



The Love Language of the Cartel

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: Demi

I was born at the top of the food chain of Chicago's underground crime scene.

As the daughter of a don, the rules I've been raised to follow are as archaic as they come.

But everything changes when my father severs my marriage contract to Ozias Rivera, a ruthless leader of a powerful Mexican cartel.

With a body like a god and an attitude like a demon, it's no wonder the streets call him El Diablo.

He isn't the Romeo to my Juliet or the Prince Charming to my fairy tale.

He's the villain to my nightmares and the type who'll stop at nothing to claim what he desires most—me.

And he'll cut down anyone who dares to stand in his way.

Ozias

When you're the drug lord of a cartel, nothing is off-limits.

I've built my empire on blood and loyalty and crushed anyone who plucked up the courage to cross me—to take what's mine.

And Demi Malone is mine. Or at least she should be.

She was the bride I was promised and the beauty to my beast.

A deal is a deal, and I won't let her slip through my fingers.

Not now. Not ever.

Total Pages (Source): 61

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Demi Malone

My arms were laced with designer shopping bags as my friend Samara and I shopped in the Oak Street District. We hit up every high-end boutique and storefront on the hunt for the perfect engagement party dress. The spring air was crisp and aromatic with the scent of blooming flowers as we passed from one store to the next, running up a check.

Inside one of the many boutiques we visited, Samara and I sifted through racks of expensive, glittery cocktail dresses and gowns, yet my thoughts were far from all the glitz and glam surrounding me.

“What about this one?” Samara asked, pulling a mermaid-style gown off the rack and holding it up for me to examine. “You think you want to try it on?”

I pushed out a hard, audible sigh. “Mara, I’m not sure about going through with this marriage. Everyone says he’s a monster. I mean, they do call him ‘El Diablo.’ What if all the rumors are true? What if I’m literally walking into a waking nightmare when I marry him in two weeks?”

Samara pushed her long dark curls with blonde highlights behind her ear before shooting me an empathetic look. “Listen, I know arranged marriages are tough, but things could be worse. At least he’s handsome from the picture you showed me, right? Who knows? Maybe you’ll end up pleasantly surprised in the end,” she said optimistically.

I frowned. “Handsome or not, I’m only twenty-four! He’s eleven years older than me.

That's a huge gap, which means I was in diapers when he was probably already whacking his wiener." I cringed.

Samara belted out a chuckle. "Again, it could be worse. He could be twenty years your senior and old enough to be your daddy."

Her words sent a shiver down my spine. "You're right about that. Gross. But still, Mara! He lives in an entirely different country! I don't know if I'm ready to be someone's wife, especially not under these circumstances," I confessed under duress instead of my typical calm, confident demeanor. "I've never met this man a day in my life, and suddenly, I'm supposed to be tethered to a stranger forever just so our families don't kill each other. I've only had one real relationship before now, and you know how that ended! I can't imagine marrying a man named 'El Diablo' will be any better."

Samara put the dress back on the rack before reaching out to give my arm a comforting squeeze. I felt the tension in my shoulders slightly relax, but my restlessness remained. I looked into her almond-shaped eyes. They were warm and familiar. I could always count on her to tell me the truth or be the strong shoulder for me to lean on.

My eyes quickly scanned her familiar features. She stood at five-foot-two, and had a head full of thick, dark curls with blonde highlights spilling down her back and over her shoulders. From her high cheekbones and full lips to her button nose and a perfectly sculpted jawline, her face was a card that never declined. My girl had no problem turning heads anywhere she went.

"Look, I get it. It's a fucking shitty thing your father is making you do. But as the sole heir to your family's business, it's your obligation. And who knows? Maybe he'll show you a side of him that dispels all the rumors. Right now, let's focus on thinking positive thoughts and finding you the perfect dress, because my best friend

deserves to feel like the beautiful badass she is, no matter who is standing at the end of that altar in a few weeks.”

I took a deep breath, trying to silence my loud, racing thoughts. I scanned all the lavish dresses and allowed myself to be momentarily wowed by the beauty surrounding me.

“You’re right, Samara. I should at least look the part, even if I don’t feel it.”

She cocked her head to the side and gave me a hard glare. “Um, excuse me? The Demi Malone I know always feels the part because she is the part. I don’t know who this wannabe is standing here in front of me.”

I scoffed. “Shut up. A bitch is stressed, okay?”

“Let’s go. We’re finding a mirror.”

My forehead crinkled. “What? Why?” I whined.

“It’s affirmation time, bitch. Hop to it.” Samara grabbed my wrist and marched us over to the full-length mirror. She took her place behind me and stared at our reflections. “Say the words, Demi,” she hollered.

I quickly darted my eyes to the ground. “Oh my God, you’re embarrassing the shit out of me right now!” I hissed. “Lower your voice before they kick us out.”

“Not until you say it.”

My chest deflated with a hard sigh as my nostrils flared. I knew I was fighting a losing battle and didn’t bother putting in the effort. “Fine. If it’ll get you to shut up.”

“I just want my friend back so I can finish finding her a dress.”

I rolled my eyes skyward and huffed, visibly annoyed. “Okay, okay. I’m ready.”

“Who are you?” she asked, eyes piercing into my reflection.

“I’m Demi fucking Malone.”

Her voice rose. “I said, who are you?”

“I’m Demi fucking Malone.” I repeated with a little more grit, voice matching hers.

“One more time for the people in the back!” she yelled.

“I’m Demi fucking Malone!” I chanted back, feeling my adrenaline pumping through my veins.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“Who gon’ fuck with you?”

“Nobody!”

“Who gon’ top you?”

“Nobody!”

“Who gon’ shake you?”

“Nobody!”

She cheesed while high fiving me. “That’s my girl. Now c’mon, let’s shop!”

We continued our search, navigating through the world of high-end couture. My heart was heavy, but Samara’s support offered me a sliver of optimism as I prepared to face such an uncertain future. She was the only person around for me to vent my feelings to.

My mother died during childbirth, living long enough to push me out before she bled out in the delivery room. As my father’s sole heir, I only knew conditional love, never nurturing. My father was a purebred Chicagoan through and through, and he had to be cold to survive in the underworld. He couldn’t come home and turn off the streets or erase all the evil things he’d done or commanded others to do on his behalf, so he didn’t even bother to try. I understood it; I just didn’t like it.

“Do you think anyone is ever truly ready for marriage?” I asked while walking past a

display of mannequins clad in designer dresses of all lengths and colors.

“I think it’s normal to feel uncertainty,” Mara responded thoughtfully. “I don’t think it’s always about feeling ready. I think it’s about taking the jump and figuring things out one day at a time.”

I shot her a half smile. “I wish I could believe that. You make it sound so simple and carefree. I just wish I had more autonomy over my life. I mean, it is my life. What if I don’t want to spend it chained to a monster?”

“I get that, but you’re tough as iron, Demi. And you’re not alone in this. You have your father, your cousin Dominic, and me.”

A nearby gorgeous, sleek, ivory mini dress with a glittered bodice and low-cut neckline caught my eye, and I held it against me. “What do you think about this one? It’s sexy, but is it doing too much?”

Samara’s big brown eyes popped wide before a big grin spread across her face. “Oh my God, Demi! It’s gorgeous! And it’s not doing too much at all. You should want to feel confident and powerful when your engagement is announced to the world, especially given the situation. This dress screams all that and more. Try it on!” she urged.

I headed to the fitting room and emerged a few minutes later wearing the dress. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a mix of emotions crossing my expression. My gaze traveled across my rich, smooth skin with a warm caramel complexion like Werther’s. A few subtle freckles dusted across the bridge of my nose—faint, hardly there. My long eyelashes were full and fanned out over my almond-shaped, chestnut-brown eyes. And then there was my dimple—emerging whenever my full lips flashed a smirk or smile.

I wore my long, wavy hair loose, allowing it to cascade down my shoulder and back in silky, rolling waves. My posture was controlled yet relaxed—a testament to my upbringing in an environment where poise came second-hand. Malones were at the top of the food chain, therefore, we had to act like it.

“So, what do you think?” Mara probed with her eyes bright and wide with excitement.

“I don’t know. I mean, it feels like me. I like the fabric it’s made of. It feels good on my skin. Maybe this is a start.”

“But is it the one? Is it screaming I’m about to be Mrs. ‘El Diablo’?”

My lips slightly parted in thought as I paused to marvel at myself from head-to-toe once more before answering. The designer fabric perfectly draped over my figure, making my beauty seem even more effortless than it already was. My fashion choices had always echoed my high-class upbringing—never flashy, always purposeful. Does it scream Mrs. Ozias Rivera? I don’t know. It kind of has a ring to it.

“Fuck it. I’m buying it. Let’s do it! It’s the only way to embrace whatever lies ahead in a couple of weeks.”

Samara cheered her pearly whites while clapping and jumping up and down for joy. “Yass! My best friend is a baddie, and she looks so good!”

I stepped back inside the fitting room and changed back into my two-piece outfit. When I returned, Samara and I continued browsing on our way to the checkout counter, discussing various dresses and their potential as wedding day contenders. Suddenly, my eyes lit up when I spotted a stunning emerald dress glimmering under the boutique’s fluorescent lights.

“Oh my God, Samara, look at this one! You know green is my favorite color. I have to try it on!”

“Oh, that is gorgeous, Demi. You definitely should. Go for it!”

I snatched it up and raced back to the fitting room to slip into the emerald mini dress with a rhinestone corset top and draped skirt. The moment I stepped out in it, Samara nodded with approval.

“Damn, girl!” She squealed. “That dress was made for you. Ass lookin’ right! Titties sittin’ pretty! You look absolutely stunning.”

I studied my reflection in the mirror, turning to make sure my eyes caught every angle. The dress was the color of money and good luck, and it fit me like a glove, accentuating my slim-thick figure and bringing out the color of my chestnut brown eyes. I smiled wide and bright, feeling the rush of confidence I needed.

“Eek! I love it, Samara. I love it so much that I think I’m going to wear it out of the store and to my father’s club tonight.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Samara laughed. “You should! You look great in it!”

As we headed to the checkout counter, I couldn’t help but feel a little lighter—in my step and in my heart. My strides were effortless, never hurried, only smooth and controlled. My reservations about my upcoming marriage were still apparent, especially with the swirling rumors about my fiancé. But I was happy to have my best friend’s support and a new favorite dress.

The consultant behind the desk frowned when we approached, laughing and giggling with our bags and my two dresses in tow. “Hello, how can I help you two today?”

“Hi.” I greeted the consultant. “I’d like to purchase this dress and the one I have on, please.”

“Do you plan on taking it off first, ma’am?” she asked rudely.

I scoffed. “No, because I love it, and I want it on my body right now.”

“That dress is fourteen hundred dollars,” she explained.

“Do you see these designer bags hanging off my arm? I said I want it,” I repeated with a sharp hiss in my tone. “In fact, another bag won’t be necessary. Just ring it up along with the other dress. I’m wearing it out of the store,” I confirmed while dropping cash on the counter and lifting my chin in defiance.

Wearing the emerald dress, I stepped out of the boutique with a transformed sense of confidence. I was still nervous about the announcement of my engagement to Ozias

Rivera, but for now, I vowed to hold onto the small wins. I even started to embrace the idea that I had the power to shape my own happiness, even within the constraints of an arranged marriage to a homicidal maniac.

I shot Samara a half-moon smile. “Thanks for coming out with me today. I think I needed this retail therapy session more than I realized.”

She leaned in to give me a supportive hug. “Of course. You know I got you, girl.”

The click of my strappy, gold stilettos echoed through the dimly lit hallway, each step a declaration of my arrival. I paused before the ornate double doors. Their polished mahogany surface gleamed under the soft glow of crystal sconces. Taking a deep breath, I smoothed down the brand-new emerald-green cocktail dress, feeling the cool silk against my almond-brown skin.

It’s fucking showtime.

I pushed open the doors, and the world of high-stakes luxury unfolded before me. The Emerald Room, my father’s crown jewel in his empire of sin, pulsed with an energy that was equal parts danger and decadence.

The air was thick with the scent of expensive cigars and even more costly perfume, an intoxicating mix that spoke of power and privilege. My brown-eyed gaze swept across the room, taking in the opulent surroundings. The walls were adorned with priceless artwork, each piece carefully curated to showcase wealth without being overzealous. It didn’t matter if the art was purchased in blood money. All that mattered was its appreciated value.

Crystal chandeliers dangled from the ceiling, their facets catching and refracting light, creating a subtle dance of shadows across the faces of Chicago’s elite. As I made my way toward the main poker table, I couldn’t help but feel a surge of pride.

This was my world, a realm where fortunes were made and lost with the turn of a card. The plush emerald carpet muffled my steps, allowing me to observe the room's occupants unnoticed for a moment longer.

To my left, a group of men in tailored suits huddled around a roulette wheel, their excited whispers punctuated by the rhythmic click of the ball. To my right, the bar stretched the length of the wall. Its polished surface gleamed under the soft lighting. The bartender, a tall, slim-thick woman in a crisp white shirt, mixed drinks with the precision of an artist.

As always, there wasn't a thing out of place. I approached the main table, where five men were already seated, their faces a mix of concentration and carefully cultivated nonchalance.

As I drew closer, heads turned, and conversations paused. I was used to those reactions; being Cyrus Malone's daughter tended to have that effect on people.

"Gentlemen." I greeted them, my rich, velvety voice carrying just the right amount of warmth and authority. "I trust you've left some chips for me?"

A chorus of chuckles rippled around the table. Those men, each powerful in their own right, knew better than to underestimate me. I might have been Cyrus Malone's daughter, but I'd earned my place at their table through my own merit.

"Demi, you're looking like money my dear," called Vincent Jackson, a portly man with a skin tone like Godiva, a receding hairline, and a fondness for flashy rings. "We were beginning to think you wouldn't grace us with your presence tonight."

I slid into the empty seat, the leather cool against my bare arms. "And miss the chance to relieve you of your hard-earned cash, Vinnie? Never."

The dealer, a slim young man with impeccable posture, began to shuffle the cards. The soft whisper of cardstock against cardstock was like music to my ears. I leaned back, crossing my smooth legs, and signaling to a passing server for my usual, a glass of eighteen-year-old Macallan, neat. To run with the big boys, I had to learn to drink with the big boys and hold my own.

As the first hand was dealt, I took a moment to study my opponents. Besides Vincent, there was Malcolm Reed, a shark-eyed lawyer who'd defended half the criminals in Chicago; Anatoly Volkov, a Russian arms dealer who I was certain had ice in his veins; Thomas Chen, a Chi-Town real estate mogul with a poker face to rival any statue; and lastly, Dominic Malone, my cousin and security detail and the only one at the table I trusted implicitly.

The game began, and I felt the familiar rush of adrenaline coursing through my veins. I thrived in the delicate dance of strategy and chance. I played my cards close to my chest, both literally and figuratively, as the stakes rose with each hand.

An hour into the game, I'd earned a respectable pile of chips. The conversation flowed as freely as the top-shelf liquor, a dangerous combination in a room full of secrets and lies. I sipped my whiskey, savoring the smoky flavor as I listened to the men around me boast and banter.

"So, Demi," Anatoly said, his accent thick as he tossed chips into the pot. "When are you going to settle down? Surely, a beautiful young woman like you has no shortage of admirers."

I arched an eyebrow, my lips curving into a sardonic smile to reveal the dimple on my right cheek. "Why, Anatoly, are you offering? I didn't realize you were in the market for a wife who could outshoot, outplay, and outdrink you."

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

The table erupted in laughter, and I caught Dominic's approving nod. He knew as well as I did that in our world, showing weakness was a death sentence. And make no mistake, treating me like some prize to be won was a weakness I wouldn't tolerate.

"Ouch. You wound me, woman," Anatoly said, clutching his chest in mock pain. "But perhaps you're right. I need a woman who knows her place, not one who'd challenge me at every turn."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees. I leaned forward, my eyes locked on his. "And what place would that be, Anatoly? Behind you? Beneath you? Or perhaps in the kitchen, barefoot and pregnant?"

The tension was thick enough to cut with a knife. I saw Malcolm and Thomas exchanging uneasy glances while Vincent suddenly became very interested in his cards. Dominic, always at the ready, looked willing to intervene if necessary.

Anatoly's expression darkened, his jovial mask slipping to reveal the archaic misogynist underneath. "You forget yourself, girl. Your father may run this city, but you're still just a—"

"Careful, mothafucka." Dominic's baritone voice sliced through the tension like a knife. "You're talking to Cyrus Malone's daughter inside of his club sitting at the table with his nephew. I'd choose my next words very carefully if I were you."

I waved Dominic off, never breaking eye contact with Anatoly. "No, please, let him finish. I'm dying to hear what profound insight he has about my role in this world."

Anatoly opened his mouth then seemed to think better of it. He muttered something in Russian that I was sure was less than complimentary and threw his cards down. "I fold."

I leaned back with a triumphant smile playing on my lips. "Wise choice."

The game continued, but the easy camaraderie from earlier had evaporated. I felt the weight of unspoken words and simmering resentments hanging in the air. It was a familiar feeling in this world of ours, where alliances shifted like sand, and today's friend could be tomorrow's enemy.

As the night stretched on, I found my thoughts drifting to the marriage contract my father had arranged. The idea of being bartered off like a prized stallion had initially filled me with rage, but I'd come to see the strategic value in aligning with the Mexican cartel. Ozias 'El Diablo' Rivera was a force to be reckoned with, and the thought of standing beside him, rather than cowering behind him had started to appeal to me in ways I hadn't expected.

I was jolted from my thoughts by a commotion at the door. Turning, I felt my stomach drop as I spotted a familiar face.

Harris. My bitch ass, cheating ass, allergic to telling the truth ass ex.

The sight of him sent a jolt of adrenaline through my system, but I forced myself to remain outwardly calm. Show no weakness. That's the rule.

Still, I loathed the way his presence carried such an effortless confidence. It was like the nigga walked on air. His mahogany brown skin was smooth, and his jawline was sturdy, with a thick beard sculpted to perfection to give his face a rugged but polished structure.

His hair was cut clean with a fresh lineup done with expert precision, and his attire—a cashmere shirt draped over his frame and designer slacks with a sleek watch and blinging diamond studs in both ears. It was clear he still put more care into his appearance than he did our relationship.

As Harris made his way toward our table, I caught Dominic’s eye. He was already moving to intercept, his hand resting casually on the gun hidden beneath his custom-fitted jacket. I gave him a subtle nod, silently communicating that I had things under control, for the moment at least.

“Gentlemen,” I said, pushing back from the table. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment. It seems I have an unexpected guest to attend to.”

I stood, smoothing down my dress and plastering on a smile that didn’t reach my eyes. As I moved to meet Harris halfway, I felt the eyes of everyone in the room on us. In this world, every interaction was a performance, and right now, all of Chicago’s underworld was my audience.

“Harris.” I greeted him, my voice calm and controlled. “This is an unexpected surprise. I don’t recall seeing your name on the guest list for tonight.”

He smirked, that same arrogant smile that once made my heart race but now only filled me with irritation. “C’mon now, Demi. You know a pretty mothafucka like me don’t need an invitation. Your father and I go way back.”

He spoke with such buttery smooth confidence, his voice deep and unhurried, always measured. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Harris had always loved to throw around his good genes and supposed connections as if that shit impressed me. I carried five different currencies on any given day and had a passport in two different countries. The only language I didn’t understand was short money. “Be that as it may, I’m in the middle of a game. So unless you have urgent business with my father or something

important to say, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave."

Harris's brown eyes narrowed to slits, and he took a step closer. I stood my ground, refusing to be intimidated. "Actually—"

I narrowed my eyes back at him, meeting Harris's gaze with unyielding determination.

Ugh. Those fucking eyes—a shade of brown deep enough to drown in and long, dark lashes that made even the humblest gaze feel premeditated.

"Actually, what?" I asked as I tilted my head to the side. "Spit it out or get the fuck out, Harris. I've got a game to win."

Turning on my stiletto heels, I strolled back to the poker table, feeling Harris's brown orbs bore a hole into my back, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of looking back. I wanted him to watch me sashay away, and made sure to throw my ass just a bit more to really make him want to eat his fucking heart out. I slid back into my seat with practiced grace, flashing a grin that exposed my teeth at the men around the table.

"Gentlemen, shall we continue?" I inquired while picking up my cards. "I believe it was your bet, Vinnie."

Vincent chuckled as he tossed a stack of chips into the pot. "Always in a hurry, aren't you, Demi? You should learn to savor the game, sweetheart."

I arched my freshly waxed eyebrow at him with a smirk playing on my lightly sheened lips. "Oh, I savor it plenty. Especially when I'm winning."

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

The men around the table laughed, and I felt a familiar thrill run through me. This was where I thrived—in the heart of danger, surrounded by men who underestimated me at their own risk.

As the game progressed, I carefully studied each player's tells. Chen's left eye twitched when he was bluffing. Reed drummed his fingers when he was confident. And Vinnie? He leaned back in his chair when he had a good hand as if he'd already won.

I used the knowledge to my advantage, raising the stakes when I knew they were weak and folding when their confidence was genuine. With each hand, I chipped away at their stacks, my own pile growing steadily larger. I'd been playing poker and learning people based off the things they didn't say since I was a kid. I practically grew up in my father's club. I knew better than to trust half of the bullshit that came out of any of their mouths.

"Damn, Demi," Chen exclaimed after I took another pot. "Your old man teach you to play like this?"

I laughed, the sound light and carefree despite the tension I felt coiling in my stomach. "Please. My father may have taught me the rules, but I perfected the art of the game all on my own."

"Is that so?" Vincent leaned forward, his eyes twinkling with amusement and something else. Interest, perhaps? "You know, Demi, a woman with your skills would make quite the wife. Volkov might have fucked up the conversation earlier, but has a contract been arranged for you?"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at his comment, feeling a flicker of annoyance. "Oh, Vinnie," I said, my tone dripping with artificial sweetness. "I don't think it matters. You know I could never marry a man I've beaten at cards. It would be terribly emasculating for you, wouldn't it?"

The table erupted in laughter, and I caught a glimpse of Vincent's face slightly tightening with embarrassment. Good. Let him stew in his humiliation.

"Tell you what," I continued, unable to resist twisting the knife a little. "If any of you manage to beat me—truly beat me, mind you, not just take a single hand—then I might consider it. But until then . . ." I trailed off, shrugging my shoulders with feigned nonchalance.

None of them knew about the contract my father made with Rivera, and it hadn't been stated publicly yet. However, it was only a matter of time until it was.

Reed chuckled, slapping Vincent on the back. "Looks like you'll be waiting a long time, Vinnie boy. Our Demi here is undefeated."

As the laughter died down and we returned to the game, I couldn't help but feel a swell of pride. This was my world, my arena, and I'd carved out my place in it through sheer force of will and intellect. Let them underestimate me—it only makes my victories that much sweeter.

But even as I reveled in my success, a nagging voice in the back of my mind reminded me of the true stakes at play. This wasn't just a game—it was a demonstration of power, a reminder to those men that I wasn't just Cyrus Malone's daughter but a force to be reckoned with in my own right.

I didn't want to be known for being the daughter of a don.

I wanted them to know me as a bad bitch.

I was about to call another round when I caught a dash of movement from the corner of my eye. Dominic was trying to get my attention. His face, usually stoic, carried a hint of tension that immediately put me on alert. With a subtle tilt of his head, he motioned toward the club's bar.

My eyes followed his gesture, and my heart plummeted. Harris couldn't seem to take a fucking hint. What is wrong with this delusional, cheating ass nigga?

"Gentlemen," I alerted them, my tone steady despite the turmoil inside. "I believe it's time for a short break. Don't spend all your money at the bar—I intend to relieve you of it when we return."

They chuckled, none the wiser to my inner distress. As they dispersed, Harris approached, his eyes locked on me with an intensity that made my skin crawl.

"Baby girl." He greeted me, his voice dripping with false charm. "I didn't say this earlier, but you're looking beautiful as ever. You look as good in it as I know you would out of it."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes but couldn't hold back my expression of disgust. He'd never get the privilege of touching me again. "Harris. I've already told you I'm in the middle of a game, and I damn sure ain't your baby girl no more. What do you want?"

He leaned forward, trying to create an air of intimacy that we no longer shared. "I'm not going to lie to you. I was hoping we could have a word. In private."

He's not going to lie to me? That was rich, considering all he did was fucking lie when we were together. My fingers tightened around my drink. The last thing I

wanted was to be alone with him, but I couldn't show weakness. Not here, not now.

"I'm busy," I replied coolly before taking a sip of my whiskey. "Whatever you have to say can wait."

Harris's calculated smile faltered for a moment as a flicker of frustration crossed his face. "It's important, Demi. You'll want to hear what I have to say."

I met his gaze, unflinching. "I very much doubt that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have another game to win."

Before I could entirely dismiss Harris, Dominic stepped between us, his linebacker physique and imposing frame creating a much needed barrier. His voice was low but firm as he addressed my ex. "She said she's busy, so run along, you dainty mothafucka."

I saw the muscles in Harris's jaw tighten and his eyes narrow as he glared at Dominic. For a moment, I thought he might've thrown a punch, but then a cruel smile split his face.

"Fine," he spat, his gaze slithering back to me. "But don't count on that marriage contract of yours going through, baby girl. Things aren't as settled as Daddy Dearest would have you believe."

My heart lurched in my chest. How the hell does he fucking know about that? The contract was supposed to be top secret, known only to a select few.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

I whipped my head around, fixing Harris with a steely glare. “Tell me what you know about the contract,” I demanded, although my voice was barely above a whisper.

He smirked, clearly savoring the moment when he realized he had one up on me. “More than you, apparently.”

My impending marriage to Rivera was supposed to be a union to end the bloodshed between our families over territory in the South and Midwest and product and solidify our power. If that fell through . . .

“You’re bluffing,” I said with a scoff, but there was a tremor I couldn’t quite hide.

Harris leaned in, his breath hot on my ear. “Am I? You might want to ask your father about his recent negotiations, baby girl. Things aren’t looking too good for the blushing bride-to-be.”

I pulled back, my heart pounding. Is it possible? Has something changed without my knowledge? The uncertainty gnawed at my gut, threatening to shatter the carefully constructed facade of control I’d maintained all evening.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” I hissed, but even to my own ears, the words lacked conviction.

Harris’s arrogant smirk widened, and there was a predatory glint in his eyes. “Oh, Demi, always so feisty. It’s what I love about you. Well, that and—” He paused, reaching out to touch my arm.

Before he made contact, Dominic's hand shot out, grabbing Harris by the throat. My loyal cousin's face was a mask of cold fury as he lifted my ex off his feet.

"She told you to leave, mothafucka" Dominic growled, his grip tightening with every word.

Harris's eyes bulged, his mahogany brown face turning an alarming shade of dark blue. Part of me wanted to let it continue, to watch him suffer for his arrogance and the pain he'd caused me. But I knew better. We couldn't afford a scene, not here, not now.

"Dominic," I muttered, placing a hand on his arm. "That's enough."

As if on cue, two of our security personnel appeared, their presence commanding instant attention. Dominic released Harris, who crumpled to the floor like a foldable chair, gasping for air.

"Escort this leech out and put him on the blacklist," I ordered, despite the turmoil bouncing around inside me. "His ass is no longer welcome here."

The guards nodded, dragging Harris to his feet. As they marched him away, he managed to rasp out, "This ain't over, Demi. You'll see!"

I turned back to the poker table, forcing a likeness of a smile onto my face as the men returned with drinks in hand. "Gentlemen, my apologies for the interruption. Shall we continue?"

The game resumed, but my mind was clearly elsewhere. What if Harris wasn't bluffing? What if the marriage contract really was in jeopardy? I played mechanically, my usual sharp instincts dulled by worry.

After winning another hand—more due to my opponents’ incompetence than my own skill—I decided it was time to make my exit. “Thank you for a delightful evening, gentlemen,” I declared while rising from the table. “But I’m afraid I must retire for the night.”

As Dominic and I made our way through the opulent club, the weight of Harris’s words pressed down on me. I glanced at my bodyguard, noting the tightness around his eyes. “D . . . you don’t think there’s any truth to what Harris’ lying ass was saying, do you?”

Dominic shook his head, his expression grim. “Nah. I doubt it, Demi. That nigga Harris has always been more mouth than brains. You know that. He’s probably just trying to get under your skin so you’ll go back to chasing behind his pansy ass.”

I nodded, but the knot in my stomach didn’t loosen. “You haven’t heard anything? About the contract, I mean?”

“No, not a thing,” Dominic replied, his tone careful. “But if there was any change, I’m sure Unc would inform you directly.”

I chiseled a smile into my features, but inside, doubt chewed away at me. My father had kept things from me before, always under the guise of protection. What if he was doing it again? What if everything I thought I knew about my future was about to come crashing down around me?

Dominic’s hand rested lightly on my back as he guided me to the waiting car, its sleek black exterior gleaming under the streetlights. He opened the rear door, and I slid onto the plush leather seat, the familiar scent of polished wood and new car enveloping me.

“Thank you, D,” I murmured, my mind already racing ahead to the conversation I

needed to have with my father.

As Dominic shut the door and made his way to the driver's seat, I pulled out my phone. My thumb hovered over my father's contact for a moment before I hit call. The car purred to life as we pulled away from the curb, the city lights blurring past the tinted windows.

One ring. Two. On the third, my father's gruff voice filled the line. "Demi. What is it?"

I took a deep breath, bracing myself. "Daddy, we need to talk. Harris showed up at the club tonight spouting off about the marriage contract. Talkin' shit and said it wasn't going through. How did he even find out about my engagement? What's going on?"

There was a pause, and it told me everything I needed to know. When my father finally spoke, his tone was carefully controlled. "Ah, Demi. I was going to tell you tomorrow. The contract . . . it's off. I'm looking at new prospects for you as we speak."

What in the actual fuck is going on?

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

My brows knitted together. “What? Tomorrow? The announcement of our engagement and the alliance between our families was supposed to happen tomorrow! Why did you cancel it? What happened?” I quizzed as my mind whirled with possibilities, each more alarming than the last.

“It’s complicated, love. Nothing for you to worry about. We’ll discuss it when you come over tomorrow.”

I gripped the phone tighter, frustration bubbling up inside me. “Daddy, I’m not a child. If something’s going on, I deserve to know. This is my life too! How could you let Harris find out before me?”

“Not now, Demi,” he said sternly, his tone a warning. “I’m on my way to the club. We’ll talk later.”

The line went dead, leaving me staring at my phone in disbelief. The marriage to Ozias ‘El Diablo’ Rivera was supposed to be a done deal, a strategic alliance to secure our family’s position. For it to fall through now . . .

I leaned back against the seat, my mind racing. Something big must’ve happened, something that had my father willing to risk the wrath of the Mexican cartel. But what?

Later that evening, I sat on my bed draped in lavish linens with my new emerald dress carefully hung on a felt hanger outside of my walk-in closet that rivaled any runway it-girl or fashionista. The phone call with my father and his unexpected news still echoed in my mind. He’d just severed the marriage contract, which should’ve

filled me with nothing but relief. Instead, it occupied me with a new sense of dread—knowing my father would soon try to arrange another marriage, possibly with someone even older and potentially more problematic.

Feeling distressed, I called Samara over to my apartment to vent about everything that happened at the club with Harris and the upsetting phone call with my father. As soon as she arrived, she crashed down beside me on my oversized, L-shaped couch in the open-concept living area that flowed seamlessly into the kitchen, ready to lend a listening ear.

She looked at me with her bottom lip poked out. “You poor thing. How are you holding up, Demi?”

My shoulders rose and fell. “To be honest, I don’t know. I thought I’d be relieved about this, but now I’m even more anxious. What if my father tries to marry me off to someone worse? Someone old, wrinkly, and more dangerous? What am I going to do?” I questioned while nervously wringing my hands.

I was so anxious that I couldn’t sit still. I started pacing the floor, walking from the couch over to the floor-to-ceiling windows in my apartment that showcased the stunning views of the city’s skyline and Lake Michigan.

“You’re going to keep your head up. I get this is a lot to take in for anybody, but you need to remember who you are. Just like you said in the dress shop, you’re motherfucking Demi Malone, bitch. You better poke out your chest and act like it! Like I told you earlier, you’re not alone in this. We’ll figure something out.”

“How? We don’t have any more time, Demi. The man was supposed to be leaving Mexico to come here tomorrow and stay until the wedding, and then we were going to go back together.”

At a loss for words, Samara sighed. “I’m sorry, Demi. I wish I had better things to say to keep your spirits up.”

“I know you do. I just feel so trapped. It’s like, every time I think I see a fucking way out of this dark ass tunnel, there’s always another dead end. How am I ever supposed to find what makes me happy and what I want to do with my life if I’m always underneath a man’s thumb?”

“It’s okay to feel frustrated and unsure given the circumstances. It’s fucked up, period. But you’re one of the strongest people I know, Demi—a lot stronger than you can even appreciate right now. We need to start thinking about what you really want and how we can make that happen for you. Maybe now is the time to have a serious heart-to-heart with your father about your future and what you want to get out of it. You deserve to be happy and free.”

I nodded slowly, letting her words sink in. “You’re so fucking right, Mara. I need to take control of my own life. I can’t keep letting decisions be made for me anymore.”

“Fuck it, come with me tomorrow,” Samara suggested.

My brows dipped low. “Come with you where?”

She smacked her full lips together. “Remember I told you about my cousin’s wedding a few months back when I got the invitation? It’s a destination wedding in Cancun. She gave me a plus one, so now I’m inviting you! My flight leaves tomorrow afternoon. It’ll take your mind off things and let shit cool down between you and your father.”

A getaway does sound nice right about now.

I sighed. “Okay. I like that idea. I’m down and could use the change of scenery. I’m

meeting with my father in the morning, but I should be good for the rest of the day.”

“Eek!” Samara squealed with excitement. “This is gonna be the best weekend ever!”

My chest inflated with a deep breath, feeling a renewed sense of excitement. My future was uncertain, but with an impending getaway to Mexico right in the midst of my world being rocked, I felt like it could be the silver lining I never knew I needed. For the first time, I felt like I had a say in my own future, and I was ready to live it up, one tequila shot at a time.

Ozias

The buzzing of my phone cut through the silence of my office like a knife. I glanced at the screen, my jaw clenching as I read the name Cyrus Malone. The Chi-Town cabrón. I let it ring twice more before answering.

“Cyrus. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I leaned back in my leather chair, fingers drumming on the polished mahogany desk. The Cabo San Lucas skyline stretched out beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows, a testament to the power and influence I’d built. But it wasn’t enough. It would never be enough.

“Ozias, my boy! How are things in sunny Mexico?” Cyrus’s booming voice carried a forced cheerfulness that set my teeth on edge.

“Warm, as always,” I replied smoothly. “And Chicago? Still freezing your cojones off?”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Cyrus chuckled, but there was a bite to it. “Ah, you know us Chicago natives. We’re built for the cold.”

I reached for the glass of tequila on my desk before taking a slow sip. The burn in my throat was familiar and comforting. “I’m sure you didn’t call just to discuss the weather, Cyrus. What can I do for you?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. I could almost see him squirming, searching for the right words through the phone. It brought a smirk to my face.

“You’re right, Ozias. This isn’t a social call,” he answered before clearing his throat. “I’m calling about business.”

My grip tightened on the phone. “Business? And here I thought we had concluded our negotiations months ago.”

“Yes, well . . . circumstances change.” Another pause. “I’m afraid there’s been a development regarding the . . . er, arrangement between our families.”

I sat up straighter, my free hand curling into a fist. “What kind of fuckin’ development?”

Cyrus drew in an audible deep breath. “I’m sorry to inform you, Ozias, but you won’t be marrying my daughter after all.”

The words hit me like a physical blow to my gut. For a moment, I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. Then the rage emerged, hot and familiar, coursing through my veins

like liquid fire.

“The fuck you say?” I inquired. “Because I don’t think I heard you correctly, Cyrus.”

“You heard me just fine, Ozias,” he replied, his tone hardened. “The engagement is off. Demi won’t be marrying you.”

I stood abruptly, pacing the length of my office. My mind galloped, calculating the reason this shit could be happening, trying to understand why he would do something as foolish as go back on his word to a man like me. Was he trying to make an even bigger enemy out of me? Was he trying to insult my honor?

“We had a deal, Cyrus. A binding agreement between our organizations,” I reminded him. “I was planning to board my private jet to Chicago to announce our engagement and the alliances between our families.”

“Agreements can be broken. My daughter’s happiness is more important than any business deal.”

I laughed, a harsh, bitter sound. “Her happiness? Don’t fuckin’ insult me, Cyrus. This was never about Demi’s happiness. It was about power, about uniting our empires. About getting the Malones off my shit list. And now you’re backing out?”

“Things change, Ozias. I’m sure you understand.”

“Oh, I understand perfectly.” I stopped at the window, staring out at the city below. In my mind’s eye, I could see Chicago, could see Demi. The prize that was promised to me. “You’ve made a grave mistake, old man.”

His voice sharpened. “Is that a threat?”

I smiled, cold and cruel. “Not at all. Simply making an observation. You’ve chosen to break faith with the cartels. That rarely ends well for anyone.”

“Watch yourself, Ozias.”

“My reach extends far beyond these borders and whatever wall your president promises to build. You’d do well to remember that. But if you forgot who runs this shit, I don’t mind jogging your memory, mothafucka.”

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. When Cyrus spoke again, his tone was tight and barely contained anger. “I’m sorry it’s come to this, Ozias. I truly am. But my decision is final.”

“We’ll see about that.” I ended the call abruptly, resisting the urge to hurl the phone across the room.

For a long moment, I stood there, staring unobservantly at the paradise before me. My mind whirled with plans, possibilities, and bloody fuckin’ revenge.

I’d built my empire on blood and pain, on loyalty and fear. I’d crushed anyone who dared to cross me, who dared to take what was mine. And Demi Malone was mine. She was promised to me—the jewel at the peak of my empire and the key to unlocking even greater power.

I won’t let her slip through my fingers. Not now. Not ever.

My phone buzzed again. It was Ángel, my right-hand man. I answered on the first ring.

“Jefe? Is everything alright?” His voice was concerned. He knew me well enough to sense when something was wrong.

“No, Ángel. Everything is not alright,” I answered as I turned away from the window, my mind made up. “I need you to assemble a team. Our best men. Have them ready to fly to Chicago first thing in the morning.”

There was a pause. “Chicago? What’s going on, O?”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

I took a deep breath, feeling the familiar calm of my decision settle over me. “The Malones have broken faith with us. They’ve called off the engagement.”

“Shit,” Ángel muttered. “What do you want us to do?”

A cold smile crawled up my face. “We’re going to take what’s ours, Ángel. Demi Malone was promised to me, and I intend to fuckin’ collect.”

“You want us to . . . kidnap her?” Ángel asked hesitantly.

“I want you to retrieve what belongs to me,” I corrected him. “By any means necessary.”

There was a moment of silence, then Ángel’s voice returned, firm and loyal. “Consider it done, Jefe. I’ll handle everything.”

“Good man.” I ended the call and tossed the phone onto my desk.

My gaze fell on the bar in the corner of my office. Without conscious thought, my feet carried me toward it. I poured a generous measure of tequila into the cup I just finished, savoring the sharp, clean scent.

As I raised the glass to my lips, I made a silent vow. Demi Malone will be mine, one way or another. The Malones think they can play games with me? They’ll soon learn the stupidity of their ways.

I wasn’t called El Diablo for nothing. And hell hath no fury like a devil scorned.

The tequila burned a path down my throat, igniting the fire in my belly. I was about to pour another when there was a knock at my office door.

“Enter,” I called out, not bothering to turn around.

I heard the door open, followed by hesitant footsteps. “Señor Rivera?”

I recognized the voice. It was Mateo, one of my lower-ranking men. I turned slowly, fixing him with a hard stare. “What is it, Mateo?”

He shifted nervously under my gaze. “There’s . . . there’s been an issue, sir.”

“What. Kind. Of. Issue?” I growled, each word dripping with menace. I wasn’t in the mood for any more bad news.

As Mateo stammered out his explanation, I felt the last threads of my control slip away. The rage that had been simmering since Cyrus’s call boiled over, consuming everything in its path.

Let them all burn.

The Malones, the traitors, anyone who stood in my way. I’ll annihilate this whole fucking world to dust if that’s what it takes. Because in the end, I always get what I want. And what I want is Demi Malone.

The rage coursed through my veins like molten lava. I clenched my fists, my knuckles hardening as I struggled to maintain some aspect of control.

“It’s about the shipment from Sinaloa. There’s been a delay at the border. Customs is—”

I didn't let him finish. In one fluid motion, I turned and hurled my glass against the far wall. It shattered spectacularly, shards of crystal and droplets of tequila raining down on the expensive carpet.

The man flinched, taking a step back. I fixed him with a glare that made hardened killers tremble. "Fuckin' fix it," I barked. "I don't care what it takes. Bribe them, threaten them, kill them if you have to. But that shipment better be in by tomorrow night, or it'll be your head on the chopping block. Understood?"

He nodded frantically, already backing toward the door. "Y-yes, Jefe. Right away."

As the door closed behind him, I took a deep breath, trying to rein in my temper. I couldn't afford distractions, not now. Not when I was about to make my boldest move yet.

I walked to the window, gazing out at my country. Mexico was mine, but I wanted more. Demi was the key to that expansion. She was my ticket to new territories and new alliances. The fact that she was reputed to be as beautiful as she was fierce? That was just a bonus.

"Soon, mi amor," I whispered, imagining her face among the twinkling city lights. "Soon, you'll learn what it means to belong to El Diablo."

Demi

The whiskey burned as it slid down my throat, a familiar comfort in the dimly lit study of my family's mansion. It wasn't even noon yet, and I already felt the need to drink. I set the crystal tumbler down on my father's mahogany desk with a soft clink, bracing myself for the conversation ahead as soon as he ended his phone call.

Finally, he hung up and turned his attention to me. "Hi, princess." He greeted me

with a heavy sigh, signaling that he was stressed.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“Is everything okay, Daddy?”

“No, but it will be soon. I just need to have one of my men handle Councilman Reed, or I’ll hop on a plane and pay his ass a visit myself.”

“Plane? Is he not here in Chicago?” I probed.

“He’s vacationing with one of his whores in Cancun this weekend,” my father informed me.

My heart skipped a beat. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah. The greedy son of a bitch is demanding more money to keep our smuggling operations under wraps. I’m over here working double-time to ensure we’re good, while he’s relaxing on a beach sippin’ Mai Tais and fucking his mistress. One wrong move and our entire empire could crumble.”

“I can handle Councilman Reed, Daddy,” I asserted, meeting my father’s icy gaze. “I’m leaving for Cancun tonight to go to Samara’s cousin’s wedding. Since I’ll already be there, let me prove I’m more than just a pretty face to be bartered away in your deals.”

My father, the infamous mafia boss of Chicago, leaned back in his leather chair, his cocoa brown face emotionless and tough as nails. “And why should I trust you with such a delicate matter, Demi? This isn’t some pretty little charity gala or social event.”

I bristled at his dismissive tone, but I kept my voice steady. “I’ve been by your side for years, learning the ins and outs of this business. I know how to read people and how to negotiate. I’m not some naive little girl anymore.”

“No.” He agreed as his chocolate brown eyes narrowed. “But you’re still my daughter, and this world is dangerous. I won’t risk your safety.”

“My safety?” I scoffed as I stood up and paced the room. The Persian rug muffled my footsteps as I moved. “I’ve been in danger since the day I was born into this family. At least let me use that danger for something worthwhile. Let me prove my value beyond being a shiny bargaining chip in your alliances.”

My father’s expression softened slightly, and I saw a flicker of something in his eyes. Pride, perhaps? Or acceptance? “You’ve always been stubborn, just like your mother,” he muttered.

I pressed my advantage, being sure to keep my foot on the gas while I could. “Exactly. And you know I won’t back down from this. So, you might as well let me handle it officially rather than risk me going behind your back.”

He chuckled darkly. “Is that a threat, princess?”

“It’s a promise,” I replied, meeting his gaze unflinchingly. “I’m a Malone, after all. We don’t make idle threats. Isn’t that what you taught me?”

For a long moment, the only sound in the room was the ticking of the antique clock on the mantle. I held my breath, waiting for his decision.

Finally, he sighed. “Fine. You can meet with Reed. I’ll set up the meeting and send you the details. But Dominic goes with you as backup, and you follow my instructions to the letter. Understood?”

Relief and excitement coursed through me, but I kept my expression neutral. “Crystal clear,” I answered with a nod, already planning my approach.

“Don’t make me regret this, Demi,” my father warned. “Benjamin Reed is a greedy mothafucka, but he’s got connections. We need him in our pocket, but we can’t let him bleed us dry either.”

“I won’t let you down, Daddy,” I promised, meaning every word. This is my chance to show him—to show everyone—that I’m more than just Cyrus Malone’s daughter. I’m a force to be reckoned with.

My father reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a thick manila envelope. “Here’s everything you need to know about Reed—his financials, his dirty little secrets, potential leverage points. Study it carefully and recall it to memory.”

I took the envelope, feeling its weight in my hands. It was more than just paper; it was an opportunity, a test, a chance to reshape my destiny.

“Thank you, Daddy,” I acknowledged softly. “I won’t disappoint you.”

He nodded then turned back to the papers on his desk, effectively dismissing me. As I reached the door, his voice stopped me. “Demi?”

I turned with one hand on the doorknob. “Yes?”

For a moment, I saw a glimpse of the father I remembered from my childhood—before the responsibilities of the family business hardened him and his heart to stone. “Be careful,” he said quietly.

I nodded, feeling a lump form in my throat. “I will.”

As soon as the study door closed behind me, I pulled out my phone to text Samara the news.

Me: Mexico is a go. I'll see you later tonight.

The next nine hours flew by in a blur of preparation. Dominic and I traveled separately from Samara and the rest of the girls, to fly in and handle my father's business dealings first before getting to pleasure. I packed for my trip while poring over the files my father gave me and memorizing every detail about Councilman Benjamin Reed—his favorite restaurants, his gambling debts, even the mistress he'd been keeping on the side. I practiced my negotiation tactics in the mirror and on the private jet, perfecting the balance between charm and blade that I'd need to bring him to his knees and make him kiss the ring.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

After landing in Cancun, I stood before the full-length mirror scrutinizing my reflection. The obsidian black dress I wore hugged my curves, projecting an image of sophisticated elegance. My long, jet-black hair was swept up in an intricate updo, exposing the warm caramel column of my neck. Diamond studs glittered in my ears—a gift from my father on my eighteenth birthday. I applied a final coat of deep red lipstick, the color of fresh blood. It was fitting, given what I was about to do.

“You ready, Demi?” Dominic’s gruff voice came from the doorway. “We need to be there in thirty minutes.”

I turned to face our family’s most trusted bodyguard with a slight smirk playing on my lips. “Born ready, D. Let’s go put the fear of God into this mothafucka.”

When I stepped off the jet, there was nothing but dirt and desert for as far as my eyes could see. My father arranged to have us picked up from the airport and carried directly to the meeting point with Councilman Reed.

The drive to the restaurant was tense with anticipation. I went over the plan in my head one last time, envisioning every possible scenario. Dominic’s presence in the car was reassuring—a solid, dependable anchor in the storm I was about to unleash.

“Remember,” I said as we pulled up to the valet stand, “you’re just here as a precaution. I need to handle this on my own.”

Dominic grunted in acknowledgment, his eyes scanning the area for potential threats. “I’ll be at the bar if you need me. Don’t hesitate to give the signal if things go south.”

I nodded, taking a deep breath to center myself. “It won’t come to that. But thank you.”

As I stepped out of the tinted black SUV, I felt the weight of expectations settle on my shoulders. This wasn’t just about proving myself to my father anymore. It was about carving out my place in the dangerous world I’d been born into and would likely inherit one day. Everyone knew me as his daughter, but I wanted to be known for so much more than that.

The maître d’ greeted me with a submissive nod, recognizing the power that exuded off me like a scented perfume. I was led to a secluded booth in the back, where Councilman Reed was already seated, nursing a glass of what looked like expensive tequila.

“Miss Malone.” He greeted me, rising to his feet with his lips pinched upward with tension. “What a pleasure to see you here. Up until earlier, I was expecting to meet your father.”

I slid into the booth, my eyes never leaving his. “I’m sure you were, Benjamin. Please sit down. We have so much to discuss.”

As he settled back into his seat, I saw the barely concealed disdain in his chocolate brown eyes. He was underestimating me, just as I’d hoped he would.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” I said. “Your recent demands are unacceptable. We had an agreement, and now you’re trying to change the terms. That doesn’t sit well with my family.”

His expression changed slightly. “Now see here, young lady. The risks I’m taking have increased. It’s only fair that my compensation reflects that.”

I leaned forward, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Fair? Let’s talk about fairness, shall we? How fair would it be if certain photographs of you wining and dining that beautiful young intern from your office were to find their way to your wife or the mayor? Who am I kidding? Why stop there? Maybe we go straight to the Chicago Times,” I warned with malice.

The color drained from his face. “You’re b-bluffing,” he stammered, but I saw the fear in his eyes.

“Am I?” I pulled out my phone, scrolling through a series of images before turning the screen toward him. His eyes widened in shock when he saw a recent photo from his Mexico getaway of him and a much younger woman, who wasn’t his wife, French kissing and holding hands on the beach. “I assure you, Benjamin, this is just a taste of what we have on you.”

As I continued to lay out the evidence we’d gathered—the bribes, the affairs, the embezzlement—I noticed movement from the corner of my eye. A man seated across the restaurant at a secluded table was watching our exchange with undisguised interest, a smirk playing on his lips as I verbally eviscerated the corrupt official before me.

For a moment, I wondered who the hell he was. Some elite local getting his kicks from watching a few tourists from Chicago’s underbelly? Or perhaps a business official traveling for work, amused by what he assumed was a lover’s quarrel?

I pushed the thought aside, refocusing on Reed. “So, here’s how this is going to work,” I said, my tone dripping with ice. “You’re going to honor our original agreement. No changes, no additional demands. In return, we’ll continue to keep your dirty little secrets . . . well, secret.”

Benjamin’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “You’re just like your father,” he muttered.

I felt a surge of pride at his words, even as I maintained my calm exterior. “I’ll take that as a compliment, Benjamin. Do we have an understanding?”

He nodded, defeated. “Yes, Miss Malone. The original terms stand . . .for now.”

I cut an icy glare at him. “Forever.”

As I wrapped up the meeting, laying out the specifics of our continued arrangement, I couldn’t help but feel a rush of satisfaction. I’d done it. I’d proven that I was more than just a golden bargaining chip in my father’s games. I had my own power behind my name.

Yet, even as I basked in my victory, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being watched. The man across the restaurant was still there, his dark eyes following my every move. There was something about him that set my nerves on edge, a dangerous aura that both thrilled and unnerved me.

Who is he? And why won’t he stop looking at me?

Our eyes locked in a brief moment, and an unexpected shiver ran down my spine. There was something in his gaze—a mix of amusement and intensity—that made my breath catch. I quickly looked away, focusing back on Benjamin.

“Remember, you don’t want to get on the wrong side of the Malone family. There will be hell to pay if you even think about double-crossing us.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

He nodded, his expression worn. “I understand, Miss Malone. You have my word,” he answered as he stood to leave.

Once he was gone, I allowed myself to relax slightly, savoring the victory. I signaled the waiter to bring me a glass of their finest tequila and pulled out my phone, typing a brief text to my father.

Me:Handled.

The reply came almost instantly:

Daddy:Good.

I stared at the screen, feeling a familiar mix of frustration and disappointment. Would it kill him to show a little pride? To acknowledge that I’d done well? To thank me for not fumbling the bag?

“What did you expect, Demi?” I muttered to myself before taking a sip of my drink. “A pat on the head and a ‘good job, sweetheart’?”

I forced myself to push aside the hurt. This was how it’d been with my father for as long as I could remember. He always said if you can’t be smart, be pretty. If you can’t be pretty, be silent. Praise was for the weak, and Malones were anything but weak. Instead, I focused on ordering and savoring each bite of the perfectly cooked, medium well steak. I’d earned this, after all. The men could have their guns and fists. I’d proven that a sharp mind and sharper tongue could be just as deadly as a beautiful, dimpled smile.

As I ate, I couldn't help but steal glances at the mysterious man. He was still watching, still smirking. Part of me wanted to march over there and demand to know what his problem was. But another part, a part I wasn't entirely comfortable with, was intrigued. There was something about him that called to the wilder side of me, the side that craved danger and excitement.

I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I'm here on business right now, not to get distracted by some stranger.

I took another bite of my steak, but the flavor had suddenly lost its appeal. Something was off. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched more intently now. I glanced up, my eyes immediately drawn to the mysterious man.

He was still there, but his smirk had morphed into something darker, more predatory. What I initially mistook for flirtation now sent a chill down my spine. My gaze darted to the restaurant bar, searching for the comforting presence of my cousin.

But Dominic wasn't there.

My heart rate quickened. "Shit," I muttered under my breath, gripping my fork tightly. Where the hell is he? Dominic never leaves his post unless. . .

I swallowed hard, forcing myself to appear calm, even as my mind raced with a million negative thoughts. This could be nothing. Maybe Dominic just stepped away for a moment to use the restroom. But the nagging voice in the back of my head whispered that something was very, very wrong. With trembling fingers, I pulled out my phone and typed a quick message to Dominic.

Me: Where are you? Some guy is staring me down.

I hit send and waited, my eyes flicking between the screen and the mysterious man. He was still watching, his dark eyes never leaving me. The seconds ticked by, feeling like hours.

No response from Dominic.

“Come on, come on,” I whispered, willing my phone to buzz with a reply. This isn’t like me. I’m Demi Malone, for God’s sake. I didn’t get rattled easily. I was the one who did the rattling.

But something about the situation had me on edge. Maybe it was the way the man’s gaze seemed to strip away my defenses or the unusual absence of Dominic. Whatever it was, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was in danger.

I took a deep breath, trying to center myself. “Get it together, Demi,” I muttered. “You’ve handled worse than this.”

But even as I said the words, I wasn’t sure I believed them. Because for the first time in a long time, I felt truly vulnerable. And in my world, vulnerability could be a death sentence.

The waiter approached, his crisp white shirt and black bowtie a stark contrast to the turmoil churning inside me. “Is everything to your satisfaction, Miss?” he asked politely.

I conceded a smile while willing my hand not to shake as I reached for my clutch. “Yes, thank you. I’ll take the check now, please.”

As I slid my black American Express card from its leather sheath, I couldn’t help but think how absurd this was. Here I was, daughter of Cyrus Malone, capable of bringing a corrupt official to his knees on foreign soil, and I was unnerved by a

random stranger's stare.

What the hell is going on with me?

The waiter returned with the receipt, and I signed with a flourish that contradicted my inner turmoil. "Have a pleasant evening, Miss," he acknowledged, but his words barely registered.

I stood, smoothing my dress, and made my way to the elevator. Each step felt heavier than the last as if my body knew something my mind hadn't fully grasped yet. I pressed the phone to my ear, anxiously awaiting to hear Dominic's voice on the other end, but nothing happened. No one answered.

The elevator doors parted with a soft ding, and I stepped inside, my heart pounding. Just as the doors began to close, a hand shot out, stopping them.

It was him.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

The man who'd been watching me all evening. Fuck.

He stepped in, wearing all black from head to toe and smelling like palo santo with a devilish smirk playing on his lips. His sandy brown skin seemed to glow under the elevator's LED lights as the doors closed, trapping us together in the small space.

"Going down?" he asked, his voice low and smooth with a hint of an accent.

I straightened my spine, channeling every ounce of Malone steel into my response, yet "Mm-hmm," was all I managed to mumble.

He chuckled, the sound sending a chill down my spine. That was when I noticed it—a flash of gold as he smiled. A gold grill covered the bottom row of his teeth. My eyes darted to his exposed forearm as he reached out to jab the button for the lobby, and I felt the blood drain from my face. There, inked into his warm brown skin, was a tattoo with the words "Loyalty above all" and a barbed wire crown above the L.

Cartel.

The realization hit me like a punch to the stomach. I parted my lips to speak, to scream, to call out for help—I wasn't even sure what. But before I could utter a sound, the elevator doors dinged and reopened on the same floor.

My heart somersaulted in my chest when I saw Dominic standing there with a brooding look on his face.

"Where the fuck have you been, Demi? I've been looking all over for you!" he

barked.

“Me? I called and texted you! Where were you?”

“I stepped out to take a call. You good?” he inquired, staring the man up and down as he stepped inside the metal box with us.

I eased out a sigh of relief before quickly jabbing the button so the doors would close again. “Yeah. I’m good now.”

The elevator lurched before it finally started to descend. As much as I hadn’t wanted Dominic to accompany me to Mexico, I sure as hell felt safer with him here. A part of me felt childish for being so jumpy in the elevator with the man from the restaurant, especially since he didn’t bother to utter another word to me once Dominic appeared and stood between us.

Ding.

The elevator doors opened, and the man proceeded to step out and disappear, leaving only Dominic and me standing there. “Who’d you have a call with? Was it my father?” I inquired.

He dipped his chin. “Yeah.”

My brows knitted together in an unsatisfactory frown. “What did he say?”

“Just checking in. He wanted to know how things went.”

“But I texted him and told him everything was good with Councilman Reed, and he responded,” I explained, tilting my head to the side.

Dominic shrugged his broad shoulders. “I told him we didn’t have any issues. I was keeping my eye on that mothafucka from the bar, though.”

An exasperated huff flew past my lips. “Ugh,” I groaned. “Why is he still going out of his way to treat me like a child after I told him I had it taken care of? I mean, what’s the point of even sending me out here to meet with Reed if he was going to have you report back my every move before I had the chance to?”

“That’s between you and Unc. You know I don’t get in between y’all shit. You’re too much alike and opposites at the same time. It’s weird.”

I rolled my eyes while trying to brush off the negativity building up inside me. “Well, I’m good now. Once I get to the villa with Samara and the rest of the girls, you’re free to head back to Chicago.”

Dominic nodded. “Bet. You got the address?”

“I’m texting it to you now.”

The breathtaking Mexican sunset spread its golden, orange, and pink rays over the grand estate that sat on a hilltop overlooking the Caribbean Sea. I stepped out of the car in awe. A smile crept across my face as my eyes soaked in the breathtaking beauty of the secluded mansion, painted a warm, earthy orange. The large house was made of stucco and bordered by tropical gardens and palm trees with necks as long as giraffes swaying gently in the light breeze. Samara’s cousin, Rayne, had gone above and beyond, securing a spectacular estate for the pre-wedding festivities. I couldn’t wait to see what the weekend had in store for me.

“You sure you don’t need me to stay?” Dominic asked as he grabbed my luggage.

“In a house this gorgeous with a dozen beautiful half-naked women running around?

No. I think I'll spare you the torture," I joked.

He smirked. "Yeah, whatever. Be safe, alright?"

"Always," I replied with a wink.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

As soon as my heels hit the paved walkway, I was greeted by Samara and the other bridesmaids, who were all buzzing with a blend of excitement and tequila.

Samara took my hand and pulled me through the front door. “You’re here!” she squealed with delight.

“In the flesh,” I said, looking around. The house was as much a picture of luxury on the inside as it was on the outside.

“Shots and introductions first,” she insisted. “And then I’ll give you a tour.”

The foyer and living room were a colorful blur as we raced into the kitchen to meet and greet everyone. It was the weekend escape I never knew I needed. I was beyond ready to free myself from my worries and my father’s unrealistic expectations that had been weighing on my shoulders for most of my life.

Samara handed me a shot glass filled to the brim with tequila. “Welcome to paradise, Demi! I’m so happy you could make it, girl! This weekend is all about love and having fun. Leave your stress at the door because that shit is not allowed up in here, okay?”

My teeth flashed white and broad as I took the shot glass. “Thanks, girl. This place is exactly what I needed, and this tequila is right on time! Thank you for including me.”

“That’s because I’m an on-time type of bitch, okay?” she teased with a chuckle.

We laughed in unison as the bride and the other bridesmaids gathered around the

kitchen island.

The bride raised her glass. “To love and marriage.”

We toasted Rayne’s upcoming nuptials and the adventures that lay ahead for her as a newlywed. The five of us clinked our glasses together as the sound of joyful laughter blended with the R&B and Hip-Hop music blasting in the background. I tossed back the shot, feeling the fiery tequila blaze through my body. I planned to let my hair down in more ways than one.

After a couple more shots, Samara and I explored the house. The mansion had ten bedrooms and twelve bathrooms, as well as several dining and living rooms. There was an expansive courtyard in the center, surrounded by terraces and six private balconies, enough for each of us to have our own.

Outside, the poolside terrace was decorated with fairy lights to create a magical vibe, and the infinity pool backed up to a beautiful view. The mountains rose in the distance, looking so close, although they were an ocean away. I couldn’t wait to change into my bathing suit and relax by the pool.

As the night fell, Samara and I lounged on the luxurious sunbeds, sipping on cocktails while her cousins smoked and twerked by the pool.

“Everything about this place is perfect, Samara. I can’t thank you and your cousin enough for letting me tag along at the last minute. With all this shit going on back home, I finally feel like I can breathe.”

Samara’s smile swung free. “That’s the point! You are way too young to be this stressed. It’s not healthy, and it sure as hell ain’t cute.”

I groaned. “You’re right. But, like, my father just gets underneath my skin so bad. It’s

like his superpower or something.”

“I don’t know why you let one man have so much control over you.”

“He’s not just any man, Samara. You know that.”

She sighed. “Look, let’s just get through this weekend. Rayne literally has a jam-packed itinerary. So, there won’t even be time for you to stress or worry. You’ll deal with Chicago when you land in Chicago. But as for me and this house, we getting fucked up tonight!” she sang like Beyoncé. “Deal?”

I chuckled before taking a sip of my tequila sunrise. “Deal.”

As the songs changed and the night continued to unfold outside the beautiful mansion, everyone gathered around the bride-to-be.

“Okay, ladies. Tomorrow morning, we’re starting with bridal yoga on the terrace at sunrise. We’ve got a private instructor coming just for us, and then we’ll have a chef come and cook brunch,” Rayne announced.

My eyes lit up with enthusiasm as I grinned. “Sounds like the perfect way to start the day to me. Thank you all again for including me this weekend.”

Rayne displayed her teeth in a joyful grin. “The more the merrier.”

When things finally started to wind down around two o’clock in the morning, I finally headed back to my room. I showered and changed into a comfortable oversized T-shirt and shorts before opening the window to let in the sounds of the ocean and the gentle breeze.

Still feeling partially buzzed, I climbed into bed and let the fresh, crisp sheets envelop

me. As I closed my lids, the rhythmic sound of the crashing waves was soothing, like a baby to warm milk. It lulled me to sleep within minutes.

Like the sunrise, the yoga instructor came like clockwork the next morning. She had sienna brown skin, long brown hair styled into two French braids, a bright smile, and a bubbly energy that I was too hungover to appreciate. Still, her disposition remained perky and jolly, like the captain of a high school cheer squad.

“Buenos días,ladies! My name is Veronica, and I’ll be your bridal yoga instructor today. I hope you chicas are ready to kickoff the day with some energizing yoga. And my high-level energy isn’t all I brought with me. I’ve got champagne and OJ for some post-yoga mimosas!”

We cheered, thrilled by the thought of drowning our livers in more alcohol. We grabbed our rented yoga mats and headed out onto the terrace. The soft sound of the waves added the same serenity I felt when I went to bed only a few hours prior. It was the perfect setting for our intimate workout session.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

For the next hour, the petite Hispanic instructor took us through a sequence of poses, guiding us with her calming voice. The deep stretch of the poses, the rhythm of my breaths, and the natural beauty enveloping me were the trifecta. I was in perfect peace.

As the session came to a close, the instructor led us into the winddown phase. She encouraged us to lie flat on our mats, close our eyes, and relax. She handed out cool towels that smelled like lavender.

“This is your time to rest,” the instructor said calmly as she walked around to each of us. “Place the towel over your face. Feel the cool lavender against your skin and let the scent wash over you. Breathe deeply and let go of any lingering tension. You are here, in this beautiful place. It is time to rest in peace. Padre, perdóname,” she whispered.

I drew in multiple deep breaths, soaking in the last tranquil moments before the session ended. We all closed our eyes, soaking in the tranquility of the moment. The combination of the lavender on the towel, Veronica’s soothing voice, and the crashing sounds of the ocean waves had me in a trance. The deeper my breaths, the heavier my eyelids and limbs felt.

I went from feeling energized to tired in a matter of minutes. My arms felt like lead when I tried to remove the towel from my face. When I did, I saw the instructor kneeling beside me with a sympathetic look on her face.

On the inside of her wrist was the same tattoo as the man in the elevator. She was with the cartel too. But before I could utter a sound, her hand moved with lightning

speed. A glint of metal caught my eye, and then I felt a sharp sting in my neck.

My vision began to blur almost immediately.

“What . . . what did you . . .?” I tried to ask, but my tongue felt heavy and uncooperative in my mouth.

My body felt heavier as if I were sinking into quicksand. I tried to fight it, to stay conscious, but it was a losing battle. The terrace spun around me; the sunlight blurred into streaks of color.

“No . . .” I murmured, barely audible.

My thoughts galloped, desperately trying to piece together what was happening. Who is this woman? Why is she doing this? And is she connected to Ozias?

Ozias. The name echoed in my fading consciousness. El Diablo. The devil himself. I’d never met him, but I’d heard the whispers, the stories. A man as dangerous as he was powerful. Is this his doing? Is this retaliation for some perceived slight by my family?

I wanted to ask, to demand answers, but my body wouldn’t cooperate. My eyelids were so heavy, and I couldn’t keep them open any longer. As darkness consumed me completely, one final thought flashed through my mind: I’ve failed. I failed to prove my worth and failed to protect myself. What would my father say?

Then, nothing.

Ozias

I stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows of my office, watching the city come to life

as my gaze swept over the skyline. The view from the fiftieth floor of Rivera BioPharma Cancun headquarters was breathtaking, but my mind was elsewhere. My fingers drummed impatiently on the polished oak desk as I awaited news of Demi's arrival.

Everything was falling into place, just as I planned. I'd been watching Demi from afar since the deal came across my desk to align our families. I knew her frequent whereabouts, how good she was at poker, who she told her secrets to, and how fucking good she looked even when she thought no one was watching. While my men were retrieving the Malone princess from the private mansion in Cancun, I was already en route on my private jet. It was only a matter of time before she would be delivered right at my feet.

I allowed myself a slight smirk of satisfaction. Cyrus Malone thought he could back out of our deal, but he'd soon learn that no one double-crossed Ozias Rivera and got away with it. I'd had men stationed in Chicago to retrieve her when I learned about her meeting in Cancun. I had Javier, my most trusted lieutenant, watch her at the restaurant. He sent me videos and photos of her meeting and put a tracker on her vehicle, which led me right to the mansion she was staying at. Taking his daughter was just the first step in bringing the Malones to their knees. Making her fall in love with me and bear my seed was the second.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text. It was from Javier.

Javier:Package secured. ETA. Ten minutes.

"Excellent," I muttered before pocketing the phone.

I turned back to the window, clasping my hands behind my back as I surveyed my domain. Chicago may not have known it yet, but the city, among others across the US and Mexico, belonged to me. Rivera BioPharma was just the tip of the iceberg—a

perfectly legal front for the real empire I'd built. Every day, shipments of cocaine, heroin, and other illicit substances flowed into the country under the guise of pharmaceutical supplies. The DEA hadn't caught on yet, and by the time they did, it'd be too late.

But drugs were just the beginning. With Demi as my wife, I'd have a foothold into the Malone's territory. And once I crushed Cyrus, there would be no one left to challenge my power.

Ten minutes later, a knock at the door interrupted my deliberations. "Enter," I commanded, not bothering to turn around.

I heard the door open, followed by the soft whir of wheels on the carpet. My pulse quickened, knowing who they'd brought me.

"Jefe." Javier's gravelly voice broke the silence. "We have her."

I took a deep breath, composing myself before I faced them. I couldn't let them see how eager I was to lay eyes on my bride-to-be. When I finally turned, my expression was a mask of cool indifference.

Javier stood beside a large laundry cart on wheels with Ángel hovering nearby. I approached slowly, savoring the moment. When Javier pulled off the sheet, I got my first glimpse of Demi Malone in the flesh. She was even more beautiful than her photos suggested. Long dark hair framed a face of sweet caramel perfection. Her curves were generous, her body delicate and inviting, even in unconsciousness. But it was the stubborn set of her jaw, the slight furrow between her perfectly arched brows, that truly captivated me. This was a woman who wouldn't be easily tamed—and I was looking forward to the challenge.

"How long until she wakes up?" I asked, not peeling my eyes away from her.

Javier shrugged. “Shouldn’t be too much longer, boss. We gave her another dose when we got her in the truck, but it’s starting to wear off.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“And the female mule?”

“Paid well for her job, and the bodies have been disposed of how you asked.”

“All?” I asked, brow lurching upward.

“All but one,” he clarified.

I nodded, pleased. “Good. I’ll take it from here. My fiancée and I have much to discuss.”

As if on cue, Demi began to stir. A delicate moan escaped her lips as her eyelids fluttered. I leaned in closer, eager to see those brown eyes I’d heard so much about.

“Ugh,” she groaned, slowly lifting a hand to her forehead. “My head is killing me.”

Her eyes snapped open suddenly, darting around the large cart in confusion before landing on me. Recognition dawned, followed quickly by fear and anger. She tried to sit up, but Javier’s hand on her shoulder kept her in place.

I decided to break the ice. “I’m sure you know who I am and why you’re here.”

The realization snatched the air straight from her lungs. Her eyes ballooned when she realized the amount of danger she was in. Demi swallowed hard, her throat working as she struggled to find her voice. When she spoke, there was a tremor.

“I know exactly who you are. W-what happened t-to the bride a-and Samara a-and,

oh my God! What the fuck did you do, and why am I here? Our marriage is supposed to be off the table!” She screamed at me, chest heaving in and out as her anxiety started to take hold.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her spirit. Even drugged and at my mercy, she still had fight in her. “Oh,mi amor,” I growled, leaning in closer. “Your father may have terminated our deal, but I’m afraid I don’t accept his decision. You see, you’re the key to everything I want—and I intend to make you my wife whether your daddy likes it or not. And as for your friends,” I said, clasping my hands together. “They’re dead.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “D-dead? Are you insane? What the hell is wrong with you, you fucking monster? You just go around killing innocent people for fun?”

“I don’t find killing fun,mi amor. I find it necessary. And for your information, the wedding that was set to take place there on Sunday was for one of my rivals. No bride, no wedding. That’s two birds, one stone in my book, and I love efficiency.”

She daggered her glare at me, hoping that by showing me her teeth, I’d tuck my tail and stand down. “My fatherwillkill you. Do you hear me? He isn’t the kind of man you fuck with.”

Something snapped inside me at the sound of her words. In an instant, I was in her face, my hands gripping the sides of the cart as I loomed over her. “And you think I am?” I roared, watching her flinch. “Do I look like the kind of man who gets fucked with, Demi?”

To my surprise, a bark of laughter escaped her lips. “Actually, you do,” she replied, her brown eyes glittering with defiance.

“Mind your fuckin’ tongue,” I growled, grabbing her chin and forcing her to look at

me. “With me, there are rules. It’s the only thing that separates us from animals in the wild. You don’t exist outside the rules. It’s something you’ll have to learn if you’re going to survive being my wife.”

She jerked away from my grip, glaring daggers at me. “I’ve never minded my tongue in my fucking life,” she spat. “I speak my mind and do what I want, when I want. And I sure as shit won’t be on your fucking leash.”

A smile tugged at my lips despite my anger. Oh, how I was going to enjoy taming the wildflower. “That’s what you think, *mi amor*,” I murmured, running a finger along her baby-soft jawline. She tried to bite me, but I was too quick. “But you’ll learn.”

I stepped back, nodding to Javier. “Are we ready to leave?”

“Si, Jefe,” he replied, reaching for something in his pocket.

Demi’s eyes widened as she spotted the syringe. “What the fu—” Her protest was cut short as Javier jabbed the needle into her neck. Her long lashes fluttered, and her eyes rolled back as she went limp once more.

Ángel chuckled as he helped put the cover back over the cart. “She’s got quite a mouth on her, boss.”

I couldn’t keep the grin off my face as I gathered my things. “And I look forward to putting that mouth to good use.”

As we made our way out of the office, my mind was already racing with plans. Demi may have thought she could resist me, but she had no idea what she was up against. I’d waited too long and sacrificed too much to let this fiery spirited creature derail my ambitions.

By the time we reached my private elevator, I'd taken a few deep breaths and calmed myself down. I would make Demi Malone mine, body and soul. And through her, I'd crush her father and claim everything he held dear.

The elevator doors slid shut, carrying us down to the waiting car. I felt a thrill of anticipation. The real game was just beginning—and I intended to win, no matter the cost.

The elevator dinged softly as it reached the ground floor. I stepped out first, my polished shoes clicking against the marble as I led the way through the deserted lobby. The overnight security guard nodded respectfully as we passed, averting his eyes from the covered cart Javier pushed behind me.

Smart man. In my world, curiosity could be a death sentence.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Outside, the warm air wisped past my face. The city stretched out before us, a glittering labyrinth of spice and culture. My kingdom, though few refused to acknowledge it. I inhaled deeply, savoring the scent of power and possibility.

“The car’s ready, Jefe,” Ángel murmured, gesturing to the waiting black SUV.

I nodded, watching as Javier carefully maneuvered the cart to the vehicle. “Gentle with our guest,” I reminded him. “I want her unharmed.”

As they loaded Demi into the vehicle, I allowed myself a moment of reflection. The beauty had become the key player of all my plans. She was crucial to expanding my empire, crushing my rivals, and cementing my power once and for all. And yet... there was something about her defiance that stirred something deeper—a challenge I hadn’t faced in years. It was intriguing, to say the least.

I shook off the thought. As much money as I had, sentiment was a luxury I couldn’t afford. Not when I was so close to everything I’d fought for.

“We’re set, boss,” Ángel called out.

I slid into the back seat, my eyes immediately drawn to Demi’s unconscious form. Even in sleep, the stubborn set to her jaw made me want to smile. She wouldn’t be easily tamed and wouldn’t break easily, but that was half the fun.

I’ve always enjoyed a challenge.

As the car pulled away from the curb, I allowed myself a rare moment of anticipation.

Just by looking at her, I knew the next few days would be very interesting.

I settled back into the plush leather seat and my eyes fixed on Demi's beautiful face as we glided through the streets. The morning sunlight flickered across her smooth brown skin, casting shadows that danced over her delicate features.

I adjusted my grip on Demi, her head lolling against my chest. "Have the jet prepared," I ordered, staring at Demi. "We leave for Cabo within the hour."

Demi

I jolted awake with a sharp gasp, my senses immediately on high alert. The gentle hum of engines surrounded me, and the subtle vibration beneath my body told me I was no longer heaped inside a cart. I was moving. Flying.

My ears popped as my eyes widened, and I found myself staring at a sleek, cream-colored ceiling. The air smelled of leather and expensive cologne. I blinked rapidly, trying to clear the fog from my mind as I pushed myself up on my weak elbows. My eyes pinged near and far, from the half-empty bottle of dark tequila next to a deck of cards on the edge of the bar to the opened mahogany humidor with silk lining on a table next to my seat.

"Welcome back to the land of the living."

That voice . . . deep, accented, and dripping with amusement. I whipped my head to the side, my black hair tumbling over my shoulders, and there he was, that model-looking mothafucka. Ozias "El Diablo" Rivera, lounging in a plush leather seat across from me, looking every bit the dangerous menace I knew him to be through rumors and now, firsthand.

Even seated, his confident posture eluded to a tall, athletic build. His brown skin was

a warm, sun-kissed bronze, hinting at his Hispanic heritage. His dark, low curls were freshly styled with a tapered fade around his ears and nape, adding to his polished, king-like appearance. His eyes were an enchanting shade of deep cocoa brown, and the well-defined brows that framed them and the thick beard that covered his jawline only added to his overall sex appeal.

Dressed in a tailored black suit, the smell of designer labels and money practically emitted off of him. I'd been in the room with millionaires before. I knew the aroma well.

"You," I spat out, my voice hoarse from disuse. "What the hell is going on?"

Ozias's dark brown eyes glittered with amusement as he took a sip from a crystal tumbler filled with amber liquid. "I thought that would be obvious by now, Demi. We're taking a little trip."

I struggled to sit up fully, my limbs feeling sluggish and uncooperative. As I did, I took in my surroundings. We were in what appeared to be a luxurious private jet, all polished wood and gleaming metal. The windows showed nothing but endless blue sky and wisps of clouds.

"A trip?" I echoed, my thoughts scattered. "Where? And why the fuck am I here?"

Ozias set his glass down on a small table beside him, his movements fluid and controlled. "All in good time, mi amor. How are you feeling?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, anger bubbling up inside me. "How am I feeling? I feel like I've been drugged and kidnapped by a fucking psychopath who had my best friend and her family murdered for no good reason. How the fuck do you think I'm feeling?"

He had the audacity to chuckle when he smiled, the sound low and rich. His smile was magnetic, revealing a grid of perfect white teeth that lit up his ruggedly handsome features. It was one of those smiles that could've easily won over any woman he encountered. Any woman except me.

“Feisty as ever, I see. Good. I was worried the sedative might've dulled that razor-sharp tongue of yours.”

“Sedative?” I repeated, my hand flying to my neck, where I suddenly remembered feeling a sharp prick. “You mothafucka. You drugged me!”

“A necessary precaution,” Ozias responded, his tone maddeningly calm. “You’ve proven quite . . . resourceful in the past. I couldn’t risk you causing a scene.”

I clenched my fists, fighting the urge to lunge across the cabin and strangle him with my bare hands. “My. Father. Will—”

“Your father,” Ozias interrupted smoothly, “isn’t going to do a fuckin’ thing. At least, not for now.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

A chill ran down my spine at his words, but I refused to let him see me sweat. Instead, I forced a smirk onto my face. “You clearly don’t know my father very well if you think he’s just going to sit back and let you get away with this.”

Ozias leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. The movement caused his tailored shirt to stretch across his broad shoulders and defined muscles, and I hated myself for noticing. “Oh, I know Cyrus Malone quite well, *mi amor*. Perhaps better than you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” I demanded to know as my heartbeats per minute doubled.

He shrugged as another small, infuriating smile played at the corners of his mouth. “It means your father and I have an . . . understanding.”

I scoffed while crossing my arms over my chest. “Right. Because my father would be over the moon with his only daughter being kidnapped by a delusional Mexican cartel boss. I call bullshit, Ozias.”

“Believe whatever you want,” he said, leaning back in his seat. “But the fact remains, you’re here, and you’re not going anywhere.”

I glanced around the cabin, looking for anything I could use as a weapon. My eyes landed on a bottle of champagne chilling in an ice bucket nearby. If I could just reach it . . .

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” he warned, his voice suddenly hard as stone, as if he could

hear my thoughts. I froze, realizing he'd been watching my every move. "If you ran away and I had to kill you, I'd be heartbroken, Demi. It would make our two-hour journey so much less pleasant."

"Our journey to where exactly?" I asked, fishing for intel. "You still haven't told me where we're going."

Ozias's eyes softened slightly, and for a moment, I caught a glimpse of something behind his carefully constructed facade. Weariness? Regret? But it vanished in an instant, replaced by his mask of cool indifference.

"Cabo San Lucas, of course," he replied simply. "My home."

The words hit me like a Mack truck. Cabo. Thousands of miles away from Cancun and even further from Chicago, from my family, from everything I knew. I struggled to keep my panic at bay, reminding myself that I was Demi Malone. I'd faced down rival gangsters and corrupt politicians. I could handle this. Him. Couldn't I?

My brows snapped together. "And what makes you think I'm just going to go along with this little half-baked plan of yours?" I challenged, raising a questioning brow.

Ozias's full lips quirked up in a partial smile that radiated confidence. "Because, mi amor, you don't have a fuckin' choice."

I belted out a harsh laugh. "There's always a choice, Ozias. And I choose to tell you to go to fuckin' hell where you belong!"

Instead of getting angry, he looked almost impressed. "Such fire. It's one of the things I'm starting to admire most about you, you know."

"Save it," I snapped. "I'm not interested in your admiration or anything else you have

to offer.”

He tilted his head, studying me intently. “You’re not the least bit curious about the big, bad El Diablo?” Ozias teased, but there was an edge to his voice.

“I know everything I need to know about you,” I answered carefully. “Every time I think about the loss of my best friend, I’ll have a chilling reminder of who you really are.”

Something flashed in Ozias’s eyes—maybe hurt or regret—but it was gone before I could be sure. “And who am I, Miss Malone? Please, enlighten me.”

I leaned forward, meeting his icy gaze head-on. “You’re a fucking monster. A killer. An unhinged menace to fuckin’ society who gets off on power and control.”

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. The only sound was the steady thrum of the jet engines. Then, slowly, Ozias rose from his seat and crossed over to where I was seated. I tensed immediately, ready to defend myself if necessary, but he simply crouched down in front of me, his face level with mine.

“You’re right about one thing,” he said softly. “I am a killer. I’ve done things that would make you never want to close your eyes again for the rest of your life. But the rest of that shit? You’re wrong about.”

I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the way my heart bucked against its reins. With his recipe of good looks, charm, and apparent wealth, Ozias was the epitome of a modern-day melanated prince charming with a dash of Sazón.

“Oh? Now I guess it’s your turn to enlighten me,” I said finally.

Ozias reached out, brushing a stray curl away from my face. I flinched at the contact,

but I didn't pull away. "I care about more than you know, Demi. That's why we're here. That's why I had to take you."

"What are you talking about?" I whispered, hating how breathless I sounded in his presence.

He stood abruptly, turning away from me. "Get some rest. We'll be landing in about another hour or so, and you'll need your strength."

"Ozias," I called out as he started to walk away. "Tell me the truth. Why am I really here?"

He paused at the door to what I assumed was a bedroom, his hand on the handle. For a moment, I thought he was going to ignore me. But then he turned, and the look in his eyes made my breath catch in my throat.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“Because you’re the only one who can save thousands from unnecessary bloodshed. I might be a monster in your eyes, but I will never unnecessarily sacrifice my people.”

I slumped back in my seat, my mind whirling with questions. I closed my eyes, trying to make sense of it all, but exhaustion and grief quickly crept up on me again. Despite my best efforts to stay alert, I felt myself drifting off.

As I slipped into unconsciousness, one thought echoed in my mind: Whatever game Ozias was playing, I refused to be just another pawn. I was Demi Malone, and I would find a way out of the dirt I’d been buried under. I had to. With that thought, I snapped my eyes open, refusing to succumb to the fatigue or the sorrow plaguing my heart. Ozias’s words echoed in my mind, stoking a fire of defiance within me.

“Nice try, Ozias,” I called out to him, my voice dripping with sarcasm. “But if you think I’m buying that bullshit you’re selling, you’re sorely mistaken.”

He emerged from the room, his dark eyes locking onto mine. The intensity of his brooding gaze sent an involuntary shiver down my spine, a mix of fear and . . . something else I didn’t want to name.

“You think I’m lying to you, Demi?” he queried as he stalked toward me, each step deliberate and predatory.

I forced myself to hold his gaze, chin lifted in defiance. “I think you’re full of shit. You’re a cartel boss, not some savior to your people.”

A cold smile played at the corners of his mouth. “And you’re the daughter of a

Chicago kingpin. So, unless you popped out of Mother Teresa's pussy, I don't think you're the expert on who needs saving."

His words struck a nerve, and I felt my temper flaring. "I know enough to recognize a manipulative psychopath when I see one."

Ozias chuckled, and the sound was devoid of humor. He leaned in close, his breath hot against my ear. "Oh, little fire. You have no idea the type of heat you're dealing with."

I tried to suppress the shudder that ran through me at his proximity, but I knew he felt it. Damn him. I hated how my body betrayed me, how a part of me responded to his dangerous allure even as my mind screamed in protest.

"Then educate me," I dared, meeting his gaze head-on. "What exactly am I dealing with, Ozias?"

He pulled back slightly, studying me with those intense brown eyes and long, sweeping lashes. For a moment, I thought I saw a flicker of vulnerability before it was masked by his natural cold amusement.

"You're dealing with a man who has more enemies than friends, Demi. A man who's been betrayed by those he trusted most," he explained, his voice soft, but there was an edge to it that spoke of barely contained rage. "And us, our union benefits us both greatly. It benefits our survival."

I scoffed, even as a part of me wondered at the sincerity in his tone. "And why the hell should I care about your survival?"

Ozias's large, tatted hand came up, fingers ghosting along my jawline. I hated myself for leaning into his touch, even as I told myself it was just to throw him off guard.

“Because, my fierce little fireball, your survival depends on it too. You have no idea how many men want you just to kill you. How they want to get under your father’s skin by killing his only heir, ending his line in the process and changing the order of succession.”

The words sent a chill through me, and I felt my heart rate quicken. Anger, fear, and a traitorous spark of excitement warred within me. I wanted to slap his hand away, to scream at him for daring to fucking touch me. But another part of me, a part I was desperately trying to ignore, wanted to lean in closer.

I settled for glaring at him, mustering all the contempt I could. “You’re clinically insane if you think I’d ever help you.”

Ozias responded with another dark and rich laugh that sent unwelcome shivers through me. “We’ll see, Demi. We’ll see.”

I narrowed my eyes, studying Ozias’s face for any sign of deception. The intensity in his gaze unnerved me, but I refused to let it show. Instead, I forced myself to focus on the situation at hand.

“You’re cocky as hell.”

“I see it as healthy arrogance.”

I lifted my chin rebelliously while rolling my eyes. “My father is going to come for me. Like you said, I’m his only child. He’d never abandon me.”

Ozias belted out another low and humorless laugh. “Ah, the naivety of youth. You’d be surprised what even the most devoted fathers are capable of when the stakes are high enough.”

His words sent a chilling ripple through me, but I pushed the doubt aside. I knew my father. I knew what he was capable of. And I knew he wouldn't stop until he found me.

"You're wrong," I insisted, more to convince myself than him. "He'll find me. It's only a matter of time."

As I said the words, a comforting thought occurred to me—the tracker. Of course. My father, ever paranoid, had insisted on it years ago. A tiny chip embedded just below my nape. I protested at the time, but it could've been my last chance at salvation.

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. Ozias noticed, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. "Something amusing, Demi?"

I trained my features into neutrality. "Just imagining how satisfying it will be to watch my father's men drag you away in chains."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Ozias's laugh was genuine this time. "Oh,mi amor. The delusional bubble you live in is truly captivating. But I'm afraid you're in for a rude awakening. If your father comes for me, I'm chopping him down. No question."

I said nothing, content in my secret knowledge.Let him think he's won. Let him believe he has the upper hand. My father will find me, and when he does, El Diablo will learn what true power looks like.

All I had to do was bid my time and play along until rescue came. I could do that. I was a Malone, after all. Deception was in my blood. The tension in the cabin thickened as Ozias's dark orbs bore into mine. I refused to back down, meeting his gaze with boldness burning in my chest.

"How much longer did you say we have until we land?" I inquired innocently.

"About another hour or so. Why?"

My eyes pinged around the enclosed space before landing on a box of playing cards. "You play poker?"I asked, recalling the deck of cards I'd spotted earlier.

He shrugged. "It's been a minute, but yeah. I do. You?"

"Yes. Play me. No chips. No cash. But if I win, when we land, I'm a free woman."

"And if I win?"

I paused, unwilling to automatically accept defeat. "You tell me."

“I’ll tell you after I win,” he boasted.

I scoffed. “We’ll see about that.”

The tension in the air was thick as Ozias and I sat across from one another. I wasn’t even sure if I was in the right frame of mind to play at my best, but I didn’t care. My freedom was on the line. My bones crackled with anticipation, knowing the stakes were higher than ever.

Ozias shuffled the card deck with ease. I watched him closely, convinced I’d find his tell, and when I did, it would be all over for him.

“Ready to lose?” he inquired, right eyebrow arched toward his crisp hairline.

“You’re too cocky for your own good, y’know that?”

“You’re only mad because when you look at me, you see the parts of yourself you try to pretend aren’t there,” he replied before delivering a knowing smirk. “You like the darkness, Demi. I bet it makes that pussy drip, doesn’t it?”

My heart fluttered as I picked up the two cards he dealt. He was trying to throw me off my game. I couldn’t let him get inside my head.

“You know,” I said, my voice dripping with venom as I tried my best to turn the tables, “I don’t understand why my father would ever agree to let me marry a monster like you in the first place.”

Ozias’s expression hardened, a muscle ticking in his jaw. For a moment, I thought I’d struck a nerve, but then his lips curled into a smirk. “You love that term, monster. Tell me, Demi, what makes a monster? Is it the blood on one’s hands? The power they wield? Or perhaps it’s the fear they instill in others?”

I swallowed hard, fidgeting with the nape of my neck, an anxious habit I'd picked up over the years as I fought the urge to shrink back into my seat. "All of the above," I retorted.

Ozias nodded slowly as if considering my words. "Then, by your definition, your father is as much a monster as I am. Yet you don't seem to view him that way."

His words hit me like a slap. I parted my lips to argue my point, but he continued before I could speak.

"The truth is, Demi, I have more foes than friends these days. Your father included." He leaned back, his gaze never leaving mine. "This arrangement . . . it's not about love or even alliance. It's about survival, whether you choose to believe it or not."

I blinked, caught by surprise by the unexpected vulnerability in his tone. "Survival?" I probed, listening more. "This is the second time you've mentioned that now."

"In our world, you're either predator or prey," Ozias explained as his left eyebrow twitched. "I've made choices—some I regret, others I'd do again—but they've all led me here. To a point where I need your father as much as he needs me."

I struggled to process the information. Is he manipulating me, or is there truth in his words? The calculating part of me wanted to dismiss it as a ploy, but something in his eyes made me hesitate.

"I don't believe you," I protested, but there was less conviction in my tone than before.

Ozias shrugged as a ghost of a smile played on his lips. "You don't have to. But consider this—in a world full of monsters, sometimes the wisest choice is to align yourself with the devil you know."

I narrowed my eyes, studying his handsome face for any sign of deception. “You’re lying,” I declared, but the words came out less certain than I intended.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“I’m not going to mistreat you, Demi,” Ozias said softly, his voice rough with an emotion I couldn’t quite place. “My intentions with you are see-through,” he confirmed, reaching underneath the table to grip my left thigh.

My limbs instantly froze. With one simple touch, Ozias had the power to make my body come alive with desire. The sincerity in his tone caught me off guard. I felt my walls breaking down, and a surge of anger and lust washed over me. How dare he try to manipulate me like this? I won’t fall for his act.

“Bullshit,” I hissed, my hands clenching my cards.

“Things are simple with me. If you wanna die, run. If you wanna live, stay with me where you’re safe.”

“Safe? How could I ever be safe with you? You murdered my friend! I’ll never like you, respect you, let alone love you.”

“I don’t care if you don’t love me, princessa. I’ll cut a hole in your heart and live in it if I fucking have to. One way or another, you’ll be mine,” he declared, words searing into my brain as his hand slipped between my thighs.

My breath hitched as I swatted his hand away. “Keep your fucking hands off me!”

The game progressed alongside our conversation, each card flip more intense than the last. That was when I saw it again—a subtle twitch of his left eyebrow. He was bluffing. I couldn’t hold back my confident smirk. I had the game in the bag.

Finally, it was time for the showdown. The space was silent enough to hear a pin drop as we prepared to reveal our cards. I was sure I'd caught him bluffing, and my confidence had my pulse racing as I prepared to claim my triumph over him and my freedom.

"Ladies first," Ozias insisted.

"Straight flush," I confirmed, revealing my hand of sequenced diamonds to him. "Looks like I win."

Ozias's eyes danced with amusement as he slowly laid out his hand one by one, revealing an ace, king, queen, jack, and ten of hearts. "Better luck next time. Papi's got a royal flush."

My mouth gaped open in disbelief. "Wait. What?" I asked as frustration clouded my features. I thought I knew him well, but clearly, I was wrong. I hated how he was able to knock me off my square effortlessly. "I-I can't believe it," I mumbled, voice dragging with defeat.

He leaned in closer. "You played a good game. Maybe next time, I'll let you be the one on top."

I scoffed as I pushed myself up from my seat, hating the fact that deep down, I'd found a newfound respect for his poker skills and charm. The world tilted suddenly, and I stumbled. My legs felt like jelly beneath me, and I grabbed onto the nearest surface to steady myself.

Ozias's mocking laugh filled the cabin. "You should sit back down, mi amor. You're in no condition to be up and about."

I gritted my teeth as fury coursed through my veins. "Don't fucking tell me what to

do,” I growled, taking another unsteady step.

My foot caught onto something—the edge of the seat maybe—and before I had sense enough to catch myself, I was seconds from hitting the ground. The floor rushed up to meet me, but his strong arms caught me before I collided.

A light chuckle reverberated through his chest as he held me against him to still my movements. “I know about the tracking chip your father implanted in you.”

My breath hitched as I froze. “W-what? You knew about the chip this entire time?”

“Relax. Of course, I knew. The sedative you were given before our flight blocks the signal. It’s untraceable now.”

My eyes widened in surprise, and a chilling mix of confusion and fear washed over me. The longer I was in his presence the more I realized I knew nothing about him and he seemed to know everything about me. The last thing I expected was for him to know about the tracking chip, let alone take steps to deactivate it without my knowledge. How long had he been watching me? How much did he know?

“I-I don’t understand.”

“I told you; the medication is still in your system. You should really listen when I give you advice,” he insisted, his breath hot against my ear. “Your father isn’t coming. At least not yet. He’s building an army against me first. But you’re all the armor I need. For now, you don’t have to worry about being monitored by anyone but me. And I don’t require a chip, bella.”

I struggled weakly in his grip, hating how my body betrayed me. Whenever he was too close, his touch sent tingles across my skin, and I couldn’t tell if it was from revulsion or something more sensual. The game may have been over, but there was

something between us that was only growing stronger.

Don't listen to him.

Don't trust a single fucking word that comes out of his slick-ass mouth.

But as he helped me back to my seat, his hands surprisingly gentle, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that there may have been more to the man they called El Diablo than what met the eye. And that terrified me more than any threat he could ever make.

Ozias

The sleek, black, bulletproof SUV glided to a stop, kicking up a cloud of dust that swirled around us like a veil. I stepped out first, my boots crunching on the gravel driveway as I surveyed my kingdom. The expansive hacienda rose before us, white stucco walls gleaming in the harsh Mexican sun. Palm trees swayed lazily in the dry breeze, their branches whispering secrets only I could hear.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

I placed my black cowboy hat on my head and turned back to the vehicle, watching as Demi emerged. Her obsidian black curls caught the sunlight, showing off its luster. Even after our long journey, she held herself with a defiant grace that equally infuriated and intrigued me.

“Welcome to your new home,mi amor,” I announced, gesturing grandly at the compound.

Demi’s wide brown eyes narrowed as she took in her surroundings. “This isn’t my home, Ozias. It’s my prison.”

I chuckled, amused by her stubbornness. “A golden cage, perhaps. But I assure you, it’s far more comfortable than the alternative.”

“Which is?”

“A coffin,” I answered bluntly.

She didn’t respond, but I noticed the tension in her shoulders, the way her hands clenched into fists at her sides.Good. Let her simmer in that anger. It will make breaking her all the more sweeter.

I strode toward the main entrance, not bothering to check if she was following. She had no choice but to come along, after all. The heavy wooden doors swung open at my approach, revealing the cool, shadowy interior.

“This way,” I called out over my shoulder, leading her through the grand foyer. My

footsteps echoed on the polished tile floors, a steady rhythm punctuated by the softer sound of Demi's bare feet.

I felt her gaze burning into my back as we walked. Is she studying me, looking for weaknesses? Or is she admiring the way my tailored suit hugs my athletic frame? Either way, I allowed myself a slight smirk. She could look all she wanted. She'd learn soon enough that I had no weaknesses for her to exploit.

We entered the main living area, a spacious room with high ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a breathtaking view of the neighboring mountains. I paused, giving Demi a moment to take it all in.

"Like what you see?" I inquired, turning to face her.

She lifted her chin, defiance flashing in her brown orbs. "It's just a house, Ozias. Bricks and mortar will never impress me."

I stepped closer, knowingly invading her personal space. She held her ground, refusing to back down. "And what impresses you, Demi? Power? Wealth? A big dick? I have all three in abundance."

"Compassion," she retorted. "Kindness. Things you clearly don't know a damn thing about."

She might've acted like she wasn't attracted to power, but one look at the woman said otherwise. Her words should've angered me, but instead, I found myself laughing. She was like a feisty Chihuahua in my eyes—tiny with an overcompensating bark.

"Compassion and kindness are luxuries I can't afford in my world. They're weaknesses that get you killed."

Demi's expression softened for a moment, then it was gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced by her natural scornful expression.

I turned away, moving toward the bar tucked into one corner of the room. "Drink?" I offered, pouring myself a generous measure of top-shelf tequila.

"No, thank you," she replied stiffly.

I shrugged, knocking back my own drink in one smooth motion. The alcohol burned pleasantly as it slid down my throat, a familiar warmth spreading through my chest.

"You should relax, Demi," I encouraged, setting the empty glass down with a soft clink. "This is your home now, whether you like it or not. You might as well get comfortable."

She crossed her arms, her slim-thick figure accentuated by the defensive posture. "And how long do you plan on keeping me here? A few days? Or will I need a forwarding address?"

I moved closer again, circling her like a shark in bloody water. "That depends entirely on you, mi amor. We'll be staying here for at least the next week. After that . . ." I let my voice trail off, allowing the questions to hang in the air between us.

There was a fair amount of distance between us, but I could still see she was shaking. Demi's orbs widened slightly, a flicker of fear breaking through her tough exterior. Good. She should be afraid. I liked it. I shouldn't have, but I did. Fear was a powerful motivator in a relationship, and I intended to use every tool at my disposal to bend her to my will. Fear and loyalty would mean our marriage was a relatively happy one.

I watched as she moved demurely toward me. Her eyes were glued to her feet. She

was everything I had been told she would be. Everything I'd witnessed in the photos and videos before we met. Demi Malone was the perfect bride for a man like me. But nothing could have prepared me for how beautiful she was in person.

And she was all mine. Well almost. All we had to do was say our vows in front of a priest, and she would be mine forever.

“Demi.”

She lifted her head so sharply that I was afraid she would give herself whiplash. Her eyes widened as she stared straight at me. Then she dropped her head again, staring at her bare feet. “El Diablo,” she answered sarcastically.

“Ozias.”

She stiffened. “Pardon me?”

“You know my name is Ozias. I think it is important that you say it, don’t you? After all, you will be my wife.”

“What do you want from me, Ozias?” she whispered.

I reached out, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. She flinched at the contact but didn’t pull away—progress, however small.

“I want everything, Demi,” I muttered, my fingers trailing down the side of her neck. “Your body, your mind, your loyalty. I want you to be mine in every fuckin’ way.”

She gulped, her pulse racing beneath my touch. “And if I say no?”

I stepped back, letting my hand fall away. “Then you’ll learn just how ruthless I can be. Your father may have sheltered you from the true brutality of our world, but I won’t be so kind.”

Demi’s face hardened, her earlier vulnerability replaced by unyielding determination. “My father didn’t shelter me from anything. I’ve seen what men like you are capable of.”

“Men like me?” I repeated, raising an eyebrow. “And what kind of man do you think I am? Because a few minutes ago, I was a monster.”

She didn’t hesitate. “I already told you. A killer. Someone who takes what he wants

without regard for anyone or anything else.”

Her words should’ve stung, but instead, they filled me with a stubborn sense of pride. Yes, I am all those things and more. I’d cultivated that reputation carefully, using fear and violence to carve out my place in this unforgiving world.

Pride flooded my veins. An icy kind of arrogance that made me strangely calm. “You’re not wrong,” I admitted, pouring myself another drink. “But you’re not entirely right, either. There’s more to me than you know, Demi. And you’ll have plenty of time to discover that for yourself.”

She scoffed, tossing her hair over one shoulder. “I’m not interested in getting to know you, Ozias. I just want to go home.”

I set my glass down harder than necessary, the sharp sound making her jump. “How many times do I have to tell you this is your home now? The sooner you accept that, the easier things will be for both of us.”

Demi’s eyes flashed a dangerous glare. “I will never accept this. You can keep me here, force me to stay, but you can’t make me want it.”

I closed the distance between us in two quick strides, gripping her upper arms tightly. She gasped, trying to pull away, but I held her firmly in place.

“I don’t need you to fuckin’ want it,” I growled as I lowered my face to her sweet-smelling hair. I breathed in the scent of her. She smelled just like she looked—deadly and pure. “I just need you to obey. You’re mine now, Demi. The quicker you understand that, the better off you’ll be.”

For a moment, we stood there, locked in a soundless battle of wills. I saw the conflict raging in her eyes—defiance warring with fear, anger with a reluctant curiosity.

Finally, she tore her eyes away, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

I released her before taking a step back. “Come. I’ll show you to your room.”

Without waiting for a response, I turned and headed toward the sweeping staircase that led to the upper floors. Demi followed silently, her earlier fire temporarily extinguished.

As we climbed the stairs, I found my thoughts drifting to the future. How long would it take to break through her defenses? To mold her into the perfect partner, both in business and in the bedroom? The challenge excited me in a way I hadn’t felt in years, maybe ever.

We reached the second floor, and I led her down a long hallway lined with thick wooden doors. I stopped in front of one near the end, pushing it open to reveal a luxurious suite.

“This will be your room,” I informed her, gesturing for her to enter.

Demi stepped inside cautiously, her eyes widening as she soaked in the luxury furnishings. A massive four-poster bed dominated one wall, draped in rich fabrics that shimmered in the late afternoon light. A sitting area with plush armchairs and a small writing desk occupied another corner while floor-to-ceiling windows offered a stunning view of the gardens below.

“It’s . . . beautiful,” she admitted stingily, running her hand along the silky bedspread.

I leaned against the doorframe, watching her explore. “Only the best for you. I meant what I said when I told you this is your home. I want you to be comfortable here.”

Demi turned to face me, her earlier fire rekindling. “Comfort is relative, Ozias. A

golden cage is still a fucking cage.”

I pushed off from the doorframe, moving further into the room. “True. But it’s up to you whether this becomes a prison or a paradise. Your attitude will determine how you’re treated here.”

She lifted her chin rebelliously. “And if I choose to fight you every step of the way?”

I stared down at her, shaking my head softly as I reached out and closed my hand around her breast. I squeezed harder than I needed to, cupping the jiggly, round mound in my hand as my thumb glided over her nipple. I wouldn’t raise my voice at her. I had never raised my voice in my life. It was part of the reason people feared me so much. I always kept my calm.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

A whimper escaped her lips as she stumbled back. My arm whipped out, capturing her around the waist and drawing her to me. As I was about to respond further to Demi's defiant dare, rapid footsteps approached from the hallway. Mateo appeared in the doorway, his brown face flushed with excitement.

"Jefe," he called out, slightly out of breath. "I have news about the shipments in Sinaloa."

I held up a hand, silencing him momentarily. "Un momento, Mateo." Turning back to Demi, I said, "We'll continue this discussion in a minute, mi amor. Make yourself comfortable or don't."

She rolled her eyes but said nothing as I stepped out into the hallway with Mateo.

"What's the update?" I queried, keeping my voice low.

Mateo grinned, his dark eyes gleaming. "It's good news, boss. I was able to pay off a few workers at customs. Our product is in motion as we speak."

A surge of satisfaction coursed through me. The shipment was crucial for maintaining our stronghold in the region. I clapped Mateo on the shoulder, squeezing it firmly. "Excellent work, amigo. This will put us ahead of schedule."

"Gracias, Jefe," Mateo boasted, clearly pleased by the praise. "I'll keep you updated on its progress."

I nodded. "Do that, and make sure our men are in place for the distribution. We can't

afford any more issues.”

As Mateo hurried off to carry out my orders, I turned back to Demi’s room. I found her standing by the window with her arms crossed tightly over her chest as the sunlight caught her glossy black curls.

“Back so soon?” she asked, her tone carefully neutral.

I studied her for a moment, noting the tension in her shoulders and the way she refused to meet my gaze. “Why so damn silent all of a sudden? You had plenty to say earlier.”

Demi turned to face me, her brown eyes narrowing with suspicion. “I’m just . . . surprised, I suppose.”

“About?” I pressed, moving closer.

She hesitated, then said, “The way you were with your man just now. Commending him, giving him kudos . . .” She let her voice drift off before a bitter laugh escaped her lips. “My father would never do anything like that.”

I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by the glimpse into her family dynamics. “No? And how does your father treat his men?”

Demi’s smooth jaw tightened. “Like dogs,” she answered. “Only to be kicked when they fail and ignored when they succeed. He believes fear is the only way to ensure loyalty.”

I considered her words carefully. While fear certainly had its place in our world, I’d always believed that a combination of respect and reward yielded better results. “And you disagree with his methods?”

She shrugged, turning back to the window. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I’m just a pawn in his game, same as I am in yours.”

Her words stirred something in me—anger, yes, but also a strange desire to prove her wrong. I stepped closer, close enough to smell the faint scent of her perfume. “You’re no pawn, Demi. You’re the queen on this chessboard, whether you like it or not. And I’m not your father. I’m nothing like him,” I confirmed.

Her neck twisted, and her hair cascaded down one side of her chest as she faced me. There was a challenge in her eyes that made my blood simmer.

“Oh really?” she challenged, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “And how’s that, Ozias?”

I closed the distance between us, my eyes never leaving hers. “I’m a better leader,” I stated plainly. “That’s why people wanna see me dead.”

A scoff escaped her lips, and for a moment, I caught a spark of fire that reeled me into her in the first place. “No,” she said, her voice thick with disdain. “They wanna kill you because you’re brutal and ruthless.”

Her words hung in the air between us, and I couldn’t help the smirk that spread across my face. She meant it as an insult, but to my ears, it was the highest form of compliment.

“Someone has to be, *mi amor*,” I murmured, reaching out to brush away a stray eyelash from her cheek. She flinched at my touch but didn’t pull away. “In this world, brutality and ruthlessness are the only things keeping us alive.”

Demi’s eyes narrowed, a mix of confusion and defiance swirling in their depths. “And what about kindness? What about compassion?”

I let out a dark chuckle. “I already told you kindness gets you killed in this business, and compassion is a luxury we can’t afford.”

As I said the words, I couldn’t help but think of all the times my own compassion had nearly been my downfall. The faces of those I’d lost flashed through my mind, a grim reminder of the cost of weakness in the cartel.

Demi must’ve seen something in my expression because her own softened slightly. “Is that really what you believe?” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

I considered my answer carefully before blessing her with a response. Part of me wanted to maintain the facade, to be the monster she clearly thought I was. But something about her vulnerability at that moment compelled me to be honest.

“It’s what I’ve had to believe to survive,” I admitted, my tone curt with unexpected emotion. “To keep my people safe. To build something that will last.” I took a deep breath, bracing myself for what came next. The time for games was over. “But enough about my beliefs, Demi. Let’s talk about your future.”

Her shoulders tensed. “My future?”

“Yes, your future,” I repeated, my tone brooking no argument, “as my wife.”

Demi’s eyes widened as a mix of shock and anger flashed across her face. “Your wife? You can’t be serious.”

I stepped closer, invading her personal space. “I’m dead ass serious. You will be my wife, willing or not. It’s non-negotiable.”

She backed away, her breath coming faster. “You’re insane. I won’t do it. You can’t force me to marry you!”

“Can’t I?” I quizzed. “You were already promised to me, Demi. My rules. My expectations.”

For a moment, I saw fear in her eyes. It was quickly replaced by determination as she suddenly bolted for the door. I reacted instantly, my hand shooting out to grasp her

arm.

“Let go of me before I kick your—” she snarled but she never finished that sentence. The look I gave her put a stop to it.

She gave a yelp as I spun her around and pushed her back against the wood paneling of the wall. It was smooth. She wouldn’t get splinters, but it clearly knocked the wind out of her. Our faces were inches apart. Her chest heaved with exertion and anger. “I’m like your shadow, Demi. You can’t escape me. Just accept that shit.”

“I’ll never accept it,” she spat. “I’ll never be yours.”

Something inside me snapped at the sound of her words. Without thinking, I crashed my lips against hers in a bruising kiss. She stiffened at first, then, to my surprise, began to respond. Her lips softened against mine as a small moan escaped her throat when I slipped the tip of my tongue into her mouth.

When I finally pulled back, we were both breathless. I cupped her face in my hands, forcing her to meet my gaze. “You’re already mine, Demi. You belong to me now. All of you,” I confirmed.

I noticed the conflict raging in Demi’s eyes as she processed my words. Her chest heaved with each ragged breath, her warm brown skin flushed with a mix of anger and desire, perhaps? Whatever it was, I didn’t give a fuck. I reached out and roughly pulled her sports bra over her breasts. Instantly, she crossed her arms over her C-cup mounds. I caught her wrists, dragging her arms down.

“No.” I didn’t shout it, but she jumped like I had. “Don’t cover up, mi amor. Show off that beautiful body of yours when you’re around me.”

My eyes drifted down, feasting on her high breasts. Each one was topped with a

chocolate nipple that had hardened under my gaze. I rubbed my thumb over one of those hard points, drawing it up even harder.

“Please, El—I mean, Ozias. Not like this,” she whimpered.

The things I wanted to do to those breasts would do more than make her whimper. They would make her scream with both pleasure and pain, sounds I couldn’t wait to hear and record to memory.

“Why?” I pinched her nipple, and her little cry was music to my ears. “You’re as good as my wife already.”

I didn’t want to wait. My hands slipped around her body as I lifted her off her feet so I could move her where I needed her to be.

Fear filled her eyes. “Ozias, please.”

Lines pulled at the corners of my mouth. “I like it when you beg, Demi.”

I let my hand lazily travel down her body, over her round breasts and across her flat stomach. Soon, it wouldn’t be flat, though. I’d make it swell with my seed. A baby was the only thing that would stop her from running away from me.

“I’ll never be happy with you,” she snapped, her voice trembling with emotion. “Never.”

I leaned in close, my lips brushing her ear. “Your happiness isn’t my primary concern, *mi amor*. What matters is that you’ll be my wife.”

Demi’s eyes flashed with fury. Before I could react, her hand connected with my cheek in a stinging slap. The sound echoed throughout the room.

For a moment, I was stunned. Then, a dark chuckle escaped my throat as my dick pulsed. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

In one swift motion, I pinned my body against hers. “If you want to be treated like a possession, then that’s exactly what you’ll get,” I growled before removing my hat and tossing it to the side.

Demi struggled against me, but it was useless. I was stronger, and we both knew it. “Stop it!” she cried out, but there was a quiver when she spoke that told me everything I needed to know.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

I didn't stop until she was naked before me. Her satiny, smooth skin glowed against my touch. My gaze raked over her curves, appreciating every inch, every peak, and every valley her physique had to offer.

"This," I said, twisting her nipple hard enough to make her gasp, "is mine."

My hand traveled lower, between her thighs. I cupped her pussy and squeezed her clit, eliciting a strangled moan from her soft lips. "This is mine."

Demi reached for my wrist to try and pull my hand away. She was frantic, eyes half-crazed with desire and rebellion. Her brown eyes were clouded with a mixture of passion and defiance, a combination that only fueled my hunger for her. Her head fell back against the wall as she squeezed her eyes shut. I felt her body betraying her, responding to my touch despite her protests.

A tear slipped down her cheek as she tried to tug my hand away before I could slip two fingers inside her, pumping slowly. "And this pussy? It's mine too."

I sensed her body's response, the way she shivered under my touch, her breath coming in short, ragged gasps.

"See?" I whispered against her ear, my fingers still working deep inside her. "You like that. You like what I do to you. This pussy is too damn wet to even deny it."

Demi bit her lip, trying to stifle a moan. "I . . . I fucking hate you," she managed to say, but her body arched into my touch, deceiving her words.

I chuckled darkly. “You can hate me all you want. Don’t you know your body belongs to me? I’ll make you surrender to this dick,mi amor. I won’t stop until I have you screaming my name.”

Without warning, I lifted her higher, pinning her against the wall with my hips. She intuitively wrapped her legs around my waist, and I growled with approval.

“Tell me you want this,” I demanded, my voice husky with need.

For a moment, she hesitated, her pride warring with her desire. Then, almost gradually, she mutely nodded as more rage-filled tears rolled down her cheeks.

I tilted her chin up. “Say it,” I demanded as my lips drifted over her cheeks, catching up all of her tears. At the same time, I screwed my fingers inside of her. “I’m going to be your husband.” I ducked my face into the hollow of her throat and let my lips move across her skin. “The only one in your body.”

She purred. “Yes.”

“Yes.” I agreed as I nipped at her shoulder.

She cried out. Only this time, the pained sound was mixed with something else. Grinning, I strummed my thumb against her clit. She was so tight and wet that she seemed to grip my fingers with an iron-like hold.

Demi may have been reluctant, but she couldn’t deny her body’s reaction to my touch. She was just trying to be defiant to say she’d done it.

“Your pussy feels amazing,” I whispered. “Can you imagine how good it’ll feel when I push my dick deep inside you? I can’t wait to watch those beautiful fuckin’ eyes roll to the back of your head because it feels so good.”

To prove my point, I thrust my dick into her hip.

Demi's eyes shot open and widened into saucers. Her sexual awakening was essential to me. I wanted to push limits she didn't even know she had. I wanted to own her body and soul.

"I'm going to enjoy fucking the shit out of you, princessa," I conveyed as I ground against her, my voice turning rougher and rougher as the dirty images of what I wanted to do to her filled my mind. "Filling that pussy with my seed." My groan filled the air, and just under it, a tiny little moan from her lips.

"P-please d-don't stop," she begged.

"But not tonight," I concluded before slowly inching away and dropping my hands from her body.

She glared at me, eyes filled with something that I could only hope to understand one day. Lust was there, but so was anger. It made me smile on the inside. I knew exactly why she was angry, and it had nothing to do with me manhandling her body and everything to do with me not touching her more. My defiant bride-to-be had enjoyed me taking control of her just as much as I did.

I sucked my teeth. "Fuck it. Hands back on the wall."

Those big brown eyes ballooned again. "What?"

"We're both grown. I know you want it, so I'm going to take what's mine."

"But you just said . . ."

Even as she said the words, she moved back into her position.

I dropped to my knees and spread her pussy lips. Her pussy was pinker than Cam'ron's fur coat. I licked my lips, ready to eat her pussy like a mango. "I know what the fuck I said, but you look good enough to eat."

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

I dove into her pussy from behind and thrust my tongue into her as far as I could go. Demi was sweeter than a slice of Tres Leches. I knew it from the moment I first laid eyes on her. I could sense good pussy, and Demi's was Michelin star worthy. She moaned—an unrestrained little sound that made my bulge ache against my zipper.

“I’ma taste all you can feed me,mi amor,” I promised, rolling my tongue against her folds over and over again.

She rose to her tippy-toes and popped her ass against my face. I gripped her hips, winding my tongue over her gushing honeypot.

She moaned. “Oooh fuck. Don’t stop. Don’t you fuckin’ stop.”

“You gon’ save this sweet ass pussy for me,mi amor?”

From the way I had her ass shaking, squirming, and unable to string two words together, I knew I’d proven the point I’d set out to prove.

I smacked her ass before flicking her clit with the tip of my tongue. “You only cum for papi,mi amor?” I asked, sliding two fingers inside her.

She twisted her neck over her shoulder. Her eyes were slammed shut, and her forehead was glistening with sweat beads. She looked like Heaven on Earth. She reached back, landing her palm on the back of my head, mashing my curls.

“Fuck, yes, just like that,” she whimpered, legs shaking.

My tongue flicked up and down with reverence as I repented my sins into her folds. Her body was my church. My dirty, naughty church. My tongue darted in and out of her. She trembled, her thighs shivering. Her breathing was ragged, just like mine was.

“Please, please don’t stop.” The needy cry escaped her mouth in a sob, and for a second, I paused. But not for long.

“Yes, Demi.” My thumb found her clit and rubbed it hard. Her knees buckled, and I had to catch her around the waist to hold her in place.

I turned her around and lifted her up so that her legs were resting on my shoulders. She gripped my head with two hands while bucking against my face with every last drop of energy she had. I knew she was nearing her climax, and I was going to make sure she never forgot the feeling of my tongue fucking her.

“Oh fuck. I’m about to cum!”

“Fuck my face, mi amor. Cum for papi.”

I kept up the pressure, but with my free hand, I freed myself and fisted my growing erection up and down. I couldn’t help myself. Watching her, tasting her, and hearing her moans had me ready to turn my feature presentation into a short film. Soon, we would be married, but I didn’t want to wait. I wanted to know how good her pussy felt wrapped around my dick and how tightly she gripped me and how she sounded when she came.

“Oooh fuck. Fuck, Ozias! Fuck! I’m cumming! Don’t you fuckin’ waste it. I want you to get every drop!”

That was all the invitation I needed. I lapped up her love juices like a kitten to warm milk, allowing her to ride the wave of her orgasm all the way to the end. When her

thighs loosened around my neck, I lowered her, only letting her feet dust the ground for a second before I had her legs wrapped around my waist and her back against the wall.

I pulled my pants down lower and slowly dragged the tip of my dick down her creamy slit, coating myself in her wetness and pushing myself in with one hard brutal thrust.

I growled upon entering her waterpark. My eyes rolled back into my head as she clamped around me, and at the same time, my fingers on her clit pushed her over the edge. Her legs shook, and she screamed. A cry that was a perfect mix of pleasure and pain. Our connection was rough, primal, and echoing through the hallway. I didn't give a fuck who heard. I wanted to let everyone know I'd planted my flag and claimed her pussy as mine from that day forward.

"Who better than me?"

"Nobody."

"Louder.

"Nobody!" she squealed.

"Don't you fuckin' forget it," I said, pulling almost all the way out while gazing down at the cream that coated my dick and then slowly slid back inside. I loved watching her body take every inch of me. It was a beautiful fuckin' sight. She had me warring with myself, trying to hold back from spilling my seed inside her too quickly.

Demi's long red nails dug into my tattooed back, leaving marks I'd wear proudly. Her moans grew louder, more desperate, and I felt her wetness tightening around me.

I continued thrusting into her relentlessly, feeling the familiar heat building in my own body. But this wasn't just about satisfying my own desires. This was about showing Demi who was in control and who she belonged to. My hands roved over her back until I grabbed a handful of her dark hair and yanked it back so her back arched and her breasts were thrust out.

I leaned forward to capture her lips in a kiss, our tongues battling for dominance as our bodies moved together in perfect rhythm.

Demi moaned while roughly gripping my face with both hands. "I hate you." She gasped against my lips, but there was no persuasion behind her words.

"Then why do you feel so fuckin' good?" I growled back, my voice rough with lust.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

She didn't answer, too lost in the pleasure coursing through her body. And that was all the answer I needed. She may not have wanted to admit it now, but deep down, she knew we were meant to be together.

I increased the pace of my thrusts, and Demi arched against me with a cry of pure ecstasy, her body writhing. I buried all nine and a half inches of my dick deep inside her one last time before reaching my own peak and spilling inside her. We both collapsed against each other, panting and spent. Our bodies were slick with sweat as we clung to one another in the aftermath of our unplanned, passionate encounter.

A few minutes passed before either of us uttered a word. "Why did you do that?" Demi asked quietly, her voice still shaking with emotion.

"Because you needed to know that you belong to me," I replied honestly.

She pulled away from me then and looked me straight in the eye. "But I don't belong to you. I can't be owned," she answered firmly.

I sighed and ran a hand over my low curls, feeling a slight sense of defeat wash over me. She was right—no one could legally own another person.

"I'll never truly be yours," she whispered.

I smirked before pressing a gentle kiss to her lips. "We'll see about that. You know what, I changed my mind."

I swept Demi into my arms and carried her down the hallway, my hands curling her

naked body into my chest. She trembled slightly—whether from the chill in the air or the aftermath of our encounter, I wasn't sure. I felt a primal satisfaction seeing her like that—marked by me and vulnerable.

We reached a set of double doors at the end of the corridor. I pushed them open, revealing my private quarters. “This is where you'll be staying,” I informed her. “With me.”

Demi's eyes widened as she took in the room. The massive king bed dominated the space, draped in rich, dark fabrics. A wall of windows offered a breathtaking view of the Mexican countryside.

“Get comfortable,” I told her, setting her on the bed. “You'll need to rest before tomorrow.”

She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly seeming small. “I . . . I need clothes,” she muttered, refusing to meet my eyes.

I nodded, moving to a nearby console. “I'll have some things brought for you. Whatever you want, it's yours. I'll make sure you have it.”

There was a long pause before she answered barely above a whisper. “Is going back home to Chicago on the table? Because that's what I want.”

I raised an eyebrow, studying her naked body appreciatively. Demi was delectable from her head to her pretty pink toes. “How much will it take to make you want to stay? Ten bands? Twenty? A hundred? Five hundred? Name your price.”

She flushed, anger and embarrassment warring on her face. “I'm not cattle, Ozias. I can't be bought. And even if I could, the price tag would break your bank. Now, just get me something to wear,” she snapped.

I chuckled, reaching for the phone. “As you wish. But so you’re aware, I prefer you like this,” I gestured to her naked form. “Naked and all fuckin’ mine.”

Demi

The sun’s golden fingers stretched across my face, luring me from the depths of my sleep. I blinked, disoriented, as memories of the previous night flooded back. The silken sheets whispered against my skin as I turned, expecting to find Ozias’s commanding form beside me. Instead, I was greeted by rumpled bedding and a lingering warmth where his body should’ve been.

“Ozias?” I called out, my voice hoarse from sleep. Silence answered me.

I sat up, clutching the sheet to my chest as I surveyed the opulent bedroom that smelled like palo santo and sage. It wasn’t a far cry from my luxury apartment in Chicago, with its floor-to-ceiling windows offering a breathtaking view of the Mexican coastline. The gentle lapping of waves reached my ears, a soothing rhythm that opposed the turbulent emotions churning inside me.

Swinging my legs over the side of the bed, I stood on shaky feet. The plush carpet sank beneath my toes as I padded toward the window, my reflection ghosting across the glass. I barely recognized the woman staring back at me—disheveled curls, eyes haunted by the weight of the recent events.

I hadn’t even had time to process losing Samara fully. I couldn’t help but feel like she was dead because of me—that they were all dead because of me. That was a weight I never expected to carry. I didn’t like the feeling of blood on my hands, especially not innocent people.

My mind flashed with every memory my brain could muster of Samara and me—from the first day we met at private school to our joint sweet sixteen party to the

last night we spent together in Mexico, living it up without a care in the world. Of all the times to have needed a crystal ball, that would've been one of them.

I'd spend the rest of my life hating Ozias for orchestrating her death and taking her from me. Fuck Ozias. But now that I knew what it was like to actually fuck Ozias, what it was like to feel him speaking tongues over my pussy—every line between us had blurred. Where were the boundaries? What were the rules? I felt like a traitor for sleeping with the enemy. Not only did I betray my family but my best friend too.

Still, in the depths of my mind, I didn't know how long I could keep up the charade that I didn't want to feel him on my body again. I loved the feeling of his hands all over me. His softer side made his darker side more tolerable. Maybe it was the slickness of his tongue that got him far with me, breaking down my invisible walls. Perhaps it was his big dick with the slight curve to the left that hit my spot just right. Regardless, my feelings for him—whether hatred or something more pleasant—didn't warrant a discussion outside of my head. At least not yet.

When I was a child, my nanny Gloria would always read me the same bedtime stories—a big book of fairy tales every night. Every story was the same, always the handsome prince coming to save the princess and riding off into the sunset on his white horse.

She never spoke of the prince's dark side.

She never said the people he'd slay would be innocent.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

She never told me they'd call him El Diablo.

She never told me I'd be attracted to his darkness more than his light.

"What the hell have you gotten yourself into, Demi?" I muttered, pressing my forehead against the cool glass.

The door creaked open behind me, and I whirled around, heart pounding. But it was just a maid, her eyes widening as she took in my state of undress.

"Lo siento, señorita," she stammered, averting her gaze. "I did not know you were awake."

I grabbed a nearby robe, wrapping it tightly around myself. "It's fine," I said, tweeking my lips to the side. "Have you seen Ozias?"

She nodded her head. "El señor Rivera is downstairs."

Of course, he is. The asshole probably needed a jump start to his whole day of planned criminal activities. I bit back the scathing remark on the tip of my tongue, reminding myself that the woman was just doing her job.

"Thank you," I said instead. "I mean, gracias. I'll be down shortly."

She exited the master bedroom, shutting the door behind her, and I headed inside the en suite bathroom. Once inside, I trekked across the cool tiles, my bare feet leaving faint impressions that quickly faded. The beauty of the space was jarring—all

gleaming marble and gold fixtures. I never took Ozias for someone who liked to show off, but I'd obviously been mistaken. As I approached the sink, my eyes locked onto a folded piece of paper, stark white against the dark surface.

My heart rate quickened as I unfolded the note to see Ozias's bold, angular handwriting:

Take a shower, put on the robe, and meet me downstairs.

I couldn't help but scoff. "Romantic as ever, aren't you, El Diablo?" I muttered, crumpling the paper in my fist.

For a moment, I considered defying his instructions out of sheer spite. But the promise of hot water on my aching muscles was too tempting to resist. Once the temperature was set to my liking, I stepped into the massive shower, letting out a small gasp as the steaming water cascaded over me.

As I stood there, eyes closed, I could almost pretend I was back home in Chicago. The steady rhythm of the water drowned out my noisy thoughts, if only for a moment. I breathed in the steam, trying to center myself.

"Get it together, Demi," I whispered, running my hands through my wet hair. "You're stronger than this. You'll find a way out of this fucked up situation."

But even as the words fell off my tongue, doubt crept in. Ozias's resources seemed endless, his control absolute. How could I possibly outmaneuver someone like that? I shook my head, dispelling the negative thoughts. One step at a time. For now, I'll play along and gather information. There has to be a weakness, a chip in his armor. I just have to find it.

Reluctantly, I turned off the water and stepped out, wrapping myself in the plush

Versace robe hanging nearby. It was softer than a cloud, and for a split second, I allowed myself to enjoy the simple luxury. Taking a deep breath, I aligned my shoulders and headed for the door. It's time to face the devil himself.

I descended the grand staircase, my bare feet silent on the polished tile. The mansion was quiet except for the faint clinking of cutlery coming from the direction of the dining room. As I rounded the corner, I spotted Ozias seated at the head of a massive table, calmly eating his breakfast.

He glanced up as I entered, his dark eyes raking over me in a way that made me acutely aware that I was naked underneath the robe. "Good morning, mi amor." He greeted me with a glimpse of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I trust you slept well?"

I forced myself to meet his gaze, refusing to show any sign of weakness. "Like a baby." I lied smoothly, taking the seat to his right. "Nothing like being kidnapped and forced into marriage to ensure a restful night's sleep."

Ozias chuckled, seemingly amused by my sarcasm. "You'll adjust," he spoke confidently. "In time, you may even come to enjoy your new life here."

I leaned back in my chair, studying him. He was dressed in designer from head to toe, a subtle black suit jacket and matching pants with a crisp white button-up shirt that revealed the tattoos etched into his neck and collarbone. In the morning light, I could see the faint lines around his eyes, the barely perceptible flecks of red hair at his temples. For all his power and bravado, he wasn't invincible. Not immortal. Not God.

"And what exactly will this new life entail?" I inquired, genuinely curious. "Am I to be a silent, obedient wife? Or do you actually expect me to play some role in your . . . business endeavors?"

Ozias's relaxed expression turned serious. "You're just as intelligent as you are beautiful, Demi. I didn't want you solely for your beauty or your family connections. I believe you have potential—potential that was being wasted in Chicago."

His words caught me off guard. I hadn't expected it. Respect? Is that what I heard in his voice?

"So, what?" I pressed, leaning forward. "You're going to make me your protégé? Turn me into some cartel queen?"

A ghost of a smile crossed his face. "Would that be so terrible?" he asked softly. "Over the years, I've gained a special set of skills that I can share with you. I'm offering you more than marriage, Demi. I wanna give you a seat at the table."

For a moment, I was at a loss for words. The offer was unexpectedly tempting—power, respect, a chance to prove myself beyond the constraints of my family's expectations. But I quickly pushed the thought aside. This is manipulation, nothing more. Isn't it?

"I think I'll stick to being the unwilling bride for now," I answered dryly. "One step at a time, right?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Ozias nodded, his expression unreadable. “As you wish. Now, eat. We have a busy day ahead of us.”

As a plate matching his was set before me, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d just passed some sort of test. But to what end? What game was Ozias really playing?

I stared at the plate. The aroma was enticing but foreign. I hesitated, unsure where to begin.

“What is all this?” I asked, picking up a fork and poking at what looked like scrambled eggs mixed with chili peppers.

Ozias gestured to each dish. “Huevos rancheros, chilaquiles, and there’s some chorizo on the side. Try it.”

I took a small bite of the eggs, and immediately, my mouth was on fire. I coughed, reaching for the glass of water beside me.

“Shit,” I mumbled, taking a gulp. “Do you always eat food that could double as a weapon?”

Ozias chuckled, a deep, rich sound that caught me off guard. “You’ll get used to the extra kick of spice. It adds flavor, depth.”

I eyed the plate warily. “I’m all about flavor and seasoning, but I think it might take some time for my taste buds to adjust to all this heat.”

“Take your time,” he encouraged, his voice unexpectedly gentle. “We’ve got forever.”

I looked up at him, struck by the contrast between the moment and the violence I knew he was capable of. It was jarring, and I found myself searching his face for some clue to the man beneath the monster.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Ozias warned.

“Like what?”

“Like you want me to put you on this table and eat you for breakfast instead,” he answered calmly. “Because you know I won’t hesitate.”

His comment sent chills down my spine and made my pussy tingle simultaneously. I refused to let him drive me to distraction so early. I cleared my throat and crossed my legs.

“You know, I could make this difficult for you. Scream, fight, try to escape at every turn.” Ozias’s eyes narrowed slightly, but he remained silent, waiting for me to continue. My chest inflated with a deep inhale. “But I’m not going to do that. I can either suffer and make this harder on myself, or I can . . . adapt. Make the best of it.”

A smile spread across Ozias’s handsome face, and for a moment, I saw genuine pleasure there. It transformed his features, softening the hard lines and making him look almost boyish.

“I’m glad to hear that, Demi. I think you’ll find that life here can be quite rewarding.”

I allowed a small smile to peek from behind my teeth in return, all the while thinking how he shouldn’t get too comfortable. My father will come for me. This is just

temporary. I just need to survive until then.

But I kept those thoughts locked away, hidden behind a mask of cautious acceptance. Instead, I picked up my fork again and took another bite of the spicy eggs. This time, I was more prepared for the heat. Although I hadn't had an appetite before being presented with food, my stomach welcomed the nourishment. I hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours, and with the hurting Ozias had put on my body the day before, I needed the sustenance.

"You're right," I said, meeting his gaze. "I think I might get used to this after all."

Ozias leaned back in his chair, his dark eyes stationed on mine. There was a calculating gleam in them that sent a shiver down my spine.

"Speaking of adapting, there's something I need to tell you, Demi."

I paused with a forkful of food halfway to my mouth. "Oh?"

He reached across the table, his large hand enveloping mine. The warmth of his sun-kissed skin was startling, and I fought the urge to pull away.

"We're getting married this evening," he announced, his tone matter of fact. "At sunset, overlooking the beach."

I nearly choked on my food. "W-what?" I sputtered, eyes wide.

Ozias's full lips curled into a smirk. "You heard me. By nightfall, you'll officially be Mrs. Rivera."

I couldn't help it—I laughed. It was a sharp, bitter sound that echoed in the ornate dining room. "You've thought of everything, huh?"

His expression softened slightly, and for a moment, I caught a glimpse of something almost vulnerable in his eyes. Who knew the devil was such a romantic? “I wanted to make sure it was at least a little special for you.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Special? As if being forced to marry my kidnapper could ever be special.

But I bit my tongue, remembering my decision to play along. Instead, I trawled up a smile. “How . . . thoughtful of you.”

Ozias dipped his chin, seemingly satisfied with my response. “There’s more. My younger sister, Maya, will be arriving within the hour to take you dress shopping.”

I blinked, trying to process the new information. “Your sister?”

“Sí. And Javier will be accompanying you both for protection, of course.”

Of course. He couldn’t have the bride running away before the forced wedding, could he?

Outwardly, I maintained my composure. “I didn’t realize you had a sister.”

Ozias’s eyes darkened for a moment before he shifted his gaze away. “There’s a lot you don’t know about me, Demi. But we have time for that. A lifetime, in fact.”

The weight of his words settled over me like a blanket. A lifetime. With this man. This dangerous, unpredictable man who’d turned my world upside down in a matter of twenty-four hours. I swallowed hard, pushing down the panic that threatened to rise in my throat.

Remember the plan. Play along. Survive. Wait for Daddy to come.

“Well then,” I said, injecting a note of false cheeriness into my voice. “I suppose I better finish my breakfast. Wouldn’t want to keep your sister waiting.”

Ozias’s porcelain smile was predatory, sending another shiver through me. He grunted. “That’s my girl.”

I had to fight not to flinch at his words.

As I returned to my meal, my mind raced with a million thoughts. A wedding. A dress. A sister-in-law I never asked for. It was all happening so fast, and I felt like I was drowning in a sea of chaos. But I’d stay afloat. I had to. Because somewhere out there, my father was coming for me. And until he arrived, I’d do whatever it took to survive in Ozias’s world.

Even if that meant saying I do to the devil himself.

I pushed the remaining food around on my plate. As hungry as I once was, my appetite had suddenly vanished. A question burned on the tip of my tongue—one I’d been too afraid to ask but I needed to know the answer to.

“Ozias, w-what happened to the bodies of all those innocent women you had murdered?”

He looked up from his plate, his dark eyes unreadable. “Excuse me?” he questioned, his brow furrowing slightly.

I clenched my fists under the table, frustration bubbling up inside me. “My best friend Samara was the woman who was beside me when that yoga instructor drugged and helped kidnap me. I want to know what you did with her body.”

I’d been wrestling on and off with the thought of my best friend’s lifeless body lying

in the bottom of the ocean somewhere and her soul never truly being at peace.

A neutral expression masked Ozias's face. "Are you sure you want to know the answer to your question, mi amor?"

"Yes. I want to know what happened to my friend, Ozias. I want to know what the man I'm about to marry is truly capable of," I stated, leaning forward so that my eyes bore into his.

"Would it make you feel better if I told you I had my men carve the words return to sender into their chests before shipping them back to where they came from? Or how about if I told you I had their bodies burned and their ashes scattered in the ocean?"

Ozias took a sip of his coffee, seemingly unfazed by my intensity. "I gave my men clear instructions," he answered calmly. "Take you at any cost and clean up the mess. Despite what you may think of me, I'm not here to make you my enemy. Your father, on the other hand, is another situation in its entirety. I wasn't looking for a war, there is one on the horizon. I can feel it."

"Me too," I said softly, surprising both of us.

We fell into silence as he continued his meal. My thoughts raced with possibilities, plans, and prayers that my family would find me sooner than later.

I must've stayed idle too long because I caught him staring at me through the corner of his eye. "What?"

"Eat your food," he demanded.

"I'm no longer hungry."

“You need your strength.”

“I don’t care.”

“Damnit, Demi,” he roared, slamming his fist against the table so hard the silverware rattled. “Why the fuck must you fight me at every turn?”

“Because I hate you,” I stated matter-of-factly.

“Fuck it. I know what you need.”

I folded my arms across my chest in defiance as I leaned back in my chair. “What the fuck do I need?”

He grunted. “A fuckin’ attitude adjustment.”

Before I could respond, he shot to his feet and knocked everything off the table, making a loud, crashing sound as everything hit the polished floor beneath us. Ozias grabbed my wrist and yanked me out of my seat. In one swift motion, he tossed me on top of the table and ripped open my robe, revealing my naked body.

I didn’t object. I couldn’t. I was too busy trying to swallow the melon-sized lump in my throat.

“Ozias,” I said breathlessly, unsure if I wanted him to stop or go.

Regardless of my decision, he was going to do whatever he wanted to me, and the lust bubbling up inside me wouldn’t let me stop him. My heart pitter-pattered in my chest as he spread my legs from east to west and buried his face into my center. My

body ticked forward, arching off the table. I squirmed at the tickling feeling of his beard against my freshly washed skin.

“You smell so fucking good,” he mumbled while peppering soft kisses against my inner thigh.

Upon instinct, I bucked forward, eager to feel the familiar pleasure of his tongue against my folds and his soft lips gently sucking my clit. I couldn’t deny the fact that Ozias had a gift. From the way his long, snake like tongue flicked and lapped my sweet spot as if he’d been born to do it.

I opened my eyes long enough to look down at him, watching him slurp my pussy up like a chocolate milk shake. “Oooh shit,” I hissed, sucking in air through my clenched grid of teeth. “Don’t stop. Keep licking me.”

The sight of him between my legs alone had me ready to explode. And I did. It was hard, fast, and had me seeing fucking stars. It was then and there that I knew I’d never be able to escape that man. His tongue held too much power over me, let alone his strong hands.

Before I knew it, he’d licked me clean and breakfast was over. Ozias ushered me upstairs to get ready for the day. On wobbly legs, I dressed mechanically in a matching black crop top and maxi skirt that clung to my curves, my thoughts still swirling with the morning’s revelations and the fact that he’d tongue fucked me into submission. I was just finishing up when he presented me with a red watch box with the gold Rolex crown in the bottom right corner.

“Here.”

“What’s this?” I inquired, hesitantly reaching out for it.

“Open it and find out.”

I cracked open the box to see a sparkling, diamond-encrusted rose gold Rolex watch with scattered pink gemstones around the dial. My eyes popped wide when I realized I was looking at, at least a couple of carats around the dial alone.

“Take it out and flip it over.”

I followed his instruction and flipped the watch over to see the inscription—*en esta vida y en la próxima*.

“W-what does it say?”

“In this life and the next.”

“I never knew someone like you was capable of saying something so beautiful.”

“I’m half Mexican and was raised here for most of my life. You’ll hear some of the most beautiful shit come out of my mouth.”

“Half?”

“My father is black.”

“Really?” I inquired, more enlightened than shocked. Having African American blood flowing through his veins verified his swagger and the length and girth of his dick. “I didn’t know that.”

His eyes dropped down to my bare wrist as he stepped forward to place the watch on it. “Now you do. You like it?”

“The watch or the fact that you’re half black?”

“Both.”

I cleared my throat before nodding. “The watch, yes. It’s beautiful. How’d you know pink was my favorite color?”

“You’re going to be my wife, *mi amor*. It’s my job to know everything about you. Besides the pink diamond studs in your ears, the pink sports bra and leggings set you had on when I had you delivered to me. I pay attention to detail.”

I clenched my thighs together. His confidence made my pussy drip. “What did I do to deserve such a reward? All I’ve done is kick and scream since you met me.”

“Consider it a wedding present.”

I fully expected him to try and kiss me or force himself on me in the best ways, but he didn’t do either of those things. Instead, he dipped his chin and turned on his heel.

“You’re welcome by the way,” he replied over his shoulder. “I’ll see you downstairs. Don’t take too long.”

A few minutes later, I heard two voices downstairs—a woman’s laughter mixing with Ozias’s deeper voice. Curiosity got the better of me, and I quickly made my way down to investigate while trying to give audience to their conversation.

As I descended the stairs, I saw Ozias standing with a beautiful young woman with brown skin who looked to be in her twenties, like me. She had a slender, athletic build, with long legs that had her standing at around five feet seven. Even with the

three-inch heels on her feet, Ozias still towered over her.

Her skin was a few shades darker than Ozias's warm, sun-kissed sienna brown complexion, but when standing side-by-side, there were parts of their features that favored, hinting at their shared DNA. Maya's dark-eyed gaze was sharp and assessing as it landed on me.

We studied each other in silence for a few seconds, feeling each other out. Two long spiral curls cascaded down the front of her oval face, framing it perfectly, while the rest of her hair was pulled up into a high, messy bun. Her cocoa-brown eyes were filled with warmth and curiosity and framed by long lashes and thick, manicured brows.

"Ah, there she is," Ozias declared with a hint of pride in his voice that made me want to scoff. "Maya, meet Demi Malone. Demi, this is my sister, Maya."

Maya didn't extend a hand or offer any form of greeting. Instead, she began to circle me slowly, her eyes raking over every inch of my body. I felt like a prized pony being assessed at an auction, and it made my blood boil.

"So this is the Chicago spitfire you've gone through all this trouble to marry, Ozias?" Maya asked, her voice dripping with snootiness. "She looks . . . soft. Like baby shit."

I bristled at her words, my hands clenching into fists at my sides. "I assure you, there's nothing soft about me," I snapped back.

Maya's eyebrow arched, a smirk playing at the corners of her mouth. "Is that so? Because from where I'm standing, you look like a pampered princess who's never had to fight for anything in her life."

The words hit too close to home, striking at insecurities I'd harbored for years. Before

I could think better of it, my hand flew out, connecting solidly with Maya's cheek. The crack of skin on skin echoed through the foyer, followed by a stunned silence. I stood there, breathing heavily, my palm stinging from the impact.

To my surprise, Maya threw her head back and laughed instead of assaulting me back. Her smile was joyous, revealing perfectly white teeth that lit up her face even in the midst of our pissing match.

She turned to Ozias, her eyes dancing with amusement as she chuckled. "Well, well, I stand corrected. It seems you've found yourself a bitch with thick skin after all. She'll fit in with our family perfectly."

Ozias's expression was a mix of shock and maybe pride. I couldn't quite tell, and I was too rattled to analyze it further. There I was, preparing to scrap with the bitch for playing in my face, and she was ready to invite me to their family reunion.

Maya rubbed her cheek, still grinning. "Come on, firecracker," she said, grabbing my arm. "Let's go get you a wedding dress. I have a feeling this is going to be more fun than I thought."

As she dragged me toward the door, I caught Ozias's watchful eye. There was a heat in his gaze that sent a shiver down my spine—whether from fear or something else, I wasn't quite sure. One thing was certain: The day was far from over, and I had a feeling it was only going to get more complicated.

The sleek black SUV glided through the narrow streets of the coastal town, a glaring difference to the pastel-colored buildings and antiquated storefronts. I was wedged between Maya and Javier in the back seat, feeling like a prisoner being escorted to her doom. The irony wasn't lost on me. I couldn't help but recognize Javier as the man from the restaurant in Cancun. I knew I'd felt an eerie feeling when I saw him, only to find out he'd been working for Ozias all along. The realization that he'd been

watching me through another man's eyes made my skin crawl.

"Here we are," Maya announced as we stopped in front of a small boutique. The sign above the door read *Vestidos de Ensueño* in elegant script. From the lavish gowns on the mannequins in the storefront window, I knew it was a dress shop.

As we sailed inside, leaving Javier a few steps behind, I was hit by the overwhelming scent of perfume and champagne. The bridal shop was a sea of white and ivory, lace and tulle as far as the eye could see. My stomach churned. Fuck me.

Maya immediately approached the owner, a petite Hispanic woman with graying hair, and launched into a rapid-fire conversation that was a mix of English and Spanish. Javier stood at the door, smirking at my evident confusion. I only caught every other word.

"What's she saying?" I inquired, keeping my voice low.

Javier shrugged, his expression maddeningly neutral. "Just discussing your . . . requirements."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "My requirements? You mean Ozias's requirements for his unenthusiastic bride?"

Before Javier could respond, a flurry of activity erupted. The owner clapped her hands, and suddenly, assistants materialized from behind curtains, wheeling out racks upon racks of wedding dresses.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“Jesus Jamal Christ,” I whispered, overwhelmed by the sheer volume of options. “This is crazy.”

Maya turned to me, her eyes gleaming with something that looked suspiciously like excitement. “Alright, Demi. Time to find you the perfect dress for your big day.”

I couldn’t help but scoff. “Perfect? For a sham wedding to the man who kidnapped me?”

To my surprise, Maya’s display of exposed pearly whites didn’t falter. “A wedding is a wedding, *cariño*. And trust me, my brother spares no expense. You can hate it all you want, but you don’t have to be ugly doing it.”

She’d made a point I couldn’t argue with. As Maya began rummaging through the dresses, I caught sight of myself in one of the full-length mirrors. All I saw looking back at me was a caged animal.

“I won’t be your dress-up doll,” I snapped, even as Maya held up a particularly elaborate gown.

She raised an eyebrow. “No? Then what will you be, Demi? Because, like it or not, this wedding is happening. You can fight it every step of the way, or you can put on your big girl panties and find a way to make it work for you.”

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. She was right again, of course. I hated to admit it, but I needed to keep thinking strategically. If I was going to find a way out of this mess, I needed to keep playing the game . . . until I won.

An hour later, we were still sifting through a sea of wedding dresses, each one more stunning than the last. Still, nothing felt right. But how could it be when everything about the moment was wrong? Maya held up a delicate lace gown, and I shook my head with a frown. It was beautiful, but there was something else on my mind. If I had Ozias's relative all to myself, I needed to make use of it and pick her brain for anything I could use against him. I decided to stop pouting about my circumstances and seize the moment.

I glanced at Maya, trying to find the right words while she searched for another dress to try and wow me. "I always thought Ozias was an only child before today," I said casually. "What was he like as a kid?"

Maya's eyes lit up as if a lightbulb had gone off inside her head. "Let me guess, you want me to dig back in my memory and pull out all the sentimental stories I have of him, right? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's nothing like that to share."

"What do you mean?"

"Ozias is my half-brother. We share the same father. We didn't grow up in the same house together, didn't celebrate holidays or birthdays together, and we damn sure didn't have the same relationship with our father."

"Why not?" I asked, ears burning to learn more.

Maya arched a questioning brow. "How much do you know about my brother?"

"Nothing. He's so hard and guarded. Every time I think I'm seeing a softer side of him, it changes like the phases of the fucking moon."

"Ozias is protective. He always has been, especially after losing his mother at such a young age. He felt the need to grow up early, be a man and shit."

“How’d his mother die?”

Maya sighed. “I probably shouldn’t be telling you all this, but fuck it. You’re about to be his wife. Ozias was born in Texas but grew up here in Mexico with his mother. I didn’t come along until seven years later when our father married my mother. By that time, Ozias’s mother had been dead for years. She was murdered when he was really young, which obviously had a crazy traumatic impact on him growing up. My mother died in a car accident when I was eight, so I get it.”

“Mine died in childbirth,” I added, volunteering information about my past.

“See, so you get it. That shit fucks up a kid in ways not many people can understand.”

I nodded, understanding. “Yeah.”

“Anyway, fast forward; when I was thirteen, our father passed away from a heart attack. Ozias was twenty, and although they never had a good relationship, I knew he felt a way about the loss. That’s when he and I started to get closer. He felt the need to step up and protect me since I was his baby sister. Y’know, typical big brother shit.”

My lips lifted in a half-smirk. I liked hearing about his softer side. It reminded me that there was still a human heart beating beneath the monster’s outer shell. I felt a sense of warmth filling me as I listened and learned more about Ozias’s tragic past.

“Thanks for sharing. So, do you live in Mexico too?”

“No. I’m only here for the wedding. I live in Texas.”

“Texas?”

“Yup. Just over the border. I oversee my brother’s pharmaceutical branches throughout the state and do some interior design work on the side. It’s my true passion. But enough about me. Let’s put the focus back on finding you a dress before your ceremony in a few hours. What do you think about this one?” she probed, holding up a simple ivory gown.

I shrugged instead of turning up my nose. Maybe one of the reasons I didn’t want to put in the effort of entertaining her was because the last person I’d gone dress shopping with was Samara. It still hurt too much to fully unpack the fact that I couldn’t pick up the phone and call her. But none of that mattered. I hadn’t seen my phone in days, and even if I had it, she was no longer around to answer.

“Might I remind you, Ozias will require you to walk down the aisle to him, whether you’re in a dress of your choosing or as naked as the day you came screaming into this earth. Fucking pick something already!” she demanded, showing her dark side.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“Fine. Let’s get this over with,” I said, reaching for the dress Maya was holding.

As I disappeared into the dressing room, I could practically feel Maya’s triumphant smile beaming on the other side of the door. Little did she know, I was already formulating a plan. The dress might’ve been for a wedding, but it was also armor for the war ahead.

Ozias

The clock on my oak-paneled study wall ticked gloomily, each second bringing me closer to both my wedding and a potential bloodbath. Across from me sat Joaquín Valdez, leader of the Jalisco cartel. He leaned back in a leather chair with a smirk playing on his weathered face. His eyes, cold as the Arctic winter far beyond my windows, bore into mine.

“Come now, Ozias.” He paused as his fingers drummed on the polished surface of my desk. “Surely you see the benefits of this alliance. Your territory, our product—the possibilities are endless.”

I resisted the urge to clench my fists, keeping my face expressionless. “And what guarantee do I have that you won’t flood my streets the moment I let you in? Your reputation precedes you, Joaquín.”

He chuckled, a sound devoid of warmth and genuine humor. “Ah, but so does yours, El Diablo. Tell me, how many men have you killed to sit where you are now? How many bodies are underneath your throne?”

The question stirred memories I would've rather forgotten—faces contorted in pain, the acrid smell of gunpowder, crimson blood staining my hands. I pushed them aside, focusing on the present. My father wasn't the one who previously held the title of cartel king. It was a role I stole from the man who killed my mother, and I would gladly do it again. "Enough to know that trust is earned, not given freely."

Joaquín's eyes narrowed, the amusement fading from his expression. "You're making a mistake, Rivera. We could crush you if we wanted to."

"That's bold of you," I replied. My hand inched toward the gun holstered at my side, hidden from view beneath the desk. "But I assure you, it wouldn't end well."

The tension in the room was intense, thick enough to cut with a knife. I was highly aware of my men positioned strategically around the house, ready to move at a moment's notice. The meeting was a risk, but one I had to take. The cartel wars had been escalating, and an alliance, as distasteful as it sounded, could've been the key to calming things down momentarily.

I might've held the highest position, but none of the smaller cartel leaders understood how to work effectively. One pissed off another. One stole another's product. It was a complete shitshow.

Just as Joaquín opened his mouth to respond, the door to my study swung open. My heart nearly stopped as Demi walked in.

"You'll be pleased to know I—" she began, her voice trailing off as her eyes landed on Joaquín. The smile on her face faded, replaced by a mix of surprise and caution.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still. I soaked in Demi's appearance—the curve of her hips accentuated by her fitted skirt, the caramel skin of her neck exposed by her upswept hair. She was breathtaking, and the sight of her sent a jolt of

possessiveness straight to the tip of my dick. But her presence was a complication I couldn't afford at the moment.

"Demi," I called out, keeping my tone steady despite the turmoil inside me. "I'm in the middle of a meeting. We can talk later."

Her brown eyes pinged between Joaquín and me, understanding dawning in their depths. "Of course," she replied, her tone clipped. "I'll leave you to it."

As she turned to leave, Joaquín's voice cut through the air like a knife. "Well, well. What do we have here? Ozias, you didn't tell me you had such . . . exquisite taste in women."

I bristled at his words, at the way his eyes roved over Demi's physique when she turned to walk away. My fingers twitched, itching to reach for my gun and put a bullet between his eyes. But I couldn't afford to lose control, not now.

"This is my fiancée, Demi." I introduced her, my tone warning Joaquín to tread carefully. "We're getting married in a couple of hours."

Joaquín's eyebrows shot up to his receding hairline as a wolfish grin spread across his face. "Married? Today? My, my, Ozias. You are full of surprises, aren't you, my boy?"

Demi, to her credit, didn't flinch under Joaquín's scrutiny. She lifted her chin, meeting his gaze with a defiance that made me equally proud and anxious. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. . . .?"

"Valdez," Joaquín answered while standing up and moving toward her like a shark. "Joaquín Valdez. The pleasure is all mine, Ms. . . .?"

“Malone,” Demi replied coolly. “Demi Malone.”

I watched as recognition flashed in Joaquín’s eyes, his smile turning predatory. My muscles tensed, ready to spring into action if needed. The air in the room seemed to thicken instantly, charged with an electricity that threatened to ignite at any moment.

“Malone?” Joaquín repeated, his voice deceptively casual. “Any relation to Cyrus Malone, by chance?”

I swallowed hard, and my throat suddenly became bone dry.

Joaquín’s eyes widened in recognition, a slow smile curling up one side of his face. “Demi Malone, is it? Her father’s crossed me more times than I can count,” he indicated with malice dripping in his tone.

Before I could react, before I could even process the threat in his words, Joaquín moved with startling speed for a man of his age. His hand shot out, grabbing Demi’s arm. She let out a surprised gasp of pain, her eyes meeting mine in a moment of shared shock.

“You’re going to pay for what your father did,” Joaquín snarled, yanking her roughly.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

My heart pounded in my chest as rage and fear coursed through my veins. How dare he touch her? How dare he threaten what was mine? And on my wedding day, no less? But beneath the anger, there was a trace of something else—a protectiveness I hadn't expected to feel.

“Let her fuckin’ go, Joaquín,” I growled, my hand racing toward my holster. “This shit is between us. She has nothing to do with it.”

In one fluid motion, I unholstered my gun and aimed it at Joaquín’s arm. The sound of the gunshot echoed through the study, followed immediately by Joaquín’s agonized scream. His grip on Demi’s arm loosened as blood spurted from his wound.

“Have you lost your mothafuckin mind? You’re going to pay for touching what belongs to me,” I snarled.

Demi stumbled away, her eyes ballooned with shock. I wanted to go to her, to make sure she was alright, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Joaquín. He clutched his bleeding hand as his face contorted in pain and fury.

“You have no idea what Cyrus has done!” Joaquín spat out between ragged breaths. “The Malones have been a thorn in our side for years. This little bitch—”

“I don’t give a fuck,” I barked, cutting him off as my finger tightened on the trigger. “Demi is my wife. Her father’s business is not her burden to bear.”

Joaquín’s pain-stricken eyes darted between Demi and me, a sinister smile twisting his features despite the discomfort. “You think this is over, Ozias? You and your

pretty little bride better watch your backs. The Malones have made powerful enemies, and now, so have you.”

I saw the movement before it fully registered—Joaquín lunging toward Demi again, his good hand outstretched. There was no hesitation, no moral dilemma. My body reacted on instinct, honed by years of being at the top of the cartel food chain.

The second gunshot was louder than the first, or maybe it just felt that way. Joaquín’s body jerked, a look of surprise frozen on his face as he crumpled to the floor. The bullet hole in his forehead was neat and precise—a perfect kill shot.

Still, that wasn’t enough for me. He’d laid his fucking hands on my bride not once but twice and was stupid enough to have done it in my presence. His demise was too clean, and the last thing a messy mothafucka deserved was a clean death. I stepped over to his lifeless body, screaming my war cry as I grabbed his face, and squeezed it so hard his jaw snapped like wishbones. I split the lower half of his face open like a juicy watermelon, rendering him unrecognizable. The warmth of satisfaction washed over me as I dropped him to the ground and pulled out my handkerchief to wipe the blood splatter off my face and lips before looking up at Demi.

There I was—El Diablo in the flesh with my claws out, fangs showing, or however she pictured the monster I tried my best to hide from her. For a moment, the room was deathly silent, no pun intended. Then I heard Demi’s shaky breath, and it snapped me back to reality. I slowly moved toward her, my eyes scanning her for any signs of injury.

“He touched you,” I muttered.

“O-Ozias . . .”

“He touched you,” I repeated, my voice softer than I intended. “Are you okay?” I

asked. Her face was colorless, making the barely visible constellation of freckles across her nose stand out even more. “I need an answer, Demi.”

She nodded, but I’d already noticed her hands trembling. “I’m . . . I’m okay,” she managed to whisper. “I—you h-have blood everywhere.”

“He shouldn’t have touched you.”

Her chest rose and fell. It was almost as if I could see her heart beating through her clothes. “T-thank you for not letting him hurt me.”

I reached out, hesitating for a moment before reeling back. I didn’t want his blood on her. “You’re safe now,” I told her, surprised by how much I meant it. “I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Demi’s eyes met mine, and for a moment, I saw a flicker of trust. It stirred something in me, something I thought I’d buried long ago. I’d never even considered letting my heart go all the way before, but Demi had the type of pussy that could bring even a man of steel to his knees. She was my kryptonite. I was ruthless about her. I thought I didn’t have a weakness. Turns out, it was her all along.

I ran a hand over my nape, feeling the weight of the situation pressing down on me. The smell of gunpowder still hung in the air, mingling with the metallic scent of blood. I needed to reassure her, to make her understand.

“Demi, like I said, I’m not a bad person. You’ve just heard bad things about me,” I explained, gesturing toward the body on the floor. “This . . . this was necessary. To protect you, to protect us.”

She looked at me, her brown eyes wide and searching for answers I didn’t know if I could give her. I saw her trying to merge the man who just killed someone in cold

blood with the one who was about to become her husband. The conflict was written all over her beautiful face. Even in conflict, she looked like an angel.

“I know it’s a lot to process,” I continued, taking a step closer to her. “But everything I do, I do for a reason. For survival, for power . . . and now, for you. I promise I’ll do the worst for you, Demi.”

Demi gulped, her gaze darting between me and the bloodied corpse. “I . . . I understand,” she sputtered.

I nodded, relieved she wasn’t running screaming from the room. “Good. Now, I need you to go upstairs and rest. Get ready for the ceremony,” I declared while glancing at my watch. “We don’t have much time, and I want everything to be perfect.”

She hesitated for a moment then dipped her chin. As she turned to leave, I caught her arm gently. “Demi, I meant what I said. I’ll always protect you. You’re mine now, and I always take care of what’s mine.”

A slight shiver ran through her at my words, and I couldn’t tell if it was fear or something else. She was probably wondering how I was able to switch from a savage killer to a man about to be married at sunset. She gave me one last look before hurrying out of the room, leaving me alone with the consequences of my actions and the anticipation of what was to come.

Four hours later, I stood on the pristine sands of the secluded beach on my compound, watching the sun dip lower and lower beneath the skyline, painting the sky in pastel hues of orange, lavender, and pink. The gentle lapping of the ocean’s waves provided a soothing backdrop to the intimate gathering. Only a handful of my most trusted associates were present. Their faces were a blend of curiosity and respect.

I adjusted my diamond cufflinks, a nervous energy coursing through me that I hadn't felt in years. Our union wasn't just another business deal or power play. It was my wedding day, and I was determined that Demi would be my wife. The soft strains of a violin filled the air, and I turned to see her. My breath caught in my throat.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Demi glided down the makeshift aisle, a vision in ivory. Her dress, a sleek covering that hugged every curve, sparkled with tiny crystals that caught the fading sunlight one by one. Her black hair cascaded over one shoulder in soft waves, and her brown eyes remained locked on mine.

“Dios mío,” I whispered, drinking in the sight of her as I balled my fists. Demi’s beauty hit my heart like a cool breeze. She was the perfect blend of supermodel elegance and womanly curves—a deadly combination that set my blood on fire. At that moment, I fell in love with everything about her. It was more than the thrill of getting one over on my enemy or good pussy. What I felt for her was too real to put into words.

As she reached me, I took her hand, noting the slight tremor in her fingers. “You look breathtaking,” I mumbled loud enough for her ears only.

She flashed me a slight smirk, a hint of nervousness in her eyes. “Thank you,” she replied softly.

The officiant began the ceremony, but I was barely listening. I was too focused on Demi, on the way the setting sun cast a golden glow on her skin, on the slight catch in her breath as we exchanged rings. Her beauty was even more breathtaking than the sunset itself.

When it was time for the vows, I took both her hands in mine. “Demi, in such a short time, you’ve exceeded my expectations of what it means to be with a real woman. Every time you touch me, you remind me that I’m still alive. That I’m more than the monster you’ve heard whispers about. But know, El Diablo would run through fire

for you without question, mi amor. From this day forward, I vow to protect you with every fiber of my being. To put you before anybody. You are mine now, and I will move Heaven and Earth to keep you safe.” I paused, looking deep into her eyes. “That means killing for you and even dying for you. I may not be a good man, but I will only give you the best pieces of mi corazón,” I confessed as if I were preaching.

As I spoke, I noticed a softness creeping into Demi’s gaze, a vulnerability that wasn’t there before. It stirred something unexpected within me, a desire to be worthy of that look.

Her vows were simple, her voice steady despite the emotion displayed in the single tear that slid down her cheek. I didn’t know the driving emotion behind it. Maybe it wasn’t just one. Maybe she felt everything I did—fear, uncertainty, curiosity just to name a few.

“Ozias, we both know the world is a cold place. The warmth you’ve shown has somehow made it more tolerable. I don’t know what the future holds for us, but I know you’ll be at my side through whatever comes our way.”

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the officiant declared. “Señor, you may salute your bride.”

I cupped Demi’s face in my hands, searching her eyes for a moment before claiming her lips in a passionate kiss. She responded with a passion that surprised me, her body melting against mine as if we were made for each other.

As we broke apart, breathless, I couldn’t help but think that while I may have married Demi for ulterior motives, our arrangement could work out in ways I never anticipated. The fire between us was undeniable, and I found myself looking forward to exploring it further.

“Mrs. Rivera,” I whispered against her ear as we turned to face our small audience.
“Welcome to the cartel.”

Hours later, we were finally alone. My bedroom was decorated with candles and flowers, but the thick tension in the atmosphere was anything but romantic. Demi stood by the French doors with her arms tightly folded across her chest. Her wedding dress was still in perfect condition, but her expression was anything but happy for a bride on her wedding night.

“The fuck is your problem?” I asked, unwilling to tiptoe around the elephant in the room any longer. “You’ve been pouting for the last hour or so.”

“Fuck you, Ozias!” She spat the words at me like bullets from a gun. “I don’t have shit to say to you.”

“And why is that?”

“Because being around you for more than a few minutes at a time is unbearable! Every time I think things are starting to smooth out, you always throw me another curveball. Why the hell would you do that?”

I looked confused. “Do what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know what the fuck you said tonight,” she spat, her voice trembling with frustration.

My bedroom had turned into a battleground, the air crackling with mutual loathing and an undercurrent of something more dangerous. I stood there, infuriatingly calm, with my dark eyes fixed on hers.

“I don’t, and even if I did, whatever came out of my mouth, I meant, so I don’t know

why you're wasting my time with this shit when you should be riding my face," I said, loosening my tie as I sat on the edge of the bed.

She smacked her lips. "You insulted my fucking family during your toast, Ozias, practically toasting to my father's impending demise. That doesn't make me want to fuck you. It makes me want to fucking kill you."

"Again, I said what I said, and I meant that shit. Get over it."

We circled each other like predators locked in a dance neither of us wanted but couldn't seem to escape. I got close enough to let my cinnamon-flavored breath fan her face, and just like that, her body betrayed her with its traitorous heat.

"Admit it, Demi," I taunted, the corner of my mouth lifting. "You're not mad about what I said. You're mad at yourself because you hate that you want to be near me."

"I'd rather be stranded in a desert full of scorpions!" She spat.

The words flew from her lips, but before she could step back or register how fast I moved, my lips crashed against hers.

She kissed me back hard. Every argument and every shred of hatred had evaporated into maddening lust. Her hands found my hair, clutching my curls and pulling me closer, anchoring me to her so I couldn't escape the force of our collision.

My tongue slid against hers, a bold invasion that stoked the fire within us both. I was lost in the sensation as she pushed her body against mine. Instinctively, my hands roamed down to her round ass, gripping it firmly and dragging her into the hard bulge of my dick.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

“Demi.” I groaned into the kiss, a sound that made her shiver.

“Fuck you, Ozias.” She panted against my open mouth, but even as she said it, her body clung to mine, craving the friction, the connection, the undeniable truth that, for this moment, she was mine, and I was hers.

My lips left hers as quickly as our clothes vanished, including the ivory wedding dress that clung to her curves like another skin.

“Lay down and spread those fuckin’ legs,” I commanded.

The plush bed cushioned her back as my presence loomed over her. My heated gaze traced every inch of her exposed flesh before I snaked my tongue up her inner right thigh with deliberate slowness, leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

“Look at that pussy glistening. I know it’s oozing for papi, isn’t it?” I growled.

“Tease your nipples for me. Show me how you like it,” I demanded.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” she snapped back defiantly, but her traitorous hands betrayed her words. They crept to her full breasts, fingers tweaking those diamond-hard nipples.

I smirked as my hands traveled up her juicy thighs, pushing them apart with possessive ease. I savored each moment my mouth was on her body, licking, sucking, and drawing out each breath until it was my name she gasped.

“Ozias . . .” escaped from between her lips, a plea, a curse, a surrender.

She rolled her head, trying to escape the intensity of my gaze, but there was no hiding from me. When our eyes locked, there was triumph, victory even, because I knew I’d conquered her without uttering a single word.

Her delicate fingers were still playing roughly with her nipples, pinching harder, but she seemed to enjoy the bite of pain.

“Look at you, Demi,” I murmured, my voice thick with desire. “So ready to deny it, but here you are, panting under the command of my touch.”

“S-shut the fuck up, Ozias,” she managed to utter, though the heat of my breath against her skin had her stuttering.

Her hand drifted upward, tangled in her hair, then skimmed down the side of her slender neck. The touch was tentative but deliberate as she traced the outline of her collarbone. She was playing my game now, offering teasing glimpses as her hips rolled against my face, grinding against the relentless assault of my tongue. She was taking exactly what I wanted to give her, and for a moment, we both allowed ourselves to forget how much she hated me.

“You like that, don’t you?” I growled against her, my voice vibrating through her core.

“Shut up,” she muttered, caught between annoyance and the haze of pleasure.

Then, without warning, I bit down softly on her clit, and it was like a lightning strike of sensation that split her open. Pain blurred into exquisite pleasure, and she couldn’t hold back the groan that spilled from her lips, raw and ragged. Her body writhed uncontrollably underneath me, each wave of pleasure catapulting her further into

blissful oblivion.

“Fuck, Ozias!” Demi cried out with intensity.

My response was a deep, guttural groan as I dug my hands under her, gripping her ass hard enough to leave marks. The sharp sting of it just fueled the fire burning inside us, mixing pleasure with pain until they were indistinguishable.

“Cum for me, Demi. Cum for your fuckin’ king,” I commanded, my breath hot and heavy against her throbbing flesh.

And she did. She came so fuckin’ hard, shattering into a million pieces as rolling bursts of pleasure racked her delicatemelanated body. Each one hit harder than the last, leaving her gasping, clinging to sanity by a thread while I devoured her with a hunger she’d never seen before.

After the relentless assault of pleasure, her breath hitched as she slowly started to come back to herself, the heat of climax still simmering under her skin. My lips pressed into hers, leaving a kiss that tasted like her. The sensual tang of her sweet pussy on my lips was intoxicating, almost addictive.

“God, you taste . . .” I started but ceased to finish my sentence.

“Stop talking,” Demi snapped, her voice hoarse but lacking conviction.

She pushed me back onto the bed with an urgency that mirrored the racing of my heart. She knelt before me, making me feel powerful and entirely in control. Her fingers curled around the hard length of my dick, exploring every inch as if she were learning a treasured secret. My shaft pulsed against her sensual touch, savoring the velvety feel of her fingertips. I shuddered a vulnerable tremor that raced through me from head to toe. Then, my hand covered hers, guiding her with a firmness that sent

another jolt of desire coursing through my veins.

“Mmm, I like it like this,mi amor,” I murmured, my tone rough with desire.

She purred. “I bet you do.”

She ran her tongue along the tip just to tease me. Her hand followed my firm grip, and I smothered a moan when something deep inside of me twinged as I looked at my hand covering hers.

“I’m going to make you beg for this dick,mi amor.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

My words were a vow, one that tempted her with promises of sinful delight.

“Big talk,” she replied, even as her grip tightened around my girth. She leaned forward, letting her tongue graze the crown of my dick, teasing us both with the lightest contact.

I hissed, hips jerking upward involuntarily, driving myself deeper between her soft, full lips before cursing and pulling back. My restraint was hanging by a fucking thread, my eyes dark with raw need. “You don’t know what you’re getting into.”

Demi paused, her lips hovering just over me, and smirked at the challenge in my gaze.

“You started it,” she whispered, defiance laced in her tone.

She took me back into her mouth, swallowing the thick length of my erection until I felt the back of her throat.

“Don’t stop,” I groaned, a command that vibrated through me.

My plea was her power. She’d so cleverly set a pace that had me writhing beneath her. Her mouth moved with purpose, drawing out each of my ragged breaths, each stifled moan. The taste of her, the heat of her, it was all-consuming, and despite the turmoil churning inside me, I couldn’t deny the satisfaction that came from being at the mercy of a woman that fuckin’ beautiful.

“Demi,” I said, panting as my fingers threaded through her hair, desperate for

something to hold onto.

One look into her eyes, and I knew she reveled in the way I moaned her name. Tomorrow, we could go back to being married enemies and lovers tangled in a web of passion, but right now, she owned the moment, and I'd savor every second of it.

I lost all control. My hips bucked forward, forcing me deeper and deeper every time she moved down on me. But she kept in rhythm with me, drawing me deeper into the vortex of her mouth while watching and waiting for her cue. My hand clutched tightly at her hair, a lifeline in the turbulence of pleasure she wielded with every flick and swirl of her devious tongue.

"Fuck, Demi," I called out, my voice a ragged thread unraveling from the spool of my control.

My hips bucked, my dick hitting the back of her throat, and she didn't flinch. She took it, letting me feel the vice of her throat around me. My thighs trembled. I was so close.

"Fuck . . . Demi," I choked out again, almost a plea.

At that moment, we both knew she had me.

When I came, it was with a primal sound that echoed off the walls. My release flooded her throat, hot and pulsing, and she swallowed with pride swelling in her chest. As she pulled away, some of my nut spilled over her cheek and breasts, marking her in the most intimate of ways.

Without hesitation, I smeared it into her nipple, claiming the act, claiming her.

"Look at you, making a mess of me," she said while climbing my body like it was a

mountain to be conquered. Her knees bracketed my hips, and she leaned forward, her eyes locked onto mine as she pressed her nipple to my lips. “Suck, papi.”

With one swift motion, she lowered herself onto me, feeling my hardening dick recharged and ready, even after my recent climax. My mouth found her nipple, wet and hot, and she shivered as I lapped and sucked with fervent strokes of my tongue.

“Demi . . .” I murmured against her skin. “I love it when you call me papi.”

I devoured her with a hunger that bordered on desperation. My mouth sealed over her nipple, suckling with burning need as she rode me. She put her right hand on my shoulder, sinking her nails into my skin. Demi leaned forward to kiss me before I slid my hand between us. My fingers danced over her clit in a rhythm as old as time, and it was like striking a match. Heat flared, spread, and consumed her.

“Harder,” she rasped out, caught in the moment of sensation. “Don’t you dare fuckin’ stop.”

My hands, intense and unforgiving, clasped her hips, anchoring her to the reality of my lap, my dick, and my mouth switching from her lips back to her other breast, tongue swirling around the peak.

I grabbed her wrist while I thrust my hips upward. “Tell papi how you like it.”

Demi’s moans were like music to my ear. “I like it deep, papi. Fuck me deep, Ozias...” The way she said my name felt like raw worship. “I-I’m—”

Her body tightened and coiled, and before long, she was shattering above me, crashing into pleasure so intense it obliterated everything else. There was no room for hate, no space for anger. Just this, just her, just us.

“Fuck, Ozias . . .” Her voice broke, exhausted and lost in the waves.

“That’s it, Demi. Cum for papi.”

My name echoed off the walls as she released, each pulse of her body milking me dry, drawing out my own release. I groaned, a primal sound that let her know I was right there with her. My growl vibrated against her skin, pulling another surge of bliss from deep within.

“Fuck, you’re so fuckin’ beautiful.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

Collapsing against me, she buried her face in the curve of my neck, lungs heaving and heart pounding. I inhaled deeply, drawing in the lingering smell of her perfume against my skin. Her pussy was my lullaby, and my chest was her pillow. I was content with that. I slept better at night with her by my side.

“God, what are you doing to me?” I whispered against her ear, a mix of wonder and something dangerous.

She didn’t respond, and I didn’t mind. Because right now, in this aftermath, there were no words. There was only the steadythrob between her thighs, the slickness of our combined sweat, and the undeniable truth that, in one reckless moment, we’d officially consummated our marriage.

Demi

Four weeks later.

I pressed my palm against the cold glass, my breath fogging the window as I gazed out at the sprawling expanse of Mexico City below. The sun dipped behind the distant mountains, painting the sky in water colored hues of orange and pink that reminded me of the sunsets back home in Chicago. But this wasn’t home. It was what I used to consider my gilded cage, my beautiful prison.

Four weeks. It’d been four weeks since Ozias kidnapped me from the private villa, whisking me away to his compound in Cabo. Now, we were in his luxurious home on the outskirts of Mexico City because he’d killed the cartel leader and wanted to ensure my safety in case of any retaliation. That, and to keep my father from finding

me, I suspected. What I didn't expect was to feel a mix of emotions—conflicted, confused, and, dare I say, content.

The city lights began to twinkle as nightfall settled in, and a galaxy of stars spread out before me. It was breathtaking, really. So different from the harsh, concrete jungle of Chicago, yet just as alive and vibrant.

A throat cleared behind me, startling me from my thoughts. I didn't need to turn around to know it was him. Ozias. His masculine presence and the scent of his familiar cologne filled the room, electric and intense. I could almost feel the heat radiating from his body, even from across the room.

“Enjoying the view, *mi amor*?” he inquired. His voice was a rumble that sent shivers down my spine.

I dipped my chin, not trusting myself to speak. How could I explain that I wasn't just admiring the cityscape but contemplating how my entire world had shifted in almost a month?

His footsteps approached, and I tensed instinctively. But Ozias didn't touch me. He came to stand beside me, his reflection appearing in the glass. I studied him—the sharp line of his bearded jaw, the intensity in his dark eyes, the faded scar that cut across his neck. He was handsome in a dangerous way, like a hunter poised to strike. He had me mesmerized. I felt my heart beating out of my chest and through my clothes, and he'd only uttered a few words.

“It's beautiful,” I finally said, gesturing to the panorama before us. “I've never seen anything quite like it.”

Ozias's lips curved into a smile. “Mexico City has its charms. Very different from Chicago, no?”

I couldn't help but chuckle. "You could say that. Although I suppose both cities have their fair share of danger and intrigue."

"Ah, but here, the danger is more . . . exciting, wouldn't you say? There's more spice, more sex, and a hell of a lot more guns." There was a glint in his eye that made my heart skip a beat.

I slowly turned to face him fully, crossing my arms over my chest. "Is that why you brought me here? For the spice and the sex?"

His expression darkened slightly. "You know exactly why I brought you here, Demi. It was necessary."

"Necessary," I repeated, tasting the word. "Necessary for your plans, you mean. For your power play against my father and the other cartels."

He didn't deny it. Instead, he reached out, his fingers grazing my cheek. I should've flinched or shied away, but I didn't. His touch was gentle, almost reverent. "Yes, it was necessary. But that doesn't mean I haven't come to . . . appreciate your company."

I scoffed, but there was no real venom in it. "Oh, I'm sure. Who wouldn't appreciate having a hostage who didn't cause too much trouble?"

"Is that what you think you are? A hostage?" Ozias questioned.

I met his gaze with defiance. "Isn't that exactly what I am? You kidnapped me, Ozias. You took me from my family. Not to mention what else you took from me."

"And yet, here you stand. Not bound, not locked away. Free to wander this house, to look out upon the city, to get the shit fucked out of you or that sweet pussy licked

whenever you want,” he said, gesturing to the bulge behind his dress slacks. “Tell me, Demi. If you truly felt like a hostage, why haven’t you tried to escape since we tied the knot?”

His question threw me for a loop. Why hadn’t I tried to escape? The answer made my stomach knot up.

“I . . . I don’t know,” I whispered, turning back to the window. My reflection stared back at me, wide-eyed. Who is this woman I’ve become?

Ozias moved closer, his hard, tatted chest nearly touching my back. I felt his heat and smelled the spice of his cologne mixed with something uniquely him. “I think you do know, *mi amor*. I think you’re starting to realize that perhaps this isn’t such a terrible fate after all.”

I whirled around to face him, anger flaring. “Don’t presume to know what I’m thinking or feeling, Ozias. You may have taken me away from my home, and I may have handed over my pussy a time or two, but you’ll never take my mind.”

He chuckled, the familiar sound dark and rich. “There she is. There’s the fire that’s captivating *mi corazón*.”

His words ‘captivating my heart’ hung in the air between us, heavy and charged. I blinked, unsure if I heard him correctly. “I can’t believe you just said that. What, are you falling for me?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

His expression softened slightly. “This dance we’ve been doing these past few weeks has caused me to have feelings for you that stretch far beyond lust, and I think you have those same feelings for me.”

I shook my head, trying to clear it of the thoughts I’d been trying to suppress. Obviously, I’d been doing a poor job of hiding how badly I wanted him. But I was tired of pretending I didn’t want Ozias to come and break my back every waking minute. I could spend all day riding his sexy ass face.

I cleared my throat in an effort to dismiss my inappropriate thoughts. “I’d call it Stockholm Syndrome, maybe. Or just plain insanity.”

“Is it insanity to find a connection where you least expect it?” He inched a step closer, and I had to tilt my head up to maintain eye contact. “It must be so maddening to discover that the villain in your story isn’t as monstrous as you once assumed.”

His words echoed my own thoughts from earlier, and it unnerved me. “You’re still a criminal, Ozias. A cartel leader. A kidnapper.”

“And you’re the daughter of a mafia don,” he countered. “We’re both products of our worlds, Demi. But that doesn’t mean we can’t take what we learned and build something better.”

I laughed bitterly. “Build something better? What does that even mean? I’m here because you needed a bargaining chip against my father.”

Ozias’s hand came up to cup my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip. I should’ve bit

him or shoved him away. Instead, I found myself leaning into his gentle touch. A part of me—a nagging, treacherous part—never wanted Ozias to stop touching me. I melted every time he gave me a glimpse of his softer side. There was something about his presence that made my racing thoughts stop.

“You were a means to an end, yes,” he admitted. “But you’ve become so much more than that. Can’t you feel that shit? Admit it.”

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed by the conflicting emotions warring within me. Part of me wanted to scream, to fight, to demand he take me back to Chicago immediately. But another part—a part that was growing stronger every day—wanted to stay right here, in the moment, with him. I felt tethered to him in a way that surpassed a ball and chain.

“I don’t know what I feel anymore,” I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. “Everything’s so confusing. You’ve turned my world upside down, O.”

His other hand came to rest on my waist, reeling me in closer. “I like it when you call me that.”

I sucked my teeth. “Whatever.”

“Seriously though. Perhaps it needed to be turned upside down. Maybe this is exactly where you’re meant to be.”

I opened my eyes, meeting his intense gaze. “And where is that, exactly? In the arms of my kidnapper husband? In a foreign country, cut off from everything and everyone I’ve ever known or loved?”

“In a place where you can finally be yourself,” he responded without hesitation. “Where you’re not bound by your father’s expectations or the rigid rules of your

family's world. Here, with me, you can be free.”

The irony of his words didn't escape my attention. “Free? As your captive bride?”

He swung his head in a no. “Never as my captive. As my equal. My partner. My wife.”

I raised a questioning brow. “Partner? In what, exactly? Your criminal empire?”

His lips quirked into a smirk. “Why not? You have the intelligence, the craft. You understand this world better than most. Together, we could be fuckin' unstoppable.”

The offer was tempting. I couldn't deny that. To have real power, real work—something I'd never truly had under my father's thumb and watchful eye. But could I trust Ozias? Hell, could I trust myself?

“And what if I say no?” I challenged, unable to douse the fire inside me. “What if I tell you I want to go home?”

His grip on my waist tightened slightly. “Is that truly what you want, Demi? To return to Chicago, to your father's control? To be married off to the highest bidder for the sake of alliances and power?”

I cringed at the reminder of my father's plans for me—to marry me off to the next highest bidder or killer. Ozias saw it, and his expression softened.

“I'm not holding you prisoner here. If you want to leave, I won't stop you. But I'm asking you to stay. To give this—give us—a real chance. And I never ask people for anything.”

I searched his face, looking for any sign of deception. But all I saw was sincerity and

something that looked dangerously close to love.

“I still don’t know if I can trust you,” I admitted.

He nodded. “I understand. Trust must be earned. But just know, if I didn’t give a fuck, I’d hold back a whole lot more from you, but I’m an open book with you, and that shit just doesn’t happen with me. Ever. It’s not in my nature at all.”

I took a deep breath, considering my choices. Return to Chicago, to the life that suffocated me? Or stay here, in this beautiful, dangerous new world, with this beautiful, dangerous man?

“I need some time,” I said, clearing my throat before I changed the subject. “Have you heard any news?” I probed.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:01 am

His expression shifted from mush to stone almost instantly, becoming more serious. “Your father has been putting out feelers, trying to locate you, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

My heart skipped a beat at the mention of my father. A month ago, his news would’ve filled me with hope, with the promise of rescue. Now, I was surprised to find myself feeling . . . conflicted.

“Oh?” I said, keeping my tone neutral, not wanting to reveal the turmoil of emotions swirling inside me. “Did you hear anything specific?”

Ozias studied me intently as if trying to gauge my reaction. “Are you sure you want to know?”

I nodded while internally bracing myself. “Yes. Tell me.”

As Ozias relayed the information, I found myself struggling to blur the man before me—protective, attentive, even loving at times—with the brutal cartel leader I’d been warned about, that I’d seen in action. He wasn’t the monster I’d imagined in my nightmares, and I was no longer convinced that my father was the savior I once believed him to be.

“Demi,” Ozias said, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind my ear. “What are you thinking?”

I leaned into his touch, surprising myself with the action. “I’m thinking . . . that if you knew what happened the last time I opened my heart to someone, then you’d know

why it's hard for me to look you in your face for more than a few seconds at a time. That, and nothing is as black and white as I once believed it was."

Ozias's dark eyes searched mine, though his expression was unreadable. "Mmm, very true. Your father claims he'll get our marriage annulled," he stated, his voice low and controlled.

I felt a sudden tightness in my chest. "Annulled?" I repeated, the word tasting bitter on my tongue.

He nodded, his jaw clenching. "So you can marry a Russian businessman."

My chest deflated with a heavy sigh, and my shoulders sagged. Of course. Another chess piece for my father to move across his board of power and influence. "Let me guess, someone with deep pockets and useful connections?"

"Alexei Fedorov," Ozias confirmed, his brows turning downward. "The mothafucka is known for his brutality, especially toward women. It's pathetic how your father would willingly put you through something like that for his own gain."

A chill ran down my spine. I'd heard a few whispers about Fedorov here and there at my father's club. None of them were good. My stomach lurched at the thought of being handed over to such an animal.

"Wow," I mumbled while running a hand through my hair. "And here I thought my father might actually be worried about me."

Ozias's hands curled into fists at his sides. "You deserve better than to be treated like a commodity, Demi."

I looked up at him, really looking at him for more than a couple of fleeting blinks.

The fierce protectiveness in his eyes, the tension in his strong posture—he was genuinely angry on my behalf. When was the last time anyone outside of my cousin Dominic had shown such concern for my well-being?

“It’s always been that way,” I said softly, more to myself than to Ozias. “I’m the only child. I’ve always been at his will. Jump when he says jump, marry who he tells me to marry. It’s the least I can do for not being born with a penis between my legs and killing my mother in the process,” I said callously.

I turned back to the window, gazing out at the sprawling cityscape of Mexico City. The realization hit me like a bucket of ice-cold water: Ozias, the man who kidnapped me, was looking out for me more than my own father ever had.

“Maybe . . . maybe this is my chance to live my life the way I want to.”

I felt Ozias move closer, his presence warm and solid behind me. “And how do you want to live?”

I spun around to face him, my heart pounding straight through my chest. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a choice, and I wanted to make the right one. My future depended on it. “I’m not sure yet,” I admitted. “I think I’d like to find out, but I have questions. Questions I need answers to right now.”

Ozias arched a furrowed brow. “Ask away, *mi amor*.”

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for the answer to the question that’d been gnawing at me for weeks. “What was the point in marrying me?”

His expression shifted as he ran a hand through his short, dark hair before answering.

“Politically, it was a strategic move. The marriage ties me to your father’s allies and

the Malone family. It created an alliance that strengthened my position within the cartel world.”

I nodded, having expected as much. But Ozias continued, his eyes never leaving mine.

“More importantly, it offers protection. Many of my enemies won’t dare move against me now, knowing that an act against you is an act against the Malones. Your father may be . . .” He paused, choosing his words carefully. “Misguided in his treatment of you, but his reputation precedes him. The thought of incurring his wrath is enough to make even the most ruthless men think twice about fucking with me or my business. At least the smart ones.”

I processed the information, feeling a strange mix of understanding and disappointment. “So, I’m just a shield then? A human bulletproof vest for you?”

“No, Demi. You’re far more than that.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

He took a step closer, and I felt the warmth radiating off his body. “When I first proposed this arrangement, those were my primary motivations. But now . . .” His voice trailed off, and I noticed a vulnerability in his eyes that I’d never witnessed before.

“Now?” I probed, my heart skipping every other beat.

Ozias’s soft lips curved into a smirk. “Now, I find myself continually surprised by you. Your confidence, even in the face of danger. The compassion you show, despite the dark underworld you’ve been brought up in.”

A warmth spread through my chest as I listened to his words. “I’m not sure I’m as confident or compassionate as you think,” I admitted.

He chuckled, the sound rich and warm. “Oh, but you are, *mi amor*. You challenge me in ways I never expected. You bring out the best in me . . . and at times, I must admit, the worst.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that, remembering some of our more heated exchanges early on. “I guess I do have a talent for getting under your skin.”

Ozias joined in my laughter, the sound echoing through the room. It was a moment of lightness I never thought I’d share with the man known as ‘El Diablo.’ As our laughter subsided, I found myself studying him—the scars that marked his tattooed skin, a testament to the violent world he inhabited and the intensity in his eyes that both thrilled and terrified me.

How did we get here? From captor and captive to . . . whatever this is now?

“You know, you bring out sides of me I never knew existed too,” I said, surprising myself with my openness.

“Is that so?” he murmured.

I nodded, feeling a mix of excitement and apprehension at the tension building between us. “I never thought I’d be capable of adapting to this world. Of finding the strength in myself I always knew I had but never thought I’d be able to fully show. At least not outside of the poker table.”

Ozias reached out, his calloused hand gently cupping my cheek. “You’ve always had that strength, Demi. You just needed the chance to show it off.”

As I leaned into his touch, I realized that for the first time in my life, I felt truly seen, not as a pawn in my father’s games, not as a prize to be won, but as myself. And in that moment, with the man who was once my enemy, I realized I didn’t want a piece, a slice, or a half. I wanted all of him. Forever.

My hand connected with Ozias’s in a decisive grasp, slowly guiding his hand away from my face and down the center of my body before stopping at the top of my pussy. The intense thumping of my heart echoed through the otherwise silent room. It was so loud I was almost sure he could hear it too.

Ozias’s eyes popped wide with a look of surprise flashing across his face before it was replaced by something darker, more primal. He chuckled, the sound sending shivers down my spine as he cupped my pussy in his hand. “Oh, you want to play? I know what’ll get you out of those clothes,” he growled.

Before I could react, Ozias was on me. His large hand wrapped around my throat, not

painfully, but with enough pressure to make my pulse race and my pussy cream. He backed me up against the wall, his body pressed against mine, trapping me. I should've been terrified—maybe even put up a fight. But all I felt was an overwhelming surge of desire, hot, wet, and fucking urgent.

“Fuck me, O,” I growled, the words tumbling out before I had sense enough to stop them.

Ozias's eyes popped wide then narrowed with heated intensity. “As you wish, princessa,” he promised before his lips crashed down on mine and his hand snaked around my throat.

The kiss was rough and passionate, all teeth and tongue, a battle for dominance that left me breathless. His hand left my throat, sliding down to grip my hip, pulling me impossibly closer.

I tangled my fingers in his low-cut curls, tugging sharply at the roots. He groaned into my mouth, and the sound sent a jolt of electricity through my body.

“O,” I said with a gasp as he trailed kisses down my neck, nipping at my sensitive skin. “I don't know how much more of this I can take . . .”

“Tell me what you want, Demi,” he demanded.

“You,” I managed to whisper. “Every drop of you.”

He pulled back, his eyes searching mine. “Are you sure? There's no going back from this.”

I nodded, my heart pounding. “I'm sure. I want this. I want you.”

A slow, predacious smile snaked up one side of his face. “Then let me show you what it means to be mine, Demi.”

The moment our eyes locked, I knew there was no turning back. His gaze was as intoxicating as the finest whiskey, leaving me drunk on its intensity. He rasped out my name again, saying it as though it was a prayer, a curse, and a promise all at once.

His hands slid down my sides, rough against the silk of my dress. The fabric slid off my body with a whisper, leaving me naked to his burning gaze. His touch became gentler then, exploring my form with care that contradicted his earlier roughness.

I arched into his touch, a gasp escaping my lips as he traced the curve of my C-cup breasts. His gaze flicked up to meet mine, and what I saw made me tremble; I felt a desire for me, raw and unfiltered.

“O,” I pleaded, needing him to understand the depth of what I felt for him. He silenced me with a kiss, his soft lips searing against mine.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

Slowly, he lowered me onto the velvet chaise, his body hovering above mine as he peppered soft kisses along my neckline. His hand snaked its way down my abdomen, leaving a trail of fire in its aftermath. My breath hitched at the intimate touch, and he stilled, his eyes meeting mine once more.

“Tell me how bad you want papi to give you this dick,” he demanded, his voice breaking through the haze of desire.

I nodded, reaching out to cup the full beard that wrapped around his face as my thumbs traced the sharp curve of his cheekbones. I purred as my naughty intentions slipped past my lips. “I want you to punish this pussy like you fuckin’ mean it.”

His breath hitched at my words, dark eyes softening. With a slow, calculated move, Ozias loosened his pants and greeted me with his mouthwatering erection. He pushed inside me, instantly deepening our connection as his hips pressed against mine in a tantalizing rhythm. Our bodies moved as one, an erotic dance as old as time itself.

Every gasp and moan we uttered was swallowed by our joined mouths, along with every shudder and sigh echoing through the large bedroom. The world outside our little bubble ceased to exist. There was only us.

“Fuck me, Ozias. Fuck me harder,” I urged.

His eyes glinted with feral hunger at my demand, darkening with desire. He kissed me fiercely, passionately, claiming my mouth as his own. The taste of him intoxicated me, and the raw intensity of my yearning for him had shattered any ounce of restraint in my possession.

“God, yes!” I cried out as he plunged into me deeper.

A guttural growl left his lips as he set a punishing pace, his athletic body a solid weight against mine. His rhythmic movements were commanding and deliberate, a domination that only a man of his stature and grit could achieve.

I felt every powerful thrust of him inside me. His hands gripped my thick hips, guiding my movements to match the rhythmic dance of our bodies. Sweat trickled down our chests as passion radiated off us in crashing waves. My nails dug into his back, making him grunt as he buried himself deeper within me.

“Mine,” he claimed me with a groan, his voice hoarse as he tightened his hold on me. His possessiveness sent a thrill coursing through my veins, stoking the fire that burned deep inside me. “You’re mine, Demi,” he repeated, each word punctuated by another thrust that siphoned a moan from my lips. I could only nod in agreement, lost in the intoxicating rhythm we’d created.

I purred. “All yours.”

My heart thumped against my ribs as he ground into me, claiming me in every way possible before pulling out only long enough to switch positions.

He flipped me over onto my knees, and I eagerly got on all fours. The anticipation was nothing compared to the sensation of him pushing inside me, filling me up in one smooth, powerful stroke. My body stretched taut around him, welcoming the invasion with a silent scream of ecstasy.

“Fuck,” I said with a gasp, unable to contain the rush of pleasure that cascaded through me.

Ozias didn’t respond with words. Instead, he started moving, his hips driving into me

with a slow, deep rhythm that was both torturous and divine. He took his time, each thrust deliberate, deep, hard, exploring and claiming every inch of me over and over again. I balled up the sheets in my fists, trying to keep myself in place and my legs open for him and him only.

“Like that?” He grunted, his hand finding my clit and teasing it with an expertise that had my entire existence spiraling into bliss.

“Yes,” I managed to whisper between moans.

The sound of our flesh slapping together filled the room, as primal as the act itself.

“Good,” he growled, his fingers working magic on my sensitive spot. “Cum for me, mi amor. Show papi how much you love this dick deep inside you.”

His command shattered any residue of my control, and I unraveled around him, waves of intense pleasure rolling through me in a relentless tide. My groans mingled with his, the sound of my name on his lips fanning the flames even higher.

“That’s it, Demi. Cum all over this dick. It’s yours, baby,” Ozias promised through a primal growl. His movements became erratic as he chased his own release, and I felt the shudder of his body as he came, his grip on my hips tightening to the point of pain. “Fuckkkkkkkk!” he groaned.

Through the haze of my orgasm, I felt him pulsing within me, his seed flowing wild and uncontained. Lying there spent and panting, I knew this was complete madness, but the thrill of the unknown only added fuel to the fire. Lust was produced when our bodies collided, but love developed unexpectedly when our hearts became more than just the organs that kept us alive. They became our lifelines, tethered to each other until death did us part.

That blissful, carefree feeling was what I'd always wanted, but I never thought I'd fall so hard for the man who kidnapped me. What we had was stronger than the aged tequila on his top shelf and deadlier than snake venom. I knew he was far from perfect, but somehow, he'd still managed to carve out a space in my heart, which was something no man had done since my cheating ex. Whatever life brought our way, I knew Ozias and I would get through it, even if we were the only two standing after the world burned down. We were quite the fucking pair, and the fluttering in my chest told me it was only the beginning.

Then, there was a knock on the door, and everything changed.

"Jefe?" I heard a baritone voice call out, recognizing it as Ángel's.

A groan escaped Ozias's soft lips as reality began to sink in around us. "Fuck. I'm sorry, mi amor. This should only take a minute," he promised as he started to redress. "Don't move. I wanna see you just like that when I return."

I nodded with a sultry smirk. "I'm not going anywhere," I promised him, meaning the words in more ways than one.

I watched Ozias redress and exit the bedroom, leaving me naked on the velvet chaise. When he returned a few minutes later, his entire demeanor had changed. His expression was cold, and his posture was stiff and almost militant-like. I instantly sat up when he looked at me, eyes devoid of emotion.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“Get dressed,” he commanded. “Your father and his men have touched down in Mexico.”

My heart did a backflip inside my chest. “W-what?” I inquired, unsure of the words I’d just heard.

“He’s coming for you, Demi. And I’ll be damned if I let him have you.”

The time had finally come for me to pick a side. And now that I knew the truth about my father’s intentions and had seen a softer side of Ozias, which one would I choose?

Ozias

A couple of hours later, the phone vibrated on the mahogany nightstand, slicing through the unspoken tension inside my bedroom. I reached over and picked it up, glancing at the name illuminated on the screen—Cyrus Malone. My heart skipped a beat. Cyrus wasn’t the type of man who called to shoot the shit; his call alone meant it was close to showtime. A warning always came before destruction.

I answered calmly. “Cyrus, to what do I owe the pleasure?” I answered, tone thick with sarcasm.

“Cut the shit, Ozias,” he replied in his typical greasy voice. “You know why I’m calling.”

“I do?”

A part of me was amused. I knew I had Demi right where I wanted her. From the beginning, I didn't hide anything from her about who her father was and his selfish intentions, and I showed her the actual value of her worth. There was no way she'd go back to living under his thumb now that I'd given her the opportunity to taste true power. That, and making her pussy bust like an AK every chance I got. She'd never leave me.

He scoffed. "You've been a tough man to track down, but you fucked with the wrong one this time. Tonight, all that changes. I'm sending my men in. Give me back Demi, and annul the marriage, or lose everything, including your fuckin' life."

My jaw clenched. "Is that a threat?"

"No," Cyrus grumbled. "It's a fuckin' promise. My men and I are on their way to your gates as we speak. Armed and waiting. I want my daughter back in my custody in the next fifteen minutes or else. Tick-tock, mothafucka."

Then, the line went dead.

Rage boiled inside me, scorching my veins and causing me to propel the phone across the room. I stormed over to the window, needing to see for myself. Sure enough, four pairs of headlights were driving up the curvy road to my iron gates, casting long shadows against my mansion. I was able to make out figures of my men—armed—and standing the gate.

I spun around and raced to my bedside to immediately begin barking orders into the intercom. "Get the fucking security team! I want every man available armed and at their posts now! We're not letting these mothafuckas take a single step onto this property, and we're damn sure not letting him take her!"

Demi stood nearby with worry etched into her expression. "W-what's happening?"

“Your father,” I answered curtly. “He’s come for you. He’s finally making his move.”

Her lips thinned. “He’s outside r-right now?”

“At the gates as we speak.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

I swung my head in a sharp no. “I’ll handle him. You stay here where it’s safe. I’ll send Javier to protect you.”

“No, Ozias. Absolutely not!”

“This isn’t up for fuckin’ debate, Demi. I said no!” I barked while pulling out my bulletproof vest.

My voice rose as I contemplated putting it on her, but knew it was two sizes too big for her small frame and would likely weigh her down. If it came down to it, I’d take a bullet for her with no question.

Her firm gaze met mine, equally determined. “You said it yourself. You need me,” she said, her tone softer but no less determined. “You said I was the queen, right? Then let me reign.”

I glared at her for a long minute, torn between my instinct to protect her and the fact that the truth she’d spoken had turned me on. Finally, I nodded half-heartedly. “Fine. But your ass better stick to me like fuckin’ glue, Demi. No hero bullshit. I may not have another vest, but I’m not letting you go out there without being strapped. Have you ever shot a gun before? It’s real simple. Aim at the fuckin’ enemy, release the safety, and pull that trigger as hard as you can.”

“Okay,” she said, striding forward to stand at my side. “I can handle myself. I got it.”

I strapped us both up, and we went downstairs hand in hand. Outside, the rumble of engines grew louder, and the standoff between my men and his began to take shape at the gates.

As Demi and I stepped out of the mansion, the line of armed men stationed at the gates came into clearer sight, illuminated by the vehicle headlights of Cyrus Malone and his men. We inched closer, walking in step with each other as if we were of one body. At the heart of it all stood Cyrus, a towering melanated figure projecting a familiar aura of command even in the darkness of the night.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“Tell them to open the gates,” Demi instructed.

“No.”

“I know my father. He’s not going to back down until I’m on the other side of that gate.”

Instinctively, I gritted my teeth as my hand let go of hers to brush against the weapon holstered on my right hip. I knew she was right, but I still didn’t trust it.

“Please. It’s the only way to stop this.”

I sighed before signaling for the gates to open slightly.

Then, without notice, Demi broke into a dash. “Demi, stop!” I called out, my voice cracking through my clenched jaw, but she didn’t listen.

I broke out after her, halting only a couple of feet away when I saw her fling her arms around her father, burying her face in his broad shoulder. For a heartbeat in time, everything seemed to freeze, and I felt the icy sting of disloyalty twist inside my chest. My jaw tightened so hard I thought I’d crack my teeth. My doubt continued to blossom as negative thoughts danced through my head—had she led me into a fuckin’ trap? Would she choose her family over me and everything I could give her? For the first time, I didn’t know if Demi was riding for me or if she was riding against me. It was a scary feeling, and I wasn’t the kind of man who was easily spooked.

Then, her soft voice sliced through the chaos. “Daddy, please stop this!” she pleaded

as she drew back to look him in the eyes. “Ozias told me about your plans to force us to get an annulment so that you can marry me off to some Russian businessman to strengthen your alliances. I don’t want to be a pawn anymore, Daddy. I won’t do it.”

I watched her father’s expression darken as his jaw tightened like mine. “You’re my daughter, and you’ll do as you’re told,” he growled, his tone thick with malice.

“No!” she shot back, her tone sharp as a blade. “I’m done being treated like a pawn one minute and a piece of property the next! I’m not going back to Chicago with you. I choose to stay here with him. No annulment. No war. If you love me, you’ll agree to walk away without bloodshed.”

For a second, her father stared her down. His stormy features were a blend of wrath and surprise. Then he straightened his spine, and his expression turned as hard as granite. “Oh, you naïve little bitch. Don’t you know blood is the love language of the cartel? That’s what you’re choosing to stay married to, which means you’re no daughter of mine,” he hissed, his tone sharp like the crack of a whip.

A muffled gunshot went off, and a sharp gasp from her lips split the air before Demi’s body jerked violently. Her eyes widened in shock as she stumbled, her hand clutching her stomach. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as her body doubled over and her knees buckled beneath her. She pulled her hand away to see a pool of crimson on her palm.

“No!” I yelled, my voice tearing from my throat, raw and gruff. Everything around me blurred as the sounds of the fight faded into the distance. All I could see was her, falling in excruciatingly slow motion. I lunged forward, catching her just before her head hit the cold, hard pavement.

Amid the chaos, her eyes fluttered open, and a tear slipped out the corner of her eye

as she clung to me. “I-I. H-he s-shot . . .”

“Shh,mi amor,” I whispered as I cradled her in my arms. Blood seeped through her fingers, staining both our hands. “You’re . . . okay,” I murmured, though my voice was weak.

Cyrus’s action had unleashed full-on anarchy. The battle was deafening—gunfire crackling, shouts echoing, and the smell of smoke and blood filling the air as I shouted orders to my men, signaling the snipers on the roof and then the men on the ground to attack without mercy. Wrath ignited me, a fire in my chest that burned more than any tequila, burning away any fear and hesitation inside me. I moved like a man possessed by the devil himself, shielding Demi as I navigated us through the battlefield and back into the mansion.

I gently laid her down, my jaw set into a hard line and eyes blazing with a savage intensity to rip her father and his men to tiny shreds. A loud roar came out of me as I summoned for someone to get her medical assistance. She was losing more and more blood by the second and we didn’t have a minute to spare. Rising to my feet, I turned back toward the fight, my war cry slicing through the night.

Above me, the moon hung high in the sky as the darkness stretched on for miles. The stars were barely detectable behind the curtain of gun smoke, wandering like lost souls through the night air. The ground beneath my feet was littered with expended shell casings, blood, bodies, and broken glass.

The grounds continued to erupt into a warzone, with echoing cracks and flashes of deadly gunfire. I didn’t give a fuck. My eyes quickly scanned the scene, searching for Demi’s father. Thoughts of Demi’s bleeding, helpless body danced through my head, powering my fury. He’d hurt my wife, my reason for existing, and he deserved a fate worse than death. Our feud had reached its boiling point, and neither of us was willing to back down. It was a big joker, little joker situation, and I wasn’t about to

get bitched.

My chest swelled with a deep breath as I reached for a grenade from my vest, pulled the pin, and launched it ten yards forward, firing as I moved closer, dead set on ending everything for good. Seconds later, the blast rocked the Earth, throwing my enemies to the ground. I plunged deeper into the chaos, my gun blazing, each shot fired with remorseless accuracy. My men assembled behind me, inspired by my rage.

Gunfire sizzled through the air. I ducked behind an overturned truck, sweat trickling down my furrowed brow as I holstered my empty weapon and picked up a nearby assault rifle. My heart jackhammered against my ribs as I shot up, advancing forward with my AK raised, finger trained on the trigger. I fired at the hood of one of his flaming vehicles, bullets cracking against the bulletproof truck, sending fragments and gold sparks flying through the sky like fireworks.

For a blink in time, Cyrus and I locked eyes across the frontlines, both realizing that if we continued, one of us wouldn't live to see the sunrise. I had every intention of that being him. Soon, the tide began to turn, and Cyrus's men began to succumb to the attack.

But my mind was on tunnel vision. Things had gone too far and burned too deep to abandon. It wasn't a fight for survival, dominance, or power—it was fuckin' personal. Every order I barked, every kill shot I took, was my solemn vow to my wife: Cyrus Malone would pay for what he did in this life and the next.

Demi

Two days later.

The first thing I noticed was the quiet. There was no hum of machines, no distant echo of footsteps—just an unnatural, pressing stillness. Am I dead? Is this Heaven?

My eyelids slowly fluttered open, and I scanned the room. The soft light of the chandelier overhead signaled that I wasn't in just any hospital. The room had artwork displayed on earth-tone-colored walls and lavish seating for visitors throughout the spacious area. It was as private as it was posh and faintly smelled of antibacterial supplies and fresh-cut roses.

Turning my head to the left, I spotted him—Ozias, slouched in a plush recliner chair beside my bed with his hand wrapped around mine. His clothes were wrinkled, and the faint bags under his eyes hinted at more than one sleepless night. He looked up the moment I tried to slip my hand away.

“You're awake,” he said, relief evident in his voice. He leaned closer, brushing a strand of dry hair from my face.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

He shot me a half smile, but his eyes were haunted. Drained, but not just from sleeplessness. There was a heaviness to them, an unspoken load he'd chosen to carry for us both.

“W-where are we?” I croaked out, sounding like a frog.

My voice was dry and unfamiliar to my ears. He quickly grabbed a cup of ice water and placed the straw up to my lips so that I could rehydrate. After a moment, I pulled away and cleared my throat. “Thank you.”

He dipped his chin with hesitation. “Still in Mexico City. You're safe now.”

“What happened?”

I watched his Adam's apple bob up and down inside his throat as he went back and forth inside his mind on what to say and what parts to omit. His chest inflated with a slow, deep breath as his fingers tightened around mine. “Your father hurt you, Demi. The doctors had to operate to stop the bleeding from the gunshot wound. They got the bullet out, but they couldn't save . . .” He paused as he looked up at me. “They couldn't save the baby.”

My heart ceased to beat. “The baby? What baby? I-I was pregnant?” I whispered as my mind raced with a million questions.

Pregnant? I hadn't even known. I hadn't felt different. There hadn't been a sign or an inkling.

Ozias nodded, his own pain carved into every line of his hauntingly handsome brown face. “You didn’t know. Neither did I. But—” He hesitated, and it wasn’t hard for me to see the pain in his eyes. “There’s more. The damage was severe. The doctors said there might be permanent scarring, and there’s a chance you might not be able to have children.”

The words struck me like a bodily blow to the gut, each one plummeting deeper until I felt nothing but emptiness inside. Without warning, tears gushed from my eyes, but I wasn’t sure if they were from my sorrow, rage, or utter disbelief. I gently pressed a trembling hand to my flat stomach, and the hollowness there suddenly became excruciatingly hard to process.

The baby had been collateral damage in my father’s campaign for power and control. I felt robbed of something precious, a life snuffed out from my womb before I even had the opportunity to appreciate it—before it even had a chance to blossom fully. Ozias’s words echoed in my mind: You might not be able to have children.

And then, the realization hit me like a second tidal wave, more violent than the first. Cyrus Malone. My father. The man who’d brought me into the world and tried to take me out had been the puppet master in my nightmare. Even after all his greed and shady business arrangements, he’d come with his men, one of them being my cousin Dominic, knowing full well the violence and bloodshed that would follow. And now, because of him, the life growing inside me had vanished, leaving my future as a mother with a permanent question mark.

I parted my lips to speak, and my voice was barely a whisper. “How could he do this to me?”

Ozias’s anger was apparent in the way his bearded jaw tightened. “Because he doesn’t give a fuck about anyone but himself, Demi. Now you know that firsthand.”

The walls seemed to close in around me, suffocating me in its stillness. My father—the man whose blood flowed through my veins—had orchestrated all of this. And for what? A power play to see whose balls were bigger? An alliance that would lead to more bloodshed and treachery? I couldn't even begin to wrap my head around the depths of his sickening betrayal. The man who bought me a pony on my fifth birthday, who called me his “princess,” had disowned and tried to murder me in cold blood without a second thought.

I stared up at the ceiling, trying to slow the tears from slipping down my cheeks. A wave of emotions overtook me—grief for the innocent baby I'd never get to meet, hate toward the man who was supposed to always protect and put me first, and a painful, troubling sadness at the prospect of never being able to experience motherhood. How could I ever forgive him? The question lingered in the forefront of my mind, weighty and unanswerable.

My voice quaked as I broke the silence between us. “Is he . . . dead?”

“He killed our child, mi amor. I would never let him off so easily as to reward him with death. He deserves to suffer.”

“Where is he?”

“Locked away on my compound.”

“I want to see him,” I said firmly, my gaze stationed on his.

“No. I went against my gut and listened to you once. I'm never doing that again. Not after what he did to you.”

“I want to see him, Ozias. I deserve to face the man who tried to kill me.”

Ozias's expression darkened before he sighed heavily. "When you're strong enough, mi amor. You have my word. But I'm not letting you go alone, even if that means handcuffing your wrist to mine."

He gave my hand a squeeze, but it barely registered. My thoughts were too busy spiraling inward.

"And my cousin Dominic?" I inquired with hesitance, unsure if I could take any more bad news.

Ozias's expression remained cold. "My men and I went to war against your father after he shot you. None of his men survived in the crossfire. If he was there, he's dead. I'm sorry."

We both knew he wasn't sorry, but I nodded anyway. My chest instantly tightened, and my throat burned with even more unshed tears. He was the only loyal family member I had left. I couldn't help but think of my cousin and the fact that my father's recklessness had extinguished his life in the blink of an eye. Still, he'd chosen a side, and it was the opposite of mine.

Rage boiled inside me, mingling with my heartache until it became something distorted and unrecognizable. My father had been right about one thing: Blood was the love language of the cartel, and I intended to make him pay me back in his. I wanted to scream, to bawl, to rip out his heart and feel its last beat in my hand. And yet, I knew I needed answers. I needed to look him in his eyes and ask him why he'd chosen his own selfish desires over the betterment of his flesh and blood. But most of all, I needed to tell him that, despite everything he'd taken from me, he hadn't won. The queen remained the most important piece on the board.

Ozias

Two weeks later.

The humidity in the evening air was thick, clinging to my brown skin like a second shadow as I led Demi down the dimly lit passage. The flicker of a few overhead bulbs was the only light we had as we marched past the aged, crumbling concrete walls.

The stench hit my nose first—a stomach-turning fusion of perspiration, feces, and the tang of rusted chains. It was the familiar smell of desertion, of misery—something Cyrus Malone deserved every fuckin’ bit of.

His cell was far from luxurious. The concrete floor was slick with fresh piss, and the bucket in the corner reeked of filth. A solitary cot rested against the wall with a paper-thin mattress and no pillow to separate his head from the stains left by past captives. Corroded chains dangled from the walls, clinking every time he shifted his weight. His once-massive figure had been reduced to nothing but a hunched bag of bones. The clothes on his back were ragged, and his ugly mug of a face was bloodied and bruised.

Good. He is getting everything his ass deserves. Let the Malone militia or Russians come. I don’t give a fuck.

The tiny window high above his head let in a slice of light through the iron bars, but it did little to erase his oppressed expression or the fact that he hadn’t been fed even a crumb in days. Droplets of water dripped repetitively from a leak in the ceiling, pooling near the back corner where mice scampered and clawed against the decaying stone, trying to escape.

My jaw ticked with rage as I glanced at Demi. Her expression was blank, and her full lips were pressed into a hard line. I wished I had the power to read her mind, though I noticed the conflict in her eyes almost instantly—the daughter who’d done nothing but love and defend her father and the woman who now stood before the monster who’d caused her unspeakable pain.

The irony of it all wasn’t lost on me, though. The villain who’d once been a titan of power and influence in the drug business now looked like a shell of his old self, beaten and chained like an unloved dog. Still, I felt no satisfaction. Not yet. If I had it my way, Demi would’ve never laid eyes on him again. At least not while he was still breathing. I planned to string him up and drag his dead body through the streets of Mexico City for what he’d done to my bride. For what he’d taken from me.

Cyrus eventually acknowledged our presence by looking up at us. His orbs were bloodshot red, but his gaze was still glaring and defiant, which told me his spirit hadn’t been fully broken yet.

“Come to gloat?” he quizzed, his voice raspy from dehydration and abandonment.

I remained silent and kept my hand tightened protectively around Demi’s. The silence stretched on for a few more seconds, weighted with undeclared feelings, before Demi took a cautious step toward her father.

I widened my stance in front of the dimly lit cell, keeping my observation trained on Cyrus. The minute he even breathed funny, I was going to put a bullet in his fuckin’ brain.

“If I had it my way, I’d be doing much more than that,” I began, my tone laced with malice. “You came to my home, knowing full well the war that would unfold. You didn’t just betray your daughter—you took life from her.”

“What?”

I ushered another step closer with my fists clenched at my sides. “You heard me! I lost my unborn child, and I almost lost my wife because of you!” I accused. “Do you know what that feels like? Watching her bleed out in my arms, not knowing if she’d survive? And then to find out we lost a baby. A child we didn’t even know we’d created.”

I paused, my jaw tightening as I tried to contain myself from ripping the bars off the hinges and strangling him to death with my bare hands. I’d never seen myself becoming a father. It was something I never thought I wanted before laying eyes on Demi. But after finding out I’d succeeded in getting her pregnant, I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about what could’ve been every time I looked at her. I imagined her belly swelling with my seed—growing a little boy or girl with my smile and her attitude. Cyrus Malone took that from us.

I leaned in, gripping the bars as my voice dropped to a savage whisper. “You think this cell is your punishment? It’s not even the fuckin’ beginning, mothafucka. I’ll drag your body through the fuckin’ streets and let your corpse rot here, Cyrus. I’ll make sure you feel every drop of the pain you’ve caused us. And just when you think it won’t get worse, I promise you it will.”

My posture straightened, my cold gaze stationed on him as I awaited his response. Cyrus lifted his chin, his rusted chains rattling lightly as his emotionless eyes met mine. There was no guilt in them, no sorrow—only a glint of arrogance he’d had his entire life. He stretched his dry, cracked lips into a defiant smirk.

“You think you’re the hero in this story?” he asked, his raspy voice raw and gravely from dehydration. “You think chaining me like an animal and dragging me through the streets makes you a fuckin’ man? Look at you. You’re no better than me, mothafucka,” he grunted with a scoff. “The intimidating threats, the savagery—it’s

like looking in the fucking mirror, whether you choose to believe it or not. Whether we die today or tomorrow, you'll be burning in the same hell as me when the time comes."

My jaw ticked, but I remained silent. But it seemed my stillness only drove him to continue his bitter monologue.

"You wanna talk about pain and loss, but you don't know what it means to sacrifice your seed if you're not a boss. Everything I ever did, I did it for power, respect, and her," he confessed as he tilted his gaze toward his daughter. "And look where the fuck it got me."

I looked over my shoulder. Demi stood behind me, her face drained yet tense. Again, I found myself wishing I could read her thoughts. In the midst of it all, Cyrus let out a hacking cough that reverberated off the walls of the filthy cell, causing my eyes to shift from Demi back to him.

"She's my fuckin' blood. My seed. My daughter. I raised her! I taught her everything she fucking knows! And you think she's better off with you? The cartel boss who's been defiling my daughter and playing house while mourning a child he probably didn't even fuckin' want before you found out about it? If I couldn't do it, you'll never be able to keep her safe. One call to the Russians, and you're finished. You're nowhere near strong enough."

I inched forward, ready to prove him wrong, my fury visible in my knitted brow and clenched fist, but Demi's soft yet firm grip on my arm stopped me in my tracks. Upon instinct, my attention shifted to her, and for a split second, my stone-like expression softened.

"Demi," he said, chains rattling as he turned toward her. "You can despise me, judge me for my choices, but you'll always be my daughter. You'll never escape that, no

matter whose last name you take on. You're a Malone at heart. It's my blood running through your veins, whether you fuckin' like it or not."

She flinched, tears building up in the corners of her eyes. Cyrus detected it and smirked slightly, knowing he'd gotten under her skin. "See what I mean? Even now, you wanna turn your back on me, but you can't. You know why? Because no matter how much you think you're his, you'll always be mine because we're family, Demi. You'll come to understand it all one day—you don't fuckin' walk away from family."

My words sliced through the silence. "You're not her fuckin' familia anymore," I growled.

Cyrus's arrogant smirk faded, but he remained silent as his gaze lowered to the dirty floor beneath him. The chains rattled as he slumped against the wall, visibly weary. His last words replayed in my head like a broken record, a sour echo of a fallen man desperately clinging to the only thing he had left—his false impression of power and control. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I fished it out, the name on the screen made my chest tighten slightly.

"It's Maya," I muttered to Demi.

"Answer it. I'll be okay here," she assured me.

“You sure?”

She nodded. “Yeah. What’s the worst he can do? Talk me to death?”

I hesitantly stepped a few feet away from the cell out of earshot and placed the phone up to my ear. “Hello?”

“Ozias,” came my sister’s soft reply. Her familiar tone instantly brought me comfort. “I just heard about everything that happened from Javier. Are you alright? How’s Demi?”

I exhaled while running a hand over my curls. I hadn’t told her the full details of the Malone ambush. I didn’t even think I wanted to. Everything still felt so fresh and too tender to discuss. I’d already relived it once to the man I hated the most in this world. “It’s . . . been crazy,” I admitted. “She’s recovering. But . . . we lost a baby.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the phone, followed by deafening silence. Finally, Maya spoke. “I-I didn’t even know she was—oh my God, I’m so sorry, Ozias. My mind is spinning right now. I can’t imagine what you two are going through. What can I do? What do you need from me?”

Neither could I, to be honest. I hadn’t prepared for any of this. “Nothing,” I answered softly before swallowing the lump in my throat as I looked back toward the cell, training my eyes on Demi. “I’ve got it under control.”

“Fuck that! I’m booking a flight, and I’m coming out there,” Maya insisted, her tone firm, which let me know her mind was already made up.

“No,” I said quickly, my tone harsher than I’d intended. “It’s not safe right now. I need you to stay in Texas and keep an eye on you know who.”

“But Ozias—”

“I’m serious, Maya,” I interjected. “I’ve got everything under control here. I just need you to stay put and do what I asked you to do, alright? You’re the only family I’ve got left.”

There was a pause on her end before she expelled a loud sigh. “Okay,” she replied reluctantly. “But if you need me—if either of you needs me—you call me. Any day or anytime, no matter what. Okay?”

“You know I will,” I promised, though I knew it was a lie. The weight of the world still felt like a ton of bricks on my shoulders.

“Speaking of you know who, I’ve still got eyes on her. I flew two of my men out to Chicago yesterday to observe and report.”

I dipped my chin, grateful for the update. “Thank you.”

“Anytime. I love you. Take care of yourself,” she said softly.

“Will do,” I replied before ending the call.

I stared at the phone in the palm of my hand for a moment, the quiet settling around me. I’d stood there and told my sister that I had everything under control, but truthfully, I felt anything but. Between the weight of Demi’s grief, my unexpressed pain, and the boiling rage toward her father, I was barely hanging on by a thread. But for Demi’s sake and the sake of my sanity, I would keep going. I didn’t have a fuckin’ choice.

Demi

The heavy door creaked behind Ozias's departure, leaving me alone in my father's presence. I scoffed just thinking about the term father and what it meant. Whatever its definition was, Cyrus Malone was far from it. I rolled my heavy shoulders before squaring them. The stench of his cell was almost insufferable, but I pushed through by drawing in small breaths.

My steps minced forward, my heels sticking to the grimy floor with each click. The sound of my heels made him look up lazily, his eyes narrowing when they zeroed in on mine.

"Come to see if I've found my moral compass?" he mocked, his tone exuding the sharpest sarcasm his tongue would allow.

I balled my hands into tight fists and halted just out of arm's reach of the rusted iron bars. Keep your cool, Demi. Don't give him the satisfaction of seeing you weak. "We both know that would be a waste of my time."

"Then why are you still standing there?"

I drew in a deep breath, trying to ground myself while choosing my following words carefully. "I want—no—I need to hear the words straight from your mouth. Why, Daddy? How could you do this to me? How could you spill the blood of your child? How could you betray your flesh and blood?"

He replied with an emotionless scoff as he shifted to lean against the concrete wall, the chains rattling with every movement. "Oh, cut the fucking dramatics, Demi. Yes, you were my child, but had you been a son instead of a daughter, maybe you'd be more than a pawn to me. But I can't change biology or life, princess. Pawns will always be sacrificed before the king. That's just the way shit goes."

My chest heaved in and out with fury as my heart rate escalated. “I’m your fucking daughter, not a piece on a chess board, and certainly not your property! You auctioned me off to the highest bidder, showed up to my home and tried to murder me in cold blood, caused the senseless death of my cousin, and—” My voice cracked, and my hands shook with rage and more emotions I couldn’t quite name. “And because of you, I lost my baby. Your only grandchild.”

In a blink, I noticed my father’s stoic expression shift with something—maybe remorse or even shame—but it disappeared as fast as it appeared. “Side effects of the game,” he said coldly. “I did what I thought had to be done. You won’t hear an apology for that.”

My eyes stung with fresh tears, but I blinked them away, refusing to let them fall in his presence. He didn’t deserve one single tear from me. “You could’ve made a different choice,” I retorted with less shake than before. “You chose power over family, cupidity over love. And you have the audacity to sit there, unremorseful, acting like you’re still the fucking king. Look at who you’re ruling over now. The rats in your cell don’t even fucking respect you,” I muttered before spitting at the ground.

My father’s lips twisted into a half-smirk. “You wouldn’t understand. You’re too soft for this life, Demi. All I have to do is talk to you crazy, and you’re like baby shit in the palm of my hand. Contrary to what you believe, this world doesn’t run on butterflies and rainbows. Ask the fuckin’ killer you married.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

Before I could muster up a response, Ozias stepped back inside. His domineering presence filled the small, smelly space almost instantly. His razor-sharp gaze sliced through the tension in the air, darting between my father and me as he assessed the situation.

“What about me?” Ozias growled, stepping protectively in front of me with his finger wrapped around the trigger of his gun. “You don’t deserve to be in her presence any fuckin’ longer. And if you ever open your mouth to speak to my wife like that again, I swear to God I’ll be on your ass quicker than a rabbit fucking his bitch.”

“Do what you gotta do, mothafucka. Dying is the easy part.”

“No,” I interrupted, placing a hand on Ozias’s muscular arm. He turned to me with rage etched into his expression, but I swung my head. “I can handle this.”

Ozias hesitated, but after a few seconds, he nodded, slowly lowered his gun, and stepped aside.

“You can’t hurt me anymore, Daddy,” I asserted as I stared at him. “Your hurtful words and reckless actions don’t mean shit to me anymore. You may be my father by blood, but that’s it. I’ll never let you control me again. And when you’re sitting here in this filthy, dark cell, all alone with your racing thoughts, I hope what you did to me fucking eats you alive before the rats do. They like the taste of despair.”

For the first time, my father remained silent. He had no rebuttal or hurtful remark. Instead, he looked away. He didn’t have to respond. The silence between us told me everything I needed to know. His fate had been sealed, and he was too prideful to

even acknowledge it.

I twisted my neck toward O, who stayed close behind me like a shadow, his protective instinct still simmering just beneath the surface. I knew all I had to do was say the word, and he would've slaughtered my father like fresh cattle, but that wasn't what I'd come here for.

"Open his cell," I instructed.

Ozias's eyebrow lurched toward his hairline. "What? Hell no."

"Open his cell and give me your gun. This ends here," I said, outstretching my hand palm-side up.

I could tell Ozias didn't know whether to be turned-on or afraid. Either way, he obliged me with a nod before passing me his pistol. The minute I felt the cold, dark steel hit my hand, I wrapped my hand around the grip. He fished around inside his pocket for the keys to my father's prison cell. The keys jingled against the lock before I heard the groans and creaks of the iron bars as the cell door opened. I stood at the cell entrance, hesitant but ready to do what I had to do.

I rushed toward my father, not stopping until I'd rammed the gun far enough down his throat to obstruct his airway. The best thing he could do for me would be to drown in his own saliva, but that still wouldn't have been good enough.

"Let this be a lesson to you and every other mafia or cartel boss out there. I'm the biggest, baddest Malone-Rivera there is. Run this shit now."

My finger squeezed the trigger, and my arm jerked back from the impact of the shot, blowing a bloody, gaping hole into the back of his skull, popping it like a bloody red balloon.

Ozias stood to my right and gently eased the gun out of my hand.

“Burn in hell, mothafucka,” he mumbled before he spat on my father’s dead body and made a call to his men to clean up the mess I’d made.

I turned on my heels and walked out of the cell with my shoulders back and my head held high. I’d come for answers but left with something unexpected—strength, unshakable resilience, and the fucking crown.

The chilled air of the dark corridor leading from the cell gave way to the warmer Mexico weather as Ozias closed the thick front door behind us. My steps were minced, and all I felt was the nauseating churn in my stomach anytime I looked at the speckles of my father’s blood on my skin and clothes.

Ozias took one look at me and frowned, his protective instincts back at the forefront. “You’ve been on your feet too long,” he said, his voice firm but considerate. Without giving me the opportunity to protest, he bent down and swept me into his strong arms with ease.

“Ozias—” I whined, but he silenced my woes with a half-smile.

“You’re still healing, Demi,” he confirmed, his tone leaving no room for disagreement no matter how much I wanted to. “Plus, you’ve done enough for one day. Let me take care of you now.”

He carried me through the house, his heavy footsteps firm as they ascended the staircase. The slushy churn in my stomach seemed to intensify as we reached the master bathroom, where the faint scent of lavender hung in the air. He set me down gently on the counter before turning to the oversized freestanding bathtub by the window and filling it with warm, soapy water.

I watched the stream and the bubbles rise to the surface as the tub filled. As calming as my surroundings were, I couldn't stop the image of my father's head busting open like a juicy watermelon from replaying inside my mind. Out of nowhere, bile bubbled in my throat. I lurched forward, sprinting for the toilet just as the vomit spewed from my mouth. I was mortified and could only hope the gentle sound of the stream drowned out my dry heaving. When I finished spewing my guts, I reached for the toilet handle to flush and slowly started to pull myself back up to my feet.

I turned back to Ozias with embarrassment on my face, fully expecting him to laugh and point out my weaknesses like my father used to. What he did next surprised me. Ozias knelt to my level, his hand lightly brushing the small of my back as he helped me back into an upright position.

"It's okay," he acknowledged gently as if he could read my thoughts. His eyes were filled with both compassion and understanding. "Just relax, Demi. It's over now, and I got you."

His words broke the levee. My lips curved into a frown, my tense shoulders finally weakening as I allowed myself to fully let go, at least for the moment. Tears poured out of my eyes like a raging waterfall. I was fucked up beyond measure. Never in a million years did I think my first kill would be the man who'd given me life.

"I bet you were smooth as butter the first time you killed someone," I assumed as a tear slipped down my cheek.

"On the contrary. I was just as sick as you were."

"Seriously?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“Right hand to God,” he assured me. “You never forget your first kill.”

I paused, unsure whether or not to let my curiosity take over. “W—who was yours?”

As the warm bubbles continued to rise, Ozias turned to face me. His expression was soft yet weighted with words he had yet to speak. His strong hand found mine and swallowed it up as he looked into my eyes. I saw a flicker of hesitation as if he were grounding himself before taking a giant leap into the unknown.

“If it’s too personal, you don’t have to—”

He waved his hand to silence me. “It’s not that. It’s just I’ve never talked about it before. Not outside my head, at least,” he admitted.

I waited patiently, recognizing the turbulence inside him. “Does not being able to talk about it mean you regret it?”

He swung his head in a sharp no. “I could never regret doing something that needed to be done. I think you’ll feel the same. Not today. But one day.”

I scoffed. As much as I wanted to tell him he didn’t know me, he’d called it. I didn’t regret it. Sure, I was fucked up about it. I felt a lot of fucking emotions. Regret just wasn’t one of them. When I took too long bouncing around the thoughts inside my head, Ozias spoke up again.

“I think in order for you to understand the significance of my first kill, you’d first have to understand more about me and who I am.”

“Then tell me,” I insisted, listening attentively. “You hardly ever talk about your past.”

Ozias reached for me, his hands slightly trembling as he slowly undressed me. I stared at him in uninterrupted silence, noticing the painful weight of years etched into his every gentle move. Once I was fully naked, he scooped me into his arms and eased me into the bathtub, submerging me under the bubbles.

“I was born into chaos, and that shit molded me in ways I haven’t always been proud of,” he said as he started to wash all my father’s blood off my hands, both literally and figuratively. “I took my first breath in Corpus Christi, Texas. Then, I moved to a small city in Mexico with my mother after she split from my drug-dealing father when I was around two years old. Life there was full of struggles, but it all got ten times worse when my mother was killed by the cartel when I was five.”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Oh my God. I-I’m so sorry.”

He dipped his chin. “Yeah.”

“So, what happened after that? You were so young when that happened. Where did you go?”

“I was headed to the orphanage when a man who said he was a friend of my mother’s came to get me. His name was Armando Diaz. Armando took me in, raised me, and offered me the kind of protection I needed at that age. He was kind and street smart but also heavily connected to a world I was too young to understand at the time.” Ozias paused, staring down at the bubbles as if searching for answers he still hadn’t been able to find after all these years. “By the time I was fourteen, I was following in his fuckin’ footsteps like a dutiful son. You couldn’t tell me I wasn’t his blood. I thought I was paying him back for taking me in after losing my mother, y’know, proving my loyalty and shit. But instead, I let him mold me into someone I never

thought I'd be. I started at the bottom, training as a drug mule while learning weaponry and other combat skills. Over the years, I became the top enforcer for the cartel, which is how I got the nickname 'El Diablo,'" he explained.

"How many lives have you taken?"

"If I told you all the horrible things I've done or how many men I've killed, would you run away?"

"I could've run away from you a million times, and I haven't gone anywhere yet. Not even a bullet can seem to keep us apart," I replied.

"Over a hundred," he admitted. "None of them fucked me up like the first because, just like you, it was personal."

His words made a lightbulb go off in my head. "Oh shit . . . Armando was your first kill? The man who raised you?"

Ozias dipped his chin to confirm my suspicions. "Yes."

"But why? I don't understand."

"Because he was the one who ordered the hit on my mother."

My heart sank to the soles of my feet. "Oh my God. And then he turned around and raised you? How did you find out?"

"He kept a photo of her inside his office desk drawer. He thought I never knew about it, but I did."

"I'm confused. Why would he have a picture of your mother?"

“Because he loved her, and she ran away to America, met a black man, and had me. When things didn’t work out, she was desperate and reached out to him. He arranged for us to move back to Mexico if she agreed to become a drug mule for him. She did it for a few years, but I was getting older, and the jobs were getting riskier, so she told him she was done with the cartel and him for good.”

“She wanted out, and he had her murdered?”

“In cold fuckin’ blood.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“H-how did you find all of this out?”

“He admitted to all of it with my gun to his head and two bullet holes in his kneecaps so he couldn’t run anywhere. Once I had the truth, I blew his fuckin’ brains out and took over his entire operation. Since then, I’ve never given a fuck about taking a life. Not until I met you.”

“Me?”

“I know it’s going to sound crazy, but losing our baby at the hands of your reckless ass father may have been the key to restoring my humanity. It made me realize I didn’t want to keep doing shit that hardened my heart. From that point on, I vowed to only kill for the people I love.”

I tilted my head, waiting for him to continue, not wanting to interrupt the unshielded emotion I witnessed in his gaze. When he didn’t, it prompted me to ask the burning question on my tongue. “Y-you love me, Ozias?”

Before giving him the chance to respond, I stood up from the tub, exposing my bare breasts and glistening pussy. He froze when he saw me. Then his eyes darkened with lust as they roamed hungrily over me. I inched closer to the edge, his presence grounding me, giving me the courage to face my own demons through what he’d carried on his shoulders in silence for so long. My heart raced with anticipation.

“What are you doing, Demi?” he asked, his deep voice sending shivers through me.

“Answer my question first.”

He sucked his teeth. “Demi.”

“Yes or no, Ozias. Say it,” I demanded, lifting my leg up on the edge of the tub.

He swallowed hard, clearly fighting a losing battle against his desire and pride. I stepped out of the tub and stepped between his legs. Pressing my body against his, I felt his hardness straining against his pants. Wetness dripped down my thighs. Grabbing his hand, I guided it between my legs so he could feel what type of time I was on for him.

“Fuck,princessa,” he groaned as his fingers glided through my slick folds. “You’re so fuckin’ wet for me.”

I moaned as he teased my aching clit. “All for you. You said you were going to take care of me, right?” I said, looking at him through my lashes. “So, I want you to fuck my pain away.”

“Are you sure? You’re still recovering,” he acknowledged before he laughed and nervously ran a hand through his curls. For a second, he looked as though he was bracing for rejection.

“Positive,” I replied, giving him the green light. “I just had my stitches removed.”

With a growl, he crashed his lips against mine in a searing kiss. It was raw, unpolished, and entirely him. His tongue delved into my mouth before he pulled it out. He bit my bottom lip and pulled it through his teeth. I melted against him, my wet nipples hardening as they rubbed against his chest.

“You’re something like an angel, you know that?” he growled in my ear.

I scoffed lightly. “Yeah. The angel of death.”

“Still an angel, no less.”

He scooped me up, my legs wrapping around his waist, and carried me into the bedroom. Tossing me on the bed, he quickly stripped off his clothes, revealing his muscular, tattooed body.

I licked my lips as I took in the impressive size of his thick, hard dick. Pre-cum glistened at the tip. He crawled over to me, nudging my thighs further apart.

“I’ll fuck every last ounce of your pain away,” he promised darkly.

“Yes, please!” I whimpered with need.

He knelt down, licking a trail down the center of my body before staring openly at the water droplets on my pussy. He groaned, moving his head forward until his mouth was on me, licking and sucking my love button.

I cried out as his tongue swirled around my clit, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body. He lapped at my juices, devouring me like a dehydrated man in the desert. I writhed beneath him, my fingers tangling in his curls, holding him against me.

Another moan slipped past my lips. “Oh fuck, Ozias!” I called out as he slipped a finger inside me, slowly pumping it in and out.

Soon, he added a second and then a third, stretching me in the most delicious of ways. His fingers curled, hitting that sensitive G-spot deep inside. I swear I saw stars as my back arched off the bed.

“Ooooh fuck! Don’t stop! Don’t fuckin’ stop!”

He worked me mercilessly, his fingers and tongue bringing me right to the edge, then backing off, over and over, until I was a quivering, begging mess. “Please, O. I need you inside me.”

Rising up, he positioned the tip of his dick at my entrance with his eyes stationed on mine. “Whenever you’re ready, I will spend the rest of my days trying to put another baby inside you.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

I blushed, the flush creeping over my chest and heating my face. “Okay . . .” I whispered, but my affirmation was small.

I wiggled my hips, my pussy brushing against the tip of his dick, the ache inside me growing as the seconds passed.

He took a deep breath, trying to restrain himself. “I’ll go slow, mi amor. Let me know if it’s too much.”

With that, he began to push forward, the thick head of his dick breaching my tight entrance. I gasped at the stretch and burn as he sank deeper into me inch by inch. He paused, letting me adjust before pushing deeper.

“Fuck, this pussy is so tight,” he groaned. “Relax for me, Demi.”

I tried to relax my muscles while breathing deeply. Gradually, it gave way to a satisfying fullness as he filled me completely.

“You okay?” Ozias asked, holding still with genuine concern in his lust-filled eyes.

“Y-yes. Don’t stop, and don’t go easy on me,” I demanded.

Bracing himself on his forearms, he began to move, sliding out before thrusting back in with a smooth roll of his melanated hips. Each intimate stroke seemed to reach deeper inside me, igniting my nerve endings with exquisite friction.

His pace gradually increased, and I moved my hips to meet his, finding a rhythm as

the pleasure built inside me with each deep thrust. He buried his face against my neck, his breath hot on my skin as he let out a low groan.

“Fuck, Demi, you feel so fuckin’ good.” He panted while snapping his hips faster and driving into me harder. “You’ve ruined anyone else for me, baby.”

I cried out, my nails digging into his muscular back as a tsunami of sensations threatened to sweep me away. Electric sparks of bliss radiated out from where we were joined. Every nerve in my body came alive.

I purred with pleasure. “Ooooh fuck.”

“That’s it,” he growled. “Take this dick. I’m going to make you cum so hard.”

One of his hands slipped between us, his fingers finding my aching clit. He circled the sensitive nub, and stars exploded behind my eyes. My inner walls clenched around him, my whole body drawing taut as the coil of tension inside me wound tighter and tighter.

“Fuck! I’m so close.” I whimpered, on the knife’s edge of ecstasy.

“Cum for me, Demi,” he commanded as he kept working my clit. “I want to feel you come apart all over this dick.”

His words were my undoing. With a cry, I shattered, my release crashing over me in wave after wave of searing bliss. My body shuddered and clenched around him, holding tight onto his thick shaft as he continued to pound into me, prolonging my electrifying climax.

“Fuck yes, just like that,” he growled, his rhythm growing erratic. “Gonna fill this tight ass pussy with my seed if it kills me.”

With a guttural moan, he slammed into me one final time, buried as deep as he could as he found his own release. I felt him throbbing and pulsing inside me, spurting hot jets of his seed deep in my pussy.

Slowly, we came down from the high, hearts racing and chests heaving. Ozias collapsed on top of me, his weight a comforting anchor after being utterly wrecked by pleasure. He nuzzled my neck, pressing soft kisses to the sensitive skin.

“I fuckin’ love you,” he mumbled quietly against my wet skin. Although the words were barely above a whisper, they hung in the steamy air between us. His gravelly voice was firm but filled with emotion as if he were exposing another piece of himself to me that he’d safeguarded for far too long.

I froze as the air caught in my throat mid-breath, and goosebumps populated all across my skin. The world seemed to tilt slightly as his confession settled over me, warm and disarming. It was then that I realized I’d witnessed him grow brave enough to confront the darkest parts of his past right in front of me. He’d laid his heart bare in a way I knew he’d never done before.

I felt it in the uptick of my heart whenever he said my name or in the goosebumps that crowded on my skin whenever he touched me—the truth of his confession mirrored my own unspoken feelings. I loved him too. If I hadn’t been sure of it before, I was now. But the weight of the heavy ass day I’d had mixed with the paralyzing pain and devastation that swirled inside me like a raging tornado—they silenced me, rendering me speechless.

My lips parted to allow words to come out, but none did. I blinked a few times, breaking eye contact with him. I was suddenly overwhelmed and overstimulated. Instead, my hand found his and gave it a firm squeeze. It was all I had to give, but he seemed to understand. Still, it didn’t stop me from feeling the sting of guilt.

He replied with a faint smile, though the flicker of disappointment in his eyes hadn't gone unnoticed. "It's okay," he finally said out loud as he leaned forward to kiss the back of my hand. "On our wedding night, I promised you I'd go to the gates of hell and take on the devil himself for you, and I meant every word. I know you've been through a lot, but you're safe now, Demi. Now get some rest," he said as he kissed my forehead. "I'm not going anywhere."

Ozias

Four days later.

I wasn't the type of man who was used to wearing his heart on his sleeve. I didn't do emotional shit, so telling Demi I loved her was a leap into the abyss for somebody like me. It left me feeling both shockingly relieved and like a bitch for saying it first. I'd never said those words to anyone that wasn't family—and especially not with the genuineness I felt when I told it to Demi. I stood on business and got my feelings off my chest. And for that, I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Although her silence felt like a bee sting to the chest, I didn't trip. I understood it and even respected it. She'd been through more than most and had her world turned upside down in more ways than one. Even though it would've been nice to hear her say the words back in the moment, I wasn't going to live and die by it. All I needed was for her to feel safe with me. I wanted to be her peace.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

Before her, love always seemed like a distraction, a weakness I couldn't afford as the head of a cartel. But somehow, Demi had managed to change all of that. In her, I found something I never even knew I wanted, let alone needed—someone who saw me for the man I was beneath the carnage of El Diablo.

Determined to lift her spirits, I decided to do something thoughtful for her. Although I hadn't mentioned it to her directly, I did have the decency to have her father's body cremated and his ashes shipped back to Chicago out of respect and as a warning to the fucking Russians and anyone else who stood with the Malones. I stood at her bedside, watching her sleep peacefully for the first time in days, and almost felt bad for waking her. Still, I nudged her with a gentle hand on her shoulder. She stirred, blinking up at me.

"We're flying to Chicago today," I announced, answering the question burning in her sleepy eyes. "I need to handle some business at the Midwest office, and I thought you might appreciate the change of scenery. Maybe you can even see a friend or family member while we're up there."

Demi sat up, smoothing down her bedhead while taking a moment to process my announcement. Her blunt reply was filled with unmistakable honesty. "Everyone I cared about is dead. There's no one I want to see. I don't trust anybody but you."

Her words were simple, but to me, they meant more than "I love you" ever could. Demi trusted and depended on me—and in the cartel, trust was as fragile as glass. It meant everything to me to hear her say that.

Without hesitation, I leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead,

hovering over her as I softened my voice. “Pack light, mi amor. We leave within the hour.”

As I left the room to finalize my preparations for our trip, I felt something shift inside me. Demi had become my number one priority, and I would do everything in my power to protect, provide for, and love her—even if I had to burn down the world to do it.

The lulling hum of the engines filled the cabin as my private jet soared through the sky.

I sat across from Demi in my plush leather seating, my eyes flickering toward her as she lazily gazed out the expansive window while her fingers distractedly traced circles against her exposed thigh. She hadn’t said more than a few words since we boarded, and her stillness was starting to gnaw at my insides.

I leaned back in my reclined seat and ran a hand over my nape. At first, I told myself to give her breathing room. After all, it had been an emotional few days, and she was probably still trying to process everything while still being able to walk and breathe. But the more the silence stretched on, the more frustrated I became underneath my calm exterior. I wanted to know where her head was and, more importantly, where we stood. We hadn’t spoken about what I’d told her since I said the words, and the uncertainty had started to drive my ass crazy.

Finally, I couldn’t take that shit anymore. “Demi,” I barked, my voice harsh as it slashed through the silence. It was more razor-sharp than I intended, but I pressed on. “Have you forgotten how to speak? Or are you planning to sit here in silence the entire fucking flight?”

She twisted her neck in my direction, prying her attentive gaze away from the panoramic views of the skies. She blinked a few times, visibly surprised as she

flashed her long lashes and knitted her brows together. “Children need to be entertained, Ozias. I didn’t realize you were one,” she replied with an edge to her words.

“That’s not what the fuck I meant,” I grunted, hearing the rise in my tone. “I’m trying to be here, Demi. I’m trying to fuckingdo something nice for you, to be present for you, to be strong for you, and I feel like I’m sitting across from a ghost. I mean, shit. What the fuck do you want from me?”

Making her smile felt almost as good as making her moan, and I hadn’t seemed to be able to do either in days, which led me to entertain the thought that maybe she didn’t feel the same way I did. At first, I thought it was the grief that had her tongue bound, but it was deeper than that. I needed someone who could love me at my worst. If she could love her father, I knew she could carve out a place in her heart for me. Couldn’t she?

Demi’s brown jaw tightened as her back stiffened against the seat. “I want you to shut the fuck up so I have time to think without being dissected and cross-examined every fucking second!” she hissed.

“Fuck,” I growled, feeling the heat of frustration and lust warring underneath my skin. I lurched forward. “You’re fuckin’ beautiful when you’re mad.”

She paused, ready for an argument, but my compliment had stopped her dead in her tracks. She didn’t know what the fuck to say next. She was speechless. I didn’t add a joke or make a face. Nothing shifted in my expression. It was just a statement, as a matter of fact.

“What?” she asked.

All the heat in her chest had dissolved.

“You probably get that a lot, but still, I wanted you to know I think you’re beautiful when you do that thing with your eyebrows. And then there’s this pouty thing you do with your bottom lip. It only happens when you’re pissed off. It’s equally fucking stunning and infuriating.”

Again, she was speechless. For the first time, her silence was welcomed. Suddenly, my full, soft lips were pressed against hers. She melted into my embrace like butter, and for a second, all was right with the world.

I wrapped my arms around her petite waist and pulled her on top of my lap, making her body flush with mine. “You still mad?” I asked in between tender kisses.

“Yes, actually,” she answered breathlessly. I felt the heat rush through my body. Desire overtook us both. Demi lifted her hips off my lap and moved her legs so that she was straddling me.

That was all I needed to know that she was into this as much as I was.

I bent her backward, lifted her legs, and nudged them over my shoulders before placing her on her back against her seat and reclined it. My mouth peppered kisses against her lips, cheeks, and neck.

I couldn’t get enough of her. I couldn’t keep my lips or hands off of her. Her smooth palms slid up and down my back, feeling every muscle, every curve.

My hands slithered down her body and slipped into the front of her crop top. I moved my thumb in circular motions on her stomach, then slid down and lifted her shirt up to her black lace bra and kissed her stomach while still caressing her soft skin in circular motions.

I lifted her up and slid my hands behind her back. The bra was off in a second. I

tossed it to the side. “Still mad?”

“Please, don’t make me talk right now.”

I chuckled into her stomach. “What? Why not?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

Demi pushed herself up to her elbows, noticeably breathless. “You know what? I never would’ve pictured you as the chatty type.”

I locked eyes with her and then burst out laughing before our lips found each other again as my hands skimmed her body.

Demi pulled her top over her head and tried to toss it, but it hit me in the face.

I swiped it off my face. “Stay still and keep your mouth shut since you don’t wanna talk.”

“What?” she protested.

“Shut!” I said.

“But—” Before she could finish, my lips were already on her hard nipple, suckling on it like a hungry newborn while massaging her other breast.

She sucked her teeth. “Can’t guarantee you that doing that will make me be quiet.”

I bit gently on her nipple.

She winced. “Okay. Okay. I’ll try.”

While I kissed, licked, and gently bit on Demi’s mouthwatering breasts and nipples, one of my hands found its way underneath her skirt.

Demi lifted her hips while I pushed her panties to the side, then I undid my pants. I slipped out of them and tossed them to the side, grateful for the privilege of having a private jet and a staff that minded their fucking business. I tugged on the delicate fabric of her panties, and they ripped. I stared at her with hooded eyes and held out a hand. “Come with me.”

She stopped moving. “We’re twenty thousand feet in the air. Where exactly would we be going?”

I didn’t respond. Instead, I stood, lifted Demi, and carried her to the king-size bed inside the private bedroom. I didn’t bother giving her a chance to settle or say another word. I slid into her, filling her up.

“Fuck,” I groaned in her ear, feeling her walls clamp my dick. “Your pussy remembers me.”

A moan slipped from Demi’s lips as her back arched, taking me all in. Her lids were slammed shut, probably unable to believe she was about to become a member of the Mile High Club.

I started fast with almost desperation, like I couldn’t get enough of her, and from the sounds of her desire-filled purrs, she didn’t mind a bit. Then, I slowed the pace and made her beg.

“Please don’t stop. It feels so good.”

Instead of responding, I flipped us over so she was on top of me.

“Take all this dick, Demi,” I said, lifting her so she felt every pulsating inch. “Ride it.”

She looked down at me as I thrust myself up inside her so far that her head kicked back. She had to grab onto my shoulders for leverage. My hands were on her hips as I lifted and pushed and pulled until we found our rhythm. When we did, I couldn't believe what I was feeling. Demi was so beautiful, so sexy, so everything and more. She let go and completely lost control until we were both dripping in sweat.

I smacked her ass as her hips bucked forward. "Say my name," I mumbled before flicking my tongue against her bouncing nipple.

"Fuck, Ozias!"

She rode me hard until my toes curled. My body shook as chills ran up and down my spine. I was close. I could feel it.

"Mmm shit, Demi." I growled against her dewy brown skin. I wasn't ready to cum yet, I wanted to taste her.

I quickly lifted her off my dick and leaned back against the bed so that she could ride my face. I'd probably never seen Heaven's gates, but if it didn't feel like what I felt between Demi's thighs, I didn't want to.

Her round ass was in my palms, and her thighs were wrapped around my neck like a bowtie.

Demi wound her hips as she looked down at me, watching me strum her clit.

She moaned. "Suck my fuckin' clit, papi. Suck it hard."

I obliged her, focused and mesmerized by her pleasure. I slid a finger inside her while my tongue spelled out my secrets into her folds.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“Oh my God. Oh fuck!”

Demi gripped the back of my head, locking me in place. Her moans were like music to my ears. I knew the staff was getting an earful. I didn't give a fuck. I flipped her over and spit into her asshole before licking it.

Demi reached around to spread her cheeks before looking back at me.

“That's it; spread that fuckin' pussy wide. Let papi taste every drop,” I said before latching my lips back to her clit as if I were attracted to her like a magnet.

I smacked her ass as she winded her hips against my face, arching her back and popping her ass. I couldn't help but stroke my brick-hard erection as she screamed and moaned my name.

“Oooh fuck, yes! Don't stop!”

“That's it, pop that ass for papi.”

“Fuck, I'm gonna cum! You're gonna make me cum!”

“Mmm. That's a good girl,” I said, slipping two fingers inside her to stroke her g-spot.

“Oh shit! Yes! Yes! Just like that!” Demi squealed. “I'm cumming, baby! I'm cummmminnggggg.”

I pulled out, and she squirted all over my hand and face, super-soaking us and the sheets in her love juices.

“Mmmhmm, mmhm, give papi every nasty drop,” I commanded, licking and swallowing her juices.

As much as I loved having her so weak and watching her legs shake, I wanted to bury my dick deep inside her.

“Keep it just like that for me, mi amor. Keep that ass up in the fuckin’ air.”

I slapped the tip of my dick against her gushing slit and pulled her to the edge of the bed.

She looked over her shoulder at me with a devilish look in her eyes as if she’d been overtaken by lust. “You gonna fill up my pussy with your cum?”

“You fuckin’ right I am,” I promised, stroking the base of my dick.

Demi was so fuckin’ beautiful. I had to fight the urge to only fuck her missionary. But I wanted to see that ass bouncing back against my dick. I wanted to see her fuckin’ back arched until it damn near snapped.

I pushed inside her, deeper and deeper with every stroke. She repeatedly called out my name in whimpering moans. There was nothing sweeter than the sound of my name on her lips.

“Shit, I love this tight-ass pussy,” I growled, thrusting my hips forward.

“You love it, papi?”

“Yeah. I do.”

“I want you to cum all inside this pussy, baby. Drip every last drop inside me.”

“Mmhmm, I know you do. I told you that you were gonna be mine, and I fuckin’ meant it. You hear me, Demi? You’re mine.”

“Oh yeah, I’m yours, baby! Fuck me. Keep fucking me! Spill your seed inside me, baby. I’m ready,” she squealed.

Her command sent me spiraling. I fucked her harder and deeper until an explosion like no other rattled through her.

She couldn’t hold still. She had to release, scream, and let go.

“Oh my God, I’m cumming, O! I’m cumming!” She squealed while squeezing her thighs together.

When neither of us was breathing normally, and our bodies were glistening, and her legs were shaking like tambourines, I cupped her round ass cheeks and squeezed before I spilled my seed into her. My body suddenly stilled. I held my breath, squeezing Demi harder and harder as I came down from my high. She took in my warm juices and then exhaled slowly, leaning into me as she raked a hand through her sweat-drenched curls.

“Wow . . . that was—”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“Incredible?” I answered, cutting her off.

“Yes.”

“I just . . .” I hesitated. “I can’t lose you.”

Her expression softened at the sound of my unexpected confession. She remained silent for a few seconds while staring at the tattoos on my body.

“You won’t,” she said, her voice steady despite the exhaustion of her body. “But I need you to be patient with me.”

I dipped my chin and nodded. All the tension in my shoulders had disappeared entirely. “I can try,” I replied quietly. “I just hope you know how important you are to me.”

A ghost of a smile spread across her face as her eyes met mine. “I do. And I’m more grateful than you know.”

After that, we settled into a comfortable silence, allowing the personal turbulence between us to dissipate naturally as we continued our journey to Chicago.

Demi

The familiar Chicago skyline welcomed me and Ozias with open arms. I was finally home. Yet, home had never felt so unfamiliar, so cold before. I felt just as foreign on U.S. soil as I did when I first arrived in Mexico.

Everything about being back felt different—more intimate, yet tethered to Ozias’s dark world and the ghost of my father. As the armored car pulled up to his Midwest office, I stepped out and placed my hand in his. A wave of curiosity washed over me as soon as we stepped into the building.

The office space was polished and contemporary, and every employee we passed greeted us with reverence as if we were the king and queen. Their glances toward me were expected but still felt unnatural as if they were marveling at me from behind a bulletproof glass. With my fingers laced with his, I walked at his side as he effortlessly trekked across the marble floor, oozing his typical manner of confidence and command. Still, Ozias was quick to make me feel included.

I found my brain flooding with questions—wondering about all the nuts and bolts of his operation and comparing it to what I knew about my father’s. Ozias’s entire operation was far more streamlined, but I still found myself brainstorming ideas on how to make the process even more seamless and even potential opportunities for expansion—things my father would’ve never allowed my input on. Before I knew it, I was saying my thoughts out loud as we walked. Ozias listened attentively, a noticeable shift from the shooing off or shooting down I would’ve received if my father had been on the receiving end.

“You’ve got a knack for this business shit, huh?” Ozias mentioned as a slight smirk crept up one side of his mouth.

“Yeah, I do,” I replied with a light shrug.

His nod of approval was all I needed to see to know he valued my input. “Let’s see what we can do about implementing some of your ideas.”

“Seriously?” I quizzed, brows heightened.

“You’re the queen of my world now, Demi. You don’t need my permission to act like it.”

Later, as we drove back toward the hotel, Ozias cleared his throat, his voice slightly softening as he spoke. “There’s one more stop I thought we might make before we head back to the hotel.”

“Where?” I questioned.

“Graceland Cemetery, to your family’s estate lot. There’s something I need to show you.”

My heart chilled at his words. I hadn’t stepped foot in that cemetery in years. My father used to take me there yearly on my mother’s birthday, but over time the visits stopped and I didn’t bother to pick up the tradition on my own. It always felt like I was visiting a stranger. I never got to meet her and only knew what she looked like through photos. The idea of facing my family’s lot after already losing so much gavemy stomach a sickchurn. But there was something in the way he looked at me—the sincerity behind his deep-set eyes that showed how much he cared. I couldn’t stop myself from nodding.

The black car began to slow before rolling to a halt just outside the well-manicured lawn and iron cemetery gates. I barely heard the soft crunch of gravel under the tires over the erratic thumping of my heartbeat. Ozias reached over, gently placing his warm hand over mine to stop the trembling I hadn’t even noticed was happening.

“You ready?”

I nodded before reaching for the door handle and stepping out. My eyes stretched across the rows of gray headstones that seemed to stretch on forever. The graveyard was quiet, an eerie reminder that we were enveloped by death.

As we trekked slowly, side by side up the winding path toward the Malone estate, the weight on my chest grew heavier, making it even harder to breathe. Elaine, Cyrus, Dominic—the familiar names of my parents and cousin etched into the headstones triggered an emotional wave of memories I wasn't sure I was prepared to feel.

I stood there, allowing myself to feel the loss of my mother, my best friend, my cousin, my unborn baby, and my father's unexpected betrayal—all of it came crashing down on me at once. Before I knew it, my face was wet with hot, frantic tears I hadn't realized I'd spilled. Trying to hold them back was useless. The levee had already been broken, releasing years of trauma, grief, unrepressed anger, resentment, and heartbreak.

My knees felt hollow, fading in strength. Ozias was right there to anchor me, using his strong arms to steady and comfort me. "I've got you, mi amor," he whispered.

I wept with no attempt at concealment. It was loud, ugly, and freeing. I didn't give a fuck how I looked. I felt every drop of sorrow I thought I'd buried deep. The teardrops continued to multiply nonstop, and Ozias remained. His comforting presence was a silent witness to my heartache.

When the tears finally stopped, I wiped my eyes, smearing my mascara even more. I blinked a few times, clearing away the tears in time to catch movement in the distance. I froze, instantly rooting myself where I stood. I couldn't take my eyes off the figure with the familiar silhouette of a woman.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

My breath hitched as I clutched Ozias's hand, giving it a tight squeeze. "I-I think I . . . is that . . . that's impossible . . ." I whispered as my heart raced.

I tried not to let my mind run free with wild, impossible thoughts, but it was useless. Everything about the woman's silhouette seemed familiar, including the way she stood with her weight resting more on one leg than the other. Iron bands tightened across my chest. Is it? No. It can't. Can it? Without a second thought, I took a cautious step forward. My lips parted, and I called out with a tone laced with hesitance. "Samara?"

For a moment, everything went silent as if I'd gone completely deaf. But then the frame turned and began to move closer, revealing a face I assured myself I'd never lay eyes on again.

Samara—the one I hadn't mourned adequately after everything that happened in Mexico. Yet there she was, in front of me, alive and in the flesh.

Instantly, my eyes misted over with fresh tears, and I let out a squelched sob. I slipped my hand out of Ozias's and broke out into a sprint, trying to close the space between us as quickly as possible.

Samara's arms opened wide, engulfing me in a hug as our bodies collided in an embrace so intense it seemed to erase all the grief that had taken over me since she'd been gone.

"A-are you r-real? I . . . I thought y-you were . . ." Tears garbled my words as I held the sides of her face, eyes soaking her in to make sure she was real and I wasn't

hallucinating from heartache.

“It’s me, Demi. I’m here,” she confirmed.

“W-where have you been all this t-time? What h-happened after Mexico? I thought you were dead!” I cried out as the words continued to spill off my lips between my blinding tears. I refused to let her go, afraid she might disappear again.

Samara drew in a trembling breath while looking over her shoulder at Ozias, who was slowly making his way toward us. “If I’m being honest, it’s really all a blur. After that morning yoga session, the next thing I remember is waking up in a private hospital room with a woman sitting next to my bed. She told me I was in Texas and said someone found me and brought me there unconscious. That’s when I found out what happened to my cousin . . . and h-her bridesmaids. I thought you were dead too, until I found out Ozias was the one who arranged for me to be spared because of my connection to you. I was so weak and so broken. I didn’t know who to trust or what to do. It took me a while, but when I finally accepted things for what they were, they arranged for me to fly back home if I delivered a message to your father.”

I twisted my neck back in the direction of Ozias, who was standing a few feet away. “What message?” I questioned, voice cracking.

“That you were his, and he was never letting you go. I’ve been laying low ever since. I knew things wouldn’t go well. I swear to God I wanted to reach out to you to make sure you were safe or even to warn you, but I was scared out of my fucking mind. I know he’s had people watching me this entire time.”

“Who?”

“El Diablo,” she said, the sound of his name sounding like more of a warning than anything else.

Still, her words seemed to go in one ear and out the other, refusing to register in my brain. The only thing I had the ability to absorb was the fact that my best friend was alive. I hadn't lost her. All the other shit I could figure out another day.

"I thought I'd lost you," I mumbled, pulling her in for another tight hug.

The heaviness in my heart that had once seemed eternal began to ease for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

"You didn't lose me, but you did marry the devil," she warned, slowly pulling away and stationing her eyes on Ozias.

I turned back to face him, knowing some parts of her statement were true. But when I looked at him, I didn't see the devil or a monster. All I saw was the man who'd spared my best friend and would slay dragons and burn down the world for me whether I asked him to or not. He'd shown me love by sticking by my side even when the world was crumbling around me. That hadn't gone unnoticed, but I didn't have time to explain every part of our twisted love story in detail to her.

"Listen, I know I had my doubts in the beginning, but he's not all bad. We've been through a lot in a short amount of time, and he's protected me through it all. And now, I can protect you, Mara. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

She shook her head. "I'm as grateful to be alive as the next woman, but I can't fuck with this cartel shit, Demi. I-I just can't do it," she said, waving her hands in surrender.

I grabbed her by the shoulders. "Trust me, Mara. Everything is going to be okay now. Whatever hold you think Ozias has on you, it's over."

"That's where you're wrong," she replied in disagreement. "It'll never be over."

“I promise I won’t let anything happen to you. You have my word.”

Samara paused, truly considering my words. “Are you sure?”

“I swear. You have my word and his,” I assured her.

As Ozias and I departed from the cemetery, my brain churned with questions. He wasted no time calling his sister Maya and having her recall the men she’d sent to watch Samara back to Texas. He promised me she’d have her life back, even if it weren’t the same one she had before everything happened. The calm that settled over me had been replaced with a burning curiosity that I couldn’t hold back. I needed to know why he’d spared her and why he’d kept the truth from me until now.

I cleared my throat before speaking. “Why?” I questioned, my voice tight. “Why didn’t you tell me Samara was alive, Ozias? Especially after I asked you.”

Ozias’s dark eyes flickered with a shred of remorse. He parted his lips to respond but paused as if he were tiptoeing around landmines, trying not to say the wrong words to make shit worse. He moved half a step closer but stopped mid-stride, aware of the invisible wall I’d placed between us.

“I never meant to hurt you,” he stated earnestly. “This is why I wanted you to come to Chicago. She’s what I wanted to show you. To prove to you that I’m not always a monster.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

I scoffed, feeling the sting of betrayal carving through me. “Why did you allow me to think the worst? To think that everyone I loved was gone knowing I’d already lost my cousin, my baby, and my father? Do you have any idea what that did to me mentally? Emotionally?”

He clenched his fists at his side. “At the time, I thought I was protecting you.”

“Protecting me from what?”

“I didn’t want to give you false hope when shit could’ve gone differently at any moment—what if she tried to call the police? What if she tried to sell me out to your father? What if I had to make her disappear again? I thought it was best to wait until I knew for sure where she stood and that she knew the consequences if she chose to switch sides. I swear, it was never about keeping anything from you . . . it was a business move. I did what I felt was best.”

I pushed out a sour laugh as hot tears of rage began to sting my eyes. “Best for you, clearly. I thought you did, but maybe you don’t give a fuck about protecting me.”

“There you go saying shit you don’t mean when you know I’d die a thousand lives for you.”

“I thought I was supposed to be your queen. Well, a queen is supposed to know what the fuck the king is doing, right? And yet, you kept me in the dark just like my father used to! It’s triggering for me, Ozias. Can’t you see that?”

“Look, I know I hurt you, and I can’t take that back. But believe me, I thought I was

sparing you more pain. I see now . . . I was wrong.”

I scoffed again. “Dead fucking wrong! Samara was shaking like a leaf on a tree when she could’ve been feeling safe with me all along. You caused that!”

His expression hardened. “I sent her to Texas to heal and had Maya watch over her. Would you rather I’d had her buried in the fuckin’ desert like everyone else?”

I scoffed again as my eyes burned with tears. Burying bodies in the desert was the one grim option he hadn’t given me when I’d originally asked what happened to the bodies. “Wow. There he is. There’s El Diablo. At first, I thought it was a mask—something you could take off and put on when necessary, but no. This is who you are, Ozias.”

His baritone voice softened. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You meant it exactly how it came out of your fucking mouth. We both know that,” I said with an exaggerated eye roll. “Do you know how much worse I feel now knowing that you had every opportunity in the world to tell me, and you still kept it from me?”

His broad shoulders crumpled inward as the heaviness of my words weighed down on him. “Whatever I broke between us, I wanna fix it.”

I snapped my neck in his direction as my ears homed in on his unexpected response. “What?”

“I might not like it, but I know how to admit when I’m wrong, *mi amor*,” Ozias admitted, his voice barely above a whisper.

For a moment, the only sound between us was the whistling of the breeze through the

air. I no longer knew what to feel or how to react. Every emotion I felt didn't feel appropriate for the moment. Had I allowed Samara's words to get into my head and take root underneath my skin? On the one hand, I felt like I had every reason to smile again, knowing my best friend was still alive, even if it meant our friendship was never the same. On the other, the man I'd secretly given my heart to had lied to me and omitted the truth every time I asked. How could I trust him when he was so quick to keep a secret from me, even if his intentions were good?

I turned away and wrapped my arms around myself in a comforting embrace as if I were trying to keep all my emotions from spilling out at once. I slowly twisted my neck to face him again, stationing my eyes on him. I instantly sensed the vulnerability radiating from his body—from his tensed posture to his emotion-filled gaze.

“You should've told me,” I reiterated. “Maybe I would've spent less time hating you.”

“Do you hate me now?” Ozias inquired, his gaze brimming with remorse.

My chest deflated with a hard sigh. “No, but you should've trusted me enough to let me decide how to handle that situation. I could've helped. I could've—”

Ozias cut me off with a wave of his hand. “I'd rob the sky of the sun and moon if I knew it would make you smile, Demi. If it's trust you want, you can have that. I've already given you my heart, and I'll spend the rest of my days making sure you feel like my equal. You're the only queen on my board, Demi. Without you, the game's not even worth playing.”

My gaze shied away, falling down to my balled fists in my lap. “Do you really mean that?”

He dipped his chin without hesitation. “I do. When I told you I loved you, I meant it.

Ain't no half-stepping with me, mi amor. One hundred is the only percent I'll give and the only one I'll accept."

"Then never, ever give me a reason to question you again."

"I'll never lie to you again."

The unexpected trip to the cemetery had unleashed a storm of emotions I hadn't been prepared to endure, but as I sat there, listening to Ozias spill his feelings while sorting through my own, I started to feel like I could finally shed the back-breaking weight I'd been carrying around like a second shadow. For the first time in weeks, I experienced a wave of clarity and peace I hadn't experienced before. It was as if I'd unlocked a new level in the game of life.

I turned my entire body to face him as my heart galloped at the reins inside my chest. There were no more secrets, no more enemies to slay, and no bodies to bury. It was only us, the truth, and our feelings about it. My lips parted, then paused as if temporarily paralyzed. It was only for a fleeting second, but it felt like forever.

"I love you," I finally admitted. Those three words spilled off the tip of my tongue as if they'd been biding their time until I was ready to confess the secret I'd been holding back from him. "I know I didn't say it back when you told me how you felt before, and I know you might've taken my silence as a rejection, but it wasn't that. It was far from it."

"Then what was it?"

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

“Fear,” I responded matter-of-factly. “Loving you . . . loving El Diablo . . . it scares the living shit out of me.” I watched his expression teeter between comfortable and not, and I continued on before he had the chance to respond. “And although we both have flaws, I think we can work on them together. I want this to work,” I said, reaching for his hand. “Us, Ozias. I want us to work,” I clarified, my voice rooted in certainty despite the charge of emotions surging through my body. “I want to stay Mrs. Ozias Rivera forever. To be your queen. To really see where things can go and not because of the fucked-up circumstances, or revenge, or sex, or grief, or obligation, but because I’m choosing to be your queen and want you to be my king.”

The car fell silent for a short while as I tried to read Ozias’s mind. Visually, he seemed taken aback as if my confession had literally taken his breath away. Then, without a warning or word, he leaned in and gently cupped the sides of my face in his hands. His brown-eyed gaze was trained on mine with an intensity so hot that it sent a rush of heat pooling right to my sweet spot.

“You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to hear you say those words. The world is already mine, but I need you to make it all worth it. You’re my purpose and my reason. All I’ve ever wanted was for you to save a space for me in your heart.”

“You don’t need a space. You already have it all.”

He reeled me in for a long hug, and a smile broke through the fresh tears that were at risk of falling down my face again. For the first time in a long time, I was exactly where I was supposed to be—safe in Ozias’s arms.

“You meant what you said about being mine forever?”

“Yes.”

“Then forever it is, *mi amor*,” he murmured before pressing his lips against mine in a searing kiss that held all the passion, solace, and affection we’d both been holding back. “Forever it is.”

Epilogue

Ozias

Six months later.

My heavy eyelids flickered before slowly lifting to put a face to the soft melody of Demi’s delicate voice as she sang “Happy Birthday” to me once in English and again in Spanish.

It was my thirty-seventh birthday—another year I thought I might never see.

My grin spread wide across my face as I rubbed my eyes, hoping to see her more clearly. Demi sat perched on the edge of the bed, looking like an angel in a baby pink teddy, her dark hair swept up into a high messy bun. In her hand was a red velvet cupcake with a single gold candle flickering at the top. It was my favorite flavor, of course. Over the time we’d been together, she’d made a habit of remembering the simple things about me.

“Go ahead and make a wish, birthday boy,” she encouraged with a hint of playfulness behind her eyes.

I propped myself up on my elbows, lightly smirking as I watched the candle’s flame dance between us before closing my eyes, making a wish, and blowing it out.

“Aren’t you going to take a bite?”

I licked my lips. “As good as you look right now, the only sweetness I want on my tongue is you.”

Demi playfully rolled her eyes. “Later for that. Tell me what you wished for,” Demi insisted.

I belted out a soft chuckle while leaning in to close the space between us. “I would, but if I tell you, it won’t come true. Ain’t that rule number one when it comes to birthday wishes?”

The sweet sound of her carefree laugh filled the room, sounding and feeling like a warm hug. “Okay. That’s fair,” she said. “Are you ready for your birthday gift?”

I arched a questioning brow. “I thought I told you I didn’t want you buying me anything.”

“I know what you said, but who said I bought anything?” Demi replied, her expression softening, although the mischievous expression on her face remained.

“What?”

“I kept asking myself, what do you get a man who could literally buy anything he wants? And then, this happened,” she bellowed, handing me a skinny box with a red bow wrapped around it.

By that point, she had my full attention. I sat up, intrigued, and eased the box from her hand, slowly pulling apart the ribbon with care. When I opened the lid, my breath hitched. Staring back at me were three pregnancy tests, each with two bold positive pink lines. For a moment, all I could do was stare at them while my heart hammered

against my ribcage.

“Demi,” I whispered as my gaze pulled away from the sticks to meet hers. I witnessed the same blend of happiness and shock looking back at me.

“We did it, O. I’m pregnant,” she announced, her voice slightly shaking with a rollercoaster of emotion. “It’s a miracle.”

My heart somersaulted in my chest. She was right. It was an absolute miracle. I was so taken aback I couldn’t even find the right words to say to commemorate the moment. So, instead, I reached for Demi and pulled her into my arms, squeezing her as tightly as I could without hurting her. The future I’d pushed to the back of my mind, never allowing myself to dream about, had suddenly become my reality in the blink of an eye. Everything felt perfect and so surreal at the same time.

“Happy birthday, Ozias,” she whispered against my bare shoulder before kissing it.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 10:02 am

I leaned back just far enough to look at her. She was already glowing to me. “This is the best birthday gift I’ve ever gotten,” I announced.

She belted out a soft chuckle. “Good, because I don’t think I’ll be able to live up to the hype next year.”

And at that moment, I was certain there wasn’t a demon in this world I couldn’t face as long as I had Demi at my side—her, and now, the new life she was growing inside her.

The sight of the pregnancy tests had hit me like a bolt of lightning. For the last thirty-six years, I’d lived my life according to my own carefully calculated terms. Parenthood had never been part of the plan until I met her and we lost our first child. Since the shooting, I never allowed myself to hold onto the hope that I’d become a father again. Yet, here I was, staring down those bold pink lines that would change everything.

In the midst of my joy was a silent fear that simmered just beneath the surface. Could I be the father our child deserved when my own childhood had been molded by the power plays of the cartel and the cold, emotionless presence of killers? At that moment, I swore to myself that I would do and be better for my child. I wouldn’t be my absentee father, and I damn sure wouldn’t be hers or any other man who allowed power, money, and ambition to come before his family—his flesh and blood.

But in the midst of it all was Demi. I loved her in a way that left no room for question, and the thought of seeing her belly swell with my seed and seeing her bloom into a mother filled my chest with a level of happiness I couldn’t put into

words. If anyone had the power to anchor me in this uncharted territory of parenthood, it was her. She made the impossible feel possible.

We'd already been through so much in such a short time—grief, loss, betrayal, unimaginable pain. Yet, the universe had found a way to surprise us both, to offer us a blessing in the midst of our chaos. And while I wasn't the kind of man who believed in fate, I couldn't shake the feeling that the baby, like us, was meant to be.

With the amount of joy and gratitude buzzing around inside me, my heart felt like it had grown three sizes. Speechless, I stared at her beautiful face, noting the mix of nervousness and excitement etched into her features, and I couldn't hold back the emotions coursing through me.

"I love you," I declared.

Those three words carried even more weight than they had the first time I'd said them to her. This time, they were melded with the unexpected awe of the moment. I leaned in to capture her soft lips in a kiss that was as tender as a butterfly kiss but as deep as the ocean.

When I pulled back, I dropped my gaze down to her flat stomach and kissed it gently, reverently. "And I love you too," I whispered softly, speaking directly to the tiny life growing inside her.

Our eyes met as I straightened out my posture. For the first time in forever, I felt like the stars and planets had aligned perfectly. This was our family—our future—and I couldn't imagine anything more miraculous than sharing it with Demi, my queen, by my side.

The End