people, too. She and *Tío* Joseph adopted Edier six years ago, when he was just eleven, which is the same age I am now.

Tía Anna runs *El Refugio*. It's a place for women and children who are hurt, scared, and homeless. She calls it a 'shelter', but that word makes me think of leaky huts and flimsy doors when I know that it's so much more.

I'm not sure how Edier and his birth mom came to be here, but not long after they arrived, she killed herself and left him all alone. I think about that a lot, the same way I think about how much pain a heart can take before it breaks into tiny, unfixable pieces.

Thalia swats a bug away from her face. "What's he doing to Jeremiah anyway?"

"He's drawing him. Can't you see?"

"Oh, cool."

Very cool.

So cool I've been secretly watching him do it through the kitchen window for the last half hour.

I love Edier's pictures. He can make anything come to life, even the ugly, gray gargoyles by the front gates of this estate. I find them sad sometimes too, like there's a story behind the picture that he can't bring himself to tell the world about yet.

Sam, our other childhood friend, thinks they're stupid. He says that Edier's nearly a man now—a Santiago *sicario*-in-training—and he should be shooting guns, not farting about with pencils and paint brushes. He says that

if you're a guy and you're brought up in this world, you never leave it.

He's right, even though I think it's wrong.

Edier just won a place at some fancy art college in London, but we all know he'll never accept it. Edier's adoptive father runs *Papá's* organization for him in Colombia so he's pretty much stuck here for life.

"I'm bored," declares Thalia with a yawn. "I'm going to find Gabriela."

"Not outside the compound, okay? You know what *Mamá* said."

"I *know*," she sing-songs, muttering her next words like a reluctant chant. "Bad men want to hurt us."

Bad men always want to hurt us, but 'bad men' is a catch-all for all the dangers lurking beyond our security. It's super confusing to me because I know that some bad men can do good things too.

Once she disappears into the house, I swing back to Edier, and my breath catches. He's not drawing frogs anymore. His head is turned and he's watching me.

Me.

"*Mi Cielo*," he beckons me over with a grin. "Come and tell me about your morning."

There's a new huskiness to his voice this summer. I noticed it the other day.

Stories.

It's full of stories.

Tía Anna once told me that Edier couldn't talk when they first met him. She said that sometimes the eyes see too much and that the heart and mouth need a little extra time to process stuff.

To me, it's like all those unspoken words have built up inside him, and now they're scratching at his throat like sand.

"Well? You coming or not?"

I shrug my shoulders, biting back a smile—acting like he hasn't just granted my best wish.

Truth is, I adore him even more so than his drawings, and that's, like, *a lot*. He never treats me like an annoying little kid, and he always sticks up for me, like the time Sam's younger brother Seb said I wasn't brave enough to jump into the lake, and then again, last year, when he hit Sam in the face for making me cry over something stupid and made his nose all bloody.

"Like that, huh?" His grin splits even wider. "On second thought, I'm way too busy to stop and talk—"

“Ugh, don’t you dare!”

At this, I fly across the patio in my sandals, my pale blue summer dress brushing against my fingertips. His dark eyes grow lighter the closer I get, and when I go to sit down next to him, they’re so blinding I can’t look away.

He’s still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, but he’s not my secret anymore. Women turn their heads like sunflowers when he passes, and I know he has girlfriends. Lots of them. I overheard *Mamá* and *Tía* Anna talking about it the other day. I’m not jealous over something that can never be mine, but I often find myself wondering if he smiles at them too.

“For you.” He hands me his drawing of Thalia’s frog and it’s stunning, like I knew it would be.

“If I kiss him, will he turn into a prince?”

He snorts and pushes his messy black hair out of his eyes. “No princes here. Not in Colombia.” He glances at the spiky rainforest skyline bordering *El Refugio* with a strange look on his face. He does this sometimes, slipping from this world to another, but he always comes back to me. “What’s up, *Mi Cielo*? There are blue notes in your smile today.”

That’s the other thing about Edier, he notices *everything*.

“I go home next week,” I say with a sigh, kicking off my sandals to slip my toes into the icy-cool water. Home is *Papá*’s private island in the middle of the ocean with no friends and no Edier, a load of hi-tech security, and invisible prison bars rising from the waves.

I can’t believe the last ten weeks have gone so fast.

“You’ll be safe there,” he reasons.

“I’m safe here.”

“Is this about you leaving all your adopted animals behind?”

“I’ll miss them.” *I’ll miss you.* “Sam says they eat stray dogs in China,” I blurt out with a frown.

“Sam is *estúpido*, remember?”

“But he’s right, isn’t he?” I glance up to find him watching me again. He’s never lied to me before but there’s a shadow of hesitation on his face. “Don’t,” I whisper, feeling frightened suddenly.

The shadow disappears.

“I won’t...ever.”

There’s a pause. “Can we try and rescue them?”

“Sure we can.”

It takes another second for this glorious news to sink in. “You mean,

you'll come to China with me?"

"¡Dios mío! You really are like the sunshine, Ella Santiago," he teases, tucking a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Always trying to save the world, one blinding ray of light at a time."

"I'm not trying to save the world, just dogs from turning into yukky soup. Uncle Rick gave me a hundred-dollar bill for my birthday," I confide. "He told me to spend it, and not roll it, whatever that means. Will it be enough to buy me a plane ticket?"

"A super cheap one maybe."

He says it with a gleam in his eye, which means that he and Sam's dad are in on a joke I'll never understand.

"We could always borrow *Papá's* jet when he's not looking." Drawing my knees up to my chest, I rest my chin on them, and let out a contented sigh. "I could drop you off in London on the way home and you could go to that art college and draw all day, every day, for eternity. What's it called again?"

"Goldsmiths."

"What do you think?"

"Sounds good."

"You're not going to do it though, are you?"

He laughs in a way that's more regretful than funny. "Maybe one day, *Bonita*."

"You're talented enough. I know you are." I stop and yawn like Thalia did, feeling all sun-sleepy. The sound of the lapping water is making my eyelids flutter like a butterfly's wings.

"Never lose it, Ella," I hear him say as he flips the page over and starts outlining a Tanager bird that's roosting on a nearby chair.

"Lose what?"

"Your shine."

"What does *that* mean?"

"You see the world as a prize, not a burden. It's a gift."

"Huh?"

He goes to explain when a loud explosion of gunfire shatters the calm of the estate, lifting the birds from the trees and rattling the glass in the windows.

We both freeze. "Did you just—"

The gunfire sounds again, this time in rapid, *very real* bursts, and I

whimper in fear.

Bad men.

The bad men are here.

“IT’S COMING from the front gates. Run, Ella, *run!*”

Grabbing my wrist, he yanks me to my feet. As he does, his sketchpad slips from his lap and lands in the water with a splash. He doesn’t seem to notice it, while I can’t look away—watching in horror as the paper swells and the magic sinks.

“Edier, your drawings!”

“Leave them. They’re not worth dying over!”

But I refuse to budge. It feels like something else is drowning here, and I can’t stand by and let it happen.

Meanwhile, the gun fight is a near-constant *rat-a-tat-tat* to our left.

“*¡Dios mío!* Ella!” he explodes, shaking me by the shoulders so hard his fingers burn my skin. “I can’t let anything bad happen to you. Do you hear me? Do you understand?”

Can’t?

I’m spellbound by his expression... That word... The fear in his voice.

‘Can’t’ means so much more than ‘won’t’.

In the background, there are men shouting now. *Papá’s* voice is rising louder above the rest, issuing orders and threats.

“I’ll draw more for you, *Mi Cielo*, I swear.” He finally lets go of my shoulders, but it’s like his fingers never left. He’s never touched me before—not even to hug me—and I know he doesn’t like people touching him. *Tía* Anna says it’s a quirk and we all have them, whether we want them or not. “Right now, you need to come with me, okay?”

“Okay,” I whisper.

The second I say it, he's grabbing my hand, and run-dragging me all the way back to the house. We're nearly at the back door when a strange voice calls out to him.

"Edier Hurtados. *Es hora de temer tu sangre, muchacho.*" *It is time to fear your blood, boy.* "*Es hora de temerle a la verdad.*" *It is time to fear the truth.*

Hurtados? But Edier's last name is Grayson.

I turn so fast my dark hair gets trapped in the web of my eyelashes. Scraping it away, I see an old woman standing in the shadows of the path we just ran down, with deep lines on her face like claw marks and wispy white strands framing her hollow cheeks. One shriveled hand is pressed tight to a red stain on the front of her dirty dress, and the other is reaching out to us as she lurches forward with jerky steps.

Her finger is pointing in accusation, the same way Thalia's does when she thinks I've cheated her out of rent money in *Monopoly*.

"Who are you?" demands Edier, stepping in front of me to protect me. "How did you get into this estate?"

A blast of cold air rushes up my skin as the heat of the day vanishes. The bushes and trees around us feel like thick walls closing in, trapping us in place with this woman with her unblinking, beetle-black eyes.

"I know what you promised, *niño estúpido.*" *stupid boy.* She trails off with a cough that wets her lips the same color as the stain on her dress. "I know how red your hands really are."

I wait for Edier to tell her she's mistaken. That he's only seventeen, and that his hands are mostly covered in paint not blood.

Instead, he pulls out a knife from his back pocket and slashes at the air with a hiss and a threat. "Stay away from her, *bruja*, or you'll be finding out for yourself."

The old woman glances at the knife and her thin lips twist in scorn. "You think Santiago steel can stop me?"

Her next words slip into a strange language I don't understand, but they scare me more than anything. It reminds me of the Latin American *brujería* that *Tía Anna* once told me about. How Colombia is this big mysterious country filled with black and white magic, where in some places superstition and curses have a higher power than God.

She shuts her eyes, her breath rattling, and then they're flying open to fix tiny, black needlepoints on him. "I am not here for her, *niño estúpido.* I am

here for *you*.”

Edier slashes at the air again as she steps closer. “Stay back!”

But she keeps coming.

“You thought you could just *forget*? Don’t you know? The past is a slave, and she is not so easily freed.”

He goes very still, and her eyelids snap shut again. That strange language is drifting over us once more.

This time, the air turns even cooler. It feels like icicles are forming on the inside of my chest. I watch in a daze as she pulls out a crumpled piece of paper from the folds of her dress and shoves it into her mouth, and then she smiles, as though she just fired a bullet right at him

“Get down!” snarls a voice.

Edier lunges for my waist, and I lose my balance, my bare knees scraping painfully on the gravel path as we hit the ground together. A second later, a gunshot rings out, stamping a perfect, red circle in the old woman’s forehead. She collapses a few meters away, her beetle-black eyes all glassy and still.

“No need to cry, *Mi Cielo*,” Edier whispers after a time, gently pulling me to my feet and brushing the tears from my cheeks. “You’re safe now.”

“Is she hurt?” *Tío* Joseph swings me around to face him, his arctic gray-blue eyes blasting me with heat, not ice, as he jams his gun into the back of his jeans. “Are you hurt, *Ella*?”

“She’s fine,” insists Edier.

I’m not though, and neither is he. I can see it in his face. I can feel it in my bones. This morning has changed us somehow. It’s changed everything,

Tío Joseph’s face creases into a frown as he cups my cheek. *Mamá* said he’s from a place called Texas, but he doesn’t look like a cowboy. He’s more like a mountain in Utah, all sun-kissed and solid. “Sweetheart, you’re shaking.”

Am I?

I think about the piece of paper the old woman stuffed in her mouth before she died.

Why did she do that? What does it mean?

“Thalia,” I croak, remembering my sister.

“She’s safe too.”

“W-we heard guns.”

“Not anymore,” he reassures. “The uninvited don’t take long to evict from this estate.”

But his words don't comfort me like they should. My body is aching and my head hurts. All I want to do is go inside and lie down, but Edier has other ideas—grabbing his father's arm as we turn to leave.

“Did you hear what she said to us, *Pá*?”

“She spoke a load of bullshit, if that's what you're referring to.”

“You sure it was all bullshit?”

Tío Joseph's expression tightens, the same way *Papá*'s does when he doesn't want to talk about something. “You were just a boy when fate brought you here, Edier. The only thing you left behind in Bogotá were broken bones.”

Broken bones?

Edier drops his gaze to me, and then it slides right off again like ice cream down a hot surface. “That *bruja* cursed me. I know she did.”

His father just scoffs. “You think I haven't been cursed a thousand times in this country by shamans and charlatans shaking their feather sticks at me? Yet here I am...still alive enough to kill them.”

“You killed *her* when she was already dying.”

“That an accusation?” he says sharply.

“You silenced her on purpose.”

“Because her threats were pissing me off.”

“She called me a ‘Hurtados’.” Edier's refusing to let it go, even though I can see how angry it's making his father. “No one's called me that in six years.”

“Is that what *you* feel you are?”

He grits his teeth and shakes his head. “My name is Grayson.” He throws another look my way. “My future is with Santiago.”

“Then forget this ever happened.” *Tío* Joseph starts to lead me toward the house. “The witch came here to make trouble and I killed her for the insult.”

Peeking over his huge shoulder, I see Edier hanging back, looking like all the words he could never speak before are now finally wanting out.

I want him to follow.

I want him to be okay, to smile, to draw, to tell me that *Tía* Anna is cooking *arepas* for dinner—my favorite—and that it's going to make me feel so much better.

But he doesn't look my way. He doesn't even turn his head. He just gazes off into the distance, as if that other world is calling him away from his home, and away from me again.

Only this time he isn't coming back.

3

EDIER

THE FLAMES CATCH in the late evening breeze, rising higher and higher, until the whole sky is on fire—bright, orange, and savage. Bodies burn different. *I should have remembered that.* This pyre was built in haste but it's already an inferno, as if the old *bruja* herself was made of gasoline.

Here, superstition is a pop song not a mandate. Santiago scorns it as much as my *Pá* does, but their men insisted on it. By setting fire to the body, we'd release the curse, or so they said...

Too bad they can't set fire to my past at the same time.

With shaking fingers, I slot a cigarette in between my teeth and light it up, the first hit of nicotine tasting more like chaos than calm. All I can see in the flames is that *bruja's* face and the triumph oozing from her dead black eyes.

She knew what I'd done.

She knew what I'd promised.

She knew my secret.

But how?

I was led to believe my entire family was dead, and the Hurtados cartel destroyed...

Did someone make it out alive?

Fuck.

My cigarette doesn't last long. Fear and guilt work faster on nicotine than the disease it causes, eating up the stick until I'm sucking on air.

So now what?

I spark up another, and then a third, just to avoid thinking about it.

Eventually, my adoptive father wanders over to join me, sliding his hand back and forth across his head in irritation, making no bones about the fact he'd rather be anywhere else but here. Burning bodies isn't his idea of a good time but his men are edgy, so a cynical presence is required.

He's never hidden who or what he is from me. People have been calling him *El Asesino*, *The Killer*, around here for years, and there's a reason for that.

He's also taught me that there are two types of bad men in this world: ones who sin with their hearts still beating—like him—or those who are dead inside.

My father's rhythm is his family: a wife whom he worships, and me, the fucked-up Colombian kid he adopted.

It beats for those who are dead, too: a brother who was gunned down at my age, and a son who never made it out of diapers before the car hit a truck doing one-twenty in a seventy. He'd die in the name of their memory. It fuels his ambition, making him harder and stronger. I've watched him pick off twenty armed men in a room and walk out with just an empty clip and a smile.

I'm the other kind of sinner.

I figured it out the day I noticed a big, empty hole in my chest.

"Any curse should be halfway to hell by now." He pauses in front of me, his icy gaze raking over my face. I don't know how or when things got so strained between us, but all the words left unsaid could fill up the Amazon River.

I flick my dead cigarette at the flames and keep my anger in check. If this is his attempt to reassure me after our disagreement earlier, it's not enough.

It's never enough.

I left more than broken bones in Bogotá, but I can't tell him about it. There's an unspoken rule in the Grayson household—he doesn't share his pain, and I don't share mine.

Instead, we watch the old witch burn in silence together, while on the inside I'm screaming.

If I could, I'd tell him this isn't my first human pyre. That I've seen things, too many things, and done far worse. That if he looked closer at my drawings, he'd see the truth staring back at him—the way Ella does—even if she doesn't recognize it yet. I know she feels it, and that's enough for me.

By the age of eleven, Andres Hurtados, my birth father, had made me

burn hundreds of men like this. Most were alive when I drew the matches, and I can still hear their screams in my head. Andres was first cousin to the Hurtados kingpin, back when Colombia was divided into the *Los Cinco Grandes*, the five ruling criminal classes, before Santiago crushed the competition with a bloody coup that led to his cartel dictatorship.

My birth father died during that war, along with Hurtados, but they were both depraved *malparidos* who got everything they deserved. By then, I was already at *El Refugio*, but I wish I could have been there for their deaths. I would have pissed all over their corpses.

“Is it done?” I glance at my father as the flames lose their sting. I need to get out of here, find some pussy, and stop thinking so much.

I screw a lot of girls, but it’s more a predilection for self-loathing than release. None of them fit right, and I only end up hating them for it.

“Yes, it’s done.” He stares at the flames, as though he wants to say more. “Whoever the *bruja* was, she’s gone. Get some sleep. Santiago wants to talk tomorrow.”

“What about?”

“He’s thinking about sending you to Monaco.”

My head jerks up in shock. “The *fuck*?”

I’ve been my father’s *sicario*-in-training for a while now, wanting more, but never daring to ask. Silently accepting that my place in the Santiago Organization is here in Leticia when all I’ve ever wanted is to get the hell out.

“It’s time you learned how to run a business, as well as burn one to the ground. Our associate can teach you that. I know you had your heart set on that place at Goldsmiths—”

“For how long?”

Goldsmiths was a dream I killed and buried before it ever drew first breath.

“As long as it takes. We fly to London to handle some bad business with an Irishman first. After that, we’ll drop you off in Monaco with Aiden Knight. In a year or so, we’ll bring you back to Colombia, where you can take over operations in Cali.”

“I’m ready.”

Keep running. Never go back.

I ignored it for a time. Sunshine made it easy to forget for six years, but I remember everything now.

“You were born ready, Edier, even if you don’t know it yet.” I catch my father looking at me with a strange expression on his face. “Don’t stay out here for too long. It’s not good to linger near death. Kill and move on.”

“Kill and move on,” I intone, staring at the glowing embers as his footsteps disappear into the night.

Leaving Colombia will be a defining moment for me, like the day I arrived here, and the day I discovered my birth mother dying in the bathtub two weeks later, the red from her wrists pooling on the white tiles below with a steady *drip, drip* sound that haunts me even now.

Then, I think about Ella—that perfect little blast of sunshine—who’s never known that color, despite her own father dealing in it.

Unbeknownst to her, she changed the direction of my life on a beach six years ago, and for that I’ll cherish and protect her until the day I die.

She’s the reason Santiago’s proposition is the easiest ‘yes’ I’ll ever make.

My past threatened her today.

My past will keep on threatening her.

But not if I fly away and never return.

IN THE END, I GO STRAIGHT HOME.

There’s no detour to the village for a quick fuck, followed by ten seconds of bullshit pillow talk. Something inside me has shifted, caught up on the same breeze that’s blowing the old woman halfway across the sky and I’ve lost interest in easy pussy tonight.

The kitchen is deserted as I let myself in. The lights are off and there’s a lingering smell of spices from a dinnertime I never showed up to.

I pause by the island to listen to the muffled laughter coming from *Pá’s* study across the hall. He’s in there drinking bourbon with Santiago again. Their fighting days are all but done now that they own Washington, the CIA, FBI, *and* the DEA. Their coke flows freely from here to the US. Every port and customs official up and down the East Coast have been stung by the cartel’s scorpion motif. They fear it, as well as respect it, and soon it’ll be up to me, Sam, and Santiago’s much older daughter, Isabella, to build on their empire of sin and make it our own.

I'm climbing the stairs, craving nicotine again, when a wave of uneasiness hits me out of nowhere, doubling me over, and flooding my mind with dread.

What the...?

I freeze, counting off my inhaleds and exhaleds in the darkness as I wait for it to pass, and then I hear someone breathing behind me—a rasping, croaky, *should-be-dead* kind of breathing—that sends a violent shiver down my spine.

“Who’s there?” I snarl, spinning around, but all I see are a medley of shadows, pierced by silver spears of moonlight.

Ella.

The urge to check on her is overwhelming, and I take the last few steps at a run. When I hit the hallway, I move quickly toward the yellow light stemming from the crack underneath her door. My hand is reaching for the handle when a piercing, animal-like scream from inside shakes the whole damn house awake.

!Dios Mio!

Barging into her room, I see the empty bed, and follow a trail of discarded bed clothes into her bathroom.

“What—”

“Edier! Help her! Help her!” Her sister, Thalia, flings herself on me, her tiny body vibrating with fear and misery. “She won’t stop shaking and crying. I’m so s-scared!”

No.

Beyond her, Ella is curled up on the white tiles at the foot of the bathtub.

Drip, drip.

Her back is arched at a weird angle, her limbs outstretched and rigid as if someone is driving a million sharp needles into them. When our eyes lock, I see so much pain in hers that my dead heart stutters. Her cheeks are wet with tears and there’s a strange red rash staining the bridge of her nose. I don’t even need to feel her skin to know she’s burning up with fever.

This can’t be happening. The bruja cursed me, not her.

“How long’s she been like this?” Pushing Thalia to one side, I scrape a hand through my hair and think fast, barely holding back the wall of panic that’s threatening to crush me.

“I just f-found her a few minutes ago.”

“Go get help, Thalia...GO! Your *Mamá, Papá*, anyone! Wake the whole

of Colombia up if you have to!”

She turns and flees in fright as I drop to the floor beside Ella and pull her into my lap—holding her close to my chest and trying to absorb as much of her agony as I can. I’d take it all if I could, every last jagged piece, until I’m the broken shell not her. At the same time, I can feel her fingers twisting knots into the back of my T-shirt as we cling to each other, with me silently praying to a God I’ve never believed in until now.

“My past did this to you, *Mi Cielo*,” I whisper as heavy footsteps sound on the staircase. I know she can’t hear me. She’s locked in a world of agony, but I say them to her anyway, over and over, like an endless confession. “We watched her burn. We killed the curse. I don’t understand how—”

“Make it stop,” she whimpers, twisting violently as another wave of torture ripples through her body. “Please, please, make it stop. Everything hurts so much.”

“I will, but I need you to be strong first.” My voice breaks as I stroke the damp tendrils of hair away from her wet cheeks as gently as I can. “Say you’ll do that for me, *Bonita*?”

She sobs in response, shuddering and gasping, as those heavy footsteps finally reach the hallway outside her bedroom door.

“I have to go away,” I tell her. “Far, far away where I can’t hurt you anymore, but I’m going to find a way to fix this. Do you hear? I won’t fucking rest until your shine is bright and beautiful again.” She moans, her eyelids flickering, and I can tell she’s slipping in and out of consciousness. “I should have kept running. I should never have—” My voice breaks again as my guilt closes in on me. “Ella? Ella, wake up!”

What did that old bitch do to you?

A beat later, the bathroom door is caving in behind us, and I’m punching my one-way ticket straight to hell.

PART II

THE KISS

4

ELLA

Past

Ella, 17, Edier, 23,

“HAVE YOU TAKEN YOUR PLAQUENIL?”

“Yep.”

“And your Baclofen? You know you need to space those suckers apart, otherwise the side effects make you act like *Papá* after two bottles of bourbon. Like you did that time in—”

“I know, I know, I was there too, remember?”

I keep my back turned so Thalia can't see how tightly I'm gripping the drapes. Still, there's no disguising the sigh in my voice.

Climbing off the bed, she slides her arms around my waist and rests her chin on my shoulder. “You know it's only because I love you, dork face.”

“Cute, and yes I do.”

“That, and the fact I need you to stick around and act as mediator when I'm older. I'm determined to marry someone unsuitable.” She giggles knowingly. “Sam says *Papá's* bought an extra special gun for the occasion.”

I smile and lean back into her warmth, wrapping her strength and vitality around me like an extra pair of arms. Once the lupus flares subside, the muscle aches are more manageable, but the tiredness never fully goes away.

“You know you're talking about the entire male population, don't you? *Papá* will never be truly happy until we join a nunnery.”

“And swear a vow of eternal abstinence.”

“Do you think he's bought me a purity ring for my birthday?”

“Even better, a chastity belt.” Thalia spins me around to tease me with glittering blue eyes. They’re the same shade of mine, but hers don’t dull with pain on the turn of a dime. “You could have it accessorized with diamonds and rubies, and...” Her gaze trails across the room. “You could do the same to all those script boxes in your bathroom. All that white is so John Lennon Peace Out Dirty Bedsheet Seventies.”

And just like that, the fun moment curdles.

“That reminds me, have you taken your Mobic and Prednisone?”

I squeeze her hand to show her that I love her, and that I appreciate her, but that the burden of her constant concern, and the constant concern of the rest of our family, crushes me more than my health sometimes.

“Yes, I have. Danielle reminded me two hours ago. Now, stop fretting and get dressed. I’m feeling okay, I’m seizing the moment, I *will* have a sneaky flute of champagne when no one’s looking, and unless you’re planning to wear electric-blue yoga pants to my eighteenth birthday party, you need to get a move on... This thing started twenty minutes ago.”

“Shit! You’re right!” She flies across my bedroom in a panic, all tan limbs and shiny black hair. At sixteen, my sister is already a dynamite fusion of mischief, beauty, and sweetness, and I love her more than life itself. “You’re sure you won’t forget to—”

“Yes! No! Go! I want you downstairs flirting with *Papá’s sicarios*, not stuck in here acting like my nursemaid.”

She pauses in the doorway and smiles. “You know I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.”

It shouldn’t be your burden in the first place.

This is the heartless root of living with a chronic illness. It flips everything upside down, and I mean *everything*. It’s the small print that doctors never tell you about because, by then, the panic is top tier, and they don’t want to send it stampeding down a side street like a bull in Pamplona.

Dreams change.

You start living vicariously through your younger sister.

Childhood friends I thought were forever, barely even remember my name...

I watch her disappear into the hallway, wondering if I’d have her confidence if I hadn’t been locked up in a hospital for months, back when the doctors were still figuring out what was wrong with me. Maybe if those sterile-white walls hadn’t driven me deeper and deeper inside myself...

But I am who I am. I've come to terms with myself now. I'm determined not to be defined by anything, let alone some stupid autoimmune disease.

Instead, I'm the girl who talks too much when I'm nervous, rattling off words like bullets from a gun, and I take empathy to the next level by constantly weighing up the impact of my decisions. I'm also literally *obsessed* with Fleetwood Mac, so much so Thalia's considering an intervention. And I'm terrible at walking in high heels. Like toddler terrible. It's almost embarrassing.

From the window, I watch as another black supercar zooms up the driveway of Uncle Rick's gray-stone mansion in the Hamptons. It brakes by the steps below, skidding up gravel from the front tires like an angry encore.

They've been arriving all evening, delivering hundreds of faces I've never met before to my own birthday party. I don't have friends of my own, only the kids of my various cartel 'Uncles'. The people downstairs are all *Papá's* business associates, but I don't mind, just so long as *he's* here.

My phone beeps. It's Thalia from the room next door.

And you're POSITIVE you've taken them?

I tap out my reply with a reluctant smile, knowing her concern comes from a beautiful place.

I may have a defective immune system, but my memory still works. Plus, there's a wonderful invention called a smart phone which reminds me to take my meds on time. You might have heard of it?

Her response is instant.

Am I doing it again? Am I bugging you too much?

My smile widens.

Yes, but I secretly love you for caring.

Two seconds later...

Good because I just stole your favorite Dior mascara.

Chuckling my phone on the bed, I turn back to the window, feeling nervous suddenly. Nothing can go wrong tonight. *It just can't*. Because it's been six years of wishing, wondering, hurting and—

The car door swings open and my breath hitches, even before the driver reveals himself. Something about the way his heel spurs the gravel with the bitter crunch of reluctance tells me it's him... The man who's avoided all my calls and letters since that day in Colombia. Because he *is* a man now. Twenty-three, lethal, powerful...

Cavalier in all the ways he rejected our friendship when I was eleven,

and how it still cuts me to the core on the eve of turning eighteen.

Edier Grayson.

The real reason why I begged *Papá* to let me have my party on US soil.

I knew his no-show tonight would be viewed as a great disrespect, and that's something my father deems worse than poor judgement. Besides, it's practically a Santiago Cartel class reunion downstairs. All the major players are here, which includes Edier too, now that he's taken over New York and is hell-bent on making a name for himself.

I know everything about him, except for the stuff that really matters. I know that he lived in Monaco for a time, and then on the west coast of Colombia for a couple of years. He only moved to New York recently and since then he's been cutting a swathe of red through the city, destroying a Bratva cell on my father's orders.

I watch as he unfurls from the car, rising higher and higher until he's towering over the roof of the black Ferrari. It's difficult to make out his face as he saunters up the steps, but I can tell by his trailing shadow that he's changed in other ways too.

He's broader, taller... More imperious.

The valet steps forward to take his car keys, and he tosses them in his direction with a deft flick of his wrist, and then he pauses, head snapping toward my window, as if he can sense someone's watching him.

"Quick! Turn off the lights!" I hiss at Thalia who's reappeared to steal the rest of my make-up.

"What?"

"Just do it!"

The room plunges into darkness, and he stays motionless, staring up at my silhouette with the same intensity that I'm staring down at his.

"You let me down, Edier," I whisper, placing my hand on the glass. "I needed you and you weren't around."

His shadow lingers. It's almost as if he understands—*as if he acknowledges and accepts my accusation*—and then he's sweeping into the open doors of the mansion below.

"You can switch them on again," I mutter to Thalia, and light comes flooding back into the room.

"What was all that about?"

"Danielle joked that my meds could make me see in the dark. I was just testing out her theory."

“And?” She narrows her eyes at me, knowing I’m talking rubbish.

“And I need to speak to *Papá*,” I say, changing the subject. “Do you know where he is?”

“Where he always is, I suspect. Holding court in a luxurious study or library somewhere, declaring wars, and chopping off heads.”

“You’re wicked.” I stop to kiss her cheek on my way out.

“One of us needs to be, otherwise Isabella gets all the glory. Speaking of which, is she coming later?”

I shake my head. “She and he-who-shall-not-be-named are back in Russia,” I say, referring to our much older half-sister and her partner—a man our father hates and loves in equal measure. We’ve stopped mentioning him by name now because a wry smirk one day, can so often cause a raging tempest the next.

“Probably for the best. No one wants a decapitated head with their birthday cake.”

“Sounds delightful.”

Once in the hallway, I check my reflection in the mirror. I’ve chosen to wear gold tonight, and the silky material is molding to my body like water, with sleeves that fall below the creases in my elbows, a hemline that dusts my newly painted toes, and a scooped back that’s low enough to raise a few eyebrows, namely *Papá*’s. My black hair is pinned up high, with tendrils snaking down around my face, and my make-up is my favorite combination of light foundation and a smoky-dark eyeshadow.

I don’t have many occasions to dress up, but each one is a gift, and I try to make it as memorable as I can. It just so happens that I’m doing great with my new meds. I’m feeling lighter, stronger... Maybe even brave enough to ask Edier if the reason he ignores me comes from a place of hate, indifference, or worse, *pity*.

Please don’t let it be pity.

My smile falters as the sour taste of that word floods my mouth.

I can take any other reason, but that.

FUCK. I don't want to be here.

I'm not wearing Armani, I'm wearing bitter reluctance, and it's woven into every thread. It's weighing me down like concrete and constricting my chest, and now it's shoving me up the steps and into a smart white lobby, when all I want to do is sit in a dark room, nursing a large whiskey, until the thought of all the red on my hands blurs into a messy oblivion again.

But what Santiago wants he gets, including my presence at his daughter's eighteenth birthday party. I believe his words to me yesterday were, "show up or fuck off", and when he tells someone the latter, they usually end up in a body bag. After years of hard grafting, I've earned New York, and I'm not about to jeopardize it with a bullet in the head for disrespect before the aperitifs start circling.

"Ah, my favorite Grayson! I wasn't sure if you'd make it."

Senator Rick Sanders sweeps out of the nearest doorway, clutching a bottle of Macallan and reeking of well-dressed dissidence. He's the owner of this mansion and our main man in Washington, but he used to be on the ground like us.

Two decades ago, he drew a line of white coke around New York, and no one dared cross it. Then, he met a nice girl, and chose to corrupt The Senate instead. He's been prowling those fêted hallways ever since, cutting backroom deals for the cartel on the sly, and making 'exploitation' the new in-word for the upstanding and good.

His eldest son, Sam, is just as charming, loyal, and manipulative, albeit a nineteen-year-old version, which makes him twice as lethal.

“Didn’t have much of a choice,” I admit, taking his outstretched hand. “I wasn’t in the mood for my own funeral.”

He smirks, looking as predatory as ever. “You don’t share the same blood as your old man, but you certainly have the Grayson glare.”

“Have you killed him yet?” I snatch at a glass from a passing tray, not caring what it is, just so long as it gets me drunk. “Or does that happen after dessert?”

There’s no love lost between Sanders and my adoptive father, but they tolerate each other on occasions such as these.

“Would you care if I did?” He lifts his Macallan and takes a swig, waiting patiently for my reaction. He knows we rarely speak these days. What was once a strained silence is practically non-existent now outside of normal business hours.

“I’m *reluctant* to answer that,” I murmur, watching his eyebrows shoot up at my odd choice of vocabulary.

“Suit yourself.”

There’s a new arrival and he switches effortlessly to hosting duties before ushering me toward a huge living room that leads out onto a patio.

“Go in. Get shitfaced. Knight’s already here. The belle of the ball should be down any minute.”

“How is she?” I say, picking dried blood off my nails.

“Better than she was.” His gaze lingers, and I resist the urge to run my finger underneath the rim of my shirt collar. “They switched her meds, so she hasn’t had a flare up in a while. Santiago won’t let her out of his sight. He’s never had a problem he can’t fix without violence, and he’s part furious, part frustrated about the whole fucking thing.”

“Does she walk with a stick, or is she in a wheelchair?”

I try not to think about the happy little girl who once skipped across a patio toward me with shining eyes and a megawatt smile.

“Christ, you really *haven’t* seen her in a while, have you?” He watches as I lighten another passing tray.

“Tell me.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“If I wanted a riddle, I would’ve stayed at home with a fucking crossword,” I snip back. “Just answer the damn question.”

“Why the hell, should I? I’m a politician!” He throws his head back and laughs. “I see you have the same endless charm as your father, too. Need I

remind you that Ella is a Santiago?” He offers me his bottle of Macallan as a chaser for my champagne, deciding my need is greater than his. “That DNA doesn't submit to anything without a battle.” Through the open doorway, I see my old mentor from Monaco holding up an *Arturo Fuente* cigar with my name written all over it. “Just a little something to keep in mind.”

“You say it like I give a shit.”

Handing the bottle back to him, I go to leave when I'm distracted by an original Salvador Dali on the wall. Pausing to admire it, I catch a flash of gold out of the corner of my eye. It's coming from the marble staircase beyond. There's a woman descending from the first floor, her left hand lightly trailing the polished banister. Something about the way she moves holds my attention, though I can't see her face. Her eyes are fixed to the floor, and the careful way she's positioning each step tells me that wearing heels is still a novelty for her.

My gaze lingers. I'm intrigued to see if the rest of her matches up to that promise of innocence. Her dress is expensive. Designer. Maybe even Givenchy Couture. The way the silk flows makes the material look like liquid gold, skimming off her small breasts and hipbones, and clinging tantalizingly to the soft mound between her legs.

Every step is a delicate lesson in caution.

Every hip swing is a siren to my cock.

I'm hard already, which tells me that it's been far too long since I last fucked a woman.

Get a grip, Edier.

My gaze narrows.

I want this woman to be ugly suddenly. I want her to be so repulsive that even her perfect body isn't enough to tempt me. I live my life by denial, these days, because it's all I fucking deserve.

As if willed by my anti-longing, she glances up as soon as she hits the bottom step, but she doesn't see me. She's too busy biting back a smile of relief for navigating such treacherous terrain in spiky, four inch-heels.

One look at her face, though.

That's all it takes.

One look and my stomach is hitting Sanders's white marble floor down by my black Oxfords.

Fuck. No. *Anyone but her.*

I left a girl behind in Colombia, but somehow that girl grew into a young

woman while I was busy running, forgetting, and sinning.

She rounds the stairs, as graceful as an angel, and heads away from the party—gifting me the sheer heart-attack of a back view.

The dress is a scam. It's gone from 'demure' to 'revealing' in the flick of her heels, leaving me with a canvas of fine white porcelain, right down to the dimple at the base of her spine.

I haven't sketched in years, but I find myself itching for a pencil...a paint brush...*anything*. Her figure is perfection. None of the priceless artwork hanging in this house come anywhere close to her.

You took the curse, and you mocked it, Mi Cielo. You were always so much stronger than anyone gave you credit for.

"Drink this." Sanders's eldest son, Sam, appears next to me and slams a metal hip flask into my abdomen. "It's way stronger than anything my father will serve you tonight."

"Not interested." I push it away. Truth is, I just lost my thirst, my appetite, and everything in between.

Sam cocks his head in amusement, knowing exactly what, or rather *whom*, is the source of my distraction. I can't take my eyes off her, and I never usually notice women unless they're buying or selling my product. "Isn't this the unwritten Eleventh Commandment?" he drawls. "Thou shalt not covet the boss's daughter?"

I flick him a vicious look. "She's a child."

"Who's only a day away from being legal in every state in this glorious country."

"Would you like your teeth smashed in first, or a bullet in both kneecaps?" I say idly. "Neither would be a great look for you, college boy."

His handsome face cracks into a grin. He knows I'll make good on my threat, but he'll have a little fun before the pain starts. *Crazy fucker*. He's already counting down the days when he can ditch class for cartel life. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"Years."

I seek her out again.

Hating myself when my eyeline dips south *again*.

"A lot can grow in that time."

Isolation, self-loathing...

"Besides, you and your deep-freeze heart cut her dead ages ago."

"I moved away."

“They don’t have postal services or phones in Monaco or Colombia?” He snorts in disbelief. “What did she do to you anyway? Steal your sketchpad? Wound your fragile teenage ego? If anyone dares mention her, you shoot them down—quite literally in some cases, or so I’ve heard. You’re only at her birthday party because Santiago demanded it. Admit it, Edier, you couldn’t have shown less interest in Ella these past six years than if her last name was Carrera.”

“Don’t mention those Mexican bastards to me. She’s sick. How the hell is she...?”

Walking around looking like that.

“Because she chooses to fight it, every single day of her life.” The respect in his voice catches me by surprise. Sam has more arrogance than common sense, so he’s notoriously short on the stuff. “You’d know it too if you’d ever bothered to ask.”

“Watch it, Sanders...”

“She wakes up, she breathes it in, and then she chooses to step in the ring and face it. Do you even know what lupus is?”

It’s not lupus, it’s the curse. I refuse to call it anything else.

“Her body is at war with itself. What you’re seeing tonight is her determination to live and to have a little fun while doing it, plus a shit-ton of medication.”

I watch her glide into a room at the end of the hallway and shut the door behind her, and then I’m hightailing it toward the exit.

“I’m done. I’ll deal with the consequences later.”

“Edier, don’t.”

Incensed, I spin back around. “Did you just give me an order, college boy? You know you’ll be working for me if Santiago and Daddy ever give the go-ahead, so just remember who you’re talking to.”

“Keep to the other side of the room,” he mutters, realizing he’s gone too far. “There are two hundred people here. She’s not going to notice...”

But what if I want her to notice?

It only took one glance for me to see how hollow my life’s been since I went away. I’ve missed her kindness, her peace, her light. I’ve missed being around all the good in her soul because I’m done drowning in all the bad in mine.

But I also know the rules, and I don’t need a dying *bruja* to spell it out for me this time.

We were close once, and she paid a terrible price for it...
Whatever happens tonight, I can't make the same mistake again.

6

ELLA

“AM I INTERRUPTING YOU?”

My father looks up as I slip inside the study and shut the door behind me. “Not at all,” he says, his face impassive, but there’s a rare warmth in his eyes as he motions to the empty chair in front of him. “Come...sit.” Sweeping his black boots off the desk, he tosses whatever he was reading to one side with that same sharp air of authority that Edier had when he tossed his car keys to the valet earlier. The force of his charisma is already overcrowding the more-than-generously-sized room.

“There are so many stories in here,” I marvel, glancing around at all the overloaded bookshelves. “I never realized Uncle Rick was such a literary hoarder.”

“Clearly, there’s too much downtime in between all that venality in Washington.” My father beckons me closer again with another of those highhanded gestures, and then pulls out one of the desk drawers. He places an exquisite chess set between us, and my heart flutters with joy. “It just goes to confirm what I’ve long suspected. Politicians are part-time lawmakers and full-time bullshitters. Shall we play?”

“At least they’re well-read ones,” I reason with a smile, watching him twist the board one-eighty and present me with two rows of gleaming white pieces.

I always play white. He always plays black.

Chess is our thing, or it used to be until business took him away from the private island we call home for much of last year. Every evening we’d play until I was dizzy with exhaustion. It’s the only game I’ve ever beaten him at,

and the only time I've seen a glimpse of that scary, dark shadow that everyone talks about when they think I'm not listening.

"How are you feeling?"

The question is subtle, but I know it's all he's been thinking about since I stepped inside this room.

"As much as I love you, *Papá*, could we maybe have a conversation that doesn't include the state of my health for once?"

"If you insist." His gaze still lingers on my face though, and I know he's looking for warning signs of the tell-tale lupus rash.

I drop my eyes to neaten my pieces. "We don't have long. I think they're about to bring out the entrees."

"It's *your* birthday, *mija*. We can stay here all evening if we want to."

"On second thought, it might be best if we do."

"Oh?"

I glance at his outfit and laugh. "For starters, you're not even *dressed* for a party."

Every man here tonight is wearing formal attire, but not him. In fact, I've never seen him wear anything other than black boots, jeans, and a shirt.

"Men like me don't bow to social etiquette, Ella," he says with a smirk. "We hang it on the wall and let others worship it."

This reminds me of something my mother once said about him, about how he makes up his own rules in this world. It wasn't a casual justification for his many transgressions, but rather a statement of fact. Some men lead, others follow, and then there's him, the King of Sin, who presides over all of them.

I've known he was a bad man ever since I was a little girl, and it used to confuse the bejesus out of me. Bad men aren't supposed to love wholly and unconditionally. They aren't supposed to sacrifice. They aren't supposed to hold their daughter's hand and never tire when she's going through round after round of chemotherapy to help suppress a bad lupus flare, and all the horrible side-effects that comes with it.

Yet here he is: my beautiful terrible contradiction of a father—which, incidentally, is another of my mother's sayings about him—and the man I'm proud to share my blood with, even if his soul is the same color as his clothes.

"Maybe you should ask Uncle Rick for some book recommendations?" I suggest, as he debates his first move. "*Mamá* says the last one you tried to

read was *War and Peace*, only you got so mad about the lack of graphic violence you threw it out of the window.”

The corners of his mouth lift, causing a single crack in his fierce façade. He only allows the people he loves to speak to him like this. The rest of the universe is kept at arm’s length, like dogs on leashes, but he’s the one baring the teeth.

“Believe it or not, I did ask him, but I won’t tell you what his response was.” He smirks again at the memory. “Not until you’re eighteen, anyway.”

Tilting my head, I check the time on his enormous Patek Philippe watch. “Then I have exactly four hours until true enlightenment.”

“Nothing true about it.” I watch his eyes narrow at my dress. “Though I suspect you’re far more *enlightened* about certain things than you’re letting on.”

I blush and drop my eyes.

“Word of advice?” He advances a black pawn because he always goes first.

“Please don’t let this be a sex thing.” Embarrassed, I rush my move and play the wrong white pawn, and he swipes it off the board.

“That’s not something you need concern yourself with just yet.” He unleashes his first knight as I remember what Thalia and I were laughing about earlier. *No boys allowed. Period.* “Call this a gentle parental warning, Ella.”

“Don’t joke, *Papá*,” I chide, freeing my first bishop and sliding it across three squares to the right. “You don’t know how to be gentle. You only know how to swing baseball bats studded with nails.”

“Hmmm, maybe you’re right.” He glides his black queen into the middle of the board in an audacious move, so typical of him in chess *and* in life. “Besides, I never joke about murder. It’s not good for my alibi.” Once finished, he steepled his hands, and considers me for a moment. “When you long for something, *mija*, don’t be too surprised if that constant ache turns into a bleeding bullet wound.”

I freeze, my hand suspended above the chess board. “I-I’m not sure I follow?”

His black eyes are drilling into my face now. “Men have reasons for what they do, and more often than not, it makes no fucking sense to anyone but themselves.”

He knows.

Oh my God, he knows.

And I thought I was being so careful in disguising my true motives for this party.

Deflated, my hand drops back into my lap. I should have realized he'd blow through my plan like a hurricane.

"Ask Edier Grayson what you've been dying to for years. Get your answers, and then leave your history outside in that marquee. He's a damaged man, Ella. No peace will ever come from anything he has to say, yet I'm choosing to allow this because it's your birthday. Afterward, he'll go back to New York, and you'll return to the island with your mother and Thalia. It's better for your health there."

But what if I don't want to go back to a paradise in chains?

I think about the crumpled letter hidden underneath my pillow.

"You know I speak the truth. Turning eighteen is meant to be 'enlightening', after all."

I watch him take my bishop in a move as casually brutal as his words.

Damaged? How?

"Please don't hurt him. This was all my idea. We were friends once, but we haven't spoken since... I just..." I trail off in defeat.

"He's the son of my oldest friend, Ella, and he's shaping up to be extremely effective for my organization. He would need to cross every line to make me put a bullet in his head." He sweeps his hand across his jaw as he studies the board again. "I believe it's your move."

"I don't think he's attractive, if that's what you're implying," I say, blushing again. "I'd *never* be interested in Edier that way. He's just another man with a lot of explaining to do. That's all."

"I'm glad to hear it. As for him, he's not permitted to think about you in any capacity."

Gritting my teeth, I bring my queen into play, and he's forced to retreat with a curse.

"*Mija*," he murmurs in warning.

"May I offer you some advice in return?" I advance my queen one more square to the right, making his queen retreat even further and putting his knight at risk.

"I'll listen, but there's no guarantee I'll act on it."

"Damaged people still feel, *Papá*. They still love. They still *deserve*." My vision blurs, and I know it's not just Edier I'm talking about. "I'm asking you

not to underestimate them, and to realize that they have their own reasons for doing what they do... And they often make sense in time.”

Ignoring his knight, I position my second bishop in front of his remaining pawns.

“I’d never underestimate you, Ella Santiago,” he says, flicking his dark gaze up to meet mine. “You’re my daughter, after all.”

“Then I have another birthday request, and this time it’s a big one.” I hold his gaze as the butterflies in my stomach explode into colonies.

I have a dream—an impossible dream that’s trapped on the other side of a high fence labelled ‘duty, health, and my father’s OTT overprotectiveness’. I can see beautiful colors through the cracks, but I’m going to need a sledgehammer to break through to the rainbow.

No time like the present.

“Tell me.”

He takes my bishop, just like I’d anticipated.

I suck in a sharp breath, and then I go for it.

“If I win this game, I’d like your permission to attend NYU and study journalism like *Mamá* did. I’d like to move to the city and have a little more freedom.”

My request hangs heavy in the air, and then he’s throwing his head back and laughing—his rich, scornful tenor filling the room far more than his presence. “I don’t bet my daughter’s future on a game of chess, *mija*. Not when she’s as sick as she is.”

“There are good doctors in New York, maybe even the best,” I argue, my heart beating like a drum. “Show me that you believe the thing you just said about not underestimating me. Because deep down you know you can’t keep me locked up forever, not when I finally have a chance to grow and to breathe.”

“And how are you magically going to conjure up a place at NYU?” His tone is low and dangerous, like a growl from a cornered animal.

“I submitted an application in secret.” I quail at the look in his eyes. “They already had my grades from my home tutor, and they wanted to see examples of my writing. I received an acceptance email six days ago.”

My father’s face goes very still. He’s been toying with one of my annexed pawns since I started speaking and now it’s being crushed in his clenched fist. “There’s just one fatal flaw to your plan, *daughter*. You’re assuming you’ll beat me at this game.”

“Does that mean you’ll think about it?”

He smiles coldly, and my hope waivers. “Your faith is beguiling when you know you can’t win. I already have your bishop, and your queen is more exposed than you think.”

My breath catches. “So, do I have your word?”

There’s a pause. “You always have my word.”

“Swear it?”

His massive jaw tics with irritation. “Just make your move, Ella, before I throw this fucking thing across the room.”

With the blood rushing in my ears, I glide my queen all the way to the left, in a move so exquisite he never sees it coming. Every black square I cross is another brick in the wall crumbling. Every white square is another glimpse of my freedom.

“Check mate, *Papá*,” I whisper.

HIS ANGRY ROARS and curses are still ringing in my ears as I beat a hasty retreat down the hallway toward the living room. From there, I can see the patio where most of the party goers are mingling on porcelain flagstones, underneath spiderweb strands of fairy lights. Beyond that, the vaulted roof of the dining marquee is rising from the emerald lawns like a silken, white citadel.

My hands are shaking. My thoughts, muted in disbelief. I've never dared trick my father into anything before, and I know there'll be consequences and endless conditions the second I set foot in New York.

There's hope, though. *So much hope*. Not least, because I know that when my father gives his word about something he means it. For the first time, light has appeared around the edges of my gilded cage, and it's so bright it's blinding... So much so, that I miss the step and stumble out onto the flagstones with all the grace of a baby elephant on roller-skates.

"Easy, birthday girl," murmurs a slick British accent as I'm steadied by a huge shadow. "I hate to break it to you, but a broken foot won't match that pretty dress."

Gasping out a 'thank you', I blink up at the wickedly handsome face of my father's close business associate, Aiden Knight.

He lets go of my arm and offers me a flute of champagne, and then he's withdrawing it just as quick. "Not old enough," he says with a grimace, but I know it's nothing to do with that, and everything to do with my illness.

I take the flute from him regardless, tipping the entire thing down my throat before he can stop me.

“Ella—*shit*.”

“It’s okay,” I croak, the back of my throat still in flames. “One glass of champagne isn’t going to kill me. I checked with my doctors earlier.”

“No, but it might kill *me* when your father finds out.”

“I won’t tell him if you don’t.”

His scowl breaks, and he chuckles softly. “And I was led to believe you were such a good girl.”

“Even good girls can have hiccups, right?”

“So long as they’re not champagne induced.”

I smile, feeling more than a little reckless this evening. Not enough to hurt myself and negate my medication, but enough to inch into those Badlands, instead of pacing the perimeter.

“How’s Monaco?” I ask, taking a glass of juice from a passing waiter’s tray to appease him. “It’s been so long since we last visited.”

We used to stay on his superyacht on the Cote D’Azur all the time before I got sick. When you’re accepted into my father’s inner circle, you become part of one big happy criminal family. Each of my ‘Uncles’, have earned their status in blood. Aiden runs all the casinos on the French Riviera and allows my father to launder most of his revenue through his establishments. In return, he owns most of Monaco, which is where Edier was living for a time.

“Hot. Posh. Lucrative... Christ, just promise me you won’t get pissed and start singing karaoke.”

“I’ll be fine,” I say, laughing as I reach up to kiss him on the cheek. “No karaoke, I swear. It’s lovely to see you. Is Issa here?”

I adore his wife. She’s clever and funny, and with a tongue just as sharp as her husband’s.

“She’s switching out the dinner place settings. You can’t leave anything to chance these days. And I wouldn’t go kissing me like that again, sweetheart. Not unless you want to give me another death wish.” The ghost of a smile touches his lips as I glance around in confusion.

“But I just left *Papá* in the study. He can’t have gotten here so fast.”

“I’m not talking about your father, Ella. I’m talking about the man over there who’s about to stab me to death with all the daggers shooting from his eyeballs.”

Frowning, I swing around again, and my heart stops dead. *Boom*. Just like that, my whole chest is paralyzed.

There’s a second shadow standing in front of the bar, his dark eyes

trained in our direction—melting away the rest of the party like he’s fire and they’re ice. He’s even more beautiful than I remembered, with his thick, tousled black hair and his movie star cheekbones...

But I was right. He’s a man now, a big, scary man, with one fist curled around a glass so tightly it’s a miracle it’s not shattering. His knuckles are covered in black ink, reaching deep into his jacket sleeve, and then rising out of his shirt collar to wrap around his neck, as if there’s no end to his darkness.

He’s wearing the same scars and scowl as every other *sicario* here, but I could pick him out from a crowd of thousands. He’s a million memories that no ocean of time could wash away.

Sunshine.

Sketchbooks.

Laughter.

Security.

And light. So much light.

I remember it all.

Does he still think about those days, too?

I drag my eyes back to his face, and my blood turns cold.

I’m guessing that’s a ‘no’.

There’s no friendliness in his gaze. No warmth. If I was expecting a happy reunion, there’s not enough champagne in the world to ease the slap of *that* disappointment.

Tossing his drink away, he starts walking toward me. Correction: *stalking*. His movements are slow and deliberate, like a hunter locking onto his prey. My breath hitches, but I stand my ground, each step making me tip my head back a little more because he must have grown at least two feet since I last saw him.

As he draws closer, I find he’s not looking at me at all, but at someone directly behind us. He doesn’t even stop. He just brushes past, blasting me with a cologne that’s spicy and unfamiliar, and an undercurrent of a scent that takes me straight back to Colombia.

“Edier, *don’t*,” I hear Aiden snarl, but his warning falls on deaf ears.

Turning quickly, I see a couple of waiters with trays standing directly behind us. I catch their eyes lingering on my ass until they realize Edier’s coming straight at them like a heat-seeking missile.

Muttering a ton of bad words, they spin on their heels, trays flying, and

break into a run, disappearing around the side of the mansion with Edier in deadly pursuit.

8

EDIER

MY FIRST SWING slams into the waiter's jaw.

The second makes a mess of his nose and rattles his shit-for-brains—decorating the pristine white tiles behind him in a perfect arc of crimson.

Eat your heart out, Banksy.

“Jesus, stop! STOP!” he screams, sliding down the wall in a pathetic heap—flinging one hand out in a futile attempt to stop me, while the other hand clutches what’s left of his face. “I’m sorry, okay?” He starts weeping, spilling salt water all over his friend who’s lying unconscious by his feet. The fucker was so scared he ran straight into the doorframe and knocked himself out before I’d even started.

Shaking my fist out, I tut in disappointment. “*Hijueputa. Son of a bitch.* I haven’t even broken a sweat yet.”

“We shhhhouldn’t have loohked at herrr.” His words start slurring together, which means I must have broken something good. “We didn’t know sheee was your gshirl!”

“She’s not my anything,” I lie coldly. “I just didn’t like the look of you.” Crouching down, I take his shattered jaw between my fingers, hissing in disapproval at his pig-like squeals, and wave my knife in front of him. “Did you get a good look, *malparido*? Did you imagine sinking your teeth into that pretty ass, or maybe even your dick, if you got her drunk enough?” I grit my teeth at the thought of this punk getting a taste of her sunshine. “Was it worth it?”

“W-worth it?” he gasps out, eyeing the knife in fear.

“The price you have to pay,” I say patiently. “You don’t get to check out

an ass like that for free. There's always a tax."

"W-what tax?"

I'm about to carve out his left eyeball to demonstrate when there's a metallic scrape of a lighter behind me, followed by the acrid tang of cigarette smoke. The kitchen staff all fled the scene as soon as I erupted into the room, leaving their half-plated-up salmon mousse entrees behind. It means Aiden must have followed me in.

"What a fucking mess," he drawls, his accent making him sound even more disapproving. "What did they do? Spit in your whiskey?"

"They looked at something they shouldn't have." I pause, my blade millimeters from its target. Silver tendrils of his cigarette smoke are curling around me like a noose and pulling me back from the brink.

Shit.

"Please, mister," sobs the waiter, throwing beseeching eyes over my shoulder. "I think he's going to kill me!"

"Oh, he'll do much worse than kill you," says Aiden calmly. "I should know. I trained him myself."

"Jesus, JESUS!"

"Shut the fuck up," I snarl, turning out his lights with a well-placed elbow to his temple before rising to my feet to meet my old mentor.

He's leaning against a counter, ankles crossed, eyes narrowed, with his lit cigarette held loosely between his fingers. Cool as British fuck, but I can tell he's pissed as fuck too.

"What the hell are you doing, Edier? This is a social gathering, not a backroom brawl."

"Show's over," I snip back.

"The show never should have started in the first place. What happens when Santiago finds out about this? It's his daughter's eighteenth birthday, for Christ's sake."

"Finds out about what?"

My father appears in the doorway, dominating the space with his regimented censure, and dropping the temperature in the kitchen down to around minus fifty.

Cursing under my breath, I watch him take in the two unconscious men at my feet, my bloody fist, and the knife in my hand.

His expression tightens. "What happened?"

"Nothing that won't disappear from this kitchen in the next five minutes,"

says Aiden, diffusing the situation briskly. “There was a minor disagreement over the wine list. Your son was only too happy to put them straight.”

“Edier?” My father transfers his glacial glare my way. “Care to elaborate?”

“The Chablis didn’t agree with me,” I reply tonelessly.

The resulting silence stretches on and on until I’m tapping my knife against my thigh in irritation.

“Go back to the party, *Pá*. We said we’d sort it, and we will.”

“See that you do.” With one final glance at the waiters, he disappears back into the hall, just in time to miss my slow, mocking clap at his departure.

“I think that’s the most he’s said to me in six years.”

“Try listening for once.” Aiden chucks his packet of smokes at me. “If you did, you might hear whispered words in those cold, empty spaces.”

“Maybe I have selective hearing when it comes to his bullshit.” I take one and slot it between my teeth before chucking the packet back at him. This isn’t the first time Aiden’s tried to address the growing abyss between me and my father, but some things cut too deeply to ever be stitched that neatly. “Growing up with Joseph Grayson was like living in a soundproofed room.”

“Then, you should have shouted louder.” He’s thoughtful for a moment, smoking away, until one of the waiters stirs with a moan. “I’ll tell Rick’s men to drive these fucking idiots to the nearest hospital... Here.” He tosses his lighter at me. “Since you’re so keen on lighting fires these days, I suggest you keep it.”

It’s an old chrome Zippo with the faded initials ‘J.K.’ engraved into one side.

“I can’t take this. It was your father’s.”

“His memory is more than a lighter, Edier,” he murmurs, heading for the door. “Sort this shit out with your old man, or that silence is all you’ll have left. What does your ma think about it?”

“Says she’s living in hope, but she’s living in ignorance.”

“Christ, you’re just as bloody stubborn as he is.”

“Are you calling Sanders, or shall I?” I say irritably.

Aiden sighs and flicks his cigarette butt into the sink. “Fix your hand, while I fix your mess, and then we’re re-joining the party. The only thing getting spilled for the rest of the night is my whiskey.”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, THE KITCHEN IS SCRUBBED CLEAN OF VIOLENCE, AND the entrees are winging their way out to the marquee. The place is a sea of polished chrome tranquility now that the caterers have moved to their trucks to prepare the rest of the meal. Apparently, violence doesn't lend itself to the 'plating up' of goat's cheese and truffle soufflés, but that's a matter of opinion.

They dimmed the lights when they left, but the moon is flooding in through the open windows, along with the monotonous hum of conversation from the party outside. It's orchestrating with a steady *drip, drip* into the stainless-steel sink as I lean over it, head bowed, hands gripping the sides. I sliced my knuckle open on the waiter's eyebrow ring, but I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Ella's body isn't theirs to fantasize over. It's not mine either, but I've never been good at sticking to what my fists preach.

Fuck, Mi Cielo, why did you have to grow up to be so beautiful and strong? It was so much easier to ignore you when I was drowning in oblivion.

Drip.

Drip.

The noise drags me back to a bathroom when I was a kid. To a tub filled with red water, watching as my birth mother's life drained away.

I used to wonder if she'd killed herself because of what we'd done to escape hell, or because she couldn't handle the fact we'd made it to *El Refugio*. I read about it once. It's called 'Tahiti Syndrome'. It's when a newfound peace makes you feel even more depressed than the shithole you left behind.

Or maybe she just couldn't bear the fact that I was her son. She saw the evil in me and knew that no amount of rosary clutching could ever absolve it.

A noise in the hallway catches my attention. A beat later, I'm drawing my Glock, and staring down the one woman I'm tearing myself in two to protect.

"Ay, for fuck's sake, Ella!" I drop my gun immediately. "What the hell are you doing here? You know better than to creep up on men like me."

The kitchen is mostly in darkness and silver, but she's a vision in gold, her soft curves haloed from the hallway light. Her expression is wide-eyed and wary, but that quickly morphs into something else as my words hit home.

"What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here, more like?" she retorts,

not quite slamming the door behind her, but closing it hard enough to catch my attention. “My party invitation promised drinks and dinner, not fights with waiters and long periods of alone time in Uncle Rick’s kitchen.”

“Forgive me for breaking party etiquette,” I drawl, enjoying her indignation a little too much. “Does it make you angry, *Mi Cielo?*”

The endearment slips out before I can stop it.

“Don’t call me that. You lost your right years ago when ‘my sky’ never extended into your universe. And, yes, I’m angry, Edier Grayson. I’m angry about so many things, and I’ll be more than happy to tick them off, one by one, as soon as I’ve looked at your hand.”

“My *hand?*”

“Yes, you’re bleeding.”

Crossing the kitchen, she stops directly in front of me, her nearness making all my senses explode. The last time we were this close I was at least three foot taller. Now, she’s level with my chest, and that’s not the only change. Her skin is clear and smooth, and what little make up she wears is accentuating the fullness of her lips and the length of her black eyelashes. Her neck is fine and slender, and I force my eyes not to stray to her breasts. Her scent is just as intoxicating as it was on the patio.

Fuck me. This is every shade of wrong.

“Seventeen,” I mutter to myself. “Seven-fucking-teen.”

“Eighteen, actually. In less than four hours.” Her voice has gone all croaky, and I know she’s as affected by me as I am by her. She just doesn’t have a name for it yet.

“Are you trying to fix me?” I say, staring at her mouth.

She grins, offering me a glimpse of the girl she once was. “Even I’m not that skilled. Now, hold still.” She lifts my hand to inspect it, and I can feel her shaking. That, plus the delicate warmth of her touch, is shooting life straight to my cock.

I shouldn’t be alone with her. I’m putting her in danger, in more ways than one.

“Enough.” I tug my hand away, forcing an icy glare. “It’s a scratch. Nothing a bottle of whiskey won’t cure.”

“Ugh, you sound like every other man here.” Gently, she takes it back again, her blue eyes flashing me a warning to ‘stay still or else’, and it has me transfixed. “You can always tell kingpins and *sicarios* from the state of their hands. My father has this big, old scar running right through the center of one

palm. I asked him how he got it once, and he told me he'd disagreed with a Russian. He didn't tell me what they were arguing about, just that it didn't end so well for either of them. Mostly the other guy, I expect."

"Kamikaze fool," I murmur. "Why are you rambling?"

"Am I?" She smiles again, opening a black hole in my mind that has me falling straight through it. "Thalia always accuses me of rambling, too. Hmm...you won't need stitches, but I wouldn't go punching any more waiters."

"I'll just shoot them in the head then, shall I?"

Her smile falters, and I curse inwardly.

She lets go of my hand and takes a step back, as if my throwaway response has given her the answers to the many unspoken questions between us.

"Thank you for coming to my party," she says stiffly, avoiding my gaze. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening."

In mounting disbelief, I watch her turn and head for the door, presenting me with that stunning canvas of fine porcelain skin—the one I'm aching to put my mouth on it.

Her walking away from me is the best thing she could do, but *dammit* if it doesn't piss me the hell off.

"So, that's it?" I say loudly.

She stops and turns. "Why, is there more? Are you actually going to talk to me after all this time?"

"You got sick," I grit out.

"So?" The hurt in her eyes hits me like a bullet. "That's not a license to cut people out of your life. Did you think I'd make you paint pictures of me all day long when I was in hospital? Or was it pity that really drove you away?" Her voice catches on the word.

"Ella, stop." Cutting the distance between us, I do the unthinkable, crossing every line to take her face between my hands, just to feel her trembling beneath my touch. "I don't pity you, *Mi Cielo*. Look at you. Just fucking *look at you*." Still holding her face prisoner, I let my gaze roam her body again, and it's even more stunning with her heart beating inches from my own.

I wish I could tell her how flawless she is.

Just as she is.

"I missed you," she whispers, her cheeks coloring.

“I missed you, too,” I say truthfully. “I miss sitting on that patio in Leticia with you drawing frogs.”

She giggles suddenly, lifting the moment further, reminding me that she’s goodness and innocence, and that I’m tainting her just by being in the same room as her. “It was a great frog. I think Thalia called him Jeremiah... Do you still draw?”

Reluctantly, I drop my hands from her face. “Not for a long while.”

“You never made it to Goldsmiths.”

“I never made it to Goldsmiths.”

“How’s New York? *Papá* says you work for him there now.”

“Busy. Noisy. But no worse than Colombian Chicharras.”

Her face lights up. “Oh my gosh, they were noisy, weren’t they? Some nights I couldn’t get to sleep until early morning. And the birds? So many chattering birds! I used to make up their conversations in my head at five a.m. I wrote whole stories about them. It drove my tutor crazy.”

That’s when I feel it. The relief, the peace, the *comfort* I always have when I’m around her.

I close my eyes to savor it. It’s been so long since I’ve felt this calm, but then I ruin it by mentioning the one thing we’re dancing around.

“Sanders says you’re on new meds.”

She nods, looking weary suddenly. It’s as if she’s been dying to live for nearly as long as I’ve been living to die, and we’re both pretty fucking exhausted by it.

“Can I make a deal with you?”

“Do I have to kill anyone?”

“Please don’t make jokes like that,” she says with a sigh. “I might think you mean it.”

Oh, but I do.

“If I forget to tell my father that you pulled a gun on me this evening, you need to promise me you won’t mention my health again. At least, not until tomorrow.”

“That’s not a deal, Ella. That’s blackmail.”

She bridges the gap between us again to press a soft finger to my lips, and I make no attempt to push her away. “Just know that I’m okay,” she whispers. “It’s been hard. So hard. Some days I’ve cried so much I didn’t know if I’d ever stop, but this moment? This night? I’m okay. Really, I am, and I just want to pretend that I’m a normal teenager having a normal party,

which is kind of abnormal, if I'm being honest, because it's full of men and women who are mostly twenty years older than me, and who murder other men and women for a living, but still." She withdraws her finger and sucks in a shaky breath. "When can we dream, if not on our birthday?"

"You're rambling again." The imprint of her finger is burning me in all the best ways.

"Yes, well, you're making me nervous. Estrangers can do that."

"*Estrangers?*"

"People who get callously ditched by other people, but they already know each other, so they can't technically be called strangers."

"Ella..."

"Let's not talk about that, either. Put it in a box labelled 'tomorrow'."

I nod, knowing I'll be long gone by then. Cutting ties. Causing more hurt. Doing anything in my power to protect her from me.

Ella's mom's is in the hallway outside, calling her name.

"Shoot. I've got to go. *Papá* wants to make a cringe-fest toast about me. I'll come find you later, and we can talk some more about all the things we've promised not to talk about. I guess that'll include our last day in Colombia too. Because it's just a big blank of nothing to me."

"Go," I snarl, not wanting to think about it, let alone acknowledge it.

"I take it that's a 'yes'." Her eyes flicker over my face, searching for clues as to why my expression has turned to stone, but she'll never find them. "*Papá* was right. Eighteen's shaping up to be an enlightening year, which is a good thing in my opinion. I'm tired of not knowing all the important stuff."

"What do you want to know?"

"How long have you got?"

Let me teach you everything.

She takes a couple of steps back, but she doesn't turn away. "Can I ask you one more question before I go?"

"So long as it's not on the restricted list."

"Restricted *box*, remember? Our thing's too big to fit on a single piece of paper."

Our thing.

We have a thing.

"Did you ever make it to China like we spoke about all those years ago?"

For the first time in forever, I feel like laughing. Note the 'feel' part because my lips don't even curve.

“Not yet.”

“We should do it sometime.” She disappears out the door before reappearing again with that gorgeous smile in place. “It’s good to see you again, Edier.”

That’s when I know I’m going to break her big, beautiful heart.

9

ELLA

I LEAVE the kitchen with grace and dignity, but it all goes to crap after that. Ten steps down the hallway, the air is whooshing out of my lungs, and I'm reaching for the wall to steady me. My heart rate is concertinaing between 'sky-high' and 'dangerously combustible', and there's a savage heat pooling between my thighs.

I close my eyes to try and make sense of it, but the only thing I see is him. My ex-friend. My number one estranger. I've known Edier Grayson since I was five years old, and I'm pretty sure he used to steal cookies from *Tiá* Anna's kitchen when she wasn't looking, so what the heck is he doing stealing my breath away tonight?

It doesn't feel shameful, though.

It doesn't even feel wrong.

It just feels...*different*.

Whatever drew us together when we were younger has changed with us. It's been evolving in secret, until we found ourselves in an empty kitchen years later with him looking at me like that, and my body responding in ways I never knew it could. My pussy has a pulse now, an *actual pulse*, and my nipples feel achy and sensitive like I've been swimming in a sea of ice.

I wage war with my body every day. It brings me nothing but trouble, but it feels like we're finally in sync tonight.

"Ella! There you are! I've been looking all over for you."

My eyes fly open as my mother rushes up to me, her smile lifting in relief. Everyone always comments on how alike we are. We both have long dark hair, sapphire-blue eyes, and pale complexions as opposed to *Papá* and

Thalia's tan skin, but she has way more self-possession than I ever will. I bet she never had to cling to a wall because a man made her dizzy and breathless.

"I came in for a glass of water. Has everyone finished their entrees?"

"Not yet, and why didn't you ask the waiters to get you one?" Narrowing her eyes, she regards me suspiciously for a moment. "You look flushed. Are you sure you're feeling okay? Shall I call Danielle? Is this all too much?"

"*Mamá*, I'm fine," I say, sliding my arms around her and bringing her in for a hug. Occasionally, the only way to convince my parents I'm not actually dying is to have them feel it for themselves. "Should I be turning that question around? You look worried about something."

"Someones," she corrects, emphasizing the plural. "Uncle Aiden and Uncle Rick have gone AWOL, and your father just showed up at our table in a volcanic mood." She breaks away to smooth a stray strand of hair from my eyes. "Right now, he's simmering, but I fear the explosion may be imminent."

"Dead people imminent?" I glance through the kitchen door as we double-back on ourselves to reach the patio, but Edier's already gone.

"Quite possibly," she says with a frustrated sigh.

My parents are the prime example of 'opposites attract'. She was a reporter in Miami when they first met, writing award-winning articles that exposed dangerous men like him. He took that challenge and ran with it, taking her free will out of the equation at the same time, and giving her no option but to fall in love with him.

I once asked her if she ever felt anger or resentment toward him for kidnapping her the way he did. She just smiled and told me to watch carefully. That's when I saw how effortless their marriage was. The passing glances, the brief touches... Their history was the daisy chain link that bound them together, and their love was a perfectly imperfect love in motion. It bent with the storm and braced against the tide. Ever present and undying.

It's the kind of love I aspire to have one day.

"You were the last person to see him, Ella. Did you have words?"

"Something like that..."

She stops and spins, an incredulous smile creeping across her face. "You told him about NYU."

"I told him... Then, I might have tricked him into agreeing to let me go."

My mother gasps in excitement. "Why, Ella, you're a natural!"

Of all my family, she's the one who understands me the most. We both love to write, and it feels wrong when we don't, like there's not enough oxygen in the room.

I thought about writing fictional stories, but then I became too curious about the real ones. When I found some of her old articles online, I ate up her words like candy. They made me realize I had something to say too. That I had a voice, and a craving to shape the world from my own perspective when so much of mine over the last six years had been shaped for me.

My mother recognized this. In the end, she was the one who encouraged me to apply to the college.

"Do you think *Papá* will ever forgive us?"

"Yes, but he'll make us suffer for it first," she teases, linking arms with me as we step back out onto the patio. "And don't expect your freedom to come without a price. The cartel has a big presence in New York. You'll be watched and guarded around the clock. Every step will be overshadowed. The first sign that it's impacting your health, you'll be brought back to the island. They'll be days when you'll feel like you're glimpsing something wonderful from behind a sheet of glass, but, *Ella...*"—she turns to face me, gently cupping my cheek—"you need to take it and make it your own kind of wonderful."

"I will, *Mamá*."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

She leans in to hug me again because sometimes the only way parents can put more love into their words is to let their children feel it for themselves. Letting go with a smile, she adds, "At least you know people on the East Coast already. Sam's only at Rutgers in New Jersey, and his younger brother Seb might be starting with you next fall."

And Edier, I think with a jolt, setting off that pulse between my legs again.

Edier lives in New York, too.

I DON'T SEE HIM FOR THE REST OF THE NIGHT, BUT I FEEL HIS DARK GAZE ON me constantly. It's prickling my bare skin and making me whip my head

round expectantly, only to find empty chairs and spaces.

I swore I caught a glimpse of him when I was attempting the Macarena with Thalia on the dance floor and falling about laughing as we messed-up all the steps. Then again, I'm also a liquor rookie who's drunk two and a half glasses of champagne, which is still two and a half more than I've ever drunk before, so I stopped trusting my eyesight hours ago.

It's half eleven when I make my way over to the bar to grab a glass of water. Sam's already there with Thalia. Their heads are bowed, and I can tell they're plotting something.

"Do I *want* to know what's going on, or will you have to kill me afterward?" I slide my arms around Thalia's waist and give Sam a shy smile over her shoulder. He's older than me and already at college, but he has that cool, lethal vibe that Edier exudes so naturally. It's only a matter of time before he ends up working for our father, as well.

"Here you go." The bartender hands me my water, but his eyes are all over Sam.

Sam doesn't notice, or if he does, he's not interested. He's sworn off both sexes this year. Thalia's convinced he has a girlfriend at Rutgers, but he hasn't admitted anything to us.

"We're sneaking off to the beach," Thalia confides, her face bursting with the devilish thrill of it. "Sam knows a secret path that avoids all *Papá's* security."

"Thals..." I warn.

"The tide is in. The ocean is dead calm. We're only going for a swim, and it's going to be *heaven*. We'll be back before you know it, I swear."

"Hey, don't I get to come?"

They both stare at me like I just admitted to a murder. I never do anything spontaneous. That's usually Thalia's department. She's careless. I'm careful. It's just the way things are.

But then I think about that box of unspoken things that Edier and I created for tonight, and I figure I can shove that stereotype of me in there as well.

"Do you think you should?" Thalia looks worried. "It's a hot night, but the water might be freezing. I'd hate for you to get really sick...."

"It's only for a couple of minutes, right?" I'm craving the ocean suddenly. I want to feel weightless and stare up at the stars. I want to feel small because then my problems won't feel so big. "The second I get cold I'll

go back to the house.”

“Are we doing this, or not?” Sam folds a tab of gum into his mouth and chews impatiently.

“Doing it,” I say, reaching over the bar counter to grab an unopened bottle of champagne and handing it to him. “If we’re going to break the rules, let’s break them all.”

He takes the bottle and grins. “I’m liking this new batshit crazy Ella.”

I’m liking her too.

His dad’s private beach is curved like a crescent, and it’s being mirrored by the shape of the moon shining down on it. The tips of the black waves are dipped in silver, and the sand is a paler shade of dark. There are no other lights out here, except for the string of bulbs above the steps we just climbed down.

I bury my toes in the wet sand as Thalia pulls off her dress and runs headfirst into the water with a squeal.

“Holy shit, it’s so cold! Your balls are going to shrink to raisins, Sam!”

“Tha-lia!” I chide, but Sam just laughs. Tossing the champagne bottle down by my feet, I see a flash of white teeth as he drags his shirt over his head, drops his pants, and follows her in, diving headfirst into the waves in an elegant arc of muscles and tattoos.

I wait until they’re at least ten meters from the shoreline before my own dress is a pool of gold silk next to the bottle. Unlike Thalia, I’m not wearing a bra, so I cover my small breasts with one hand as I jog to the water’s edge.

The first kiss of cold is painful. The second and third are needle-pricks of ice. The fourth tempts me enough to wade in even deeper, the water caressing up my knees. To my left, Sam is scooping Thalia up and chucking her back into the ocean, and the balmy night air is alive with her screams, splutters, and laughter.

Once there’s a little more distance between us, I drop my hand from chest and skim the surface with my palms, smiling each time the undulating water rises to submerge them. I continue walking like this until it’s up to my breasts, hardening my nipples to aching points for the second time tonight.

“Hey, Ella? You still alive out there?”

“Hush, Sam, you’re ruining my zen!”

“What the fuck is that?”

“The opposite of chaos!”

I hear him scoffing loudly at this. “No wonder I don’t know what it is.”

Tearing the pins from my chignon, I lay back in the water, allowing the current to lift my feet from the ocean floor until I'm floating on the surface, with my loose hair twisting in ethereal shapes around me.

"Maybe you don't hate me so much, after all," I whisper to my body, brushing a hand over my stomach as I'm carried out a little further to sea. "You've got me this far without killing me, and now you're making me feel invincible."

Up above, the stars are swirling ribbons of white dots on black. As I stare at them, sculling my hands by my sides to keep myself afloat, I think of the first time I met Edier, and our conversation rushes back to me. That day, he'd told me that the sun was special, and a galaxy was a place beyond heaven. He'd said the sun would be okay, but only if he kept running and forgetting...

Running from what? Forgetting—

Just then, a freak wave hits me out of nowhere, covering my face like a salty-wet rag and stealing out my poise from under me. I lose my buoyancy too—sinking fast as I struggle to stay upright.

In a panic, I kick out with my feet but there's no ocean floor beneath me anymore. I must have drifted out further than I thought. My fingers rake blindly at the water, clawing for purchase, but there's only darkness down there—deceptive and weightless.

Oh my God, I'm drowning.

By now, my chest is bursting for air, and there's a myriad of stars behind my eyelids too. Even so, there's a strange sense of calm settling over me. It's making me think of dark eyes and lost moments...

A beat later, a strong arm is circling around my waist, hauling me skyward, and propelling me up through the surface.

Spluttering and gasping, I swipe my eyes free of water, but I'm still blind to the world as I curl my arms around my savior's neck and lock my legs around his waist. It's only when my head stops spinning that I finally register the scent of hot spice and fury.

"What the hell are you doing?" roars Edier, bringing me in so close we're face-to-face. *Mouth-to-mouth.* "Next time you decide to go night swimming, use a fucking life preserver! Jesus *fuck!* I'm going to murder Sam for this!"

I stare at his dripping black hair, his eyelashes divided like starfish, his clenched jaw, and those murderous dark eyes.

God he's so beautiful.

Too beautiful.

Suddenly, it doesn't matter about the last six years of silence. Him being here now is twice as loud.

"Sam didn't make me do anything," I croak, feeling clothes beneath my fingertips. His white shirt is completely see-through and stretched to breaking point across his massive chest. He's lost his jacket somewhere along the way, but not his gun holster or his pants. He must have dived in the second I went under. "It was my idea to come."

"I don't give a fuck whose idea it was. You never should have left the party."

"You're standing up," I mutter.

"I'm taller than you. Look how far you drifted. Another couple of meters and even I'd be out of my depth."

I glance over his shoulder. He's right. Thalia and Sam are just specks in the distance.

"Were you watching me from the beach this whole time?"

"*!Dios Mio!* I've been watching you all evening, Ella. Never took my damn eyes off you. Couldn't even when I tried."

I'm aware that my naked breasts are superglued to his pecs now, and my core is pressing against something rock-solid and burning-hot.

Instead of shifting backward, I press harder, and he snarls out another curse.

"Don't."

"Why were you watching me?"

Our mouths are a heartbeat apart. I can smell his whiskey breath. His hand detours from my waist, inching lower before it changes direction sharply.

"Time to go."

"No," I whisper, shivering more from his heat than the cold water. "Stay. With me. Right here in this ocean."

"You nearly drowned." He turns toward the shore with me still wrapped around him.

"But I didn't, and now I have Survivor's Euphoria. I'm high on life and I want to share it with you." I trace the flat seam of his mouth with my finger. "You used to smile more, Edier Grayson. There was still sadness, like in your drawings, but there was hope too."

"People don't tend to smile much in my line of business," he says grimly.

"Stop walking."

“No.”

“Stop walking, or I’ll kiss you.”

His eyes swivel my way again, and then narrow. “You don’t know how to kiss a man.”

“Then teach me.”

“For God’s sake, Ella. You’re seventeen, which is underage in numerous states in this country, not to mention if I cross this line any further your father will be ramming a shotgun so far up my ass I’ll be choking on bullets for the rest of my short life.”

“But not this one.”

“What?”

“The age of consent is seventeen in the State of New York, and I’m not asking you to have sex with me Edier. I’m asking you to kiss me.”

“No,” he grits out, but I can tell he wants to.

“Then you leave me no choice…” Holding his gaze, I let go of his neck, and lean back in his arms until my head is skimming the surface of the water, and I’m baring my naked breasts to him.

He lets me go with protest, his large palms sliding up my spine to support my back, making me feel like nothing bad could ever happen to me again.

Far off in the distance, a church bell starts chiming, and as I lay there, with a man who’s barely holding onto his self-control, I count off each peel in turn.

I know he’s counting them too. When they strike twelve, I’ll be eighteen, legal, and his for the taking. Not even my father’s wrath can reach us out here.

Six.

Seven.

Eight.

It feels like we’re standing on the edge of a precipice that’s already crumbling.

Nine.

Ten.

His palms move up to my shoulder blades as he dips his head. I can feel his hot breath on my stomach. His wet hair is teasing my skin. The tension is unbearable, coiling red and wicked at the place where our bodies are touching so intimately.

Eleven.

That's when I realize I've always wanted him. I just didn't know it was *every part of him* until now.

Twelve.

When the final bell tolls, it happens so fast. One second, I'm lying in the water bracing myself, and the next I'm flying through the air, our mouths colliding in a brutal confusion of lips and sparks.

My experience is next to zero, so I go with the flow, opening myself up to a tongue that's rough and demanding, allowing it to sweep into my soul and leave it raw and wanting.

"*Fuck, Ella. Forgive me.* I can't help myself." Digging rough fingers into my hair, he angles my head to take even more from me. It's like he can't get enough. I whimper in protest, but it only makes him hungrier. "You taste like sunshine and I'm betting your pussy tastes just as sweet. Are you aching for me, *Mi Cielo*? I can feel you clenching against my cock."

Kissing me again, his hand slips down our bodies to press between my legs, mimicking how I traced my finger across his mouth earlier. I jerk in surprise at how sensitive I am down there, and he smirks into our kiss.

"It's too late to be shy, *Bonita*. You chose to invite the devil in, remember?"

"Then why are you still standing on the doorstep?" Taking his jaw between my fingers, I smile through the millions of new sensations invading my body.

In retaliation, he pinches a part of me that has me crying out at the sour sweetness of it. Next, I feel the gusset of my underwear being yanked to one side and a finger pushing against my entrance.

"Beg me to do it." He sounds as drunk as I do.

"I don't need to beg for something we both want."

"I'll fucking destroy you," he warns again. "I only know how to take."

"That's okay," I say shakily. "I only know how to give."

Sliding my own hand between us, my heart stutters as I take in the sheer size of him. *He's going to break me in two with that thing.*

He glares at me, the lapping water swallowing his silence as a verdict is made and closing arguments ignored.

"Not here," he rasps, shooting frissons of lust and terror around my body. "Which one is your bedroom?"

"Third on the left after you reach the top of the stairs."

"Who's in the room next to you?"

“Only my sister. My parents are in the east wing. Uncle Rick and his family have the whole of the back of the house.”

“Is Thalia a light sleeper?”

“Why?”

“Because, *Mi Cielo*,” he says huskily, leaning in to kiss me again. “You’re going to be screaming my name all night long... Either that, or you’ll be chanting it like a fucking prayer.”

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOU?”

Sam’s dressed and waiting for me as I emerge from the ocean in Edier’s white dress shirt. He insisted I wear it to protect my modesty. That’s all well and good, but after catching a glimpse of his tattooed chest in the moonlight there’s nothing appropriate about my thoughts anymore.

Sam’s gaze swivels with interest to the shirtless shadow behind me, and then he’s cursing loudly. “Ah, shit. Tsunami alert.”

A beat later, Edier is charging past me and Sam’s rolling around in the sand, clutching his jaw. “Son of a bitch!” he hisses. “What’s your fist made of, Grayson? A wrecking ball?”

“*Malparido!* You’re buying me a new suit, and then you’re buying a second one for your own funeral. You’ll need it after Santiago finds out you put his daughter in danger.”

“Stop! Stop!” I cry, but Edier just glares me into submission, his furious dark eyes making me painfully aware of my own body again. My lips are swollen from his brutal kisses, my heartbeat is racing like crazy, and my fingertips can still feel the heat and size of his...

Why oh why does the power trip thing have to look so hot on him?

“What danger?” demands Sam. “And what possessed you to go swimming in a four-thousand-dollar suit?”

“I wasn’t planning on it until I took a late-night stroll, saw Ella get hit by a wave, and go under.”

“Shit, is that true?” Sam jerks his attention back to me.

I nod wearily as Edier steps into his line of vision. “Put your dress on,” he

snaps at me over his shoulder.

“I wasn’t staring at her tits,” grumbles Sam. “By the way, I think you’ve broken my tooth.”

“Good. Next time it’ll be your neck. Now, look away.”

“Where’s Thalia?” I ask, pulling on my dress at top speed.

“She said she was tired so I sent her back to the house. I told her I’d wait for you myself.” Staggering to his feet, he turns to Edier with a grimace. “It was only meant to be a bit of fun. No harm done, eh?” In response, he finds himself staring down the barrel of Edier’s gun. “Man, are you serious?” he yelps.

“Fucking deadly.”

“No, I mean are you seriously expecting me to believe that thing still works with half the Atlantic Ocean inside it?”

“Let’s find out, shall we?”

“*Edier*,” I wail, grabbing his hand and dragging it down. The amount of testosterone flying about this beach is ridiculous. “It’s not his fault. I begged him to let me go.”

Sam glances between me and Edier. “I see you two have finally melted the Cold War. How fucking Hallmark. Now, if you don’t mind, I have an emergency private dentist to call.”

“Not so fast.”

Sam pauses. “Are you planning to cut my dick off next?”

“Tempting, but no.” Edier tilts his head to the side, assessing him for a moment. “I’ll settle for your suit instead.”

WE LEAVE SAM CURSING AND SHIVERING IN HIS WET BOXER BRIEFS ON THE beach. Edier’s completely unrepentant about it, but I mouth my apologies to Sam. He gives me a dirty look in return.

Once we reach the gates of the mansion, Edier hangs back, and I walk the rest of the way alone. We can’t risk being seen together, but before we part, he murmurs a plan and a dirty promise that has my stomach churning with anticipation. There’s magic in this moonlight, and I intend to embrace it. Whatever the reasons he’s been keeping his distance have been pushed aside.

The party’s still in full swing as I creep closer. The alcohol is flowing,

and the live band has advanced to a cheesy 'B' set list that always has the dance floor buzzing. I'm clearly not missed, and that's okay. It was never about me, anyway. This was all for the man who gave me my first kiss a half hour ago. The same man who's about to take and break my innocence.

Circumnavigating the marquee, I enter the mansion via the living room doors. I nearly make it to the stairs undetected when I collide with my mother coming the other way. One look at my soaking wet hair and smeared mascara and she's up in orbit with worry.

"Ella, what in God's name happened to you?"

"Long story. How's *Papá*?"

"Calming down, but he might not stay that way if he sees you like this." Taking my hand, she whisks me up the stairs and into my bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind us. "Tell me the highlights, and then I'll leave you in peace."

"I went for a late-night swim. I feel fine. It was bliss, and now I'm going to bed."

"Who with?"

I gape at her, until realizing she's asking who I went to the beach with.

"No one. I, er, went by myself."

"Has this got anything to do with your sister?" she asks suspiciously. "I went in to say goodnight to her, and she was taking a shower at one a.m."

I stifle a grin. "That's not a bad idea."

"Then straight to sleep." She gently cups my cheek. "You need it more than most. And don't forget your meds... Happy birthday, sweetheart. I hope you had the best night."

It's been great so far, but it's not over yet.

I stay in the shower for ages, scrubbing and shaving every inch of me as my thoughts threaten to split me apart like atoms. I can't think about all the sexy, confident women Edier's been with or I'll die of nerves. Nor can I think about who he is or what he's done, otherwise I'll be knowingly giving my virginity away to a sinner.

In the end, I empty my head. It's too scary a place to be lost in right now.

Switching off the shower, I towel dry my hair, and line my meds up on the bathroom vanity. Five white pills. Two blue. Two orange. Small, yet mighty, like tic-tacs and promises.

I'm swallowing the last one when there's a muted thump from my bedroom. Stepping out of the En Suite, I go to switch the side lamp on when

a huge hand clamps over my mouth, and I'm shoved up against the wall by a growl and a shadow.

"Don't scream yet, *Mi Cielo*," murmurs a voice, roughened by liquor and lust. "Let me give you a reason to do so first." In one wicked movement, he rips my towel away, leaving me naked in front of him. "Jesus Christ," he hisses, dropping his gaze to take me all in. "It's too late to change your mind, Ella. You're all mine to wreck and ruin now... Get on the bed."

I hesitate at his order.

Seizing my upper arm, he spins me around and delivers a stinging smack to my ass.

"Ow!" I gasp, shocked to the core, but unbearably turned on by it at the same time.

"Do as I say, or that happens again," he threatens. "And keep your voice down or I'll gag you. You're not fucking a college boy tonight. You're fucking a man." He catches sight of my expression and smirks. "You said you wanted this, remember?"

"You want this too," I rasp. "I know you do... Ow!"

He delivers another smack that's dangerously close to the apex of my thighs, jolting me with pleasure and causing a trickle of wetness to smear across my skin.

Holy moly, what was that?

"Look at your perfect ass pinking up for me already." He nuzzles my neck as he traps me against the wall again with his huge frame. His stubble is leaving delicious marks. His hot breath is scorching my skin. "This is your punishment for making me want you so badly all sense and reason is going up in flames. Do you have any idea what I'm risking by being here tonight?"

"More," I choke, my breath coming out in sharp, shallow gasps. He's the first person who hasn't treated my body like glass in years, and I'm craving the novelty like a drug. My legs are shaking, and I can't seem to think straight.

"More?" He chuckles darkly. "And I haven't even crushed your cherry yet."

A shiver courses down my spine. His words are bordering on sadistic, and my father's warning swirls around my head.

"He's damaged, mija..."

But so am I, Papa. So am I... I shouldn't crave his pain and pleasure, and all the filthy and debasing things his touch promises, but I do.

Walking unsteadily over to the bed, I slide between the white sheets as instructed, but he rips the top one away immediately, leaving me shivering and exposed on the mattress.

“There’s nowhere to hide.” He gives me another of those wicked smirks. “By tomorrow, there won’t be a part of you that hasn’t been fucked by me.”

I hug my knees to my chest as he stands at the foot of the bed and slowly unbuttons the dress shirt he stole from Sam. It’s dark in here, but the amber glow from the En Suite is casting shapes and backlighting the show. His face is expressionless as he loses the garment, and I feast on everything he’s offering—the dusting of black hair, the hard ridges and ripples of muscle, the livid white scars on his tan skin, and the huge tribal sun tattoo that covers most of the right side, rising up to his neck and down past his wrist.

His pants are next to go, and he bobs free, erect, and freaking massive.

I can't do this. I can't—

“Come here,” he orders, as if sensing my panic.

Reluctantly, I crawl toward him.

Bending down he takes my face between his hands, running the rough pads of his thumbs across my cheeks. “Are you scared?”

I nod.

“You should be,” he admits, his voice tinged with regret. “I don’t fuck gentle, even for you, *Mi Cielo*. I’m not sure I’m capable of it, but I’ll make sure you’re so wet first the pain will be fleeting.”

I nod again, biting my lip.

“Have you ever seen a hard cock before?”

I shake my head, my eyes darting to his. It’s thick and veiny, and so swollen it looks uncomfortable, with a clear liquid already leaking from the tip.

“Touch it.”

Hesitantly, I curl my fingers around the velvety girth, and he groans. I start to pump, and more of that clear liquid trickles out.

“Kiss it.”

He guides my head toward him, and I wrap my lips around the crown, flicking my tongue over the little slit, tasting the ocean and something else that’s salty.

His hands move to the back of my head, fisting my hair, and locking me in place. “Do you like that, Ella?” he says roughly. “Stuffing your tiny mouth with my cock?” He encourages me to take him deeper and I oblige, choking

when he starts to thrust, and spitting up saliva all over him.

Instead of being disgusted by it, he only groans harder and thrusts faster.

“Keep going like that and you’ll be tasting more of my cum.” Pulling out, he pushes me back down on the bed, and then flips me onto my front. “All fours. Now.”

I scramble to obey, whimpering when I feel the heat of his breath at the crease of my ass. He smacks me again anyway, pitching me forward with a muffled shriek as my skin bursts into flames.

“So pretty with my handprints all over you,” he croons, kneeling behind me. “You’ll look even better with my cum spilling from your holes.”

Another smack has my core vibrating with need.

Oh my god this is insane. INSANE. I feel like I’m free falling into the most delicious sin.

With another helpless whimper, I drop my head between my shoulders and widen my legs to show him just how desperate I am.

“Look at you all swollen and needy,” he breathes. “Such a good girl for me already. And good girls get rewarded.” Sliding his palms between my legs, he gently pulls my lips apart, and murmurs his approval. “I’m just going to hold you open like this and watch you drip all over the bed for me.”

“Please, Edier,” I gasp out, squirming to bring his fingers closer to the epicenter of all this madness. *Just one single touch and I’ll ignite.*

“Don’t beg.”

“I hate you,” I sob.

“Not yet, but you will.”

Before I can ask him what he means by that, he runs his tongue down through the crease of my ass, circling where he shouldn’t, and then—*hell no*—pushing inside me.

“Oh my—stop!” My face is red hot with embarrassment as I try to squirm away. “You can’t kiss me *there!*”

“I can kiss you anywhere I like,” he growls, digging his fingers into my hips to hold me still. “I can fuck you anyway I like too.” At this, his tongue slides over the tense ring of muscles again. The sensation is so powerful I rock forward on my elbows in a futile attempt to control the chaos going on between my legs.

When his tongue moves lower, I’m a quivering wreck, plateaued somewhere between heaven and hell—and then he’s driving a finger inside me. I yelp at the sharp, twisty pain, and he sucks in a sharp breath.

“Shit, you’re tight. I need to work you more, *Mi Cielo*.”

His finger slips out, and then his mouth is finally where I need him the most.

The second he wraps his lips around *that* part of me, my whole world flips and shatters, burning me up from the inside out. There’s a scream coming from somewhere in the room before his hand is smothering my mouth again.

“Swallow it down,” he orders harshly. “Feel it everywhere. You look so stunning right now, Ella. So fucking beautiful when you come. We’re black and gold forever.”

Black and gold?

I’m vaguely aware of being flipped over again, and then of my legs being pulled apart. When the foggy haze clears, I’m flat on my back, staring up at an angel and a devil.

“Welcome back,” he murmurs, dipping his head. His hard kisses tastes of my pleasure and his violence. “I ripped that orgasm from you so hard, you came all over my face.”

I go rigid when I feel a damp patch on the mattress beneath me too. “Did I-I wet myself?”

His lips twitch, softening his dark intensity. “No, *Mi Cielo*, you did something that was fucking *flawless*.”

“That was...”

“Just the beginning.” He drops his mouth to my nipple and rolls the tip between his teeth. “I’m planning to corrupt these next.”

But I’m too impatient to have him inside me.

Wrapping my hand around his cock, I guide him toward my entrance. “I’m ready.”

“It’s going to hurt like a bitch.”

“You think I don’t know pain?” Lining him up, I smear his cock with the residue of my orgasm. “One difference. This time, I’m welcoming it.”

“You’re killing me, Ella,” he says with a groan. “My self-control is fucked. I can’t...” He trails off with another curse. Every muscle in his body is straining to hold him back. “Tell me you’re on birth control.”

“Would you stop if I wasn’t?” Lifting my hips, he slides in until he meets resistance. Cursing me out some more, he bites down on his bottom lip so hard, his teeth rip through the flesh.

This is more than us dancing on the edge of something... This is me and

him going under.

“No,” he hisses, his hands curling into tight fists around mine. “*Fuck.*”

“Yes,” I whisper, tipping my head back and opening my legs wider. “Fall apart for me, Edier. The way I fell apart for you.”

EDIER

SLAMMING my mouth down onto hers, I drive all the way inside her virgin pussy, not just taking her innocence, but fucking eviscerating it.

I'd planned on slow and steady. Then, I lost my mind. Having her beneath me, so open and so sentient, is bringing out the base animal in me. Just because I wear a four-thousand-dollar suit doesn't mean I'll act like a gentleman in this bed when the treat on offer is priceless.

It's too much for her.

Too soon.

Her back arches as she whimpers and strains to accommodate me. When I have a rare flash of conscience and try to pull back, her fingernails dig welts into my back.

"Don't you dare stop!" she gasps out. "Finish what you started, Edier Grayson, or else."

"Or else what?" I murmur, my taunt grazing her cheek.

"I don't know yet, but I'll think of something." At this, I roll my hips to slide in that final inch and she's choking out a response, "Oh my God!"

The words on my lips aren't as eloquent. I'm buried so deep inside her I'm burning up on her sunshine. The heat around my cock is shooting straight to the base of my spine. When I was younger, I used to screw women for hours and feel nothing. With her, I feel every-damn-thing, and I haven't even started fucking her yet.

Holding her head steady, I kiss away her reluctant tears. She feels so delicate beneath me, so fragile—

"Move," she urges through gritted teeth.

“Not yet.”

“Yes, yet.”

“I’m in control here, *Mi Cielo*, not you.”

That’s when her inner muscles start squeezing my cock, and I’m left pushing back a tide that’s perilously close to consuming me.

“Okay, you asked for it.” Easing out a couple of inches, I go to slam back into her, when she whispers my name in the darkness.

I pause, thinking how pure it sounds coming from her—like the offer of religious salvation, but without the quid pro quo.

“I’m so happy it’s you.” She lifts her head from the bed to meet my lips.

“You won’t be when you can’t walk straight in the morning.”

“Is that another-*ah!*” She trails off as I drive in, balls-deep, turning her sweet sass into another scream for me to swallow. I repeat my action on the downstroke, taking her so hard the back of her head crushes the pillow.

“Don’t make me say it,” she rasps, wrapping her legs around my waist, her small hands gripping my shoulders.

Thrust.

“Say what?”

Thrust.

“A bad word.”

“A bad *word?*” I grind against her, eliciting another precious gasp.

“I have a record to maintain.”

I drag my mind back over this evening. Not one curse word has left her mouth. Not one single profanity. “Is that a challenge?”

“Don’t you dare...”

Rolling my hips again, I make sure every part of her pussy feels me, and she cries out in response. “Say it,” I taunt. “Say you want me to *fuck* you harder.”

“Oh God...”

“You keep saying his name, *Mi Cielo*, but with all due respect, he’s not the one splitting you in half.”

Thrust.

“H-harder.” She chokes on the word and my smirk widens.

“Tell me how good I feel.” She arches her back again as I jackhammer into her a couple of times before showing some monster restraint and slowing. “Tell me all about how you’ll be sitting at the breakfast table tomorrow morning with daddy, with your panties soaked in my cum.”

Her breath is coming out in shallow little gasps. “Please, Edier.”

I give her what she wants—a whole minute of it—reaching between us to play with her clit, which has her digging her heels into my ass.

When I sense she’s close, I ease up the pace again like a bastard.

She moans and tips her head back.

“All you need to do is—”

“Fuck me.” Her voice is barely audible. A reluctant concession.

“Louder,” I order.

“Fuck me,” she croaks, and a surge of triumph courses through me. The more I push her, the more she opens up, and the more I’m basking in her sunshine.

After that, our bodies blur. I’m chasing a high I’ve never felt before, never slowing my pace even when her pussy starts pulsing around me.

In turn, she whimpers as my cock jerks inside her. Biting down on her shoulder, I bury my face in her hair—forcing myself to remember everything about this moment, and when I start free-falling into a place that used to be oblivion for me, I realize it feels strangely close to paradise with her.

In the end, it’s not just me that falls apart. We fall apart together.

I'D PLANNED to leave the second she fell asleep, but I'm still here, hours later, lying in the darkness and fighting dawn. Recognizing that each passing minute is a countdown to a war I don't have a chance of winning.

She's exhausted, but she's fighting alongside me, one arm strewn across my chest and her left hand resting on my heart.

"I'm waiting," she mumbles, barely stirring.

"Waiting for what?" Pulling her on top of me, I bury my face in her hair again, breathing in citrus and something dangerously close to serenity.

"For you to think I'm dead to the world, and then slip away like a thief."

"I don't slip anywhere, *Mi Cielo*. I make noise and cause dissidence."

Resting her chin on her arm, she studies me for a moment, our faces so close I'm basking in her every exhale. Her black hair is a gorgeous, freshly fucked mess and it suits her, but only when it's me who's made it that way. "Admit it, you had no intention of opening our box of secrets. You figured you'd be long gone by then."

"Bullshit. I opened your box plenty last night."

Her grin fades as fast as it appears. "I've tried so hard to remember that last day in Colombia. All I have are sketchy memories of you drawing frogs and then of waking up in a bathroom with my parents and a gazillion doctors around me. Did something else happen?"

"I got drunk."

"Was that after I was taken to hospital, or while I was still lying on the floor?"

"Ella..." The tone of my voice is a warning.

“Why didn’t you visit me before you went to Europe?”

“Box,” I grit out, like it’s some kind of a bastard safe word. “Now, kiss me, or face the consequences of defying me.”

My phone beeps, but I ignore it. The three Bratva *patsans* I have strung up in a warehouse in Red Hook will have to wait a while longer for my justice. This isn’t the time or place for slaughter talk. It’s the land of lost innocence and regret, at least until sunrise.

“Do you think there’s magic in the moonlight?” she muses suddenly, glancing at the window.

“If there is, let’s not ruin it by overanalyzing it.”

“I blame Selene.”

“Is that an anagram, or a subtext?” I brush my fingers over the silky-smooth curves of her ass, resisting the urge to dig my fingers in and bind us together forever.

“She was a lunar goddess. Susceptible to spells and stuff. When she disappeared each morning, the Greeks believed a curse had sent her light away. Hey, maybe whatever magic that keeps her high in the sky...” She trails off and blushes. “Sorry, I’m doing it again.”

“Never apologize. I love your pretty little digressions. Smart women make me hard.”

“Everything makes you, ah, hard.”

“Smart woman,” I correct coolly. “And you’d be surprised how selective he is.”

“Do you usually talk about *him* in the third person?”

“It’s a requisite when it’s so big. It won’t fit in first person narrative.” She laughs and I can’t drag my eyes away. “I was making you nervous again?”

She nods. “You looked like you wanted to eat me alive and—*oh*.” I catch her mouth in that kiss I’ve been craving, and she melts into my embrace. “You’re such a bad influence,” she says with a sigh. “Before this evening I’d never made a rash decision in my life.”

“Or used bad words, apparently. Now, put those soft lips back on mine. I decide when we stop this, not you.”

“You’re very dictatorial as well.”

“The only word I heard in that sentence was ‘dick’.”

“Stop pretending to be some dumb, sex-obsessed mobster! You’re so much more than that.”

How does she do that?

How does she see the good in me when all that's left is bad?

Depositing her on the mattress, I rise from the bed and walk naked into the bathroom. Returning with a damp towel, I whip the white bedsheet away again.

“Open your legs.”

Her eyes widen. “I really don’t think—”

“No dicks. Just this.” Prizing her knees apart, I press the towel to her swollen pussy, and she closes her eyes with a wince.

“Is it always like that? Sex, I mean.”

“What, painful?”

“No, perfect.” She rolls her eyes at my smirk. “Be honest.”

Short answer? *Never*. What she and I just made was a sexual supernova, and nothing but a lifetime of shitty lays awaits her after this.

“I figured as much,” she mutters, reading my silence like a book.

Meanwhile, the image of her with another man is so fucking wrong I can’t blink it away.

“How many women have you been with?”

“What the hell is this? *Heartbreak High*?”

“It’s a serious question.”

“And I’m pissed you’re even asking it.”

I’m tempted to tell her that none of them mattered. That their names are inconsequential, just petty scrawls on a wall that she tore down all by herself this evening.

Not like this. Not like her.

“That many, huh?” she says, sounding hurt. And young. *So goddamn young*.

Truth is, there’s been no one in six years.

Tossing the towel away, I dip my head between her legs and bury my face in her sweetness. The scent we make together is intoxicating. Her fingers are tangled up in my hair and tugging gently.

“Just answer me one more thing. Did you ever smile for them?”

“I don’t smile for anyone.” I glare at her to prove the point.

“You used to...for me.”

“That was different. We were kids.”

“You did earlier. It was fleeting, but it was there. Right after you made me...”

“Come?”

“Hmm, yes that.”

“Say it.”

She shakes her head and seals her lips tight.

“Say it.”

“Edier...”

“Come, come, come,” I chant wickedly, sweeping a finger over her pussy and bringing it up to her mouth. “Taste it for yourself.”

Those soft lips part obediently, and I force my digit in so deep she chokes. Recovering fast, she sucks tentatively, swirling her tongue over the tip, as I watch transfixed. I’m hard already. No, it’s more than that...I’m goddamn *aching*.

“*Mi Cielo*,” I warn, my voice thick with need. “Don’t start something you can’t finish.”

She pops free of my finger, then lifts her hips to make her intentions clear—her pussy wet and gleaming in the dim light. “Try me.”

It’s too beautiful a sight to refuse.

Dipping my head between her legs again, I flick her another look. “You really want this? For me to taste the cum we made in this bed together? To drive my tongue inside your puss—no—*cunt* so deep, I’ll be breathing it in more than air?” I feel her clenching helplessly at that word. “I may be a bad influence, but your body’s loving every dirty second of it.” Sliding my finger inside her, I turn my wrist one-eighty, to press down on her spongy heat. At the same time, I brush my thumb over the tip of her clit, and she jumps a mile high.

“Hold still.”

“I’m trying,” she grits out, “but it’s not easy when you’re shooting electric volts into me. Your fingers are like conductors of torture.”

I smirk and repeat my actions. *She has no idea*.

This time, she trembles, but she doesn’t move away.

“Good girl. Better.”

As a reward, I pump my finger in and out a couple of times, pushing my cum deeper and deeper inside her with every stroke. I’m fighting the urge to push it in so far it stays forever—hidden from the world and from *bruja* curses—but that’s just a bullshit fantasy.

Her nails dig into her thighs as she rocks her hips before it all gets too intense and her hand is flying above her head to grip the corner of the pillowcase. Her rhythm is mesmerizing, just like everything else about her.

Her back is arching higher and higher off the bed as those waves start to build.

Moving up her body to kiss her, I groan when her other hand finds my cock.

“Shit.”

“More!”

One finger becomes two. At the same time, she works me so damn hard my breathing is as labored as hers.

She spirals with a cry, and I follow after, fresh ropes of my cum striping her pale stomach and pussy as for one exquisite moment nothing else exists but this.

Her.

Me.

Us.

I could love her. My eyes fly open at that dangerous thought. *In this room, right now, I could rip myself wide open for her. I'd kill for her, die for her...*

It's exposing a secret, no matter how deep I've buried it, or how inconvenient I find it.

Turns out, I have a beating, bleeding heart after all.

SHE FALLS ASLEEP IMMEDIATELY. MARKED, CLAIMED, AND SATED. HER PALE arms are strewn across the mattress, as if reaching out for something unseen. The white bedsheet is tangled up in her legs, covering a part of her I can't seem to get enough of.

Dragging it up to her chest, I press my lips to her forehead before dressing in Sam's suit pants and shirt and scooping my phone off the floor. The magic she spoke of is fading fast, the edges curling like burning paper as I scroll through a message from Gabrio.

I don't have a second-in-command right now, not after my last one took a bullet to the gut last month, but Gabrio's as close as it gets. He's keeping order until Sam fixes his tooth and his attitude. His place by my side is assured, but he's got some growing up to do first. Still, despite everything, I've always liked the arrogant little shit. He's loyal, and he's shrewd, and I

know he won't hesitate in pulling the trigger when the orders come down.

Border patrol caught Sidorov attempting to flee NY. The Russian's a mess. Keeps acting like his number with the Devil just got called and he's allergic to fire.

Sidorov? The Bratva Pakhan?

Now I'm intrigued. When one crime boss starts running like a little bitch, the others sit up and take note.

I tap a reply.

Is he loaded?

Gabrio responds right away.

More like scared shitless. He's gibbering about something. Don't know what language he's speaking though. Whatever it is ain't Russian or English.

I grit my teeth as the ugliness of my business creeps into Ella's room. This is one thing I'll always admire Santiago for. He keeps his daughters in the eye of the storm, but still manages to shield them from the worst of him. They know he's a cartel kingpin, and I'm guessing they know all about the huge bounty the FBI, the CIA, and Interpol have on his head, but he's never gutted a man from dick to sternum in front of them. He shows them just enough of himself to keep the truth alive, but anything else is a smokescreen.

Not me.

I know exactly who he is.

I've seen his darkness because I'm only two steps behind him, contending with my own.

Be there soon. Make him sing.

Sliding my phone into my pocket, I spark up a cigarette with the old Zippo Aiden gave me. After that, I'm prowling around the bedroom, smoking fast, trailing ash and conflict like gray confetti.

I'm restless to go. Restless to stay.

Outside, dawn is bleeding indigo across the sky and it's my least favorite color.

Moving over to her desk, I sift through a surface that's scattered with literary classics, pens without lids, and half-finished essays, and then my eyes are lingering on a stash of pencils.

Moments later, I'm flicking the cigarette butt out of the window, and one of those pencils is skimming across an empty page, capturing the dips and curves of the young woman sleeping in front of me until I'm satisfied with

the result. No picture could ever do her justice, and I'm rusty as fuck, but I draw enough to keep a perfect memory alive.

Ripping out the page, I slide it into the pocket of Sam's shirt and head back into the bathroom. Splashing water on my face, I rake a wet hand through my hair, and steal a look in the mirror above the sink. There's a grown man staring back at me, but I don't recognize him. He looks angry. Trapped. Weighed down by a consequence that trails him like a shadow.

"Fuck you," I mutter at his reflection, as another message comes in from Gabrio.

Semenov is dead.

Drip, drip.

Can you feel it coming, Edier?

How?

I glance at the man in the mirror again to see a killer and a liar glaring back.

He went for Arturo's knife. Slit his own throat before we could stop him.

Drip, drip.

Why d'you really kill yourself, Mamá? Was it because I couldn't be saved or because of the deal I made to get us out of there?

"Fuck you," I mutter again, tapping out my reply.

On my way.

Something, or someone, has the entire Bratva network abandoning New York in droves. For the past month, they've been rising up from the underground and taking flight like insects before a storm, and I want to know why.

I turn to leave the bathroom and catch sight of all the script boxes and pill bottles lined up on her vanity. The sheer volume of them makes my stomach lurch, and for the first time in six years I taste real fear.

I wasn't allowed to ask, but now I need to know.

How bad is it, Mi Cielo? Are your organs going to fail? Is it life-limiting? When it's bad, does it hurt to breathe and cry?

Sam gave the curse a name earlier.

Lupus.

I glance back at her through the open doorway. She's hardly moved. She's blissfully unaware that in a matter of minutes I'll be gone from her life forever.

But it's my fault she's sick. My fault that I can't figure out why the curse still lingers.

My fault I have to leave.

The house is silent as I make my way downstairs, shrugging into my suit jacket, but leaving my bow tie undone and my hair a tousled mess. Meet me now, and you'll know what I'm guilty of. Meet my eyes, and they'll blind you with my contradiction.

The walls are rose gold. The sun is almost up. The valet will be long gone, but I always keep a spare car key in my pocket for a quick getaway. I'm just hoping the good senator didn't notice an extra Ferrari parked amongst his Vanquishes and Lamborghinis when he stumbled up to bed last night.

I head for the door and I'm a meter out when a nine-inch hunting knife comes breezing past my face and buries itself deep in the woodwork in front of me.

Holy—

“At least you had the balls to *try* and walk out the front door like a man,” comes a mocking voice from behind me. “If I'd caught you climbing out her window, I would have killed you, then and there.”

Santiago.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I swing around on a hard swallow as he emerges from the shadows, his expression far darker than the place he's just come from.

“I didn't realize there'd be a twenty-one-gun salute celebrating my departure,” I clip back, bracing myself for the end. The man just caught me walking out on his daughter, reeking of sex and guilt. There's no coming back from this.

“Not twenty, just one,” he corrects, prowling toward me, stinking of bourbon and retribution. He's a tall bastard with at least twenty-five years on me, but I'd never make the mistake of thinking my age was an advantage. “Besides, I've always preferred a blade over a gun. You can't carve hate into a man's flesh in as much detail with a bullet.”

He cruises to a stop in front of me to yank his knife out of the door. I stand like a statue as he mimics slitting my throat, the blade coming in a little too close for comfort—catching the skin covering my jugular with a vicious flick of his wrist—and drawing first blood. It's just a trickle, a mere tributary, but we both know it'll be oceans by the time the day is through.

Was she worth it?

Every touch, every second. No question.

“Silly girl,” he says, clicking his tongue in irritation. “I warned her to leave this at the party, not to take it upstairs and lay with it.”

I know better than to ask him what he means by that.

“Did you fuck her?”

I also know better than to answer loaded questions.

His black eyes narrow at my silence. We glare at each other as the seconds tick by ominously, and then he’s taking half my jaw off with his first hit. The second slams the back of my head into the wall so hard I’m seeing stars.

Damn, he hits hard.

I take it all without retaliation. If any other man took a swing at me, they’d be lying in a morgue already, but this is my medicine for screwing the boss’s daughter, for dishonoring him and his hospitality, and for that I deserve it all and more.

“You’ve presented me with quite the dilemma, Grayson.” He doubles me over with a brutal hit to my stomach that leaves me hissing and cursing for air. “I should take you on a little trip to Sanders’s basement for what you’ve done, but your last name is your Get-Out-Of-Being-Murdered card today. You can thank your father for that.” Dragging me up by my neck, he pins me to the wall, his face a malevolent mask, and his black eyes as cold as mine. “Not to mention, you’re the best *sicario* I have. In less than a year, you’ve turned the Santiago Cartel into the number one criminal organization in New York City. There’s nothing you wouldn’t do for what you believe in. In that respect, you remind me of myself.”

“Am I meant to be flattered by that?”

His grip on my windpipe tightens. “Does a bastard shit in the woods? No, he takes what he wants, and shits anywhere he likes, only this time you got caught. But I’m not going to kill you, Grayson. Not this time. Instead, I’m going to tell you all about a choice you’ll be making one day.” He lets go of me to straighten my jacket and shirt with a dangerous smile.

“Is this a concession?” I drag myself up to my full height, undecided which is worse: being in his debt, or my father’s. “Are you losing your edge, old man? You know I don’t deserve your mercy.”

“Maybe not, but I have my own debts to pay.”

“You mean to my father.” My lip curls in distaste.

“Him, and one other.”

“Who?”

“See this?” It takes me a second to realize he’s holding up his hand. There’s an ugly, white scar running through the center of his palm, and it pricks at a recently made memory. “This was *my choice*, and one day—maybe tomorrow, maybe in a few years—you’ll be making it for yourself. You see, I’m not like all those mafia cunts who sell their daughters for status. Women aren’t commodities to be bought and sold. Their future happiness isn’t mine to barter for the price of power, or to show the world how big my swinging dick is. I take mine the old-fashioned way, by brute force. Because of this, I swore to my wife that when the time came our daughters would marry for love. Call it a payoff for dragging them up in a world they have no business being in.” He steps closer, his jaw set, his eyes glinting unpleasantly. “Take note of the word ‘marry’, Grayson. It has a number of meanings, many of which I’d prefer not to think about my daughters doing. Do you have any idea how much I’d like to snap your neck for smelling her on you?”

“I’m not going to date or ‘marry’ your daughter anymore, Santiago.”

He nods, as if he’s expecting this. “No, you’re not because you don’t love her.”

“*Hijueputa!*” With a roar of pain, I push him away. “Who the fuck are you to decide that? You may own my gun and my allegiance, but you do *not* own everything.”

His eyebrows shoot up at my reaction, and then I’m spinning sideways from another of his savage uppercuts. “Remember who you’re speaking to, Grayson. It was an interesting reaction though, and it just goes to confirm what I’ve long suspected.”

“Fuck you,” I growl, through bloody teeth.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-three.”

“Old enough to know better, but still young and arrogant enough to think every path you choose is the right one... I’m not disputing that you love her in your own way. You just don’t love her in all the ways she deserves.”

“You have no fucking idea,” I snarl, spitting a mouthful of blood at Sanders’s white marble floor.

He shakes his head and flexes his hand. “You think I don’t know my own daughter? You think I don’t how much she’s been hurting these past six

years, and not known the reason behind it? But here's the thing..." Stepping forward, he grips my jaw between his fingers and forces me to look at him. "You don't love her enough because you hate your past more, and *that's* why you're not good enough for her."

"Bullshit!"

"Maybe when your ego stops cursing me out, you'll shut up and listen. My choice came two decades ago in a room with a Russian trafficker called Sevastien Petrov. I was either walking out of there with him dead, or I wasn't walking out alive."

"So, you killed him."

"No, I traded him," he says, shocking me. *This man feeds off retribution like piranhas feed off flesh.* "I made a choice, and at the time it hurt worse than the knife he'd just stuck through my hand. I traded all my hate to save the woman who's lying upstairs in my bed, and then I wrapped him up in a red bow and I delivered him to the authorities."

"Why the fuck would you do that?"

"My future was more important than my past, so I let it go. Now, it's your turn to do the same. Take this and cut it free. I don't give a fuck how you do it, just get it done."

With a jolt, I realize he's offering me his knife.

"You want me to stick this through my hand?"

"Stick it up your ass for all I care, just so long as you do what I ask. Love her whole. Don't love her with half a heart. Not her, she's too special, and you know it. That's why you're creeping out of this house. You're protecting her somehow, and that's another reason you're still alive."

I take the knife without a word, fighting dark urges.

"Maybe my past isn't so easy to cut loose."

"True." He shrugs nonchalantly, but for him it's a warning sign. "I can see how trapping a hundred men in a church and burning them alive might mess a kid up, but I'm guessing from that permanently haunted look in your eyes, it wasn't the worst of it. I met Hurtados many times before I destroyed him," he adds, filling my stunned silence with his distaste. "I met your birth father too, and if their *sicarios* were anything like them, their deaths shouldn't be a stain on anyone's conscience. I know what they made their kids do. I know what they did to their women. You killed to survive, Grayson, the same as the rest of us. Don't get consumed by it, or you'll end up burning with the rest of them."

“How long have you known?” I say roughly.

“A while.”

“Does my father know?”

Clicking his tongue again, he glances away. “It wasn’t my decision to send you away six years ago, so read into that what you will.”

I laugh bitterly at this.

All my adoptive father needed to do was listen, but he couldn’t even give me that.

All I needed to do was talk.

I push that thought away immediately.

“It was his way of trying to fix things. Personally, I couldn’t give a damn what goes down between you and him so long as it doesn’t affect the business. Have your teenage daddy tantrums on your own time. Now, get out of my sight before I change my mind about this.”

“Sidorov is dead. He took his own life after we caught him at the border.”

He pauses. “So, I heard. Head down to the docks and see if those Bratva *patsans* you have hanging from the rafters can shed any light on what’s happening... And Grayson?” He grabs my arm and slams me back against the door. “Figure out a way to kill your past fast or get used to the torture. Turns out, my daughter is as smart and devious as she is beautiful, and she’s about to make all our lives interesting.” His expression darkens. “She’s moving to New York. She starts at NYU in the fall.”

The ground gives way beneath my feet.

No. Fuck. No.

Not the same city, Mi Cielo. You’ll be in constant danger. I’ll be a constant threat.

Santiago’s gaze flickers dispassionately over my face, taking in the reaction I’m not quick enough to hide.

Moments later, he’s shattering my left cheekbone with his final stamp of disapproval.

PART III

THE PROMISE

EDIER

Present Day

Ella, 21, Edier, 27,

“ARE YOU INTO FOREPLAY, Señor Grayson, or are you here to fuck?”

The woman skims her palms across the dove-gray satin sheets and juts out her breasts, the neckline of her dress barely covering her modesty. “I’ll keep my heels on, if you like? All you need to do is slide my panties to the side and...*mmm*.” Catching her lip between her teeth, she lets it slip free with another tortured moan, before adding huskily, “I bet your cock is as big as your reputation.”

So is my gun, I’m tempted to add, but I haven’t decided on her fate yet.

Maybe she’ll live.

Maybe she’ll die.

Maybe she’ll open her fucking mouth and give me what I really came here for.

She stretches out her next moan like it’s the purr of a Harley. “I’ve never had a man in that *other place* before and I want *you* to be the first.”

It’s an open invite to take, but there’s nothing about her body I want. So, I ignore her, flicking the lid of an old metal lighter between my fingers as I stay seated in the chair opposite the bed, with a cock that’s as dead as my heart.

No twitch.

Not even a semi.

There’s only one woman who turns me to stone, and she’s not a whore in

a hotel suite on the Upper East Side...

An establishment that I happen to own, amongst numerous other businesses, legitimate and otherwise, in the tri-state area.

“You don’t say much, do you?” She pouts playfully, treating my indifference as a challenge. “What if I was to show you what you’re missing out on?” With a coy smile, she flips onto all fours, delivering her ass to me on a plate.

I’ve had enough.

“Stop.” My tone sends a visible shiver down her spine. “I suggest you *sit*, sweetheart, preferably on that ass, instead of waving it in the breeze like a flag.”

She glares at me over her shoulder, forgetting herself, *forgetting her orders*, and then she remembers—panic flooding her expression as she scrambles to obey. She knows who I am and what I’ve done. Most of all, she knows what I’m capable of, and that there isn’t a cop in the whole of New York City who can touch me for it.

“Good,” I murmur, when she’s sitting up all straight and prissy like a churchgoer in the front row pew. “*Now*, we can talk.”

“Do you mean ‘talk’ as in ‘dirty talk’?”

“No, the other kind.”

I watch her fingernails dig cavities into the mattress. “Don’t you w-want me to suck your—”

“No.”

“That figures.”

“What figures?” I snap the lid of the Zippo shut with a vicious finality.

She stares down at it for a long moment, as though her own thoughts are a puzzle to her. “When you look at me it’s not my face you’re seeing. There’s a woman.” *The only woman*. “Are you married?”

“None of your business.” I push an exquisite memory of black and gold to the back of my mind. “But you’re correct about one thing: when I look at you, I see words, not action.” Slowly, I remove the gun from the inside of my jacket. “Not unless we’re counting blood sports.”

She licks her lips in fear. “*This* is how you get off?”

“I’m not into snuff, sweetheart.” My expression hardens. “But I *am* interested in Colombian drug mules who pose as whores to get close enough to kill me.”

She freezes, the penny dropping.

“Don’t,” I murmur when she tries to stand—my Glock already pointing at her head. “I suggest you sit down again and tell me who sent you.”

“You know who sent me,” she whispers, her earlier confidence blown to hell.

I see the girl underneath it now:

Scared.

Young.

Expendable.

“I want his real name in ten seconds, or you’ll be learning first-hand how I punish rival rats who make unsanctioned coke runs into my territory... Not to mention those who have the balls to think they can execute me in my own city.”

“You don’t understand.” Her face crumples. “He’ll curse me. He’ll curse my family.”

Curse?

My blood runs cold at this.

“Who will?”

“Don’t make me say it.” She drops to her knees in front of me and clasps her hands together. “Please, God, please, please, I’m begging you.”

Leaning forward, I press the muzzle of my Glock to her forehead just in case she didn’t get the memo the first time around.

“*El Alquimista.*” Her eyes dart to the door in terror as she stutters his name. “In English it means—”

“The Alchemist,” I interrupt grimly, watching her flinch a mile high, as though I just chanted ‘Voldemort’ at a fucking Harry Potter convention. “Yes, I might have heard of him.”

Black magic is the number one religion for our enemies in South America, and *El Alquimista* is their self-appointed dark god. For those craving absolution for their sins, he sells them a lie and a couple of dead rooster feet to make them sleep easier at night.

What they fear the most, they follow blindly.

We ignored him until he started perpetuating his own bullshit. His legend grew, and now he’s a problem. For the last couple of years, he’s been preaching wealth, sex, and forgiveness to anyone willing to help bring down the Santiago Cartel...

The number one Colombian cartel.

The organization the man who adopted me has dedicated his life to.

The organization I've pledged my own allegiance to, albeit for less altruistic reasons.

In short, *El Alquimista* got greedy, and now he wants a piece of our power.

I glance at the girl again. She's one of his disciples. I've been tracking her for months, and I've known about her plan for weeks. There are cameras in every corner of this room, and twelve of my best *sicarios* are right outside the door, but none of them are as lethal as me.

All I need is El Alquimista's true identity from you, sweetheart, and then I can end him for good.

"They say he sent one of his *bruja* to curse you when you were a boy," she blurts out suddenly. "They say she damned you to walk alone. To bring pain and misery to anyone who dares to love you."

The walls spin.

Long-suppressed emotions start slashing at my insides like razor-wire: Guilt. Anger. *Failure*.

I'm back in Colombia again, aged seventeen, stuck in a memory, with my arms wrapped around sunshine.

Twelve hours later, my arms will be full of her screams.

"I suggest you shut your goddamn mouth if you plan on getting out of here alive."

The girl's eyes fill with tears. "It is too late for me, but there's still time to set her free. If not, *El Alquimista* will do terrible things to her."

He already has.

Jesus. *Fuck*.

"Tell me who he is!" I roar, as my past and present collide for the second time in my life.

"He is the fear," she mutters, leaning into the muzzle of my gun, a dangerous calm settling over her face. "He is the destruction of all of us."

She moves so fast I don't feel her finger pressing down on mine until my bullet is exiting her skull. Reeling backward in my chair, I hear her final words as clear as day as the metallic stench of loss and emptiness fills the hotel suite:

"He knows what you promised, Edier Grayson, and he's coming to collect."

“*CARPE DIEM*, PEOPLE. RISE AND SHINE!”

There’s a collective groan of dissent around the office as our Editor-in-Chief, Rob Willis, appears in his office doorway, clutching his perennial mug of coffee with the immortal words, ‘To cut a long story short,’ blazoned across the front.

There must be something juicy on the horizon because he never calls his morning meetings before seven a.m. His favorite diner doesn’t start serving his favorite Asiago bagels until six thirty, and he’s fastidious about starting the day on a full stomach.

“*Carpe Diem*, people,” he rumbles again, as people slowly emerge from behind their desks and cubicles, blinking back late nights and the aftereffects of teething babies. “The news doesn’t wait for the hungover and the underpaid.”

“You got that right,” mutters Ivy from the desk opposite, continuing to speed type as she rises from her chair. “There, it’s done.” She brings her finger down on the ‘send’ button like it’s the mother of all condemnations. “Nothing says, ‘we’re over’ more than a hastily written email with seven typos before breakfast.”

“What did Chester do this time?” Grabbing my pen, notebook, and folder, I balance them carefully in one hand, leaving the other free to tip caffeine down my throat at warp speed.

“He ‘forgot’ last night’s dinner date with his mother, who, incidentally, makes Kris Jenner look like Matriarch of the Year. I had to sit through two hours of lectures about the dangers of pre-marital sex over cold carbonara

and a glass of red wine that tasted like something had curled up and died inside it along with my soul. Did I mention that she's a close relation of Ebenezer Scrooge?"

"Sounds hell." I give her an eye roll of female solidarity, though I know she'll have forgiven Chester by lunchtime. By evening, she'll most likely be wearing her engagement ring again. She and her fiancé have the kind of relationship that gives onlookers whiplash.

"We need to move." Marching straight past my desk, she beckons me to follow. "No one wants to be blamed for causing Rob's fourth heart attack in four years."

"I'm coming," I mutter, bombing after her in my scuffed black Chucks, trying not to think about the half an espresso that I'm wearing down the front of my white shirt, or how I'd fooled myself into thinking my hair didn't need washing at five a.m. this morning in my sleep-deprived, delusional state of mind.

In short, I look a mess, but I'm amongst kindred spirits here, except for Ivy, who's immaculate as always in a navy-blue pant suit and neon pink heels.

I started as a junior reporter at *The New York Eagle* five months ago, and Ivy was the first to take pity on me. We bonded in the copy room over our mutual love of Fleetwood Mac and Pumpkin Spice Lattes, both of us bemoaning the fact that they should be an all-year thing instead of a Winter tease.

She's been at *The Eagle* for a couple of years, and she's already a fully-fledged reporter—a post I can only dream about as I drown in fact-checking, cold calling, and coffee runs all day. She also has a wicked sense of humor, looks like a pint-sized supermodel with spiky blonde hair, insists on setting me up with disastrous dates who never call me again, and can't understand why I have an apartment on the East Side when everyone knows West is Best.

What's more, she has a twin sister with lupus, so she always knows the right words to say when I'm extra tired, my body's extra sore, and I'm stressing about my latest bloodwork. My flares are becoming more regular, and I'm running a low-grade fever most days. I keep postponing appointments with my rheumatologist because I know what she's going to suggest we try next, and I don't have the mental capacity to deal with that kind of treatment right now.

“How are you holding up, Miller? You quitting on us yet?” Rob grins at me as I squeeze past to enter his office. For anonymity reasons, I used my mother’s last name when I signed my employment contract, and he refuses to call me anything else.

He’s as wide as he is tall, with more hair on his face than on his head, and I’ve never heard anyone say a bad word about him. He’s been in the business for over fifty years, covering everything from the Fall of the Berlin Wall to the aftermath of 9/11, which makes him a certified god and legend around here.

“Not today,” I say with a breezy smile, carrying on a joke that’s been ping-ponging between us since the beginning. “I figured I’d see how the week goes and make my decision on Friday.”

“Don’t leave it too late, eh? Human Resources like to clock out dead on time for the weekend.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.”

Hovering at the back of the room with all the other juniors, we wait for the seats around the oval glass meeting table to be filled. They’re reserved for reporters and various editors, and those whose annual paycheck actually dribbles over thirty thousand a year.

Rob takes his usual place at the head and sizes us all up, one at a time. “Okay, folks and yolks, let’s get cracking.”

A dramatic shift in the Midterm polls takes immediate precedence. Responses are discussed, and interviews mooted for Page One potential. While *The Eagle* is pretty low down on the New York newspaper popularity list, we have a solid reputation for breaking political bombshells and reliable digital content to back it up.

When it comes to filling the rest of the pages, we’re a tenacious group. Well, we don’t have much of a choice with our budget... Rob has a thing about making weak leads newsworthy, especially when it comes direct from a source. “No smoke without fire and poor monetary incentives,” is one of his favorite sayings, so he has me interview and background check every caller, no matter how crazy they are.

Once all the current affairs stories are distributed around the table, we dwindle down to the rumors and gossip and the human interests that make up the rest of the pages. That’s when Rob’s shrewd gray eyes are seeking me out again.

“Miller! Whatcha got for us? Anything good on Twitter with strong

traffic? Any cats stuck up trees on Park Avenue?”

There’s a ripple of amusement at this.

“No cats this time, I’m afraid,” I tell him cheerfully. “But that ‘dog that looks like it’s owner’ thing is trending again.”

More ripples as one of the editors asked Rob if he has a neutered pitbull.

I used to hate speaking in public, but there’s no room for self-consciousness here. Like Ivy’s always telling me, I need to step out of my comfort zone to be taken seriously in journalism, especially as a woman. A paper is a team, and I don’t want to get sidelined.

“Anything else?”

“Well, there is this one thing... Though it’s not really a ‘human interest’. A source from forensics called in a suicide two nights ago. A single gunshot to the head. I checked it out and everything seems legit. Police reports say a body was removed from the five-star *Helios Hotel* on the Upper East Side. No suspicious circumstances.”

“There’s one suicide every five hours in this state, honey. What makes him so special?”

“It’s a woman. They sent me over the initial report about thirty minutes ago. Forensics noted a tattoo on her shoulder and it’s kind of distinctive—”

“How distinctive?”

“Like an ‘A’ intersected with an inverted pentagram—”

“Spooky. And?”

Give him the punchline, Ella. Don’t make him wait for it.

“It’s the same as one they found on another suicide victim at a different *Helios* last month. I remember reading about it in *The Tribune*. Here, I think I kept the clipping...” Flicking through my red folder, I hold it up to show him.

A slow smile spreads across Rob’s face. “Cops caught onto this yet?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“I’ll give my contact a call and check. Let’s keep it quiet, just in case. Good work, beautiful... Ivy?” He turns to my friend. “Go check it out and take Ella with you. She’s earned it. Report back to the mid-afternoon meeting. I want to know if it’s a non-starter... Now, will someone *please* go get me a stash of those fucking bagels before I start eating copy editors.”

Everyone files out of his office and Ivy squeezes my hand as she passes. “Pulitzer within five years, easy-peasy,” she whispers. “Just don’t forget us poor *Eagle*-ers when you have a corner desk at *The Times*.”

I laugh. “I wouldn’t fit in. I like the bargains in Target too much.”

“Miller, hang on a minute.” Rob’s voice pulls me back into the room as Ivy plucks the empty Starbucks cup from my hand and gives me a gentle shove of encouragement before shutting the door on us.

“Is everything okay?”

“Not really.” My heart is in my mouth as I watch him limp over to his desk and drop into his chair with a groan. “I have budget cuts coming out of my ass, bad arthritis in my left knee, a gallstone the size of a golf ball, and my wife’s threatening to send me to fat camp.”

I bite back a relieved smile. “Sounds painful.”

“Not as painful as hemorrhoids, so that’s something.”

Most Editors bark and bite and drool red pen all over everything. Not Rob. He’s more like Santa Clause on a good day, just so long as you keep feeding him newsworthy cookies.

“Moans aside, how are you settling in?”

“Fine. Ivy’s been amazing—”

“Good, because your mom’s worried about you.”

I gape at him in shock. “What...?”

How the hell does he know my mom?

“We worked together in Miami,” he admits, leaning back in his chair and grimacing at the ominous creak. “She was the best investigative reporter I ever had until she went AWOL. I hadn’t heard a word from her in twenty-two years until three months ago when an email showed up in my inbox. She told me that her eldest daughter had just dropped out of NYU, but that she was far more talented than she ever was, and I’d be an idiot if I didn’t snap her up.” He grins. “I always loved your mother’s directness. She’s one in a million.”

“She, er, really said that about me?”

But instead of being flattered, I feel flattened. I was proud to land this job on my own merit. It stings to know it was really nepotism that hired me.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. I wouldn’t have offered you the position on her recommendation alone. I do my own research. Make my own enquiries. Turns out, you were on course to be Valedictorian until you stopped showing up.” He leans forward to steeple his hands on the desk. “Look, it’s none of my business what made you quit. Some kids find the job easier than the classroom, and it seems you’re one of them. Keep going, Miller. You’re living up to the name.”

I’m not good at accepting compliments. It comes from being part of a family where everyone is either brilliant or ruthless and the inbetweeners get

comfortable in second place.

His words mean everything, though.

I've had to fight even harder with my father to stay in New York recently. Each step forward is a new negotiation. It's an exhausting climb, and I'm still nowhere near the summit. I've got so many bodyguards around me I can't breathe out without one of them inhaling it, but maybe, *just maybe*, it's all been worth it.

"Don't be nice to me, Rob," I warn, my voice going all husky and revealing. "I haven't had nearly enough coffee to jitter past my sleep-deprived emotions. If you say anything else, I'll cry."

He scrunches up his face in mock disgust. "Gratitude accepted. Tears are not. Now, go help Ivy find me a story."

TEN MINUTES LATER, I'm sliding into the passenger seat of Ivy's Honda Civic in the parking lot downstairs. The windscreen is fogged-up and the heater's going full blast, but she turns it down the second I close the door.

"What did he say?"

"Told me he has gallstones, but that he wasn't going to fire me anytime soon."

She throws her head back and laughs. "Thank fuck for that. Not about the gallstones, though. They suck. So, I messaged that contact in forensics, but he can't meet until Thursday, so I figured we'd swing by the *Helios*. We can score a couple of Bloody Marys in the bar and an interview with the manager at the same time. Well, maybe I can... You can watch on piously. I know your bloodwork isn't so great right now."

"At eight in the morning?" I say, pretending to look shocked.

She grins and reaches for the stereo. "If it's on the house, I'm drinking it. Even if it's tap water."

While she navigates out of *The Eagle's* cramped parking lot and onto a side street, I check the mirror out of habit for the two familiar black SUVs. As predicted, they slot effortlessly into the traffic, three vehicles behind us. I used to have one private bodyguard, but things didn't turn out so well with him, so now I have three.

I try not to make a fuss about it, just so long as they keep a subtle distance at work. At home, they occupy every apartment on my floor, and I need to check in at least two times a day with my parents. It's claustrophobic existing in such a protective bubble, but if it's what I need to do to keep living a semi-

normal life, so be it.

We turn left at the next block, heading east towards 59th Street and I find I can't stop thinking about what Rob said. I don't know whether to be mad at my mother or hug her to death for what she did. All I know is I need this job like air, and if her influence helped make it happen, I need to swallow it up and continue proving I'm worthy of it.

It's been a whirlwind few months since I dropped out of NYU and Thalia married the World's Most Unsuitable Man, like she joked about doing when she was sixteen in a bedroom in the Hamptons.

The crazy thing is, she did it for me.

She did it because of a tape... Ten whole minutes of stolen, dirty, black and white footage that caused cartel earthquake tremors around the world.

My stomach twists in knots whenever I think about it, so I throw it in a box next to another box from a birthday long ago that I try not to think about at all.

Fortunately, what started out as intense hatred between Thalia and Santi Carrera has grown into a once in a lifetime love affair, the sort I used to dream about having for myself one day. I've never seen her as happy as she is right now, and she deserves every picture-perfect moment of it.

"Swanky AF," I hear Ivy mutter as she parks the Civic alongside three black marble steps flecked with gold, leading up to the entrance of the hotel. The huge doors are tinted the same color, with an elegant, gold-embossed 'H' for 'Helios' etched across each glass panel. Even the valet and the doormen are wearing smart black uniforms fringed with gold, making them look like Soldiers of Hospitality. One steps forward to open her door the second she switches the engine off.

"*The Independent* rated this the best hotel in Manhattan last month," she confides, grabbing her iPhone from the dash. "More like the most expensive... They charge thirty bucks for a bowl of olives in the bar. I did a piece here the night Senator Sanders was re-elected. The afterparty was as insane as the décor."

I bet it was.

Reluctantly, I think back to my eighteenth birthday and the lavish party that he and my family had thrown for me that night.

"The Press was chucked out at nine, but the bar didn't close until six the next morning."

"And now they're pulling dead bodies out of their hotel suites." I gaze up

at the building with an uneasy feeling inside me. Something about this place is pinching at my chest and leaving bruises.

“Welcome to the *Helios*, ladies,” purrs the doorman. “How may I help you with your stay?”

A little white lie and ten bucks later, we’re standing at the front desk and putting in a polite request to speak with the manager. The exquisite black marble has followed us up the steps and into the lobby, and now we’re swimming in a lake of it.

Ivy was right. The décor inside is far more sophisticated than the usual hotel glitz, where gold and glass is vomited everywhere in a bid to sell ‘exclusivity’. It’s tasteful without being bourgeois. Refined without being unwelcoming. Even the pictures on the walls have a post-modernist subtlety about them, and they’re all featuring horizons and suns in various stages of the day.

“Ms. Sanchez... You asked to see me?”

The hotel manager, Mr. Addaman, steps out of his office looking as smooth and stylish as the rest of his establishment. His gaze slides from me to Ivy, quickly assessing that we’re neither rich enough to be a guest, nor submissive enough to be a potential employee, thus making us a potential threat.

Narrowing his eyes, his chest swells, as though he’s shielding his precious hotel from whatever dirt we’re treading in from the sidewalk.

Pretending not to notice, Ivy flashes him her press credentials, which only serves to melt his frozen smile into a watery scowl. “Mr. Addaman, we’d like a comment on the tragic passing of a young female guest of this *Helios* two days ago.”

“We’re a hotel, Ms. Sanchez,” he says, glancing pointedly at the well-dressed patrons checking in either side of us, all clutching their Louis Vuitton. “We have thousands of guests through our door every year, and occasionally tragedies like this occur, through no fault of the *Helios*, I might add. I can assure you that the New York Police Department have conducted a thorough investigation and have concluded that no—”

“Is this your official response?” she interrupts, shoving her iPhone in his face.

“I’d prefer it if you spoke directly to our PR department about that.” Turning to the open-mouthed clerk at the front desk, he hisses out an order that has her diving under her desk for a card.

At the same time, Ivy leans over to me and whispers, “Guy’s a corporate stiff. We’ll get nothing but tight lips from Mr. Frigid. See if you can find the bar. I may need that Bloody Mary after all.”

Slipping away from the front desk, I head for the two shiny gold elevators over by the far wall. From there, I go to follow signs for the *Daystar Brasserie* when the front doors are flung open again, and all the air is sucked out into the sunshine. A huge shadow blows back in, trailing three men in black suits, and a willowy blonde in a red leather pantsuit worth a hundred times more than Ivy’s.

It takes me a second to recognize the shadow, and another to pray for the ground to open and swallow me whole.

Not today.

Not when I’m looking like roadkill.

Edier’s changed since I last saw him. For starters, he’s wearing clothes... An expensive black suit, black shirt and tie, and a murderous expression to match. He’s still just as beautiful, but there’s a cruel twist to his features, an unsmiling brutality that sends a shiver up and down my spine.

We haven’t spoken since the morning of my eighteenth birthday, and though I’d guessed correctly he’d leave before I woke, his second rejection broke something inside me. The bridge back seemed almost impassable after that, especially since we’ve been living in the same city and sharing the same sun. His ghosting seems even crueler somehow. His flat-out refusal to be in the same room as me has cut twice as deep.

He doesn’t see me cringing behind a bright green Pygmy Date Palm, but he spots Ivy right away.

“Get *that* out of here,” he orders his men as he strides right past her, making everyone stare, including two of my bodyguards who are hovering by the concierge desk. “She’s Press. I can smell her bullshit a mile away. If we talk to anyone, we talk to *The Post* and *The Times*, not some piss-take of a media outlet like *The Eagle*.”

“Excuse me?” Instead of slinking back to her Honda Civic like he expect her to, Ivy grows an extra foot in height, purely from indignation. Nothing scares my friend, not even Edier Grayson. She once interviewed a Death Row inmate who was charged with seventeen murders and made him cry.

“Are you coming, Queenie?” Edier snaps at his companion, ignoring Ivy.

Queenie?

I find I can't take my eyes off her, with that slash of red Chanel lipstick that's more a hazard sign than a fashion statement. She looks like the kind of woman who eats Dalmatian puppies for breakfast, and then sends them to her sister, Cruella, to make fur coats out of the remains.

Maybe it's the thought of her and Edier together—of him even *wanting* a woman with such glacial superiority and addiction to leather—that pushes me out of my hiding place behind the Pygmy Date Palm and into the path of the lion.

“Leave her alone.” My softly spoken words have a whip crack effect that has everyone's attention, including his. He stops dead in his tracks, his head snapping toward me. “Tell your men to back off *right now*, Edier. If they lay one finger on Ivy...”

I leave the threat hanging because there's really only one thing I can do, and it will always be enough to make him to sit up and listen.

If he's shocked to see me after so long, he doesn't show it. He just stands there with his fists clenched and dark things swarming behind his eyes.

Behind him, his men have stopped their advance on Ivy to wait for his reaction. I catch one of them looking at me, and I instantly recognize him. *Gabrio*. He's head of Edier's *sicarios*, but he used to work directly for my father. I can tell from his expression that he's already clocked my bodyguards too. We're all fighting the same war, just in different battalions, and from the looks of it they clearly don't speak to one another very often.

“Well, well, well.” Edier forces a cold smile as he swaggers toward me. “The reporter brought a spare. Or haven't you made the cut yet, Ella? I gather you couldn't stick it out at NYU so I don't hold out much hope of seeing your name in print soon.”

His words sting like hell, but I force myself not to flinch. I'm not the girl I was before. I'm not the teenager who fell apart so easily in his hands.

“Nice to see you, too,” I counter smoothly. “Does my father know you're stealing his style, or are you so stuck up his ass these days you had to send one of your *sicarios* to steal it for you?”

“That's an interesting assessment...” He slithers his wretched gaze over my outfit and smirks. “From a woman who clearly got dressed in the dark.”

“Go to hell, Edier. Stop being such a high-handed bastard.”

“Using bad words more frequently, are we?”

“I use a lot of things more frequently, including my right to call you out on your ridiculously autocratic behavior.”

“Gabrio,” he snaps over his shoulder, “would you and Enriquez please escort Ms...”

“Sanchez,” I grit out, holding his gaze. “Ivy Sanchez.”

“—Ms. Sanchez to her car,” he finishes swiftly. “Use *all* force, if necessary.” He smirks again at my shocked gasp. “And Queenie?” He turns to address Red De Vil who’s hovering next to him, tapping something into her iPhone with her crimson talons. “Would you be so kind as to inform Ms. Sanchez of her lack of rights, considering she’s now officially trespassing on my property. As for Ms. Miller, she’ll be taking an alternative method of transport home later.”

Before I can protest, he’s taking me by the wrist and practically flinging me into the open elevator carriage. By the time I’ve recovered, we’re moving upward to an unknown destination and Edier has a hand at the base of my throat, pinning me to the mirrored wall behind.

“What the *fuck* are you doing here, Ella?”

He’s standing so close I’m practically wearing him *and* his expensive black suit. His scent is everything I remember and more. It’s making my head spin and my chest hurt.

“Following a lead,” I croak, ignoring that familiar twinge between my legs. “How was I to know this was one of your establishments?”

“Considering I own most of Manhattan, *Bonita*, you knew damn well it was one of mine.”

“I know nothing about you anymore, Edier Grayson. I chose not to keep up that education because those kinds of lessons always lead to tears and disappointment.”

His lips peel back in a snarl. It’s as if I’ve wounded him, but that’s impossible. The man’s officially dead from the waist up.

Meanwhile, we’re climbing higher and higher at a crazy speed and there’s a strange keening noise emanating from the mechanism above our head.

“Whatever trail you’re following, you need to leave it alone.” His grip on me loosens and he takes a step back. “It stops *now*.”

“It stops when we find the story.”

He pauses a fraction too long. “What story?”

“Two dead girls. Two separate *Helios* hotel suites. The cops listed them as suicides, but we both know that’s fiction. You and my father had the NYPD sewn up decades ago, so I don’t trust a single report of their’s.”

“Walk away,” he orders. “Before I drag you kicking and screaming

behind me. Don't think I won't do it, Ella."

Heat surges in my veins. "I'd like to see you try!"

"Ay, *Dios Mío!*" He spins away from me in frustration before thinking better of it. A beat later, I find myself being crowded up against the same mirrored wall, that warm hand back at the base of my throat. "Walk away," he urges again, his tone low, dangerous, and tinged with a darkness that scares me. "I'm not asking you, Ella. I'm fucking *begging* you to."

My eyes widen in surprise. Edier doesn't beg for anything. He forces everyone else to kneel and then kicks them in the face when they're down.

"What's going on? Are you in some kind of danger?"

He glares at me and then the corners of his mouth twitch. "Did you really just ask me that, *Mi Cielo*? Knowing who I am, and what I do? Did you slip and bang your head in the last three years, or did I fuck you so hard that night every pretty brain cell foundered? It was a hell of a good time. I remember that much."

It's the endearment that does it, more so than the taunt. I can feel it ripping at the delicate strands of my restraint as years of repressed hurt take over.

As the elevator slows and the doors ping open at the Penthouse Suite, I drive my knee into his crotch so hard he lets go of me with a grunt, determined to make him feel as much pain in the place that once gave me so much pleasure, no matter how much residual misery it's going to cause my swollen joints later.

"I wasn't your 'sky' three years ago, and I'm sure as hell not your 'sky' now," I say angrily, as he reels backward, hissing and cursing. "Go find Queenie. I'm sure she'll kiss it better for you!"

Then, stepping out of the elevator carriage, my heart jackhammering in my chest, I reach back in to slam my palm against a couple of random floor buttons, watching in triumph as the doors close shut on his howl of rage.

SLAMMING the pedal to the floor, the Ferrari roars out into the oncoming traffic, cutting up three yellow cabs and a black saloon full of Turkish dignitaries who just pulled up to the front of *Helios*.

Like I give a fuck.

My balls are aching, but the pain in my chest is alive and roaring. When I stumbled out of bed this morning with the mother of all hangovers, I didn't expect to find myself face to face with the biggest one of all in my hotel lobby three hours later. Her bodyguards know to send me her itineraries in advance, followed by updates every half hour.

So, what the hell went wrong today?

"I assume that was her." Queenie doesn't look up from her phone as she makes her bored deduction, barely shifting in her seat as I weave down East 57th Street doing eighty-five, her red heels flung up on my dash, making careless scuff marks on the Italian leather.

"Who?" I grit out, running the next set of lights without even glancing at them. If this fever in my veins doesn't break soon, I'll end up snapping both our necks. Not that it's bothering Queenie. She lives for the thrill, which is why she enjoys working for me.

"Don't play coy. It doesn't suit you. I meant the girl in the hotel lobby who stopped you in your tracks, which, *incidentally*, never happens. She's the other daughter, am I right?"

"Yes, she's the daughter," I confirm through gritted teeth. *But there's no 'other' about her. She's the only one I see.*

One glance, and I know we both felt it. Our vicious words spoke of our

mutual agony. All I could think about was driving my cock inside her, and making her so full of me, she'd never have a chance to forget us again.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

This pull between us is the rush to our fucking ruin. We're still killing each other slowly, even after all this time.

"She's not what I expected."

"Careful..."

"Oh, don't growl at me, Grayson. I was about to say she's stronger than I thought she'd be. Quietly beautiful underneath all those layers of spilt coffee and reporter grime. She's not as impulsive as Isabella, or as tough as Thalia, but she's certainly not the pretty little family wallflower I was led to believe. Hell, I might even like her, and that's saying something. I regard everyone except you, Sam, and Tabs as steaming piles of shit."

Something inside me lurches violently, but I force it back down to where it belongs. Ella and I made a box a long time ago, and it's staying right where we buried it that night.

"I wasn't waiting for your approval, Queenie. You're my lawyer, not my dick."

"Just as well, judging from the amount of wincing going on. What did she do to you in that elevator? Knee you in the balls or kiss them?"

Gritting my teeth again, I hang a right.

"She *kneed* you?" Queenie's laughter is a raucous cackle of joy, berating my eardrums all the way down Fifth Avenue. "Oh, I definitely like her now. Tell me, did you orgasm from the contact? That's the closest anyone's got to that part of you in three years."

"*That part* doesn't concern you."

"True, but it's obviously concerning you from the amount of pent-up energy rolling off your Brioni three-piece."

Just then, a call comes through from Sam.

"What is it?"

"Morning salutations to you too, oh mighty leader," my second-in-command drawls back.

"Two words," pipes up Queenie, ignoring my death glare. "Starts with Ella and ends in Santiago."

Sam curses under his breath, knowing the whole day's gone to shit now.

"Tell me something good, Sanders," I snarl, more as a threat than a request.

“We found Franco. Tracked him down to his stepmom’s trailer and discovered him hiding under her bed, the kinky shit. He’s portside with me now, looking longingly out of a broken warehouse window at all the container ships departing when his motherfucking one just came in. Can I start without you?”

“No,” I say sharply. “He’s mine. I’ll drop Queenie off and come straight there.”

“If you insist.” Sam yawns loudly and I berate him for it. “I have a baby with sleep regression, Grayson. Cut me some slack.”

“I should cut off your balls for your lack of respect.”

“Too late. The mother of my child claims she’s already wearing them. See you in an hour.”

I swing the Ferrari alongside Queenie’s building on 72nd Street and brake viciously. When she first moved here, her firm occupied a single floor. Now, she owns three, and she’s not even thirty. The woman has one of the sharpest minds in the legal universe, but four years ago she was stripping to survive with a loaded gun pointed at her head.

The Russians had trafficked her to the US from Romania as a teenager, but when they vacated the city, I found her sleeping rough in one of our warehouses. Turns out, she’d been a Senior Year law student back in Bucharest, so I gave her some money, fixed her up with US citizenship, and sent her to college to finish her studies. Everyone connected to the Santiago cartel shares the same distaste for the trafficking industry—from my mom with her welfare shelter back in Colombia, to the secret hit squad Dante Santiago and my father set up decades ago to wipe out as many of the cockroaches as they could.

Her first case after she graduated was a murder trial she didn’t have any hope of winning. The evidence was stacked, and the District Attorney’s office were already popping champagne corks, until she stood up and blew the competition away. The guy walked free from jail ten days later, even though everyone in that courtroom knew he was as guilty as hell.

From that day on, she’s been my lawyer and sometime friend, though we’re both too messed up to ever fly by the rules of that definition. All I know is she tolerates my black moods and I tolerate her Grade A bitch of a girlfriend called Tabitha. I trust her, the same way I trust Sam, which makes everyone else, bar Ella, the freaks and the enemy.

As she opens the passenger door and climbs out, I drag my thoughts over

to the bigger issue, namely what led *Mi Cielo* straight back to me.

Two nights ago, one of *El Alquimista's* disciples killed herself after I'd gotten a little too close to discovering her boss's identity. He's been a busy man since the Russians left town, filling the void by flooding the streets with Meth and Ecstasy, each wrap and tab stamped with his distinctive 'A' and inverted pentagram logo, not to mention bleeding his quasi-voodoo bullshit into every corner of this city. The imports of black magic staples have skyrocketed, and I don't need three guesses to know who's been pocketing the profits.

If what the disciple said was true, *El Alquimista's* been causing headaches for me long before he started moving in on my territory. And if it was really him who sent the witch to curse me and Ella ten years ago, I just got a whole new incentive to find him and burn him alive.

Curses have roots. Poison the root and the black magic dies. Santiago's men believed that setting fire to the *bruja's* body would release the bad, but that was before they knew about the source. That's where I come in. When the curse dies, so does the last link back to my past.

I need Ella to be free of it, too. Free to live a normal healthy life.

Free of me?

I push that thought away as Queenie leans into the car to say goodbye.

"Acquisitions meeting for the new hotel site at nine," she says briskly. "Don't be late, and don't show up reeking of murder. You can celebrate after the deal's closed but not before."

"You trying to make me hard?"

"You trying to make me vomit?" She regards me shrewdly for a moment. "Uh-oh, you've got that wild, restless look about you again. Last time you had that you bought up half of Park Avenue."

"I'm not interested in property anymore. It's time to diversify the portfolio."

If Ella won't drop this story through polite persuasion, I'll find another way. I can't have her anywhere near this cartel war. It's too dangerous.

"Okay, I'm listening."

"What media group owns *The Eagle*?"

"*Winslow Fire*. They own a couple of other papers and radio stations in the US. Pretty small fry. They're not exactly keeping Rupert Murdoch up at night..." Her eyes narrow as she locks on to where I'm going with this. "Edier—"

“Tell Harris to offer them three percent above market value.”

“In this climate?” she splutters, losing her cool. “Are you fucking insane?”

“I need it done, Queenie. In twenty-four hours, I want that paper under my control.”

If I need to spend billions to keep her safe, I won't even hesitate.

EDIER

I'VE RECOVERED MOST of my composure by the time I reach Red Hook Container Terminal. It's our product's main point of entry into the US, not to mention the best place in the city to commit the worst kinds of depravity. The constant cries of the gulls overhead are more than sufficient to drown out the screams of the dying.

Sam greets me at the entrance to the largest warehouse, his dark eyes narrowing when he sees my expression. He's grown up a lot since Ella's party in the Hamptons. He's also gotten himself shot up and loved up. The guy's a fucking savage, and he's loyal to me to his own detriment. He's proved himself repeatedly, and now he's the sarcastic lynchpin of my entire organization here on the East Coast.

"Knife or gun?" he says, by way of greeting.

"Both."

He grins wickedly. "I almost feel sorry for the fucker."

"Don't."

He offers me the handle of his Fixed Blade, but I wave it away. The nine-inch hunting knife Santiago gave me is the only one I use these days. Perhaps when I'm carving my initials into *El Alquimista's* chest, I'll finally understand the choice he was talking about that morning, but for now it's a constant reminder of the woman I live, breathe, and kill for. Even if I can't give her every part of me yet.

My love for Ella has never faltered, never strayed... I may have pushed her away to protect her, but for three years it's rested clean on my surfaces, while everything else has grown rotten and toxic.

Franco's suspended from a steel rafter by his wrists, his bare feet barely dusting the dirty concrete. His black T-shirt "*The Devil made me do it*" is ripped around the neckline from Sam's manhandling, and his face is bloody and bruised. I take three steps inside the warehouse, remove the gun from my holster, and then I'm blowing both his kneecaps off without hesitating.

"Boom," mutters Sam, above the screams of our shocked guest. "You're not fooling around, are you?"

"Not today."

Sliding off my suit jacket, I chuck it at Gabrio who's loitering nearby. By now, Franco's gone limp, his head lolling to the side. He's quietly sobbing to himself, one terrified eye locked on me as I unbutton the cuffs of my black shirt and roll them up to my elbows.

Look all you want, malparido. In about five minutes I'll be carving those eyes out of your skull.

"You sure this is the guy who edited the tape?"

Sam nods.

Piece of shit.

Eight months ago, a product problem necessitated a trip back to Colombia. I left Santiago's men in charge of Ella's surveillance, along with a couple of my own. For the second time in her short life, she lost her fucking mind and gave them the slip.

An hour later, in a bar in Manhattan, she was getting targeted and roofied. Thirty minutes after that, some Italian called Bardi was taking naked footage of her to blackmail her sister with. He didn't lay a finger on *Mi Cielo*, other than to remove her clothes and violate her with his fucking camera, but he's still long dead for what he did, as is everyone else connected to the footage. Some died by my hand, some by Santiago's, some by Thalia's new husband Santi Carrera—my devil equivalent in the Garden State next door.

We're all guilty of letting it happen, and we all share the blame, but no one blames herself more than Ella. I've watched her cry herself to sleep, night after night, on the screens in my Black Room. She plays by the rules so tightly these days, even I can feel the pinch.

In the end, she dropped out of college because of it, and like the bastard she told me I am, I used it as ammunition when I lashed out at her earlier.

Franco's the final, living piece to that mess. He edited the original tape. He made the copies.

He's about to die shitting himself, like all the others.

Grabbing hold of his matted hair, I wrench his head back and force him to look at me. “You know who I am?”

He nods, his face a state of agony and regret, snot and tears making dirty tracks down his pitted skin.

“You know what you did?”

He nods again, more forcefully, as if he thinks Confession Time will make this hurt less.

Delusion is the blind hope of liars.

“How’s that imagination of yours holding up? Or would you prefer I demonstrate what I did to your friends?”

He tries to shake his head, but there’s barely any movement. The realization he’s not getting out of this alive just hit. Judging by all the high-pitched whining he’s doing, he’s not liking the punch of it either.

“I’m sorry. S-so sorry.”

“Apologies are like bad Chinese takeout, Franco. Everyone shits them out eventually.”

“Please...”

Glancing to my left, I catch Sam’s grimace. He knows that pleaders always get the worst of me. If I choose to kill, I do so because they deserve it. Once my decision is made, it can’t be swayed, so this fool is wasting my time and his breath.

Unsheathing Santiago’s knife from my belt, I wave the jagged edge in front of his face, his eyes instantly glued to it like it’s a swinging pendulum. “The problem I have, Franco,” I begin idly, “is that I don’t know which part of you to carve up first.”

He jerks back in terror at my words, the ripped neckline of his T-shirt slipping to reveal a familiar tattoo stamped into his collar bone.

El Alquimista.

I glare at it, resisting the urge to kill him straight away.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” I trace the lines of the ‘A’ with the tip of my blade, turning the color from faded black to bleeding crimson, and then repeating the same with the inverted pentagram. All the while, I can feel a familiar darkness moving below my surfaces, its icy fists punching at my skin. “Are you moonlighting on me, Franco? Has someone been subsidizing their earnings by selling cut-price Meth for the enemy?”

My words seem to shake him up, not beat him down. I watch in mounting fury as his head lifts with a jerk and a nasty smile starts spreading across his

face.

Our gazes lock again.

That's when a cold chill hits my spine and starts crawling in both directions. When I walked into this warehouse, this fucker's eyes were green. What's staring back at me right now is black.

"You can't win this, Grayson," he rasps, his voice so low only I can hear it, while that smile keeps on spreading into a joker's grin. "Kill me all you want, but you'll never kill your past. Didn't the old *bruja* tell you as much? He sees you constantly. His spies are everywhere. He's biding his time, and then he's coming for you, *and* what you promised."

"I'm growing tired of your master's coded messages," I grit out, wrenching his head back again. "If he wants me so fucking badly, I suggest he comes and gets me."

I pause. *I never pause.* And then I'm slitting his throat from ear to ear.

Silence falls over the warehouse as Franco gargles out his last breath. I can feel twenty pairs of eyes burning into the back of my head as I wipe my knife clean on his t-shirt.

The Devil made me do it, too, Franco.

Once done, I turn back to Sam. "Burn the body."

His face creases up in annoyance. "Can't we just—"

"Do it. Don't argue. Take him a couple of hours upstate. Find a crematorium. Hold a gun to the owner's head until Franco's dust and ash, and message me when it's done."

"If you say so."

Stepping out into a ripe and pleasant afternoon, I tip my head back and close my eyes—filling my lungs with the salty odor of the ocean to offset the most poisonous parts of me.

Sam follows me out. I can sense him and his questions hovering behind me.

"What was all that about?"

"Murder. You should try it sometime. It's bad for the soul."

"I was referring to the freaky comeback of the near-dead son-of-a-bitch. If we need an exorcist, I know a guy down in Brooklyn who can cut us a deal." His joke has a shaky undertone. Sam's spooked, while I'm just mad and frustrated. "What the hell did he say to you anyway?"

"He asked me for a quick death, and I obliged."

"Are you lying to me, or to the both of us? I saw the tattoo."

“He was another *El Alquimista* rat as well as a pervert.”

Sam blows out a breath as he glances around the port. He knows this is more than a turf war, and that it’s somehow personal to me, but I’ve been refusing to confirm or deny it for months. The less he knows the better. I want his gun, but I don’t want his death on my conscience.

I open my mouth to give him a bland response to make his curiosity go away when there’s an angry roar from the trawler moored alongside us, followed by a volley of desperate barking.

Sam curses. “The Lopez crew must be importing dogs for their fucking rings again.”

“That’s unfortunate,” I murmur, pulling out my gun and checking the clip. “Didn’t I tell them I’d put a bullet in their skulls if they ever brought that kind of shit back to my city?”

Moments later, we’re strolling aboard a ship called *The Persephone*, ready to send the vessel back down to hell. The deckhands scatter when they see us coming. The cartel scorpion motif holds more sway over these parts than the port authorities.

In the hold, we discover three men trying to force a huge gray dog into a metal cage using metal rods and violence. The animal’s not having any of it. It must sense what’s in store for it. It’s digging its claws into the metal floor and leaving jagged white tracks in its wake, snapping and snarling with its teeth bared and eyes rolling.

I watch as one man brings his metal rod down on the dog’s back, and its howl of pain flicks a red switch inside me. The next thing I know, my bullet is putting Pablo Lopez down, right between the eyes.

“Do they really eat dogs in China?” I ask Sam as the other men drop their rods and stumble backward, gibbering in fear and surprise.

“How the fuck should I know?” he says, frowning at me.

“You said it once to Ella. Ah, forget it... Good afternoon, gentleman.” I swing back to the cowering dog fighters. “It’s come to my attention that you’re not following my rules in this city.” I fire fast. Two more rounds later, the men are on the ground and bleeding. “I guess you won’t be making that mistake again.”

Sam calls for my orders as I turn to leave.

“You can burn them alongside Franco.”

“What about the dog?”

“Take it to the nearest ASPCA shelter or walk away. I don’t care. There

are worse places to be a stray...” I catch sight of the animal. She’s not fighting anymore. She’s lying quietly on the deck, watching me, her long pink tongue lolling out of the side of her mouth as she pants her side of the story.

I can tell she’s a bitch. Men don’t sit that still after being attacked. We’re too busy strutting and raging, not assessing and plotting.

She’s also the ugliest fucking dog I’ve ever seen. Neither a Staffie nor a Collie or Greyhound, but some kind of flea-bitten iron-gray mongrel hybrid with lopsided ears and legs that are too long for her body. She looks like a gazelle who took an unfortunate fall into a meat grinder.

Sam goes to pick up the lead attached to her collar, and she growls threateningly. “Guess I just met your twin sister, Grayson.”

The dog turns and stares at me again, dropping her snarl instantly.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, clicking my fingers, and the dog comes straight over and sits at my feet. “I don’t have time for this bullshit.”

“Turns out she doesn’t take no for an answer, just like every other woman I know,” quips Sam as I kneel to remove her collar.

She lets me do it without a single growl, and I run my eyes over her body. She’s not badly hurt as far as I can tell, but she needs a couple of T-bone steaks to fatten her up.

“Maybe you two should go on a date?”

Ignoring him, I start walking toward the ship’s ladder, the dog falling into heel. “I’ll drop her off on the way back to the office. We’ll speak more later.”

Climbing into the Ferrari, I try not to think about the dog’s claws scratching up my leather seats as I punch in the GPS locations for the nearest shelter. This is all Ella’s fault, I reflect grimly. She and her soft heart have infected my world.

Switching on the ignition, I catch the dog staring at me again.

“What?”

She barks once, the noise echoing.

“You’re fucking hideous, you know that?”

She whines in agreement.

“In a gunfight, you’d be the first I’d shoot no matter what side you’re on.”

She curls up into an awkward ball on my heated seat, all legs and sticky up bits of coarse dirty fur and puts her head between her paws.

I watch the rise and fall of her skinny body for a moment, and find it

strangely soothing. I've been on my own for so long, I've forgotten what it's like to share silences.

"If you shit in my car, I'm sending you straight to China," I warn, as her eyes start to close. "And I'm not giving you a fucking name, either. You don't deserve to be humanized when you should be being euthanized. You hear that, Dog?"

She starts grunting in her sleep, and I shake my head at her lack of respect. She's as bad as Sam, but at least he shoots straight and follows orders.

"Ella would like you," I murmur, gazing into space.

In the end, I don't stop at the ASPCA.

I take her to a meeting with the mafia instead.

I DON'T GET HOME UNTIL AFTER ELEVEN P.M.

Exhaustion is leaching from my bones as Dog and I take the private elevator up to my apartment. It's been a hell of a day, starting with Ella kneeing me in the nuts, and ending with a tense meeting with the Italians over a spate of armed robberies and other crimes on their turf which they're accusing me of instigating.

I was ice-cool in my disinterest. Hunting *El Alquimista* down is the only thing worthy of my attention right now. I have the FBI and every police department in New York on my payroll and earning it, along with two hundred of my own men infiltrating street gangs and doling out bribes and incentives, but still nothing. People are either too scared of him, or not scared enough of me, so it's time to turn up the heat.

Stepping into my apartment, I tap out an international number on my phone.

She answers on the first ring.

"We're moving up the date of the operation."

The woman laughs, unfazed by my clipped demand. "Do you have an endurance problem, Grayson?" she purrs, her accent so similar to mine, yet far more sensuous, curling around each word like silver smoke tipped with razor blades. "What happened to 'staying the course'?"

"I killed another of his disciples today, but not before I received my

second threat in a week. Tell your insider we need a new schedule.”

“For when?”

“Three months’ time.”

“Three *months*?” she hisses in disapproval. “It’s too soon. We’d planned to do this in six months. This is the biggest shipment *El Alquimista* will have organized from Colombia to GCT, New York. I’m not even sure he’ll have enough product by then.”

“He’s greedy. He’ll make it happen. If he’s already in the country like we suspect he is, he won’t be far away when his ship sails in. That’s when we take him and burn him.”

There’s a long pause as she calculates the pitfalls and risks. I know she’ll go for it, though. She wants to unmask *El Alquimista* just as much as I do. Always send a Colombian cartel princess to catch a Colombian kingpin wannabe because they won’t ever stop until the job is done.

“The things I do for you, Grayson,” she says with a sigh, rare resignation in her voice for someone with her reputation. She can cut a man down as quickly as I can. She’s more like her father than either of her half-sisters. “You owe me for this.”

“Don’t do it for me, Isabella. Do it for Ella.”

Chuckling my keys on the table by the door, I collect a whiskey decanter and glass from the sideboard as I pass through the living area. I’m heading straight for my favorite room in the apartment with Dog following hot on my heels. She hasn’t left my side all day, and Don Russo didn’t dare comment on her presence in the meeting earlier. When it broke down, she ingratiated herself by pissing all over his priceless Fornasetti rug.

Punching in a security code, the metal door slides back to reveal a dark cave of a room. The far wall is lined with forty-eight hi-tech monitors.

Forty-eight black and white angles of an apartment I know even better than my own.

Placing the decanter and glass down on the desk, I toss a half-smoked packet of Marlboros and an old Zippo lighter next to them and collapse into a leather chair. No one knows about my Black Room, not even Sam. I spend most of my nights in here, drowning more than sleeping—letting my life play out through a lens, but it’s better than no view at all.

The black walls cocoon my obsession, giving me and her a fucked-up sense of intimacy whenever she appears on screen.

Glancing from monitor to monitor to locate her, I almost forget about

Dog until she barks.

“Liar. You just had the best steak of your life.”

Dog barks again and rests her head on my thigh, but I make no move to touch her. She hasn't earned it yet

I'm sparking up my first cigarette when there's movement in the righthand corner of one monitor. Ella is unfurling from the couch, her face contorting in pain. It's midnight and time for her Vicodin and Ambien. I know her medicine schedule better than she does.

I follow her into the bathroom and watch through the three-way mirror as she counts out her pills and knocks them back. I study her unguarded face in fine detail. When she's alone is when her truth comes out. It's when she finally allows her bright smile to slip, making my fucking chest explode.

This is the place I share her pain.

I've been right there with her through it all: The days when she can barely get out of bed until her meds kick in. The tight scrunchy thing she does with her face when she's counting down from ten before calling her father and breezing through a lie, telling him that she's fine and happy, and if he asks her to go back home one more time he's not getting a Christmas gift.

I've witnessed her confusion and self-doubt after her dates never call again, when in truth they all loved her because there's nothing about sunshine to hate. It was my intervention that made them run a mile. Those who smiled at her, got a warning. Those who touched her, got a broken hand. Those who tried to kiss her earned themselves a hospital stay.

I've heard her play her favorite record over and over, and that one song in particular. I know it's because the lyrics remind her of me.

She hides it well at *The Eagle*, but her flares are more frequent, and her meds need urgent reviewing.

I make a note to call her rheumatologist tomorrow and stick a rocket up her ass.

I make another note to request a tracker implant be inserted.

After today, I can't risk another unscheduled meeting again.

ELLA

PLEASE DON'T GIVE me 'the sigh', anything but that.

I'm sitting in my rheumatologist's office, staring at her mouth, hearing words but not really understanding them. I'm waiting for the medical equivalent of a hammer to fall and smash up that sweet little illusion I have going on with myself right now, the one where I'm not really that sick. That the joint pain and muscle aches will ease up eventually if I get more rest, less stress, take every vitamin known to woman...

Bad news always comes after a brief pause, and then—

Sliding her gaze from the computer screen displaying this week's blood results, Dr. Erin Bailey finally gives me what I've been dreading: a subtle little zephyr with the force of a cyclone.

It's almost imperceptible, but to me it's the loudest sound in this room, beating out the ticking clock above her desk and the muffled chatter coming from the waiting room outside.

The sigh.

The dark hole.

The death of delusion.

Tears threaten my eyes, but I blink them back fiercely. I've dealt with shitty news before. I can deal with it again. Besides, I didn't get much sleep last night and that's why I'm feeling so vulnerable. I heard a dog barking in the apartment next door, but my bodyguards just stared at me blankly when I'd asked them about it this morning.

"How bad is it?" I force a modicum of strength into my voice, wondering if once this appointment is over, Dr. Bailey will go home to her nice house

and her accountant husband and her two beautiful children, and take a long, hot shower to wash away all the not-so-great news she's given out to her patients today.

"Your rheumatoid panel isn't good, Ella," she says gently. "Your C3 and C4 proteins have dropped again which indicates the current course of treatment isn't working."

I suck in a shaky breath. "Can't we just increase the Plaquenil? It's worked great since I was seventeen."

I have an image of myself at that age. I'm the edge of it, just like in that Stevie Nicks song I love so much. Fast forward a year, and there'll be a cold ocean and strong arms, and a night I try so hard not to think about.

I'd do anything to go back to that moment, when I was his sun, and he was my darkness.

Dr. Bailey places her wrists on the edge of her desk and leans back in her chair, creating a bigger distance between us so her next blow will hurt less. "The Plaquenil isn't suppressing your immune system alone. You're getting too many minor infections on top of everything else. I know you're adverse to this idea, but I think we should consider a three-month course of Methotrexate to calm everything down."

Chemo.

She wants me to go back on chemo.

I can feel my whole body sagging into my chair. The last time I had this kind of treatment I was fifteen. I didn't lose my hair, and I could still function, but the nausea and exhaustion made every day a battle.

How the hell am I supposed to keep working a twelve-hour day?

No one apart from Ivy knows about my lupus but *screw it*, I'll find a way to make it work. I don't have a choice. Leaving isn't an option. Everyone will just have to think I'm in a constant state of hangover for three months straight. There will be whispers and rumors, and...

"Will it be an IV, tablets, or—"

"Tablets. Once a week. It's quite simple and the side effects won't be as brutal as some of the others. We can handle any nausea you may experience with an extra strong dose of Phenergen." She pauses to let all the medical jargon sink into my skin like a blunt blade. "I'm sorry, Ella. I know this isn't the news you wanted."

As she starts to list off the other side-effects, I drift away again. I'm back in that ocean, at the exact point the wave took me under. Once I'd stopped

fighting against the current, a sense of peace had taken over my fear right before Edier saved me.

I want that feeling now.

I want it so badly I'd sell my soul for a taste.

“Are we clear on everything, Ella?”

I nod.

Dr. Bailey smiles but it doesn't quite reach her eyes this time. “There's just a small procedure we need to do to ensure the efficacy of the new meds. If you'd like to roll up your sleeve as high as it will go, I can perform it here and now with a quick shot of local anesthetic.”

WHEN I GET BACK TO THE OFFICE AN HOUR LATER, THERE'S AN undercurrent of panic coming from each desk and cubicle. Even the news channels on the screens overhead have been muted.

Swinging into my chair, I ball up a piece of paper and chuck it at Ivy to get her attention. She's on the phone and stuck on hold if her bored expression is anything to go by. “What's going on?” I hiss, handing her a Starbucks cup which she takes mouthing, “thank you, I love you, but this better be what I think it is.”

After taking a sip and sighing in satisfaction, she presses the mouthpiece to her shoulder. “*The Eagle* just got bought out by some mega rich businessman. He's bought out the whole of the *Winslow Star Group* apparently.”

“Are you serious? Are they shutting down the paper?” My heart lurches.

She shakes her head. “Not yet, but they're restructuring. Rob's in a meeting upstairs with the new team now. If he comes back down wearing his once-in-a-lifetime frown, you know we're all fucked...” She sits up with a jolt as her call connects. “Yes, hello, this is Ivy Sanchez from *The New York Eagle* and I was wondering if you could give... Asshole,” she snarls, as the caller hangs up on her. “Speaking of assholes, I need to grill you about your hot Colombian kidnapper from *Helios* yesterday. Your text stopped me calling the cops, but my imagination was still rioting. Tell me honestly, did you know that guy?”

“Yes, briefly when we were kids.” I pretend to flick through my notebook

as Ivy splutters into her Pumpkin Spice Latte.

“Er, excuse me. Back up for a moment there, Ella Miller. You totally omitted to mention that you *briefly* knew the elusive hotelier, Edier Grayson, yesterday when we were checking out his flagship hotel on a suspected murder story.”

“I-I didn’t know he’d be there,” I admit, wishing to God he hadn’t been. His words still sting, and my knee is still aching.

“Has he always been an arrogant fuck, or can we blame the botched personality transplant for that? Where did he take you on his express elevator, anyway? Heaven or hell?”

“Definitely hell,” I mutter, making her eyebrows shoot up. “I didn’t get anything out of him about the suicides, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“I take it we’re still banned from *Helios*?”

“Yep, definitely still banned.”

“Damn.” She makes a face. “At least we have the forensics source. We’re meeting him in a bar later this week after work. Rob’s still intrigued to see where it leads, so we’re back on the story.”

Just then, a deathly hush falls over the floor as our Editor-in-Chief walks in, making a beeline for his office and avoiding all eye contact.

The first thing I notice is his tie and suit jacket. As someone who jokes on the regular about a creased white shirt, open collar, and rolled up sleeves being the only uniform required for newspaper editing, this is pretty seismic already.

Reluctantly, my eyes flick to his face, but Ivy’s already cursing and confirming what I’ve suspected. His usual air of fun and ebullience is gone, replaced by the frown we’re all fearing. Even his steps are heavy and dragging, like some ten-ton disaster is weighing them down.

It’s bad.

Really bad.

And then I notice the aloof, unsmiling woman sashaying behind him, and ‘bad’ takes a turn for the very worst. She’s not wearing red leather today, but it’s the only color I’m seeing.

How dare he. How bloody dare he.

I know exactly who’s bought the paper... What I don’t know is *why*.

BEFORE I CAN STOP MYSELF, I'm out of my seat and walking toward the elevator.

Pressing the call button a couple of hundred thousand times, I hear the hasty scrape of a chair behind me as one of my bodyguards, Rodrigo, rushes over. He's been loitering in the reception area pretending to read National Geographic, and if he sticks around for the next twenty minutes, he'll get to see another prime example of just how ruthless nature can be.

He moves up alongside me, and I glare his questioning look away.

Don't even think about stopping this.

The meeting has only just finished so there's every chance Edier is still in the building, or at least in the process of leaving.

"Come on, stupid elevator," I hiss. "Don't fail me now."

Once I start trying to rationalize my hurt, I know I'll talk myself out of this, and then I'll be even angrier at *me* than I am at him.

Spilling out of the carriage into the large glass-fronted lobby, I spot him straight away. He's standing in front of the revolving doors with his back turned, dominating the light and space like the big dark raincloud that he is. He's chatting to Gabrio and Sam, and some other men I don't know who look officious and business-like and very, very smug.

He's still the tallest and most beautiful. *And the most noxious.* For the first time, I see his black Brioni three-piece suit for what it really is: a reflection of his wicked, twisted, conniving soul.

After that, I don't think. I just do.

"Edier Grayson," I say loudly, walking up to him on shaking legs. "How

fucking *dare* you!”

He turns as my voice echoes, as does everyone else in the vicinity, but my focus is solely on him. There’s barely a flicker of recognition when he sees me advancing, and that just makes me even more mad.

I go to slap him hard across his handsome smirking face, but his reflexes are much faster than mine. He catches my wrist before it’s even grazing his cheekbone, and I gasp in pain. He doesn’t let go of me, but he loosens his grip on my swollen wrist, glaring over my shoulder at my advancing bodyguards and motioning for them to ‘stand down’.

“My, my, we really *have* graduated with our bad language skills,” he drawls, swinging his dark gaze back to me. “Why don’t you say ‘fuck’ like that again, and give my right hand something to think about later?”

“You’re disgusting,” I counter, wrenching my wrist free. “Who the hell do you think you are buying the paper I work for? And why didn’t you talk him out of it?” I say, rounding on Sam. “I fully expect Edier to crap all over everything good in my life, but not you.”

Sam just throws his hands up in the air and tactfully backs away. “This is between you and him, Ella. I’m not getting involved.”

“I never took you for a spineless coward. You’ve been spending too much time in corrosively bad company... Well?” I turn my fury back to Edier who has his head tilted while he considers my outfit of blue denim skinnies, nude ballet pumps and smart gray jacket.

“Well, what?” He continues to appraise me in that cold, calculated way that makes me feel naked and vulnerable. “At least you managed to keep your coffee in the cup today.”

My jaw drops. “That’s all you have to say to me?”

“I’ll be insisting on a much smarter appearance of *all* my new employees in future...as well as other things,” he adds ominously.

“Does that include Ms. De Vil? I’m not sure that wearing the skinned furs of baby animals is very woke these days. Tell me, how many cows died to make her leather pantsuit again? Was the color red some kind of an homage?”

We both ignore Sam’s dirty laugh at this.

“Careful, Ella,” he murmurs, taking a step closer. “That almost sounds like jealously talking.”

“I’d rather screw her than you.”

“I’ll let her know you’re available. My lawyer fucks women, not men.”

I despise the sense of relief that washes over me at this.

She's not his girlfriend.

He doesn't like glacial superiority, after all.

Why?" I say, my anger losing steam. "This job is my sanctuary. The one thing that's *mine*, away from my family, my health and...and *you*." I watch his eyes flare with agony for the briefest of seconds before they're back to being black and brutal again.

"I'd prefer not to talk about my business in the lobby of a newspaper," he says coolly. "I'm reliably informed that these people aren't the most discreet, whether I own them now or not."

"But you're happy to talk to a reporter?"

"Junior reporter," he replies, taunting my fragile self-worth again. "But you're a cartel princess first, or did you forget that, *Mi Cielo*? I'm not sure your Editor-in-Chief is fully aware. Remind me to mention it in our content meetings the next time you step out of line."

"You wouldn't dare," I gasp, unsure if he's bluffing or not. "My father would kill you if you exposed me like that."

"I think you'll find even his influence stops at my borders these days. This is *my* city, Ella." He says it like it's a threat. "Four years ago, he gave it to me, and I've made it my own. The underground is mine. Allegiances are mine. Even your fucking bodyguards answer to me."

Is he really as powerful as my father, or are his delusions of grandeur as big as his ego?

"You're lying."

"Then I guess you missed the memo about the new world order. It's only a matter of weeks before your half-sister, Isabella, takes full control of the Santiago organization in Colombia, and I take over the whole of Stateside. Empires are like snakes, and all leaders need to shed their skin once in a while. Our fathers have been planning this for years. It's a natural succession."

"I don't care about the business, Edier. I've never cared about the business! All I want to do is stay in New York and write for *The Eagle* and live as normal a life as possible."

"Unfortunately, the business cares about *you*," he snaps, finally losing his temper. "Do you have any idea how many threats on your life I have to deal with?"

My face flushes when I remember the tape, and from his narrowed gaze I

know he's thinking about it too.

Shame. Guilt. Responsibility. They've all played their part as I've come to terms with what happened. The aftereffects of that kind of violation don't just rain down on you like a monsoon. It's a trickle effect—slow and steady—washing away a little more of your confidence every day, and I don't need a man like Edier Grayson making it worse.

"No, I figured as much." He tuts in frustration. "Your father allows you to stay here because of *my* protection, as well as his own. I withdraw that, and you'll be on the next plane home to his island."

"So, this is what it's all about?" I say quietly. "Control and ambition, and middle fingers to all those you hurt along the way? Was it always about you taking over from my father, or did you ever give a damn about—"

Me.

He doesn't answer, which only makes it worse.

Instead, we stand there, glaring at each other, with something jagged and unwelcome fizzing between us. I know he feels it too. It's there in the hard tic in his jaw and the coiled tension in his shoulders. As for me, the pulse between my thighs is a near-constant irritation, and each inhale feels like a massive head trip.

"Fine. You want to talk about this? Let's fucking talk." Taking me by the arm, he leads me back to the elevators, snarling "fuck off," at my bodyguards over his shoulder.

I tell myself he's only walking this slowly because it's giving him more time to think up new ways to make my life miserable, and not because he knows that moving any faster would be painful for me. That would mean he's considerate, which he's clearly not.

"Let go of me, Edier," I grit out. "I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You are if you want to keep your job."

Ivy was right. He really IS an asshole.

Once inside the carriage, I position myself as far away from him as I can, but his scent and his presence are everywhere. I'm drowning in them, and I can't see dry land.

Slamming his fist against the top floor button, we start to rise.

"I hate you," I tell him calmly, but he doesn't even blink.

"You need to change up your repertoire of insults. You've said that to me once before." Leaning against the far wall, he slides his hands into the pockets of his suit pants.

It's his own damn fault. His close proximity is choking all my best comebacks out of me.

"This is different. This time, it's not some throwaway comment when I'm desperate to get off. This time, I *really* mean it."

"Good. Tell me more. It'll save you a fortune in therapy."

"You're a liar!"

His face tightens. "I've never lied to you, Ella, I made that promise when we were kids. You're just pissed at me that I grew up and kept my distance."

My jaw drops for the second time in ten minutes. "Your very definition of that word is *unfathomable* bullshit."

"If you insist on using big words, at least let me phone a fucking friend."

"Okay, fine, so you twist the truth to suit your own ends... And you murder people for a living."

I say it like it's the final twist of a dirty knife, but he just laughs it away.

"Only if they deserve it, *Bonita*, and most of them do... Come on, you can do better than that."

We're nearly at the top floor. It's a place I've never visited in my five months of working at *The Eagle*. The top floor is where big, important decisions are made, such as whether I'll be pushing this infuriating bastard of a man out of an open window in the next five minutes.

"Get out of my life, Edier Grayson!" I scream suddenly, my words coming from a place just off center in my chest. "Get out of my heart!"

It's like a hit of acid. One minute we're glaring at each other, the next he's springing away from the wall, eating up the distance between us in two short strides, just as the doors ping open. He pauses barely a foot away and disappointment tingles in places it really shouldn't.

Taking my arm again, he marches me down an empty hallway and through a set of smart black doors into a huge room with breathtaking views of Manhattan.

"What is this place?"

"My new office."

"Can't be," I say dismissively. "The Devil doesn't have white walls and impeccable taste in Italian furniture. Besides, you only just bought this company. There's no way you could have had this decorated overnight."

"When I move on something, I move fast, and I keep all my chains and whips in the basement." Spinning me around, he backs me up against the floor to ceiling windows. "Why the *fuck* am I still in your heart, Ella?" His

question shocks me, but the fury in his voice shocks me more. “We were a one-time thing. I made it very clear that night.”

“You make it sound like you slept with me as a favor.”

I flinch as he places a large hand against the base of my throat again. It’s not a threatening gesture, I realize. He’s just feeling the beat of my traitorous heart for himself.

“I left before you woke. I made sure to shatter *this* into pieces, so you’d never want me again.”

“Unfortunately, *that* fixed itself in the shape of bad men who enjoy breaking things, and trust me, I hate it more than I hate you right now... I could accept waking up cold and alone, with no note and no explanation that morning. I’d even accepted that our dirty little box of unsaid things would remain shut indefinitely, but not the ghosting. Not your insistence over the last three years on making me feel as small and insignificant as possible. I clawed myself out of a dark hole to start working here, but now you want to take that away too?” I shake my head, holding his gaze, firing my icy blues at his dark and deadly. “I’m not going to let you do it. Not this time. I love this job. I love it enough to fight like hell for it, so you’re just going to have to get used to a new side of me.”

“Jesus, Ella! If only you knew!” Slamming his fists down either side of me, trapping me, he drives his forehead into mine like he’s trying to force his way inside.

The sudden warmth and pressure make my breath hitch. I’m smelling whiskey and lust. I’m back in my bedroom in the Hamptons again, aching to be touched and filled.

Trembling, I tip my head back to bring his mouth in line with mine. “Tell me, Edier Grayson... Are you ready for the fight of your life?”

He tenses as my words graze his lips.

“I hate you too,” he says harshly, shutting his eyes. “I hate that I can’t stop thinking about what we did that night. I hate that when you came on my face so hard, I felt like a god, or when I filled you up with my cum, I wanted it to stay inside you forever so that one day, if you ever wanted children, they’d all be mine.” Reaching down between us, he roughly cups my pussy, and I let out a helpless groan, twisting my body to escape his touch. Part of me is incensed that he’s ambushing me against the window like this. The other parts, not so much. Every movement I make increases the friction, until I find myself squirming against him instead of fighting him.

“We can’t do this,” he snarls.

“Then stop,” I gasp out.

Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.

“I can’t fucking stop, *Mi Cielo*. That’s the fucking problem.”

I fumble for his belt as he flicks open the top button to my jeans, his movements so much more skillful than mine. Everything else is forgotten in this moment. The hurt. The loneliness. The new meds in my bag... It’s like his touch is a medicine all by itself.

Dragging my jeans and panties down past my hips, he drives two fingers inside me without warning. I close my eyes in ecstasy at the familiar burn and fullness, grabbing his hand to encourage him deeper. “Still so hot and welcoming for me, Ella,” he says harshly. “Just how I made you.”

Pushing my jeans down to the floor with his foot, he orders me to spread my legs as wide as I can before he’s delivering a stinging slap to my pussy.

I cry out in shock and need, twisting and gasping out some more.

“You like that, *Mi Cielo*?” He slaps me twice more, making me squirm, the vibrations of his sweet cruelty sending shockwaves to my core before he’s plunging those same two fingers back inside me and stretching me wide. “Wet and gaping. Such a good girl gone bad... I could fit two more fingers in there, and you’d take it all.”

He’s just as filthy as I remembered, maybe even more so. His touch and words are tinged with a depravity that speaks of the torment I sensed in him yesterday.

I’m clinging to the front of his black shirt as he fucks me with his fingers, driving in and out of me so quickly and so violently I can feel my desire spilling down his hand and onto my thighs. At the same time, the waves are building and building, suspending me over that beautiful void. When he brushes his thumb across my clit, I choke on a curse as my orgasm rips through my body like wildfire, a fresh gush of wetness flooding out between my legs as my head floats somewhere above us.

He finally kisses me, crashing his mouth down onto mine, stealing the remnants of my pleasure for himself. “Fucking beautiful,” he rasps, his voice strained. “Black and gold, all over again, *Mi Cielo*. You’re blinding sunshine. You’re *my* sunshine.”

That’s when it hits me. His hotel. *Helios*. It’s the Greek word for sun. His décor is black and gold, like the colors he professes we are.

Gold for the light he says I bring to his life.

Black for the darkness he brings to mine.

He made sure I was a constant, even when he pushed me away.

I open my mouth to confront him about it, but he's already glancing at the skyline. I sense that cold abyss widening between us again.

No, Edier. Stay with me. Stay with us. Don't you dare leave.

But his expression is shuttered. His jaw, clenched. It's as if I'm not even standing there, naked from the waist down, with the orgasm that he just wrung out of me so callously seeping down the inside of my thighs.

"Get dressed," he orders, winching his belt together with unnecessary force, stinging me all over again with his Jekyll and Hyde behavior as he heads for the door. "I have work to do, and so do you."

TO ADD INSULT TO INJURY, he leaves me stranded on the top floor, stealing the waiting carriage for himself while I'm still dressing, and then forcing me to wait ages for a second.

The doors were closing as I exited his new office, and now he's probably downstairs in his black Ferrari, smirking to himself about how easily I fell apart for him...*again*.

God, I'm so mad at myself it's unreal.

Slipping into my chair like an emotional stowaway, I'm debating whether to drown my sorrows in my second Pumpkin Spice Latte of the day when Rob shoots out of the meeting room and clicks his fingers at Ivy and me.

"In here you two."

We share a brief look of "*what the fuck now?*" because there's nothing scarier than an unscheduled meeting with the boss when the company's just been taken over.

We file in, one after the other, and he closes the door behind us. "Okay ladies, this is me officially telling you to drop the *Helios* suicide story. Seems our new overlords would prefer us to focus on the political arena, content-wise."

"Are you kidding me? This is bullshit!" Ivy's white-faced and furious while I'm silently cursing out Edier for the hundredth time today.

At least I know why he bought the paper now.

"Listen, I know this is hard," says Rob, perching on the edge of the table, and folding his arms over his huge stomach. He's quietly ditched the jacket and tie, so he doesn't look quite so much like a corporate stooge anymore.

“But if you know anything about me, you’ll know there’s a reason why I just used the word ‘officially’.”

I glance up to find a wicked gleam in his eye.

“You want us to continue anyway?” whispers Ivy.

He nods and grins. “Yes, honey, and then I want you to blow it sky-high. I find that when someone gives me an order like that, it sends me in the opposite direction. We need to be smart about this, though. Keep off the usual channels. No business emails or calls in this building when we’re discussing the story in case they’re being monitored. Any developments, we meet at my favorite deli across the street... You’ve gone very quiet, Miller. Still considering quitting?”

“Not at all,” I say, forcing some of my old breeziness back into my voice. “I was just wondering if breaking the rules will get me a raise?”

Rob chuckles as I dodge a loaded look from Ivy. It tells me she’s figured out who’s bought the paper already, which means it’s only a matter of time before she makes the connection between the acquisition and the *Helios* story.

Then there’s the whole conflict of interest thing, which I was doing a great job of ignoring until now. No one wants to figure out Edier’s secrets more than I do, but to the detriment of the people who loved and raised me...?

I warned him he was in the fight of his life earlier, but I’m also in the fight of my own. This must have been how my mother felt when she was exposing criminals on the front page and falling for my father on the side. I’m straddling two worlds, losing my balance, and there’s nothing but jagged rocks and alligators waiting for me down below.

Rob picks up his mug and takes a thoughtful sip. “Tell me what else you’ve got.”

“My hunch is it’s narc related.” Ivy flicks through her pad for her notes as my stomach lurches unpleasantly. “Another source confirmed that the streets are being flooded with a product that has the same logo as the tattoo. He also said online shops in the city have started selling voodoo paraphernalia, again, all with this same logo, which makes more sense with the inverted pentagram being a symbol of black magic.”

“Black magic?” I pounce on the words as random snapshots of memories flood my mind:

Frog.

Sunshine.

Drowning sketchpad.

What happened to me in Colombia is still a missing jigsaw piece. There's a time jump of around fourteen hours between the morning and waking up on the bathroom floor in agony, and I can't recall it no matter what.

And why am I thinking about this now?

"Yeah, but get this..." Ivy's jade eyes have taken on that same wicked gleam as Rob's. "All these narcotics and rooster feathers are being imported from Colombia. Same place. Suesca near Bogotá. And guess what's rumored to still be practiced there? Witchcraft." She lets that word settle, or rather *unsettle* the moment before continuing. "For some of the smaller cartels it's bigger than Catholicism. They use it to murder their rivals, gain notoriety..."

"Does it work?"

She shrugs. "Lady, there's some weird stuff out there. I find it best to respect superstition and keep an open mind. Remember that haunted house story we did last year, Rob?"

"*Brujería*," I blurt out, the cogs in my mind whirring again.

Ivy frowns. "Yeah, that's right. How did you—"

"I'm half Colombian. My aunt used to tell me stories about them all the time."

"You think your forensics guy might have seen more bodies with this logo?" asks Rob, switching tack.

Ivy nods. "He really wants to meet this week. I reckon he's got something big for us."

"Good." Rob straightens up with a wince. "Switch to burner phones. Call me as soon as the meeting's over and watch your backs. If this is gang related, they'll see us coming before we've even arrived." He opens the door and turns his smile down into a frown. "I'm sorry, ladies," he says loudly. "There's just no story here so go find me something else."

"Sure thing, Rob," says Ivy with a shrug, as I catch the ghost of a wink from him.

Whatever you're hiding, Edier, we're going to find it, one way or another.

AFTER AN UNPRODUCTIVE AFTERNOON WHICH MOSTLY CONSISTS OF AVOIDING dart-like questions from Ivy, I leave the office on time.

Walking through reception, collecting various bodyguards en route, I'm sliding into the back of their SUV when my sister, Thalia, calls.

"I'm not going to say it." She pauses for dramatic effect. "No, fuck it, I can't help myself."

"Okay, shoot." I brace myself for a bombardment of health-related queries. No one knows about my latest appointment, and I don't want them to. I need to figure out a plan of resistance before I'm ordered back to my father's island.

"Do you think *Rumours* is the greatest Fleetwood Mac album in existence or the greatest album of all time?"

I burst out laughing at this, caught off guard in the sweetest way. "That's easy, Thalia. It's both!"

"I knew you'd say that. You're such a Gen X trapped in the body of a nearly twenty-two-year-old goddess. Okay, next question... Do you think they would have had that same angsty creative vibe if they hadn't all been screwing, fighting, and getting divorced during the making of that record?" Before I can answer, she's collapsing into laughter herself. I can hear a male voice in the background. "So, Santi just asked why I was giving you the recap of our entire relationship, minus the divorce part. Though I'm pretty sure I threatened it a couple of million times when we first married."

"Thalia—"

"Final question," she says, cutting me off. "Do you prefer sushi or Thai?"

"Sushi, why?"

"Great, because I'm on my way to Manhattan to take you out for dinner. Santi's got some bad man meeting with Grayson and he's dropping me off on the way. Oh, and *Mamá* and *Tía* Anna just landed in Teterboro and are planning to join us there."

"Are you for real?" I'm stunned. I haven't seen my family in weeks, and I've missed them so much.

"I swear the older you get, the more your brain cells defect on you," she says fondly. "It's your birthday tomorrow, dork face, or have you forgotten?"

Oh God, she's right. Today's the seventeenth.

"It was meant to be a surprise, but I'm terrible at keeping secrets. Anyway, I pre-guessed sushi, so I booked a table at *Umai*. It's completely

unpretentious. You'll love it. I'll text you the details and see you at eight."

SOMEONE'S BEEN in my apartment.

It hits me the second I open the door. Everything is exactly where I left it—my black Chucks are still lying in a messy heap under the table and my sunflowers are still sad and dull and in need of replacing—but the air is different. It's thicker. More masculine, and with the faintest trace of a scent I can't place. When I glance at the floor, I half-expect to find incriminating footprints on the carpet.

"Everything okay, *señorita*?" Antonio's hovering behind me, puzzled as to why I haven't moved from the threshold.

I don't usually allow him inside. My father owns the whole floor, so every exit is heavily protected, but on this occasion, I shimmy to the left to let him go first. He frowns for a split-second before comprehension kicks in, and then he's pulling out his gun and waving my other two bodyguards over.

"Stay here while we check it out."

"Okay, Rambo," I joke, attempting to make light of it.

I hover in the hallway, picking old varnish off my nails and going over every rational explanation in my head. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe my anxiety is off the scale again. Since the whole tape incident, it's been a roller coaster for me in that department.

"*Señorita*?" Antonio appears in the doorway of my bedroom and motions for me to join him.

I don't know what I expected to find, but it wasn't the designer black silk dress, Gucci purse, and black Louboutin heels that someone's laid out for me across my white comforter. Hundreds of rose petals have been scattered

around the outfit, but they're not red, they're gold.

Black and gold.

I'm beginning to loathe that color combination.

"Was this you?" he demands, looking antsy.

I shake my head, tempted to tell him that this mystery doesn't exactly require a Sherlock Holmes-style deduction to figure out the culprit.

How dare he enter my apartment without my permission. Is he on a total mission to screw with me this week?

"It's okay, Antonio," I say wearily. "You can tell the others to stand down. I know who did this. Please tell your *jefe* that if he thinks an expensive dress is a suitable apology for what he's done, he's very much mistaken."

He blinks in surprise. "You want me to call Señor Santiago and—"

"I meant your *other jefe*, but can you do so in the hallway outside? I'd like to get changed for dinner if that's okay?" When he doesn't budge, I give him a gentle shove toward the door. "Go!" I cry, trying not to laugh at his mulish expression. "Tell Grayson he's not wanted, and neither is his dress. I'm fine. Thanks for checking my apartment over. I'll be ready in a half hour, and then can you take me to *Umai*? It's a sushi restaurant on 46th Street."

Or not, as the case may be...

Ten minutes later, I'm close to meltdown. Everything I own is either dirty, looks crap, or is at the dry cleaners gathering dust. All the while, Edier's dress is sitting pretty on my white comforter, mocking me with her easy elegance. I'd love to box it back up with some passive aggressive rejection note, but desperation is overriding my principles right now. Besides, he doesn't *have* to know I've worn it. I could always bribe Antonio to tell him I threw it in the trash.

Finishing off my black eyeliner, which, for once, hasn't made me look like a cat on steroids, I step out of the bathroom and run my fingers over the material of the dress. It's so similar to the one I wore on my eighteenth birthday. I remember how invincible it made me feel that night. I wasn't a patient, or a daughter trapped in a gilded cage, just a normal teenager who was free to make her own mistakes, including the biggest one of all.

Before I know it, I'm removing my bathrobe and shimmying into the dress. It fits perfectly, like I knew it would. Edier's a Grade A shitty human being but he's always had impeccable taste. Slipping my feet into the heels, I grit my teeth at the familiar bite of pain in my ankles. I've increased my meds tonight in the hope of feeling semi-normal, and I'm still waiting for them to

kick in.

Collecting my new purse and my phone, I'm heading for the front door when it suddenly bursts open so violently it bounces off the opposite wall.

"Take it off, Ella! Take the fucking thing off right now!"

Before I can register who's storming into my apartment like a raging tempest, the man starts ripping at the delicate straps of my dress. I scream and try to push him away as he kicks the door shut again, his familiar cologne wrapping my senses in a chokehold.

"Edier, no! What the hell are you doing?"

"Stop fighting me!" he roars, before shouting to his men in the hallway outside. "Sam, search the stairwells. Get Gabrio and Hernández to sweep the parking lot."

I'm still clutching at the material and the remnants of my dignity, but he's too strong for me. There's an awful ripping sound as the neckline disintegrates and the accompanying look on his face is terrifying. He's a huge man and I'd be powerless to stop him if he ever forced me against my will.

Sam would never let that happen.

"Sam, help me! Help me!"

"Wasting your breath, *Mi Cielo*," he hisses, prizing my hands away. "Sam does whatever the fuck I tell him to do."

"Have you lost your mind? Get off me!"

But he doesn't stop until my dress is a shredded mess on the floor.

"Are you burning up?" he demands, grasping me by the shoulders, his eyes anywhere but my face. To my relief, there's no hunger in his expression. He may as well be assessing cattle.

"Burning up with anger, more like," I splutter, standing there in just my panties with one arm thrown across my chest to cover my breasts.

He's not listening. He's too busy checking every inch of my skin again.

"We can't risk it. We need to wash you." With this, he scoops me up in his arms, and carries me straight into my walk-in shower, despite my violent protests. I may as well be swatting away a wall. Punching his chest and arms is like punching concrete.

"Don't you *dare* do what I think you're about to do! I've just done my hair and make-up. My dinner reservation is in twenty minutes!"

"Fuck your make-up. You don't need it anyway. You're beautiful without."

"Don't be so—*oh my God!*" I let out a shriek as my body is engulfed in

boiling jets of water.

Dumping me back on my feet, he aims the shower head at my shoulders and breasts before ripping down my panties and doing the same there, running his rough, calloused hands over every part of me, and then repeating it with body wash.

I've had enough.

"Stop!" I scream above the hissing water, temporarily blinded by the relentless torrent. "Just switch the damn shower off!"

Instead, he spins me around and takes my face between his hands. "Do you feel dizzy? Faint?"

"No, no," I stammer, realizing he's still wearing his black suit and he's just as soaked as I am. "I feel nothing except *really* dark thoughts about you."

Despite my anger, I can't help noticing the way the water runs in rivulets down his face, skimming off his carved cheekbones, forcing paths through his stubble, and accentuating his strong jaw. His suit is completely wrecked, the shirt underneath molding to his muscles and hard edges. It's the second one he's ruined because of me.

His fierce expression starts to relax when he realizes I'm okay.

"I didn't send you the dress."

"What? Then who...?" I stop fighting him as soon as his words hit home. Some things chill me to the bone, and my attempted murder is one of them. "Was there something on the dress? Did someone try to p-poison me?" I can hardly get the word out.

He doesn't answer, but I can feel the tension in his touch. He's poised to give me something—*finally*—be it the truth or more of his aching silences.

I wait for him to speak, but nothing comes out.

"No," I say harshly, trying to rip his hands from my face, but they're stuck like glue. "No more boxes, Edier. You need to tell me right now what's going on. Is one of my father's enemies trying to hurt me, or is it one of yours?"

"Mine," he rasps, the word barely audible above the water.

"Why?"

"Doesn't matter how much running or forgetting I do," he mutters, sounding exhausted suddenly. "It always finds me."

Running and forgetting.

He spoke those words the day we first met on my father's private island. I was recalling them the night of my birthday party just before that giant wave

took me under.

“What are you running from, Edier? What are you trying to forget?”

“From everything you’re not, *Mi Cielo*, and the more I put my hands on you, the more I drag you back there with me.” His twisted smile gives me another glimpse of the killer inside, but it doesn’t frighten me like it did when I was eighteen.

He said ‘back’.

Not down.

“Are you talking about your past?”

He presses his lips to mine, but the kiss doesn’t feel complete. He’s pulling away before I’ve even tasted him. “When I was a boy, my father would send dresses to the women of his enemies laced in poison. It was his way of declaring war.”

It’s the first time he’s ever mentioned his life before he was adopted, but it’s not a sweet reminisce. He’s giving me a taste of his hell.

“Did these women die?” I say quietly.

“Some.” Dropping his hands from my face, he reaches around to switch the shower off. “It was my job to oversee the delivery and sneak into the houses to watch. I took pictures as the women lay there, gasping for breath.”

“Edier...”

“Don’t.” He shoots me a warning look. “I don’t want your fucking pity.”

“The same way I never wanted yours.” He can glare at me all he wants, but he knows I’m right. “You think someone from Colombia did this to me tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Shit.”

“Stop cursing,” he snaps. “It doesn’t suit you. I corrupted you.”

“You didn’t corrupt me enough.” I offer him a weak smile which seems to loosen his scowl. “And don’t change the subject.”

“I need to.” His dark gaze skims over me. “You’re standing there naked, and I’m still hard from earlier.”

“You walked away,” I accuse. “You were rude and cruel. Don’t think I’ve forgiven you, even if you did just save my life.”

“Good girl gone bad,” he says huskily, repeating his words from earlier, backing me up against the side of the shower cubicle, and then frowning at my wince. “Are you hurting?”

“We don’t talk about my health, remember?”

“That was a one-night deal.”

“It’s an ‘every night deal’ with us. I’m switching up the rule. You don’t get to ask me about that, and I don’t get to ask you how many people you’ve murdered.”

He chuckles—a deep, wicked, and enthralling sound. “Will you knee me in the nuts again if I break it?”

Damn him.

His lethal charm is seldom used but when he unleashes it, he’s the grand master. He’s melting my resolve and sparking heat between my legs already.

“I can do worse than that.” I tilt my head to bring my mouth in line with his once more. “This is your one and only warning, Grayson.”

“Consider me warned.”

I’m mesmerized by the golden flecks in his dark irises as he leans in closer, our lips hovering millimeters apart. “The more you push me away, the stronger I become... So, try it again, I dare you.”

He growls and grinds his erection into my stomach, looming over me like the beautifully broken shadow that he is. “Do you have any idea how much of a fucking queen that makes you? You rise to every blow, every challenge. You refuse to give up on something that’s best left in a better place.”

He’s talking about us.

“Edier—”

“Tell me how bad you’ve *really* gone,” he interrupts, tempting me with an invisible sin as he swipes a finger across my lips before tasting the moisture for himself. “Tell me truthfully, Ella, would you fuck a man for information?”

“No,” I whisper, dusting my knuckles against the front of his wet pants, feeling how big and hard he is already as we slip-slide to an honesty we’ve never reached before. “But I’d sleep with him for the truth.”

“Touch me,” he urges, taking my chin between his fingers and thumb, holding my face captive, setting me on fire with the lust in his eyes. “Maybe then we’ll both find what we’re looking for.”

Unbuckling his belt, I curl my fist around his smooth warmth. When I start to move it from root to crown, he tips his head back and groans. “*Mi Cielo...* Your hand is as tight as your pussy.”

“Will your enemies try to hurt me again?”

“I’ll never let anything else happen to you. I swear it.” Dragging my hand away, he lifts me up by my waist and orders me to put my legs around him.

Pinning me against the white tiles, he holds me in that position, my arms snaked around his neck, his cock nudging my entrance—teasing and testing—when all I want is for him to slam me down and break me. “I’m tired of pushing you away,” he says, nuzzling into my neck. “So fucking tired of it. But once you know the truth, you’ll be the one leaving.”

Pressing my hand to his jaw, I seek out his lips again, my heart thudding against the walls of my ribcage. *So close. He’s so close.* “Try me.”

“Can’t risk it.”

“Then let me go.”

“Can’t do that either.”

“Then what are we, Edier?”

“We’re forever in that ocean,” he says, after a long moment. “Just us. Together. The only two people left alive.”

How strange that we both seek solace in the same memory.

“Don’t leave us there when we can be so much more.”

“How much more?”

“We could be everything.”

“You already are.” Lowering me down onto his cock, he starts to penetrate me, inch by delicious inch, until nothing else exists except his hard heat inside me and his body wrapped around me.

He carries me like this into the living room, past the contaminated bedsheets, and lays me down on the couch. Every movement he makes feels like he’s pouring burning oil on an aching surface. I’m so full of him, I could scream, but when he pulls out to remove the rest of his clothes, I feel so empty I’m cursing him in frustration.

“Quiet,” he chides, removing his gun holster. “Let me see how wet you are.”

Arching my back, my legs fall apart, and he groans appreciatively. “Finger yourself. Show me how you make yourself come.”

I hesitate, forgetting how fast he likes his orders to be followed. A beat later, he’s pinching my clit in punishment, and I nearly orgasm from that contact alone.

“Shit!”

“Don’t,” he snarls, ripping at his shirt buttons. “I can see your pussy quivering from here. You come without my permission, and you won’t like the result... Now do as I say.”

Pulling my lips apart, I slide my index finger inside my hot channel,

shuddering from the sensation. My finger isn't as thick as his, but my inner muscles are clenching at it just as hungrily.

"More," he orders, and I switch to my middle finger to reach a deeper place. "Such a greedy little pussy, *Bonita*." He tears off his shirt, and then the tip of his tongue is spinning circles around my clit. "You taste like the purest drug."

"Oh God, don't stop." I remember this high from before. This feeling of total insanity where I can't get enough of his words and his touch. He takes all my limits and shatters them, then writes his name in the ruins.

I'm pulsing and shaking, holding my breath to reach the destination quicker. The second I sink into oblivion, he's driving his cock back inside me, taking me so savagely my eyes fly open at the bite of pain.

It's our pain, though. We made it together. It doesn't belong to a disease. We own it and I crave it.

He's all around me. Slamming in and out of me.

"Your fucking mine, Ella," I hear him rasp. "This body. This heart. This soul. Do you understand?"

Three years fades to nothing. It's so familiar the way his body's moving inside me. He's the only man I've ever loved and lost. My first and my last.

He comes as hard as he fucks, his cock jerking violently, and when he slows, each measured stroke feels strangely intimate for a man like him.

"I have to go," he murmurs into my hair.

"I know you do."

I could beg him to stay, but he won't. We've progressed to secret moments now, but it's better than no moments at all.

Our mouths find each other again just as Sam bangs loudly on the door.

"Place is swept. No sign of an intruder. Carrera's pissed. You're late for his meeting. Told me to tell you that it didn't end so well for the last person who stood him up. And your dog just crapped all over the hallway."

"You have a dog?" I gasp.

"Long story. Tell Carrera to go fuck himself," he roars back at Sam.

"Is that a direct quote?"

"Your clothes..." I glance at the ruined suit on the floor. "And mine," I add with a wince.

"Phone your sister. Tell them you'll be an hour late. Your new boss is working you too hard." He looks dangerously close to a smile then, the golden flecks in his dark eyes dancing like flames. "There's a designer

boutique at *Helios*. I'll get them to courier over a selection now."

WHEN THE CALL came in from Antonio I was on my way to another fractious meeting with Don Russo. The second he mentioned the dress, I was U-turning across four lanes of heavy crosstown traffic, and not giving a fuck about the vehicular bloodbath I was leaving in my wake.

I only had one focus.

The same focus I've had since I was eleven years old.

Keeping Ella safe from harm, and safe from me.

Earlier that evening, I'd checked the GPS coordinates on the tracker that the ever-accommodating Dr. Bailey had inserted into her arm yesterday. That little favor had earned her kids two college educations to an Ivy League of their choice. Ella went straight to her apartment after work, but my piece of mind disintegrated somewhere between Madison Avenue and 79th Street. I cut a twenty minute journey in half, screeching the Ferrari to a halt outside her apartment block as four black SUVs pulled up with Sam and the rest of my men.

I'd been waiting for a sign from *El Alquimista* that war was imminent, but in targeting Ella directly, he's just fired the first shot. Now, I need to figure out if he did so because of her last name, or because he's discovered she's my whole fucking universe.

If it's the latter, I have a rat in my organization who needs to be exterminated.

Easing out of her swollen pussy, I hold her legs open as her eyelids flicker with exhaustion. I'm waiting for the moment my cum starts leaking out of her so I can push it back inside. As far as I'm concerned, it stays right

where it belongs.

Once satisfied, I pull on my wet pants and shirt, keeping my back turned to Ella the whole time. There are new things carved into my chest that I'm not ready to show her yet.

"*Mi Cielo.*" I bend down to kiss her head, inhaling her scent and holding it deep in my chest before straightening up. "Grab whatever hair and make-up stuff you need and go get ready in the spare room."

"I thought you said I didn't need it," she says sleepily, forcing her eyes to open, but they're half-lidded and unfocused.

"You don't. I'm being magnanimous after you made me come so hard I'm still aching."

Her lips curve into a secret smile as I tuck a blue throw around her naked body. "Three run-ins in one day. You could almost call us a bad habit."

"Stop flirting with dangerous men," I warn, scooping her up in my arms again. "It leads to dangerous things."

"Only you," she whispers, curling her arms around my neck in that sweet, sweet way that I can't get enough of. There's an honesty in her embrace. It's an endless warm lake, and if I had to die today, I'd want to do so by drowning in it. "I tried to date, but it didn't work out so well. You ruined me for all the others."

I ruined all the others with my fists, Mi Cielo. Let's get our facts straight. They never stood a chance because I never let them have one.

"Stop." She taps my shoulder as we pass the side table in the hallway. "My phone... I need to call Thalia and let her know I'll be late."

Afterward, I carry her into the room that used to be her sister's. There are faded patches on the walls from all the missing pictures, and the smell of stale perfume and emptiness is overpowering. Laying her down on the bed, I'm tempted to fuck her again, but I know that she'll be sore.

"It's so cold in here," she says with a shiver, glancing around the dark bedroom.

She misses Thalia's effervescent presence. In fact, she misses her whole family. I know because I read her diaries too. Well, I did before she stopped writing them a couple of months ago. She thinks she's not worthy to be a Santiago, but she's the strongest of all of them. She broke away. She's standing on her own two feet, and she's dealing with her problems with far more dignity and determination than maybe they give her credit for.

I killed the connection with my own family long ago, and any sentiment I

have toward them died with it. It's strictly professional between me and my adoptive father now. As for my mother, contact is reduced to one phone call a year. I didn't deserve their kindness or shelter when I was a kid, and I sure as fuck don't deserve their love now.

Kicking the door shut behind me, I take her phone and call Sam. "It's Grayson. Tell the clean-up crew to work over the whole apartment this evening. Ella's in the spare room. No one goes in there unless they want a bullet from me. I need Eduardo and Dominic on the door until she departs, and then they won't be leaving her side in the restaurant. I'm adding them to her permanent security detail, along with Santiago's men."

Hanging up, I chuck the phone on the nightstand and catch her staring at me. She's sitting up, still wrapped in that soft blue throw that makes her eyes burn like sapphires. Those arms I love so much are now wrapped around her knees.

"How did you know my passcode, Edier?"

I frown. "What passcode?"

"My iPhone's. You didn't even hesitate. You just tapped it in."

"Easy. All good girls use their birth dates." I head for the door, taking it as my cue to leave. "Guess you're not such a bad one after all."

"Your Mom's coming tonight," she calls out, her words catching up with me as I step into the hallway.

"Don't." I spin back around with a snarl. "Don't speak about it. Don't even dream it. You can't fix something that broke a long time ago."

"We're all broken, Edier," she counters. "At least you and I know our flaws, our cracks, our bad news, and our heartbreak. We've had time to come to terms with them, or to fix them if we're lucky. Others don't have that luxury. For them, it's already too late."

"Speak for yourself. I hear that countdown in my head every day."

"So do I," she says, her eyes flashing defiantly.

She and I don't look to the future. We live right here in the present, with me trying to outrun my past, and her health still caught up in a nightmarish web of it.

I stalk toward her busted front door, our parting exchange ringing in my ears. I'm still refusing to acknowledge the fear I felt when I thought she'd been poisoned, or the lingering, ever-present one I have over her disease progression. Men like me don't recognize that emotion. It's a bad secret that we hide behind vengeance and violence.

I can't lose this woman.

Whatever it takes.

Whatever massacres I have to commit.

I'll burn the whole fucking world down before that happens.

I repeat my orders to my men outside, ignoring their puzzled looks at my appearance. Then, I let myself into the apartment next door, stripping off my wet clothes as I go, as Dog surges forward to greet me, wagging the scrap of fur she calls a tail as I hush her silent when she threatens to bark.

“Fuck off, Dog,” I mutter, pulling on dry black pants and a black shirt, and gently shoving her away with my foot as she tries to lick me dry. She sits down with a sad whine, and guilt has me brushing my palm over her head as a compromise. Only once, mind. She still owes me for saving her, but I don't want her affection as payment. I don't want affection from anyone except Ella.

No one gets to touch me except Ella.

Flicking back over the day's footage in my Black Room, I freeze-frame the moment a man steps into Ella's bedroom at precisely four p.m., his face and head covered in a hoodie and ski mask. Hitting 'record' on a second device, I let the next few minutes play out, watching as he lays out the outfit before lifting his concealed face to the hidden camera in the light fixture. In a fury, I watch him hold his hands up and make the shape of an 'A' with his thumbs and forefingers.

El Alquimista is taunting me.

Only two people knew about this camera's existence. One died two months ago from an unfortunate bullet wound, and the other is standing in this room still very much alive.

It means I have more than just a leak in my organization.

SAM'S WAITING FOR ME BY THE PRIVATE ELEVATOR IN MY APARTMENT, HIS hands in his pockets, and a furious scowl etched into his face. For once, I'm not the cause of it, but I have a pretty good idea who is.

“Remind me again why we have a truce with Santi Carrera?” he drawls, barely glancing at Dog, as we step into the carriage together. “If that piece of shit gives me one more remark about your tardiness, I'm going to shove his

phone—”

“Because Thalia married him and you’re fucking his sister.” I hit the button for the Lower Parking Lot.

That shuts him up for all of ten seconds.

“I hate that you get to say stuff like that to me and I can’t kill you for it.”

I shoot him a sideways glance. “Perks of being your *jefe*.”

“How’s Ella?” he says slyly, earning himself another less favorable look as the doors ping open.

“She wasn’t wearing the dress long enough for the poison to take effect.”

“You were in there for ages. Did you kiss her better?”

“I’m choosing to ignore that fucking comment because I need you out of hospital for the next few months.”

“If I can’t beat the shit out of you, Grayson...” He grins as he exits the carriage backwards, throwing his hands out like a goddamn showman. “Then I’m gonna hit you *anyway* I can.”

Prick.

Carrera’s waiting for us in the private parking lot with a dozen of his men and a dozen of mine. Sharp suited, as usual. Sarcasm on fucking overload. He takes one look at Dog and his smirk widens.

“Interesting *sicarios* you hire these days, Grayson.”

“She’s more effective than you think.” Dog sits neatly by my feet, never taking her old eyes off me. “You don’t cross state lines much, Carrera. Is this a pleasure trip, or will it be painful for the both of us?”

There’s an understanding between our two cartels right now, one that’s been strengthened by a bond in marriage, and a mutual respect, but make no mistake, animals like us never forget our DNA. We’ll happily rip each other apart the second the truce collapses.

“It’s going to be painful for someone, but not for us.” Nodding at the huge tank of a man next to him, the back door to one of the parked SUVs swings open and a man gets kicked out.

There’s a muffled scream as his knees hit the concrete floor. His hands and feet are bound together by tape, the same with his mouth, and he’s already been worked over by Carrera’s *sicarios*. His blond hair is matted with dried blood, and his white T-shirt is dirty and torn.

“I appreciate the heads up about *El Alquimista*,” Carrera continues, as the man tries to crawl away. He doesn’t get far before the tank’s boot is crushing

his shoulder blades into the ground. “Turns out, he’s been trying to flood our market as well. Figured I’d bring you a gift as a thank you.”

“Who is he?” I say, sounding bored. There are rules to this game, the first being never to display a flicker of interest when Santi Carrera lays a golden egg in your lap. He’s on a need-to-know basis when it comes to *El Alquimista*. Problems make you appear weak. Weakness gives you even more problems, and so the circle of cartel bullshit propaganda continues.

“A dealer on Spring Street. He used to be one of ours until he defected. You might want to check out the tattoo in the center of his chest...” That damn smirk creeps back across his face as he glances at Dog. “Tell me, does she do tricks too?”

“Sam?” I say, over my shoulder, ignoring the provocation. “See to it that our new guest gets a proper Santiago welcome.” With this, I reach out to shake Carrera’s hand, his grip just as firm and unforgiving as mine. “Take him over to Red Hook. Give him a couple of hours of our New York hospitality. I’ll be down later tonight to serve him the fucking house special.”

ELLA

THE SELECTION of dresses that Edier has couriered over to my apartment are exquisite.

In the end, I settle on a stunning black asymmetric midi that leaves my left shoulder bare and me wincing at the price tag. My father is the richest man in the world, but my financial independence was the one condition of me staying here when I dropped out of college.

Put simply, if I wanted my freedom, I was going to have to earn it. My apartment would be paid for, along with my healthcare, and my security detail, but everything else was up to me.

I can't pretend it's been easy, but it's taught me to respect money, and to be damn appreciative when a three-thousand-dollar dress gets sent my way. As such, I decide to call Edier and thank him for his generosity.

One problem. I don't have his number.

I've never had it.

I've never been *allowed* to have it.

For years, he's existed in my memory, and now he's spinning circles around my reality.

"Antonio, do you happen to have the contact details for Señor Grayson?" I say, addressing the tall Colombian walking beside me as we make our way down to the parking lot.

He reels it off by heart, and then proceeds to do the same with a further four.

"He has *five* phones?" I splutter.

"And he replaces them frequently, *señorita*. Some days he has six. He's a

very busy man.”

Of course, he does. He’s a telephonic megalomaniac, as well as a sinner and a heartbreaker.

“Okay, then tell me which one he’s most likely to pick up.”

He grins and repeats the first. I tap it into my phone as I slide into the backseat of the waiting vehicle.

It rings once before it’s snatched up.

“Yes?” Edier’s voice is more a growl than a greeting.

“It’s me,” I stammer.

“*Mi Cielo.*” Instantly, his voice softens. “Did you get the dresses?”

“I did. I just wanted to call and say thank you.”

“Such impeccable manners,” he purrs, managing to make three words sound so sexy I’m close to purring too. “Next time we meet, you’ll get down on your knees and thank me another way.”

“Nope,” I croak, ramming my legs together to kill the heat. “Sorry to be a buzzkill, but if I kneel, I’ll never get up again without screaming for all the wrong reasons. My lupus joints don’t work that way.”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “Then I’ll get down on mine and eat out your needy little pussy, *Bonita*, until you beg and plead for more. *That* will be my reward.”

“Stop, please stop,” I hiss, blushing hard. I glance at the two stoic silent men sitting in the front seat, pretending not to listen. “I’m not doing this now, Edier.”

“Are you in the car?”

“Yes.”

“My ears only,” he snaps, coming over all growly and possessive, and then he’s silent for a moment. “I can’t come over tonight. I have business.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to.”

He mutters something in Spanish that tells me he’s torn. “Just know that I fucking want to.”

“Maybe it’s fate,” I say idly. “Maybe I’ve realized it’s not sensible at this stage in my career to be sleeping with my new Boss’s boss.”

“What if your boss’s boss doesn’t take no for an answer? Now, hit the privacy screen button, *Mi Cielo*. These walls have eyes and ears. I trust very few, after you.”

He trusts me.

I don’t know why that makes things flutter even harder, but it does.

After pressing the button, I sit back and rest my head against the seat. He's making me dizzy with his frenetic back and forth again. He's building me up on shifting sands, and any minute now he could sink me.

"What is this, Edier?" I ask softly. "Is it a prelude to you breaking my heart, or is it something more?"

"You know I can't give you more." I close my eyes in frustration. "But I can't fucking breathe without you, either. I'm asking you to be still with me in the present. If we're careful, we can find another ocean right here in this city."

For how long? Hours? Days? And then you'll be gone again.

"You can't be still in the present, Edier," I say, feeling depressed suddenly. "It's in constant motion, the same as the tide."

There's the sound of a car door slamming in the background, and then I hear Sam's voice.

"I have to go," he snaps, slipping into 'brutal businessman mode' again before muttering his parting words to me in Spanish, "*Debes saber que las sombras no existen sin la luz.*"

"Just know that shadows can't exist without their sunshine."

WE REACH *UMAI* AT NINE P.M.

People on the busy sidewalks stop and stare as I'm escorted from the black SUV and into the restaurant by Eduardo and Dominic, with Antonio and the others trailing behind. It's like I'm an A-list celebrity being flanked by a posse of hot bodyguards tonight.

I can just imagine Ivy's scathing response if she ever saw me like this. Even my mother looks faintly embarrassed on my behalf as she stands to greet me. As the wife of Dante Santiago, she's one of the most heavily guarded women on the planet. Half the men in the restaurant are my father's *sicarios*, but at least they're acting discreetly and pretending to study their menus, instead of storming in here like they're the National Army of Colombia.

"Sweetheart, has something happened?" she murmurs, enveloping me in her embrace as my bodyguards sit down, uninvited, at the nearby *kaitenzushi*.

"Edier decided my gift this year would be to embarrass the heck out of

me,” I say, beaming brightly to dissuade her concerns. No good will come from telling her about the dress. She’ll only worry, and I trust Edier to keep me safe. Besides, I promised her something before I moved here, and I can’t fulfill it if my father is hauling me back to island jail. “I think it’s his idea of a joke.”

“Sounds most unlike my son,” says a wry voice to my left as *Tía* Anna leans in next to hug me tight. My mother’s best friend is as beautiful as she is kind, and as tough as she once was shattered. After being trafficked in her twenties, she’s dedicated the rest of her life to helping others with similar experiences.

El Refugio was her first middle finger to all those who hurt her.

Unleashing her husband on them was her second.

Despite what Edier said, I don’t believe their family connection is irretrievably broken. Nothing is certain in this life, and nothing is set in stone. Earthquakes happen all the time and they have the propensity to reshape all our worlds.

“He also bought me this dress.”

My announcement brings the conversation to a crashing halt, and I catch the looks zigzagging across the table.

“That was very thoughtful of him,” says Thalia, biting back a grin as she’s the final one to pull me in for a hug. “I love the asymmetric style. It really suits you. I didn’t realize you two were talking again?”

“We’re not really... Just suspending hostilities, temporarily.”

Well, it’s not a total lie.

“How is he?” asks *Tía* Anna curiously, but we all hear the note of grief in her voice.

Pig-headed, dogmatic, rude, bossy, infuriating, enigmatic, obstinate...

Everything.

“Busy,” I blurt out, hoping the word goes partway to explaining why he’s ghosting her the same way he’s usually ghosting me.

“Of course,” she says, accepting my reply as the tactful side-step that it is, taking her seat again as my mother motions for me to do the same.

“Elephant?” she murmurs, sitting down next to me. “I’ll only ask it this one time, I swear.”

This is her cue for enquiring about my health, aka the so-called ‘elephant with aching joints in the room’.

“I’m well,” I lie, picking up the menu, so I don’t have to face her laser-

beam scrutiny.

“How was your latest appointment?”

“My bloods are holding steady.”

“Really? Because when you walked in, I could tell you were wincing, and your wrists look a little swollen—”

“*Mamá*,” I plead, and she throws her hands up in apology. “I know. I’m sorry. It’s your birthday. We can talk about this another time.”

“Thank you. How long are you staying?”

“Anna and I fly back to Colombia tonight. Your father has business with Isabella.” She shrugs her shoulders helplessly and I know she’d stay longer if she could. “You’re not the only one in constant negotiations with him, Ella.”

“Yes, but you have one major advantage over the rest of us,” Thalia interjects sweetly.

“*Tha-lia*,” our mother scolds, swatting her arm with her napkin, as the server comes over to take our drinks’ order.

“Is it true *Papá*’s stepping away from the business?” I say in an undertone as the others noisily discuss the merits of *sashimi* over *temaki*. “Is that why he’s with Isabella?”

My mother carefully places her napkin down on the table. “He and Joseph have been planning it for a while, but after everything that happened last year with Thalia...” She trails off and glances at her youngest daughter. “This isn’t the first time he’s stepped away. He did it before we were married too, back when he was initiating his anti-trafficking task force. Instead of flitting between them, he’s decided to focus on that for now.”

“You mean he’s working hard on his morality,” I say, trying not to smile. “He should skip the queues and become a priest.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t think there’s enough Holy Water in the *world* to wash your father’s sins away,” she responds dryly. “And, knowing him as I do, he won’t be able to stay away from the business forever.”

The server returns to take the first portion of our order, and then Thalia is asking what articles I’m working on.

“Nothing much.” I hesitate. “Although there’s this one story about the Latin American *brujería* that’s pretty eye-opening...” I glance at *Tía* Anna to catch her reaction.

“*Brujería*? Really?” She leans forward with interest.

“Witchcraft?” Thalia looks confused. “Wait. What’s this got to do with the New York news scene? Unless Uncle Rick’s been using religious occult

practices to gain new voters again...”

We exchange quick-fire smiles, while *Tía* Anna studies me thoughtfully.

“What’s the story?”

“There’s been a spike in the black market for this kind of stuff,” I say, keeping it super vague, but enough to stir up interest, before I’m switching the subject. “How’s Santi, Thalia?”

“Good!” Her face lights up as soon as I mention his name. “In fact, we’ve decided to have a second wedding in a couple of months. Please be my bridesmaid!”

“I’d be honored!”

“You can choose any dress you like, just so long as it’s red.”

The rest of the evening passes in an easy haze of Thalia’s plans and *Tía* Anna’s updates from Colombia. Occasionally, I’ll catch her staring at me, and my heart skips a beat. There are unspoken words in her eyes that I desperately want to hear, but it’s a conversation for another time.

Being around my family again is like coming in from the cold. As the night progresses, I can feel their love and warmth wrapping around me like a blanket. Worries about my intruder are quickly pushed to the back of my mind, but Edier’s still front and center, like the forceful, demanding bastard that he is.

When my mother’s head bodyguard, Armando, murmurs something in her ear, we know our time is up.

“Here,” she says, slipping an envelope into my hand. “Happy birthday, Ella. Just a little something from your father and me.”

“*Mamá...*”

“Rob says you’re doing great, by the way.”

I give her a look that’s somewhere between *how dare you* and *eternal gratitude*.

“Shush, you got that job on your own merit, and you’re keeping it with instinct.” With that, she waves the conversation away. *Finito*. No more. As far as she’s concerned, what she did to help me get into NYC, and then to land me on Rob Willis’s radar are just things that all mothers should do to help their daughters.

“Señora Santiago, your transportation is outside.” Armando appears on the horizon again like an unwanted thunderstorm.

“Thank you... Thalia, darling, I promised your new husband I’d see you home. If he’s anything like mine, he’ll be clock-watching and scowling until

you're safely back in his sights."

We move toward the door, shrugging into coats and scarves, with *Mamá* and *Thalia* walking ahead. Just before we reach the sidewalk, I feel *Tía Anna's* hand on my arm.

"Tell me," she urges in a low voice. "Does your *brujería* article have anything to do with *Edier*?"

I pause a fraction too long. "Why would you think that?"

She glances at the passing traffic, her faraway gaze trailing one yellow cab all the way to the next block. "When *Edier* came into our lives, *Ella*, he was so damaged. You know how he couldn't speak for months... At first, we thought it was because of the trauma of his mother's suicide, but after *Joseph* and your father destroyed the last of the *Hurtados Cartel*, stories began to emerge about what had been happening in and around *Bogotá*."

"What kind of stories?" I whisper.

"Of children being forced to commit terrible atrocities, unspeakable abuse against women..." She forces a smile for my mother and *Thalia* who are already climbing into her car. My mother's mouthing at her to 'hurry up'.

"Is there something you're not telling me, *Anna*?"

I need to know every detail suddenly, no matter how tragic. There's a savage, beautiful, complicated man who holds my heart in the palm of his hand, and I want so badly to believe that one day I could be holding his in mine.

She chews on her lower lip for a moment. "Rumors swirled that *Hurtados* was obsessed with the occult and ritual sacrifice—animal and human," she adds reluctantly, making my stomach lurch. "The blackest of the black. The kinds of things you can't look up on the internet unless you venture into dark places."

Did you witness this, Edier? Were you made to be a part of it?

My mother's motioning frantically from the car now. *Armando's* looking like he's a hot minute away from *DEFCON 1*. Meanwhile, my own security is getting twitchy. I'm too exposed standing in the doorway of a sushi restaurant.

"Something happened the day you fell sick in *Leticia, Ella*."

I freeze, all other thoughts forgotten.

"I know you don't remember it. Your mother's told me as much. A *bruja* managed to break into *El Refugio*. There were four men with her, but they were quickly killed by your father. I think they were a distraction, though. I

think the *bruja* really came for Edier.”

Just then, I’m hit by a jumble of emotions: confusion, sadness, fear, loss... *So much loss.*

No images, though.

Why can’t I remember?

“Edier went away soon after. First, to Europe with his father, and then back to Cali in Colombia. He’s not been home to Leticia since.”

“And the *bruja*?”

“Joseph killed her on sight, but he wasn’t fast enough. Whatever she said to Edier in that short space of time was enough to have him spinning away from us.”

He wasn’t spinning, Tía Anna. He was running and forgetting.

“I was with him,” I blurt out, feeling that certainty so strongly in my heart. “I have this weird sense that he was trying to protect me from something... Oh God. Do you think the witch cursed us?”

“I don’t believe in curses,” she says firmly. “And neither does Joseph, but words can be just as poisonous if whispered into the right ears at the wrong time. Joseph’s been telling me to leave this alone for years, saying that Edier needs to work through whatever demons are in his past, the same way he did himself when we were first married. But the more the time passes, the more I can feel my son falling into darkness.” Reaching out, she takes my hands, and I can feel her trembling. “I didn’t give birth to Edier, but that doesn’t dilute the quality of my love. I know what he is. I can’t change what he’s become, but maybe with your help I can try and understand him.”

“How can I...?” I trail off with a frown.

Her face softens. “He has a connection with you, Ella. He’s had it since the first day you met. It’s not something you can define. It’s just there, lingering unseen like an invisible string. I know you feel it too. I know how close you were. I also know how much he’s hurt you by ignoring it and pushing you away for so long.” She squeezes my hands gently. “Look, I have to go before your mother kills me, but if you remember anything about that day, will you let me know? Maybe we can help each other.”

She kisses me briefly on my cheek, the overhead light snatching at her tears, before she’s walking away, leaving me with a thousand blank spaces that only Edier can fill in.

EDIER

Past

SHE FEELS SO FAR AWAY, even when she's next to me.

It's nothing new. I'm the one she beats the most and likes the least, but it's gotten worse since we started on this journey last night. Every stumble earns me a slap to the face. If I fall behind, she threatens me with a hiding. It's like she's trying to hit the boy right out of me, when all I want to feel is her love.

But *Mamá* got caught doing something she shouldn't with one of *Papi's* *sicarios*, and now we all have to pay for it.

A red day is breaking over the trees. The air is busy with black insects. It doesn't feel like a fresh start to me. It just feels old and stale. Temporary freedom from *Papi* doesn't taste as good as I imagined because death and fear bought it for us.

We hitched a ride in a truck from Bogotá. It wasn't a taxi, but there was some sort of fee. *Mamá* told me to wait outside the vehicle for ten minutes while she sorted it out with the driver. He dropped us off near La Pedrera, called *Mamá* a bad name, and we've been hitch-hiking in cars and walking ever since.

The closer we get to Leticia, the more she's acting like a stranger. If I wasn't so tired, I'd slip my hand into hers and try and squeeze us back to life. I need something to spark and catch and make everything right again, but not like the match I threw at the church soaked in gasoline which felt so wrong.

Papi tricked me. He told me the church was full of *sicarios* who needed

to be burned for betraying him. I saw their faces at the windows as the flames took hold. They didn't look like lying *sicarios* anymore, they just looked scared.

I killed a hundred men yesterday, and I don't feel good about it. Not like *Papi* said I would. My hands stink of smoke, and the ash is still staining my skin.

Papi said it was my first 'atonement' for what *mama* did. The second is waiting for us at our destination.

"Keep up," *Mamá* hisses, wrapping an extra loop of her red rosary around her hand, the small beads jingle jangling. She never used to wear one, but she hasn't stopped clutching it since we left Bogotá. It's almost as if she's protecting herself from me.

"How much further?"

"As long as it takes."

I lose my footing, crying out as small rocks cut into my heel, and I get a vicious cuff round the head for it. My shoes were full of holes before we started, and I've been walking on bare skin for miles. The stinging pain turned to white-hot torture hours ago, and I'm too afraid to look behind and see the sticky trails of blood.

Instead, I keep my eyes on the rising sun, hoping it burns what I did to those men right out of my mind. I wish I could draw it and lose myself in it, and never come out again.

"My feet hurt," I mumble.

"Stop moaning. We've all had to make sacrifices. If it were up to me, *Nacio* would be here instead of you."

I stare down at her shoes, the ones that don't have holes in, and hold my tongue. No good ever comes out of talking back at her. Besides, I've known for years that my older brother, *Nacio*, gets all her affection. Not me. He's her favorite. Not me.

We turn onto another track. This one's smoother and less painful to walk on. We follow it for a while until we see gates up ahead. There's a line of men with guns standing in front of it and gray stone monsters resting on top of the walls on either side.

El Refugio

"Is this it?"

"Yes."

As we draw closer, *Mamá* grabs my arm and yanks me to a stop. "Don't

forget what you need to do, Edier. Nacio's life depends on it." Her eyes water in a way that they never do for me. "Don't you dare run and forget, no matter how long this takes. Hurtados will kill us all."

Hurtados is *Papi's* boss and cousin. He stinks of *Quesito* and surrounds himself with scary old *bruja* who smell even worse than him. He and *Papi* are sending me to Leticia to do something bad for them. They say it's for 'revenge'.

Just the thought of it turns my stomach. It's even worse than the things they do to the women they keep chained in the barn. They make me watch sometimes and laugh when I vomit. They said if I fail at this, they'll make me shoot every single one of them before they burn me, *Mamá* and Nacio alive.

My eyes seek out the sun again. Anything is better than looking directly at someone who hates you, but she slaps me hard across the cheek. "Did you hear what I said, Edier? To these people at *El Refugio*, we're running *away* from Hurtados. They won't know any different unless you blurt it out to them."

Over her shoulder, I can see shiny green grass and a big house through the gaps in the gates—greener and bigger than anything I've ever seen before.

"I won't, *Mamá*."

"We're staying at this place until it's done and then we get to go home to Nacio. Your father will forgive me, and we'll be a family again."

I don't want to go home.

I don't want to turn that green grass red, but I don't have a choice in either.

“AS YOUR LAWYER, I’m advising you to burn your clothes and pick an alibi,” says Queenie, giving me the once-over as I emerge from the warehouse wiping my bloody hands on a dirty rag. “Here.” She shifts position against the parked BMW to pass me a manila folder of documents embossed with her company’s logo. “These papers need signing. They’re from that important meeting you never showed up to this morning.”

There’s no judgment in her voice. She’s far too unprincipled for that.

“This is a very personalized service,” I say, throwing the rag away. “I didn’t expect them to be hand-delivered by my two-hundred-dollar an hour employee. Will you be invoicing for gas, too?”

“Naturally... You wanted this media group fast and I pride myself on delivering excellence to my clients, at any cost.” She glances at the warehouse behind me. “I’m assuming whoever’s lying half-dead in there deserved it?” When I don’t answer, she sighs, and turns around to open her driver door. “Have you seen her again?”

“Who?”

“What have I told you about playing coy? And when the holy *fuck* did you get a pet?” She scowls at Dog, who’s lying on the ground by my feet, looking up at her with baleful eyes.

I smirk when I remember Ella’s Cruella De Vil comment from the other day. “That’s not a pet, that’s an emotional support animal. I need it for all the murder I’ll be committing in the next few months. You got a pen?”

Reaching into her pocket, she pulls out a Montblanc and studies me as I sign the places where she’s marked. “I’m the legitimate face of your empire,

Grayson. I don't want or need to know what's happening on the other side, but there's something big going down, am I right?"

"I'm in control of this, Queenie, so no need to liquidize any of my assets just yet." I hand the signed papers back to her before sliding the Montblanc into my back pocket. "And I'm keeping the pen. Client privileges."

"I also had my P.I. do that digging you requested."

I pause. "And?"

"Your father's dead. No question. He was buried in a shallow grave in Suesca near Bogotá, not long after Santiago came blazing through the place with his Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse over a decade ago. We had the body exhumed and verified. Hurtados himself died in a notorious Colombian jail called *La Modelo* within two weeks of starting a bullshit nine-year sentence for Tax Evasion, mainly because they couldn't land him with anything else. Sources say it was your adoptive father who had a man on the inside that time."

"And my brother, Nacio?"

"We're still trying to verify him. They're a lot of cartel bodies in unmarked graves around the place, Edier. We need more time."

"I want confirmation that every single one of them were killed by Santiago. Send me pictures."

She raises a cool, blonde eyebrow at this. "Most people would be mildly conflicted to know that their close relatives were murdered by the same people who adopted them, and who they've pledged their eternal allegiance to."

"Most people aren't blood related to pure fucking evil," I clip back, turning to go. "And you should know by now that no allegiance is eternal."

WE'RE GETTING NOWHERE. IT'S BEEN FOUR HOURS AND CARRERA'S 'GIFT' IS refusing to talk. There's been no hocus pocus with the ugly bastard either, just defiant silence. His eyes are still gray and bloodshot, but the rest of him is red and dripping.

So far, his tattoo is the only interesting thing about him. It's larger than the ones we've come across before, sitting dead center in the middle of the chest like a badge of honor, with what looks like a single army service stripe

underneath. He's more than a disciple. This man means something to *El Alquimista's* organization, and we intend to find out what. Afterward, I'll be sending Carrera a gift of equal value.

"Leave him, Sam," I order, watching my second-in-command ram his fist into his ribcage again and get nothing but grunts in return. "We'll let him consider his options for a couple of hours."

It's close to midnight and I'm craving Ella's peace and touch, though it's reckless of me to go anywhere near her so soon after what happened. Unfortunately, recklessness is a lot like gravity in that respect, and after building so many walls between us for so long, I can feel their foundations crumbling under the weight of it. How she feels in my arms is immeasurable. It's the only time I can distract myself from the unavoidable collision that's coming. I need as much of her as I can get before it all turns to shit.

I click my fingers at Gabrio who's standing to one side, smoking a cigarette in a slow and measured way. Some men are thinkers, and he's one of them. I need his brains as much as I need Sam's brawn. "Call one of our contacts at NYPD. Let's get a name for this man and an address... Whatever they have."

"I'm betting he's got a record as long as my dick," drawls Sam, wandering over to join us, shaking out his fist.

"We're not talking about his small list of minor parking offenses," I drawl back, making Gabrio snicker. "I want everything they've got."

Pulling on my suit jacket over a bloody black shirt, I slide my knife back into the hidden sheath around my ankle and head for the door with Dog trailing behind. "I want a four-man team watching John Doe at all times, plus two on the door, and two at the rear. Check-ins every half hour. The rest of the *sicarios* can go home."

"Yes, jefe."

"Sam, you're with me."

He follows me out to the Ferrari and swings into the passenger seat, with Dog reluctantly jumping into the back. I set a course for the Upper West Side. I have one more item of business to oversee tonight before heading to Ella's place.

"Clean-up crew have finished." Sam's checking his messages. "Ella's back home."

"I know."

He side-eyes me with interest, but for once he doesn't comment.

“Santiago called.” I turn out of Red Hook and take a right back to the city. “He’s coming to New York next week, straight from Colombia.”

There’s a pause. “You think the old man’s quitting?”

“Looks that way. He confirmed it with Isabella a couple of hours ago.”

“Your father, too?”

“Ay, *Dios mío!* You say it like I have a direct hotline to him, but I expect so... This anti-trafficking taskforce means as much to him as it does Santiago. They run that show together.”

“Edier Grayson, former King of Shadows, and now the official ruler of the US Santiago Empire,” declares Sam, sounding impressed. “Will I have to start bowing to you?”

“Only if you want my fucking foot in your face.”

Now, it’s my turn to fall silent. I’m thinking of a kid who was told he was a worthless piece of shit for ten years, and who’s now on the verge of becoming the most powerful criminal in the US.

“It’s time you had your own territory, Sam.” I let this bombshell settle for a moment. “I’m giving you Vegas, if you want it?”

His next breath shoots out on a curse. “You serious?”

I nod. “Don’t give us an answer yet. Go home. Talk it over. Vegas is still eighty percent mafia-controlled, but that needs to change. Queenie just ‘completed’ on a new hotel complex for the *Helios* brand, and it’s right next to their flagship. I know how much you’ll excel at being the bad neighbor...”

He snorts loudly at this.

“There’s something else.” I pull alongside my main office, parking the Ferrari in front of his Vanquish. Killing the engine, I offer him a cigarette before sparking up one for myself. “It’s not in my nature to overshare, but I need you across something personal before you go.”

“I’m listening.”

I stare at the turning leaves on the sycamore trees overhead, taking a couple of lengthy hits of nicotine before continuing. It’s late September, but there’s barely any breeze. It’s like the whole world is holding its breath. “You were right.” Smoke comes hissing out between my clenched teeth. “*El Alquimista* is connected to my past. Someone’s not dead and buried. And I have a leak. Find out where I’m hemorrhaging information from and make it subtle. I want a record of anyone seen going in or out of Ella’s apartment block, bodyguards included.”

“And yours,” he murmurs, blowing smoke over his shoulder, as I turn to

glare at him. “You think I didn’t know you had the place next door to her, Grayson? It’s stalking 101.” He grins wolfishly. “You should come talk to me about it sometime.”

“It’s complicated,” I grit out. “In the meantime, I need extra checks and surveillance on every single *sicario* in our crew.”

“I’m on it.”

Taking one last toke, I grind the cigarette butt into the palm of my hand, feeling nothing. “Isabella Santiago has an insider at *El Alquimista*’s main plant in Suesca. We’ve managed to manipulate the time and date of his next shipment to New York. We believe he’s already in the US from several messages we’ve intercepted. We follow the product we get to him.”

“When?”

“Three months, if not sooner. It was originally six...but I’m not liking how things are playing out right now, so I moved the date up. This stays between us, Sam. Only four of us know, and we’re two of them.”

“And the poisoned dress tonight?”

“That was him.”

“So, he’s targeting Ella as well?” The concern in his voice makes me want to pound his head into my dashboard, but I’m grateful for it too. We all grew up together. Our shared history entitles him to give a shit and not incur my wrath, and I also know he’d take a bullet for her, no question.

“Does Santiago know what’s going on?”

“He doesn’t need to. This is my problem to handle, and I have the best protection for his daughter.”

He nods, taking it all in. “We done?”

“Done,” I agree. “Now, go home and kiss your kid tonight.”

He climbs out and bangs his goodbyes on the hood of the Ferrari, making Dog fidget and bark. Before I can offer her an invitation to the front of the car, she’s curled up next to me in a furry ball of sly persistence.

THERE'S something so sensual about how she sleeps.

As skilled as I am at breaking down her inhibitions, as much as I enjoy making those cheeks blush and her skin bloom beneath my slaps and rough touches, there's an impetuosity to how she's sprawled across the mattress tonight with the sheet kicked off and her skimpy white panties on display. She's naked everywhere else, her pale skin smooth and taut, her spine gently curving below the waistband of those same panties—the ones I'd like to tug slowly down her slender thighs with my teeth.

I slide my finger across the monitor, tracing the curves of her ass, before stopping at the apex of her thighs, over that soft mound that I'd kneel before and worship every hour of the day if I could—my mouth watering as I recall the honeyed taste of her.

My clean-up crew did a good job. Even her bed had been replaced by the time she arrived home from the sushi restaurant at eleven thirty-three. The apartment was spotless, and the poison used on the dress screened and detected. Although it was a heavily diluted concentrate, if she'd worn it for another hour, she would have experienced severe dizziness and blood pressure issues, not to mention reactions with her current medication.

I've received *El Alquimista's* declaration loud and clear, but he won't be getting one back from me.

I don't play war games. Instead, I'm going to sit back and wait as patiently as Dog, and when he least expects it, I'll rip out the bleeding heart of his entire operation.

Tearing my eyes from the screen, I pour myself a double of Macallan and

knock it back in one hit. It does nothing to cool my ardor. If anything, the heat at the back of my throat is just fanning the flames inside.

I need her tonight.

Need her more than ever.

I need to lose, and find, myself in her body again.

Hissing at Dog to 'stay', I let myself into her apartment via the connecting door I had secretly installed last year. I'm removing my clothes as I go, first my shoes, jacket, holster, and shirt, and then my pants, socks, and shoes. By the time I reach her room, I'm completely naked, my hard cock bobbing and aching and leading the fucking way as I take my place at the foot of the bed. Morality isn't a code I live by, and it has no place in this room. Consent is a gray line that I'll cross, but only to bring her pleasure...

Just shut the fuck up, brain, and put your mouth on her.

She looks so small in the middle of the bed, her long black hair fanning out across the white sheet, her small hand curled into a loose fist, and her breathing soft and even.

So fragile and so damn fuckable.

Kneeling behind her, I rain soft kisses down her spine, reveling in the smooth warmth beneath my lips, before I'm sinking my teeth into the waistband of her panties like I'd imagined doing. She stirs in her sleep, and I swear she lifts her hips for me like the good fucking girl that she is.

Once she's naked, I roll her over, her head flopping to the side with the motion. She moans, but her eyelids stay shut. Positioning myself next to her, the mattress dipping beneath my weight and pitching her even more dangerously close to me, I run my fingers through the narrow strip of dark hair between her legs, then cup her pussy, groaning inwardly at her scorching heat.

The digital clock on her nightstand is blinking 01:00 a.m.

I think about the morning I left, exactly four years ago, when I'd lain next to her for hours, waging a battle with myself.

Restless to stay. Restless to go.

I part her legs just enough to slide my middle finger into her pussy. She's still wet from earlier. Still leaking traces of my cum. I dip my head and breathe us in, a scent so unique and powerful it shoots lust straight to my cock.

The feeling is so intense I have to pause for a second, otherwise I'll be coming all over her pussy before I've even fucked it. This is what she does to

me. It's not black magic, it's white. It's Ella's spell, and I'm one hundred percent under it.

Dipping my head, I wrap my lips around her still-swollen clit bud and suck gently, stealing another moan from her parted mouth. At the same time, I move my finger in and out of her, smirking to myself as her hips start to sway in time to my relentless rhythm, even when she's asleep.

Flattening my tongue, I lick her pussy in long, firm strokes until I feel the tension growing in her thighs. Her hip sways increase. That's when I know she's awake and sentient.

"What are you doing?" she asks drowsily, her eyes still shut fast, smiling that secret smile which tells me she knows exactly what it is, but that she likes it, and if I stop, she'll be disappointed.

"Birthday surprise," I murmur. "Open your legs wider, *Mi Cielo*, and let me in."

"I thought I wasn't going to see you again tonight?"

I push one thigh to the mattress, temporarily losing my mind at the sight of her. "I couldn't stay away."

"Were you going to make love to me, even if I stayed asleep?" She sounds curious. All the while, I'm still finger fucking her at a leisurely pace.

"Who says I haven't already?"

"Because I'm still unsatisfied, Señor Grayson," she whispers. "Just don't get mad if I fall asleep straight after. I'm on two Valium."

"I'm about to make you come so hard I'd be fucking insulted if you *didn't* pass out."

She giggles softly, burrowing her fingers into my hair. "You know I can't resist you when you're 'charm offencing'."

"I swear you make this shit up. I'm still getting over 'estranger' from four years ago."

She smiles at the memory. "That's actually a word, by the way. I looked it up afterward."

"I was too busy fucking my right hand five times a night at the memory...*afterward*."

"Just your right hand?" she teases.

I move so fast she barely has time to cry out. Whipping my finger away, I drag her whole body down the bed and onto my waiting cock, spearing all the way inside her without a single thrust.

"You think I'd fuck another woman after having pure sunshine?" I snarl,

balls deep and seeing stars. “That’s like drinking cheap pinot after savoring a 1945 *Romanee Conti, Mi Sol*. No one. *Not one single woman* has crossed my mind in all this time, Ella. Now, open your fucking eyes and look at the mess you’ve made of me.”

Her response is equal parts guttural and seductive as she rakes her fingernails down my back. Pulling out, I surge forward again with a brutal stroke.

“Eyes!” I growl, and her bright blues fly open and fix on my face. Her breath is jagged and rough. She wants me to move, to take her over the edge, but she deserves my punishment for not obeying me fast enough. “You want my cock, Ella?”

She nods, crushing her lower lip between her teeth.

“Beg me for it.”

“Santiagos don’t beg,” she whispers, and a dangerous smile creeps across my face.

“That sounds like a challenge and a defiance all in one, *Mi Cielo*.”

Her eyes flash playfully as I rear up, still buried deep inside her, and hook her knees over my shoulders. A beat later, my palm is connecting with the underside of her ass...*hard*.

“Shit!”

Her pussy spasms around me on contact, so I do it again and again, until she’s crying out as new sensations flood her body and drive her closer to the edge. Just to compound them more, I fuck her roughly for a couple of strokes until she’s chanting out my name in desperation. Her relationship with pain is a toxic love affair. Dissatisfied with what her body gives her on a daily basis, she craves me to give her something extra. Something that she needs and wants, that flood her body with endorphins and satisfaction.

“Begging yet?” I grit out.

When she doesn’t respond, my palm rectifies the situation once more, the delicious sound of skin on skin echoing around the dark bedroom.

One.

Two.

Three.

This time when I thrust into her, the angle and pressure on her clit is too much and she comes so fucking beautifully around my cock she nearly drags me under with her.

“What about now,” I demand harshly, leaning down to catch her lips in a

vicious, all-consuming kiss. “Or do I have to fuck the words right out of your mouth?”

Her lips curve instantly, her gorgeous eyes daring me to do it.

Dropping her legs from my shoulders, I slip from her pussy and climb up the bed. Kneeling next to her face, I hold my cock out to her. “You want this?” I hiss. “You want me to take you like this?”

Flashing me another sly smile, she lifts her head and swallows me up, as much as the angle will allow.

“Hijueputa!”

I tip my head back as lightning races up and down my spine.

Sliding my leg across her chest, pinning her to the mattress, I give her more access as she continues to suck and swirl her soft tongue over every inch of me.

“Mi Cielo,” I warn with a groan, “you need to stop...”

She looks so beautiful stuffed full of me, bobbing back and forth, her cheeks perfectly rounded, her blue eyes watering. Then there are all the wet noises and moans filling the air...

“For fuck’s sake, Ella. I’m going to come.” I fist her silky black hair as every muscle in my body tenses.

It’s the look she gives me that unravels me. I might have her trapped beneath me, but she has all the power, and she knows it.

In the end, I’m the one who’s begging for her.

I empty myself down her throat with another tortured groan as she swallows frantically, catching the sensitive tip of my cock, and making me jerk inside her. When I pull out, I’m still coming, trailing my seed across her tongue and lips as she licks me clean. Nothing goes to waste.

Collapsing onto the bed next to her, I throw my arm over my face as I wait for my breathing to slow. My heart is beating so hard, it’s hammering her name into my soul.

She wriggles up against me, pressing her breasts to my side, as she skates her palm across my abdomen, trailing it over my chest and arms.

Before I realize what she’s doing, it’s too late.

She’s seen them.

Every.

Single.

One.

Fuck.

I go to push her away, but she stops me with a gentle hand on my shoulder. “Don’t, Edier... I want to look.”

Gritting my teeth, I fall back onto the mattress and let her examine each tattoo in turn, from the tribal and Celtic rays across my chest and arms to the thousands of score lines across my abdomen.

“Are these...?”

“Suns.”

For you. All for you.

“And the tally marks?”

“One for every day we’ve been apart since you were eighteen.”

She’s silent for a moment, and then she lies back down next to me, her hand never straying from the unmarked skin directly over my heart. “Why isn’t there a tattoo here?”

But I think she knows the answer to that already.

“Because you own that part of me, Ella, and everything underneath. You have done since I was eleven years old.”

Her breath catches, and then she’s sitting up in a rush. “Damn you, Edier Grayson!” she cries, pounding my arms and chest with her fists. “How could you have just pushed me away like that? You knew you owned my heart too!”

“Ella!”

“Screw you!”

“ELLA!” Catching her flailing fists, I pull her into my embrace, holding her tightly as she sobs all her anger, pain, and frustration into the crook of my neck. Pulling away, I trap her face between my hands. “There are reasons, *Mi Cielo*, so many reasons why we shouldn’t be together.”

“Name them! Just fucking name them! I’m done playing this game!”

I glare at her, the truth resting right there on my tongue.

“Is this about my father?” Her blue eyes are blazing for answers. “Does he know about us? What did he say to you?”

“Fuck!” I let go of her as my phone starts ringing from somewhere on the floor. Throwing my legs off the bed, I’m aware of her gaze constantly as I start hunting for it. Her hurt and confusion are infusing the air between us, slowing my movements.

I find it underneath my pants in the doorway.

“What?” I snarl into the receiver.

“NYPD contact came up with a match,” says Gabrio, indifferent to my

terseness. "You might want to sit down for this."

"Tell me."

"The name's a fake and his record's been wiped, but the home address he's given is Ella Santiago's apartment block."

EDIER

Past

“EDIER... *Ed-eee-errr*, I’ve got something to show youuu...”

Her voice has that tinny, echoey sound that tells me she’s in the bathroom down the hall. It’s also weaker and more garbled, like she’s been drinking bottles of *Guaro* again.

“*Mamá?*” I tap on the door, hoping she’s not naked like she was the last time she got drunk in here.

“Come in, *niño estúpido.*”

Pushing the door open, I see white and then red.

White tiles.

Red water.

Drip, drip.

“What have you done?” I rush to the bathtub as the razor slips from her fingertips. It lands on the floor below with a delicate zing before it spins and settles in a spreading pool of crimson.

“Don’t,” she slurs, as I go to press a towel to her gaping wrists. She’s cut so deep I can see the moving tendons below the skin. All the while I can sense her black eyes drilling into my face. “You couldn’t do it, could you?” she guesses. “Ugh, you’re pathetic, Edier...” I sink to my knees as I let her hurt me one last time. I know she’s dying. I know it’s too late. There’s nothing more I can do to help her.

She’s been this way ever since she found out that *Papi* killed the man she did something behind his back with. Her pain will always be more important

than her sons.

“He was here today. The first time in months, and you let poor Nacio down, you gutless *hijueputa*.” She starts to cry, and I just stare at the floor. “Hurtados will kill you both now, but he won’t get to kill me.”

I don’t tell her about the photographs Nacio’s been sending me in secret. The ones of him with the trapped women in *Papi*’s barn. He’s proud of them. He’s enjoying himself. We only left Bogotá three weeks ago, but my brother’s already been lost to *Papi*’s evil.

She doesn’t need to know the fate of her favorite son before she dies.

“Who’s ever going to love you, Edier,” she croaks, slowly sliding down the curved white head of the bathtub. “Who’s ever going to love you—”

Her last words gurgle and get swallowed up by the red water as she sinks out of view, but the truth of them stay in this bathroom.

I sit there long after she’s gone and hours before anyone finds me, drawing pictures and patterns in *Mamá*’s blood, and wishing for my own death to come find me first.

ELLA

“TWO DRINKS, and not one of them is alcoholic. It’s a depressing day in hell.” Ivy places them down on the table and drops into the seat next to me. “Speaking of which, you never told me how your appointment with the rheumatologist went the other day.”

“It was right up there with that double endoscopy and colonoscopy I had on my sixteenth birthday, or the time my sister left my favorite Vintage Mac Tee in an airport in Maui.”

“Ouch.”

“Ouch,” I agree, running my finger up the side of my glass, collecting all the little beads of condensation on my skin. Alas, the path is quickly frosted over again by the chill of my mineral water, which is a miserably accurate depiction of my life right now. Since Edier stormed out of my apartment two nights ago, and started screening my calls, everything seems to be a couple of degrees cooler.

“What magical meds have they suggested you try? I swear my sister’s a lupus dispensary these days.”

“Methotrexate.”

She winces and puts her drink back down on the table. “Chemo? Seriously? I’m so sorry, Ella... When do you start?”

“Started yesterday. The nausea kicked in this morning.” I flash her my wrists to show off my funky new motion-sickness bands. “So far, no spewing, just tiredness and cravings for ginger.” I glance around the busy bar, refusing to dwell on it any further. There’s still no sign of our forensics source.

I check my watch. He's twenty minutes late already.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Nope. I just need to kick this stupid flare. I'm sick of my knees feeling like shards of glass are sticking into them. Besides, the chemo's only for a couple of months..."

"You're a fucking rock star, you know that?" Ivy shakes her head at me in admiration. "Anyone else would be passed out in bed, watching bad movies on repeat."

"*Anyone else* doesn't have a cool newspaper story to pursue... That's if our source ever turns up."

"Oh, he will. He's been persistent in calling this meeting." There's a pause. "Want me to come over to your place later? I could be your cheerleader from the other side of the bathroom door if the antiemetics start timing out."

"As tempting as it sounds, there are some lines that work colleagues *never* need to cross." I flash her a rueful smile. "You know I love you tons for the offer, though."

"Yeah, I know." She gives me an exaggerated sigh. "I'm a very loveable reporter, despite my bitchy reputation."

I can't help laughing at this. Sympathy isn't infinite. I've found that out the hard way over the years. It's rare to find someone like Ivy who's unfazed by the long-haul nature of this disease. Best of all, I know her offers are genuine, and they'll never have expiry dates.

"You going to tell Rob?"

"Nope."

Rob will tell my mother. Three hours later, a private jet will be landing at Teterboro, New Jersey, to fly me home.

"Brave."

"Stupid?"

"Fucking inspirational. If you need an excuse for skipping work, just ask. I'm the queen of bullshit apparently, or so says my fiancé..." She trails off as a tall man in his mid-thirties wearing a black suit and thick-rimmed glasses enters the bar. "Hold that thought. I think our man just arrived." She gives him a subtle wave, and he comes straight over. "Not what I was expecting, *at all*," she adds to me in a side-whisper.

I know what she means. He's nothing like other anonymous newspaper sources who skulk into our meetings under wide-brimmed hats and dark

glasses.

He moves like he's courting interest, with his black hair slicked off his face and a skin tone as richly tan as Edier's.

Aloof and unsmiling. Brutally composed.

I wouldn't call him handsome as such, he's far too frosty for that description, but all the women in the bar are checking him out anyway.

There's no way he works in windowless crime labs all day.

We stand to greet him, and he shakes our hands in turn. His touch is even colder than my glass and I shiver on contact. If he notices, he doesn't comment.

"Mr. Gutierrez? I'm Ivy Sanchez, and this is my colleague at *The Eagle*, Ella Miller. Thank you for agreeing to meet with us."

"Good evening, Miss Sanchez. Miss...*Miller*." The slight hesitation before he says my last name catches like a bad splinter. It's unmistakable—a gaping, black hole for all those who know my lie.

Is it my imagination, or did his gaze just flicker to the booth where my bodyguards are sitting?

I told them nothing about this meeting, other than it was a generic work thing. As far as they and Edier are concerned, this story died days ago. We've kept to Rob's rules. No emails or calls in the workplace. Burner phones always...

"Please, take a seat." Ivy indicates to the empty bench opposite. "Can I get you a drink?"

He shakes his head and maneuvers his angular frame into our booth, unhooking his expensive suit jacket button in a fluid movement. His shoes are fine Italian black leather. I know because they're the same ones Edier wears with his Brioni suits.

My barometer of unease shoots up ten-fold.

"Gutierrez...is that Spanish?" asks Ivy, launching into small talk which is a skill I swear she majored in.

There's a pause. "Actually, it's Colombian."

My stomach does a savage flip as he turns to look at me again, his lips twisting, as if he's enjoying my reaction.

Shit.

As a Santiago, I was born with an inbuilt threat detector. Right now, it's screaming orders at me:

Make an excuse.

Get up and leave.

Now, Ella, NOW.

“What a coincidence,” I hear Ivy say. “Ella’s half-Colombian herself.”

“That *is* a coincidence,” he says smoothly, never taking his eyes off me.

“Whereabouts are you from?”

“A village called Suesca, just outside Bogotá.”

“Was there something you wished to share with us, Mr... *Gutierrez?*”

This time it’s my turn to leave a skeptical pause before delivering his last name. I want him to know we’re playing the same game now, and from the slight quirk of his eyebrows it’s worked. “You intimated in your messages that you’d seen this inverted pentagram tattoo on a number of other bodies. Can you confirm this?”

He taps his fingernails lightly on the table. “Perhaps I’ll have that drink, after all. Surprise me, Miss Sanchez. Something...*American.*”

He’s not the only man I know who can use words like threats.

“Coming right up.” Ivy shoots me a ‘cool it’ look as she rises to her feet. She doesn’t want to miss a second of this conversation, but I get the feeling we won’t be discussing the article once she’s gone.

I’m right. The second she reaches the bar his smile vanishes, and his lips flatten into a thin red line.

“Perhaps we should drop the pretenses now, *señorita.*”

His accent has slipped too. It’s much heavier than he was letting on.

“Who are you?” I say quietly.

“One step closer to the man you’re looking for, leaving you one step closer to mine.” He toys with my drink for a moment, drawing a letter and a shape in the same condensation before spinning it around to show me.

I don’t need to look down to know what it is.

“Are you telling me you know who committed these murders?”

“Who, the two whores?” He smirks. “I suggest you ask the man in your bed that question, and please don’t bore me with your bluffs and rebukes,” he adds, seeing my face. “I know all about you, *señorita*, no matter how hard he tries to hide you, or reject you. You have no idea how vulnerable you’ve made him since you stormed back into his life last week. Every man has a weakness, and I’m staring straight at his.” Without asking for permission, he takes a long draft of my water, and smacks his lips together as though it’s the most delicious thing he’s ever tasted.

“Tell me your real name,” I demand, losing my temper.

“Not yet.”

“What’s the big mystery?”

“I do so admire you for your *persistence*, Ella,” he says, choosing to irritate me with his patronization instead. “You fight for your freedom the same way men like myself and Edier Grayson fight for power and status. You’re relentless about it, and even sweetly devious, if I may be so bold.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Would you like to see a demonstration of *true* power?” It’s like he hasn’t even heard me. “I understand you’re familiar with that concept, having grown up with a father such as yours, but have you ever considered the possibilities of a power without limits?”

“No thank you, I’m leaving.” I go to stand, when that ice-cold hand shoots out and closes like a vise around my wrist, just above my anti-sickness bands. He glances at them but doesn’t comment. “Let’s keep this pleasant, shall we? It would be a shame for all these good people of New York City to die because of your impetuosity.”

I glare down at him, fighting a vicious swell of nausea. “I have three armed bodyguards sitting five meters away, Mr. Whoever You Are,” I clip back. “One sign from me and you won’t be walking out of this bar alive.”

“You’re also forgetting the two SUVs parked out front, not to mention the one that’s parked in the side street behind the bar,” he adds, his black eyes glinting. “I do my homework before I step into a meeting with any Santiago, *señorita*. Even the decorative, wallflower-type ones.” On this, he leans into me, his orangey scent turning my stomach even more. *Any minute now, his smart Oxfords are going to get hurled on.* “Just don’t think for one second there won’t be consequences if you choose to go with a more *regrettable* course of action tonight.”

I stare at him, thinking fast, and then I’m sinking back down into my seat.

He directs my gaze to Ivy who’s still waiting at the bar, making his second threat implicit. One false move and he’ll be telling her exactly who I am. The life I’ve struggled so hard to make for myself here will disappear overnight.

“Now, about that demonstration of power...”

“I’m not interested.”

“You should be,” he sneers. “Watch and fear, *señorita*. Then, I want you to run back to your friends and family and tell them exactly who the face of

their enemy really is.”

With this, he flips his wrist over and suspends it a couple of inches above the table, palm to the ceiling. Flicking me a vicious smirk, he slowly crushes it into a fist.

Right away, the air whooshes out of my lungs, and that veil over my missing memory flutters violently in my mind. I see glimpses of the day I forgot—an old lady, strange words, the sound of bullets—before a piercing scream slams me back to the booth in the bar.

I blink, my gaze snapping to a woman standing next to my bodyguards’s booth. She has her hands clapped over her mouth, her horrified expression creeping around her fingertips.

A beat later, Antonio is staggering past her, blood pouring from his nose and mouth as he clutches at his throat. I watch in mounting horror, as he collapses to the ground, convulsing violently.

Oh my God.

I fly from my seat to help him, but the stranger yanks me back, my aching wrists screaming from his rough treatment.

“Get off me!”

“They’re already dying, *señorita*,” he says, sounding amused. “There’s nothing you can do for them now except watch their demise.”

I blink back the tears as my other two bodyguards stumble from the booth, the polished floorboards beneath them quickly turning into a lagoon of crimson.

The bar goes deathly quiet.

This isn’t happening.

This. Is. Not. Happening.

“I-Is this you?” I drag my eyes back to the ultra-composed stranger sitting in front of me. His fist is still clenched, but even as I say the words, the rational part of me is trying to comprehend what I’m witnessing. “Are you doing this?”

“Now do you believe in true power?”

“Stop it! Just stop it!” I fling myself across the table to grab his fist and prize it open, but he just dances it out of reach, taunting me with his widening smirk.

Meanwhile, in the bar, it’s like a starting gun has been fired to see which customer can act like a stampeding animal the most. Customers are running in all directions, some to help my men, but most are heading for the door.

My overriding thought is to reach them and comfort them, but when I go to stand again, that ice-hand is back wrapping itself around my wrist and stealing my breath away.

“You’re sick, Ella,” he murmurs. “I can make it all disappear for a price.”

“Let go of me!”

“Wouldn’t you like to know what ‘normal’ feels like? To walk without wincing? To wake up in the morning without every bone in your body aching? To live a life without pills and routines, doctors’ appointments, needles, and dietary requirements?”

“I’ll never be sick enough to want that from you!”

This time I get a laugh, instead of a smirk, but it’s just as frigid and hostile. “*Niña estúpida. Stupid girl.* Tell Edier Grayson he has something that belongs to me. If he doesn’t give it back soon, I’ll be taking something of his.” I manage to wrench my wrist away, and then I’m limping to reach Antonio before it’s too late, the stranger’s last words trailing after me like black smoke. “Tell him, it’s time to fulfill his promise.”

My steps falter. “What promise?” But when I snap back to him, he’s already melting into the crowds by the front doors.

“Give them some space and dignity, Miss.” An ashen-faced doorman starts to herd me toward the doors too. “Emergency Services are on their way. Nothing more we can do. You need to leave the premises and wait for the cops.”

“Are they *dead*?”

His grim expression is already telling me the worst news imaginable. The place looks like a slaughterhouse and none of the men on the floor are moving anymore.

“Miss, did you hear what I said?”

Shocked into submission, I allow him to push me away.

I find myself outside, my movements jerky and uncoordinated. Ivy’s nowhere to be seen. I’m spinning wildly on a packed sidewalk, shocked faces bordering me on all sides, my eyes blinded by neon and confusion, and then two strong arms are wrapping around my shoulders and trapping me against a familiar rock-hard chest.

“Don’t fight me, *Mi Cielo*,” he mutters into my ear as relief washes over me. “We need to get the *fuck* out of here, and we need to do it now.”

I stumble as he goes to lead me to a waiting SUV. Without missing a stride, he picks me up and places me on the backseat before climbing in too.

“Go!” he hisses, punching the seat in front as Gabrio accelerates away from the curb, scattering worried onlookers, and narrowly missing the high-pitched cavalcade of arriving emergency vehicles.

By the time we’re two blocks away, I can’t hold back my tears any longer. I’ve only cried a handful of times over the years, and most of them have been Edier-related, but fear and shock are creating an impossible tsunami to resist.

Edier says nothing. He doesn’t push me for information or explanations. He just holds me close, letting me stain the front of his black shirt with my tears. At the same time, the waves of nausea are like a squall battering against the walls of my stomach. They’re coming harder and faster until the outcome is all but inevitable.

“Pull over,” I gasp, sitting up with a jerk.

He frowns. “Not—”

“I’m going to be sick, Edier, so stop the damn car if you don’t want me to make a bigger mess of your suit!”

The car screeches to a stop and I reach an empty backstreet in time. He catches my hair the first time I go down, and he doesn’t let go until the last.

Chemo sickness doesn’t come with relief. Those same waves never cease or die. It’s just a question of riding out the worst of it until your body is so shattered that sleep is the only option. I can’t even count the number of times I wretch before I’m reeling with exhaustion and falling back into his arms again.

“I’ve got you, *Mi Cielo*.”

But who’s got you?

It’s my last jagged thought before I finally succumb to the darkness.

ELLA

I'M STUCK in a Hall of Mirrors.

Everywhere I look I see monsters with smirking faces and black eyes. I try to run from them, spinning wildly like I did on the sidewalk earlier, but I keep tripping over dead bodies with blood pouring from their mouths. I'm choking on my panic. My chest is tight with fear... I'm crying out for Edier, but he never comes. He never answers.

The scene changes. That veil flutters again, giving me another glimpse and foretaste of that same memory.

Hurtados.

The bruja called him Edier Hurtados.

When I was a child, I was told never to ask Edier about his life before he came to *El Refugio*. My mother called it 'respecting boundaries', but the warning was unnecessary. I knew there was something dark trailing behind him. I was as fascinated by it as he was by my happiness and light, and I think that's what drew us together from the beginning.

As time went on, I saw the sadness in his drawings. I saw the way his eyes strayed to the horizon constantly, as if he could sense something waiting for him behind the high stone walls of *El Refugio*, prowling up and down like a restless tiger. He knew there was no escaping it, and when the *bruja* showed up she was just a catalyst for the inevitable...

With a soft gasp, I open my eyes to a new darkness and a new unfamiliarity. This bed isn't mine. The sheets smell too strongly of him, and cigarette smoke hangs heavy in the air. There are dark blinds at the windows, not the colorful geometric prints I found in a souk in Marrakech three

summers ago. One of the slats is caught at an untidy angle, and it's taking in moonlight like a sinking ship.

I'm wearing a black T-shirt that's miles too big for me. My stomach muscles ache and there's a sour taste in my mouth, but at least the worst of the nausea has passed. The clock reads four a.m., and when I fumble for the light switch there's a glass of water on the nightstand, plus all my meds stacked up in a neat pile next to it.

"Go back to sleep, *Mi Cielo*."

My head snaps to the left. Edier's sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, his long legs stretched out in front of him, almost touching the bed. He's watching me through half-lidded eyes with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, like he's some carelessly chic Parisian model. God knows, he's beautiful enough to be one, despite the undone state of the rest of him. His shirt is creased, the cuffs loose at his wrists and rolled back a couple of times, more as an afterthought than a conscious decision. His black hair is an angry mess and there's at least two days' worth of stubble darkening his jaw.

One hand is resting on a bottle of Macallan with far too much familiarity for it to be a nightcap. My guess is he's been drinking it all night.

"You look how I feel," I mutter, turning to face him. "And the answer is rarely at the bottom of a bottle, or so I've been told."

"Helps to dull the decision, though." He swipes the cigarette from his mouth and crushes it into the ashtray like it's offending him. His voice matches his appearance: ragged and raw.

What decision?

"I think we should have gone to China." I smile, but it's a weak mockery of a thing. I can't shake the air of finality in this room and it's scaring me more than my nightmares. "We should have stolen my father's private jet and risked it."

He leans his head back against the wall and considers my words. "How many animals would we have rescued?"

"Thousands." I pull the white bedsheet closer to my chest and tuck it under my bare arm for comfort. "Millions, even... To make up for all the times my father said I wasn't allowed to have a pet. Childhood rebellion at its finest—"

"Stop." He cuts me off mid-stream and takes a swig of Macallan, making a face as it burns. "I figured you'd grown out of wordy digressions."

“You can’t grow out of stuff like that. They just go into hibernation for a while, like bears and hedgehogs and—”

“Ella, look at me.” His dark gaze locks onto mine, and I find myself holding my breath.

I don’t want his next words to give weight to that horrible sense of finality. It’s like I’m back in Dr. Bailey’s office again, waiting for another one of her sighs.

In the end, I get jittery and break the silence first.

“Is this your apartment?”

“Yes.”

I glance around, taking in the stark selection of furniture and the lack of pictures on the walls. It’s not a home, it’s an existence. Joyless and functional.

He deserves so much more than this.

“I thought it would be bigger. You own most of Manhattan, after all...”

“Some things are worth more than material possessions.”

“Is that your fortune cookie answer, or something you actually believe in?” Sitting up, I wrap my arms around my knees, adopting my very own version of the brace position.

“I don’t sleep much.”

“Should I be reading anything into that?”

“There’s another room down the hall,” he snaps, shooting me a dirty look.

“Is it time?” I suck in a breath. “Are we opening all our boxes now?”

He doesn’t answer. *Big surprise.* But I’m done waiting.

“Here.” Selecting a white pill bottle from my meds stash, I toss it across the room, and he catches it with a killer’s reflexes. “Whoever holds the Ambien, gets to ask the questions. You go first.”

“Fuck the Ambien!” Staggering to his feet, he hurls it at the far wall and the pill bottle explodes on impact showering the room in tiny white pebbles. “I told you to let this story go, Ella. I even bought *The Eagle* to make it disappear. And what do you do? Ignore me and run straight into a burning building covered in gasoline.” He scrapes his hand across his jaw as he struggles to contain his fury. “Now I have three dead bodyguards, and your father breathing down my neck again.”

I’ve never seen him lose control like this before. Everything about him is so tightly wound and impenetrable.

Then I think about Antonio and my other bodyguards, and the guilt

overwhelms me.

“We have the same target. We’re just coming at it from different angles.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He glances away as if he’s said too much already.

“We just went to meet a source—”

“And walked yourself into a major set up. I told you last week you’d always be a cartel princess first. It doesn’t matter how much you dress it down in low-end retail, or with a job that pays less money a year than I make on the streets in an hour. You can’t change your blood, *Mi Cielo*. You either embrace it, or you drown in it.”

“Is that what you’re doing, drowning in Hurtados blood?” I say, glaring at him. “If you need to find this target, let me help you. Let’s work together for a change, instead of running in opposite directions.”

“It’s too late.”

A horrible thought surfaces and I quickly unthink it.

“What did you tell my father?”

“That you’d had a moment of temporary insanity...*again*.”

We’ve danced around this subject before, but we’ve never actually met it head on.

“Did you watch it?” I ask, blushing.

“The tape last year? Yes, I fucking watched it. I needed the motivation for when I tortured the *malparidos* who made it. They all died screaming by the way,” he adds viciously. “You can thank me later.”

“You give me *nothing*,” I say in despair. “You talk in endless riddles, and then you disappear for days...*years*. I knew this story was connected to your past when you warned me off it. I was tired of waiting for you to—”

“I was protecting you.” He spins away and starts pacing the room.

“No, you were trying to control the situation by shutting me out again. You’re like some Russian propaganda machine, filtering out the truth, while drip-feeding me pieces of yourself that will never be enough to make me a whole.” Kicking the bedsheet away, I swing my legs out of bed and reach for the water.

“What are you doing?”

“Drinking,” I bite back, taking a sip. “Admittedly it’s not a bottle of Macallan, but it’s the best a teetotaler like me can do. After that, I’m going to stop, take a big deep breath, and then I’m going to try not to throw this glass at your head.”

“Why, because you know I’m right?”

“No, Edier,” I say, my voice trembling. “It’s because I think I’ve been in love with a haunted man since I was eighteen, and I can’t compete with his ghosts anymore.” I turn away so he can’t see my tears, but he’s down on his knees in front of me, gripping my chin between his fingers and forcing me to look at him.

“You *think* you love me, or you know you do?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters to me.”

“Would you say it back, if I did?”

His jaw tenses, and that cold silence rises like an invisible wall between us again.

“Talk to me.”

Nothing.

“Talk to me, goddammit!” Losing my temper, I try to push him away but he’s too strong. Somehow, we end up on the floor together in an angry, emotional mess with me sitting awkwardly astride him, beating my fists against his chest to try and force the words out.

“Stop,” he orders, trying to catch my wrists. “You’ll make yourself sick.”

“I’m already sick.”

“And whose fault is that?” he roars suddenly, his face contorting in agony. “Mine, Ella, *mine!* I brought your hell with me when I stepped inside *El Refugio* and into your life.”

“You are not responsible for my disease, Edier Grayson,” I say with a gasp, taking his face between my hands. He tries to push me away, but I don’t let him. He needs to hear this. *He needs to understand.* “Lupus is a part of me. A witch didn’t curse it into me. Whatever *brujería* happened in that bar last night isn’t what made me sick.”

“Ella—”

“No, it’s time for you to listen for once instead of throwing orders around. I believe in fate, as hard as she is on me sometimes. I wasn’t born to be as strong as you, Sam, and Isabella. I’m not as smart or as vivacious as Thalia. I was meant to endure and survive and be the person I am because of it.”

“You’re better than *all* of us because of it.”

“Let this ghost go,” I plead, curling my arms around his neck. “Tick it off. Throw it away. You don’t get to claim and feel guilty over this one.”

“I can’t keep you safe anymore, *Mi Cielo.*”

There's that sense of finality again. That weight without a name.

I go to ask him what he means when a dog starts barking from somewhere in the apartment. The sound is a welcome relief from all the soul talk and tension that's been building.

"Is that...?"

He curses under his breath. "Yes."

When he sees me struggling to stand, he swiftly helps me to my feet.

"Can I meet him?"

"Her."

"What's her name?"

"Dog."

"Creative," I quip, but he's not listening to me anymore. He's too busy messaging someone else.

His phone rings as I go to greet the sound of scrabbling paws on floorboards that's coming at me full tilt from down the hall.

"Yes, she's here," I hear him say. "We'll see you in an hour."

"See who?" I pause in the doorway, and then I'm knocked backward by a huge, gray, ratty-haired bomb of affection.

"Dog, get down," he snarls, as I'm propelled onto the bed, falling in love for the second time in my life.

"I swear to fuck, Dog," he says, sounding exasperated, trying to push her off me with his foot, but the animal neatly swerves out of the way every time. "She's not usually this wired."

"She's not wired, she's gorgeous," I say, cooing as Dog pokes her nose into my hand for more attention, which I'm only too happy to give.

"You're in the minority. She hates everyone else. She tried to bite Sam."

"I bet he deserved it. Well done, Dog," I tell her, giving her extra praise and love for that. "How long have you had her?"

"A week. We interrupted an illegal dog trade—"

"You mean you *saved* her?"

His eyes narrow at my tone. "I'm not the fucking hero here, Ella. I shot three men in the head before I left."

"At least the good intention was there." His phone beeps again. "Who keeps messaging you this early?"

"Your father." He lifts his head to gauge my reaction.

"My father...?" I trail off when I see the look on his face. It's like he just set fire to the room and he's waiting to see if I've noticed.

That's when the earthquake hits.

This air of finality isn't his or ours. *It's mine.* It's for a war that began on my eighteenth birthday with a chess set and an agreement.

"No." I whisper, his betrayal cutting me to the bone. "Not this... Not after everything. You, of all people, know how much my job and freedom mean to me."

"It's too dangerous for you in New York," he grits out. "Especially with your treatment."

"This is my life!"

"You *are* my life."

"Why aren't you fighting for me?"

"Take a breath, get some fucking perspective, and then maybe you'll see that I am."

"When?"

I spit my next word at him because it's all he deserves. I'm too shocked to cry. Too angry to fight back. He swore to protect me, and now he's done the one thing his own enemy threatened me with last night.

He's taken everything away.

"I called him a couple of hours ago." I watch his jaw clench, but I don't want to see his pain. I only want to feel the bitemarks of mine. "He was already in Miami. His jet lands in twenty minutes. He's taking you back to the island today."

He waits for the explosion, but it never comes.

Instead, I tip Dog off my lap, rise to my feet, and reach for my clothes.

There's only one thing left to do when your heart's been broken, your lifeline has been severed, and all your dreams have been smashed into pieces.

You get the hell out of there and find a way to plot your comeback.

EDIER

A GOOD MAN carves his heart out for love and monuments get resurrected in his honor. Poets write sonnets, and that hollow space is filled with idolization and respect.

A bad man does the same and he gets the silent treatment, from Manhattan all the way to Teterboro Airport, New Jersey. There are no monuments for me, just a hole in my chest the size of Texas.

Her AirPods have been jammed in her ears the whole way to negate the misfortune of ever hearing my voice again. Her arms are full of Dog now, not me, and I know I'll be losing both of them today.

She hates me. I get that. I've taken her life and everything she's fought so hard to build for herself and thrown it away. She thinks I've betrayed her, but I can't lose her. *I can't fucking lose her.*

I'd rather have her hate with a pulse, than her love with just a memory.

Santiago's private jet is waiting for us on the asphalt, glinting white in the rising sun, with that familiar gold scorpion motif stinging the aircraft's tail. He came as soon as I told him about her declining health. The rest isn't important. That's for me to handle, not him. Right now, she needs her family around her while she gets her lupus under control.

After that, I'll be coming back to claim her.

She doesn't have a choice. Even if it takes me ten days or ten years, I'll be turning that hate back into love. Then, she'll wear my ring and have my children. It's been our fate from the beginning, and no goddamn curse or *brujería* is ever going to derail that.

I stop the Ferrari twenty meters out from the jet. We sit there for a

moment, listening to the whirr of the engine's cooling fan. We're back in the ocean again, right before I kissed her, only this time the sharks are circling.

Ripping her AirPods from her ears, she goes to open the door.

"Stop."

She freezes. "I have nothing left to say to you, Edier. Go be with your ghosts. You need them more than you need me."

She's already halfway to the jet, trailing Dog, by the time I catch up with her. Hissing out a curse, I spin her around, the words I've kept prisoner inside me for so long finally rebelling. "I said fucking 'stop'!"

"Get off me!"

"Never," I snarl. "Not until you hear this." I grab her chin to stop her turning her head away. "I have loved you for more than half my life, Ella Santiago. I have loved you from the moment you sat down on that beach next to me when I was eleven years old. I have loved your light, your passion, your talent. You own it all, *Mi Cielo*. Most of all, you own me."

Her eyes widen, but I'm not done yet. Not even close.

"You see me, the same way you saw me back when we were kids. It's as if you knew I was drowning, as if you knew I was a damaged, messed-up boy who walked around with a razor blade in my back pocket waiting for the chance to end it... But you changed that. You changed my life. You burned so fucking bright you made me forget my own pain, and all I've ever tried to do from then on is protect you."

She's crying now, her tears streaking her cheeks and onto my fingers. I can feel the black eyes of her father slithering over me as he descends from the jet.

"Grayson, get your fucking hands off her."

"Stay out of this," I snap back, not even looking at him. *Let him see me bleed all over this asphalt for his daughter*. If this is the last chance I have with her, I'm not leaving until I'm done.

"You made me want to live when I was trying hard to die, Ella." I let my confession settle with her for a moment. "They say love is blind but it found us in the darkness. They say love hurts but if it's done right, it's fucking agony." I move in closer just to feel her heartbeat against mine. "Don't think that this was an easy decision for me. Don't think I didn't sit there on the floor while you slept in my bed searching for any other way but this. I knew the price I'd have to pay to keep you safe, but the other price wasn't an option."

“We could have figured—”

“No,” I say roughly. “My past is coming for me, and it’s not taking hostages. I made a promise a long time ago. I thought it was dead, but it got resurrected. Now, I need to burn it, and finish it.”

“Your other ghosts,” she guesses.

“The biggest ghost of all.” I pull back to look at her one last time, committing every perfect inch of her face to memory. “You need to go... Your father’s waiting.”

I nod at Santiago who’s hovering close-by, stony-faced, looking like murder would be the kindest thing he could do to me right now. Then, I turn, and I walk away, fighting a path through an invisible snowstorm. Every footstep feels unnatural. My chest is about to explode.

“Edier, wait!”

She’s coming after me. A meter out, she’s dumping her bag on the ground, and then my arms and mouth are full of her. I’m lifting her up in the air and she’s wrapping her legs around my waist and that beautiful sanctuary of hers is snaking around my neck. I breathe her in, and I never want to exhale again.

“I love you too, and I hate you. I hate that you won’t let me be there for you,” she gasps out. “But don’t think for one minute I’m getting on that jet without you swearing forever to me, Edier Grayson. Swear it!”

“Tell me you want that too,” I say with a groan. “Tell me *forever* back, and I’ll kill for it. I’ll kill for you.”

“Forever,” she whispers. “It’s what you’re fighting for now. Ours. Mine and yours. Black magic can never compete with white.”

“Forever... I fucking swear it to you, Ella.”

I feel her lips on me one final time. I hear the distant roar of the ocean, and then she’s walking away from me with Dog by her side.

Neither is looking back.

For once in our lives, we’re all looking forward.

ELLA

Two Weeks Later...

IT's my phone that wakes me at three a.m., not the noisy Chicharras outside my bedroom window.

I blink, trying to shake off the cocktail of nighttime meds that are muddying my thoughts, as my device keeps vibrating away on my nightstand and lighting up the dark. Rolling over, I find my bedsheets are damp with sweat. The air con has been hissing away all night, but Leticia's fierce jungle humidity has still found a way into my room.

Disturbed by the noise, Dog jumps onto my bed and flops down next to me with a resentful grunt.

I never went back to the private island with my father. I negotiated with him for two hours straight to have the jet deviate to Colombia instead. I wasn't prepared to fly away from Edier completely, neither was I prepared to sit around and let my brain decay while I waited for the chemo to calm my body's immune responses down. I wanted to go to Leticia to try and piece together the broken pieces of his history for myself, and I knew *Tía* Anna would jump at the chance to help me. Plus, there'd be hundreds of *Tío* Joseph's *sicarios* there to protect me.

I'm not quick enough to catch the call the first time around, but my device bursts into life again after a couple of seconds.

The number is *Withheld*, but there are only two people who know of its' existence. That's the rule we made in *The Eagle's* meeting room that day.

"Hello?" I croak.

“Ella, it’s me! I’m a genius. Just tell me I’m a goddamn genius.”

“Ivy?” I lean over to the nightstand and switch the light on, willing my brain to move a million miles faster to catch up with my friend’s.

“I got them!”

“Got what?”

“The toxicology reports. For those three men who died in the bar last month.”

Now, I’m wide awake. Rob put me on a sabbatical after I told him about my lupus treatment, and we’d reluctantly agreed to shelve the story until I returned. Besides, after Gutierrez vanished, all the other leads had gone dead.

“And?”

“Don’t ask me how I got them. It was completely unethical and maybe a little illegal too, but your hunch was right. They’d been buried. The originals were destroyed, but some dope in the lab made a copy and forgot to file it... I’m staring at it right now. And don’t ask me to explain the sciencey bits, either. I just have the name of the poison they found in their system.”

I close my eyes in relief.

There was no black magic in the bar that night. It was just a dirty trick by a twisted magician.

“Does Rob know?”

“I’m going to meet him at the diner later. Listen to this... It’s some weird hybrid drug called scopolamine, better known as ‘Colombian Devil’s Breath’. On its own, it incapacitates you, gives you hallucinations, that kind of thing. But *this* was mixed with something else to make it more lethal. That’s what made those men vomit blood like vampires before they died of respiratory failure.” She breaks off to curse at a cab driver, and I imagine her darting across a busy street in New York, throwing up sparks from her neon-pink heels. “There’s another reason I’m calling. I did some digging into Mr. Houdini from that night too. Turns out, there *is* no ‘Mr. Gutierrez’ who works at the forensics lab, in this state or New Jersey. It was total bullshit.”

Damn. I was hoping she’d forget about him, but it was a stupid wish to make.

“All the security footage was wiped already, but I managed to snap a picture of him as he was leaving. I’ve spent the last couple of days digging the dirt. My fiancé’s an ex-cop, and it only cost me thirty-six blowjobs to get him to help me...” She sighs loudly. “Anyway, his real name is Quito Moreno, and he used to be a dealer and sometime racketeer in Brooklyn until

he got charged with a storekeeper's murder. The evidence was stacked until some newly qualified lawyer stepped in at the last minute and got him off." There's the slam of a car door in the background, as another one creaks open in my mind. "This is the best part, Ella... I saw a picture of this lawyer... It's only the same snooty red-leather-wearing bitch we saw in *Helios* with Edier Grayson, and again at *The Eagle* the day he took control of the company."

My stomach drops like a stone.

I knew that lipstick color was a warning.

"Are you positive?" I whisper.

"A hundred percent. I'll message you the images now."

I have to call Edier. I need to warn him...

"Look, I've got to go. I'm in a cab pulling up to her office on 72nd Street."

This has me throwing off the damp bedsheets and staggering from my bed in horror. "No, Ivy, NO! You can't—"

"I've gotta go. I'll call you later. I have no idea about time zones, sorry!"

"Ivy, wait!"

But she's already gone.

With my heart in my mouth, I ring her back, but it goes straight to voicemail.

"Oh god, please answer, please answer." Fumbling for my other phone. I hit Edier's number, but it rings out too. I try it again, and it's the same. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Dog barks and whines as I fire off urgent messages everywhere. She's not staring at me, though. She's staring straight at the window.

I try Sam next, and then the light on my nightstand goes out, along with the green power LED on my iPhone charger.

It must be a power cut.

Dog whines once more.

I'm stumbling for the door when the first round of gunfire hits the house.

I GLANCE at my phone to find it's Ella calling from Colombia and reluctantly switch it to silent. As much as I live to hear her soft voice, this business needs to conclude swiftly.

Sliding the device into the inside pocket of my suit jacket, I turn my attention to the stack of paperwork in front of me, signing each document in turn, and then tossing it to Queenie to be checked and verified. Through it all, she's been perched on a chair a couple of seats away, chewing thoughtfully on her lower lip.

"Do I get a prize?" I chuck my pen down on the polished glass meeting table after dispatching with the final one. "A souvenir T-shirt, perhaps?"

"Don't be greedy, Grayson," she counters, her tone mild, her face impassive. "Señor Santiago has just signed over a substantial portion of his US assets to you. You're now the fifth richest man in the country."

A couple of years ago, this would have been music to my ears, but my new kingdom is missing a queen, and every victory feels like a hollow one since Ella went away. My obsession doesn't stop because I have a hole in my bed and empty screens in my Black Room. I've been monitoring her GPS tracker numerous times a day, I have a direct line to my father's *sicarios* back at *El Refugio*, and I'm in regular contact with my adoptive mother for the first time in years.

It's not enough, though.

I'm counting down the days.

I need her under me, defying me. *Loving me*. I'm craving the way her body rises when I'm pushing her to her limits. I miss those sweet, staccato

gasps she makes right before she comes, as if I'm stealing her oxygen as well as her self-control.

Irrespective, something's shifted inside me since she left, the same way it shifted all those years ago as I stood in front of a flaming pyre and watched the *bruja* burn, only this time it's blowing me in a different direction. Distances don't seem so inaccessible anymore, and silences aren't so vacant. I finally let her in, and it didn't make the fucking sky fall down. She's still safe. She still loves me. There's still a *forever* waiting for us once this war is won and she's well enough to come home.

I'm opening myself up to others too, despite pushing them away for so long. Typically, in meetings with Santiago, my father would sit to his left and avoid eye contact with me. Today, our gazes met as we sat down, and neither of us looked away. I'm seeing past my own pain for once. I'm seeing past hers. *I'm seeing his.*

"Shall we have a drink, instead?" Santiago motions to the bottle of bourbon on the table between us. It's not to my tastes, but I can afford to be conciliatory. After all, the man just made me a king.

I gesture to Sam, who immediately leans forward and starts pouring out three glasses.

"Queenie?" I cast her a sideways glance. "I insist you join us."

She glances up from her Gucci business case in surprise, but accepts with a tight smile as Santiago dismisses everyone else from the room,

I catch my father's eye again as he passes. *Maybe Aiden was right all those years ago.* I should have listened harder and talked more. I should have owned my goddamn guilt instead of using it as a battering ram, and then maybe I could have let it go faster.

"To new beginnings." Santiago raises his glass in toast before leaning back in his chair and crashing his black boots down on the table in front of him.

"To Empires shedding their skin for the good of corruption," I clip back, making him smirk.

We drink deeply while Queenie sips at her glass delicately.

"How is she?" Santiago's smirk morphs into the dead expressionless mask he wears when murder is imminent, but he's not prepared to commit it yet.

"Better," I say, knowing he's keeping track of her movements just as closely as I am.

A call to Dr. Bailey this morning assured me that Ella's chemo is working. Her C3 and C4 markers are rising again. Her new Colombian doctors are working with her New York rheumatologist to give her the best treatment plan available.

"Did it hurt making that choice?"

"Like hell," I admit, reaching into my jacket and pulling out his hunting knife. Laying it flat on the table between us, I meet his unflinching black gaze head-on. "Do you want it back?"

"Are you done cutting your past free yet?"

"Ask me again next month, but I couldn't fucking love her any more than I do already." With this, I give it a flick, the blade glinting in the light as it starts spinning in tight circles. "Sanders accepted the Vegas post. He's making the move in two months' time."

"Which coincides perfectly with the launch of his father's Presidency campaign." Santiago knocks the rest of his bourbon back, and chuckles darkly.

Meanwhile, Queenie is rising from her chair, still downing the dregs of her own drink. "Grayson, I have another meeting in an hour. I'll be heading back to the office—"

"Sit," I interrupt pleasantly. "We haven't concluded our business yet."

She drops back down with a huff, and I choose to ignore her pointed looks.

The knife's trajectory is beginning to slow. Reaching out, Santiago gives it another hard spin as I swill my glass, contemplating the amber liquid inside.

"How did you know I was with Ella the night of her party?"

"That's a dangerous subject to bring up in my presence." He holds his empty glass out to me for a refill. "When you get to my age, observation becomes a form of entertainment. You learn to read inflections, subtle nuances across crowded rooms..." He trails off before adding viciously, "Of course, none of that fucking matters when you happen to be walking underneath your daughter's open window at two a.m."

Shit.

His gaze narrows. "For the next three hours, I imagined all the ways I'd be flaying the flesh from your bones, Grayson, then I remembered how she'd engineered the whole party just to speak to you."

The corners of my mouth twitch.

Only a fool would mistake your sweetness for fragility, Mi Cielo.

“Grayson, I really think—”

“*Sit.*” We snarl at Queenie in unison, revealing the bite beneath our calm.

This shuts her up immediately.

I wonder if she’s finally realizing she’s never walking out of this room alive?

It’s my turn to spin the blade, but I don’t use as much force this time. The meeting is coming to its natural conclusion, and we have other business to attend to.

“Tell me about the promise.”

“What promise?”

“The one from your past. The one you mentioned to Ella before she boarded my jet.”

My eyes flick up in surprise as the blade slows to a ragged stop, the tip pointing directly at him. The moment is weighted in significance, but I choose not to confirm or deny his suspicions. Some things are best left to die in the past instead of bleeding all over the present.

Seeing the steel shutters in my gaze, he concedes with a grimace, and pours himself another drink. Our battle was fought in a lobby three years ago. Since then, time’s become our equalizer. If he hit me now, I’d hit him straight back. If I don’t feel like answering his question, there’s nothing he can do to make me.

More bourbon hits his glass before he’s glancing at me speculatively. “Would you like to do the honors, or shall I? I think we’ve toyed with her for long enough.”

“My lawyer. My problem.”

A beat later, I’m pointing my Glock at Queenie’s head with an expression as cold as ice.

“Don’t,” I grit out, as she tries to stand—shock written all over her face. “I’m in a savage enough mood as it is. Betrayal does bad things to a man, especially when it’s a woman who’s guilty of it.”

“What are you talking about?” she whispers. “I’m your lawyer, Grayson. You know me.”

“On the contrary, it turns out I know you very little.” She’s acting up a storm already, even her lower lip is trembling in a most un-Queenie-like way, but I’m done with her bullshit. “Besides, like I told you before, no allegiance is eternal...”

“What the hell am I supposed to have betrayed you over?” she gasps out.

“The list is extensive. Let’s start with how a spare set of my apartment keys was found in your bag this morning.”

Her face blanches. “I can explain.”

“Good. I was hoping you’d be amenable to talking. The alternative would necessitate the ruining of a brand new Brioni suit.” Rising from my chair, I lean against the side of the table, the aim of my weapon never straying. “It’s a little unfortunate how I gave you an apartment, clothes, money, and a college education...only to have you lie to my *fucking face*.” My fury echoes before my voice slips back into that ice-cool tone again. “Your first mistake was showing too much interest in Ella. The second was giving me something that doesn’t belong to you.”

Reaching into my inside pocket again, I toss the Montblanc pen at her, the one I appropriated at Red Hook. It skids off the glass table in a graceful pirouette and lands on her lap, but she makes no move to pick it up.

“Turns out, it’s engraved with the name of a holding company with links to a Russian Bratva. Peel back another layer of shit, and they’re the ones still shipping girls to the US... Now, why would you have that, Queenie?” I ponder slowly. “Santiago isn’t too happy, given his interest in eradicating human trafficking.”

I watch her eyes flit nervously to him and her whole body trembles.

“The Russians saw *El Alquimista* coming four years ago and moved out of New York because they’re a bunch of superstitious *malparidos*. What I want to know is how *El Alquimista* turned you to such a point you’re now brokering deals between them to bring girls back into my city?”

Her head drops forward in defeat, her once-stylish blonde hair falling messily into her face.

I’m disappointed. I expected more of a fight from her.

“I want his true identity, Queenie.”

“I honestly...” She flinches as I advance on her, stopping just short of her chair. “I swear to you, Grayson, none of us know who he is! He communicates through a man called Quito Moreno. That’s our handler.”

Interesting.

Carrera’s ‘gift’ finally broke last night. This was the only name we got from him before he died of his wounds.

“How did you meet?”

She hesitates. “He was the man I kept out of jail on my first case.”

Hijueputa... I grind my teeth together to keep my composure. “Since then, you’ve been working on the side as his set-up girl: causing dissent with the Italians and making it look like the cartel, using fake whores in hotel rooms to take me down...” I shake my head in disapproval. “It can’t be for the money. I made you two million this quarter alone.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” Even her voice sounds dull and defeated. “Just go ahead and shoot me. If you don’t, he will.”

“Give me something and I’ll make it quick.”

Queenie glances between me and Santiago before settling on him. “Are you a chess player, *señor*?” she asks quietly. “If so, you’ll know that the queen is always the most important piece on the board, not the king.”

That earns her a second gun pointing at her head.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“This is what he does.” She turns back to me, her blue eyes glassy with fear. “He gets inside your head. He twists everything. Don’t you see? You were never the end game, Grayson. He was using your past as a way to destabilize you *and* your organization, to drive a wedge between you and her... When that didn’t work, he switched tactics.”

I stare at Queenie, the ground giving way beneath my feet. Not wanting to believe a single thing the traitorous *perra* is saying, but hearing the truth in every word.

“He wanted her out of New York. Away from your obsession. Away from her father’s protection. He knew she’d never stay on his island. She’s too restless. He was prepared to hunt her down wherever she went, but now she’s gone back to the one place he wanted her the most... Colombia.”

Ella.

“It’s always been about *her*, Grayson. She’s the one he wants.”

I hear Santiago roaring for more answers as I’m sprinting for the door, pulling out my phone as I go, seeing fourteen missed calls from her and seven increasingly desperate messages.

I didn’t see past my own pain fast enough.

Her number rings out.

I dial again.

Nothing.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

When I reach the hallway, my father’s already halfway down the stairs, shouting out instructions to the pilot to get the jet ready.

That's when I know.

There were three devils in this game, and one's outplayed us all.

EPILOGUE

EDIER

Past

THERE'S a monster living inside me.

He was created from the slippery red tiles in the bathroom where she died.

He ruins everything that's good, like when I'm walking with my new *Pá*, and he's telling me all about Texas and something called 'The Alamo', and making a part of me believe that maybe I'm not such a worthless piece of shit after all.

He dulls my days, and he darkens my nights.

He goes by another name, too.

Shame.

Shame that the people I was sent here to hurt only want to give me their love and protection. Shame that I'm still here, hanging around them like a bad curse.

When I kill my monster with the razor blade in my pocket later, I'm going to lie down and close my eyes too, and we can go someplace else together. There's no reason for me to be alive anymore. My whole family are dead. *Pá* and Nacio were killed by the tall man standing opposite me at the beach today, talking to my new family.

I'm happy about that. Sad about everything else.

"Edier, why don't you go and paint me some rocks," urges my new *Mamá*.

"Okay."

It's strange knowing I'm going to die, but at least I have time to say goodbye to all the things I love first.

With that in mind, I sit on the beach for ages, painting yellow suns onto eleven gray stones, one for each of the years I'll be here on earth, until something catches out of the corner of my eye. There's a little girl down by the shoreline twirling on the sand with her arms outstretched and her dark hair flying in all directions. The sun is directly behind her—big, bright, and blinding. It's dipping her in and out of vision: swallowing her up whole one minute, and then setting fire to her the next.

She catches me staring and stops twirling with a jerk. After a beat of indecision, she runs over. It's like the light is coming straight at me, and I brace myself for impact.

She stops a meter out and grins. I stare at her mouth because I've never seen anything as beautiful as her smile before. It's pure sunshine, and everyone knows that sunshine kills monsters and keeps the darkness away.

It's also pure gold. Precious and rare. And gold needs to be protected at all costs.

“Hello,” she says shyly.

She's standing right in front of me, looking down on me. It's like she's taking up the whole sky. My sky.

Mi Cielo.

I came here to die today and now I'm not so sure. The razor blade in my pocket feels heavier now, like it has another purpose.

“Hello,” I stutter back. “Do you want to come sit with me?”

“Okay.” She flops down on the sand and crosses her skinny legs in front of her. She can't be more than five or six years old. “What shall we talk about?”

“The sun,” I blurt out.

“What about the sun?”

“There are billions of stars in the galaxy, *Mi Cielo*, but nothing beats the sun...”

TO BE CONTINUED...

(Pt 2 releases December 2022 / Live Release)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you for your patience in waiting for this book! It was a tough one for me to write, especially when it came to Ella's treatment. I've been in that doctor's room. I've waited for the sighs. I've been told that chemo is the only option, and nothing prepares you for that moment.

I first started writing in 2017 while I was undergoing cancer treatment. I was thirty-seven years old with a stage 4 diagnosis, and I was missing my youngest daughter's first day at school. I remember crying for up to an hour in the hospital bathroom, still hooked up to my IV stand, wondering where it had all gone wrong. Afterward, I opened my laptop and typed the immortal words 'Chapter One'. I wrote about a character called Dante Santiago, a man who was slowly dying on the inside, but for a different reason than I was. I didn't even know mafia/cartel romance was a genre back then. I just had a story to tell about darkness and light.

I released *Hearts of Darkness* in 2018. I think it sold five copies in its first month (thanks mum!) I knew nothing about PR or release pushes. I was totally clueless! Through word-of-mouth, people started reading my books. Since then, they've literally saved my life. They've enabled me to have various lung operations and they've given me a focus other than cancer. If you've read one of my books, thank you—*truly*—from my family to yours. Words can't express how grateful I am.

Secondly, I'd like to thank Cora Kenborn for her invaluable insight into living with lupus. Personally, I think we're both fucking chemo rockstars! Thank you for your words of encouragement and friendship as well.

To my wonderful husband, Matt. My number one supporter. We navigate so much together, more than our fair share, but your constant love and

encouragement is what keeps me fighting and writing every single day. And to our two beautiful girls who hate my deadlines almost as much as I do. Thank you for your endless patience.

Sammy, Siobhan, Imogen, and Joanne. Thank you for cheering me on from the sidelines! A special thank you to Lissete Aberg for answering my numerous Spanish translation requests, no matter what time of the day it was. Imogen, your last minute proofing skills were incredible as usual!

Thank you to Autumn and Wordsmith Publicity for all you do for me. And to my amazing ARC Team, and Street Team! I would be hopelessly lost without you.

And finally, to ALL the readers, reviewers, bookstagrammers and booktokers... You make every invasive cancer scan, test, and operation worth it. Thank you for making my dreams come true.

Catherine x

ABOUT CATHERINE WILTCHER

Catherine Wiltcher is a **USA Today** and Amazon Top 15 bestselling romance author. Her books include The Santiago Series and the Cristo Sinners World.

After working in TV and movie production for seventeen years, Catherine was diagnosed with cancer at the age of thirty-seven. She started sharing her experiences of living with the disease with the Huffington Post and the British press in a bid to help raise awareness. She wrote her first book while undergoing treatment, which was subsequently picked up by a traditional publisher.

These days, she writes flawed and dangerous characters who always fall hard and deep for their women, whatever the cost.

She lives in the U.K. with her husband, their two young daughters, and their crazy spaniel, Bella.

To keep up to date with all things in the Santiago World, sign up to [her newsletter](#) for giveaways and exclusives.



ALSO BY CATHERINE WILTCHER

The Santiago World

(Dark Mafia Romance)

Trilogy Boxset

Hearts of Darkness

Hearts Divine

Hearts on Fire

Shadow Man

Reckless Woman

Devils & Dust

Lovers & Liars (coming soon)

Cristo Sinners World

(Mafia Romance)

Black Skies Riviera

A London Villain

A London Viper (coming soon)

A London Thief (coming soon)

Corrupt Gods World

(Dark Mafia Romance)

Born Sinner

Bad Blood

Tainted Blood

City of Thieves

Rush & Ruin, Pt 1

Rush & Ruin, Pt 2 (coming soon)

Standalones

(Contemporary)

Hot Nights in Morocco

Unwrapping the Billionaire

Cast Stones

Anthologies

Men of Valor

Stalk-ers

Possessed by Passion

Desire After Dark

Darkly Ever After

Sign up here: www.catherinewiltcher.com/newsletter for book updates and exclusives!