



# Vicious Angel (Criminal Sins 2)

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**Category:** Romance, Crime And Mafia, Action, Dark

**Description:** "The devil was just a fallen angel..."

I couldn't be her prince, so I became her devil.

Catalina Alzate brought me nothing but pain.

Those sharp hazel eyes. That perfect body. Her fiery lips.  
They scorched my ruthlessness and made my icy heart thaw.

But she's an addiction. An obsession. A necessity.

And the mother to my secret child.

Not to mention, someone else's princess...

My cruel brother has locked her away in his dark tower.  
—I've raised an army to get her back.

War is the only answer.

My new family will survive,  
Even if that means destroying my old one.

**Total Pages (Source):** 89

# Page 1

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1

Catalina

The jungle is dark and thick and lonely.

Over the past year, I've made this harsh journey dozens of times, but it never gets any easier—in fact, every step I take grows heavier and harder.

I'm a mother without a child, a partner without her man; I'm lost in a sea of sharp tangled vines and impenetrable blackness. The future is unseeable, even on a small, familiar trek like this. Will my light at the end of the tunnel still be waiting when I arrive? After we've shared our tiny fleeting moment together, will I ever be able to return again?

I'm risking both of our lives just to get a sliver of bliss... but this isn't just any sliver of bliss. It's primal; maternal; necessary.

I've escaped my captor to go see my baby, and if I'm found out before I can sneak back into my cage, then we're both as good as dead.

Howler monkeys wail through the jungle canopy above. Earlier in the night, the white light of a crescent moon had washed through my locked bedroom window, but now, it's all but gone. A small pencil thin flashlight is my only source of illumination. Spiny branches scratch along every inch of my body as I push through the pain and the fear and the uncertainty, until, finally, after what seems like hours, I see the faint glow of an orange bulb swinging outside of a deep jungle outpost. My heart expands

in a Pavlovian response; the howler monkeys vanish as my ears rush with blood. It hardly matters how tired I am, I sprint the entire remaining distance.

“Lady...” I whisper, rapping my knuckles against the weathered steel door. Despite the loudness of the jungle behind me, every sound I make seems to echo endlessly through the air, like a grand beacon exposing my location to every enemy I’ve ever feared.

There’s no response.

I try knocking a little louder. My big heart races and the blood that was in my ears is called on to support my heaving chest.

Come on, Lady. Answer. Please.

I ball up my fist and cock back my arm, emotion taking over any attempt at subtlety. These treacherous journeys of mine are too hard to go unrewarded. My mind might shatter if I go too long without seeing what I came to see, without holding what I came to hold, without soothing what I came to...

Before I can slam my fist against the door, a quiet click freezes me into place. I stand, hand raised in the suffocating night air like a tragic Greek statue, as the doorknob begins to rattle, free from my touch.

“Lady?” I shake away the fear and try my best to put on a calm demeanour. Fear is infectious, and the last thing I want to do is corrupt the pure innocence that should be waiting for me on the other side of this creaking door.

“Ms. Catalina?” A flood of relief bursts over my trembling heart at the familiar voice. The first hug of the night goes to the kindly old maid who is risking her life to help protect my child.

We don't linger on each other for long, it's too dangerous to waste a single second. "In, in," Lady waves me inside. She shuts the door behind us and the clanging metal echoes through the damp cement box.

"How is he?" I ask, almost unable to—anything worse than a 'magnificent' might kill me.

"He is fine. I make sure he gets enough sleep so that he will be awake when his mother arrives." Lady is a saint and one of the few saving graces I've been able to find in my life since a certain vicious Angel tore it to shreds.

His shrapnel green eyes and faintly dimpled smile creep to the front of my mind, but I quickly push his image back down into the depths of my consciousness. He's the last person I need to be thinking of now. Our son is most important—and, if there were a second most important character to focus on, it wouldn't be Angel, but, rather, his evil younger brother, my current captor, Dante Montoya. Any slip up around the wicked prince means misery for me and everyone I care about.

I can't let that happen.

Lady is decades older than me and not quite as fast as I would prefer. I won't have all night, and the only thing keeping me from sprinting ahead of the saintly old maid is the fact that I don't know where we're going.

This old jungle outpost has underground tunnels that lead to every corner of Colombia. From what I've been told, it was built during the revolution to ferry spies and soldiers off to their missions; after that, it was used to smuggle drugs and weapons and people. Now, it's abandoned, and the only people who know its twists and turns are those who've taken an oath to safeguard my precious Oscar.

My son. Oscar Luis Alzate.

Oscar Luis Alzate-Montoya.

Those who have sworn to protect him make sure to change his location every night, just to be safe. It kills me to not know where my baby is at any given hour, but I also know it's for the best. If I don't know, then no one close to Dante will know, and the further that monster is from any knowledge of my son, the better. In fact, he doesn't even know Oscar exists... and I plan to keep it that way.

"This way, dear," Angel's old maid shuffles ahead through the dripping cement tubes and under the flickering fluorescent lightbulbs until we reach a crossroads. We go a different direction every time I visit, and tonight's no exception. Lady turns down an entryway I've never been through before and we pick up speed as the ground tilts downwards.

"How has he been?" I ask. My chest is heaving and my breaths are stilted from exertion but I need to know. A mother always needs to know.

"Good, good," Lady assures me, keeping her eyes forward, constantly on the lookout for danger. She's a g

ood woman, and I'd trust her with my life; but more importantly, I'm trusting her with my infant son's life. "He's healthy and active and learning more every day."

## Page 2

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My heart breaks. It's good news—my baby is growing like any normal child should—but he's doing it all without me by his side. I'm missing out on these vital moments of his life and there isn't anything I can do to change it, not if I want to keep him safe.

Lady stops in front of a nearly invisible door and I skid to a halt right behind her. She looks furtively down each end of the long cement tube we just stumbled down before knocking exactly three times.

Then, we wait.

Down here, there are no howler monkeys or cicadas to mask the tense silence. Somewhere, in the distance, water leaks from a pipe, but other than that, we are completely alone.

Until the doorknob starts to shake.

I've been through this process before, but it never gets easier. My heart clenches and my nerves tighten. Every muscle in my body is flexed so hard that if I had any mind to think about it, I might be worried that I was about to snap—but my wellbeing is the furthest thing from my mind right now. All I can think about is...

"Oscar!" My voice rattles down the empty cement walls as Lady and I are bathed in a box of gentle yellow light.

I ignore the man who opened the door for us, instead rushing past him to the perfect angel sleeping in a white crib at the far side of the new room.

My surroundings bleed away as I sweep Oscar up in my arms. His cotton onesie is soft and his puffy chipmunk cheeks are a rosy shade of red. I smother him in kisses, trying to be as gentle as possible. My heart wants him to wake up, but my brain knows that he needs his rest. He's growing so much, and so quickly, I don't want to be selfish...

As though he can sense my longing, Oscar's eyelids flutter open and his emerald green eyes bathe me in a blanket of happiness.

He smiles and all of my pain and fear instantly evaporates. "Mama's here," I whisper, my voice breaking with emotion.

Ozzy gurgles and reaches up a stubby little finger. I lean over and let him trace the contours of my face. "Mama," he laughs.

Relief caresses my shaking heart. He hasn't forgotten me, not yet. I'm still his mama.

"Catalina," the deep voice places a thick reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"Thank you, Juan," I whisper, unable to take my eyes off of my baby boy.

"How are you holding up?" Angel's old advisor gently steps around Ozzy and I before collapsing down onto a ratty couch by the crib. He sounds exhausted.

"I'm fine," I say, and in this moment it's the truth. The reality that I'm still a prisoner hardly factors into my mood at all; either does the fact that I'm all alone in my parenthood. Ozzy's father hasn't been heard from in almost two years now, and I've long since stopped hoping that he ever might return. My concentration needs to be fully focused on the safety of my child and myself. If Angel ever returns, then I will deal with him, but until that time comes, there is no peace in thinking about the vanquished prince I once gave myself to.

That doesn't stop him from seeping up to the front of my mind any time I feel weak, though. His strong arms and muscular chest so often tease comfort when I'm at my darkest points, but when my senses return, I realize that the hope of his return is futile. All I can control is my own life, and even then, I'm only in control of so little of it...

But I don't want to think about that right now. I don't want to think about my captivity or my captor, I don't want to think about going back to my cage and I definitely don't want to think about Angel.

Right now, I'm with my son, and life is perfect; the fact that it won't last hardly figures into it. Ozzy makes me happy, and all of this pain and suffering is worth it if it keeps him safe.

2

Angel

For the first time in nearly two years, I breathe in Colombian air.

It tastes just like I remember.

Below, in the distance, the Cali lights blink and sparkle just like I remember. Above, the same stars I grew up under shine down on me just like I remember.

But none of it feels like I remember; none of it feels like home.

Not without Catalina.

"How are you feeling, boss?"



“I’ve been worse,” I mumble, stretching up to the night sky, glad to finally be free from my dark, cramped backseat box. My men insisted that I hide away for the duration of our trip over the border, and I took their concerns seriously, even if I may have doubted them at first.

Dante is my brother, I know him; he’s never been so vigilant about anything in his life, why would he start now? But it quickly became clear that everything has changed.

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We were stopped countless times on our way into Cali, and we were even almost searched on a few of those occasions. The countryside is littered with checkpoints, disguised under the legitimate veil of military operations and government concerns. An election is fast approaching, and the country has never been so precariously perched.

The underbelly that I once held in check is unstable at best. Dante may be succeeding in keeping me away, but it doesn't appear that he's doing a great job at holding everything else together.

Good. That gives me an opportunity. I'll take full advantage of that, but first, I need to rescue my girl from his slimy grip.

"Thanks for the help, hombre," I say to the brawny young man at my side. Jesus Medina. He's a low-level enforcer from the countryside, but when I take back control, he's going to be one of my generals.

"It was my pleasure, Mr. Montoya," he replies. "What else can we do to help?"

I look back at the car full of misfits who helped get me here. They will all be rewarded, but right now I have personal business to take care of, personal business that I need to handle alone.

"Don't linger too far from the city," I tell Jesus. "Things happen quickly around here, and when I call, I want you ready, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

“Good. That will be all for now.”

Jesus seems confused by my dismissal. His curious eyes dart from me down to the sparkling city below. “You’re going alone?” His nose scrunches up in bewilderment.

“It’s the only way forward.”

“Are you sure? We can help, boss—” I raise my palm to the young man and he stops in his tracks. I know he’s just eager to help, to play his part in my reckoning, but that will come later; right now, I need to operate on my own.

“Thank you for your help, Jesus,” I look past him towards the car. “Boys,” I nod. “Thank you. I will not forget what you’ve done for me, and there is more to come... but right now, I am ordering you to stand back. Right now, your mission is to wait for my signal. Can you follow my orders?”

Every last head nods in understanding. I place my hand on Jesus’s shoulder. He can’t be more than five years younger than me, but he looks like a child in my eyes. “You’re going to go far, kid, I’ll make sure of it. Just be patient.”

He nods and we shake hands. The boys in the car wave and I turn away, ready for the fight of my life.

Taking back my empire is a task that I won’t be able to do alone, but rescuing my girl is something that I can only do by myself.

The time has come to make my final push. My sources tell me that Dante plans to marry Catalina. I’m not going to let that happen. I can’t let it happen.

I’m coming for you, little bird, and this time, I’m not stopping until you’re in my arms—I don’t care if I have to burn down this whole country to get it done, we will

be together again.

I promise.

Streetlights flicker over the empty Cali streets.

Trash lines the sidewalks and pot holes litter the pavement. The slums nearly sink into the side of the hill. I don't miss the destitution of this place, but I know it's probably the safest path to take. No one cares about these poor areas, let alone someone as s

heltered as Dante.

Sure, we once lived in squalor like this, but my little brother seems to have long since forgotten what we rose from. Before he decided to play king, he would use our accrued wealth to jet set around the world like a senator's son. I never thought he'd change, especially so drastically. So, what the hell got into him?

... Enzo Barella.

The cunning puppet master tugged at my cruel brother's strings and found just the right way to play him.

Enzo knew I was too strong to handle directly, so he had to undermine me and put someone he could manipulate on the throne. There was only one person he could do that with: my little brother, the fool.

But being played doesn't excuse Dante's betrayal. Still, I haven't decided on whether or not I'll kill him for it. Hell, I don't know if I even can. He's the only blood relative I have left, but he's taken everything from me, and for such selfish reasons. Envy. Ignorance. Hate. I remember the speech he gave me in the flames at my old

compound. Everything was always given to you... If only he knew how much work I did while he slept, while he played with his friends, while he was off terrorizing girls.

I guess the grass is always greener on the other side, because I was often somewhat envious of him, too. Here he was, an orphan who had the luck of finding a fortune with me. Dante barely had to lift a finger for it, yet he still got all the benefits.

... But Enzo made him desire control, as well as a different kind of power. I'm sure of it. My brother may have grown up to be cruel, but he was never one to ever use that cruelty for any purpose other than his own sick enjoyment...

“Hey, did you hear that?”

## Page 4

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The unexpected voice makes me lunge behind an overflowing dumpster. Heavy footsteps quicken around the corner; they're accompanied by the familiar rattle of heavy artillery.

"Probably just a cat," someone says in a deep gruff voice. I peak through an opening in the trash and spot two younger guys strapped from head to toe in firepower. It looks like they've been patrolling these streets all night, but they're not dressed up in military or police gear—that means they're Dante's men.

I clench my fists and reach for the pistol tucked under my belt. These two don't look like the most vigilant of enforcers—I could probably sit still and they'd pass right by me—but I'm not looking to hide anymore. There are questions I need answers to, and there's no better time than now to go searching for them.

"We should check it out," one of the muscle-bound goons suggests.

The other waves him off. "No, it's nothing. Let's get back to the whore house already. I've got blue balls like nobody's business from those stupid school girls. Who the fuck raised them to be such prudes? I swear, if Yerry wasn't around, I would have—"

I don't let him finish his sentence. My bullet rips through his kneecap and I jump out from behind my cover before his buddy can even register what's happening. It hardly takes me more than a few short seconds to run up on the confused men. The roar from my gun drowns out the screams from my victims. I silence him with another shot, placed right between his eyes. Blood spurts onto the cratered cement and I train my barrel onto the dead man's partner.

The idiot doesn't freeze, though. Instead, he reaches for his own gun. If I didn't need him to answer my questions, he'd be dead already, but I do, so I just jump forward and strike him across the temple with the butt of my gun. A loud crack splits through the night and the big lug topples over.

For a second, I worry I might have hit him too hard, but then his chest starts heaving and a labored breath sputters out of his bloody lips. I grab him by the collar and drag him into the nearest alleyway, hoping that I've left him with enough brainpower to give me the answers that I'm after.

"Who do you work for?"

It's the first thing I ask my bloody hostage as he slips back into consciousness. He doesn't answer right away, but that's to be expected. Just a few minutes ago, he was living a carefree life, now, he's tied to a metal chair in the back of a dark, dirty kitchen with a pounding headache and no idea what's happening.

His eyebrows furrow in pain and confusion. I repeat my question. "Who do you work for?"

Slowly, realization comes over the young man's face. Young. He could be the same age as me, but he hasn't been through half of what I have, seen half of what I've seen, done half of what I've done. As far as I'm concerned, he's a child, a bully who carries a big gun around the slums and threatens the weak and the innocent for his own pleasure.

But I'm willing to cut him some slack if it turns out he's just doing his job.

"Who are you?" the man spits, a look of determination coming over his beaten face.

"Your worst nightmare," I growl, stepping in closer to my prey.

Fear flickers in the young man's eyes as he notices the switchblade in my hand, but that fear quickly glazes over. "You're no Dante Montoya," he sneers; the act sends a shot of pain across his face. My hostage recoils and I click open my sharp blade.

"So, that's who you work for?"

The young man shrugs and twists his lips. "Maybe."

"And you don't know who I am?"

The goon's dark eyes wander up from the floor long enough to give me a quick look over. "No."

That answer makes my heart sing. The more anonymous I am, the better. If Dante's low-level goons don't know who I am, then that means I might actually be able to navigate through this city without the constant fear of being spotted. It's also a surprising revelation. As far as I know, Dante has made it clear that I'm never allowed back in Colombia again. So, why don't his own men know what I look like?

"How long have you worked for Dante Montoya?"

When my hostage doesn't answer right away, I plunge the sharp end of my switchblade right through the back of his hand.

He howls in pain and desperately tries to shake loose of his restraints, but it's no use, he's trapped. I rip my blade back out and his head sinks down to his chest.

"How long have you worked for Dante Montoya?" I repeat.

"... Almost a year."



I grunt, cleaning the blood from my blade on the inside of my shirt. I knew this kid had to be a new hire. If he had ever worked for me, I'd at least have recognized him in some way, but both him and his buddy were completely unfamiliar.

What is Dante doing, hiring all these new bodies, if it's not to keep me out? He must be having trouble, but with who? The only people who live in this area are commoners, working poor who don't have the time or resources to raise hell. Sure, some drug dealers live here, too, but they all work for someone who would work for Dante.

"And what do you do for Mr. Montoya?" I ask, keeping my voice low and calm. It was just a stroke of luck that the door to this kitchen was fragile enough to bust open with my bare hands. If it wasn't, I would have had to interrogate my hostage out in the open, and who knows how many more goons like him are out patrolling these streets.

"I enforce curfew," the young man grumbles.

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“Curfew?” That’s not what I was expecting to hear. Sure, the streets are quiet, but in areas like these, people tend not to stray too far from their homes at night. “How long has there been a curfew?”

“I don’t know... a year, maybe...”

“Why is there a curfew?”

“The boss wants to keep things quiet...”

“What things?”

“I don’t know, man,” my hostage sighs, exasperated. His voice fractures from pain, but I’m not letting him off the hook just yet.

“Why did Dante Montoya give you such high-powered weapons, if you were just going to patrol the slums and enforce curfew?”

The goon coughs up blood and I place the barrel of my gun against his forehead; his heavy eyes lift back up to me.

“The people have been getting restless lately,” he mumbles.

“Why?”

The hostage hesitates to answer. I urge him on by clicking off the safety on my gun.

“Mr. Montoya hasn’t exactly endeared himself to the public.”

“What has he done?”

“Horrible things...”

Suddenly, a cacophony of yells erupts from somewhere outside. It sounds like my hostage’s friends have come across the body I left lying in the streets. I have so many more questions to ask, but I can’t risk being found out.

I pull my gun away from the hostage’s forehead and stuff it back under my belt, then I step around behind him, pull out my switchblade, and slice him right across the throat.

His dying gurgles echo through the dark empty kitchen as I exit through the front. He’s not the last man I’m going to have to kill to get what I want, and his death hardly weighs on my conscience at all. What does loom large, however, is the revelation that Dante is still just as cruel and as savage as ever. Even with all the responsibility he’s taken on, he hasn’t changed. In one sense, that’s good for me. It provides an opening. People aren’t happy with the current management of this country’s seedy underbelly; that’s something that I can take advantage of.

But it’s also something that nearly brings me to my knees as I step out into the stale night of the hillside slum.

Dante is still just as cruel as ever...

I don’t even want to

think about what that means for Catalina.

Catalina

It seems a bit excessive.

Three giant armed guards surround me in a triangle formation as I'm led from my room, out to the cobblestone encased backyard of the colonial-style mansion I've been confined to.

They each carry guns that are nearly as big as I am and march with the determination of well-trained foot soldiers.

It's kind of flattering, in an awful way. All of this attention for little old me. I guess Dante knows that the only thing keeping me from ripping his throat out with my finely sharpened fingernails is the fact that I'd be shredded to swiss cheese immediately after. What he doesn't know is that if I didn't have a child that I was hiding from him, then I'd take that risk any day. I'm keeping myself alive and meek for Oscar's sake, and no one else.

"Fucking finally," Dante hisses as I'm pushed towards him by an AK-47 wielding tough guy. "You really are the slowest bitch alive..."

I bite my tongue. There's no point in talking back; I've learned that Dante doesn't have any misgivings about hurting women. The last time I said something that offended him, I couldn't walk for the next week, and that meant missing out on a visit to my precious Ozzy. That is more devastating than any physical pain; so, I keep my mouth shut.

"Sit," Dante jerks a thin finger to the chair on the other side of the small white patio table.

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I do as he says.

“Put this on,” he continues, throwing a small black box in my direction. I’m just quick enough to catch it, but I wish I hadn’t. I immediately know what’s inside, and it makes my heart shrivel up like a raisin.

“I... I...”

“I didn’t ask you to talk,” Dante snaps. “I told you to put the ring on.” He looks over to his guards like he’s considering ordering them to do something unspeakable to me. Luckily, that thought doesn’t seem to last long. He turns back to me with cold dead eyes. “Don’t ever let me see you without that ring on, understand?”

His twiggy finger points at me like a twisted wand. I just want to bite it off and watch him squirm as blood spurts from his new stump...

But then I’d never be able to see my baby boy again. So, without hardly a glance at the diamond, I slip it on my finger. My dried-up heart immediately sinks into my gut when I recognize the feel of it.

Dante seems to hone in on my pain. “What? You didn’t think I was going to get you a new one, did you? You’re hardly worth the effort...”

I caress the familiar engagement ring between my fingers; it’s the same one Angel got for me. That seems like a lifetime ago, but a comet trail of warmth falls from my chest at the memory of the good times I shared with my missing partner...

“We’re getting married,” Dante lashes, snapping me out of my sentimental daze. If he’s an expert at anything, it’s poking you when it hurts the most. The bastard. The only luck I’ve had with him over the past two years is that he’s been so busy that he barely has the time to torment me. But that also means he has to pick up the slack when he gets the chance.

“Why?” I ask, finally staring down at the glittering jewel on my finger. It shines so sadly in the afternoon sun. I haven’t seen it since Dante ripped it from my finger after Angel was exiled. Of course, the monster would regift it—a cruel reminder of what he’s taken from me; what he continues to take.

“What did I tell you about asking questions?” Dante spits, slamming a fist against the tabletop. I hardly flinch, I’m too lost in my memories to react.

Back when all of this started, Angel made it clear that he wasn’t proposing to me out of love, but out of convenience. He wanted to win the hearts of the people; he could have cared less about mine. But then everything changed... and then quickly changed again.

I never got my money, but I did get something even better, until it was cruelly ripped away from me.

I wonder if Dante is trying to do the same thing?

The thought nearly makes me laugh. If Dante wants to win over the public, he’s going to have a hell of a time. Angel may have been vicious, but he could also be charming beyond belief. There’s no charm in Dante’s cold dead eyes, there’s only cruelty, selfish cruelty.

And right now, those cruel eyes are plastered on me.

“So?” he teases, as if my opinion matters.

“What are you asking me?” I mumble, trying to play dumb. The longer I’m not engaged to Dante, the better, even if I can only buy myself a few more seconds.

“Idiot,” Dante snaps. He reaches across the table and rips the black box from in front of me. “As if I’d give you the choice. We will be wed, and soon—and you will walk down the aisle with a big fucking smile on your face, do you understand?”

My reflection is hidden by the brightness of the diamond on my finger. It’s probably for the best, I don’t want to see myself give into Dante like this, but he’s right, I don’t have any say in the matter. I’m his captive and one wrong move, one wrong word, even one wrong look, could mean my child growing up without a mother. He’s already missing a father...

I nod as subtly as I can manage and Dante jumps onto his feet. His thin shadow stretches out over the table, covering me in a cold chill. “Is that all?” I ask, trying to hide the derision from my voice. There’s no way I did a good job, but Dante already seems distracted by other matters. He hardly cares about me—to him, I’m just flesh to torture, a mind to tease, a weighty pawn to protect him from an exiled king. I’m the expendable shield that’s keeping away the older brother who always lurks just off in the shadows; the same older brother who no one has heard from in almost two years.

I’m sure Dante was expecting Angel to have made his play by now—hell, I know I was—but the longer he has to wait, the angrier he gets, and that anger is taken out on me.

Where the hell are you, Angel!?

It hurts to hope, and it feels shameful to beg, especially after all this time, but a primal part of me won’t stop wading out into the ether, hoping that I’ll be saved from

drowning by the dark brooding prince that once plucked me from obscurity and gave me my son...

Dante limps off without answering my question. I don't mind. I'd rather be rid of him. Plus, the sunshine feels nice on my skin.

Of course, that just means another thing to take away from me. My personal team of oversized guards are quick to ferry me back to my room after Dante has exited. The walk back feels so much heavier. The engagement ring on my finger might as well weigh a thousand pounds. Every time I look down at it, I keep expecting to see a lump of coal. Instead, I'm blinded by the brilliance. I hate that it reminds me of Angel. I know that's what Dante wants; he may be too busy to properly torture me, but he's an expert at psychological cruelty. It's the one reason why he kept Angel alive in the first place, to torment him—even with all the risk involved, it's abundantly clear that Dante gets off on the knowledge that people are suffering because of him.

The monster.

I'm shoved back inside my room and the door is slammed shut behind me. I wait until I hear the lock turn and the heavy footsteps march away, and then I race for the far corner of the large chamber.

My heart races as I take one last cautious look around to make sure there are no peeping eyes, then I dig my nails under the loose floorboard and gently unlatch it.

A new note waits for me there.



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I snatch it up, shove it in my pocket, then fit the floorboard back into place. The secret message stays balled up in my fist until I close the bathroom door behind me. At a moment's notice, I'm ready to flush the dangerous little piece of paper down the toilet, and if that fails, I won't hesitate to swallow it myself. The knowledge hidden within is too precious to risk falling into the wrong hands.

You see, every time I'm allowed to leave my room—or, more commonly 'forced'—an opportunity arises. This gilded prison is an unforgivable hellhole... but one of the devil's henchmen seems to be more forgiving than

the others.

Juan Arias has a man on the inside, and that man is my only connection to the outside world. He leaves notes hidden in my loose floorboard to keep me updated on my son.

Sometimes, they're just little bits of news to uplift my soul.

The chick played with the hatchlings. That means Oscar had a fun day with some friends.

Quiet are the little ears. That means that Oscar has been moved somewhere safe and quiet.

I take a deep breath and read the message that awaits me this time...

The snake slithers from his nest on the new moon. What does the bird do?

My heart flutters. This message means I get to go see Ozzy. Dante will be leaving on business soon, and that gives me an opening to escape for a few hours to go see my little boy.

I hold the note to my chest and it feels warm and light. Dante has been coming and going a lot more than usual lately, and it's the best gift I've been afforded since Ozzy was born.

As much as I hate always having to come back to this death trap, I've been made all too aware of how impossible it would be to make a real run for freedom. Dante has flooded the city with his men ten times over, but there are still small enclaves of safety in the nearby area. Juan knows the safehouses of this city like the back of his hand, and he makes sure Ozzy is safely ferried from one to the next as much as is needed to keep him protected. He also almost always makes sure to get word to me whenever there's a chance to see my baby.

I still don't know who his inside source is, but if I ever meet the mystery man who's been risking his life to pass me these little notes, I'll thank him to the ends of the earth. These tiny slices of bliss are the only moments of hope I get these days, and every last second of them is cherished to their fullest extent—they have to be, because any journey could be my last.

Security becomes more rigid when Dante's gone. Guards stay in their lanes and follow straight forward orders. When the cruel prince is around, though, there's no telling what might happen. Dante has very little control over his temper, and he often flies off the rails at random intervals—and that means calling for his favorite punching bag to rag on. He hardly gets physical, but his words usually hurt more than his dainty grip ever could.

... But if Dante called for me and I was gone?

All hell would break loose. The district would be shut down, and I would be stuck wherever I was, unable to escape. And if I happened to be with Oscar at that moment...

... I don't even want to think about it.

There's no leaving when Dante is around, but when he's gone, there's hope, and right now, there's a little sliver of hope on the horizon. Dante may be forcing me to marry him, but he can't control what I do when he's gone, at least, not as much as he may like. I have a son, and that boy takes precedence over everything, even the boogie monster. Especially the fucking boogie monster.

The snake slithers from his nest on the new moon. What does the bird do?

Leave, I scratch into the open space underneath my coded message.

I've got to get out of here.

4

Angel

The stone hard skin on my knuckles is finally starting to break. My callous hands are cracked and splintered and bruised and battered, but it's all for a good cause. I've spent the past two nights rumbling through the underworld, trying to rip through all there is to know about Dante and where he might be hiding Catalina.

I've used my gun and my knife plenty, but my fists are my favorite tool; it helps release the anger and the frustration of this fucking pony show.

So far, I've mostly only been able to get my hands on new recruits, street-toughs who

don't know me from a hole in the wall. It's a shame. I desperately want to come across someone who betrayed me for my brother and finally start my tour of vengeance. But it's too hairy in the nicer parts of town where most of those assholes will be. For now, I have to continue to tear through the poorer areas and hope I can gather enough intel to make an informed next move.

The faster that time comes, the better. I'm already getting sick of pussy footing around.

I stare down at my stained fists. Most of the blood on them is from others, but I see a cut of my own here and there.

"I'll talk! I'll talk!" The panicked voice trembles behind me. I stretch my fingers and turn back towards the gruesome scene.

A middle-aged hitman convulses on the floor beside a younger, tied-up, transporter. The stink of fear wafts from his struggling body as he begs for mercy.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

I just might give it to him... in the form of a quick death. These two were bullying some street kids when I came across them. Apparently, the hitman had killed one of their father's, and this bastard was coming back to gloat in their misery. I would have never hired someone this evil, but I know Dante probably picked the man himself. Well, he won't be doing any more deeds for my brother. I cracked his skull with a few well-placed punches, and when he stops flopping around on the floor, I'll stomp the life out of him for good.

"Who do you work for, David?" I start with the same question I always do. I don't know if David is his real name, but I thought I'd heard the hitman call him that just before I'd attacked.

"Dante Montoya," David immediately blurts out.

"What do you do for him?"

"I transport drugs and weapons."

"And beat up school children?"

"That wasn't me! Wilmar ordered me to do it! Those kids had weapons!" His story changes so quickly he can hardly get his next sentence out before he contradicts his last one.

I raise my palm to the shaking miscreant and he stops blubbing about his innocence. It's clear I don't believe a word he has to say, but that doesn't mean all of his ramblings will be lies.

“Do you know who I am?”

The scared and trembling eyes of the cruel transporter study me intently. For a split-second, I think I might have finally found a street tough who recognizes me, but that hope is quickly extinguished.

“No.”

“Who do you report to?”

“Stefan Mendoza.”

The name doesn't ring a bell. Just how many new men has Dante brought in since my exile? Maybe I wasn't betrayed by as many people as I thought, maybe Dante really did just get rid of them all...

“Who does Stefan Mendoza report to?”

“Juan Arias.”

My heart stops in my chest. Juan Arias. There's a name I haven't heard in a long time. I would have sworn he was dead, or at least in hiding.

Despite my initial suspicions, I had completely dismissed my former advisor of any wrongdoing once I found out that Dante was behind my downfall. Juan wasn't at the compound when I attacked, and my best guess was that he had been taken care of by Dante and whoever was pulling Dante's strings.

But now I've discovered the truth. Juan didn't die fighting for me, and he didn't even run off when I needed him the most. He betrayed me.

I should have known.

Juan was always too smart to let some bullshit like this happen on his watch. I may have been distracted while my empire crumbled to dust around me, but Juan wasn't. The only way he was going to let something like that happen was if he had a hand in it.

And so, now I know the truth... and it hurts. It really fucking hurts.

There truly isn't anyone I can trust.

"Where would I go about finding Juan Arias?" I ask the scared bully tied-up before me. Flames of flurry flicker up in my chest, masking the pain. At least I can start getting my revenge the moment I wrap my fingers around that bastard's throat...

"You'd have to ask Stefan Mendoza, man. I don't know. I don't know anything. I just joined this fucking shit-show!"

I wait until he's done rambling, then I continue. "And where would I go about finding Stefan Mendoza?"

"He's got a penthouse downtown. That's all I know." He seems to know a whole lot for someone who doesn't know anything.

"What's the address?"

The trembling errand boy spits it out so fast I hardly have time to remember, but I don't forget information that's so important. It also doesn't hurt that I recognize the address. I use to have a penthouse of my own nearby; hell, I used to have entire buildings nearby. I wonder what's become of those skyscrapers?

I guess I'll find out soon enough.



## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

I wasn't going to hide out in the slums forever, and now is as good a time as any to get moving. If I want to have my revenge, I'm going to have to go to where the most powerful of my traitors roost. Downtown Cali, my old playpen.

I'll burn it to the ground if I have to.

The restaurant where I took Catalina out for our first public 'date' hits my line of sight like a flash of lightning.

It still stands there, unchanged, like nothing is different, but everything is different. I turn away from the haunting memory of what I've lost and keep my head down. I lower the brim on my baseball cap and watch the sidewalk through my dark sunglasses as I turn the nearest corner. Stefan Mendoza's place should be just up the block.

I haven't dared pass by any of my old buildings yet. The last I heard, they were on fire. Sure, maybe I could have gotten to my destination quicker if I'd paid them a visit, but I know how mid-level bosses like Mendoza work. I'm in no hurry. They play all night long and then get home in the pre-morning dawn, sleeping all day before finally getting back onto the streets around sundown. That's about what time it is right now; with any luck, I'll catch this bastard just before he heads out for the night.

My old buildings can wait.

By the time I'm out front of Mendoza's place, a strong wind has tunneled down the semi-crowded street. Busy strangers rush by with their heads tucked in

to their chests, just trying to brave the breeze for long enough to come out the other side. It works well in my favor. No one's looking at me, and I easily slip into a side alleyway without facing a single suspicious stare.

The quickening wind dies down a little in this quiet side street, and I take the opportunity to take off my hat and sunglasses. Sweat drips down my forehead and I can feel the mark left on my face by the sunglasses. I hate having to hide like this, but I know it's the only way. People would recognize me without this half-assed disguise, and the second news gets out that I'm back, Dante will go into lock-down mode and any chance I have at grabbing Catalina will go up in flames.

I try not to think about my captive bride as I search for a way into the building. Up ahead, I spot a closed door; just behind that there's a half-drawn fire escape ladder. The closed door would be easiest, but it's also more likely to have security cameras trained on it. The fire escape, meanwhile, shakes against the growing wind like an unstable branch.

I don't like either of my options.

I'm seriously considering just going in the front door with my disguise on, when a sudden gust sends me sliding backwards. My arms instinctively cross over my face in a shield to protect against the flying debris. The air smells violent and hot. It's a recognizable scent. There's no doubt that a huge storm is coming, but for now, all I can do is brace myself against the pre-gale tremors.

When the rogue gust has calmed, I shake myself free of the litter it threw against me and decide that enough is enough. I'm getting inside of this building, now...

I don't make it far before something heart-stopping catches my eye. The dying wind flips through the pages of a nearby newspaper, which lays on the ground just a few yards from my feet. A familiar picture is quickly shrouded by ink-filled sheets, but I

know what I saw.

I rush forward and grab the windswept rag, violently flipping through the dirty pages until I reach the offending photo.

Fuck.

There, filling up half the page, is a full color picture of me and Catalina, hand in hand, on our first date, two years ago.

My heart constricts as I remember the warmth of her little palm against mine. She looks so meek as she stares down at her feet to avoid the flashing lights of the paparazzi that surround the restaurant.

A new hurricane-forced gust starts blowing down the alley again, ripping back the pages and obscuring my view of my lovely little dove. It's enough to snap me out of my reverie, and I quickly move to the closed door ahead.

It only takes a few well-placed kicks to bust it open, and when I shut it closed behind me, I'm met with a still silence.

After a quick glance around, no security cameras catch my eye, and my attention is immediately pulled back to the paper in my hands. Before I open it back up to the photo, I check the date on the front page—it came out yesterday. Why the hell is a photo of me and Catalina from two years ago doing in a newspaper that came out yesterday?

I quickly race back to the offending page. There she is. For an eternal moment, I can't rip my eyes off of Catalina. She's so beautiful... I wonder if she's changed?

Slowly, my heart let's my brain regain control and my eyes wander up to the headline

above the photo.

## WHERE HAS THE MYSTERIOUS BILLIONAIRE GONE? COULD HE SAVE THIS CITY'S SOUL?

A sharp pain of confusion shoots through my skull as I try to process just what I'm seeing. An uncomfortable silence hugs me as I lean back against the hallway wall and skim through the article.

This journalist has been receiving constant updates on the philanthropic endeavors of one Angel Montoya...

Ever since he flashed into the public eye, and then promptly disappeared, some odd two years ago, this city has experienced an historic descent...

What's become of him and his fiancée? Did they fall to the same evil that has gripped this city? Did they leave us? Or have they gone underground and started a resistance that could save this city's soul? This journalist can only speculate...

My head starts to pound almost as hard as my heart as I rip the page out and stuff it into my pocket. It looks like my effort to win over public opinion all that time ago ended up succeeding after all, and my absence has only added to my legend. But why am I still being written about? It's been two years, has everything really gotten so bad that the only hero some journalist can conjure up is a mysterious rich dude who hasn't been seen in 24 months? How is Dante allowing this? And if I'm so famous, why don't any of his new recruits know about me or what I look like?

A thousand different questions whirl around in my head at light speed; the approaching storm outside hardly compares to the storm already raging inside of me. I struggle to grab hold of a single question that could settle me down...

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

In the distance, a door creaks open and I'm suddenly snapped back to reality. The pistol tucked behind my belt rubs against my back and I whip it out to make sure it's loaded.

Fully.

Uncertainty fades away and an angry determination takes it over. I may not have any answers right now, but I'm in the right place to get them. This Mendoza fucker is going to sing, I'll make sure of that.

5

Catalina

I know something is wrong the second I step inside.

Despite Juan's towering presence, the room just feels empty.

"Where is he?" I whisper, too scared to ask any louder. The answer is already clear. This happens once in a while, and each time it's so devastating that I risk falling apart.

"It wasn't safe," Juan answers, his voice strong and calm. If I looked him in the eyes right now, I'd be able to see the sympathy he holds for me, but I don't want sympathy, I want Oscar.

"Why not, what's happening?" My heart races like a heavy stone tumbling down the

side of a mountain. Every second plunges me further down into the abyss. I just risked everything... for nothing.

“Don’t worry,” Juan says, placing a reassuring palm on my shoulder. “It has nothing to do with Oscar. There’s just some trouble brewing in the underworld, usual stuff. Someone is picking off Dante’s men. So, he’s increased patrols to enforce curfew, and that made it too dangerous to bring Oscar here tonight.”

“Then why did you bring me?” I ask, desperately sad.

Juan brushes past me and makes a beeline for the liquor cabinet at the far side of the room. The way he sulks over makes me feel bad for snapping—I know he has a good heart; I know he’s just trying to help; I know I shouldn’t be upset at him, but these tears need to be directed somewhere, and we’re the only two people here. “I’m sorry...” I start to apologize, before Juan cuts me off.

“I didn’t know this area would be so tightly watched,” he says, pouring himself a glass of amber liquid. “Which is weird, because usually I’m on top of this stuff... Something big is coming, Catalina... and I have no idea what it is.”

The dread in Juan’s voice nearly pushes me into the floor... before a pinprick of hope explodes through a tiny hole in my heart. “Could it be Angel!?” I ask, hardly daring to wish, but barely able to contain it.

Juan sighs. “I don’t know... I don’t know.”

It’s hard to tell what Juan is thinking. Is he hoping for Angel’s return, too, or does he fear it?

“I feel a storm coming,” the older man says, pounding back his booze like it’s water.

“What does that mean for me and Oscar?” I ask. My voice is just as unsteady as my nerves, but that pinprick of hope hasn’t vanished just yet. It’s the longest something so light has been able to escape from my heart in a very long time.

Juan considers my question carefully.

“... Does it mean we can finally make a run for it?” I ask before he can answer. It’s a question I’ve been holding off on. For the past two years, the answer has always been a hard no, and each no grows more painful than the last. For Juan, it’s always too dangerous, too risky, too impossible... but if things are changing? If there’s

a storm coming, could we make a run for it under the cover of the rain?

Before Juan can answer, a harsh buzz cuts through our tense silence. He quickly reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cellphone. I watch intently as he answers.

“What?”

The voice on the other end of the line is muffled, but I can make out bits and pieces of what they’re saying. Usually, I wouldn’t eavesdrop, but right now, I’m looking for anything to distract myself from the absence of my baby.

“Someone got to Mendoza... No security footage... He might have talked... Just thought I’d warn you.” That’s all I can make out before Juan hangs up.

“Who’s Mendoza?” I ask.

To my surprise, Juan doesn’t hesitate to answer. “One of Dante’s top men—he’s not like the street toughs that have been vanishing recently. They found his body downtown, in his swanky penthouse suite...”

He seems to be thinking out loud, but I don't stop him. The further I can throw myself into his mystery, the less I have to think about my baby boy sleeping alone tonight.

“Does that mean someone's trying to take down Dante?”



*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

Juan laughs. I can feel my brows furrow in confusion. This doesn't seem like the time to be laughing.

“There are about a million different factions trying to take down Dante at any given moment, and there have been ever since he blew up that block with the hospital on it... but whoever is killing his men right now is going about it the wrong way. Dante doesn't give a shit about the people who work for him. Mendoza may have been more important to the organization than the local patrollers who enforce curfew, but he's no big loss... though, he might have been able to tell his interrogator where some more important people are...”

“People are trying to take Dante down?” My shriveled-up heart pumps up a little at that revelation, before quickly being overcome by a searing fear. “I thought he was too powerful to fall? You said he was too powerful to fall!” I'm suddenly in a panic. What happens to me if another battle breaks out? What happens to Oscar if the city is set on fire? I heard about what Dante did to that hospital... with all those people inside...

“He's not going anywhere,” Juan assures me. “No one has the resources to properly challenge him, and everybody knows it. Dante has terrorized his way into the political sphere. He either has dirt on, or a hostage from, nearly every important member of the government and military.”

“Is he more powerful than Angel was?” I don't know why I ask it, but the question slips out of me like a wet stone.

Juan hesitates before answering. “Angel never wanted to get involved with politics.

He hated the formality of it all...”

“... But he was trying to buy up legitimate property, wasn’t he?”

Juan nods. “He was, but business is different from politics. Business is a safe bet; politics is more volatile.”

“How?”

Juan pours himself another glass and draws the amber liquid up to his lips. “Well, during reasonable times, a building should stand for as long as whoever owns it wants it to.” He takes a slow sip of his drink. “In politics, no one owns anything. During reasonable times, the people vote for who they want to represent them. The people in charge usually don’t get to decide how long they stand for, and if they don’t get out of the way when they’re asked, they risk being toppled.”

“We aren’t living during reasonable times,” I mumble, my heart breaking in real time. Angel was playing it safe, and it all backfired for him.

“No, we aren’t. There’s an election coming up, but Dante’s doing his best to meddle in it. He can’t risk staying out of politics at this point, because if his candidates lose, he’s fucked. His businesses are all openly corrupt, and the second he shows even the slightest bit of weakness, his house of cards will come crumbling down on him. There’s no going legitimate for Dante; his only hope is to delegitimize everything else.”

“How did he get so powerful so fast?”

Juan sighs, his eyes wandering off to some sad memory. “Cruelty,” he whispers. “Unfiltered cruelty... and some outside help.”

Nausea swirls around in my gut as Juan and I wallow in silence. We both know how powerless we are against Dante's brutality, and we both know that it's because we actually care about people other than ourselves. Maybe, if we were willing to free ourselves from love, we'd be able to topple the savage giant, but I know that neither of us could ever do such a thing. I wouldn't give up my baby boy even if it meant putting a bullet through Dante's thick skull.

... I'm not willing to give up on Angel so easily either.

So, we're trapped.

"Do you want to head back now or do you want to spend some more time here?" Juan eventually asks, when his glass has been emptied.

It doesn't take me long to make up my mind. As much as I hate being locked up in Dante's mansion, every second I spend outside of those walls is a second that could come back to haunt me later. "I better head back."

"Would you like me to escort you?"

The safety of having Juan by my side is tempting, but I know the last thing I need right now is company. Two sets of footsteps are always louder than one, plus I'd like some space to think. "I think I'd rather go alone."

Juan nods and we share a quick look before I take a deep breath and head back out into the darkness.

The walk back is always longer.

Usually, it's also lighter—the soft warm touch of my baby boy lingers on my skin long after I leave him—but this time, I spent my little slice of freedom alone, learning

of just how unstoppable my captor has become.

Juan said he sensed that a storm was coming; for some reason, I feel the same thing. The air is thick and humid and every step I take feels like a trek through the ocean floor. Something has got to break and I can only hope that it's not me.

In the distance, the light of the mansion seeps through the jungle trees, and for a split-second, I seriously consider turning around and making my final run for it. It hardly matters how far I'd get, just the act alone would give me some sense of control. But a sense of control is nothing compared to my sense of duty. I can't leave Oscar alone in this world. Sure, Lady looks after him during the day, and Juan makes sure he's safe, but there's nothing like true family, true love.

I know what it's like to lose both, and I wouldn't wish it on anybody, let alone my baby boy. Oscar is my tether, for better or for worse, and his light gives me just enough strength to keep going.

A deep breath of jungle air rids me of my escape fantasies, and I trod back to my cage like a well-tamed tiger. This whole night was a complete bust. To think, I was so excited when I found that coded message beneath my false floorboard... I should have known better. High hopes get cut down far too easily these days, and I feel about a foot shorter every time I dare to stand on my tiptoes.

It's almost not worth it.

Almost...

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

Ozzy is worth everything to me. They can cut me to pieces and I'd still fight for him. Anything to keep him safe.

"What the fuck?" The unexpected voice cuts through the air like a switchblade. I'm immediately dragged from my reverie and thrown against a tree of cold harsh reality.

My whole body tenses as I spot the source of the sound. Just off to the side of my well-trodden path are two bodyguards; their guns are angled against a stump, and they stand side by side, staring through the darkness, right at me.

The glow of a lit cigarette floats in between them like an orange firefly. They must have come out here for a smoke break.

... And I didn't think my night could get any worse.

My immediate instinct is to run. I burst ahead and my shin instantly catches on an upturned root. I hit the jungle floor like a felled tree. Pain shoots through my wrists and my knees but I have no time to linger on it. I scramble back onto my feet and push forward. Behind me, I hear my pursuers gathering.

"Hey! They're going towards the mansion! Grab them!" My only hope is that they haven't recognized me yet. If I can lose them, then I might be able to get back to my room before anyone notices I'm gone.

That hope quickly vanishes into thin air when I hear the familiar crackle of a radio hum alive in my wake. "We've got an unidentified assailant heading towards the premises... lock down." I make a sharp left turn and the pursuing voice is lost in the

leaves.

Unidentified. That's good. They didn't recognize me.

Lock down. That could fuck me. Any minute now, a gaggle of body guards are going to be coming into my room to secure me. If they arrive before I do, then I might never be able to make one of these journeys again. That means no more Oscar...

A sudden rush of adrenaline bursts through my veins and I shoot forward like a loose arrow. Harsh branches and spiny leaves rip against my skin as I bound through the jungle towards the light of the mansion, but I hardly feel any pain. There's no time for pain right now. I need to get back to my room or else I risk imploding everything.

Shouts billow up from behind me and flashlights bob through the trees ahead. I make another sharp turn and nearly run face first into a trunk, but somehow, I manage to dodge it. I've never been so fleet footed in all my life, but I hardly have time to appreciate my newfound skill. Determination flexes through every single last centimeter of my muscles as I come up to the edge of the jungle that borders the back lawn of Dante's mansion.

Flood lights whip across the open field that stands between me and safety. In the distance, I can see the window that I need to get into. It's on the third floor, but three sets of balconies and a long sturdy trellis make the journey at least plausible—I've considered shattering my window and climbing down that path countless times before, but I never thought I'd be so desperate to climb back in.

The roar of an approaching motorcade rumbles through the air like thunder and I watch as streams of dune buggies race across the lawn ahead. Armed guards march towards the jungle border and stones of uneasiness roll around in my gut. I didn't realize just how closely this place was being guarded. There's practically an army out

there. No wonder Angel hasn't come for me yet. Who the hell could get through all that?

You.

I don't have much of a choice. My worst fears are on the brink of being realized. Either I slip back into my room unnoticed, or else...

As the heavily armed guards approach and sirens wail and search lights burn up the dark lawn, my pulse slows. This is for Oscar. I need to succeed for him; there isn't any other option.

A final deep breath fills my lungs as I wait for the flood lights ahead to criss cross. A small dark opening presents itself before me and I take it, lunging out from behind my jungle cover like a bullet.

Blood rushes to my ears and the outside world goes silent as I race towards the leafy trellis that I'll use as my makeshift ladder. My racing heart sets the pace for my scrambling feet, but with every step, the wall I need to reach seems to stretch further and further away.

There's no stopping, though. I keep chugging, oblivious to everything else—if anyone sees me, I don't notice it...

Suddenly, I'm at the base of the wall. A quick glance behind me shows that I haven't been followed. The flood lights don't reach this area, and all the cars and the guns are focused on the jungle.

My hands find the first rung of the trellis. The wood is warm and damp, but I don't bother testing its sturdiness. There's no time to waste. I'm up on the precariously set wood before I can talk myself out of it. The blood rushes from my ears the higher I

climb, and by the time I'm at the second-floor balcony I can hear all of the orders being barked out in the distance. None of them seem directed at me, but I'm not out of the woods yet.

Sharp stems and horny vines tears at my skin as I make my last push. Adrenaline masks any pain, but there's no hiding the blood. Dark stains follow me up the trellis until I'm close enough to the third-floor balcony to reach out and touch it...

The second I transfer my weight from the trellis to the balcony, the chunk of stone under my palm cracks and splits. I stifle my scream as it collapses beneath my weight and I fall.

I have to stifle another scream when my arm gets caught in a thorny vine that juts out from the side of the trellis. Crumbling stone falls to the dark lawn below. My feet swing in the open air. For what seems like an eternity, I can't breathe. The only part of my body that seems to work is my hearing. My ears twitch as I listen for the worst...

But nothing changes.

Men still bark orders in the distance, flood lights still search the lawn; all traffic is directed towards the jungle.

Slowly, I pull myself back onto the trellis. This time, there's no masking the pain. I grimace with every movement, but I can't stop, I won't stop.

My eyes close and when I open them back up, I'm by the third-floor balcony again. Now, though, there's a convenient hole for me to jump through. I make the fateful leap and a shockwave of agony ripples up from my shins as I land on solid ground.



## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

There's no time to relish in my small victory or give into my large amount of pain. I pull myself back onto my feet and peer through the window.

The bedroom is dark and empty, just as I left it. Relief washes over my strained nerves... only to evaporate seconds later at the thought of just how the fuck I'm going to get inside.

The window is always locked...

But maybe it's locked from the outside? I desperately search for a bolt or a clasp or a latch or anything, but it's too dark and I can't make anything out.

My brain starts to pound with panic as I realize that I may have just crawled back to my cage for no reason. I'm going to get caught...

Before I can fall too far into my pit of ever-growing despair, my hopeless gaze falls on the hole I created in the side of the balcony. The rubble is so obvious that it will be the first thing people spot in the morning. What kind of cheap shit is this paper mansion made of!?

My despair gives way to a quick bout of anger. I want to try the window pane with my fists, but I know that will only kill me quicker. The glass will shred my wrists and I'll leave my child motherless.

I'm such a failure...

The anger won't let me give up, though. I need to smash something, even if it means

the death of me. Before I can pull a punch at my window, though, I spot a thick stone in the corner of the crumbled balcony.

My heart leaps with an ounce of hope. I lunge for it, taking the big piece of rubble in my hand and raising it above my head. With every last bit of strength in my failing body I throw it at my bedroom window...

And it immediately bounces back, smacking me in the chest and throwing me against the far end of the balcony. The wind rushes from my lungs and I struggle to catch my breath for what seems like an eternity.

Slowly, air drifts back down my throat... and something else comes with it.

Not despair; not hopelessness; not exhaustion.

Fire.

Anger.

Fury.

Fuck this scene. I am not going out like this. The loose stone that bounced off the window is back in my fist before I can think better of it. My first attempt might have bounced right back at me, but it at least left the window cracked. I wack the stone right in the middle of that crack and the glass splinters a little bit more.

Tears of rage and desperation blur my vision as I pound the stubborn window with all my might. I don't care that I'm being loud; I don't care that I'm probably going to get caught; I just don't care. I need to break something, or else I might shatter myself.

Without warning, the window explodes in a flurry of broken glass. I fall through the

opening, dropping the stone on the balcony outside before I hit the carpet inside. Sharp shards rain down over my exhausted body, but I'm too tired to move. I let them wash over me...

Before I can give in to my exhaustion, the exceedingly loud sound of my bedroom door being unbolted rattles through my brain.

Fuck. What am I going to say? I didn't come all this way for nothing...

"What the hell!?" A gruff voice fills the room and I try to push myself off the ground. Heavy footsteps rush to my side and I'm pulled up onto my feet.

"Why the fuck wasn't she checked on earlier!?" someone roars.

"We were waiting outside, boss! We didn't think anyone could get in!"

"You fucking idiots!"

I'm hardly paying attention; my only struggle is to stay conscious. I feel the blood dripping down my skin, my eyelids are so heavy...

A rough hand gently slaps against my cheek. "What happened?" I don't look up, but I know the question is directed at me. My mind is empty of excuses. "What happened!?" A big hand squeezes my jaw and forces my gaze up to a red-faced guard. His eyes are wide with desperate anger. It's no secret that I'm Dante's prized hostage, if something happens to me, there's going to be hell to pay. "What the fuck happened!?"

Suddenly, a lie pops into my drained mind. "I was watching... out of the window... someone threw... a stone... the glass shattered... I... I..." I'm not quite ready to pass out yet, but this bully doesn't know it. I close my eyes and let my head go limp.

The guard seems to accept my fib. He gets out of my face and I hear him storm over to the window. “Lock this place down. Now!”

His words hardly hit my ears. My empty mind is suddenly filled with thoughts of what just happened.

## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

I just broke back into my prison.

I don't feel accomplished or relieved. In fact, the only emotion that runs through my charred veins is a surprise mixture of anger and frustration.

I broke into this place all on my own... so what the fuck is Angel's excuse? If I can get through all of that, then why the fuck hasn't he been able to!?

He must have given up on me. He must not care...

It's the last thought in my mind before I pass out.

6

Angel

The sun sets over the countryside in a brilliant display of golden light.

I have no time to appreciate it. I

'm in a rush to pay my old friend a visit. Juan Arias. The traitor. Karma's about to catch up to the son-of-a-bitch, and it's going to run over him in the form of my clenched fists.

Mendoza talked. It took some convincing, but he spilled his guts before I spilled his brains out over that Arabian carpet of his.

Oh, how much I learned... but there's still so much more to know, and Juan is the man who's going to tell it all to me.

Apparently, he's been living in his own mini-compound out in the countryside. Mendoza insisted that he didn't know the address, but his phone told a different story—I just had to unlock it with his severed thumb first.

A heavy wind sways the trees alongside the road as I turn down a small side path just a few hundred yards away from where Juan is supposed to be staying. The traitor is still working for Dante, but apparently my little brother doesn't much like the sight of him; so, the consigliere does most of his work on the ground, or out here, where no one can bother him.

Well, I'm about to do a little more than just bother him.

I stash my car under a hail of bushes and jungle leaves and make up the remaining distance on my feet. Juan's smart, and I have little doubt that his residence will be just as heavily guarded as anything involving Dante. That's why it took me two days to prepare for this invasion. I gave Jesus Medina and his country boys a call and told them how to set-up a distraction just outside of my intended destination. They're due to light some fireworks any minute now, and hopefully it will give me enough space to slip through Juan's defences with all my gear.

You see, I know Juan. He's not going to talk as easy as Mendoza or any regular street tough. He's been in this game too long to give up now. I'll have to be convincing, and that means pulling out all the stops. In my backpack, I've got tools that never fail to make grown men whimper like little girls, and they're stashed right beside jumper cables that could make a mute talk.

But first, I need to get to him.

Mendoza had said that Juan usually goes home after sun down. Back when Juan worked for me, it hardly seemed like he ever went home. Things are different with Dante, though. My little brother apparently only calls on Juan when he actively needs something from him. I, on the other hand, kept my advisor close at all times, and not just because he was good at nipping problems in the bud...

Almost on cue, the familiar crackle of distant fireworks, mixed in with a bit of unruly gunfire for confusion, sputters up from the west. I sprint through the thick jungle, not willing to risk missing my chance.

The sound of Juan's security forces racing towards the scene of my planned diversion hits my ears before the sight of the modest villa complex greets my eyes. I crouch behind a big thick bush and prepare. Dune buggies dash by my hiding spot, followed closely by wolf packs of heavily-armed men. It seems like an excessive response to a bunch of fireworks, but from what I can tell, there's a sense of uneasiness about the scrambling group.

Everyone looks on edge. Word of my little underworld rampage must be gaining traction. Good. I want everyone to be afraid. As long as I don't leave any witnesses, none of it will come back to me.

When the last wave of security fades into the distance, I make a beeline for the nearest monument. A ten-foot high white marble statue of a cherub covers my presence as I make sure my pistol is loaded.

A group of five or so men open a nearby sliding door and sprint from the house. I holster my gun and slip out my switchblade, and then, when I see them disappear behind the front gate, I make my move for the door.

It's unlocked. Fools.

Part of me is angry at the men for being so careless. I didn't get a good look at any of their faces, but I wouldn't be surprised if they were former employees of mine. Were the people who worked for me always so incompetent? It wouldn't shock me anymore—in fact, it might bring me some closure. So far, I've been carrying the full weight of my failure without any help, without anyone to truly blame but myself, but if my men were just lazy slobs...

Then that just means you didn't train them right. There's no running from responsibility anymore. These failures are mine to carry and mine to rectify, and my path to redemption starts here and now.

The inside of Juan's villa isn't as quiet as I had hoped it would be. Footsteps pound over the ceiling and I'm forced to duck into the shadows as a small group of men bolt around a nearby corner. It's already clear that I'm not going to have much time in here, but I won't need long—I just need to extract Juan and get him back to my car. If I have to use him as a human shield to do that, then so be it. I pull down my ski mask and wait for another opening.

The rushing footsteps on the ceiling slowly dissipate and I make a push for the nearest staircase. From what I remember about my old advisor, he always liked to work from the highest floor of whatever building he was in. A skyscraper would have him in the clouds while he schemed, but a three-story villa would have him on the third floor. So, that's where I head.

My path up the stairs goes smoothly, and by the time I'm at the first door on the top floor a growing suspicion has started to drag me down.



## Page 15

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

This is easy. Too easy.

Could Juan be playing me?

I'm in too far to go back now, so instead of second guessing myself, I start checking the doors down the empty hallway.

Bathroom. Bedroom. Another bedroom...

Bingo. The second I see the messy desk through the slit in the doorway, I burst in, gun raised.

But no one's there.

Fuck.

I frantically search the little room for signs of a trap door. Nothing. The closets are empty, too. No one hides under the desk.

I've been played.

There's a tiny gold statue of a lion on Juan's desk. Without thinking, I grab it and whip it towards the door, desperate to release the anger that threatens to overwhelm me.

The gilded paperweight hits the edge of the door with a thud, and the heavy wood slams shut. I go to grab something else to destroy, but before I can turn back to the

desk, something catches my eye.

... A giant note is pinned to the back of the office door. My anger cools as the rational side of me returns through the veil of curiosity. For some reason, I feel like the note is written to me.

Men bark orders outside as I approach the piece of paper attached to the wooden door. If I had been calm enough to search this place properly from the start, it would have been too big to miss, but I was stuck in tunnel vision—Catalina seems to do that to me.

Jungle creatures—tigers and birds alike—meet where the forest overcomes the fire.

That's what the note says. Somehow, I immediately know what it means.

Footsteps pound down the hallway outside the office. I tug down my ski mask and rip out my gun.

Throwing that gilded paperweight was stupid—I've been overly focused on my mission to rescue Cat—Juan's message has opened my eyes, though. If I'm ever going to reclaim my throne, I'm going to have to start acting like a king again. A king doesn't make stupid mistakes out of anger; he can't, or else he falls.

I'm done with falling, now is my time to rise again. Now is the time of my re-ascension.

The office door rips open and I fill the hallway with bullets.

Howler monkeys wail in the distance and cicadas sing their chorus as I step through the rubble of my old castle.

The jungle has already reclaimed most of it. Vines crawl over the crumbled stone and big leafy trees rise up higher than any remaining structure.

The skeleton of the once great compound fills me with a sadness that I force away. This is where I lost everything, but this is also where I've come in the hopes of regaining it all.

... Unless Juan is just playing with me again.

For some reason, I trust my interpretation of his office note. There was no malice in it, no cruelty. It was a message for me, a hand reaching out through the darkness—at least, that's what I hope. But hope can be so dangerous.

Jungle creatures—tigers and birds alike—meet where the forest overcomes the fire.

I'm the tiger. Catalina's the bird. Here, in the ruins of my old compound, the jungle has overtaken the fire that burned my legacy to the ground. It's here where the phoenix shall rise, where I shall rise...

It's where Juan should be waiting for me.

"Hello, old friend."

The silver fox stands on top of a half-crumbled wall, silhouetted by the moonlight. From my spot on the ground below, I can't make out his face, but I recognize that voice. It's Juan Arias alright.

He has his gun pointed right at me.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

I scan the quiet ruins, half-expecting a small army to come out to detain me, but nothing moves.

“Where are your men?” I demand, not nearly as worried as I should be. Despite being under Juan’s gun, there’s a temperament about him that has me thinking this won’t be our final meeting.

“It’s just you and me,” Juan says, softly.

“Bullshit,” I growl. “You wouldn’t be so stupid to meet me here all alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Juan says, shifting enough in place so that I can catch the look on his face. A sorrowful grin crosses his weathered features as he gestures towards the gun he has pointed in my direction.

I can’t help but laugh. “You were never one to get your hands dirty. Where’s the sniper that will put a bullet between my eyes if I upset you?”

Juan chuckles along. “My hands are far from clean, Angel,” He jumps down from his spot on the wall and disappears into the dark shadow it casts.

For a second, I tense up. My fist is eager to reach for the gun tucked under my belt, but then Juan reappears, and his gun is by his side, no longer pointed at me.

That’s a mistake. We both know I’m quick enough to get a shot off before he could raise his weapon to shoot back. But I’m too curious to kill this basta

rd just yet. Plus, an annoying little voice in the back of my head is drilling a seed of hope into my brain.

He's on your side...

No, impossible. He's working for my brother.

"You look as good as ever," Juan smiles, stopping some fifteen yards away from me. The heavy humid air that's been swirling around the country lately is blocked out by the ruins. It's quiet here, and deathly still.

"You look like hell," I snap back. It's not a lie. Juan looks like I feel, like he's been carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders for the past two years. "I guess working for someone like Dante will do that to you."

"I only work for your brother in name," Juan says, his soft smile dropping for a more serious scowl.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means I do his bidding... as long as it benefits me."

"So, you're not denying that you're a traitor?"

Juan sighs. "Unfortunately not, but I can explain."

A younger me might have ripped out my gun and shot him where he stands the moment he confessed, but I've had time to mature over the past two years, to think. I'm not going to make my mistake with the gilded lion again.

Juan must know where Catalina is. So, he's of much more use to me alive than dead.

“Go on, then. Explain.” I urge him.

To my surprise, Juan holsters his gun and raises his hands. “I thought it might be you, finally returned from your exile, who was killing so many of Dante’s men, but I didn’t dare hope...”

“You wanted me back?”

“We both did.”

My heart stops. “... You’ve been talking to Catalina?”

“I’ve been taking care of her.”

“What does that mean?” There’s no cruelty in Juan’s voice, but I can’t help but anger at the thought of someone else taking care of my girl. That’s supposed to be my job... but I failed. Fuck.

“It means that I’ve been doing what I can to help her.”

My shoulders slouch as heavy hope desperately climbs up over my fury. “Does Dante not have her anymore?”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

Juan shakes his head and my muscles tense back up. I should have known better than to give hope any leverage. “So, how have you been helping her then, Juan? I heard they’re getting married...”

“That’s true, but I just found out about that, too.”

I sneer. “What help could you possibly provide Catalina if you don’t even know what Dante has in store for her?”

Juan hesitates for a second, before gently placing his hands back down to his side. “I think it’s best if she tells you that herself.”

My slow pulse quickens as my heart begins to race. I half-expect Catalina to walk out from behind one of these charred walls. “Where is she, Juan?” I ask, hardly able to contain the desperation in my voice. I need her to be safe. I need to make up for my failures.

“Not here,” he says sadly, as though upset by failures of his own. “But she will be on the move soon, and that will make her more vulnerable than ever before.”

“Do they move her around a lot?” So far, no one has been able to tell me anything about Catalina or her whereabouts, but now I’m face to face with the next best source of information next to Dante himself—I need to know how she is.

“Not usually,” Juan responds. “But there was an incident recently.”

My heart tightens. My fists clench. “What kind of incident?”

“I’m still not exactly sure,” my old advisor strokes his chin. “Something to do with a possible break in...”

A bomb goes off in my gut. “Someone else is trying to steal her away from Dante!?”

“Maybe... I haven’t had the chance to talk to her since that night. It could be that it was an attempted kidnapping, or it could have just been her trying to break back into her prison without being caught.”

My fists unlatch in the confusion. “She broke out? And then went back? Why!?”

Juan hesitates to answer. Something heavy sits just behind his dark eyes. “... I think it’s best if she tells you that herself, too.”

“When can I see her?” I immediately reply.

“Soon.”

“And you’re going to help me get to her?”

“Yes. I’m here to help you, too, Angel.” Juan clears his throat and seems to fight back another confession. “Two years ago... Dante didn’t give me a choice... I’m sorry. I had to disappear, but I tried to warn you...”

**GET OUT OF THE COUNTRY. NOW!!!**

Your buildings are burning, Angel. You’ll be next. Leave the country now. Please.

I still remember those messages, clear as day. “It was you who sent the texts?”

Juan nods. “I’ve been desperately trying to get a hold of you for the past two years,



but it's been impossible."

"That was the point." I growl. "It was the only way to keep Cat safe until I was ready to take her back."

Suddenly, all the time that Catalina and I have wasted apart catches up to me in a tidal wave of oppressive fire. What have I really been doing over the past two years? It all seems so meaningless. What good is trying to take down Enzo Barella when my own empire has been suffering all this time, and my girl right along with it?

It's time for a serious fucking change.

"And are you finally ready to save Catalina? Or did you only come back now because you heard Dante was going to marry her?"

I don't answer, but my silence is clear enough. I'm back to take what's mine, but I have no grand plan. Not yet.

Juan seems to read my mind. "We have some planning to do." A smile crosses his weathered face. "Good thing I've been preparing for your return."

7

Catalina

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

My arms are so bandaged up I feel like a mummy at the museum.

White cloths wrap around my scratched arms; the dull pain hardly registers. Instead, I think about how nice it would be to take Oscar to the museum someday; to have a normal, simple life. We could see real mummies and I could be a real mother...

Is that even possible anymore?

Even if Angel does miraculously return, even if he does somehow defeat Dante, this country seems to be unraveling too fast to ever stitch back together. Juan said Dante has his tendrils in the highest offices of the land. There can't be any coming back from something that has been so corrupted... right?

What could Angel do about it? What could he do about me?

If he does return, am I even ready to forgive him for being gone for so long?

What has he been doing while I've been a prisoner?

I broke into Dante's mansion without any tools or resources or experience or anything. All I had was a mother's desire to stay alive for her son's sake. Sure, it cost me some cuts and some bruises and a scary amount of blood loss, but I'm not like Angel. If I can do it once, then he should have been able to do it by now...

I glance longingly out of the tinted back window of the limo I've been stuffed inside. Dante still hasn't shown his face since the incident, but I can feel his commands in everything his men are doing. There hasn't been a single second where I haven't been

under some kind of surveillance since that night, and, as far as I can tell, they don't even know that I was lying when I suggested that someone had tried to break in.

Maybe because it's the half-truth. Someone was trying to break in. Me. And I succeeded, but at what cost? My skin is torn and my heart is shattered; I can't imagine that I'll be able to see Oscar anytime soon.

Outside, posh skyscrapers and fancy restaurants give way to more down to earth establishments. Through the unbroken alleys, I can see the hazy slums rise up the hill to our right. Busy crowds rush about freely in the golden light that falls over the earth just before dusk. I envy them all. Oh, what I'd give to be poor and happy again. At least then I'd be able to look after my son like he deserves to be looked after: by his mother.

... But

if I had never tried for a better life, if I had never gone to that gala and worked for those dates and stepped in front of the brooding bad boy in his weathered denim jacket, then I would have never met Angel, and I would have never had Oscar...

My old life doesn't seem worth living without my son. There isn't a chance in hell I would give him up to go back to my old life. I'm his mom, and he's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I have a family again, even if it's just a family of two, and I'm going to do whatever it takes to protect it.

I miss you, baby.

The limo suddenly grinds to a halt and I'm flung forward. My seat belt catches me around the gut and a gust of air races from my lungs. It's nothing compared to the brick I smacked myself with on the balcony, but it still hurts enough to cry out.

The greedy eyes that have been watching me through the rear-view mirror for the entire trip don't seem to care. Instead, they finally dart away, grabbed by something else happening up ahead.

I try to peer through the partition, but my seat belt catches me again. My hands are too stiff and sore to do anything about it. I'm useless.

"These fucking savages," the body guard in the passenger's seat growls. I hear the now all too familiar click of a gun being primed as he unlocks the car door and pushes it open.

The sound that comes next isn't as familiar, but I immediately know what it is. A bloody gurgle replaces the body guard's growling as his throat is cut; the unsettling sound is quickly followed by a muffled gunshot and a spray of blood. Before the driver can cry out, he's met with the same fate.

I yell in fear and scramble up in my seat, desperately reaching for the door with one bandaged hand and trying to unbuckle my seat belt with the other. The fresh corpses in the front are pulled out of their respective doors just as my seat belt clicks loose. My door isn't budging, though; it's practically bolted shut.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I can smell fire in the humid air. Howling wind rushes in through open doors up front...

Then a new head pops in through the partition.

My heart nearly explodes.

No way.

“Hey there, little bird.” That smile. Those dimples. The emerald green in his eyes is still just as vibrant as ever.

Angel Montoya.

He lunges forward through the little partition and his lips meet mine. My tied tongue unfurls as he pulls back—a thousand questions race through my mind, but only one comes out of my mouth.

“Where the hell have you been!?”

## Page 19

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

His smile only gets wider; those dimples deeper. “I’ll tell you all about it, but first, let’s get you the fuck out of here.” before I know what’s happening, Angel has his gun drawn and pointed at the back door on the other side of the limo. A long silencer is attached to the barrel and the loud thump that emanates from the weapon when he fires hardly even makes me flinch. I’m too shell shocked to be mad at the carelessness of him firing a gun just feet away from my face, especially when the locked door bursts open, giving me a way out of this death trap.

Angel pulls back out of the partition, disappearing for a split second before reappearing at the newly opened door. His hand reaches to me like a ladder out of hell.

For some reason, I hesitate to take it, but that hesitation only lasts for a split second, and in the blink of an eye, I’m rippled from the limo and pulled into his warm, muscular body.

Oh god, how I missed the heat of his chest.

Still, the bliss of feeling him again hardly masks the pain of his tug. “Ow!” The yelp escapes my lips as a sharp ache ripples up my wounded arm.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” Angel growls, seemingly noticing my bandages for the first time. “What did they do to you!?” The fury in his voice is limitless, but he seems to holster it in favor of staying focused.

For a dream-like moment, I ignore everything else in the world. My cheek melts into his heaving chest and I can feel his heart beat—but Angel’s familiar musky scent is

masked by the smell of fire. After a moment of reveling in his sudden return, I turn to the scene that stopped my motorcade.

Up ahead, in front of the two now blood covered limos that were leading my car to some unknown location, is a makeshift blockade of burning cars. The flames flicker up to the sky and a crowd of rioters dance around the bonfire.

I turn to look back behind us; a few brawny men in muscle shirts and ripped jeans are finishing off what remains of Dante's security detail. The violence is swift but merciless. The streets run red with blood. My cheek instinctively digs back into Angel's chest.

"Come on, we need to get out of here."

I'm not given much time to process what's going on. Pain rips through my arm as Angel tugs me away from the chaos. I scream in pain and Angel stops in his tracks. "Oh yeah, fuck. Sorry."

He's probably apologized more to me in the past two minutes than he ever has before. It's almost weird, hearing a word like sorry come from his lips, but I don't have time to linger on it. A split-second later, Angel has swept me off of my feet.

He whisks me from the fire and the blood like a stolen bride and I swear I hear the crowd of rioters start to cheer behind us.

That sound fades, though, and my ears rush with blood as we sprint down a tight alleyway. A surreal tint comes over the world. Is this really happening? Am I finally being freed from my nightmare?

We turn a tight corner and a truck swerves to a stop right in front of us. The world rushes back into focus as Angel rips open the back door and throws me inside.

I slide across the seat, but before I can hit the opposite door, Angel dives on top of me. His muscular torso covers me like a blanket of pure steamy heat. “Go!” he orders, and the squeal of racing tires accosts my ears.

My savior holds me tight as our escape vehicle twists and turns down the winding alleys of the slum village. His big round biceps flex around my aching body, holding me in place and protecting me from the violence of our getaway. As the car speeds around sharp corners, we’re thrown from side to side, but I don’t ever hit anything but Angel. He has me completely wrapped up. Even my pain seems to subside under his blissful grip.

My mind wants to go blank; my body wants to give in. There’s no ignoring the hardness growing between Angel’s legs; it pushes up against me like a rod of divinity. He wants me bad—and, fuck, I want him, too.

Suddenly, we come to a screeching halt. Angel’s vice grip around me eases as he pops a peak through the tinted window above us.

“What’s happening?” I ask.

“Our second getaway vehicle is supposed to meet us here. We’re going to switch onto something a little more... compact.”

Somehow, I immediately know what he means. We’re about to get on a motorcycle. “Angel... I... I don’t know if I’ll be able to hold on.” I can hardly process the fact that he’s here in the flesh, but I gesture towards my bandages and daintily flex my sore limbs.

“What did they do to you?” he growls, a fury blazing behind his deep guttural voice.

“It wasn’t them,” I whisper. “It was me...”



Angel's roughness suddenly softens as he places a tender palm against my cheek. His huge rough fingers caress my jaw as he pulls my gaze into his. The emerald green tint to his eyes digs deep into my soul and nearly makes me forget all of the anger I was harboring towards him just minutes ago.

He's back... He's finally back.

The steaming tiger studies me with great interest. It doesn't take long for the concern in his gaze to give way to desire. That thick wet tongue of his lashes against his lips and my legs tingle in expectation.

"Angel..." There are so many things I want to say. An immense confession weighs heavy on my tongue, but I can't speak. I just want to look at him a little longer.

"Cat..." The low rumble of his voice sends a flock of butterflies racing through my belly. I close my eyes and fall into his hand.

The next thing I know, his lips are on mine.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

This kiss isn't as quick as the first one. The passion that Angel delivers through his mouth pushes me back against the truck door and steals away all of my pain.

I raise my hand to his chest, unsure if I should push him away or draw him in even closer. My mind is scrambled with a million different thoughts, but they all give way under the hardness of Angel's growing desire.

God, I missed him.

"You look better than ever," he says in a low voice when he finally pulls away from my lips.

I cough out a muffled chuckle as he moves his tongue down to my neck—a tiny whimper of pleasure follows close behind. "Are we safe?" I manage to eke out through the veil of pleasure that descends down upon me along with Angel's kisses.

"Not yet," he replies through heavy breaths. His lips are on my clavicle now, his hand wrapped around my upper thigh. I sigh and run my hand through the back of his hair.

"We need to get out of here," I breathe.

"There's nothing we can do right now but wait... and catch up."

I know what kind of catching up he means. Angel doesn't want to talk. His hands slide under my sundress and his fingers slip around my panties. He pulls them down around my ankles and I don't stop him.

Empty bliss straddles my stressed mind like a cowboy trying to tame a wild steed, but my responsibilities won't let me give in completely, not yet. I tighten my grip around Angel's black hair and pull him backwards just as he slides a finger between my soaking petals.

"Not now," I whisper, with hardly any conviction in my voice. His touch feels so good, his penetration feels so right... but something is wrong. He doesn't know about what our passion has already created...

Angel's teeth graze the tender skin of my throat just as a thunderous roar graces my ears. I turn my gaze out of the tinted truck window and see a motorbike appears out from behind a row of sheet covered clotheslines. It rumbles to a stop just outside of our truck.

Angel gives my neck one last k

iss before unsheathing his finger from my privates. My entire body slouches in response to his sudden absence. Somehow, I'm both disappointed and entirely relieved.

Angel and I need to talk before we can fuck. He needs to know that things have changed; he needs to know that I'm not just going to welcome him back into my life so easily. It took me one night to break into my prison, why did it take him two years?

8

Angel

I'm still hard when I lift Catalina onto the seat of the motorbike. My arousal hardly falters as I jump on behind her and wrap my arms across her smooth skin to get to the

handles.

The little jungle bird's warm body trembles along with the engine as I rev the ignition. I wasn't lying when I said she looked as good as ever; I also think I made it clear that she felt as good as ever, too. But that more sensual reunion will have to wait until we're truly safe. I probably shouldn't have pounced on her so quickly, but I couldn't help myself, she just makes me so fucking wild.

"Ready?" I whisper into her ear.

She nods and I immediately kick down. The engine roars and we speed forward through the clotheslines ahead and into a tight alley that no car could ever fit through.

Residential windows blur by as we race for freedom. In the distance, I can hear police sirens; they're just as dangerous as any of Dante's foot soldiers. Juan's made it clear that nearly everyone in this crumbling city is under Dante's thumb in one way or another, and law enforcement is no exception.

Cat shakes beneath me as we break through the thick humid air of the alleyway. It seems to stretch on forever, but, finally, we explode into an opening and I make a hard right turn, up a hill that leads to the center of these slums.

That's where we're going to meet Juan. He's going to be our personal escort down a series of interconnected underground tunnels that even I didn't know existed. Apparently, the closest checkpoint is up ahead. I just have to get us there before anyone else can get to us.

Luckily, the sun is going down, and that means the local residents are already rushing inside to avoid breaking curfew. They clear the streets and make for easy driving. I keep my foot to the pedal and we roar through the shanty buildings like a bullet through hell.

Cat holds onto my arms with an impressive stoicism and a wave of pride and relief washes through my chest. She's still as strong as ever, Dante didn't break her spirit.

Up ahead, I spot our final destination.

The little grove covered parking lot is nearly empty, except for a man bent over a manhole cover near the center. He looks up when he hears us approaching.

It's Juan.

We don't exchange pleasantries when I skid to a stop in front of him. The panicked look on his face sends a shot of dread through my racing heart.

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“What!?” I immediately growl before he can talk, sensing that something is wrong.

“It’s sealed shut. The fucking entryway has been sealed. Help me pry it open, quick!”

I leave Cat on the bike and rush over to the manhole cover Juan has been working on. Sure enough, it looks like it’s been melded into the ground.

“Did you not check to make sure it was still open before we made this fucking plan!?” I grumble, pulling out my switchblade and working it along the crusty edges of the rusted metal.

“There wasn’t any time,” Juan shoots back. I don’t push him any further. We both know that time is of the essence and a fight isn’t going to resolve anything.

“We need a blowtorch or something,” I grumble. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to cut this thing up before we’re overrun by Dante’s men.”

“What do you need?” That’s not Juan speaking. Catalina has jumped off the motorbike and stumbled over to our side.

“A blowtorch,” Juan says.

Sirens grow in the distance. I glance up at my former bride, expecting to see fear in her big brown eyes—if she’s afraid, she doesn’t show it. Instead, a look of determination comes over her beautiful features. “What can I do?” she asks.

I jump up from the unflinching manhole cover and give her a quick kiss—I can’t

fucking help it, her lips are just too soft to ignore. I missed her taste so much; I need more... but more important issues threaten to tear us apart at the moment. I turn her around and we both scan the surrounding area. Small shops and residences line the parking lot, but they're all dark. "We need to find a blowtorch, or at least something that can open this fucking hatch." I growl.

"Do you think we can find anything useful in one of these shops?" She reads my mind.

"Let's go look," I nod, patting her on the ass for luck. "Keep digging," I yell back to Juan, tossing him my switchblade in the process. "We're going looking for fire."

My hand finds Catalina's and the warmth of her palm sends a shockwave of heat up my arm. I sneer with determination and whisk her off to the nearest shop. One of these dark windows has to hold our salvation... otherwise we're screwed.

Approaching vehicles rumble off in the distance. There's no doubt in my mind that they belong to anyone else but our enemy. No one other than Dante's men would dare be out after dark—not even the rioters have that much gusto, not yet. I try to ignore the approaching thunder as I tighten my grip around Catalina's little hand. The escape hatch in the parking lot is our only way out of this. It's do or die time.

The first door I dig my shoulder into hardly puts up any resistance. We barrel through into the dark store and Catalina is immediately behind the counter, looking for something useful.

"Grab all the lighters you can carry," I tell her, spotting a display of fireworks on the other side of the counter. "We're going to have to melt through enough of the steel to get my hands through; maybe then I'll be able to rip the rest of the hatch off."

Before I get to the fireworks, I spot a rack of towels down the nearest aisle. I'll need

those. “Find any lighters?” I ask, ripping down the towels and slinging them over my shoulder.

“Yeah,” Catalina chuckles. I look over and see that she’s filled the front of her dress like a pouch. A proud grin crosses my lips. Our eyes meet and a playful slyness dances over her elegant features. Is she having fun!? I knew I fell for this girl for a reason...

Our little moment doesn’t last long. A sudden air rattling roar fills the space between us and we both snap our attentions outside. The source of the roar quickly disappears, but we both spot Juan desperately waving at us to hurry the fuck up.

“Let’s go,” I say and we both rush out of the shop with our loot.

“Wait.” Cat stops in the doorway.

I turn around, muscles flexed and my mind racing. “What’s wrong?”

Cat looks down at the loot in her pouch. “We’re stealing this stuff.” Her voice is filled with guilt.

My head nearly explodes. “Are you kidding me!?” I rush back to her, but when I go to grab her arm, she pulls away from me.

“We’re in the slums, Angel. These people can’t afford to get robbed...”

I bite my tongue as an impatient rage simmers just below my surface. Be patient, Angel. I hear a voice of reason worm its way through the fire. For her. For Cat.

My hand is immediately in my pocket. I rip out my wallet and storm past Catalina back inside the shop. She watches as I empty every last bill onto the counter we just



ravaged. “Happy?” I growl, trying to mask how desperate I am for her to say yes.

“Yes.”

“Good. Now, let’s get out of this hell hole.”

Cat nods and turns back to the parking lot. She gets a head start, but it only takes me a few strides to catch up. The last thing I want to do is let her get too far from me. I’ve put so much effort into finally getting her back, so much time into getting this close, that I’m determined never to let her go again. I’ve made a promise to myself to protect her, and it’s not one I’m going to break; not for any fucking reason.

“Did you find a blowtorch?” Juan a

sks when we return.

I stare down at the manhole cover; its edges are barely any more chipped than when I left. “No,” I mumble. “But we did bring fire.”

Catalina lets go of her dress and a flurry of lighters fall onto the pavement below. Juan immediately seems to understand. The three of us grab a lighter each and start fanning the edges of our unflinching manhole cover.

Before we can make much progress, that deafening roar we heard inside the shop passes over top of us again. It shoots by like a missile and I immediately know what it is.

“Fuck,” I growl.

“Was that a helicopter!?” Catalina shouts, as the roar passes.

“Dante’s got the whole police force under his grip,” Juan shouts. “I didn’t order a helicopter, but I wouldn’t be surprised if one of my overzealous underlings did. Everybody who words directly for Dante knows that an important package was being transported today, and now they all know that it has been stolen. Dante’s not in town right now, but it’s no secret that there will be hell to pay if he comes back and his prized hostage is missing.”

“We’re running out of time,” I growl, splitting open my lighter and tracing the fluid

inside around the edge of the hatch. Catalina and Juan follow my lead. We soak the stubborn metal in flammable fuel until we only have a few lighters left.

Before I can set the fire myself, Catalina has flicked open her own blue flame. Juan dips the tip of a nearby stick into the puddle of fuel and then presents the torch to Cat. The fire takes hold quickly, and when Juan tips it down to the manhole cover, a huge blue explosion shoots up through the darkness.

“Fuck!” All three of us shout at the same time.

If the cops didn’t know where we were before, they sure as hell do now.

But...

“It’s working!” Catalina shouts.

“Fucking hell,” Juan grumbles.

The steel around the edges of the manhole cover are curling up under the intense flames. We don’t have much time to revel in our little victory, though, because the roar of our stalking helicopter quickly returns with a vengeance, and this time, it’s brought along a spotlight.

The blinding circle cuts through the trees and slips down the facades of buildings that surround us. Sirens follow closely behind it. Trouble is closing in all around us. I look down at the melting steel, it’s working too slow—but there is already enough room for me to slip my hands under.

“I don’t have time for this,” I grumble, grabbing a towel and throwing it over the section of the flames where the small opening has appeared. I wrap my hands in another towel and bend down.

“What are you doing, Angel!?” Catalina cries as I approach the flames.

“Getting us out of here.”

The towels hardly help protect me from the raging fire, but I manage to get my fingers under the melting metal anyways. Fiery pain engulfs my hands as I pull upwards with all my might.

At first, it doesn't budge, then, slowly, it starts to shake free from its reams. The heat that scorches my skin is almost unbearable, but I'm not letting us get caught, not again. This time, I'm not running from the fire, I'm using it.

The manhole cover finally comes off in a burst, and I'm flung backwards from the effort. Catalina immediately pulls the burning rag from around my hands and covers my charred fingers in a fresh one. The coolness offers little relief, but the pain is worth it. We have a way out of here now.

“Let's go,” I say, climbing back onto my feet. Catalina is immediately by my side, her tiny arms wrap around my waist like she's trying to help me walk, but I'm too heavy. Instead, I have to help her.

Just as Juan smothers what's left of our parking lot fire, the helicopter that's been hovering above pulls up, taking the searchlight with it. Through the newfound silence, we hear a more disturbing sound.

The police sirens are so close that they might as well be on top of us... and they're accompanied by a booming voice shouting orders through a megaphone.

“We have you surrounded! Return the hostage immediately or we will open fire!” And with that, the helicopter returns, closer than ever now. It's blinding spotlight approaches us at the speed of light as its rotors encase us in a veritable hurricane.

Wind whips up Cat's hair and tugs at her dress. Before I can formulate our next plan of action, I feel a strong hand on my collar.

Juan pulls me towards the hole we just opened up and tries to force me down it. "Go!" he orders.

I sneer back at him. "Not without you two!"

Catalina scrambles up to me, as leaves and dust swirl all around us. Her hands reach for mine and I lunge for her, but Juan quickly steps between us. "No. You have to go alone."

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My immediate reaction is to clench my fists and cock back my arm. “What the hell has gotten into you!?” I shout through all the noise. “I’m not leaving without Catalina!”

“You have to,” he pleads. His tone is loud but calm, with an undercurrent of desperation to it.

Catalina steps around him and I grab her by the wrist. Her bandages are ripped off in the strong wind and I’m laid witness to her wounded arms.

There’s no way I’m letting her go back to that monster...

“You have thirty seconds!” the megaphone somehow reaches my ears through all the other noise.

I pull my girl in close and move for the escape hatch.

Juan changes up his tactics. He knows there’s no convincing me, so he speaks directly to the girl on my arm. “Catalina, you can’t go. If you’re not here, they’ll go looking for you, and there’s no covering up this mess, not for long. They’ll find the hatch and then they’ll find you. It won’t take them long; they have too many men...”

“I can’t go back,” Catalina cries through the chaos. She digs deeper into my side and I hold her as tight as I can. Without giving her the time to reconsider, I start pushing her down towards the ladder inside the opening.

“If you lead them down there, they will find Oscar.” There’s a restraint in Juan’s

voice, but something about it knocks Cat off of her feet. Her foot slips on the first rung of the ladder and I have to grab her wrist and yank her back onto the surface to keep her from falling to her death.

Suddenly, Cat's whole demeanor changes.

"Who the fuck is Oscar!?" I demand, completely confused by the exchange.

Juan doesn't answer, but his eyes dart towards Cat—there's a pleading desperation in his gaze that I don't understand.

"Angel, you have to go," Cat's voice cuts through my soul like a knife. Suddenly, the pain of my singed hands isn't hidden by adrenaline anymore, and an anguished tingle comes rushing back over my skin. I wince and try to pull Cat closer to me, but, this time, she resists.

"What the hell are you talking about!!? All of this was for you!"

"Ten seconds!" the megaphone blares. The helicopter's spotlight passes dangerously close to us.

Cat trembles beneath me. she doesn't dare look me in the eyes. "You have to go, please."

"I'm not leaving you. Never again." I bend down and take her fragile hands between my wounded fingers. Her tender touch eases my physical pain, but my heart hurts so bad I might as well be drowning. "I'd rather die with you right here and now than leave you again."

"I can't die here," Cat whispers.

“You’d rather go back to my brother?”

Cat flinches at the thought, but a hard look of sorrowful determination quickly glazes over her features. Her head drops as she responds. “Things have changed, Angel.”

“What does that mean?”

“FIVE SECONDS!”

“It’s not just the two of us against the world anymore.”

“I don’t care about anyone else,” I tell her. My heart beats through my chest; I can’t move.

“You should...”

I shake my head. “No one else matters.”

“THREE, TWO...”

Suddenly, Catalina’s hung head snaps up and her eyes greet mine in an explosion of regret and sadness and pure determination. “Leave!” she orders through a trembling voice.

“Why!?” I boom back, hardly able to believe that this is happening again. Flashbacks of our last encounter at my burning compound threaten to cripple me, but I can’t give in. I won’t.

“... Because our child needs you.”



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“GO. GO. GO!” The crackling voice coming from the nearby megaphone is the last thing I hear before my world goes silent.

Blood rushes to my ears as Juan’s hands push me into the escape hatch. I don’t resist, my mind is too occupied to think of anything other than what Catalina just told me.

A child? Our child? What is she talking about!?

My hands instinctively grab the rungs of the escape hatch and Juan practically kicks me down the ladder. When I’m far enough down, he rushes to pull the manhole cover back over the exposed opening.

Catalina and I share one last desperate look before I’m shrouded in darkness.

9

Catalina

“What the hell are you idiots doing!?” Juan yells at the approaching officers as he discreetly kicks our towels over the half-melted manhole cover.

Without Angel by my side to protect me, a tidal wave of fear crashes against my heart. I lay on the cement beside Juan’s feet as he steps forward with an authoritative demeanor.

Someone seems to recognize him... and then me. “Mr. Arias!?”

“What!?” Juan roars back, full of indignation.

“... You have the girl?”

“Of course I do!” Juan yells. He sounds like a principle scolding a class of disobedient children. “I was trying to get her as far away from danger as possible. Why the hell did you idiots follow me and not the assholes who tried to take her!?”

Whoever Juan’s talking to hesitates to answer. “We... We... We thought you took her...”

Juan rips his jacket off and throws it on the ground in a show of indignation. “I obviously took her, to safety! That was my job. Your job was to catch those responsible for making her unsafe in the first place! Fuck, you guys are so inc

ompetent. Dante is going to hear about this...”

“No, no, sir! We’re sorry! We had information that one of the hijackers came this way. They must have been mistaken! We still have search teams in other places!” The crackle of a radio undercuts the chaotic scene. My heavy mind starts to falter and I can’t quite make out what’s said next, but whatever it is causes the helicopter to finally fly away.

The sudden absence of its roar drenches the world in silence. Police lights flash but don’t make any sound. Juan yells, but I can’t hear what he’s saying. Below my feet, I know Angel is safe, if wounded—but at what cost?

As far as Dante’s men know, there’s been two recent kidnapping attempts against me. I’m going to be locked up so tight from now on that seeing my baby boy again is going to be impossible.

... But nothing is stopping Angel from meeting his son.

I wonder if he'll figure it out on his own. Was I clear? I can hardly remember what I said before Juan pulled the manhole cover shut and separated us once again.

What will Angel's reaction be?

Even without any clarification, Angel seemed stunned at my confession. What will he think of me? What will he think of Oscar?

For some reason, a stream of relief swirls around inside of my exhausted brain as Juan leads me into the back of a cop car.

No one seems to suspect Juan of being in on all of this. I may not have any freedom, but he will still be free to roam around, to meet with Angel, to introduce him to Oscar.

My son is finally going to meet his father.

... And I won't be around to witness the momentous occasion.

Another milestone missed.

The whirlpool of relief in my brain remains for the sole fact that I know Angel will be able to protect Oscar, but an insurmountable sadness also devastates my heart at the thought of them finally meeting without me being there to cherish the memory.

I've already missed so much of my baby boy's life, and I don't see any light on the horizon. Even with Angel returned, things are as dark and hopeless as ever... But at least Oscar will have family to keep him company... and that's worth something.

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This is no gilded cage, this is just a cage. A steel-barred, cement floored, no-windowed, constant-surveillance cage.

Fluorescent lights flicker constantly overhead. My bed is a cot no bigger than I am. The sheets are itchy and the toilet is two feet away from where I rest my head at night.

For my own protection, the police have thrown me into one of their common jail cells. The precinct was surrounded with security when I arrived, and I was tossed inside like some common criminal.

Juan didn't have any time alone with me to explain, but from the looks he was given me, he had no say in the matter. Word about my attempted abduction must have gotten back to Dante pretty quickly, because these are clearly his orders; they are dripped in his cruelty.

Without a window or clock, I can't quite tell how long I've been locked in here. It somehow feels both like an eternity and a blink of the eye. They don't ever turn those harsh fluorescent lights off. Have I slept yet? Or do I just close my eyes and daydream?

Guards come and go in regular intervals. I'm never out of someone's sight for long. It's so oppressive that I worry my brain might snap. The best I can do to avoid a complete meltdown is to close my eyes and concentrate on the dull ache of my injuries. It's the only distraction provided to me in a place like this. I swim in the quiet fire of each of my cuts; in the tender pounding of each bruise... even in the lingering tingle of Angel's big finger.

He was rough with me, like nothing has changed—what has he been doing for the past two years to think that nothing could have changed? Even without Oscar, I’ve been the unwilling prisoner of his evil brother for all this time, does he not think that counts for anything?

A door just out of my sight rattles open and the men standing guard outside of my cage straighten up. I lift my heavy head, expecting to see a change of security—instead, I’m greeted by something much worse.

Dante stands before my enclosure, an incessant anger melting his thin features as his cruel eyes stare daggers into my weary soul. I don’t need his abuse right now; I never have, but I could always take it before. This time, though, my mind is almost as broken as my body. I can’t let him rile me up.

“I hear you’ve been trying to get away from me?” he accuses, coldly.

The climate in my cell isn’t exactly tropical, but it gets a whole lot colder under Dante’s gaze.

I don’t answer. Instead, I look down at the grey floor and inhale deep breaths. My mind tries to latch onto images of Oscar, and even Angel, in an attempt to distract myself from the monster who has me trapped.

Dante doesn’t appear to appreciate my silence. “I’m talking to you,” he hisses, stepping up to the bars of my cage.

“... I didn’t try to escape,” I whisper. “Someone tried to take me.”

“Who!?”

The cuts and bruises on my arms are exposed, but I know that Dante couldn’t care

less about my injuries. I'm only a pawn to him, and a pawn is just as useful when it's whole as it is when it's cracked. Dante wants to know who cracked me for cold, sterile reasons. A chill skates down my spine as I realize I'm about to be interrogated.

"I don't know."

"Bullshit."

"I don't!" The fire comes out of nowhere. Suddenly, I have enough strength to look the monster in his eyes. Dante seems just as surprised as I am. He takes a step back before regaining his composure and wrapping his spindly fingers back around the bars of my cage.

Why doesn't he come in here and talk to me face to face? Is he scared?

"Tell me what you saw," his words might as well be lashes, but I take them without flinching.

"When?"

"When you were taken."

"I was almost taken twice," I sneer. "Thanks to you."

The accusation in my voice seems to take Dante by surprise again. He glares at me through the metal bars and tightens his grip around them. "Those responsible have been dealt with."

My heart drops. He couldn't mean Juan, could he?

"Now, tell me who took you."

“I told you, I don’t know,” I whisper, trying to regain my composure. Dante can smell weakness, and if he senses even for a second that I may feel sorry for those he’s punished, then he’ll know that I know more than I’m letting on.

“What did they look like?”

“Like you.” I’m just riffing, but I instantly know that those words are a mistake, if only because they’ll remind Dante that Angel exists and is still a threat. There’s only one person in this world who looks anything like Dante, and it’s his much better-looking older brother.

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A vision of Angel flickers behind my eyelids as I blink through the harsh fluorescent lights that encase me. The memory of his strong warmth gives me the little boost of strength I need right now. Add to that the anger of his still unexplained two-year absence and I'm suddenly ready to go toe to toe with Dante again.

Dante may be cruel and merciless, but he's also a weak, twisted version of his older brother. If Angel was mad at me, then maybe I'd be smart enough to be scared, but Dante? Now that I know Angel is in town and working with Juan, it can only be a matter of time before he rescues me for real.

... At least, that's what I tell myself to keep from crumbling.

"There's only one person in this world who looks like me..." Dante teases, a cruel grin coming over his gaunt features.

"Don't flatter yourself," I spit back.

Dante's demeanour changes in an instant. He slams an open palm against my cage and grunts like a primal beast, sticking his nose between the rattling bars like they're the only thing keeping him from running in and ripping me apart. "Watch your mouth, whore," he hisses.

For a split-second, I sneer back, not nearly as afraid as I probably should be, but then I think

better of it. There is still so much that can happen to me before I'm rescued—if I'm rescued. I need to be smarter, otherwise I risk leaving Oscar motherless...



But with any luck, he'll at least grow up with a father.

That thought imbues me with a new spirit. Hope isn't completely lost, at least not for my baby boy, not yet.

"... We're getting married in three days." Dante's words are like a slap to the face. His reptilian eyes slither down to my ring finger. For a second, I panic, remembering his threats, but when I look down and see that it's still there, the panic only gives way to dread. I'm still living in this nightmare; I'm still under Dante's icy grip; I'm still trapped... for now.

"You can spend the night here... for safety," Dante's nose twitches with cruelty, but his gaze doesn't wander far from my finger. I wonder if Angel took notice of the familiar engagement ring? "Tomorrow, you will be taken to a secure location and prepared for our wedding."

My heart sinks, and suddenly, for some strange reason, I'm reminded of our first encounter.

Maybe it's the fear or the dread or the helplessness that brings me back to that moment, I don't know, but the memory of Dante's initial explosion into my life rushes at me like a wild beast.

So many things have changed since that night he cornered me in the ballroom at Angel's old compound, but in this moment, something sticks out.

Back then, Dante had seemed to want me for more... 'physical' reasons. I can still remember the slimy lust in his alligator eyes and the frigid reach of his scaly fingernails. Now, though, there doesn't seem to be any physical desire for me in him.

It's a relief, don't get me wrong. My first two months alone with this monster were

spent in constant fear that he'd force me into his bed... but he never did. Something changed in him when he got me, and now, when he looks my way, it's more as though he's looking at an object, and not the kind of object he's dying to stick his dick in.

So, then why does he want to marry me?

Before I can think better of it, I ask that question out loud. I immediately regret it. Dante was about to turn around and leave me be, but instead, he pushes his face a little further through the thick steel bars.

"Who wouldn't want to marry you?" he teases, his words purposely vague.

"You..." I respond, though I know it's only wishful thinking.

"Wrong."

"Why?"

"Because you're useful. You were useful to my brother and now you'll be useful to me."

Pain rips through my chest. Angel's proposition wasn't exactly romantic, but it was far kinder. I remember those old times with a sweet coat of nostalgia. "Some good I did your brother."

Dante gurgles out a greasy chuckle. "He failed because he was weak. I'm not going to make the same mistake. Two years ago, I wanted you for different reasons, but now I've seen the light. You're nothing but a tramp, and tramps don't deserve kings." His bony fingers squeeze tighter around the bars of my cage.

A part of me wants to spit back at him that I'm not a tramp, but I know that would be stupid. Someone has clearly talked Dante out of wanting me for personal reasons, and I'm not going to try to undo that mindset. I may not be safe under his cold hard grip, but life under his wandering hands would be even more unbearable.

I shudder at the thought of Dante forcing himself on me, and thank my lucky stars that at least one thing has changed in my favor.

"I agree," I whisper, trying not to challenge his view, but my curiosity is pushing more out of me, and I can't quite seem to stop myself... Plus, if Dante is as impressionable as he seems, then who's to say I can't try to change his mind on our wedding?

Before I can contemplate whether or not talking him out of marrying me would put me in more or less danger, the words are out of my mouth. "But what good could marrying a tramp do for a king."

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Dante hesitates to answer. His eyelids open and close in slow blinks like he's trying hard to remember the reason someone else told him. Finally, it seems to catch up on him. "Because this country is filled with tramps," he sneers. "You're one of them, and if I'm going to get them off my back, I'm going to have to show them that I'm not so different... even though I am." It's obvious that Dante doesn't quite grasp the master plan, but it's clear to me. He wants to use me just like Angel did: to fix his image.

But there's no fixing Dante. "They don't like you now?" I quietly taunt.

"They don't have a choice," he hisses.

"Then why are you trying to please them?"

Dante's gaunt cheeks compress against the bars as he lunges forward. Despite the thick grey poles separating us, I can't help but flinch away; that seems to satiate Dante's anger for the time being. An evil smirk crosses his bar-framed face as he revels in my fear.

"You know, you're worth far less than I had once thought. If it wasn't for this marriage, I might have already started sending pieces of you to my brother in the mail."

The horrific imagery sends a frigid chill skating down my spine. The only thing that keeps me from violently shaking is the knowledge to call Dante's bluff—he doesn't even know where Angel is, so where would he send my body parts?

“Lucky me,” I grumble, more to stave off my own fear than to inflame my captor.

“You have no idea. If I had bought you all those years ago like I’d originally wanted to, then you’d be long dead by now. There’s no way I would have put up with your shit for long...”

The confusion caused by Dante’s statement is enough to blanket my terror. If I had bought you all those years ago like I’d originally wanted to... “What do you mean?”

That evil smirk of his returns. “Stupid girl. Didn’t you recognize me? I recognized you...”

My cold heart starts to beat faster as I remember how oddly familiar Dante had looked that first night at the compound. “Where did we meet before?”

Dante chuckles. “I knew Barella was wrong when he said you were smarter than you looked.”

The monster seems to enjoy my struggle to pick up on what he’s getting at. “I don’t understand.”

“That’s because you are a dumb whore.” It looks like Dante’s about to tell me everything, before he thinks better of it. Knowing him, he’s decided that keeping the truth from me is even crueler than revealing it.

“I’ll see you at the altar,” he hisses, pushing himself back from the bars. “Double security!” those are his last orders before he disappears around the corner and slams the door shut behind him.

Angel

I try again.

My aching hands tingle as I flex my fingers around the burner phone I've been using to try and get a hold of Juan with.

It's been three days now, and I haven't heard anything. He gave me this number before our attempted rescue of Catalina in the slums, but so far, no one has picked up. I don't dare leave a message—the last thing I want to do is blow Juan's cover. He's my only tether to Dante's organization right now, and that means he's my only source of information on Catalina.

Catalina...

I failed her again.

My lightly burnt hands don't hurt nearly as much as my crushed heart, and my heart doesn't even feel as heavy as my mind does.

... Our child needs you.

The meaning of her last words seem obvious, but the specifics are impossible to grasp. The only two people who could tell me what the fuck is going on are nowhere to be found; the last I saw of them, they were surrounded by corrupt cops.

As frustrating and heartbreaking as all this is, I haven't been able to wallow in my misery for long. Instead, I've been busy at work, enacting the plan that Juan and I conceived during our reunion.

The line rings and rings and no one picks up, but I can't quit now. Catalina still needs

saving, and apparently so does our child.

I'm a father...

It hardly seems real. I haven't seen a baby, I wasn't around when Cat would have given birth; I don't know the details of how any of that works with Dante in the mix... So, I try my best not to think of it.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

When my call goes to voicemail, I hang up in frustration. What the hell happened to you, Juan?

“Sir, would you like to speak to the crowd?” Jesus stands in the doorway of my makeshift underground office. I’ll forever be grateful for all the help him and his boys have provided me—they were integral in getting Catalina out of Dante’s limo in the first place—but we’re not done yet.

After our failed rescue attempt, those of us left reconvened on the outskirts of the city. There we decided that we should set up shop in the tunnels that Juan had shown us. That way, we’d be closer to the revolution.

That’s right. A revolution.

That’s the plan. At least, that’s what Juan and I came up with.

The people of this city—hell, of this country—are sick of the cruel corruption that Dante has openly flaunted during his short reign—they want an end to it, to him, and to all the politicians and generals who’ve allowed him to grow so powerful.

I pat Jesus on the shoulder as I brush by him. “I probably should. Where are they waiting?”

“Just on the surface, sir.”

“Do we have an escape route planned out, in case things go south?”



“Yes sir, this area is perfect to disappear in. There are three nearby escape hatches that lead back underground.”

“And you’ve made sure they’re all open?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well.”

It’s time to address the first of my revolutionaries.

We called on a few of them earlier, to start a fire on the street where we knew Dante’s men would be driving Catalina down, and then we called on those few to spread the word of my return.

Jesus follows me down the main tunnel until we get to a crossroads, then he leads

the rest of the way. A few hundred yards down a winding path, we’re greeted by a ladder that leads up to the surface. Jesus checks to make sure that his gun is fully loaded and primed before he starts climbing. I follow close behind, weaponless.

If I’m going to be a messiah to these people, I’m going to have to play the part. That means no violence from me, not yet. I’ll lead by example eventually, but right now, it’s my words that are most important.

All of those board meetings and business calls I took before my empire crumbled may actually be of some use, if they prepared me for this in any way.

I step out into the daylight and warm sunshine blinds me for a slow moment. When I blink back into focus, I see the crowd waiting for me.

There must be two hundred people packed into the cobblestone terrace hidden away in the far corner of this hillside slum. All eyes are directed on me. I puff out my chest and step up onto the boulder that will be my podium.

“The coast is clear,” Jesus whispers into my ear. He sits on a residential window sill behind, along with another bodyguard. I gaze out onto the silent crowd and notice that even more are watching from their own windows.

I have quite the audience. Good. I’ll need this entire town at my back if we’re going to defeat Dante.

“Introducing, Mr. Angel Montoya!” Jesus booms from behind me. In a split second, the crowd goes from reverentially quiet, to raucously loud.

My first instinct is to flex my fists, ready for a fight, but the tone of the event becomes instantly clear.

They’re cheering.

I let them shout and clap and wave for a moment, before I raise my palm to the sky and they quiet back down. It’s hard for me to believe how well this is already working, but I also know that it hasn’t truly been an easy or quick task.

While I was away, Juan was hard at work, secretly sowing the seeds of my return.

“Some of you may have read about me,” I start, as a hushed stillness comes over the crowd. My voice echoes through the terrace and down the alleyways. “Some of you may have heard your neighbours whisper my name. I am here to tell you who I truly am. I am here to tell you what I stand for.”

Without turning from the crowd, I reach back towards Jesus and he hands me a

newspaper. It's opened up to a page that has that same picture of me and Catalina that I found in the alley behind Stefan Mendoza's building. I read the headline out loud. "Where has the mysterious billionaire gone? Could he save this city's soul?"

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

Mumbling criss crosses the restless crowd. I let them stew in anticipation... all while I try to tear my eyes away from the photo of me and Cat. Heartache fills my heavy chest, but I push it away.

Use that pain, Angel. Let these people see that you are just as sick of all of this as they are.

“The author of this article does not answer his own headline,” I continue, waving the newspaper above my head. “Because he could not. There is only one person who can tell you where I went, and that is me...” A small cheer erupts at the back of the crowd, but I don’t stop. “There is only one person who can save this city’s soul.” I pause for effect. The air fills with anticipation. “And that is not me.”

A groan washes across the restless crowd; I can feel the air being sucked from the terrace. I let it dwindle down until it’s almost gone, then I step back in. “I cannot save this city’s soul. Not alone. There is only one person who can save this city’s soul, and it is not me... it is you!”

The crowd erupts with applause and a shiver of adrenaline works its way across my skin. I flex my singed hands—at this moment, there is no pain, only determination. “Together,” I shout through the roar. “We can uproot corruption, we can defeat evil, we can take back our country!”

The ground shakes and the shanty buildings sway as the crowd cheers and stomps and reaches for me.

I stand tall and let them release their pent-up frustrations. From what Juan has been

telling me, life has been hell for these people since Dante took over.

Not only has he enacted a strict curfew, he's also ordered the destruction of property, public executions, and extorted money from local businesses that simply can't afford the shake down.

These people haven't been able to fight back, and their politicians and police men have all either been bribed or threatened into subservience.

But through all that shit, Juan has made sure that a golden mythos has found root. When I was exiled, my old advisor immediately went to work. His brilliant idea? Take the public good will that I was fostering for business matters and use it to set the stage for my comeback.

He used his back-door connections to multiple newspaper agencies and promised them protection from Dante if they agreed to write favorably about me. Dante, of course, quickly caught onto this and went after the publications, but Juan helped them go underground. So, Dante banned newspapers from the slums. He halted their distribution and made it a punishable offense to be found with one.

That, of course, explains why Dante's men didn't recognize me when I first returned. Any mention of me among the lower tier of his organization was met with harsh penalties.

Dante may not have seen what Juan was trying to do, but Enzo Barella sure did. He tried to nip my mythos in the bud, and he mostly succeeded.

Mostly...

Dante, though, couldn't stop newspaper distribution to the richer areas of Cali—the people who live there are too influential to accept such an overstep onto their

comfort. Sure, Dante could terrorize the poor, but fuck with a CEO or banker's morning read? That might be cause for termination.

According to Juan, Enzo Barella told Dante to allow the rich people to have their newspapers, as long as he stopped the poor from getting theirs. The poor were the real threat, they had the numbers and they had nothing to lose—out of everyone in Cali, they would be the most useful to me... if I were ever to be endeared to them.

What Enzo didn't think of, however, sitting on his throne all the way over in America, and what Dante was too spoiled to recognize, was that while the rich and poor of Cali live separately, they do not work separately, not entirely.

The cooks and the cleaners and the nannies and the folks who come downtown to get their hands dirty also get those same hands on these newspapers, and they're liable to bring word back to the slums.

There is hope. His name is Angel Montoya.

And now, he has returned.

Spread the fucking news.

11

Angel

“That went well.” Jesus smiles as we head back down to my underground office.

He's right. In fact, it went far better than expected. By the end of my speech I was confident that I could count on every man woman and child in that crowd to fight for me if I asked.

But still, the little victory is spoiled.

Away from the limelight, I'm left to think only about my failures—my empire, Catalina, a child, and all the things I don't know.

That quickly changes when my phone starts ringing.

I immediately answer. Only one person knows this number, and I haven't heard from him in days.

“Juan?”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:19 am*

“How was the rally?”

Fuck. If he’s already heard about it, then that means someone else in Dante’s organization probably has, too. We don’t want word spreading too fast, otherwise we risk Dante setting fire to the hillside. If he quells this resistance before we can get it going, then everyone will suffer greatly for it. Cat included.

... Our child.

“You better have some answers for me!” I growl, excusing Jesus. I slam my office door shut and start to pace.

“I have a truckload of them,” Juan responds. “Let’s meet. Can you be back at the ruins by nightfall?”

“Yes... How is Cat?”

“She’s fine. We’ll talk.”

He hangs up before I can ask any more questions. There are still a few hours until dusk, but I don’t waste any time. A child of mine could be out there, in danger,

without his or her mother or father...

God, I don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl.

Curiosity threatens to eat me alive as I make my way back to the burnt-out ruins of



my old jungle compound. The sun sets softly but a hard determination comes over my peeling skin. When I stop long enough to think about it, my hands start to ache, but I never have long enough to linger on the pain. For the first time in my life, I'm more focused on the pain in my chest, in my heart, in my soul.

I show up at my old palace just as the bottom tip of the sun is disappearing beneath the horizon. The eerie golden light that washes over the charred and overgrown ruins fills me with a sorrowful nostalgia. I'm almost nervous. So much has changed; so much continues to change.

If what Cat said was true...

A child.

“Yo!”

Juan spots me before I spot him. He's already over by the jungle wall that borders what used to be a vast lawn. I kick myself for getting lost in my daydreams of the past, if Juan wasn't a friend, he could have easily gotten the drop on me. If I'm going to succeed in reclaiming what's mine, I'm going to have to be more vigilant.

“Where are we going?” It's one of the least important questions I want to ask, but it's a good enough start.

Juan starts walking and I don't hesitate to follow him. “I don't have much time,” he explains. “Dante's in town and that means I'm on call, but I have to show you something. We can talk on the way.”

I immediately jump forward and grab him by the shoulder. He turns around and I get right in his face. “No more pussy footing around, Juan! I should have asked on the phone... What's this about a child?”

Juan's head drops like it weighs a thousand pounds. The last thing I want to do is snap at the only friend I have left, but my patience only goes so far, especially if it involves a potential family. "I've been waiting for days, Juan," I explain. "Cat's words have been tearing me apart."

Juan takes a deep breath before finally looking me in the eye. "Catalina had a child when you were away... your child. A boy."

A heavy wave crashes over me as my entire world implodes. For an eternal moment, I'm dragged under the water. Everything is still; I can't breathe. But then the water breaks and I rush back above the surface.

"What's his name?"

"Oscar. Oscar Luis Alzate."

I shake my head. "Oscar Luis Alzate-Montoya."

A small smile breaks out over Juan's somber features. "Would you like to meet him?"

"Is that where you're taking me now?"

Juan nods and my heart fills with adrenaline. "Then what the fuck are we waiting for?"

I haven't been down this part of the underground tunnel yet, but it hardly looks any different than the other parts. Everything is the same down here; I hardly know how Juan finds his way around.

For my part, me and my men have put up markers at every corner we've used so far,

color coated to lead the way. I don't see any markers down here, though. Juan must have these routes memorized.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about these tunnels before?” I ask, when the anticipatory silence between us has grown so thick all I can do is break through it.

Juan hesitates to answer. “It’s a long story...”

“Are we close to Oscar?”

Juan doesn’t respond right away, and that’s enough to tell me that we still have a ways to go.

“Tell me, Juan. No more secrets. We can’t afford that shit anymore.”

Juan sighs and pinches his nose. “You’re right.”

His tense shoulders loosen under the palm of my hand. “We’re on the same side, buddy.”

“I know, I know, but there are some things people like us should always keep separate from work.”

“And what do you keep separate from work?”

Juan looks around the tunnel like it’s an old friend. “Family.”

The word slams through my chest like a sledgehammer. My family has never been straightforward and it’s only gotten all the more complicated with Cat and Dante. “You have a family?”

For some reason, I always just thought that Juan was married to the work. He never seemed to leave my side; how could he have had time for anyone else?

“Of course I do!” Juan responds. “Everyone has a family.”

I think of Catalina. She didn’t have a family, not for the longest time. But if I have anything to say about it, she will now. “Who makes up your family? Brothers? Sisters? A mother? Father?”

“All dead,” Juan mumbles. His eyes glaze over for a quick second and I reassure him with a quick pat on the back.

“I’m sorry, man.”

“It’s part of the life,” he says, before adding, “but it’s not something I wanted for my family, for my kids.”

That stops me in my tracks. “You have kids!?”

“And a wife... and in-laws.”

“How the fuck don’t I know about this?”

“Because I hid them from you.”

“How the hell did you do that so well?”

Juan starts walking again and I catch up to his side. With his eyes, he gestures around at the curved walls. “The tunnels...”

Realization erupts inside of me like a bouquet of fireworks. “That’s why you didn’t

tell me about these tunnels? Because it was how you kept your family separate from our work?”

Juan nods. “I’m sorry...”

Two years ago, I might have been furious at the revelation that my closest advisor was keeping something so huge from me, but now, I can’t help but sympathize with him. He has a family... nothing is more important than family.

I have a family waiting for me, too; I just have to take it.

“I understand,” I tell him, as we turn down a new corner.

“No, you don’t,” Juan says, his heavy gaze dropping down to his feet. “My family... It’s how Dante got to me.”

My heart lurches. Innocence is supposed to be left out of our darkness, but I know Dante doesn’t care about decorum. “How?”

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“I’m still not exactly sure, but somehow Enzo Barella got word to him about my wife and kids. My children go to school in America during the winter. As far as I can tell, that’s the only way he could have known.”

“Are they alright?” It’s all I can think to ask.

I desperately wait for good news, but I don’t expect to hear it.

Thankfully, Juan nods. “It was touch and go for a while there; I had to disappear to ensure their safety—but since then I’ve gotten them to a relatively safe spot... for now.”

“And you’re still helping me, even though they’re still at risk?”

“Yes.”

“And you warned me two years ago, too, through those texts, even though it meant risking your family?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

The right thing to do. “You’re a better man than I am, Juan.”

“I think you’ll find out soon enough that family makes better men of us all...” Juan stops outside a door that’s tucked into the tunnel wall and softly knocks three times.

In the distance, water drips from the damp tunnel ceiling; it’s the only sound besides my pounding heart.

For a moment, nothing moves, then I hear three soft knocks come from the other side of the door. Juan knocks back two more times and the doorknob starts to shake.

“Lady,” Juan nods, as the door opens.

“Mr. Arias.” The voice is soft and quiet and oddly familiar. I’m standing just off to the side of the doorway, but when I step forward and catch the eyes of a portly older woman, she immediately recoils.

“It’s okay, Lady. He’s on our side,” Juan assures her, stepping inside.

Lady dusts the fear off of her apron and I follow Juan in. “Where do I know you from?” I ask, the answer on the tip of my tongue.

Lady lifts her index finger up to her lips and shushes me, as though my voice is too loud. “I used to work for you, as a maid,” she whispers. Turning around, she waddles off towards a kitchen in the far corner of the little room. Steam rises from a boiling pot. Something smells delicious.

“She still works for you,” Juan whispers, careful to keep his voice low.

“What does she do?”

Juan gestures over to a crib by the kitchen top counter. The old maid isn’t concerned with whatever’s on the stove. Instead, her attention is entirely focused on what’s



inside the crib.

A tiny gurgle wafts out from some unseen bundle and I find myself floating over to the precious package.

“This is Oscar Luis Alzate,” Lady whispers.

For the first time ever, I see my son. He sleeps like a chubby little cherub, bundled up in a white onesie. The last bits of lingering ice on my once completely frozen heart melt into steam.

I’m a father...

“Oscar Luis Alzate-Montoya,” I correct Lady.

She huffs, hardly withholding her disdain for me. I don’t care. Every problem in my life, both little and small, evaporates. My feet carry me closer to the little boy who carries my blood.

“Don’t wake him!” Lady hisses, but it’s too late. I’m already reaching down for Oscar when his green eyes blink open. Confusion scrunches his little features as I slip a hand under his tiny head. Before I can lift him off his sheets, an ear shattering wail escapes his lips.

I immediately draw back, leaving the infant to squirm in his crib. “What did I do?”

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Lady doesn't answer. In the blink of an eye, she's picked Oscar up and started to sooth him with soft taps on the back. "You scared him!" she accuses.

"I'm his father!"

"You are a stranger!"

The words cut through my heart like a rusty arrow. It's true. I'm a stranger to my own son.

My fists flex and I want to put a hole in the nearest wall, but I restrain myself, if only for Oscar's sake. He'll learn that I'm no stranger. I'll do whatever it takes to gain his trust.

"What can I do?" I ask the lilting maid. Oscar seems to calm in her arms, and when she slings him over her shoulder, the tears disappear from his rosy cheeks.

"Grab his bottle," Lady orders, gesturing towards the small fridge at the other end of the kitchen. I do as I'm told.

I open up the cold box and immediately spot the bottle. It's hard not to, there's barely anything else in the fridge. My chest constricts with shame as I grab the milk and slam the door shut. No son of mine should have to live with a nearly empty fridge. His home should be overflowing with everything anyone could ever ask for...

But because of my failures, he's been forced to start out life like a mole rat, hiding underground and eating the scraps of others just to survive.

Lady takes the bottle from me and I sit against the kitchen counter. My eyes won't leave Oscar as he's sat down in a booster seat a few feet away. His curious green eyes wander over to me. I try to smile at him, but my lips just won't turn upwards. Shame and frustration weigh my face down. My son deserves more than this.

Oscar doesn't seem to mind my sullen look. Lady tips the bottle of cold milk up to his lips and the little boy greedily latches onto it. He chugs the formula down like a frat boy, but his big twinkling eyes don't leave me.

"Shouldn't you warm that up first?" I ask Lady, trying to make up for my earlier transgression.

"Oscar likes his formula cold."

And just like that, I've learned the first fact about my son—it only leaves me hungry for more.

"What else does he like?"

"His mother."

Finally, a smile finds its way onto my stony face. "Looks like we have something in common."

12

Catalina

At least the lighting is better here.

"Please don't move, miss," a young girl says as she sticks a threading needle through

the arm of my long white gown.

“How much longer?” I ask. This little fitting room might be more tolerable than that hellish prison cell I spent the last few days in, but at least I could sit down there. I’ve lost track of time, but it feels like I’ve been standing for hours now.

“I’m not sure,” the young seamstress whispers. Her squinted eyes are entirely focused on her work. “We’ve never been ordered to add sleeves to a wedding dress on such short notice.

“Couldn’t we have just gotten a new dress?” I ask, desperately wanting to sit down. I’m still sore from... well, from everything, and I’m not sure how much longer my legs will be able to prop me up. The last thing I want is another cut in my arm, but that’s what I’ll get if I collapse while Anna here is stitching up my sleeves.

“That’s what I said,” Anna mumbles. “But no one listens to me around here.”

“You and me both,” I grumble back.

Anna doesn’t return my attempt at banter. Instead, I’m left in silence as she concentrates on her task.

But I don’t want to be forced to concentrate on my task.

My mind desperately tries to focus on anything other than the event I’m being prepared for. If Dante wasn’t lying just to fuck with me, then we should be getting married in two days.

How horrifying is that?

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

From what I've been told, it will be a very public wedding. Plenty of photographers and high-level guests. That means no acting out on my part. I've been threatened more times than I can count. Put on a happy face, or else...

I shiver to think about that 'or else'. What could be worse than marrying Dante? I don't want to find out, but I don't want to be his happy little pawn, either. It makes me sick to my stomach to think I'll be helping him in any way.

"How long have you been a seamstress?" I ask Anna. It's clear that she doesn't want to talk, but I have to try. My own thoughts are too dark and dreadful to confront alone right now.

"Forever," Anna mumbles. She's young, but she works with great skill and I don't doubt her claim.

"And you've never had to put arms on a dress so suddenly before?" It's a stupid question, one she's already answered, but I'm desperate for a distraction.

"I've never had to work for a man like Dante before." Very subtly, the young woman pantomimes a spit.

My crushed heart leaps a little. Anna hates Dante, too! But she probably thinks I 'love' him, or some bullshit like that.

"He's an asshole," I quickly say, perhaps a little too loudly.

That gets Anna's attention. For the first time since she started working on my dress,

her eyes leave the fabric and fall on me. “You don’t like him?” she asks, her brows furrowed in both confusion and hate.

I shake my head.

“Then why are you marrying him?”

“Because he’s forcing me to.”

A lightbulb goes off behind Anna’s bright eyes. “You’re his prisoner...” Something else seems to be bothering her. Her gaze falls away from me as she tries to catch a thought. “How did you meet?” she finally asks. Her tone has completely changed. Now, a sliver of sly sympathy lines her once apathetic tone.

“It’s a long story,” I sigh, not wanting to revisit those dark memories.

“I can make this take as long as I want.” Anna’s smirk is filled with mischief.

“He stole me...” I whisper, my head suddenly feeling awfully heavy.

“... From Angel Montoya.” Anna finishes for me.

Now it’s my turn to act shocked. “What... How did you... Who are you?”

Anna’s gaze darts around the room, as if she’s checking to make sure the coast is clear. “I knew I recognized you. I’ve seen your picture in the newspaper before, hand in hand with the ‘mysterious’ billionaire. I’ve heard he’s returned. Did you know?”

It takes a second for the shock to wear off, but when it does, I nod. “I saw him...” The hot flash of Angel’s thick finger wriggling inside of me sends a warm wave down my tired legs. I can practically feel his wet lips against my neck.

“Do you think he’ll save you?”

“Yes.” Even though I’ve been filled with little but doubt since Angel’s failed abduction, there’s no hesitation in me.

“How romantic,” Anna sings, clasping her hands together.

I sigh. “It doesn’t feel so romantic.”

“It will when you get to look back on it all someday.”

“If I live that long.”

“You will. Angel will save you; he’ll save all of us.”

All of us? “What do you mean?”

Anna tenses up a little at the question. This time, instead of just looking around for eavesdroppers, she gets up and checks for them. Her head pops behind every curtain and dress; she even checks the door before tip-toeing back to my side.

“We’re starting a revolution,” she finally whispers into my ear. My skin tingles with anticipation, though I’m not sure what she means.

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“Who is?”

“Us. The people. Angel.”

My heart wants to push itself free from the oppressive boulder that weighs it down, but I can’t bring myself to hope too hard. “How?”

“Together.”

The word sends a crack rumbling through the stone that holds down my heart, but still that stone doesn’t crack, not yet.

“He’s starting a revolution for you,” Anna whispers. “We’re going to overthrow the government, vanquish evil, start a new era... all in your name.”

Suddenly, a loud thump comes from the ceiling above. We both jump in surprise and Anna drops her needle.

“What was that?” I ask, staring up, not daring to move. Anna’s already unfrozen. She picks up her needle and has it held between her fingers like a switchblade.

“Probably nothing...” she says, unconvincingly. Just as quickly as her needle became a knife, it becomes a needle again. “Let’s get your dress finished... hopefully, you won’t have to use it—at least, not with Dante.”

I silently agree and our conversatio



n of revolution and love fades away. Time starts to drag on again before a knock comes at the door.

“Are you decent?” It sounds like one of Dante’s men.

“No!” Anna shouts back.

“How much longer!?” the body guard growls.

Anna looks up at me, like she’s gauging how much longer I need away from Dante. “As long as it takes to get right!” she responds.

“You have ten minutes.”

“Fuck,” Anna grumbles.

A heavy sigh escapes my lips. “It’s alright, I’ll be fine,” I try to assure her, though I don’t quite believe it myself.

Anna gets back to work, her hands moving at light speed. She must have been lollygagging before, because it feels like it hardly takes her two minutes to do what needs to be done. “There, finished,” she states, taking a step back to admire her handywork.

“Yippy,” I sulk.

The young seamstress takes another one of her furtive glances around the fitting room before stepping up to my ear. “Don’t worry,” she whispers, hope coating her quiet words. “I’ve been told the location of the wedding. I’ll pass on the news.”

Angel

His tiny hand can barely wrap all the way around my ring finger.

“It’s almost his bedtime,” Lady’s voice cuts through the little moment I’m having with my son. Juan has left us to go deal with Dante, and for a moment there, I could have sworn we were alone; a family.

No, not yet. There is no family without Cat, not without my son’s mother.

“He doesn’t look tired,” I grumble, trying to disguise my own exhaustion. The last thing I want to do is sleep. There’s so much on my plate, so much to catch up on, and none of it seems as important as the little chubby-cheeked chipmunk who’s playing with my bare ring finger like it’s a tree branch.

“Boo-boo,” Oscar giggles as his tiny stumps crawl along my callous skin. My eyelids are heavy, but I’m not about to let him out of sight.

“What’s a boo-boo?” I ask him, immediately feeling ridiculous for even having said the word, much less to a baby.

“It’s his bottle. He’s hungry.” Lady responds from the kitchen, obviously eavesdropping.

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“Can I feed him?” I’m well aware of the fact that I shouldn’t have to ask whether or not I can feed my own son, but Lady is hard headed and there’s no way I’m bringing any conflict into this room.

The maid hesitates, before giving in. “You know where his bottle is.”

She’s right. It’s one of the few things I know about my son. He likes cold milk and playing with fingers; he can also say when he’s hungry—is that normal? Is he smart or should a one year old be able to say more?

“Here you go, buddy,” I say, handing him the chilled bottle of formula like you’d hand a buddy a beer.

Oscar just stares at me like I’m an alien. “You don’t want it?” I ask, confused.

“He wants you to feed him,” Lady interjects.

Despite her coldness towards me, I’m glad for her presence—without her, I’d be completely lost. I’ve been through so much in my life, but nothing has ever prepared me for this, for fatherhood. “Okay, uh, how does this work?” I pick Oscar up and sit down, setting him on my lap. I offer him the bottle again and he claps happily. A tiny chuckle escapes his little lips and a flutter of happiness grabs hold of my chest. “You like this stuff, huh?” I say, sniffing the bottle. It doesn’t smell particularly good. “I’ve never been a big fan of milk myself...”

“Boo-boo!” Oscar interrupts. He reaches out for the bottle and I draw it to his lips. He latches onto it like a starving gopher and starts sucking down the white liquid.

“Damn, you are hungry.”

“No swearing around the child!” Lady interjects from the kitchen. I flinch a little at her scolding.

“I didn’t swear,” I growl, turning around to glare at her. I may be glad for her help, but I don’t appreciate her tone. Only Cat has ever been able to speak to me so freely.

“Yes, you did,” Lady says quietly, her eyes quickly darting back to the kitchen.

“Whatever,” I grumble.

Oscar doesn’t seem to mind our little bout. He’s sucking away on his bottle, happy as a clam. Any anger in me quickly disappears.

He’s got his mother’s nose. It scrunches up as he fights back wet sniffles from his dinner—or is it breakfast? I’ve lost all track of time. I don’t bother to check my phone. Oscar’s meal going smoothly is more important than the time.

When my boy has drained the bottle, I draw it back and he lets out a hearty burp. Lady lets out an amused chuckle from behind me, and I can’t help but follow right behind her. Oscar burps again and I respond with a deep belch of my own.

“Excuse you!” Lady shouts through her giggles.

My burp seems to take Oscar by shock, but he quickly recovers and his big green eyes go wide as a big smile comes over his little face. His laugh is like heaven to my ears. My shattered heart suddenly feels so full...

I burp again and Oscar claps. His giggles fill the room, making it feel more cozy than stuffed. “You like burping, don’t you?” I tease, winding up for another one. Before I

can get to it, Oscar let's out a little one of his own.

For a quiet moment, we both sit in surprised shock, before breaking out in laughter. Oscar wriggles with joy on my lap and I slap my knee, completely hooked.

This is my kid, alright.

After some convincing, Lady finally gets me to put Oscar to bed.

I don't want to spend a single second away from my boy ever again, but I know we could both go for some serious shut eye. A yawn escapes my lips as I place him down in his crib, and he mimics me, stretching out his stubby little arms before cuddling up with his blanket.

"Mama," he says, so softly it nearly shatters me.

Sharp vines crawl over the lightness in my heart, puncturing the levity of this time spent alone with my son. Catalina's still out there and in danger. Hell, I'm still in danger, too; so is Oscar. I can't let anything happen to him; I can't let anything more happen to his mother, but I need to keep myself safe, too.

I remember how much my father meant to me, and how much his death affected my childhood. I wouldn't wish it on anybody, let alone my own son. My mother's death hit me just as hard and their sudden absence created a hole in my heart that I didn't think I could ever re-fill... until now.

"I miss her too, buddy," I whisper. Oscar rolls onto his side and seems to immediately pass out. "Sweet dreams."

As if on cue, a buzz comes from my pocket. I make sure to step far away from Oscar's slumber before I answer the phone.

“What?”

“Busy?” Juan sounds awfully calm for someone who just had a meeting with Dante.

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I look back at my sleeping son. It feels like I am busy, but I know that I'm not. I can work. I need to work. "What do you have?"

"There's a local leader that wants to meet with you. He's community head of the Versailles district, very influential. A partnership would be good for the both of you."

My eyes won't leave Oscar's crib. There isn't anywhere else I want to be right now but by his side. "Give me his number, I'll call him." I can still work without leaving.

"It's better if you meet him in person," Juan insists.

I flex my sore fists. Sure, Oscar is sleeping; he wouldn't miss me if I went out for a quick meeting, but I also desperately want to be here when he wakes up. "Can it wait?"

"... He says he has information on Catalina's whereabouts." Juan's words snap me back to reality.

Mama.

"And you trust him?"

"I verified his inside source. It's legit. He's very useful, Angel. Not even I knew where Catalina was before this guy came to me."

Oscar gurgles in his sleep and a heavy sigh escapes my lips. If I'm ever going to give him the life he deserves, I need to do what needs to be done. "Do you know where

Cat is now, then?"

"I knew where she was a few hours ago, but she's probably long gone by now. More importantly, though, is that this new source claims to know where and when Dante's wedding will be taking place."

"Fuck." A tightness grips my chest. The thought of Dante getting his slimy hands on Catalina in a wedding dress makes me go nearly blind with envious rage. She's supposed to be mine; I was supposed to marry her, even if it was all fake...

None of our feelings are fake anymore. Plus, we have a son.

"They didn't tell you?" I grumble into the speaker.

"No, they wanted to meet you first—so, what do you say?"

I take one last look over at my baby boy before I rip my eyes away. "Where and when?"

Wilmar Fabros sits on his shanty throne like the king of a garbage dump. His entire house seems stitched together from junk he found on the side of the road, but he owns it proudly and I can't help but immediately respect a man who's made so much out of so little.

"Angel Montoya," he says, almost like he's thinking out loud, rather than greeting me.

"Wilmar Fabros," I return. This guy is Juan's inside source; even though I know I should, there isn't any patience in me to make pleasantries. Cat's still a hostage, and every second I waste puts her in more danger. Oscar distracted me from my mission to save her, but now that I'm far away from him again, I can see clearly. If I'm ever



going to get his mom back, he's going to have to stay in the shadows, even when I'm out in the sunlight. "I heard you know where my wife is."

Wilmar studies me with wise, wrinkled eyes. Nothing he does is done in a hurry, and he slowly rises from his makeshift throne like a skinny leaf floating down from its branch. "I know no such thing," he croaks. "I do, however, know where that devil Dante's future wife is going to be tomorrow."

My fists clench. The skin around my hands is still slightly crispy, but I've peeled away most of the pain. The fire that burns me comes from the inside now. "Where?" I growl.

Wilmar saunters up to me, un

afraid. "Do you think your little revolution will succeed?" he asks, ignoring my question.

I hold back my sneer and amuse him for a moment. If there is one thing I learned from all my otherwise useless board meetings and business calls, it's that the older the man, the longer the detour... but also, the bigger the potential payout.

Wilmar can provide me two massive payouts. First, and most important, he can apparently tell me where Catalina will be wed—he's already told me when, though I'm sure that was more a show of his knowledge than an accidental slip. Two, he can help me recruit revolutionaries. His district has the second biggest population in Cali, and by far the most men of fighting age. According to Dante, everyone in the Versailles district would die for this man—so, I'm assuming he can convince them to fight for me.

"We will win." I answer.

Wilmar smiles. “Yes. That’s a good start. We will win. Not you, but we. I like the sound of that.”

I feel my brows furrow. “Did you believe that I had selfish intentions?”

Wilmar clears his throat and seems to consider his next words carefully. “I know who you are, Angel Montoya. Others may only know you as a mysterious savior, but I remember your name from when you were the devil himself.”

My nails dig into my palms. “I’ve changed.”

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“Ah, yes. You’ve found love?”

“I’ve found a family.” The truth of the matter unclenches my fists. I’ve found a family... and now, it’s time to fight for them.

“Dante is your family,” Wilmar slyly points out.

“Not for long,” I growl.

“You plan on killing him?”

The reality of where this is all heading stops me in my tracks. For some reason, I tell Wilmar the truth. “I haven’t decided yet.”

The old man nods and turns away, scuffling back to his makeshift throne. “Where is the wedding?” I ask after him.

Wilmar sits down again and picks up a landline next to his chair. “Bring Anna in,” he says into the receiver, before hanging up.

“We will talk about the wedding,” he smiles. “I have the bride’s personal seamstress here to tell us all the juicy details. But first, we must gather our army.”

The men of the Versailles district aren’t much to look at. They’re all thin and wiry and stained with seemingly permanent dirt patches, but there’s enough of them to stop a wedding... and start a revolution.

“Who here has ever fought before?” I ask the crowd. Nearly every one of the men raises their hands. Good, they’re a scrappy bunch, but I feel the need to clarify. “I don’t mean a street brawl. I mean in a real war, with weapons of death. Guns, bombs, hellfire.”

Most of the raised hands are quickly lowered, but a few of the older ones remain high. That’s not necessarily a bad sign; the less these men know of the horrors of war, the less scared they should be. If only I was so ignorant, then I might believe in victory as unflinchingly as some of them seem to.

“Well,” I continue. “That’s what awaits us, a war, a real war—unless we can squash out the opposition in a surprise attack.”

A murmur washes over the crowd. I let them talk amongst themselves for a moment before raising my palm to the sky. Silence follows.

“We will crash a wedding, and when we are through, this city will be forever altered—”

“Catalina,” the shout sounds like a war cry; a cheer erupts behind it.

My chest rumbles with determination. Juan has done well. These people know the story, we might as well be rescuing a princess from an evil king—well, I guess we sort of are.

I decide to forgo the rest of my speech in favor of that very simple rallying cry. It seems to capture my feelings on the matter, too. If I could, I’d add Oscar right behind Cat’s name, but for now she alone will do. “Catalina!” I shout, with my fist raised.

“Catalina!” my makeshift army roars back. The grounds of the slum shake and I know that these men—while not trained soldiers—are sure ready to crash a fucking

wedding.

14

Catalina

I haven't felt this sick to my stomach since I was pregnant with Oscar.

This time, though, there's no miracle behind my nausea, only dread.

"Are you ready?" Anna has just finished up the last alteration on my wedding dress. The scabs that grew over my cuts have all fallen off, but the dark marks they left behind aren't going anywhere any time soon. I'm almost thankful for the sleeves, if only because it's something more to hide behind.

I've been wearing my veil since sun-up for that very reason—anything to feel like I'm protected from what's coming. Dante has been physically absent from my life since he left me in my cold dank cell, but the dread he induces in me hasn't gone anywhere. My life rests on my ability to put on a happy face and marry that monster while the upper crust of Colombia watches on.

I don't know if I can do it.

I've tried a million different methods; I've filled my head with thoughts of Ozzy and Angel and a future family together, but none of it can make me smile through the heavy foreboding of what's ahead. All I can see is darkness, and not even my shining lights seem to be able to cut through—it's almost enough to make me angry. Fuck Dante for being so evil that not even thoughts of my son can lift me up from under his cruelty.

"I'll stay close by, don't worry," Anna says, patting the back of my hand. She pockets

her long threading needle and takes a deep breath for me. “Come on, say something.”

Nothing comes to mind. My stomach is so tied up into knots that I can barely breathe. “Sorry...”

Anna huffs at my apology. “Sorry!? Don’t be sorry...” she suddenly squints and scans the room like a spy on the lookout for other spies. “Don’t be sorry...” she repeats, in a whisper this time. “Be ready.”

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The sharpness of her words seem to cut through my sullen daze, because suddenly, I find my tongue again. “What does that mean?”

“It means what it means,” Anna says cryptically. “Put on a big smile and play by Dante’s rules—” she stops herself before she can go on. I can tell there’s more, but Anna seems to already be kicking herself for saying too much.

“Anna, please, tell me,” I beg. “What’s happening?”

“Nothing,” the young seamstress blurts out. “But, if something does happen, find me quick.” Her hand reaches down into the pocket where she just stashed her threading needle. “I won’t wander far, but it’s not like they’re going to let me escort you down the aisle.”

A sudden flash of hope catches in my throat.

I don’t dare consider it any further; I’m sure it will only lead to more devastating disappointment... but it might not.

Suddenly, the door to our bridal suite swings open and three huge body guards march in. I recognize them as Dante’s men. The hope in my throat fizzles out, and it’s in the pit of my gut by the time I’m being pushed to my feet.

“It’s time,” one the burly goons announces.

I take a deep breath of my own and claps my hands together as I’m shrouded in the shadows of my captors. They flank me on all sides, leading me from the privacy of

my suite and down the hall of the twisted building.

This is no mansion or palace. I haven't seen the outside yet—I was brought here in a blindfold—but the insides resemble more of an elegant state building than a home.

It only serves to make the whole ceremony seem all the colder and more oppressive. The whole country is involved in my captivity. Every government official, general and crooked chief of police; they've all come to see something they know is wrong, without any thought to stop it.

Our footsteps echo down the tall wide marble halls as I'm led across the building and then down an epic fantail staircase. A massive white chandelier glitters above my head and the opulence of it all only serves to make me all the sicker.

And to think, I once wanted to be a part of this dirty world—hell, I once desperately needed to be a

part of this sham. Now, I know better, but it's too late. I've been caught, and now I'm about to be forced to go through something unthinkable...

I see the flashing lights of the cameras before I hear the low rumble of the large crowd gathered outside. For a split-second, I'm transported away from this gilded hell and back to simpler times. The memory of my first date with Angel fills me with a sorrowful nostalgia—would I go back in time if I could?

No, not if it meant giving up Ozzy.

Be strong, Catalina. For him. For your son.

The guards push open huge floor-to-ceiling glass doors and I'm nearly knocked off my feet.



A hot humid wind smacks me in the nose and lifts my wedding gown up so high that, for a moment, it feels like I might be lucky enough to float off and escape this whole hellish charade.

But my feet stay firmly planted on the ground and my vision quickly returns as my goonish escorts grab hold of my gown and pin it down.

Gale force winds swirl around the expansive hedged-in back lawn as I'm pushed forward. Around me, cameras flash and well-fitted socialites stand and stare. Despite the veritable hurricane that surrounds us, no one budes.

All these prim and proper people who would usually never be caught dead in such weather must be so afraid of Dante that they're willing to brave the elements just to watch me be forced into his arms.

A little seed of anger finds its way up through my dread from the disgust I hold for them. Do something, you cowards! Don't you know you're all next!? Dante isn't going to stop his cruelty with me, the more powerful you all allow him to get, the further this country will fall... and no revolution will be able to stop it.

I want to scream out loud, but it's no use. No one would even be able to hear me over the chatter of the wind.

I sulk forward as servants crouch at the feet of the esteemed guests, holding table cloths down and catching any wayward cutlery. The onlookers let the workers worry about the wind; their eyes are only for me.

The bastards. All of them.

It's almost comical, to see people like them flap in the wind. I'm sure every woman here spent all morning getting their hair done just right, every man picked out their

best hair-piece, all for it to get ruined by nature.

I wonder if this is what Anna was getting at? Maybe a hurricane is coming, and in the resulting chaos I'll be able to escape with her...

A girl can hope.

But then my beefy escorts close in even tighter around me and all hope is lost. They're holding down my gown just like they'd hold me down. I'm not going anywhere.

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Suddenly, I remember Dante's threats. Am I smiling enough? Do my eyes sparkle with happiness? I doubt it, but unless I want to feel the fury of his wrath, I better buck up. Acting may not be my forte, but survival is, and right now, I need to act like I'm having the time of my life.

Through the space between my guards, I spot the outdoor altar. It stands under a leafy arbor that sways in the strong wind. Under the vines and flowers, stands the devil himself. He may have told me to smile for the cameras, but I don't see a single ounce of happiness in his face. Dante already looks completely fed up with this whole charade; anger lines his slimy features—he's pissed; am I not smiling enough?

Involuntary tears start to softly tremble down my cheeks. This is really happening...

My walk down the aisle feels like it takes both an eternity and a split-second. Suddenly, I'm face to face with the man who's taken everything from me.

"The tears are a nice touch," he hisses under his breath.

I don't respond. My goonish escorts have fanned out in a circle to protect us from the wind. The veil I've been wearing for protection is all but useless; it flaps like the wing of a falling bird...

And then, BOOM!

It's like a lightning strike hits a few yards away. The earth trembles and I'm thrown from my feet. Shrieks carry on the wind as guests scream at something...

BOOM! BOOM!

Two more explosions rattle the yard. Dante's body guards abandon me and rush to their master. The priest scrambles away; the wedding guests run like chickens with their heads cut off.

Through the chaos, I see the trunk of a giant tree collapse through the hedges that border the back lawn. It caves in the natural fence. Women scream, men bark orders...

BOOM!

Another tree falls. Suddenly, I feel a hand on my arm. My immediate instinct is to pull away, but then I hear the familiar voice. "Come on!"

It's Anna.

"What's happening?" My voice is raspy and quiet from shock; Anna doesn't seem to hear me. She's got her big threading needle out in one hand and my wrist wrapped up in the other. "What the hell is happening!?" I ask again, louder this time. Just as I'm pulled back onto my feet another huge boom fills the turbulent air. Anna and I both jump and turn around to confront the roar.

"This way!" Anna tugs at my arm, but my eyes are glued on the insane scene before me. Socialites and debutantes race about in the wind with flailing hands. They all head towards the doors of the grand state house, but there are too many trying to get through to all fit in at once. They clog up the exit as another tree falls and collapses the hedges that border the lawn.

... Then, in through that newly formed hole, rushes a sea of outsiders. What looks like hundreds of men and women spill into the chaos over the felled tree trunks. They recklessly charge at the security personnel, swinging baseball bats and gardening

shears and all sorts of makeshift weapons.

The wedding guests scream in fear as Dante's guards open fire on the intruders. Claps of thunder cut through the hurricane winds until they crescendo in another thunderous boom.

Another tree collapses even more of the hedge fence and another wave of intruders break through the wedding's defences.

Blood slowly rushes to my ears and the sounds of the blaring gunshots and whizzing bullets fade, but one noise seems to seep through it all. "Catalina!" I hear my name on the wind. "Catalina!" It sounds like the chorus to some epic song. "Catalina!"

A hard tug comes at my arm and I snap back down to earth. "Catalina!" Anna shouts. "Snap out of it! Let's go!"

I shake the shock from my head and look towards where she wants to lead me. Just ahead, there's an opening in the hedges where another tree has fallen. There, the intruders seem to have already overcome Dante's security forces. They defend a path out of here.

My feet start moving before my mind does. I let Anna's fingers fall down to my hand as we pull on each other towards freedom...

We don't get far before an even stronger hand clasps around my free wrist and stops us in our tracks.

I yelp in surprise as I'm tugged away from Anna's grip. My ass hits the ground with a thud, but I'm immediately picked up and thrown over a pair of cold broad shoulders. For a second, a glimmer of hope crosses my heart. Has Angel rescued me?

But this grip is too harsh, too frigid. I struggle to get a better look at my new captor. It's one of Dante's body guards. His tight grip only tightens as I squirm to free myself. He's so strong and I feel so weak, but my veins fill with desperate adrenaline and I kick and punch at him with all my might.

He hardly budes... until a grunt escapes his lips. Suddenly, he's falling just like one of the giant trees. We hit the ground with a thud and the ogre pins my legs to the muddy grass. For a second, I lose my breath, but then I see what caused my captor to fall and I'm re-filled with determination.

Anna's big threading needle sticks out of the fallen guards back. I lunge forward and grab it just as the ogre starts to struggle back to his feet. His effort gives me just enough room to slip out from under him; the needle comes with me. He roars as I rip it from his back. "You fucking bitch!" It's the last thing he says before I plunge the already bloody needle into the side of his neck.

This time, his hands don't reach for me. Instead, he's forced to apply his palm to the new wound on his throat. Blood leaks from his punctured skin as his eyes go white and his face turns pale.

My hands tremble at the scene. Did I just kill a man!?

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Anna's at my side before I can think too deeply about it. My first instinct is to hand the murder weapon over to her, but she seems unphased. "You keep it," she yells through the chaos. "I've got a backup!" Sure enough, her little hand is filled with a fresh silver stake.

She doesn't have to tell me to start running. In the blink of an eye, we're both moving as fast as we can towards the free opening in the collapsed hedge ahead.

Anna's fingers find my hand again just as a rogue gust lifts my flowing gown over my eyes. I don't fear. Instead, I just trust my new friend, following her hand as it leads me through the chaos. Her grip tightens around my palm—and then, suddenly, it's gone.

"Anna!?" I shout, as I desperately fight through the shroud that is my windswept gown. When I finally get the damn thing down, there's no sign of her... but I do see a wall of angry security guards racing towards me from the west. Luckily, the route to my freedom lays to the east—I hesitate to take it, though; I don't want to leave my friend behind.

"Cat!" That's not Anna's voice, but it is one I instantly recognize.

My gaze snaps away from my pursuers and towards the newest hole in the hedges.

Angel stands in the opening like a rebel king behind his wave of revolutionaries. My heart catches in my throat, but there's no time to get caught up with sentimentality. My feet find me running again.

In the distance, I see Angel barking orders at his ragtag group of intruders. They make a beeline for my pursuing guards. We rush by each other and I swear, even though my focus is locked entirely on Angel, I can hear them chant my name like a rallying cry.

That all disappears when Angel and I meet in the middle of the chaos.

The earth goes silent, the wind goes still; my heart explodes as I jump into my savior's big strong

arms and plant my lips against his.

For one blissful moment, nothing moves. Angel's heart beats in sync with mine as our body's meld and our souls intertwine, finally together again...

And then, just like that, everything erupts back into focus. Gunfire, screaming, explosions—a veritable war surrounds us—but as my senses return, only one thing comes to mind.

“Anna!” As if Angel would even know who that is. Before I can explain, though, his thick finger is on my lips.

“She'll be fine,” he states, nodding back behind me.

I turn around and flinch from the violent fight that's broken out. Bright red blood splatters across the green grass as allies and foes fall to each other's hand.

But out of that chaos, scrambles a familiar young woman.

Anna breaks from the fight, her fresh needle newly bloodied. Another fallen tree has opened up a new path out of here—she breaks the threshold even before we can.



“Are you ready to go now?” Angel’s voice is low and hot.

I sneer back at the chaos we caused, then nod. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

15

Angel

We’re not out of the woods yet.

It looks like the Colombian army has been called in on us. I unholster my gun with my free hand and pull Cat in close with my other arm. She falls against my body and I whip around, putting myself in between her and the approaching militia. Bullets upend the earth around our feet as an incredible wind blows at our backs.

I fire at the wall of soldiers and they quickly disperse. Behind them, though, comes something not even I can fight. A tank. “We need to get out of here,” I growl, looking for a new route of escape. I knew that there was a good chance Dante would have the army nearby in case I came to interrupt his wedding, but I also figured that he would never expect me to have so much support. My little brother has an iron grip over everyone who would ever work for a former cartel kingpin, after all—but he has no control over those who choose to revolt with a fellow revolutionary...

“This way!” I shout. Taking Cat’s wrist, I lead her towards a nearby alleyway. Just before we can break into the protected pathway, a huge shockwave knocks us off of our feet. Before we can hit the pavement, I wrap Cat in my arms. My skin scrapes against the hard ground, but I don’t give the pain a second thought—I’ll be fine as long as she is.

“Are you okay?” I ask, as we scramble back to our feet.

Cat's wedding gown is splayed up over her head. I grab the edges and tear it away, ripping the fabric at the seams and freeing her from that terrible fate. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she responds, almost in a daze. Her eyes are fixed on something just over my shoulder. I turn around and see the smoking barrel of the approaching tank; a huge crater lies in front of it, no more than forty yards away from us.

These idiots are actually shooting at us with fucking tanks. They'd rather tear their own city apart then let me get away with my brother's prized hostage. The fools. They'll see what true destruction is. This is just the start of the revolution.

A new flurry of bullets nips at our feet and we both snap out of our daze at the same time. I push Catalina behind the alleyway's brick wall and race ahead, then I crouch down. "Get on," I order. Catalina is no slouch, but I know we'll go faster with her on my back. She doesn't meet me with any resistance. Her long legs wrap around my hips like we're back on my bike. When she's on, I start sprinting.

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At the next corner, I rip out my walkie-talkie and set the dial to universal. “Retreat!” I order into the speaker. “Retreat and regroup!”

We got what we came for and we sent the message we wanted to—no matter how rich or influential or connected you are, you’re not safe from us.

The next corner we turn down greets us with a welcome sight. The second wave of our ragtag infantry waits under a shaded parking lot; they break out in cheers at the sight of Cat and I.

“Catalina!” they roar, raising their makeshift weapons into the air.

Cat and I only stop for a second before I find the nearest ledge. I pull my stolen bride up onto the platform and raise my hand in the air. The crowd immediately goes silent. “We aren’t done yet!” I address them. “We may have won this battle, but the war is far from over. It’s time to go home and prepare for the next fight.”

The crowd seems to understand my message. Without another wave of cheers, they disperse, scurrying back home to regroup. Cat and I follow close behind them.

The echoes of our battle at the state house fade into the distance as we make our way to a nearby escape hatch. Before we turn the final corner, I peak around to make sure the coast is clear. When it is, I nod Cat ahead. She gives me a kiss on the cheek before passing by.

That stones me. The reality that I finally have her back hits me like a sledgehammer. Before she can get far, I reach out and grab her wrist, pulling her back into me. Our

lips meet again, even hotter this time than the last.

Cat pushes into me and I'm immediately hard. The powerful adrenaline rush from our fight quickly turns into extreme lust. I push my stolen bride against the nearest wall and she immediately starts to grind against my body.

"Let's get you out of that fucking dress," I growl, my mind quickly draining of anything but desire. Consequences be damned, it's been too long since I've had my woman.

My tongue is in Cat's mouth before she can say anything in return. Her primal moan is enough to tell me that she wants this just as badly as I do. She practically rips my hands from around her waist and leads them down between her legs.

I reach up under her tattered gown and find her panties. They slip off nice and easy. "I missed you so much," Cat sighs as I work my kisses down her tender neck. Her slender fingers grab onto my hair as I thrust my bulge into her hot spot.

"I missed you, too," I grumble as I pull down the neckline of her dress, Cat's exposed nipple quivers beneath my lips; her grip on my hair tightens. Suddenly, her gyrations around my waist get even more intense. "I was so angry at you," she hisses.

"For what?" I ask, moving over to her other tit.

"For taking so goddamned long!" she moans.

I let her breasts go free and find her lips again. Our tongues tango in a fiery battle and I feel Cat's hands desperately unlatching my belt.

"Well, now I'm back," I growl into her ear. "And I promise I'll make this quick."

My belt pops open and my pants fall. Cat rips my underwear off and my throbbing cock shakes free.

“Please don’t,” Cat whispers.

“As you wish.”

16

Catalina

Angel enters me and all of my fear and dread and hopelessness explodes under the pressure of his primal desire.

My nightmare already seems like a distant memory; now, I’m smack dab in the middle of a wet dream. Angel is still just as big as ever, and his throbbing width stretches me out to my limits, but this pain is welcome. It’s searing pleasure empties the heaviness in my heart and replaces it with something fresh and dirty.

Angel pins me against the alley wall with his bulging biceps and heaving chest and I quiver against his power. This is a man who’s led an empire, this is a man who’s trying to re-invent a country, this is a man who’s made me his.

This is my man.

His thrusts are deep and purposeful; each one is followed by a grunt so deep it sends shivers down my soul. Maybe it’s the left-over adrenaline from the battle, or the intense joy from escaping the wedding, but each time Angel’s hard pelvis pumps into mine, and his cock digs so deep I feel like I might rip into two, I’m overcome by pleasure like I’ve never felt before.

This time is different than our other times. This time is even wilder than our union in the bar in Ireland or in that bed in Cyrus Kane's castle. This time feels like our passion is erupting on its own terms. We've taken what we wanted, and what we want is each other.

“Enough of this

,” Angel growls. His hands fall around my hips and he unsheathes his giant cock from my tight pussy. With all the power of a wild animal, he flips me around. I arch my back like a stretching cat and stick my ass out for my man. His big palm digs into the meat of my ass and I whimper out.

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“Fuck me!” I demand, more beast than human myself.

“With pleasure.”

I’m impaled by Angel’s thick hardness in a single thrust that nearly knocks me through the wall. I press up against the brick and take my pounding. The rippling of my ass against Angel’s six-pack sends shivers of pure pleasure raging through my once exhausted nerves.

Even my scraped arms feel as good as new as every inch of my mind focuses on the heat building between my legs. Angel’s grunts deepen and my whimpers go up an octave. I can feel him swelling inside of me as he uses me for a release of his own.

Sizzling warmth grows from my pelvis like light-speed vines; they wrap around my stomach, then my heart, then my throat. As the warmth reaches my brain, the dark and grimy world goes a clean white. All sound disappears as I implode with pure pleasure. Angel rips out of me and I feel the heat of his release splash over my backside. His cum is thick and hot and it marks my skin like a branding iron.

... Slowly, the world returns around me.

I sigh in satisfaction, my eyelids heavy in the best kind of way.

“How was that?” Angel’s deep voice comes from behind. What remains of my wedding dress lays tattered on the ground below. Good. I can’t wait to get out of this prisoner’s uniform.

“It was perfect,” I whisper.

Angel slaps my ass and I’m snapped from my content daze. “Not perfect,” he teases. “But we’re getting there.”

I find my panties on the alley floor. They’re too dirty to put back on, so I decide to go commando. “We should get going...” I whisper, as I follow Angel over to a half-covered manhole.

“Yeah, that was nice, but we have something more important waiting for us.”

“I know...” I haven’t forgotten about our son. A little whirlwind of shame crosses my soul as I think about how Angel and I just wasted this time fucking when we should have been racing back to Oscar. He’ll be alone for a little longer now because of our selfish desires.

No, not selfish, I tell myself. Necessary.

Angel and I now know where we stand. Everything may have changed since the last time we fucked, but our feelings haven’t. He’s pounded away the last bits of resentment I had for him for not coming sooner. Sure, some of it’s still there, but it’s nothing compared to what it was even just yesterday. My doubt has been cut in half; my hope has been doubled—and all it took was a hard fuck in a dirty alleyway.

“Are you sure it’s this one?” I ask, not recognizing the door—though, to be fair, down here, they all look the same.

“It doesn’t hurt to try.” Angel knocks three times on the door tucked into the side of the underground tunnel. We both wait with bated breath. I have little doubt that Oscar is safe—I trust Juan and Lady more than anybody—but it’s been so long since I’ve been allowed to see my baby boy. The same thing happens every time I come visit;



the closer I get, the more my absence hurts.

Like a dream, three soft knocks come from the other side of the door. My shoulders slink in relief. I rush by Angel just as he responds with two soft knocks of his own.

The door rattles open and I burst inside. “Catalina!” Lady’s voice is filled with shock. I let my hand fall on her shoulder as I scan the room for my baby boy. I spot him in his booster chair.

“Mama!”

My heart busts.

“Ozzy!” He’s in my arms and against my cheek before I dare take another breath. His happy gurgles fill me with joy; I smother him in kisses.

“Mama! Mama!” he begs, squirming under my tight grip.

“I’m back.” And I’m never leaving again. I don’t stay that last part out loud. After all I’ve been through, I know not to make promises like that, not to someone as innocent as my Oscar. I only make promises I know I can keep. Mommy promises she will always love you. Mommy promises that she never stops thinking of you. Those are things I can control, but I don’t dare promise what I can’t control. Even with Angel’s return, and the city at his back, I’ve been through enough hell to know that freedom and success is never guaranteed.

I give Oscar a reprieve from my smooches and instead hold him in a vice grip of motherly love. His innocent scent wafts into my nostrils and puts my mind at ease—then I feel Angel’s strong presence on my back and I can’t help but tighten back up.

I've never thought about how this would work—us, as parents. Can I even share my baby boy with anyone?

“Boo-boo,” Oscar calls, reaching between Angel and I, towards the kitchen fridge. I turn around and flip him over in my arms. “Boo-boo,” he calls out again. His green eyes are fixed on Angel.

“It sounds like he wants you to fetch him dinner,” I half-laugh.

“I guess he thinks I'm his butler,” Angel smirks.

“That's a good enough start.”

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Angel nods and heads for the kitchen. Ozzy and I float over to the ratty couch by the old-fashioned antenna-television in the corner of the little underground hideaway. Before I can blink, Angel's collapsed down on the sofa beside me.

It almost feels like we're a family.

Almost...

Oscar wriggles under my grip, reaching over to Angel and his bottle of formula. "Come here, buddy," Angel calls. He reaches over, groaning as he shifts on the couch. I can hardly imagine how sore he must be from all of his fighting. I probably would be sore, too, if I could feel anything—but despite being with the two people I've yearned after most for the past two years, I feel numb.

Oscar squirms free from my grip and makes his way over to Angel. He doesn't get far before Angel picks him up and whisks the little boy onto his lap. Oscar laughs with amusement—he may be small, but neither Lady or I have the strength to roughhouse with him like that; he seems to like it. Hell, he seems to like Angel.

... I guess that makes two of us.

"Come on, drink," Angel insists, putting the bottle up to Oscar's lips, but the stubborn boy isn't having it. To me, it's clear what he wants, but Angel doesn't seem to catch onto it. So, I push him in the right direction.

"He wants you to lift him up again," I say, resting my cheek against my palm. I watch my two boys, exhausted, but wearily content, as their eyes both light up at the same

time.

Angel lifts Oscar above his head and Oscar screeches with glee. It's funny, whenever I think of my son, I picture him as this fragile little seed, but in Angel's hands, he looks anything but fragile—though, he does look even smaller than usual. Oscar might grow to be big someday, but right now, his daddy's hands are long enough to wrap around him nearly twice over.

An unwelcome prick of dread pinches my heart at the thought of Oscar growing up. What kind of world are we creating for him? Is Angel serious about this revolution business, or was he just doing it to get me? What's next? Will we even last that long?

I don't ask any of those questions out loud, not yet. Instead, I just watch the two most important boys in my life as they make each other happy. The genuine smile on Angel's rugged face is like nothing I've ever seen from him before.

His dimples are back in full force and sharper than I've ever seen. My heart flutters and butterflies flap around so hard in my stomach that I wonder if it was them who caused the hurricane-like winds at the wedding.

No, it couldn't have been my butterflies. I didn't know Angel was coming. My belly was filled only with dread, and nothing else.

I try not to think about the horror of what I just came from, or the terror of what's to come. Right now, the three of us are safe. Right now, we're a family.

17

Angel

I wake up on the couch with my head on Catalina's lap and a baby boy in my

arms—but he’s not just any baby boy; he’s my baby boy. Oscar Luis Alzate-Montoya. Future king.

His soft breaths lull me back to sleep, but before I can drift into dreamland a buzz comes from my pocket. I sigh, knowing that I can’t ignore the outside world for much longer, not if I want to preserve this slice of domestic bliss.

Cat shifts under my head and the memory of that night all those years ago, when I walked in on her cooking at my condo, hits me like a tidal wave. What I smelled wasn’t spaghetti sauce or pasta, I realize, it was this.

My phone doesn’t stop ringing for long enough to let me relax again. It keeps buzzing and I tighten my grip around Oscar, before slowly sitting up on the couch. I hand him to his half-asleep mother and she unconsciously cuddles him in her arms.

Lady’s resting over by a cot near the kitchen. I don’t want to wake anybody, so I step out into the dark dank tunnel to take my call.

“Where have you been!?” Juan immediately asks. His voice isn’t panicked, but it definitely isn’t calm either.

“With my family,” I respond.

That eases my advisor a little bit. “Good,” he sighs. “You’re all safe and unharmed?”

“Yeah.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and let out a yawn. My muscles are sore, but the wounds on my hands seem to be healing well and my head is mostly clear, if not a little drowsy. “How’s everything with you?”

“Things are getting hectic, Angel,” Juan’s voice breaks just enough to snap me fully awake. This is serious. Juan isn’t easily shaken.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you mean, ‘what do I mean’?” he replies. “Dante escaped the wedding, unharmed and absolutely furious. The fucking army was called in and it tore up Capital street with a fucking tank. Your revolutionaries sustained heavy casualties. I’m already worried about morale, but not nearly as worried as Dante’s retribution. For the first time ever, I was actually in the room when he spoke to this Enzo Barella fucker. He’s prodding Dante for a big response... a

very violent show of power.”

My fists clench and my heart slows. “What’s he going to do?” I knew Dante wouldn’t take this lying down, but I guess I allowed myself to get lost in another world for a little bit—now, reality is coming back to kick me in the ass.

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“I don’t know yet, but I’m supposed to help plan it,” Juan responds. “I’ll keep you updated, obviously, but shit is going to clamp down for the foreseeable future. It’s obvious the location of the wedding was leaked, and ‘we’ are desperately looking for the perpetrator. I’ll try to hold them off as long as possible, but our communications are going to have to be kept to the bare essentials for the next little while, okay?”

“Yeah, I understand.” Juan seems to pick up on the hesitancy in my voice.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

I sigh and slink further away from the door that leads back to my tiny slice of domestic bliss. Before I turn down the first corner, I look back and my heart kicks. “We should get Cat and Oscar out of the city first, before shit hits the fan.”

Juan grumbles on the other end of the line. “There’s no escaping this, Angel, you know that. Either we win, or we all die.”

Juan’s words are no surprise, but still, hearing the truth said out loud like that cuts through me like a switchblade. “How’s your family?” I ask, maybe a little more aggressively than I should have. There’s no doubt in my mind that Juan knows what it’s like to want to protect your family at all costs, but I feel like I need to remind him that, as far as I know, his family is safe, while mine isn’t. Would he be making the same decisions if his family were still in the line of fire?

A tense pause follows. “I’d rather we not talk about that over the phone... but they’re fine.”

“Good.” I’m truly happy for my friend, but I won’t be happy until I can say the same for my family. “Formulate a plan to get Cat and Oscar out of here. I’ll stay if I have to, but some things are more important than countries and empires.”

“This isn’t about empires,” Juan argues. Water drips from the tunnel ceiling as I pace back and forth in the darkness. “This is about change. If I could have gotten Cat and Oscar out of the city before you ever even showed up, I would have, but it was impossible then and it’s impossible now.”

I sneer in frustration but I’ve had enough conflict for the day. There’s no point in arguing with Juan. He may disagree with me, but I know he’s just trying to do what he thinks is right. Well, so am I.

“I have to go,” Juan says, and I let him off the hook. “We should be happy for today. Despite the carnage, it was a success. You have Cat back and we’re all alive to keep fighting.”

“You’re right,” I grumble, pinching the bridge of my nose. The humid air outside seems to build in pressure under these tunnels. There’s a mighty headache lingering just behind my forehead—I do my best to push the pain away. There’s so much to do, but right now, I just need to concentrate on one thing: keeping my family safe.

Juan and I hang up and I take the long way back to the underground bunker. My mind whirls with contradicting plans and hopes and desires. Fury rips through my pounding head at the thought of Dante ever getting his hands back on Cat, and I nearly explode from the thought of anything ever happening to Oscar. Juan is right; there’s no way to sneak out of this mess. Dante has the city on lockdown, and it’s a miracle I even managed to get in—getting two people out would be next to impossible... but that doesn’t mean I can’t try.

My success as a revolutionary seems secondary to the health and happiness of my



family. Still, I have to fight to remind myself that they're inextricably linked.

But that doesn't mean that Cat and Oscar have to do any fighting. I can carry that burden for the three of us. With them safe, I would be free to throw myself fully into this war that I've started for them. With them safe, I could die knowing that it was for my family... but how could I die before knowing that they were taken care of?

As long as they're in the city—hell, in the country—I can't take the necessary risks I might need to take in order to bring Dante to his knees. I built my original empire without having to worry about the death or pain of others, everything had already been taken from me—well, almost everything. Sure, I had to fight to keep my brother out of it all, but no one ever came after him. I was the only target my enemies would ever take aim at, and that was fine with me. Now, though, everything has changed, and I'm not so sure I can do what needs to be done while my family is forced to hide under the nose of the very devil I'm trying to destroy.

Cat's awake by the time I return. Her hands are in the sink as she quietly cleans dishes in the kitchen, careful not to wake up Lady or Oscar. "What's wrong?" she whispers, when our gazes meet.

She must be able to see the worry in my eyes; the conflict raging in my soul. "Nothing, everything went as planned today," I grumble, wrapping my arms around her tight little body from behind.

She sighs as I plant a kiss against the most tender part of her neck. Her ass pushes into my crotch and I pin her against the kitchen counter. "Not here," she says, and I agree. Oscar gurgles from his nearby crib and I'm satisfied just holding the woman I've fought so hard to get back.

"Your arms," I point out, as my fingers trace invisible lines across her skin. Cat has changed out of her wedding dress and into baggy sweatpants and a long t-shirt—they

don't smell like her and I imagine they belong to Lady, but the short sleeves expose the marks left on her tender arms.

At first, I'm gentle and sympathetic—my baby has been hurt—but then the thought of how she got hurt fills me with a fury that tightens my grip around the woman I've sworn to protect.

Dante...

"Angel, you're hurting me," Cat's whisper snaps me back from the fire's edge.

"Sorry," I mumble. "What happened to your arms?" I almost don't want to hear it. Dante had her under his grip for so long, and I remember what he used to do to his girls...

"It was my own fault," Cat insists.

I don't like the sound of that. "What? You spoke back when you shouldn't have? You tried to escape? Don't ever blame yourself for what happened—"

"No," Cat interrupts. "It's nothing like that. I'd never blame myself for something that monster did to me. I got these cuts on my own accord, running back to my cage like a scared house cat..."

It's still there, that guilt in her voice. Cat isn't the one who should feel guilty. I heard what she had to go through to make sure she could keep visiting Oscar. "You were smart and brave," I tell her. She leans backwards, into me, and I can feel a lightness come over her body. Though I'm sure she'll never admit it, I know that being absolved means the world to her. I can't imagine the weight that she's had to carry while I've been away. Now, it's my turn to take that weight from her.

I support Cat's body as we gently rock back and forth in the tiny underground kitchen. Then, my eyes fall on something else. "The ring..."

Cat lifts her hand up and the jewel shimmers faintly under the dim lighting. "He let you keep it?" I ask, surprised.

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“No,” Cat responds, as though her thoughts are a million miles away. “It was one of the first things he took from me... but then, when he told me we were getting married, it was the only thing he gave back.”

“The cheap bastard,” I growl, hating that thoughts of Dante are ruining my moment with Cat. That ring should only carry happy memories, even if I originally gave it to her with a cold, calculating motive.

“It’s funny,” Cat whispers, her gaze wandering over the shining diamonds. “At first, I was terrified that he wanted me for more... primal reasons, but after the battle at your old compound, something changed in him. It was like I instantly became more of a burden than a prize. He seemed to detest me, but he also didn’t have enough time to punish me for it. His soul almost seemed to be just as trapped as my body was...”

A hea

vy sigh escapes my lips. Dante is the last person I want to think about now, but I’m not about to change the subject. A morbid curiosity has me wanting to know every last detail of Cat’s confinement—even if I don’t know if I can take it all.

Juan has already filled me in on how he helped her escape for the final four months of her pregnancy, when her baby bump became too big to hide. They stashed her down here and then had her give birth in secret, but to keep Oscar safe, Cat had to quickly return to Dante. Juan made up some story to explain Cat’s absence, and it seemed to satiate my idiot brother’s dull curiosity. He stopped his relentless search for her and Oscar was left alone. It was the only way, Juan told me. There was no safe path out of the city, and according to him, there still isn’t.

But I'll find a way. I have to.

"I don't think he realized how much responsibility came with being king," I tell Catalina, trying not to think about her time as a prisoner. I can use that anger during battle, but now is no time for fury. "He never really had to work for a living and now that he does, I bet he's more envious of his old life than he used to be of me. But there's no going back now. Everything has changed, forever."

Cat nuzzles her cheek against my bicep. "Don't get me wrong, I don't sympathize with the man..." she whispers, "but I guess what I'm saying is that you shouldn't have to worry about what I went through. That's over now, and I'm not going to lie, it was awful, but the scars on my skin aren't from Dante; they're battle marks I got for Oscar's sake, for the sake of our son."

A swell of pride fills up my tired chest. I knew I fell for this girl for a good reason. She's tougher than anyone has any right to be, and if it weren't for that, for her, then I might never have gotten a chance to meet my son, to start a family, to change.

18

Catalina

Time passes like a dream in the tunnel.

There's no sunlight or clock or schedule to adhere to. How many days have passed since the wedding? It's hard to say. Every time I remember to ask Angel, he's gone, off to inspire the people and bring down the government.

Don't get me wrong, I don't mind. I've gotten used to this kind of lifestyle, locked away in some forgotten bunker, but now, I'm with my son, and when Angel comes back from work, I get to cuddle up with my two boys and drift off knowing that

there's only one task left: true freedom.

How are we going to get out of here? Angel and I still haven't discussed it. Sure, I know about this revolution of his, but there isn't much room to talk in our little safe house and there's no way I'm letting Oscar out of my sight to go out into those dark tunnels just so Angel can tell me his master plan... if he even has one.

A revolution.

For me.

It's all so grandiose.

But he has me now, so what's the next step?

"Boo-boo," Oscar demands. He's sitting on the couch as I try to straighten the antennas on our ancient TV so that we can get a decent signal.

"One sec," I mumble, twisting the wires like I know what I'm doing. For a split-second, the white static on the screen clears and a news broadcast comes into view, but that vanishes as quickly as it appeared. "Damn it!" I curse, under my breath.

With Angel gone, and Lady off smuggling groceries, the curious side of my mind has been set free. I want to know what's happening outside.

"Boo-boo!" Oscar demands, and I'm forced to give up on the TV. The last thing I want is to have to deal with a cranky baby. When Oscar is in a good mood, every last harsh reality of my life falls away, but when he's grouchy, it's like another weight is added to my shoulders. I need him to be happy. I've already been absent from his life for far too long to not want to make the most of every moment we have together. "I'm coming, baby boy," I say, as I grab his bottle from the fridge and whisk it over

to the king of the bunker. Down here, even Angel's just a servant.

"Come on," I say, patting on my lap as I sit down on the couch beside Oscar. He doesn't budge. Usually, when he's this hungry, he'll crawl towards his bottle like a starving coyote, but his attention seems to be elsewhere.

"Boo-boo," he demands, his bright green eyes looking over to the bunker door.

Confused, I reach for him. "I have it right here."

Oscar doesn't seem to care whether or not I have his dinner—or lunch, or breakfast, who can tell anymore—instead, he crawls right off the couch. In a moment of motherly instinct, I drop his bottle and lunge to save him from the fall. Somehow, I manage to grab him before he smacks against the ground, but that doesn't stop my shoulder from digging into the cold, thinly carpeted cement.

A giggle escapes Oscar's little lips as I rise up from the floor. The pain in my shoulder is mild, and it vanishes quickly against his laughter. "What is wrong with you?" I tease.

"Boo-boo!" he says again, his attention turning back to the door.

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Suddenly, it hits me. He's not hungry for dinner, he's hungry for attention, and not just from anyone. He wants his father.

My heart struggles against this realization. Suddenly, Angel's absence looms large. He's out there fighting for us... but what if he doesn't come home? It seems like Oscar's already attached, and that's a good thing... as long as Angel stays safe.

I try to make up for boo-boo's absence by lifting Oscar up and down in the air from on my back. I'm not nearly as strong as Angel, but it seems to distract the little boy for a while. Still, it doesn't take long before his eyes turn back to the door. "Boo-boo," he says in a voice so small it breaks my heart. Ozzy's little nose scrunches up and I feel tears coming on... then, suddenly, the ancient TV in the corner of the room blares alive.

It startles the hell out of me, and I nearly drop my newly distracted baby boy in the shock. His bright green eyes are twisted away from the door and towards the color screen. I take the opportunity to sit back up and plop us both back down on the couch.

The TV screeches and the sound twists and turns until a loud pop comes from the speakers—it's followed by radio silence.

"Damn it," I mutter again. This TV is giving me more trouble than I need right now... but it also seems to have calmed Oscar. A commercial plays silently on the screen as I take a look behind the ancient box to see if there's anything I can do about the sound. The sudden idea that I could show Oscar cartoons makes my heart flutter. He deserves some sense of normalcy, even if he'd be watching them in an underground bunker while his father leads a revolution above ground.



“Boo-boo,” Oscar chants as I’m confounded by the forest of wires that confront me behind the TV.

“Your bottle is right there!” I call to him, knowing full well that he’s not asking for the formula on the couch. He wants Angel back. So do I, little buddy.

“Boo-boo!” Oscar giggles, and the sound of his clapping hands makes me abandon my little engineering project. What’s he suddenly so happy about? Is Angel home? Was I so concentrated on this stupid TV that I didn’t hear him open the door?

When I pop my head over the top of the ancient box and scan the room, though, I don’t see anyone. I scrunch my brows and look over at Oscar, who’s bouncing on the couch with a big grin on his face. “Boo-boo! Boo-boo!” he chants, giggling and clapping his hands.

“What’s gotten into you, crazy boy,” I smile, giving up on the TV for now. I plop down beside my happy son and follow his chubby little fingers to the silent screen ahead.

“Oh shit...” My hand covers my mouth as quickly as I realize what I just said. Bad Catalina! Don’t swear around Oscar!

Still, a new flurry of curses wants to escape my lips as I stare at a picture of Angel on the television screen before us.

Without sound, it’s impossible to hear what’s being said, but I can still hear Oscar loud and clear. “Boo-boo! Boo-boo!” he continues, pointing at Angel’s flickering picture.

“That’s dada,” I mumble, absent-mindedly.

“Dada...” Oscar repeats, saying the word for the first time.

My heart melts and I kiss my son on the top of his little round head, but my eyes stay fixed on the screen. Worry invades my gut. This can't be good. From what I've been told, Angel and Juan control most of the newspapers, but no one's ever said anything about the news channels. I can only imagine that Dante has his hand in this.

Oscar and I watch as Angel's photo is cut in with disturbing images of the fallout from the wedding. White sheets cover dead bodies over bloody grass...

Suddenly, dread fills my chest. How many innocent people died just so Angel could get me back?

My hands start to shake, and I realize that Oscar is watching the same thing I am. There's no way he knows that there are dead bodies under those white sheets, but I'm not about to subject him to it. I cover his eyes, but he quickly squirms from my grip.

For someone who can't even walk yet, he sure is quick. He's at the other end of the couch, leaning towards the TV before I can grab him again. “Dada! Dada!” he shouts with joy as Angel's image returns to the screen. Every time he says that word, a conflicting bouquet of fireworks erupts behind my chest. My son has a father; at night we all sleep in the same room... but look what it took to get us here.

The bloody images flash behind my eyelids as I pick up my child and turn us both away from the TV. For some reason, I head straight for the bunker door. There's no fresh air waiting for us out there, but our little room has become too stuffy to bear—it's filled with the ghosts of the dead, from Dante's men to the common people who cried my name as they rushed to their deaths.

The door slams shut behind us and the sound echoes through the empty tunnels. There's no telling which way is west or east or north or south, and the last thing I

want to do is get lost in this dark maze,

so, instead of running off, I start to pace back and forth with Oscar in my arms.

He seems undisturbed by my new mood. Thank goodness.

“Dadaa, dada, dadaa, dada, dada,” the little boy sings, without a care in the world. It’s almost comforting. Oscar is alright, and that’s all that matters.

But what about all those who just died? What about all those who will continue to die just so we can be safe? They must have families, too...

“Cat!?” Angel’s deep voice roars through the tunnel like thunder. “What’s wrong!?” he’s at our side before I can process his presence properly.

“Nothing... Nothing,” I lie. “We just needed some fresh—”

“Dada!”

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The sharp look on Angel's face immediately evaporates. His furrowed brows break in surprise, and the green tint in his eyes sparkles like a supernova. That's the first time he's ever been called dada.

"I... uh..." and that's the first time I've ever seen him stammer.

Oscar squirms in my arms as he reaches for Angel. I let him go and his father picks up the slack. "What's happening?" he asks, after taking a moment to gather himself.

Angel bobs Oscar up and down in his huge arms as naturally as any father ever did. I gaze at my two boys with a heavy heart. They look so much alike...

"You were just on the news," I mumble, trying to shake the images I just saw out of my head. Slowly, the actual events I witnessed in person also start to invade my memories. I killed a man. There was blood and violence everywhere. Not every guest there was corrupt, right? How many innocent people got caught up in our war?

"You got the TV working?" Angel asks, hardly disturbed at all. I have to remind myself that he's probably seen much worse—hell, he's probably done much worse. There's no way he would be this effected by the images of those bloody white sheets.

I can't tell him why I'm upset; he'll think I'm weak, and now is no time to be weak.

"There was no sound," I tell him.

"That's probably for the best," Angel mumbles. He lifts Oscar up to the sky and the baby boy giggles with glee. "Dante's men control the TV stations; it's a good thing

most of the slums don't get a good signal, otherwise we might have some serious competition."

"Competition for what?" I ask, already knowing full well what he means, but the nausea that's swirling around in my stomach needs a release. Just tell me what I need to hear, Angel. Lie if you have to.

But Angel's no liar. He furrows his brows and brings Oscar back down into his chest.

"For their loyalty," he states. "What else?"

My gaze falls away from the two most important boys in my life. My heart is quickly filling with an unavoidable guilt. "... Are we just using these people?"

My eyes stay glued on the ground, but I can feel Angel's glare cut through me. "We're using each other," he states, like a soulless businessman.

"What good is anything if they're dead?" I respond, tears blurring up my vision. "If their families are dead? How many sons and daughters and fathers died just so I could..." I can't finish.

"You don't think that any of that was worth this?" Angel asks, pushing Oscar forward so that his soft cheek rubs against mine

"Mama."

"Mama's here," I whisper. Angel lets me take Oscar and I hold my son tight. This time, he doesn't try to squirm free. His head falls against my shoulder, almost as if he's consoling me. I feel so weak. Oscar is the last person who should be dragged into this mess.

“Mama’s not use to this life, to this violence, but that’s alright, I understand,” Angel says. He stands over the two of us like a protective shield, but his warmth for us is offset by his coldness for everyone else. “Neither of you should have to get used to this life,” he repeats, lower this time. “I’m getting us out of here.”

19

Angel

“Right now!?”

The look on Catalina’s face has me worried. This isn’t how I hoped she’d respond. It looks like her conscience has rooted her feet into the floor. Fuck. A conscience can be a dangerous trait in this world.

“Tonight,” I tell her. “Let’s get inside. It’s not safe in these tunnels.” No one except for Lady and Juan know about Oscar, and I plan to keep it that way. If anyone else finds out about him and Cat before I can bring them to safety, then it will already be too late.

I usher the two of them inside and slam the door shut behind us. “Where’s Lady?” The portly old maid is nowhere to be found.

“She’s out for groceries,” Catalina mumbles, her mind clearly still distracted. I hate seeing her like this—though, I knew it was only a matter of time before something like this came up. Cat may be tough in her own way, but very few people can handle the violence that comes with a revolution. Luckily, I’m one of those people. A life hardened in the underworld has prepared me to make decisions that cost lives and shed blood.

Cat isn’t wrong about this being for selfish reasons, either. None of this would be

happening if it weren't for my family feud with Dante—but even then, I probably wouldn't have started a revolution to end his reign. In the underworld, wars might spill out into polite society once in a while, but they are never meant to. Revolutions are different; the whole point of them is to disturb polite society. Still, the only reason I'm revolting is to keep my family safe—re-taking my empire has become secondary.

“How long has she been gone for?” I don't like the sound of Lady being gone for long. She's pretty unassuming, but if anyone gets a hold of her for any reason, I can't exactly see her holding up under torture. Sure, she's made these trips before, but things are more dangerous now.

“I... I don't know,” Cat's eyes are glued on the TV. A news broadcast is covering a battle that just took place uptown. I wasn't there, but I helped plan the attack. We managed to capture some of the army's top men, and that's a good start—we don't want any more fucking tanks showing up to our gatherings.

“Let's turn this shit off,” I suggest, though it's more of an order. The ancient television clicks off with a loud hiss when I punch in its dial.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

“Dada! Boo-boo!” Oscar calls to me from Cat’s arms. He reaches towards the couch and I spot his bottle laying there. When I pick it up, it’s lukewarm.

“He likes it cold,” I mutter, brushing by Cat and putting the bottle back in the fridge. Luckily, there’s a spare at the back. “Come here,” I grumble, picking Oscar out of Cat’s arms. She lets him go and I plop down on the ratty couch.

“Dada,” the word hits my heart so hard that it burns, but I force myself to stay calm. I was almost knocked off my feet when I heard Oscar say it outside. Who taught him that? Cat?

“Boo-boo?” I respond, holding up the fresh bottle.

“Boo-boo,” Oscar confirms. He sucks his bottle as I hold it up to his lips. His gaze never leaves mine, it’s almost like he’s afraid I’m going to leave him again.

Don’t worry, buddy. I’m not going anywhere, not without you. It’s why I’ve decided that the three of us need to split town. Without being able to contact Juan about possible escape routes, I’ve been left on my own to think up a way out of here. He wasn’t lying when he said it was nearly impossible, but he also didn’t have an army of revolutionaries at his fingertips. If I can cause a big enough distraction...

“We can’t leave...” Cat whispers. She stands in the middle of the makeshift living room with her arms crossed.

“That’s what I thought, too,” I say, looking back and forth between her and Oscar. “But I have a plan—”



“No,” Cat interrupts. “You don’t understand. We can’t leave, not now, not until we’ve helped those who have risked their lives to help us.” Her eyes are heavy with conflict, but her voice is strong and determined. I can see she’s made up her mind, even if she doesn’t entirely realize it yet.

Fuck.

“They’re

not helping us,” I growl, not daring to move. The last thing I want to do is disturb Oscar’s dinner. “They’re helping themselves. I know you’ve been trapped in one prison or another for the past two years, but while you’ve been locked in your gilded cages, the people have suffered. They’re done with suffering, and now they’re finally fighting back.”

“... They wouldn’t be risking their lives if it wasn’t for you, if it wasn’t for me,” Cat continues, unconvinced.

I shake my head. “They just needed someone to push them in the right direction. It would have happened eventually, but if it wasn’t someone with my knowledge and resources, they might have already all been wiped out. I’ve done them a service. By being their leader, I’ve given them a chance.”

“You maybe their leader now,” Catalina says, looking down to the floor. “But what about when you leave?”

“I’ll come back.”

“And leave Oscar and I again?” Her eyes are quickly on me again. Now, she’s just prodding me. I set Oscar down and rise to my feet. Catalina shrinks under my height, but she doesn’t back down. My heart kicks and screams for her. God, she’s a special

woman, but by lord can she be frustrating.

“Enough!” I command. “Everything is in place,” that’s a lie, I have an idea on how to get us out, but it hasn’t been put into practice yet. “We’re leaving when I say we’re leaving. All of us, as a family.”

Cat turns away from me just as a thump comes from the couch. We both whip around at the same time to see that Oscar has dropped his bottle onto the floor. Milk dribbles from his lips as his big green eyes study us with curiosity.

“We shouldn’t be fighting around him,” Catalina whispers. She brushes by me to pick our son up off the couch.

“We weren’t fighting,” I say stubbornly. “We were discussing the details of our trip. We’re leaving, and that’s final.”

“And what if we get caught?” It’s like Cat can’t help herself. Even with Oscar in her arms, she’s not afraid to tell me when she thinks I’m wrong. “Then they’ll not only have us, but they’ll also know we have a son.”

Suddenly, a switch goes off in my mind. Rage fills my fists and I have to turn away. “How dare you try to use my son against me,” I growl, not wanting to turn back around and risk bathing Cat and Oscar in my fire. “I’m doing what I know is best for the both of you,” I continue. My chest tightens as I struggle to control the old fury that would have already consumed the younger me.

“He’s my son, too!” Cat snaps.

“So, why don’t you want to get him to safety!?”

“I do! But we can’t just leave everybody else behind. What about Anna? What about

all those people...”

“Screw Anna! Screw everyone!” I boom. “All that matters is—”

Suddenly, Oscar begins to cry. It’s the most horrible sound I’ve ever heard, and it stops me dead in my tracks.

Catalina wraps a reassuring hand around the back of his head and pulls him into her shoulder. His sobs are like bullets through my soul. “You scared him,” Cat accuses.

For a second, I’m overcome by shame, but then that old fury comes back with a vengeance. I need to get out of here before I blow aasket.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

Without saying a word, I march past the only two people in this entire world who I truly care about and leave them to cry alone.

“We’re going to paint the streets red with their blood.” The anger and confusion I felt from my confrontation with Cat has hardly dwindled.

How long has it been since I left her back in the bunker? A sharp pain of guilt cuts through my chest at the thought of them being all alone, but I’m able to push through that with the fury of my rage. The next time I see my family, it will be because I’ve found us a way out of here—and that starts now.

“You don’t think we should rest a little longer before we start another battle?” Jesus asks. Despite being a country boy, the young man has fit naturally into his new role as a revolutionary general. He leads city folk like a thirsty man drinks water, with a desperate zeal.

“This won’t be a battle,” I assure him, still fighting back my guilt. “It will be a massacre. By the time their back up arrives, we’ll be long gone.”

Jesus seems hesitant, but I’m not. This might be my only chance to get Oscar and Cat out of the city before everything devolves into complete chaos. Right now, there are still pockets of peace; highways that haven’t been destroyed, escape hatches that haven’t been covered in rubble, but at this pace, none of that is going to last long. It’s up to me to make a decisive move and open up a sliver for us to escape through. Whether or not I’ll return before this whole revolution is sorted out is something I still haven’t decided on. My family comes first, and as long as they’re in danger, I’ll fight for them—but once they’re safe?

Right now, there's no point in thinking about it. I'll cross that bridge when I have to.

"Do you understand?" I ask my commander.

While he may be hesitant about the plan, he never hesitates to follow my orders.

"Yes, sir," he nods. "I'll brief the crew."

"Good."

And with that, I'm left alone with my thoughts again. I so badly want to race back underground and grab Cat in my arms; I want to feed Oscar and lift him up in the air and hear his innocent laugh, but I know that doing that would be too dangerous. The only time I can relax is when I'm around them, and I can't relax, not yet.

I'm about to blow a hole in this city, and all the rats that guard the roads out of here will have to scurry to help their fallen comrades—that's when we'll escape.

... That's when you'll leave everyone behind. These people trusted you; they looked up to you...

Cat's words are like fishing hooks in my brain. I try to toss them aside with a violent shake of my head, but it's no use. She has a way of getting under my skin.

Is the guilt that I'm feeling only from fighting with her in front of Oscar? Is it just for being the reason why my son cried, or is it also because Cat was right?

I'm not leading a cartel anymore. These people I've recruited to do my selfish bidding aren't doing it for greed or cruelty or just to get their kicks. They truly believe in the cause.

Do I?

I believe in taking down Dante and everyone who's helped him... but that's only because of what's been done to me.

It's also the same reason why every last single person is fighting beside me. I'm not the only one who's lost something, I'm not the only one who's been tortured and stolen from. Everyone is fighting for selfish reasons. It's why the rich and the elite aren't taking to the streets, because nothing has been taken from them, not yet.

I'm no different than anyone else. I'm just more powerful, more experienced, more driven. I started a revolution for a girl, and now I'm willing to run away from it all for our child.

There's nothing to feel guilty about.

But these people can't just run away...

I shake my head again. It's too late to second guess myself. The massacre has been set in motion. Dante's men are about to be sent to hell, and if anyone from the army is with them, then they'll be held just as accountable as their brethren.

I pop a Glock behind my belt and step out into the growing light of a windy dawn. The weather has been polite over the past few days—at least, it has been compared to the chaos at the wedding—but I have a feeling that it's about to change again. I'm about to set this city on fire, and nature is going to fan those flames until everything is burned to the ground. Only then will we be able to rebuild.

20

Angel

On the roof, the wind is nearly strong enough to knock a grown man off of his feet. A

little further down the nearest fire escape, though, and everything is so still that you could hear a pin drop.

That's why I've commanded for all of my men to go radio silent. No one's to move or speak or even fucking breathe. Right now, this is the quietest place in all of Cali, but in a few minutes, it's going to be by far the loudest.

Through Juan's sources, I've learned that a significant portion of Dante's army is going to be passing through this perfect ambush spot. The tight midtown enclave is surrounded by tall skyscrapers on all sides. At either end of the block are big burly buildings that stand like barriers. We've emptied the buildings and blocked off all the alleyways and filtered the marching foot soldiers in this direction. Usually, a smart general would never let their men be led into a situation like this, but I've gotten word that Dante is at the helm of these poor souls. Apparently, he had a falling out with their old general; so, he killed the man and took over his troops. Now, he's leading them into a slaughter.

With any luck, Dante will be among his men, but I'm not counting on it. The last thing I expect of my little brother is for him to be down in the trenches with the soldiers he's ordering around. That's the main difference between us—or at least, it is for now. If this goes well, then I'll be out of here with Cat and Oscar before the dust can settle.

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*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

I watch the empty street below, filled with adrenaline and anticipation. This may be a ploy to help me and my family escape danger, but that doesn't mean I can't release a bit of frustration first. There will be a good ten minutes of fighting before word of this trap gets out, and it's only then that I'll leave to grab Cat and Oscar—but those ten minutes of fun won't be for completely selfish reasons. I need to see with my own eyes that this is working; there isn't anyone else I trust more to tell me when the exact right time to leave is.

Suddenly, my line of sight is accosted by a bright light.

Good. That's the signal. Dante's men are coming. Beside me, Jesus takes out a piece of glass and responds. We're ready.

Through the quiet stillness of the empty block, I hear a rumble off in the distance. Fuck. I knew there would be a lot of heavily armed men coming this way, but I wasn't sure what kind of vehicles they would have on them. That rumbling sound has made it clear that they have a tank escort.

Well, it's a good thi

ng we brought a fucking rocket launcher.

Jesus nudges me and I nod over at him. This is going to get even more destructive than I had originally thought. It will be a nice distraction from my domestic problems.

So many will die...



This is no time to grow a conscience. The first of Dante's men are marching around the corner now. They're followed by bullet proof SUVs with machine gun artillery and more men with more guns.

Under normal circumstances, we'd be far outgunned, but we've placed enough explosives along this street to blow everything to the moon. Now, we just have to wait until these motherfuckers get far enough in...

Suddenly, my eyes catch a horrifying sight.

No. Fuck. FUCK.

A woman is being pushed up through the approaching ranks. She stumbles ahead until she leads the pack. Her hands are tied behind her back, tears stream down her puffy cheeks.

It's Lady.

They caught her. How the fuck did they know to do that!?

I watch in a shocked daze as the portly old maid is pushed ahead with the barrel of a gun at her back. She scuffles forward, each step looking like it could be her last. The poor woman...

She's walking right towards the explosives. My first instinct is to call off this attack, but then the rational side of my mind grabs me around the neck and knocks some sense back into me.

This is too important. If we succeed here today, we not only strike a huge blow against Dante, but I also get the chance to whisk my family off to safety. One more woman dying seems more than worth all of that...

But Catalina's guilt won't let me look at this objectively... or is it my guilt? I can hardly tell the difference any more. Lady isn't just anyone. She helped Catalina when she was at her lowest; she's risked her life to look after Oscar; she was probably out grabbing groceries for my family when someone picked her up...

Still, three years ago, I wouldn't have hesitated. Hell, I've allowed people like Lady to die countless times before, all in the name of chasing power. My empire was built on the bones of friends and foes alike. Sure, I never kill friends, but sometimes people die in the chaos.

The old me and the new me duke it out as I watch Lady approach. There's no fighting how bad I feel for her; she looks terrified. Her steps are short and heavy and her arms look like they've been tied for far too long; there's also a bruise around her eye...

There's a bruise around her eye.

Suddenly, it hits me.

Why the fuck did it take me so long?

Lady's been roughed up, but why? Isn't it fucking obvious!?

They were trying to get information out of her! Lady may be heroic in the history of my little family, but how tough can an old maid like her really be? If her captors asked the right questions, I have little doubt that she told them about Cat... and maybe Oscar, too.

My heart falls and my vision tunnels. My family is in danger. Cat and Oscar are in more danger now than ever before, and I'm not there to protect them.

The battle for my conscience evaporates in lieu of more pressing matters.

“Call off the attack,” I order to Jesus as I unstrap the AK-47 I have hung around my shoulder.

“Where are you going!?” he calls after me as I jump in through the nearest window and sprint for the staircase.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

There's no time to answer, to explain. I need to get underground now. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Where the hell have I been? Where the fuck has my mind gone? I left Cat and Oscar alone over some petty disagreement. Lady wasn't even there to keep them company, and now I know why. Someone had to have known the maid was helping me, otherwise, why pick her up?

I slam through the basement door with my shoulder and stumble towards the underground parking garage. There, under a permanently parked car, is the manhole cover I came here through.

My mind is clouded, my judgement is off. I'm not used to having to make decisions based on keeping those I care about safe, and it's showing. Even back when I was cementing my empire, Dante's safety was hardly an issue. I just kept him at arm's length and let him enjoy the spoils of my ever-increasing power. No one ever came after him, and I learned to rule with a cold, calculating fist. Sure, I could be hot-headed out in the field, but I didn't become king of Colombia's biggest cartel just by bashing in heads.

My frantic footsteps echo through the tunnels as I race for my family. The guilt in my gut is so strong that I worry it might crumple me over, but I can't stop, I won't stop.

All of this was to keep them safe. I was supposed to keep them safe.

The final corner before our bunker feels like a canyon to get around, and my feet just won't move fast enough.

When I finally see the door I'm looking for, I can't decide if I should feel relief or fear.

It's closed.

What does that mean!?

... I find out soon enough.

21

Catalina

Angel bursts in through the front door like a mad man.

He's followed by a gust of wind that nearly knocks me off my feet. "Shh!" I recover quickly enough. "Oscar's sleeping."

Angel hardly reacts to my scolding. He's frozen in the doorway like a statue. For a split second, his eyes are wide and wild, but they quickly narrow back down into that suspicious scowl I know so well.

"Where's Lady?" he asks. There's a panic in his voice that makes me worried.

I swallow my fear. "She never came back..."

"Dante has her." His words hit me like a freight train. I've been so worried for Lady lately, but I'd been hoping for the best. Maybe, just maybe, she'd come across an old friend or family member and decided that Oscar was safe with me, and that I was safe with Angel, and so she didn't have to come back. At worst, I told myself, she got caught in a battle and was injured, so someone took her to the hospital, where she is

still recovering.

Never did I dare think that Dante had gotten his hands on her.

Suddenly, the fear that I had swallowed down rushes back up. I nearly fall to my knees. “Does that mean...” I can’t finish.

Nonetheless, Angel seems to understand. “I don’t know, but we’re not sticking around to find out.” He rushes over to Oscar’s crib and checks on the sleeping child.

“He’s fine,” I assure him, but my voice is so shaky I hardly believe it myself. None of us are fine, not if poor Lady was forced to talk...

“Where’s his stuff? Did you pack like I wanted you to?”

Angel never asked me to pack, not that I can remember. Sure, he insisted that we we’re leaving the city, but I told him I didn’t think it was a good idea... “We don’t have much,” I respond.

“Let’s go. We can get everyone new clothes when we’re safe.”

More than anything, it’s Angel’s demeanor that has me on edge. I’ve seen him red-hot and ice-cold before, but I’ve never seen him panic. It’s not much, and to an untrained eye, he might just seem eager, but I can tell he’s worried... and that terrifies me.

Still, there’s only one thing I can ask. “Did you see Lady?”

“Yes,” Angel grumbles, too distracted to lie to me.

“... Did they hurt her?” The pain in my voice must be obvious, because Angel stops

preparing to leave and instead marches up to me.

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

Now, he's focused enough to lie. "That doesn't matter right now, what matters is that we don't take any chances. Lady's a good person, but goodness doesn't hold up against—"

"Cruelty," I finish for him. My stomach lurches. "Dante."

"I'll make sure she's freed, but first, I'm taking care of you and Oscar."

For a brief moment, Angel squeezes my hand and I calm down, but then Oscar squeals awake behind us and the horrifying reality of our position returns with full force.

My baby's in danger. Before Angel can get to him, I'm by the side of his crib and picking him up in my arms. "Shh. Shh." I s

ing. The last thing we need right now is a loud baby.

"Hey, hey, it's going to be okay, buddy." The panic has gone from Angel's voice, but I can't tell if it's actually gone or he's just disguising it. Either way, it's enough to calm Oscar down.

"Dada, boo-boo," he gurgles.

"Good thinking, bud." Angel's immediately in the fridge, pulling out every last ounce of formula. "Is this it?" he sneers at our meager savings.

"Lady was going out for more..."



“We’ll figure it out,” he growls. A split second later, he’s pulled out a gun from behind his belt. I can’t help but flinch away; I don’t want violence anywhere near my baby boy... but I also know that we don’t have much of a choice right now.

“Let’s go!” Angel roars, when he turns back from the doorway and sees that I haven’t budged yet.

“Where are we going?” I ask, almost too afraid to move.

Angel hesitates, and for some reason I know that he doesn’t have a plan.

I follow him anyway.

The tall hillside home is like a collection of every building we passed on the way here. In the slums, most homes are no more than one story high. This one, however is at least three, and it looks like someone just tossed a bunch of singles on top of each other.

Hey, I’m not complaining. It’s above ground and far from the roars of all the mini battles happening in the distance.

“Are we staying here?” I ask Angel as we wait in what looks like an office. It’s hard to tell what anything is here; everything looks so stitched together. There’s a charm to it, but I only really want to know one thing: is it safe?

Oscar shifts in my exhausted arms. He fell back asleep not long after we stopped running and started tip-toeing. Thank goodness. It’s not hard to spot Dante’s men in the slums, and they were everywhere. The last thing we needed was to draw their attention with a crying baby. Luckily, Oscar stayed quiet as Angel led us through the shadows.

For a while there, I don't think he knew where he was leading us. To him, I don't think it really mattered, as long as it was away from the one place Lady knew we were.

Poor Lady...

Suddenly, the rickety floorboards of the makeshift mansion creak and a door rattles open. My first instinct is to cover Oscar. Even if Angel has brought us to friends, no one outside of our little circle knows about our son, and the instinct to protect him from everything and anything is strong. It seems to be strong in Angel, too, because his first reaction to the opening door is to step in front of us, blocking Oscar and I from view.

"Ah, Mr. Montoya, how good to see you again." The voice is old but full of a wise energy. I peak under Angel's hulking shoulder and get a glimpse of an elderly man with white hair and a bent back. He shuffles over to a big chair in the center of the room; it almost looks like a makeshift throne.

"Wilmar," Angel nods, respectfully. The panic in his voice is gone, but there's still an anxiousness there that's hard to miss.

"I see you've brought a guest." Wilmar pops his head around Angel like a turtle. "Oh, two guests, it seems."

Angel protectively re-positions himself between us and Wilmar again. "We're looking for a safe place to stay," Angel says.

Somehow, Wilmar is able to stretch his turtle-like neck out long enough to see past Angel's broad shoulders again.

"It's so nice to finally meet you, Catalina," he smiles. "I've heard so many wonderful

things.”

From who? I want to ask, but I let Angel do the talking. “And who is that peaceful little bundle of joy in your arms?”

Angel ignores his question. “Can we hideout nearby?”

*Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 7:20 am*

It's strange, hearing Angel asks for anything. Usually, he just takes, but I guess these are dire times.

"Of course, my boy," Wilmar smiles. "I will have a room set up for the three of you immediately." The old man turns back to the door and cups his hands over his mouth. "Anna!"

For a silent moment, my pounding heart stops beating. Could it be?

It only takes a split-second to confirm that it is.

"Anna!?" I'm saying her name almost even before she bursts through the door.

It's the young seamstress who helped me escape Dante's wedding.

"Catalina!" She cries back, immediately rushing forward to embrace me. Angel allows her to pass, but Anna stops when she sees the precious bundle wrapped up in my arms.

She covers her mouth with a straight hand and gasps. "Who is that little cutie!?"

My first instinct is to spill my guts to her. The truth is, I'm proud of my baby boy. He's been through so much already in his short life and he's been just as good about it all as any mother could ever ask. But the moment my mouth opens, something else tugs it shut again. How much should I reveal? Outside of a very small and tight circle, no one knows about Oscar. Unless someone got Lady to talk...

“This is Oscar,” I say, not lying, but the fact that he’s my son, our son, could put him in so much danger that I just can’t bring myself to elaborate any further.

Anna seems to pick up on my hesitancy. She respects my vagueness, while also appearing to understand what it means. This is my child. My eyes dart over to Angel; he looks just as apprehensive as I feel. This is our child.

“What an adorable little cherub,” Anna lilts, peering into my arms. “And so quiet! What a blessing!”

It feels so nice to hear something positive about Oscar from an outsider. “He is a blessing, isn’t he?” I smile, looking down at my baby boy.

Wilmar’s bones creak as he pushes himself off of his makeshift throne and onto his feet. “My dear,” he addresses Anna. “It looks like we’ll be having company tonight. Would you mind preparing a room for our guests?”

Anna’s excitement at the proposal is almost enough to mask my desperate fear—but it also serves to fan the flames of my guilt. If we leave, we’ll be leaving people like Anna behind; people who’ve risked their lives for the good of my family.

Oscar wriggles in my arms and I can’t help but sigh.

If we stay here and something happens to us, then will those who’ve helped us have sacrificed their lives for nothing?

The conflict threatens to tear me apart from the inside as I follow Anna out of the makeshift office. Angel stays behind to discuss matters with Wilmar.

“How romantic!” Anna lilts, when we’re out of sight. “The rebel prince and the princess staying here, right next door to me!”

“You don’t live here?” I ask, subtly sniffing my armpits. I don’t feel like a princess. I’m dirty and bruised and oh-so exhausted. There was a small shower in the corner of our bunker, but it had no curtains and I only ever remembered to use it every other time that Lady went for supplies.

Poor Lady... she’s another one we’d be leaving behind. How could we do that to her? Her kindness has literally saved my family.

A heavy responsibility nearly drags me through the rickety floorboards as Anna leads me up a tight cement spiral staircase to the third floor.

“I live with my family just across the street, but I often do housework around here for Wilmar. He’s so kind and generous that I’d probably help him out for free if he asked... but don’t tell him that!” Anna giggles and I force a friendly smile onto my face. Her levity is a welcome change of pace, but I just can’t bring myself to feel joyous right now. So many things have gone wrong, and I still have the biggest decision of all to make.

“How’s your... I mean... How are...” I want to ask Anna how she’s feeling but I just can’t quite seem to settle on how to say it. We both experienced the same chaotic violence at the wedding, and I know how badly it’s haunted me. It’s likely that I killed a man, and Anna’s threading needle was just as bloody as mine when I saw her last.

“I’m not bad,” Anna says, seemingly oblivious to what I’m getting at. From behind, I study her skin for signs of damage, but I don’t spot any. She practically bounces up the stairs. “Though, I am still a little sore from the wedding...” For a split-second, I swear I hear the hint of something very heavy and disturbed in her voice, but she trails off quickly enough to disguise it. Anna may be better at hiding her pain from the outside world, but I can still sense it in her. Everybody is fighting for their lives now; it’s not just me.

“Me too,” I respond, forcing out a half-chuckle to keep from sounding too dark.  
“That was crazy.”

“So crazy,” Anna agrees, before I see her head fall again from the weight of the memory. “I’ve been trying not to think about it so much, though. You know? It’s almost too crazy.”

I nod and hold Oscar a little tighter in my arms. “I know exactly what you mean,” I assure her. “There was footage of the aftermath on the news...”

“Yeah, I saw that, too,” Anna mumbles, before opening a door and changing her demeanour.

Faint beams of sunlight shimmer in through a half-closed window. Outside I can hear birds chirping and even children playing... but it’s all undercut by a constant rumble in the distance—people are still fighting; still dying.

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“I think you should stay up here,” Anna says, sweeping her arm around the charming little room like it’s a grand showcase. “This area is pretty safe because of Wilmar, but, god forbid, if you have to suddenly escape, this room has a secret door that leads straight to the roof—and if that fails, you can just use the window.”

A window...

How long was I stuck in that underground bunker? It’s hard to tell. Time went by like a dream down there. Now, a window sounds like heaven to me.

“This is so nice, thank you,” I offer.

Oscar stirs in my arms and Anna tilts her head with innocent curiosity. “He’s so cute,” she sings. “Oh, but we don’t have any baby food!” Her finger finds her lips as she tries to figure out how to change that. “... I can go out and get some.”

A sharp pain cuts through my chest at the t

hought. Going out to get supplies is too dangerous; it’s what Lady was doing when she was captured...

Before I can express my concerns, Anna perks up. “Oh wait, no! I don’t even have to go far. Marta’s daughter just had a baby, I bet they have loads of extra formula. They’re pretty much hoarders,” she giggles, as if the act of kindness isn’t any big deal. Maybe, in normal times, it wouldn’t be such a grand gesture, but during a violent revolution? I’m ready to canonize anybody who helps me.



It's funny, I've been secluded for so long now that the memory of living in a connected community fills me both with a bittersweet nostalgia and a nerve-racking anxiety. Who can I trust? I remember never having to question that, not back when I lived with Marcela...

Suddenly, another sharp pain shoots through me. I nearly crumple over.

Marcela...

Her cold blue hand still reaches out for help in my nightmares some nights. How many people have suffered because of me? How many more will?

"Marta's husband actually fought for you at Dante's wedding," Anna mentions as she fluffs the sheets on the bed in the far corner of the room.

I'm only half listening. My mind has been transported back to my home town. Happy memories of friends and parties and holidays mix in with the dread of what became of it all. Dark plumes of smoke muddy the good times, and soon all I can remember is the death and destruction.

"I'm sure he would be thrilled to meet the two of you. I think he's been to one of Angel's speeches before, but I don't think he's ever gotten a chance to..."

"Who?" I ask, suddenly snapping back to the here and now.

"Marta's husband. Jeison."

"He fought at the wedding?"

Anna nods.

“He’s... did he... I mean, he still wants to meet...” There’s another question I’m struggling to ask. This time, however, Anna seems to know exactly what I’m getting at.

“He’s fine,” she assures me. “Well, actually, he has a few nasty cuts, but nothing a few weeks of rest won’t fix.”

A sigh of relief escapes my lungs, but the moment it does, I’m reminded of all those bloody white sheets. Jeison might have made it back to his family, but how many others didn’t?

Before I can become too racked with guilt, Oscar stirs awake in my arms.

“Mama,” he smiles and my heavy heart melts.

I smile down at him and gently brush the sleep from his eyes. “Wakey-wakey,” I whisper.

Anna’s at my side in an instant. “Oh, what gorgeous green eyes he has!” she gasps.

Oscar’s gaze is immediately on the new woman. He stares at her with complete wonder, his eyes as wide as milk saucers.

His reaction is completely understandable. Except for Angel, he hasn’t ever met anyone new in the entirety of his short life. Lady, Juan and I have been the extent of his interactions—I can only hope that it doesn’t stunt his growth, social or otherwise.

“Who’s a cute little baby” Anna sings.

Oscar tilts his head to the side, like he’s trying to understand what exactly is happening. This definitely isn’t how Angel greeted him during their first encounter.

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“You are,” I answer for him with a gentle bop to his nose. That seems to snap him out of his curious daze. A little laugh escapes his even tinier lips.

“Oh, I just love babies,” Anna squeals. “Let me go get him some formula. I need him to love me!”

Before I can ask her to at least be careful, she’s gone. A soft wind blows in through the half-open window and I close my eyes and try to relish it. For now, we’re still safe. Be thankful, Cat.

Oscar tugs my eyes back open by pulling on a strand of my hair. “What is it?” I ask, still lost in the strange peace of the little bedroom.

“Boo-boo,” he gurgles. “Dada, boo-boo.”

It’s hard to tell what he wants more, his lunch or his father. The fact that both are within his reach fills me with a soft reassurance. Like most things these days, though, it doesn’t last long.

“What am I going to do?” I ask my baby boy. He tilts his head like a puppy, trying to understand.

“Dada!” he repeats, louder this time.

I don’t know whether to cry or smile. Angel. Do I follow his lead or blaze my own trail? My conscience won’t let me think in peace. All I want is a better life for Oscar, but is his future brighter if we run or if we stay?

It's an impossible question... but I've survived the impossible before.

"We'll figure this out," I whisper, more to myself than to my baby boy. "We have to."

22

Angel

The wind wakes me up in the morning.

There are no chirping birds, no sounds of children playing; even the fighting happening off in the distance is blanketed by the howling wind.

I get out of bed and slam the rickety window shut. It's been so long since I've slept near any source of fresh air, but the last thing I want to do is wake up Oscar and Cat.

"Angel?"

Shit. I'm too late.

"Go back to bed," I tell Cat. She needs her rest, especially if we're going to make it out of here as soon as I want.

"Is everything alright?" she asks, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"Yeah. It's just another turn in the weather."

That seems to satiate her early morning curiosity. Cat stretches out and lets a big yawn escape her lips. "Why didn't we come here sooner?" she asks, looking around the cramped little bedroom with a relaxed gaze. That's something I haven't seen in a

while—hell, have I ever really seen Cat completely relaxed?

Oscar whimpers from below her and she reaches to pick him up off the mattress. He slept with us last night, alternating between using my chest as a pillow and cuddling up on the little sliver of mattress between Cat and I. He's still sleeping, and I plan to keep it that way; so, I keep my voice low.

"We're not as safe here as we were in the bunker," I tell Cat. There's no use in hiding the truth from her. If I'm going to get her on board with this whole escape plan, she's going to need to understand just how dangerous it is here for us, for her, for Oscar. "Already now, two extra people know about Oscar and our whereabouts, maybe already more. I like Anna, but she went to get those bottles for Oscar from a neighbour. What did she tell them they were for?"

"... I'm sure she was discreet," Cat mumbles, standing up with Oscar in her arms.

"Maybe, maybe not," I respond. "Are we really willing to risk our family on the whims of outsiders?"

That causes Cat to furrow her brow in contention. "Isn't that what we're already doing?" she whispers, her voice is sharp and determined. Her squinted brown eyes study the little room we've found shelter in. "Not only here, but with the whole revolution. We'd be lost without the 'outsiders' who have already helped us."

I bite my tongue. It looks like Cat hasn't been able to shed that irritating conscience of hers quite yet. So be it. Sure, I'd rather have her willingly get on board with my plan, but even if she never does, it's not a huge deal. This is my family we're talking about, my son; I'll drag them onto whatever ship I deem to be the safest, even if it's the last thing my shipmate wants to do.

That's part of being a leader, a captain; it's the way life goes when you're in

charge—sometimes, you just have to do what’s best for everyone, even if someone doesn’t like it.

“They’d be just as lost without us,” I retort, and I truly believe it... to a certain extent.

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We've been mutually benefitting each other, the people of Colombia and I. Right now, I need to leave the fight for the sake of my family, and they need to keep fighting for the sake of theirs. I've already called up my friends in Paris and Dublin and had shipments of weapons delivered into the hands of those who need it, and there's more on the way.

The revolution is being fought with my resources, and we have a chance to win b

ecause of it. No guilt tripping by Catalina is going to make me think any differently, because in the end, I know what I'm doing.

"Whatever," Catalina mumbles, just as Oscar's big eyes flutter open.

"Mama," he smiles, tugging at her long messy hair.

Cat gives him a kiss on the forehead and I let the matter drop for a moment to go over and grab his chubby little hand.

"Good morning, buddy."

"Dada, boo-boo," Oscar demands, reaching out for me to hold him. Cat lets me take my boy and I wrap him up in my arms.

"Looks like I'm still just a butler, huh?" I tease.

"I'll fetch the formula from downstairs," Cat yawns. She's only wearing a long t-shirt, and when she turns to leave, the bottom flutters up just enough to give me a

tempting view of her tight little ass.

I bite my lip with desire, before the door slams shut and fatherhood finds me alone with my son. He nuzzles his head into my chest and I let Cat's body fade from my head.

When was the last time we even fucked? When was the last time I even thought about it?

I've been so pre-occupied with everything that the one thing that initially drew me to Cat has been lost in the background.

Sure, we slept together last night, but we barely touched. All that mattered was Oscar's comfort. I don't regret it, but a man has needs...

It probably doesn't help that she's mad at me. Cat doesn't agree with my approach to dealing with Oscar's safety and I get that, but it's not going to change my mind. I know what's best for us, and it comes from knowledge I've gained over years of experience. Danger may never stop being dangerous, but I'm certainly more used to dealing with it than most, and that includes Cat.

"Dada, boo-boo," Oscar mumbles into my chest.

"It's on its way," I assure him.

Suddenly, the familiar sound of my phone buzzing alive interrupts the silence that surrounds us. For some strange reason, my initial reaction is to ignore it.

That's an odd response... Usually, any news, business or otherwise, has me chomping at the bit, but with Oscar in my arms, everything else suddenly feels like more of a burden than a necessity. Right now, I'm spending time with my son, and the rest of



the world can go to hell while I am.

Still, only one person has this number, and I haven't heard from him in far too long already. The rational side of my mind slowly gains its strength back and forces me to pick up the ringing cell phone from the bedside table.

I keep Oscar in my arms while I answer the call.

“Where the hell are you!?” Those are the first words out of Juan's mouth.

It suddenly hits me that he doesn't know we've left the bunker. Does he know about Lady?

“We're safe,” I assure him. There's more panic in Juan's voice than I can ever remember him having, but I stay calm, even if only for Oscar's sake. “What's happening?”

That seems to confound my old advisor. “What's happening!? Where are you guys!? Is there something happening that I don't know about?”

“Obviously,” I growl, suddenly upset at Juan's ignorance. He should have known about Lady, then maybe we wouldn't have wasted so much time with our attempted ambush.

I can hear Juan sigh on the other end of the line. “Sorry, sorry,” he pauses for a second to gather himself before continuing. “You said you were safe. That's good. It's just that... well, things are just getting more and more hectic by the hour out here. Dante is on a tear. I don't know if Enzo Barella is losing control of him or what, but nothing he's doing seems planned out... and that makes it hard for me to keep up.”

“Where are you now?” I ask.

“At the bunker. No one’s here, not Lady, not Cat or Oscar, definitely not you. It looks like you guys scurried out of here in a hurry, what happened? I was afraid I wasn’t going to be able to get a hold of you...”

He really doesn’t know... “Did you not hear about how the ambush went?”

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“I heard you had to abandon it, but no one could tell me exactly why.”

“They had Lady,” I say. “She was their human shield...”

“Oh, fuck.”

The bedroom door pushes open and Cat returns with a fresh bottle of formula. Oscar reaches for it and I hand him off to his mother. My wandering mind has been completely captured by business; the father in me slowly vanishes for more pressing matters. “How did you not know that, Juan?”

“I already told you,” Juan snaps back, clearly agitated.

Oscar reaches back for me but I gesture for Catalina to feed him. She kisses his cheek and pulls him close as I turn away. “You should probably get away from the bunker,” I warn him. “If they got her to talk...”

“I’ve already left,” Juan assures me. His tone is tight and impatient. I decide I need to calm him down, there’s nothing to be gained from being restless right now.

“How’s your family?” I ask.

A heavy breath fills up the other end of the line. “Still safe, and yours?”

“I’m about to get them to safety,” I growl.

“Angel, you can’t,” Juan immediately begs. “It’s too dangerous.”

“It was too dangerous,” I reply, thinking back to the hair-brained scheme that our ambush was supposed to spark. In hindsight, it seems foolish—even if we were successful, it would have cost us way too many resources and men—but I was clouded by my desire to get Cat and Oscar to safety. Now, though, my mind has cleared, and so has a real path out of here. “I’ve found a possibly unguarded route out of Cali, but it will only be open for a split-second. I’m not about to hesitate.”

Juan knows better than to push back too hard on this matter. Still, he’s not shying away completely. “What does Catalina think?”

“That doesn’t matter,” I growl. I’ve wandered over to the window, but I glance back at Cat to see her struggling to feed Oscar on the bed.

“Of course it does,” Juan responds. I can practically hear him shaking his head. I’m about to receive some of his infamous personal advice. “You may be a prodigy in the underworld, but you have a lot to learn about family, Angel. They’re not dictatorships or cartels, they’re democracies. You listen and you adapt and you work together, or you crumble.”

My eyes don’t leave the bed. Oscar is still reaching for me, calling out my name as Cat tries to corral him into having breakfast instead.

The budding family man in me takes a swing at the rational leader side of my psyche. He connects, and for a moment, I’m freed from everything but my fatherly duties.

“Dada, dada,” Oscar whines. His little hands reach out to me like I’m the last bit of warmth in a cold world. I almost feel bad for Cat—I remember even just last night, when every time Ozzy would roll over to cuddle with her instead of me, it would feel like a small stab to the heart... but Juan isn’t exactly wrong, this kid needs the both of us.

“Come here, buddy,” I sigh. Bending down, I pick up my boy. Cat lets me take him.

“Boo-boo,” Ozzy gurgles. Cat hands the bottle to me, too. I pin the cell phone to my ear with my shoulder and hold my son in one hand while I feed him with the other.

“Sounds like you’re starting to get my point,” Juan interrupts.

“Don’t get a big head,” I growl back.

“So, if you’re leaving soon, does that mean I might not see you again until this is all over?”

That cursed guilt of Catalina’s worms its way through my chest at the thought. Am I really willing to abandon the people I’ve gathered to fight for my cause? What if they lose because I leave them? Am I willing to live with that?

Ozzy burps in my arms and I have my answer.

Yes. Anything to keep him safe.

23

Catalina

I’m shaken awake by a strong pair of hands.

“Cat.” It’s Angel. His voice is low and calm, but there’s an impatience behind it that snaps me awake.

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“What? What is it?” Suddenly, my chest is on fire. My first instinct is to desperately search for Ozzy. The anxiety lessons when I spot him right where I left him, sleeping beside me on the little mattress we share with Angel.

“We have to go.” Angel’s words are like bullets through my gut. The last time he was this insistent on leaving it was because someone had kidnapped Lady and possibly tortured her for information on our whereabouts. What’s happened now? I don’t stop to ask. Angel has my trust, even if I don’t agree with him on everything.

I’m immediately on my feet. Angel has already tossed an outfit for me onto the mattress. He’s completely dressed. My chest constricts again as I see him stuff a gun beneath his belt, but I try to ignore the promise of potential violence and just concentrate on getting ready.

“What do I need to bring?”

Angel points over to an open rucksack on the bedside table. Inside are about half a dozen bottles of formula and some small blankets. “Here, wrap this around Ozzy.”

A soft towel falls across my shoulders and I immediately do as I’m told. Where are we going? Why are we going? Are we ever coming back? I should say goodbye and thank you to Anna, just in case...

These are questions I’ll just have to wait to ask, because, suddenly, the ground rumbles and Angel’s impatient but calm demeanour gets a little more frantic. “We’re leaving, now,” he growls. Ozzy’s in his arms by the time I’ve zipped up the rucksack and put on my outfit. It’s heavy, but if we have to move fast, then it’s better that

Angel has Ozzy. I can always drop the rucksack if I need to.

“What’s happening, Angel?” I finally ask as he opens the bedroom door. I creep down the tight winding staircase behind him, but he doesn’t answer. My mind is racing, and so are my feet, but I’m still barely able to keep up. “Angel!?”

“Shh!” he insists, as we hit the bottom floor. “This way.”

The ground rumbles again and fear grips my chest hard enough to shut me up.

“Here,” Angel grumbles, handing me Oscar when we’ve reached the front door. Somehow, the little boy is still asleep. I guess that’s what growing up through a revolution will get you: the ability to sleep through just about anything.

The second that Angel cracks open the front door, a hurricane-like

gust blows inside. Even for Angel, it’s a struggle to get it shut again.

“Is there a typhoon coming or something?” I ask, looking around at the shanty home we’ve burrowed ourselves into. Wilmar’s place may be charming, but there’s no way it would be able to hold up against a fucking typhoon.

“Maybe,” Angel mutters, seemingly unconcerned about the weather. Instead, he creeps over to the nearest window and peaks behind the blinds. “Fuck,” he growls.

“What?”

He still doesn’t feel like sharing.

“This way.” I follow him, but look back towards the front door as I do. The fear of the unknown is almost as bad as the rumbling ground. I know why the ground is

rumbling—there's another battle being fought somewhere not too far off—but if we're in such a hurry to leave, why can't we go out the front?

“What's outside, Angel?”

He doesn't respond right away. Instead, he checks through the blinds of the back-kitchen window. “Nothing,” he finally says.

“I mean out by the front!”

“Shh!” he growls again, but I don't understand why. Can we not trust Wilmar anymore?

“What's happening, Angel!?” I demand, putting my foot down.

For a split-second, his features glaze over with a familiar frustrated fury. His thick eyebrows furl and a fire in his speckled green eyes tells me to shut up and listen, but his lips won't utter those words. Slowly, he calms down again. His gaze seems to fall on Oscar and his anger melts away.

I decide that he's calmed enough to test my luck again. “Why can't we go out the front?” I repeat.

“There were just too many people out there,” he responds, matter-of-factly.

Really? At this hour? Wait... what time is it? I didn't get a chance to check before we left.

“Too many people for what?” I ask.

Angel doesn't answer that question right away either. Instead, he nods me forward



and wraps his big burly hand around the kitchen doorknob.

The wind that greets us when Angel pushes open the back door isn't nearly as bad as it was in the front, but it's still enough to nearly blind me as I wrap Oscar up tight and follow Angel outside.

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My head acts as a battering ram against the humid gusts. No sunlight falls on my shoulders as I charge out into a grey afternoon.

“This way,” Angel growls through the wind. I try to follow his voice, but I’m essentially walking blind. The further I stumble from the backdoor, the more intense the mighty drafts become; they blow so hard that they threaten to draw tears from my shut eyelids...

Suddenly, though, the wind stops. I can still hear the howling but something blocks it from getting to me. Something big. I blink back into focus and see Angel towering over me.

God, sometimes I forget just how massive he is. There’s a look of concern drawn on his ruggedly handsome face. His sharp jaw clenches and his fiery eyes suck in the wind.

“The wind, it’s too strong...” I mumble. Guilt creeps through my gut at the thought that I’m slowing us down. Something is coming for us, something bad, otherwise, why would Angel be rushing us from the only slice of safety we have left?

“Hold Ozzy tight,” he growls. Suddenly, I’m off my feet. Angel has swept me up like a bride. I huddle over Oscar and brave the wind once more, but this time the heat of Angel’s thumping chest helps calm my frazzled nerves.

... Then, I’m back on my feet again and out of Angel’s arms. The wind is still just as loud as ever, but something other than my burly protector is guarding us from it. I manage to blink away the tears and focus through the blurriness. A steady brick wall

stands before us, blocking off the gale-force gusts.

“What’s happening, Angel?” I plead. There’s no malice in me, I just want to know what we’re facing. Is it Dante, is it mother nature, is it a bit of both?

The giant seems to finally take some pity on me, or maybe it’s just my son that cools his jets. His green-laced eyes wrap Ozzy up in their gaze as he steps forward and comforts us with the heat of his heaving body. Even he’s out of breath. I look over my shoulder. I can’t see Wilmar’s house anymore. The one-story abodes that line this new block are unfamiliar to me. How far have we gone already?

“I’m getting us out of here.” Angel grumbles through the howling wind.

“But why?” I implore. What’s coming for us?

“Because I can.”

My heart drops as it all suddenly becomes clear.

We’re not running away from anything—at least nothing immanent—we’re speeding towards something. An opening. This is Angel trying to rip us away from the revolution he started and bring us to safety.

I thought I told him I wasn’t okay with that!?

“What the fuck, Angel!?” I shout, my voice nearly getting lost in the hurricane.

He hears me loud and clear, though, and I know that he’s been purposely keeping details from me for this very reason. Angel maybe stubborn, but he’s no fool; he remembers the guilt I spilled on him about leaving—he just doesn’t care.

Bastard.

My fear and anxiety whirl around in the wind before mixing into a deadly potion of anger and inner conflict behind my pounding chest.

“We’re leaving,” Angel booms. “And that’s that!”

“Like hell we are!” I shout back, covering Ozzy’s ears with my trembling palms. Somehow, he’s still asleep. Thank god.

Angel steps forward and I can’t help but shrink away. Even though I know he only wants what’s best for us, there’s still something so intimidating about the dark hulking figure when someone is refusing to obey his orders. “I’m not taking a vote,” he growls, reaching for my arm.

I lurch away.

The truth is, I still hadn’t made up my mind about whether or not we should leave. Oscar’s safety is more important to me than anything... but how could we raise a baby boy in a world we destroyed just to make him safe? What kind of selfish example does that set? People are fighting and dying for us, and we’re just going to abandon them? Anna? Lady? Everyone?

“I’m not leaving! We’re not leaving!” I yell, tightening my grip around Oscar. He kicks in my arms, but when I look down, the baby boy’s eyes are still closed.

When I look back at Angel, a stone drops in my gut.

Something has changed in his eyes. The fury is back, but this time, there’s nothing else to hold it back. A single flash of fear cuts through my body. It stuns me for a terrifying moment. Slowly, though, I’m able to start fighting it back.

Angel's not who I should be scared of, and I'm not who he should be mad at.

"We need to stay, we need to fight," I tell him.

"We?" His voice is so deep that I can't distinguish it from the roars in the distance.

"You haven't been doing any fighting, and I'm going to keep it that way."

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“Excuse me!?” The accusation is so insulting that I nearly implode. “I haven’t been fighting? Are you kidding me!? All I’ve been doing is fighting! Sure, I haven’t been killing people like you have—although, I’m pretty sure I’ve done that, too—but don’t ever tell me I haven’t been fighting!” The levy that’s been holding back all of my emotions for Oscar’s sake shatters against our colliding fury. “For the past two years, I’ve been fighting every single day. I’ve been fighting for my life, for my son—hell, even for you! See these marks on my arms?” I turn so that he can see the dark spots left behind from the glass and the vines that tried to keep me from scrambling back into my cage. “I got these from breaking into my prison. Why could I do that, huh? Why didn’t you!? I’ve missed out on so much of my baby boy’s life because you, the big bad cartel king of Cali, couldn’t do in two years what a lone orphan girl managed to do in a single night!”

I have more to say, but before I can get to it, a hand is around my throat. The anger in me evaporates in the shockwave of surprise that follows from Angel’s massive grip. His fingers pin me against the brick wall that blocks us from

the wind.

Oscar squirms in my arms.

“You’re a monster,” I sneer.

“I’m your monster,” he growls back. “And you should be fucking thankful for it.”

With that, his hand eases around my neck and I lunge away. New tears well up in my eyes. My heart is pounding so hard that it must wake Oscar up, because the next thing

I know, he's wailing in my arms.

"Look what you've done!" I accuse.

Angel doesn't move. His fists are clenched like battering rams as he stands steaming before me.

"Shh, baby," I plead to Oscar. He cries and cries and no matter how much I rock and bob, he won't stop. How could Angel be so callous?

How could he not be?

He's never made a secret of who he is.

A monster.

But what hope do I have if he's not even my monster?

24

Angel

Time is running out.

Our opening to safety is closing as fast as my hand did around Catalina's throat.

Fuck.

A civil war breaks out behind my chest. Why the hell did I do that!? I just put everything I care about at risk—Cat, Oscar; this is all for them, so why the fuck would I threaten it all like that?

Maybe I am just a monster... An irredeemable fucking monster.

Powerful gusts batter the brick wall protecting us from the elements... and I just want to punch through it. Everything is falling apart... again, and I can't quite seem to get anything completely under my control. What's happening to me?

Maybe Dante was right when he said that things had always come too easily for me. It never felt that way before; I worked hard and smart and I saw the rewards, but now it feels like no matter what I do, it isn't enough. What are my priorities?

It seems obvious. Cat. Oscar.

But what about my empire? What about Cali and Colombia and the revolution?

My once frozen heart beats with a wild pulse, free of its frigid confines. For maybe the first time in my adult life, I'm unguarded and vulnerable, and my first reaction to that was to lash out on those I'm trying to protect.

"Why won't you let me save you," I growl under my breath.

Catalina doesn't seem to hear me. She's too busy trying to console a crying baby. I did that to Oscar, I made him cry.

Fucking hell.

The thought blinds me with rage. My clenched fist finds the brick wall, punching a hole right through it. The wind that tunnels through the new hole crashes against my chest. It's like being splashed by a bucket of cold water, and, for a moment, it's enough to temporarily cool my jets.



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But then the ground rumbles from a battle that should be giving us an opening to escape through and the fire returns.

Why does Catalina have to be so fucking stubborn!?

“We need to go back to Wilmar’s,” I hear her mumble through the wind. Her head darts on a swivel as she tries to find a route back to safety. If only she knew how unsafe we really are...

“It’s too late to turn back,” I say, stepping towards her. She flinches backwards, turning her shoulder to me as if to protect Oscar from my fury.

Guilt battles anger as my conscience threatens to tear itself apart.

“How do we get back to Wilmar’s!?” Catalina demands, the fire in her eyes directed entirely on me.

A distant blast shakes the ground and I know that our opening is dwindling. If I don’t get these two out of here now, then all of this will have been for nothing.

I step forward again, but Cat is so filled with hate towards me that she’d rather step out from behind the protective brick wall and brave the storm than let me fucking explain to her what’s happening.

“Enough!” I boom.

That gets her to freeze. The swirling wind lifts up her dark hair and wipes the tears

from her cheeks. It doesn't stop Oscar from crying, though. My exposed heart threatens to burn into ashes. "You hear those explosions?" I growl, pointing to the west. Just as I do, another blast shakes the ground. "Those are for you. People are dying to help you escape, and you're wasting the opportunity they've provided. Why!?"

Cat's guilt furrows her brow. Her eyes follow my outstretched arm before quickly darting back down to Oscar. I can practically hear the internal struggle that's threatening to tear her apart. Suddenly, I just want to hold her and tell her everything will be alright.

We shouldn't be fighting each other.

The longer she takes to respond, though, the less I want anything to do with her. She's putting our son at risk...

Oscar's continued cries stab me in the chest like ice picks. I need to end this. "Cat..."

"Catalina!" Someone else calls her name before I can get any closer.

"It's Catalina!" another voice shouts. I don't recognize either of them.

The wind greets me with a tempered blow as I lunge out from behind the brick wall and instinctively put myself between Cat and those who call her name.

"... And Angel! Oh, my lord!"

The faces of the ragtag group filing in through a nearby alleyway aren't familiar, but it's instantly obvious who they are.

Revolutionaries. My revolutionaries.

There are no weapons in their hands, but they seem bruised and battered from some past battle. What are they doing here?

Probably slinking home to rest...

“Sir, sir, it’s an honor to finally meet you!” A man rushes up to me. My initial reaction is to clench my fists and step forward.

Doesn’t he know that he’s interrupting a family matter?

... Of course not.

“I can’t believe you’re actually in the slums!” Another man cries, rushing up to my side. “A true man of the people!”

The wind seems to ease temporarily as I shake the hands of the two men who have obviously been fighting for my cause. I’ve given speeches to those like them countless times before, but I purposely never get too close. Cat has already injected me with enough guilt; the last thing I need is to get attached to anyone else—especially anyone who is putting their life on the line to follow my vision.

Back when I ran my cartel, I had hundreds of loyal soldiers to do my bidding, but barely even a handful of men who I would ever have considered sharing a drink with. That’s just how life is when you’re a leader. These people aren’t your friends, they’re your followers.

... Maybe that’s why you failed.

“Catalina, you are as—” the man who currently shakes my hand tries to approach the mother of my child, but I tighten my grip around his palm, pulling him back, and his words catch in his throat.

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There are too many people rushing at us to stop them all, though. They approach like worshippers, respectful but rabid.

“Who is that crying!?” I hear someone ask, and I’m immediately on the offensive.

“A child!”

“Who’s baby is that?”

“Are those green eyes I see?”

A small group of women are at Cat’s side before I can stop them.

Fucking hell. No one else can know about Oscar.

“Enough!” I command, hoping that my orders work better on these people than they have on Catalina.

Sure enough, everybody freezes. Curious eyes draw away from Oscar and land on me instead.

“Where are you coming from?” I ask, subtly trying to gesture with my eyes for Cat to leave. She’s not looking at me, though. Oscar’s cries are finally starting to fade and she’s desperately trying to sooth him down the rest of the way.

“We were tasked with putting down land mines over by the quarry,” a man responds.

I'm familiar with that mission. Juan and Jesus and I have been sending out groups to strategically place explosives around important routes and landmarks, so that, if we ever need to, we can funnel our enemies down whatever path works best for us.

"And, were you successful?" I ask, slowly backing up so that I can nudge Cat in the right direction.

"Yes, sir!" A younger man proudly announces. "If those bastards try anything with our water supply, we'll blow them right to hell!"

A small cheer washes over the little crowd.

Finally, I reach Cat's side... but it's too late.

"He's got the same green eyes as his father," one of the women sings.

"Oh, no... I mean... uh," Cat stumbles over her words as it becomes clear to her what's at risk. Oscar has calmed down, and his big curious eyes are trying to make sense of all these new people.

"Don't worry," another woman warmly assures Cat. "He's got your nose!"

"What's his name?" Someone asks.

"It's not safe out here for such a child," another adds.

I take that as our way out. "You're right," I agree, wrapping my arm around Cat's shoulder. She's trembling. "We need to go. Thank you for your sacrifice, everyone!" I bellow. "We fight for you!"

"I'm fighting for you!" Someone shouts.

“You and your family!” another adds.

A burly middle-aged man with a fresh scar across his weathered face raises his fist.  
“To Angel. To Catalina. To their child. And to a new and free Colombia!”

The crowd roars and I force myself to raise my fist with them. It’s the last thing I want to do right now. These people may be on my side, but there’s no way they’re keeping their mouths shut about this. News of where they saw Cat and I will spread like wildfire... and so will news of our child.

“That was a fucking disaster,” I grumble, slamming the bedroom door shut behind us.

Cat sits down on the bed with Oscar as I pace back and forth by the window. We were far enough away from Wilmar’s when we were spotted that no

one should know where we’re staying, but we were still close enough to put this whole area in potential danger.

What the fuck are we supposed to do now? Where else is there to go?

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A little burp escapes from my wriggling son and my chest pounds with shame. What kind of father am I? My son is homeless; he has nothing, and it's all my fucking fault.

The last thing I want to do is look at my failure, but Oscar calls for me and a primal instinct pulls me back towards the bed.

I stop in my tracks, though, when I see Cat absent-mindedly rubbing her throat. Pangs of guilt rip through my gut; it only serves to make me angrier at myself. I'm losing control, of my army, of my family, of myself.

"Dada! Dada!" Oscar reaches out for me. Cat's eyes drift off, lost in some distant thought. It's almost like I'm alone again.

"Dada!" Well, not completely alone.

My anger hardly falters, even as I pick my son up from his mother's limp arms. "They know..." she whispers as Oscar's little fingers wander over my face, pulling at my nose and then tugging at my ear.

"We should have kept going," I grumble. "We would have missed them if we kept going." I know accusing Catalina of sabotaging us is not the smart thing to do right now, but it seems like I can't stop myself from making dumb decisions anymore.

Her eyes drift back to the here and now and I'm met with an icy glare. "We should have never left in the first place.... We're supposed to be partners in this," she says, gesturing towards the little monkey crawling over my shoulders. "I'm not your slave."

“You’re my responsibility,” I growl, tugging down gently on Oscar’s ankle as he rolls a little too far over my shoulder. The little boy giggles as he slides back down my chest and into my arms, but he’s not satisfied yet. There’s still more climbing to do. I let him; his innocent exploring is the only thing keeping me from exploding right now.

Cat looks like she’s about to explode. Instead, though, she just bites down on her tongue and takes a deep breath. “What do we do now?”

The truth is that I don’t know, but I don’t dare tell her that. Our underground bunker was the only true safe haven in this city. Sure, Wilmar’s place is the next best thing, but, as was just made evident, it’s far from secure—especially if we decide to have shouting matches in the street...

“We stay here,” I say, hiding the uncertainty from my tone.

“But they know we’re here, and they know about Oscar...”

“They don’t know we’re at Wilmar’s,” I interrupt, ignoring the second, more worrying, part of her statement. People will know we have a son now. Eventually, word will get back to Dante...

Fucking hell.

If Cat hadn’t resisted, we might have already been clear of this hellhole by now. We’d be safe, and my biggest worry would be whether or not to return and help finish off Dante once and for all.

“Do you think they’ll come for us?” Cat asks, her voice starting to tremble. “... Do you think he will come for us?” The fear she holds for my brother is well founded, but it pisses me off, nonetheless.



“He can try,” I growl.

“No, he can’t!” Cat cries, suddenly standing up. “If he comes for us, then we’re screwed. Do you think he’ll let us live anymore? You haven’t seen him in two years. He regrets letting you live. The satisfaction of his cruelty has worn off. I was only a hostage to him; only a pawn to help keep you away and him alive, but now that you’ve stolen me back there’s nothing keeping him from dropping a bomb on this entire block and wiping us out for good!”

Oscar wraps his tiny arms around my neck and hangs on like a mountain climber. Suddenly, all I want to do is play with him.

... Maybe, if Cat had followed my orders, we’d already be roughhousing in the back of some car on the way to true safety...

“Calm down,” I order, gesturing towards our playful little boy. It stings my heart to think that he’s already gotten used to us fighting—or maybe it’s just because this fight isn’t quite as bad as the one that woke him up outside.

“How can I calm down!? Oscar is at risk...”

“You’re the one who wanted to stay.”

That might have been the wrong thing to say. “Don’t put this on me!” Cat yells, crossing her arms and plunging back down onto the rickety mattress. The bedsprings creak under her weight and my anger wanes just a little bit.

There’s no point in blaming anyone but myself for this. Cat is right, our relationship shouldn’t be a battle of power. If we’re going to survive, we need to be partners.

In my arms, Oscar reaches for his sulking mother. I sigh and lead him over to the bed,

sitting on the far side of the small mattress to give Cat some space.

She turns her back and Oscar crawls out of my arms. I can feel Catalina relax ever so slightly when Ozzy starts crawling up her back.

“Hey, baby boy,” she sighs, leaning back on the mattress so that the clumsy infant can climb over her.

“Mama,” he gurgles, before his big green eyes wander over to me. “Dada.”

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The heavy pit in my chest gets a little smaller, but a whole lot deeper.

What the hell am I going to do?

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Catalina

Did I fall asleep?

Oscar breathes softly on my chest as I try to blink through the darkness of our little bedroom.

“Angel?” The fire from our fight is still there, but at least it’s only smoldering now. I think we both had the same realization at the exact same time; if Ozzy’s going to stay safe, then it’s going to have to be a team effort.

“I’m right here,” he grumbles, playing with his phone by the shut window.

I sit up in bed, careful not to wake Oscar. “What are we going to do?” I ask, still a little drowsy.

“For now, all we can do is wait,” he sighs. “I finally got through to Juan while you napped, but he couldn’t talk. Once he gets back to us, we’ll know where to go next. Until then, we just need to rest.”

Angel looks tired. A stubborn determination laces his features, but it can’t hide his

exhaustion. Fear nibbles at my pounding heart. Did I make the wrong choice earlier? Would we already be safe if I hadn't resisted?

I don't dare ask. If the answer is yes, and something ends up happening, I don't know how I could live with myself...

Suddenly, the silence of the room is broken by a harsh buzz.

Angel immediately answers his ringing cell phone. "What is it!?" He almost doesn't get the words out, because I can already hear Juan shouting from the other end of the line.

"You need to get out of there now!"

My stomach drops just as the first bomb does.

Wilmar's house shakes and I'm thrown across the bed. Somehow, I manage to grab hold of Oscar before my back smacks against the nearest wall. For a second, the wind is knocked out of me. Everything is quiet again. Then, through the drawn drapes of our bedroom window, I see the orange glow of fire... and then I hear Oscar start to cry.

"It's okay, baby," I try to sooth him as Angel jumps to his feet. The blast was even strong enough to knock him on his ass.

Claws of pure dread slash across my pounding heart. How close was that explosion?

Another burst somewhere nearby shakes the walls. I curl around Oscar and Angel stumbles over to the bedroom closet. "We need to get on the roof!" he yells, throwing clothes from their hangers as he searches for the secret door.

A gust of wind tunnels into our bedroom and I know he's found it. I'm immediately on my feet, Oscar braced against my chest, as I make a run for the quickest way out of here.

Angel holds the little half-door open for me as I crouch down and carry Oscar out into the fiery night. A strong humid wind greets us, as does shouts and wails and another explosion.

Unsettled dust rises from the short cement staircase that leads to the roof as I scurry up it. Angel follows close behind. The smell of fire is in the air.

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When I stumble onto Wilmar's roof, it becomes clear why.

The slums are ablaze.

Great flames flicker up to the moonless sky as the orange glow of the destruction reflects off the bottom of the stormy clouds above.

A desperate sadness escapes my lips and my knees threaten to buckle... but then I hear Oscar's cries and I force myself to push forward.

"Fuck," Angel grumbles as he comes up from behind me.

For an awful moment, we just stand there and stare.

“Is this my fault?” I whisper.

Angel doesn’t answer. Instead, his strong hand finds my shoulder and he pushes me in the right direction. “This way,” he says, and I follow him.

Memories of the destruction I found back in my old home town all those years ago flash behind my eyelids as I desperately try to keep up with Angel. He’s moving so fast, and I feel so heavy. Everywhere I go, people die, communities burn, families are torn apart...

Suddenly, Angel’s at my side again. “Give him to me,” he demands, and even though I don’t want to let go, I know it’s for the best. He grabs Oscar from my arms, but instead of running off, he grabs my hand and looks me in the eyes. “Don’t pay attention to anything else,” he says, low and forceful. “Just watch me.”

His big hands tighten around my little fingers and I can feel his pulse through his burning skin. My eyes follow his rippling back muscles and he pulls me forward. Oscar cries in his arms, and I just want to pull us all to a stop and sooth my distressed little boy... but I know that it could mean the death of us.

Keep fighting, Catalina.

“Jump!” Angel booms, and for some reason, there’s no hesitation in me. My feet leave the ground, but the effort sends my gaze downwards.

A primal fear grips my nerves as I see nothing below me but air. We’re three stories high, and we just jumped across the space between buildings.

Another explosion rocks the world and the resulting fireball lights up the night. Glass shatters and women scream. Through the chaos, I swear I hear someone yell, “Up there!” but it could just be my twisted imagination.

Ahead, Angel slows down and we come up to a set of cement stairs that lead down to the roof of a one-story home. For a second, our hands fall apart and I’m left to scramble behind my family in a desperate plea to keep up.

The second my feet hit the second roof, though, Angel’s hard hand is back around mine and we’re off again.

We’re close enough to the ground now that I can hear men barking orders, and even the pitter patter of bullets as they ricochet off everything in sight. My pounding heart bleeds for my baby boy. He doesn’t deserve this, to be surrounded by constant violence. One errant bullet could be the end of everything...

I shake away the bad thoughts and instead concentrate on Angel’s muscular back. His shoulder blades rise and fall without a single wasted movement, and I can see him flex around Oscar every time an explosion erupts nearby.

Eventually, the roofs run thin and we’re forced to hop on a cement partition. There isn’t any room to make a mistake up here, and my limbs turn to jell-o as we race across the precarious perch.

The thought suddenly hits me that we might not actually have anywhere to run. Angel already told me that Wilmar’s place was hardly safe, and also that it was the last safe place in the city for us.

So, where the hell are we going?

The cement partition gradually descends to the ground and Angel and I find ourselves

running right through the action as we hit the streets again. “Where are we going!?” I shout.

Angel skids to a stop just before the next corner. Through the sound of my pounding heart, I can hear orders being shouted just ahead... and a loud eruption of gunshots follow right behind. Angel is immediately on top of me, using his muscular body like a human shield to protect Oscar and I from danger.

I can help but cry out in fear. This is all too much. Just above us, I swear I can hear the sound of bullets ripping through the bricks...

“Who’s there!?” the demand comes from just up ahead. Angel immediately whips around, reaching for the gun tucked behind his belt. It’s hard to tell if he even sees who’s there before he starts firing. Oscar is left on the ground between us and I immediately lunge forward to shield him from the violence. He cries beneath my heaving body as I cover his ears with the palm of my hands. The roar of Angel’s gunshots nearly ruptures my ear drums, but there’s no way I’m taking my hands off of Oscar.

“Run!” Angel suddenly growls. For an eternal moment, I’m too stunned to move. “RUN!” he repeats as loud as thunder. A nearby explosion matches the volume of his roar and I swear my eardrums finally burst. Everything goes silent, but I’m finally able to start moving again. I scramble back down the alley with Oscar tucked tight in my arms, away from Angel and whoever he’s shooting at.

Dust upends around my feet as bullets nip at our heels. Through the eerie silence, I swear I hear someone shout, “It’s them!”

My heart catches in my throat, but I’m too terrified to think about anything besides pushing forward. A primal instinct clutches my arms around Oscar, and I’m somehow able to keep my feet moving.



Suddenly, a hulking figure approaching from our rear. “Cat! Cat!” the voice is muffled and distant, but then Angel’s big hand falls around my shoulder and sound rushes back into my damaged ears. “Are you alright?” he asks.

I nod, hardly stopping to think. Oscar still cries in my arms.

Both Angel and I immediately search the infant for signs of damage, but he seems clean, if not scared shitless.

What are we doing to this poor boy?

What am I doing to him?

We could have been free of all of this by now. What was I thinking?

Angel shakes me out of my shocked daze and a grimace crosses his face. My eyes immediately fall onto his blood-stained shoulder. “Angel!” I yelp. “Are you—”

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“I’m fine,” he growls, before I can finish. “We need to get you two out of here!”

“There they are!”

The pursuing shouts come from behind us. Angel whips around again and immediately starts firing. This time, I don’t wait for his orders. I know what to do.

Run.

Luckily, there’s a tight corner up ahead. I lunge for the safety it provides, but when I turn onto the new street, I’m greeted by a horrific sight.

A new wall of enemy soldiers waits for me.

My escape route is entirely blocked off. I don’t have time to think, I just turn around and head back the way I came.

Before I can turn the corner again, though, I’m stopped in my tracks by a flurry of bullets. They block off the only other way out. Blood drains from my heart as I desperately search for another escape route, but there’s nothing. No secret alley, no hidden door, no fire escape ladder. I’m trapped.

“Grab her!” Someone orders from behind me.

No. No. No.

I whip around like a cornered animal, ready to tear the skin of anyone who dares test

me, but then Oscar wails in my arms and all the fight flees from my soul. He can't get hurt.

My mind threatens to shatter as a wall of armored men approach me and my baby with their guns drawn. My only hope is to turn back around to where I left Angel and hope he's still there to fight for us. The bullets seem to have stopped...

The second I turn back around, though, an explosion rips through the alleyway.

"No!" I scream as everything on the other side of the wall is immediately evaporated.  
"Angel!"

My knees buckle and an anguished wail escapes my failing lungs. Dust billows up around me and I shout into the flames... then, a cold, gloved-hand grasps me around the shoulder.

I spin around and bite at it, but I don't connect. Oscar squirms in my arms and the whole world seems like it's about to implode.

The hand retreats, but it's instantly replaced by the barrel of a gun.

My knees scrape against the hard pavement as I try to scramble away, but scorching flames nip at my back, and soon enough, four more soldiers surround me.

"Grab the baby!" one of them orders, and they all step forward.

There's no feeling in my legs, but, somehow, I'm able to jump up. A new gun is immediately pointed at my face.

Whatever, I don't care. I'll die protecting my son if I have to...

But then, one of the soldiers points his gun directly at Oscar, and the wind is immediately vanquished from my sails.

“No, please...” before I can beg any more, two pairs of frigid hands have wrapped around my elbows and pulled down. Another pair of foreign hands grab Oscar around the waist. I’m helpless to do anything as my baby is ripped from me. “No! Please!” I wail, but a foot connects with the back of my leg and I’m dropped to my knees again.

A shockwave of pain erupts up from the hard ground, but it’s nothing compared to the anguish in my heart. The soldier who has Oscar is immediately surrounded by four more heavily armed men. He backs away as they step forward, guns pointed directly at me.

My heart ruptures as I scream after my baby boy, completely helpless...

... Then, all of a sudden, one of the soldier’s heads explodes. He drops to the ground in an eruption of blood, and every gun that was pointed at me immediately pulls away.

Before they can find their culprit, another head explodes, and then another. For a moment, all I can do is watch, but then my senses return with a heaving desperation.

Oscar.

I scramble over the nearest corpse as the remaining soldiers run for cover. Up ahead, I see the man who took Oscar getting into the back of an armoured truck.

“Oscar!” I shout, reaching out for my baby boy.

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But it's too late, the door slams shut. A body falls beside me, but I ignore it; somehow, I'm able to keep pushing forward—I'm just not fast enough.

The car with my baby boy in it bursts forward and quickly disappears into the smoky night.

“No!!!” Agony rips out my heart and throws it into the fire. Still, I can't stop crawling forward. My mind shatters as I force myself

to hold out hope. I'll catch up to the car... I have to...

My vision is suddenly blinded by the barrel of another gun. “Crazy bitch,” some faceless soldier curses. They're the last words he ever says. Before he can pull the trigger on me, someone else pulls one on him. His head explodes like a bloody pinata and I'm covered in his gore.

We both collapse beside each other. I may have been spared from instant death, but I feel utterly lifeless. My legs don't work and my mind is too broken to make them to move.

My baby boy is gone. They took my son...

Suddenly, a new pair of hands find my shoulders. I don't fight them. I can't. What's the point?

My head falls to my chest and I start to sob. Misery becomes me.

The new pair of hands somehow seem to sink with my soul... They aren't even cold. No. Instead, they're hot. Searing fucking hot. I let them burn me to the ground.

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Angel

Oscar is gone.

"Cat!" I struggle to break her out of her misery. There's no time to waste, but her shoulders are limp under my grip, and I can't quite seem to pull her up.

A primal agony has its claws dug deep into my soul. I try to shake them away, but it hurts too much.

I let Dante's men take my son...

For the first time in my life, the fight is drained from my fire. All that's left behind is my exposed heart. It beats pitifully...

And then, Cat looks up at me.

"Angel?" Her voice is so soft and broken, and I can tell that we're both feeling the exact same thing. Her anguish wafts up to me like smoke.

We failed.

Dark bile weeds its way through my nerves. I stand over top of her, trying to fight back the encroaching darkness.

"... They took Oscar..." Those words are too heavy for Catalina to bear, and her

watery eyes fall back to the ground. She hangs her head in shame, and the hopelessness that weighs down my soul sinks with her.

For a moment, we don't move. I stand over top of Cat and she crumples deeper into herself. Blood runs through the streets and a fire blazes behind us. I'm almost ready to give in. My grip eases on Catalina's shoulder...

And then, I feel a warm hand fall over top of my mine.

When I look down, I see Cat's limp finger slide down the back of my hand.

... She uses the last bits of her strength to comfort me...

And it works.

The heavy hopelessness that weighs down my soul cracks and splinters, shaking under the revitalized fury that's begging to smash through it.

My grip tightens back up around Cat's shoulder and my heart explodes in a fireball of pure rage.

They took our son.

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I'm going to kill every last single fucking person in this stinking city...

I'm immediately given an opportunity to start my rampage. Up ahead, a dark platoon scurries out from under the cover of the nearest corner.

"Hey, hands up!" one of the shadows orders.

Instead, I lunge in front of Cat, gun drawn. My knee barely hits the ground before I start firing.

"Fuck!" the group breaks and scrambles back behind the nearest wall as my bullets dig into the bricks.

"These motherfuckers..." I reload my gun and don't hesitate to push forward. There's no more hiding. I'm sick of crawling through the shadows and hiding in the darkness. I'm going to make sure this city never puts out the fire I started, and I'm going to make sure they know it was me who started it.

A head peaks around the corner up ahead and I fire a shot straight at it. My bullet narrowly misses. Bricks erupt as I volley more firepower towards my attackers. Anger and frustration threaten to boil me alive from the inside out; the only way I'm going to survive is if I release it all. But I'm running out of bullets. My only chance is to ambush the unlucky fuckers who just stumbled upon me.

"Angel!" Cat suddenly cries from behind me. "On the roof!" My attention immediately whips up to a dark figure above me. His gun is drawn and pointed my way... but he doesn't fire.



“Angel Montoya!?” The exclamation almost sounds friendly.

Behind the wall ahead, a slew of voices bicker over my name. “What!? Is that Angel!?”

“We found him!”

“Stand down!”

Before I can respond, a gun is thrown out onto the street before me and two unarmed hands pop out from behind the wall ahead. “We’re friends! Don’t shoot!”

I keep my gun primed and ready, but lower it just enough to give the shadows the confidence they need to come out into the open.

They don’t look like Dante’s men...

“Sir,” the first one salutes, bringing a straightened hand up to his forehead in a show of his respect. His buddies come up behind him and follow his lead.

“It’s an honor to meet you, sir!”

“Oh shit, is that Catalina!?”

I whip back around to my fallen bride. She’s leaning against the alley wall for support, trying to pull the gun out of the dead hands of one of Dante’s fallen soldiers.

“Cat!” I call to her, running back to help. When she’s in my arms, I look back over to the revolutionaries. “Take their weapons!” I order, gesturing over to the dead men.

“Did you kill all these guys yourself?”

“Wow!”

“These guys had no shot...”

I ignore the praise and grab a few new high-powered weapons for myself. Flames from the explosion that ripped through the alley behind us still flicker hot enough to melt steel.

“Do any of you have a vehicle? A car or a bike, anything.” I need to get moving. There’s no doubt in my mind that those soldiers are taking Oscar to Dante, and if they get to him before I can, then it’s all over. There’s no hope for us if we can’t go after my little brother, and there’s no way we can go after him if he starts using my son as a human shield.

“We don’t, boss, but I know Jesus and his crew have a few bikes they’ve been using...”

Jesus. “Where is he?”

“We’re not sure, sir. He sent us over here about an hour ago to try and clear out the army, but it looks like you already took care of that for us.”

“Why did he send you here?” I ask, already knowing the answer. “Why did it take you an hour!?”

“I think he heard that you were in the area. He wanted us to help give you a path out. But every street from here to midtown is filled with enemy combatants, and their firepower is far superior to ours. It took some time to sabotage and ambush our way to you.”

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The guts on these kids. If I wasn't so consumed by rage, I might feel a sliver of pride. Look what you've inspired in these people, Angel. They're ready to bring down armies and governments for you.

"Do you have a radio?" I ask, pulling Cat onto her feet. I wrap her arm around my shoulder and carry her sad dead weight.

"No, sir. Sorry. There weren't enough to go around."

Fuck. "We need to find a car, quick."

"They took Oscar..." Cat mutters under her breath. I swallow my shame and my dread and focus instead on my rage. She may be falling apart right now, but I can't. For our son's sake, I need to stay focused and alert.

"They have your son!?" None of these new men look familiar, and I doubt any of them were there earlier today when Cat, Oscar and I were discovered by the crowd near Wilmar's, but they already know about our son. It's no surprise that Dante does, too.

I fucking knew that would happen, but not even I knew it would all spread so fast. A new flare of rage flickers from my fireball at the thought of who's responsible for that. We could have been long gone by now...

But this is no time to point fingers, and Cat has already suffered enough. I need to get her somewhere safe and I need to go after Oscar.

“Find me a car, now!” I order the man who appears to be the leader of this roaming pack of revolutionaries. He nods and gestures for two of his men

to come with him. “The rest of you stay here,” I continue. “You are to protect Catalina with your lives. Understand?”

None of them hesitate to agree.

I check the guns I’ve just picked up to make sure they’re loaded, then I carry Cat to the edge of the alley, surrounded by our new security detail.

“Did you see any cars on your way here?” I ask the group.

“There were some,” a young man answers.

“But most were already firebombed and useless,” another adds.

“Fuck,” I growl.

Suddenly, bright headlights screech around a nearby corner, blinding me. Cat tenses in my arms as I whip her back around the alley wall for protection.

“It’s us!” a familiar voice calls from the window of a beat-up old Pinto as it pulls to a stop in front of us.

The three men who went looking for the car file out. “I guess no one thought this hunk of junk was worth setting fire to,” one of them laughs, smacking the pockmarked hood with a fist.

The engine sounds worn out and sickly, like it’s on its last legs, but I don’t have any other options. Oscar needs me.

Suddenly, Cat feels very heavy on my arm. What do I do with her? Do I bring her with me, or is it safer to leave her behind with these men?

I'm torn, but Cat seems to sense my hesitation. It's enough to snap her out of her anguished daze, if even only for a second.

"Go," she pleads. "I'll only slow you down."

"We won't let anything happen to her, boss!" one of my men shouts.

"We'll get her somewhere safe; I swear it!" support echoes through the humid air. Despite all of the chaos that surrounds us, the violent winds seemed to have calmed.

My decision becomes an easy one.

"Take this," I say, throwing my cell phone at the nearest soldier. I have the number memorized. "I'll call you when I'm done. Don't let anything happen to her!"

Cat's weight transfers to new shoulders and I'm freed from her heavy sorrow. I hardly feel any lighter. Anxious dread undercuts my intense fury; I desperately try to smother it.

Stay focused, Angel.

Cat looks at me like a lost soul trying to find a hand to pull her out of the darkness. Our eyes meet and I feel numb. This is our fault. How can I ever forgive her? How can I ever forgive myself?

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I know I should give Catalina a kiss goodbye, if even only for the morale of the men who've been tasked to protect her, but I just can't bring myself to do it.

We're not just two star-crossed lovers anymore, we're parents, and we've failed our child.

"Please find Oscar," Cat begs, her voice is as frail as ever. The only thing keeping her on her feet are the two men propping her up on either side.

If there's one thing that connects us in this moment, it's our shared misery. At least I know I'm not the only one suffering...

... That ends up being enough; it's the one thing that finally draws my chest to hers.

Somehow, despite my numbness, I find my lips pressed against Cat's. Bad idea. The shivering warmth of her kiss threatens to weaken me ever more. I pull back and give her one last look.

To my surprise, a little life seems to have re-appeared behind her fractured hazel eyes. I guess that kiss was more for her than for me...

For a small moment, I wonder if I should say something, anything. Don't worry. Oscar will be safe. Promise. I love you.

None of it feels quite right, not right now.

So, instead of saying my goodbyes, I let my kiss linger on her spirit. The second I

turn around, though, I force myself to forget about her lips. They're only a distraction.

I rip my way into the beat-up old Pinto and roar down the street without another look or word. My heart races and my chest pounds, and a fiery whirlwind swirls inside of me as I try to focus.

Which way did they take Oscar?

Despite all of Juan's help, we've never been able to figure out where Dante has been hiding out, and it's not like I can call my old advisor up for a hint—I gave my phone to those men so that I could stay in contact with Catalina. I'm completely on my own right now.

For a while there, I thought Cat might be my soul mate, but if she is, then why did I feel so numb when we had to say goodbye?

You didn't feel numb when you kissed her...

I'm still angry at her. We'd all be safe right now if she had just listened—but I also know that I didn't fall for her in the first place because she followed my orders like everyone else. She's never been a rug to walk over, so why did I suddenly expect her to be? Because of Oscar?

If anything, our son has only made her more stubborn; it's only made me more stubborn, too. We've both changed enough that I don't even know what my true feelings are anymore.

Everything is in chaos.

I shred through the fire and the violence of the slums, completely lost.

Where am I going?

The faster I drive, the more uncertain I become.

I feel like a different man from the one I was before I met Cat. The old me never doubted himself so much; the old me never failed so much; the old me never dared to love so much...

The steering wheel nearly caves under the strength of my tightening grip. My knuckles go white and my vision goes red. The frustration and anger and regret and despair that whirl around behind my chest threaten to tear me apart.

Up ahead, I see a firefight ripping through the streets. I try to peer through the flames to see if any cars are caught in the destruction.

Nothing.

A hard right turn sends me down another road; this one leads to midtown Cali. There's no way Dante's there, but right now I'm just trying to get out of here.

But it's like fate doesn't want me to leave. A few blocks into this new street, and I'm heading straight into another battle. An explosion rocks the base of a four-story cement building and it comes crumbling down before my eyes.

I swerve onto the nearest avenue, but even that isn't a viable option. A bullet catches the hood of the old Pinto and the engine sputters and growls. I slam an open fist against the steering wheel just as another volley of wayward bullets slash through the front tires.

"Fuck!"



My only way out of here collapses under its own weight and I'm thrown forward. Somehow, I manage to press down on the breaks hard enough to come to a screeching stop before I can ram into the nearest building.

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The driver's door bursts off its hinges under the strength of my shoulder, and I spill out onto the pockmarked sidewalk and into the flames. Smoke rises from the Pinto and I have to scramble away to avoid the blast that follows.

In the distance, another building falls.

My heart aches as I realize there's no way out of this chaos I've caused. I've blown every bridge and blocked off every street just to keep my family safe, and all it's done is kept me from them even more.

Somewhere nearby, I hear the sound of approaching voices barking unfamiliar orders and I force myself to stumble into the nearest alleyway.

Blood seeps from my shoulder as I disappear into the darkness, my eyes desperately searching for any sign of my son.

But my brain knows better. He's not here. Oscar is gone.

I've failed him.

27

Catalina

My eyelids flutter open and for one amazing moment, I dare to hope that I just awoke from a nightmare.

“Catalina!?” The familiar voice drags me back to reality. Horrible memories of fire and violence cloud my vision and I groan with pain as I remember that my baby boy has been taken from me.

“Catalina!?” I don’t want to look. I don’t deserve to ever see anything ever again. I’m a failure of a mother and I’d be better off dead. “Where’s Angel, Catalina?”

Juan’s tone doesn’t match my anguish. A small part of me wants to lash out at him, but the dread is too heavy to break through. Everything that could have gone wrong has gone wrong.

“Where’s Angel?” Juan repeats, and his words bounce around in my fractured mind like shrapnel.

“I don’t know,” I snap, somehow gaining the strength to lunge out of my fetal position. “Where’s Oscar!?” A cold sweat breaks out on my forehead from even saying the words. They only serve as a reminder of my failure.

Juan doesn’t answer my question right away, and that makes two things very clear. Oscar isn’t with Angel, and he is almost certainly with Dante. “I’m not sure,” Juan finally lies.

“Bullshit!” I sob. “Dante has him...”

Another tense silence fills up the space between us. Eventually, it’s interrupted by an opening door. “Still no word?” Juan asks.

“Nothing,” answers a familiar voice. I look up to see one of the men who helped me escape the chaos last night. Wait, was it last night? Two nights ago? More? I can hardly remember...

In the man's hand, he holds the cellphone Angel gave to him. It's dark and quiet.

"How are you feeling, Catalina?" the man asks.

I choke back my pain and try to be grateful. "Fine, thank you," I lie, before adding, "thank you for your help last night."

"I'm sorry we couldn't get there sooner..." he sulks. "We'll do whatever we can to help find your son." His words are well-intentioned but they cut through my heart like barbed wire.

Juan sits up from his bedside chair and gestures for the two of them to talk outside. When the door closes behind them, a cold chill runs over my skin.

I'm alone.

My family has been shattered. My life has been taken from me. The country burns because of us.

I should have listened to Angel...

Suddenly, my pitiful daze is broken by the familiar buzz of a ringing cell phone. I look over to where Juan was just sitting and I see that he left Angel's phone behind.

My first reaction is to lunge for it, but when my fingers wrap around the ringing device, I can't help but hesitate to answer.

What if it's not Angel? What if someone has killed him? What if they're calling to taunt me? What if all hope is truly lost?

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My dying heart kicks and screams, but my thumb falls against the answer icon.

“Hello!?” It’s Angel’s voice.

“Angel?”

&nbsp;

; “Cat?”

“Do you have...” I can’t finish. Daring to hope has only ever led me to more misery.

“No,” Angel mumbles, and I can practically hear his head drop in shame.

Oscar is still missing.

“Are you alright?” he asks.

For some reason, I can’t bring myself to lie to him. “No.” the truth is cold and flat and awful.

“Same,” he broods.

For a second, neither of us say a word. Then...

“Where are you?”

I furrow my brows and my head pounds with heartache. My visions blurs and I have to pinch my nose to refocus. When I can see again, nothing seems familiar. “I don’t know...” I mumble.

“Are you safe?”

“I think so.”

“Who are you with?”

I look over to the doorway that the two men just walked out of. “Juan was just here.”

“Can you give him the phone?” Angel asks, but I don’t want to.

Even though we’re just talking over the phone, I feel a little less lonely, a little less broken. We’re both two shattered people, two failed parents, two awful protectors...

But still, the kiss Angel gave me before he went after Oscar lingers on my lips. The warmth soothes me enough to sit up from my bed. “I’ll go find him.”

Juan and the man he left with are just outside the door. When I open it up, they stop talking and look my way. Juan’s eyes go wide when he sees the bright cell phone in my hand.

“Angel?” he asks.

I nod.

The phone switches hands and I’m left cold and alone again. Juan starts to pace as he talks to Angel, and my mind drifts off.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” The man who helped me the other night stands with his hands clasped behind his back. “I’m fine, thank you.” I suddenly realize I never got his name. I’m about to ask when Juan gives me the answer.

“Aldar, let’s go!” he orders, stuffing the cell phone in his pocket. I guess Angel didn’t want to talk to me anymore...

A sharp pain cuts through the dull ache that ravages my body at the thought of what’s going through Angel’s mind right now. He must blame me for everything, right? He was ready to whisk us off to safety, and I refused...

Juan and Aldar are at the staircase before I snap out of my daze. “Hey!” I call after them, desperately not wanting to be alone anymore. “Can I come?”

The two men share a look of concern.

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“We don’t have enough security here, anyways,” Aldar bats for me.

Juan sighs. “Fine.” He turns to me and gestures to follow him. “If we have to, can you run?”

I take a fragile step forward and my sore body clenches with countless aches and pains. “Yes,” I answer, unsure if it’s the truth or not.

“Very well. Let’s go,” I follow as Juan and Aldar skip down the steps. My legs are wobbly but I manage to keep up. When we step outside, though, I stop for a moment to study my surroundings.

Nothing is recognisable.

We’re clearly not in the slums anymore, but this doesn’t look like downtown or midtown either. “Are we still in Cali?” I ask, as Aldar opens up the backdoor to a sleek black Mercedes for me.

“Sort of,” Juan answers, slamming the passenger door shut behind him.

My brain is too scrambled to ask any more questions. I slink down into the plush leather seats of the luxury car and let the comfort ease my worried mind.

Aldar gets in the driver’s seat and we pull out of a circular driveway. The four-story colonial mansion that we just left slowly starts to disappear behind us. For a split-second, I swear I can see a woman and two young children staring out at the car through a third-floor window. A young boy, old enough to stand, waves goodbye. I



can't help but wave back.

Where the hell are we?

Aldar pulls out onto a dirt road and promptly stomps his foot against the accelerator. The car bursts forward and I fall further into the back seat. Out of my window, I can see the tips of jungle trees swaying just over top of the large grey partitions that border the makeshift highway.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To pick up Angel," Juan states the obvious. He's focused on his phone, but I have nothing to focus on but him. The last thing I want to do is get lost in my misery again. Right now, distraction is my friend.

"Where is Angel?"

Juan pockets his phone and glances back at me. "Getting ready."

A small thread of anxiety tightens around my throat. I try to swallow it down.  
"Getting ready for what?"

"The final battle."

28

Angel

A plume of dust rises in the distance and I prepare myself to see her again.

How long has it been since our little family was forcefully torn apart? Two days?

Three?

It feels like an eternity, but I've been working the whole time.

The first face I see when the car pulls up is Juan's. The slick black Mercedes comes to a stop on the dusty makeshift tarmac and he immediately hops out of the passenger's seat. His eyes don't fall on me, though, instead, he gazes at the idling jumbo jet behind me.

"Everything's here already?" he asks, stupefied.

I fucking wish. "No," I tell him, as he rushes up to shake my hand. His fingers fall against my shoulder and I try to hide the wince of pain that wants to cross my face. I'm still sore as hell, but I've been desperately trying to fight off all of my aches in favor of more important matters.

Oscar. "Cat..."

She looks just as sore as I feel. Both of her hands grip the back door as she pulls herself out of the car. The driver rushes forward to help her; I'm not far behind.

"Thank you, Aldar," she whispers, and I take over for the man I recognize from that horrible night.

"Thank you," I echo. "You did good, kid." He couldn't be much younger than I am, but he's clearly new to this life. It wouldn't surprise me if he was a welder or a plumber or something before this revolution broke out—now, he's working for the former cartel king of Colombia.

Future cartel king, too, I have to remind myself. I'm not giving up yet. I can't.

They have my son.

I try to take Cat's weight under my shoulder, but the second I do, she pulls away. She wobbles for a second, unsteady on her own two feet, before grabbing onto the door again to even herself out.

She clearly doesn't want my help, and it only serves to get me all the more riled up. What the fuck is her deal? I'm the one who should be angry here.

"What's wrong?" I ask. It's a stupid question. I already know what's wrong. Everything.

"Where have you been?" she suddenly breaks. Pain fills her voice and tears well up in her eyes. I can see Oscar in Cat's scrunched up nose as she tries not to cry.

We need to talk.

But first, I need to tell Juan what's going on. I let my hand fall onto Cat's as she steadies herself against the car door. This time, she doesn't pull away. "I'll be right back," I swear, before turning from her.

I gesture Juan forward and Aldar follows close behind. "So, this plane is going to go get the gear?" Juan asks. "How long will that take?"

"Hopefully no more than two days."

"Probably more than that," Juan grumbles.

“Where’s it going?” Aldar asks.

France. Ireland. Morocco. “Overseas,” I reply, purposefully vague. Aldar may have earned my respect by taking care of Cat for me, but it takes a little longer to earn my trust.

“And what’s it bringing back?”

“Firepower.”

“Enough to take down a fucking army,” Juan smirks.

I look over my shoulder, back at Catalina. She’s glaring at us like a vengeful ghost. We’re not moving fast enough. Our baby’s at risk, and in her eyes, we’re just standing around catching up.

I need to tell her wha

t’s going on. “You guys go check it out, make sure there’s enough room for everything. I’m going to talk to Cat.”

I see them off, then turn back to my real duty.

The sharp heaviness that I’ve desperately been trying to ignore over the past few days finds its way back into the forefront of my mind. The only thing that keeps me from crumpling over is the knowledge that Cat’s feeling the same awful thing.

We may be failures, but at least we can wallow in our misery together.

... Or maybe not. I just don’t know what kind of company she’s going to make right now.

“I’m sorry,” those are the first words out of my mouth. It seems like Cat is the only person who’s ever made me feel so apologetic. Sure, I forgave Juan upon my return to Colombia, but I don’t think I would have ever even done that if Cat hadn’t taught me how to first.

I wonder if any of this would have happened if she hadn’t changed me so much...

“Sorry for what!?” her response is cutting, but for some reason it gives me hope. Do I sense that same fire in her that I first fell for?

“Well, now I’m sorry for apologizing,” I bite back.

Cat doesn’t flinch. She looks fed up and too exhausted to mask any true feelings, no matter how raw.

“What’s going to happen?” she asks, her lower lip trembling.

I keep my response simple. “We’re going to get Oscar back.”

“And then?”

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“And then we’re going to win this war.”

Cat’s big brown eyes shimmer as she tries to buy into my confidence. I don’t blame her doubt. So much has fallen apart that even I’m not sure we’ll ever be able to put it back together again. All I can do is press forward.

Finally, Cat seems to win her little self-battle, if even just for the time being. “How?”

My knuckles whiten as I clench my fists. Visions of what I’m going to do to all those who’ve crossed us turn my eyes red. “You see that plane?” I say, turning around so that she can see past me. “It’s going to visit our old friend, Cyrus Kane. He can’t spare any men right now—he’s fighting his own wars—but him and the Rio Syndicate, along with a Russian friend I made in Paris, are sending us some army-busting equipment. They see our chaos as an opportunity; they know we can win and take over an entire country.”

A humid breeze crosses us and Cat seems to consider my words. “... Do you think we can win?”

I don’t hesitate. “I know we can.” For some reason, in this moment, there’s no doubt in me. We will win. We have to.

“And if we don’t?” Cat seems to be fighting herself more than she’s fighting me now. I want to reach out and comfort her, but I’m not sure if that’s a good idea. There’s still so much blame to be passed around, and I’m sure she blames herself just as much as she blames me.

“We will,” I growl.

A long sigh escapes Cat’s lips as I turn away from the idling jet and back to her. “... You still don’t know about my family...” she whispers.

That seems like the least of our worries right now. I remember searching for info on Cat back when we first crossed paths and not finding anything, but once shit got crazy, I stopped looking. She was an orphan, like me, and that was enough.

“What does that have to do with anything?” I ask.

Cat’s eyes are downcast and her sharp features have turned so heavy. The fire that just sparked behind her somber mask already seems to have been smothered. “Not everyone gets their happy endings, Angel. My family didn’t. Who’s to say we will?”

I don’t like this fatalistic talk, not when our son is still in so much danger. “Your family were victims,” I sneer. “We’re not.”

Cat shakes her head softly. “They weren’t victims,” she whispers. “They were just like you.”

“There isn’t any one like me,” I growl.

“Not anymore.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

In a second, Cat’s eyes are back on me. Something’s changed; there’s a blue fire behind her fractured hazel, but I can’t tell if it’s dead or alive. “My father ran his own cartel. He did horrible things, but he was a good father...”

It almost sounds like she's talking about me. "What was his name?"

"Alejandro Alzate..."

The name does sound oddly familiar. "I've never heard of him," I lie.

"That's because he was murdered while we were still just kids. My whole family was wiped out. Now, it's almost like they never existed at all... I don't want that to happen to us, Angel..." Her voice breaks when she says my name.

My heart kicks at the thought of what she's been through. It turns out that Cat grew up closer to my dark world than I knew... and she was still trying to escape from it when I dragged her back in.

"I'm sorry that happened to you." There I go, apologizing again—but the vengeful streak in me only grows with the new information. "Do you know who was responsible?"

"All I know is that they were Americans."

Americans. The hairs on the back of my neck immediately stand up. From what I know about Enzo Barella, he's old enough to have played a hand in the destruction of Cat's family. I swear to god, if he was involved in that...

... Then what?

How could I be any madder at the man who corrupted my brother and conspired to steal my son?

I somehow manage. My infinite fury only grows under all the rage of what my family has been forced to face; and not just in the past, but in the present and for the



foreseeable future, as well.

It's gone on long enough.

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Now is the time of our revenge. I'll get it for Cat and for Oscar, for myself and for this fucking country.

Our enemies have hell to pay, and I'm about to bring them the bloody bill.

29

Catalina

Angel and I ride in separate cars back to Juan's place.

It's probably for the best. The heaviness of our two hearts would probably cave in the backseat if we rode together. Still, I've never felt so lonely as we pull back up to the four-story colonial mansion that we left earlier this morning.

The sun has started to set and the wind is slowly picking up, but we find shelter in the isolated abode.

"What is this place?" I hear Angel ask, as I follow Juan in through the front door.

"It's where I've been keeping my family," he softly replies, almost as if saying it too loud would be dangerous.

"You brought us to your safehouse!?" Angel isn't so quiet. I can hear the disbelief in his voice. "Juan, you didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," Juan sighs. "We're connected forever now. Either we all win together,

or we all die together. What we've started is bigger than any cartel; it's bigger than the underworld, and far bigger than ourselves. This was the last place I could have sheltered Cat, and so this is where I brought her..."

Angel's hand clasps around Juan's shoulder and they share a respectful look. I'm still not sure what makes this place so special, but from the tone of the exchange, I understand that it was a great risk for Juan to bring me here. "Thank you, Juan," I offer.

"For our families," he toasts. "... Would you like to meet mine?"

I don't have a chance to answer before Angel butts in for me. "No. I think it's best if we don't. Someday, this war will end, and things will go back to as they were. Family and work should be separated, it's safest that way."

Juan nods. I can't tell if he agrees or disagrees but he doesn't fight it. "I'll show you to your room," he says. "Hopefully you won't have to stay long."

I didn't think I had slept, but a harsh buzz seems to snap me out of whatever daze I had fallen into.

The basement bedroom is dark; I reach across the mattress for Angel, but he's not there. Did he ever come to bed? Could either of us bear to sleep with each other right now?

I wipe the gunk from my eyes and sit up. The source of the buzzing seems to escape me. It's the cell phone, it has to be, but where the hell is it?

Suddenly, my heart is on fire.

... Could it be someone calling about Oscar???

I whip off my covers and scramble out of bed, but my legs are so heavy that I immediately fall to the floor. That hardly stops me. My hands dig into the carpet and I pull myself forward, towards the incessant buzzing, but the further I manage to crawl, the more distant the ringing seems to become.

Eventually, the buzzing almost sounds like it surrounds me. Frustration builds behind my eyes as tears blur my vision. I can't stop. My helpless struggle continues until suddenly, the bedroom door bursts open and a stream of light locks me in place.

I look up through my tears and recognize the hulking figure standing in the doorway. He looms over me, half-devil, half-angel, and I don't know whether to cry for joy or in fear.

The buzzing doesn't stop. "... Help..." Even my own voice sounds so distant.

Angel doesn't have any problem closing the gap between us. He marches forward, a man on a mission, until his giant hand is wrapped around my throat. What are you doing!? I try to ask, but the words don't come out.

His rough fingers burn through my tender skin like a branding iron. Hot sighs escape my trembling lips. "The phone..."

Angel doesn't seem to care about who's calling, or for what. He picks me up off the ground and throws me onto the bed. I bounce on the mattress like a fallen leaf, completely useless—before I can blink, he's on top of me. His sizzling skin burns off my clothes and his forearms cage me in a prison of his flexing muscles. The heat that falls from his bulging chest makes it hard to breathe... but the second his teeth sink into my neck, I'm overcome by a new vigor.

My limp limbs suddenly roar back alive and my hands find Angel's fiery abs. At first, I try to push him off, but then his wild teeth retract and his lips suck down on my

wound, and a new weakness washes through my body.

“Angel...” I whimper. His hard cock grows and grows until its bulging head fills up the space between my thighs. Molten lava flows through my belly as Angel’s lips work down my neck and to my tits. He latches onto my tented nipples and the boulder of sorrow that weighs down my heavy heart cracks. My back arches and Angel’

s thick finger finds my soaking petals. Without any decorum, he slips into me and my eyes roll into the back of my head.

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“The phone, Angel...” in the distance, I can still hear the ringing, but with each lash of Angel’s tongue, my mind wanders further and further from any rooted thought.

I run my fingers up his muscular back and through his thick dark hair. Without warning, another finger enters me and I nearly rip his head off, but he’s too strong to move on my own. A split second later, I feel his thick wet tongue flicker against my clit.

I lose control. My body convulses and my mind goes blank. The only thing keeping me in place is Angel’s strong grip around my hip. With his other hand, he fucks me to high hell. Nightmares and dirty dreams swirl around in my emptying mind as they circle a dark drain. The pleasure building up from below is almost too much to bear. I struggle under it all as a volcanic heat slowly threatens to erupt up from my depths. My soreness snaps, my fractured mind disintegrates; my lungs burst and my throat yells but no words come out of my trembling lips.

Before I can melt completely, Angel rises from the stormy depths below. He blocks out the light from the bedroom doorway and covers me in his shadow. Steam rises from his heaving body and his green eyes glow through the darkness.

He’s a beast.

There’s no time to be afraid; he’s back on me before I can breathe. This time, his chiselled arms wrap around my head and his chest smothers me with his pounding heat. The giant head of his throbbing cock circles my tight entrance as my entire body begs for him to fuck me.

My mind is too far gone to resist.

When Angel enters me, it's like I rip into a million different pieces. He's so big and forceful, and with each thrust he makes me his. Our sweaty skin sticks and tears apart a thousand different times every second. The muscular jack hammer that pounds me has an endless reservoir of carnal energy. All I can do is hang on...

Then, something snaps in me. Suddenly, a fireball of strength rushes through my veins and I somehow find the power to push Angel off of me...

But I don't push him far.

Instead, I roll him onto his back. He growls up at me, teeth bared, but I hold him down. My fingers sink into his hard chest and his thumping heart determines my rhythm.

His giant cock impales me as I straddle the starving beast. My hips start to sway and my nails dig deep into his steaming flesh. Now, it's Angel's turn to hold onto me. His huge hands find my tiny breasts and he grips them so hard that I feel his mark forever imprinted into my skin.

My hard nipples poke out through the tiny spaces between his rough fingers as he rubs them together. A new layer of heat rises up from my working hips and I stop my swaying and start to pound myself on his thick endless cock.

I'm impaled, over and over again as we both push into each other with a primal desperation. There's nothing either of us need more right now than a little release... but there's nothing little about this.

A second eruption of momentous proportions twitches up from my searing pelvis. Pain and pleasure mix in a deadly whirlwind that rips through everything in its path.

The fear, the dread, the hopelessness, the helplessness. Evaporated.

... But so is the love, the hope, and the trust.

There's just nothing anymore but pleasure...

And then, I wake up.

My eyelids flutter open to a cold dark bedroom. A hot sweat coats my damp skin and my empty mind buzzes, trying to make sense of it all.

But my mind is still reeling from the dirty dream. My heart pounds just as hard as my head.

The buzzing doesn't stop.

The buzzing doesn't stop...

My eyes rip over to the bedside table. There, the cell phone rings with an incoming call. Before I reach for it, I pinch myself to make sure I'm really awake this time. My nails dig into my sore thigh and I flinch in pain.

I may be awake, but that doesn't mean I've escaped this nightmare.

"Hello?"

White noise crackles over the line as I wait for a response. I don't dare breathe.

"... I was hoping you would pick up." I can practically hear the evil smirk crossing Dante's face.



My steaming heart immediately goes cold. A frigid shiver crawls over my sweaty skin. I'm frozen still.

“Where’s Oscar!?” My body may be too shocked to function, but my lungs quickly fill with fire.

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Dante's sick laugh snakes through the receiver. His cruelty echoes through my ears like shrapnel and I have to fight back the anguished pain. "He's right here," the sick fuck chuckles. "Where are you?"

As if I'd ever tell him. "Give him back," I beg, tears blurring my vision.

"Sure," Dante teases. "Come and get him."

"Gladly," I tremble back. My voice breaks and I want to kick myself for showing the devil any weakness. That's what he wants, to make you suffer.

"Do you want to say hi to your mom?" I hear Dante say just off to the side. Maybe I'm just going mad from grief, but I swear I hear a familiar gurgle in response. "No?" Dante chuckles. "Maybe you shouldn't come after all..."

"Fuck you!" I shout, so loud that it burns my throat.

"We can make that happen, too."

Another gurgle sends me off the wall; I didn't imagine that one. "I swear to god, if you touch a hair on his body..."

"Then what!?" Dante snaps. The cruelty in his voice makes my heart shatter for Oscar. "You can't do shit. I'm in control here, and you're going to do as I say."

I fight back the nausea growing in my gut. What a far cry this is from my dirty dream... "What do you want?" I force myself to ask.

“You.”

Bullshit! It’s my first thought, but my throat hurts too much to yell anymore. Dante had his chance with me. For nearly two fucking years straight he had me locked away like a disobedient pet, and he didn’t do shit. I was his pawn and nothing else, but now that I’m with Angel again?

The disgusting little fucker must be jealous. Always the fucking bridesmaid...

My anger hardly disguises my dread, but it helps to push me forward. “... Fine,” I whisper. “I’ll come to you. Just don’t hurt my baby.” My chin drops to my chest and I try to swallow the pain. This is stupid, so fucking stupid, but I won’t be able to live with myself if I don’t do something.

“I would never hurt my nephew...” Dante hisses. “... At least, not yet.” My heart clenches into a fist of fury and pure sorrow. “Just make sure you come alone.”

Like hell I will.

30

Angel

It’s time to take down a country.

Cali stands beneath my ragtag army of revolutionaries like a gasoline drenched bonfire. We’re ready to set it alight. The weapons from Dublin are in; so is the firepower from Paris and Morocco. My men may not be trained to use this shit to its fullest potential, but there’s no time to waste.

Dante has my son, and I finally have a lead.

Before we attack, I'm crossing into enemy territory on my own to make sure I can get my family out before the bombs start to drop.

If we're truly going to win this time, my little brother can't survive this battle. It's all or nothing now.

"Ready?" I ask Jesus. He stands beside me as our men prepare in the rubble of our last battle.

"We will be," he assures me, looking out over the sparkling city. "You just send the signal and we'll attack."

I pat the flare gun holstered to my belt. "Good luck," I mumble.

"You too, boss."

"Aldar!" I shout over to the man who helped Catalina escape our last bout of chaos. "Let's go!"

"Yes, sir!" the young man scrambles up to a nearby black jeep and pulls a pair of keys out of his pockets. I take one last look back at our final hope. These people might not be great warriors, but each and every one of them have a fire in their eyes that can't be ignor

ed. They want justice and freedom just as badly as me and that's enough. It has to be.

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I jump into the jeep's passenger seat and we immediately speed off.

Burnt out buildings blur through the dark tinted windows as we make our way downtown. So far, the 'nice' part of the city has been mostly spared from the chaos that we've brought down on Cali, but all of that changes tonight—at least, it does if I can get my hands on Oscar first.

“Is that it?” Aldar asks, pointing ahead as we turn onto a residential street and slow down.

I peak out of the front windshield and spot a white limo turning up ahead.

... How fucking gaudy; but I wouldn't expect anything less. On the bumper is a subtle splash of red paint. “That's our target.

Aldar creeps forward, careful to keep his distance. The streets are busier than I expected, but that's not exactly bad news. It gives us more cover as we follow the leak to Dante's hideout.

My pulse slows and I re-check all of my weapons. It's funny, finally being back downtown again. Even through all the chaos and changes, it barely looks any different. When we turn down a familiar street, I even see one of my old buildings. I'm not as effected by the sight of it as I once feared I might be. It's from another life, a life I don't have time to linger on anymore.

Soon enough, the glitz and glamor of downtown Cali fades, and we roll into the warehouse district. It's not as scummy as it once was—thanks in large part to my old

revitalization efforts—but it still pales in comparison to what we just left behind. It's also far less crowded.

Good. The fewer innocents who get caught up in this, the better, because I'm not stopping no matter who's in my way.

"This is far enough," I tell Aldar when the streets become empty enough that any adept driver would easily be able to tell that he was being tailed.

We pull off onto a side street just as the white limo stops at a red light ahead. Aldar stops and I'm immediately at the trunk.

Inside is an old friend.

My bike. It's still bloodstained and caked in mud and guts, but it only seems fitting to bring it around for one last go.

I hope on and Aldar and I share one last look. "Good luck, boss."

"Be ready."

We both nod and then I'm off.

The warm humid wind picks up as I speed forward down an alleyway that runs parallel to the main street the limo drives down. The weather's been eerily still over the past few days; if I didn't know any better, I'd think the worst was over with—but I know that's not anywhere close to the truth. The worst is still to come; I just have to make sure that the cards fall on my side when everything comes tumbling down in the hurricane.

A few blocks later, the limo makes a slow turn down a tight street. I immediately

know where it's headed. Through the slits of the alleyways, I can see a warehouse that looks like it's been outfitted into a luxurious nightclub. That's so fucking Dante's style that it makes me angry we didn't find it sooner. The all black building stands out like a sore thumb amidst the red and green storerooms. If only we'd had air-reconnaissance, then there would have been no doubt where my little brother was 'laying low'.

It looks like a personal den of hedonism; the closer I approach, the louder the thumping bass coming from inside becomes.

A devastating snarl forms on my lips as I park my bike behind an overflowing dumpster. That bastard is keeping my son in that building; he's blasting that awful music at full volume while my little boy's fragile ears are at stake.

He's going to fucking pay.

But first, I need to find a way in.

Luckily, fire-escapes abound down here, and I've already pulled myself up on the nearest one when I see the white limo pull up out back of the makeshift nightclub. There's no doubt about it now. This is where Dante is, and it's where Oscar should be, too.

A more violent wind greets me on the roof of the nightclub's neighbouring warehouse. The gusts blow back my messy hair and accosts my eyes as I try to spot a way into the building ahead.

Through the stained-glass windows, I can see the silhouettes of heavily armed guards. They patrol in groups of two, at steady intervals. Every minute or so, the white light inside starts to strobe and I swear I can hear cheering coming from inside. This is no place for a baby...

It doesn't take long for me to spot a way in. One of the windows on the third floor is cracked just enough to see through. A pair of guards, each armed to the teeth, stroll by, oblivious to what's coming for them.

The next time they disappear around the corner, I make my move. There's a good ten-foot gap between my roof and their fire-escape, but even through my soreness, I'm able to make it without rattling the bars too much.

Now, I can hear the two guards chatting away inside. My attack is put on hold as I listen for any useful information, but they don't know shit. They blabber on about girls they've fucked and men they've shot and when one of them says, "I didn't even put a condom on. She was too drunk to notice..." I make sure it's the last words he ever says.

The blade of my knife finds his throat before I'm even fully through the window. His partner doesn't have time to react before I've cut him up, too. Blood spills from their sliced necks and I gently help them to the ground. Their guns are too noisy to keep around, so I toss them out of the window and onto the dark fire-escape. The last thing I need is for someone I've already unarmed to come across more weapons.

Just as the last gun hits the metal outside, I hear a gasp come from behind me. I whip around just in time to spot a rogue guard lifting his barrel my way. Before he can pull the trigger, I've thrown my switchblade through his cheek.



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“Fuck!” he yells as his gun drops to the floor. He turns away and I’m immediately at his side.

Blood gushes from his sliced lip and I add a matching scar to the other side of his face. A howl of pain escapes his mangled lips and fear skates down my spine. This motherfucker is being too loud.

I shut him up with a punch to the nose, and then with another right between the eyes. His skull cracks and he collapses, unconscious, to the already bloody floor. There’s no point in waiting around for him to wake up, so I make sure he never does. The shiny blade of my knife finds his throat, and then I deposit his weapons along with the others outside, out of harm’s way.

Just as I’m canvassing the rest of the floor for more targets, the white lights start to sputter. It’s disorientating as hell, and I’m forced to throw myself into the nearest corner and shut my eyes to ride it out. If this happens while I’m fighting someone, it could be the death of me.

Luckily, no one appears as the lights flicker back into a steady stream of illumination. The walls vibrate with heavy bass and for a moment I’m thankful for the loud music; it seems to have masked the cries of my victim.

My next move is for the door marked ‘Exit’ just up ahead. If I know my little brother, he’ll be locked away in some top floor VIP office, where he can watch his eternal party play out from behind a bullet proof window pane. For Oscar’s sake, I hope that glass is also sound proof.

When I get to the top floor, I don't stop. Instead, I go all the way to the roof. There, I bust through the door and scan my surroundings. Not only will the flare have to be fired from up here, but this will be Oscar's best bet, too. The ground floors will be too heavily guarded to get through, and, while I could take care of all those guards now, it's not worth the risk. If a single one of them lives long enough to sound any alarm, and I lose the element of surprise against Dante, then Oscar is put at more risk than ever. I can't have that.

When I figure out a promising route of escape, I re-check all my weapons and wipe the blood off of my switchblade, then I message Aldar with the address of where we're going to meet after I have my son.

After all that, I head back inside, ready to finally take back what's mine.

31

Catalina

Dante makes me wait.

The cruel bastard.

A pounding headache of anxiety and stress threatens to tear my skull apart as I sit at gunpoint in the lobby outside of his top floor office. The thin white walls vibrate from the pulsing techno music below. This is no place for a baby...

If my heart wasn't so incensed at the idea that Dante has been keeping my child here, then I might be sad enough to keel over.

... Poor Oscar, his little ears must be on fire.

“Up,” one of the guards orders me off the couch. The barrel of his assault rifle glares at me as I’m gestured towards the big set of double doors at the far end of the all-white lobby. It’s a stark contrast from the black decor outside, and so tacky that it could make a woman with less on her mind puke, but this is no time to concentrate on designer flaws and bad taste. I’m here to see Oscar, and if I get my chance, I’m here to kill Dante.

I’ve sharpened my nails into razor blades. Whether or not they can pierce human skin is yet to be seen, but I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself if Angel’s little brother dares bare his neck to me.

“In,” the cold butt of the guard’s gun pushes me through the automatic doors as they open up before us. There are almost no lights on inside, and it takes me a moment to adjust my eyesight to the new darkness. The second I do, the doors slam shut behind me and a whole new wave of blackness blinds my vision.

“Took you long enough...” a familiar hiss comes from some shadow.

I rub my eyes, desperate to gain my bearings. The last thing I need is for Dante to tie me up before I can make a lunge for my baby boy.

Slower than I’d like, my vision finally adjusts to the dark ro

om. My head turns on a swivel, searching for the devil himself.

He’s not behind me—in fact, no one is. The guards that brought me here appear to be waiting outside. Could Dante be stupid enough to meet me alone?

“Over here,” the snake hisses again. I search for the source, but the longer I look the more everything seems to darken. Where’s Oscar? I don’t see him anywhere. My gut tightens like shrinking bark around a growing trunk as I consider the worst possible

outcome...

Then, a pale white spectre steps out of the shadows. My first reaction is to shrink away from the slimy ghost, but my pride won't let me flinch far. This is the man who I've come to kill. This is the man who ruined my life and took my son.

Fuck this piece of shit.

"You're looking... well," Dante taunts me as he starts to pace. My frantic eyes dart between him and every other point in the room as I search for any signs of Oscar. There's nothing, not even a sound.

The walls in here don't vibrate; the bass from the pulsing music outside has disappeared, and even the flashing lights are barely visible through the giant, tinted glass window pane that lines the west wing of the full floor office, but still, there's no sign of my baby boy.

"Where is he?" I demand. My voice is jittery and quiet, but I push through my nerves. This needs to be done, even if it means I'm harmed in the process.

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“Who?” Dante teases. He slinks towards me, his dark fractured eyes sucking in what little light there is.

“You said you had Oscar...”

Dante takes a deep breath. “Ah, you mean my nephew? He’s here.” The cruel slime ball stops some odd fifteen feet away from me and leans against the head of a big oakwood desk. “Would you like to see him?”

The last thing I want to do is play along with any of Dante’s sick games, but I’ve come too far to play dumb now. “Yes...”

An evil smirk crosses Dante’s thin lips and my heart drops. What has he done to my baby boy?

Suddenly, he slams a clenched fist against the oakwood desk and I jump in shock.

Quickly, silence returns to the dark office... until a soft buzzing sound cuts through it all like a knife. My eyes dart around the darkness, desperate for answers, before landing on a growing sliver of light just behind Dante. He turns around just as the buzzing is replaced by a click. Then, there’s only more silence.

The new light source silhouettes Dante’s spindly body as he steps towards it. I can’t see around him, but the motherly instinct in me forces my feet forward, deeper into the shadows.

... Then I hear it.

The soft sob of a waking infant.

“Oscar!” The cry that escapes my trembling lips isn’t quite so soft.

“Shh!” Dante immediately hisses in response. He turns back around to me with fire in his eyes and a thin finger up to his lips. “He’s sleeping.”

That’s a lie. I know the sound of Oscar waking up. Sure, he may have just been taking a nap, but he’s awake now. Mama’s here.

Finally, Dante steps aside, and I get to see what I came for.

Ahead, in a square box behind a sliding panel, under a light that is far too bright for a baby’s sensitive eyes, squirms Oscar.

Before I can think better of it, I’m moving towards my son.

“That’s far enough,” Dante lashes, one hand pointed towards me and the other towards Oscar. He’s much closer to my baby boy, and I know that I have to do as he says, or else...

I reluctantly stop in my tracks and drink in the sight of my love.

Ozzy stretches out, yawning and gurgling as he wakes up from a late afternoon nap. He’s wearing the same onesie he was taken in, but he doesn’t appear to be hurt in anyway.

“What do you want?” I ask. Somehow, the shakiness has left my voice. I guess I’m fully concentrated now. My goal is clear; Oscar’s safety is all that matters.

“You,” Dante smirks.

A chill skates down my spine but I hold it together. “You already had me,” I remind him.

“No, I didn’t, not like I wanted to.”

A greasy sickness builds up in my gut at the thought of all those nights I laid awake waiting for Dante to come into my room and force himself on me. “Why didn’t you?”

“I was busy,” he snarls.

“What changed?”

Dante’s mouth opens, but no words come out. It seems obvious to me what his honest answer would be, but Dante’s anything but honest. “I found some free time,” he lies.

Bullshit. There’s a fucking war happening outside of these walls. He hasn’t found anything but a renewed sense of envy. Angel finally got me back, and now, all of a sudden, Dante can’t stand that he ever let me go, that he never took advantage of my captivity. It’s the only answer.

Still, I know what I have to do. “So, what happens now?”

“Now, you give me what I want.” Dante licks his lips and my skin crawls. It takes all of my will power to keep from retreating. Instead, I stand my ground and let him wander over from Oscar, towards me.

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“What do you want?” I ask again, this time in a whisper.

“Everything.”

“Everything of Angel’s...” I quietly correct him.

Dante stops in his tracks and I want to kick myself—Don’t jab him, Catalina!—but the ghouel seems more entertained than hurt by my foolish words. “I can see why my brother fell for you,” he whistles. “A feisty senorita to challenge him—that’s the kind of man he is, always looking for a challenge. Well, I gave him a challenge. Really, he should be thanking me.”

For a split-second, I swear I hear Dante’s voice crack when he says that word, ‘thanking’ ... does he regret all of this?

I wouldn’t be surprised, but I doubt it’s for any human reasons. He probably just misses his old carefree lifestyle.

“Why do you want me?” I prod, curiosity taking control of my vocal chords.

Dante’s reptilian eyes blink up and down my body. My arms want to cross over my chest and hide my figure from him, but I remain stoic.

Oscar yawns behind the devil and I take deep, slow breaths.

“You still don’t remember, do you?” Dante sneers. “But I guess that’s to be expected. How many men did you offer yourself to before you found the right price? What did



my brother pay for that body? Whore...”

My sharp fists clench at the insult. How dare he call me such names in front of my son? The nails I’ve whittled into weapons dig into my palms as I quietly dare Dante to get any closer. “I’m not a whore...” I mumble under my breath.

Dante huffs with derision. “Of course you are, idiot. How long were you trying to sell that tight little body of yours before my brother took you for his own? At least six years...”

My first instinct is to snap, but then Dante’s words ring around between my ears and I’m frozen still.

Six years...

How the fuck does he know that?

The truth is, that night at the gala where I first met Angel wasn’t my first attempted foray into higher society. It all started just over six years ago, when a shady friend of a friend introduced me to a man who said he could introduce me to the kind of people I sought.

He wasn’t lying... but I should have never trusted the bastard. The men he knew weren’t interested in partnerships, they wanted slaves. Sex slaves.

I was brought to an old church in a nearby town, and the second the front doors closed behind us, I was tied from head to toe and dragged up to the altar. In the pews were a dozen shadows with evil Cheshire grins. On stage with me were half a dozen other poor girls.

We had been lured to our doom, now we were to be sold to the highest bidder.

A shiver works its way across my skin as I remember my price climbing higher and higher until it seemed like a victor was finally emerging...

And then, the church door burst open and a stream of heavily armed policia entered with their guns drawn. The men all scrambled; some escaped, some didn't, but me and every last one

of the girls who had been kidnapped alongside of me were saved.

The effort was led by my old mayor, Luis Morelos—it's why I enshrined him forever in Oscar's name.

Oscar Luis Alzate. Oscar Luis Alzate-Montoya.

But what does that have to do with Dante?

Unless...

"You were at the church!?" I blurt out, and I hear a curious gurgle come from Oscar's box.

"Finally!" Dante sighs, raising his arms to the ceiling in a big show of just how exasperated he is. "Did anyone ever tell you that you were a little slow?"

I don't respond to his lashing. I'm still confused. Buying a sex slave definitely wouldn't be out of character for Dante, but he would have been so young... though, I guess I was, too. I guess that's how I first recognized him... even if I didn't want to.

"Mama?" Ozzy's innocent little voice floats around Dante's sulking shadow and my heart breaks.

“Let me see him,” I beg.

“First, we need to make up for lost time.”

Is this what brought about all of this chaos? Could Dante really be so petty? He tried to buy me as a sex slave six years ago, and then, when he found out that his brother had taken me for himself, he snapped...

The cruel idiot.

I want to dig my sharp nails into his neck and bathe in his blood, but he needs to get close first. It's a good thing that it seems like that's exactly what he wants to do.

“Fine, take me,” I tell him. My arms reach to the ceiling and I don't hide a single curve on my figure. Dante hesitates. I can see the battle playing out behind his cold eyes. It wouldn't surprise me if his dick didn't even work anymore, but he's been so consumed by envy that he can't see past me.

“I knew you were a whore... and with your son watching,” he chides. Dante has blocked Oscar from view, but I can hear the baby boy gurgling and moving about in his own little cage.

“Mama?” The tiny voice drifts through the stale air again. My nerves are so tense I can hardly process the tone of Ozzy's call. Is he scared? Lonely?

I suck in a jittery breath and let Dante crawl my way. His dark eyes impale my body and his slimy tongue scuttles across his dry lips. With each step he takes, the room

gets colder. I'm frozen still as he reaches out for me...

32

Angel

I kick through the office vent just in time to see Dante's slimy fingers wrap around Cat's shivering shoulder.

There's no hesitation in me. My switchblade is drawn and cutting through the air before the vent's metal grill can hit the floor.

Dante whips around and is immediately met by the sharp end of my blade. It digs into his shoulder and he yelps in pain.

Shit. That's too loud. There are guards just outside.

Without wasting any time, I jump over the desk that stands between us and lunge at my fallen brother. He rolls on the ground, trying to grab his bearings and reach for whatever weapon he has tucked under his belt, but I'm on top of him before he can grab it.

"You!" he accuses, his dark eyes blazing like black fires. Cat's warmth still lingers on his hands as he desperately tries to push me off of him. I settle him down with a hard punch right between the eyes. The crack cuts through the air...

And a baby starts crying.

"Where is he!?" I ask, looking up at Cat as Dante and I struggle on the floor. Blood pours out of my brother's nose, but he has a wiry strength to him that makes him harder to deal with than any burly guard.

For a second, Cat doesn't move. She stands there, frozen with shock. It's like she didn't expect me to make it on time. Now is no time for second thoughts, though. "Get Oscar!" I growl, just as Dante manages to connect a wild knee into my stomach. I crumble over and Cat finally snaps back to reality. Her eyes dart across the room and she races forward...

Only to catch herself on one of Dante's flailing legs. She falls and Dante shouts.

"Guards!"

Fuck.

Dante has a tight grip around my forearm, and I can't quite tear my hands up to his neck quick enough to shut him up forever. Instead, I have to grab his shirt around the chest and pound him into the ground.

"Fuck you!" he hisses as his knee just narrowly misses my gut again. "Guards!"

This time, there's no mistaking that his voice got through those thick office doors. I hear heavy feet rushing our way and I rip my eyes off of Dante for long enough to see Cat picking Oscar up out of some kind of box embedded in the far wall.

"Through the vent, up to the roof!" I shout. "Then go west! But first..." with my one free hand, I reach for the flare gun holstered on my belt. When it's out, I throw it towards Cat. "When you get on the roof fire it into the air!"

Just as I finish, Dante sweeps under my arm and I'm forced off of him. My back hits the ground with a crack and the office doors swing open.

Dante struggles free from my grip, but I kick at his leg and he stumbles forward, falling in front of the opening doors. For a split-second, his body blocks the

oncoming guards. It's enough to give Cat the window she needs to grab the flare gun and whisk Oscar into the vent. It also gives me enough time to draw my own gun.

Dante scrambles back onto his feet and his guards finally burst through the heavy doors. I greet each of them with a round of armor-piercing bullets. The big goons stumble through the doorway and are lifeless by the time they hit the carpet inside.

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Dante, on the other hand, is just as alive as ever. A trail of blood follows him as he scurries out of the office before I can get a clear shot.

Fuck.

He heard me tell Cat where to go. He's the only one who knows where her and Oscar are heading. He can't live, not for a single second longer. This shit has gone on for long enough.

I push myself off the bloody ground and follow Dante's dark trail through the white lobby. The door up ahead swings on its hinges and I'm pushing through it before it can settle down.

Dante doesn't greet me on the other side of the doorway, but I can hear his voice screeching orders around the nearest corner. Heavy footsteps approach as my brother's voice fades in the distance.

I immediately pull a stun grenade from my jacket pocket and unclasp the safety. Before the approaching footsteps can turn the corner, I've filled up the hallway with chaos. Bodies hit the floor and guns fire wildly. When the bullets cut through the windows, I jump out from behind the corner and spray the smoky hallway with bullets of my own.

There's no waiting around for the smoke to clear. Dante's getting away. All it takes is for him to tell one overzealous goon where Cat and Oscar are headed, and then everything falls apart. Catalina's already done her part, now it's time for me to finish mine.

When I round the next corner, though, there's still no Dante. Instead, a pair of elevator doors stand under an analogue floor counter. Shit. It looks like Dante's already almost at the ground floor.

There's no time to take the stairs. I'm going to have to leave the same way I came in.

Up here, the windows are thick, and I have to shoot through the nearest one before it shatters enough for me to slip through. Luckily, the fire escape is close by. A short jump later and I'm winding down the rickety metal construction, ten steps at a time.

Before I can get all the way down, a bright red light fills up the sky above. I look up just in time to see the flare cascading beneath the dark clouds.

She did it!

The final battle has begun...

My feet hit the alley floor just as the first eruption shakes the city. The wind has finally picked up again, and it's quickly followed by a sprinkling of rain.

I don't pause to smell the fucking flowers, and it's a good thing, because it means I turn the next corner just in time to see Dante ducking into an armored black jeep.

... But the door slams shut before I can open fire. I know these cars, they're impossible to pierce with mere bullets. My only hope now is to make sure they crash. That means Cat is on her own—that's okay, I trust her; there's no way she's lingering around waiting for me, and once she gets to Aldar, he'll whisk her to safety.

I can't come for her right now, because if this is all going to end tonight, then I'm going to have to kill my brother.



It's a good thing I have just the tool to catch up to the motherfucker.

My bike is right where I left it, and soon enough, I'm racing down the alley, parallel to Dante's car.

Hot wind whips across my face as I go faster and faster. The roar of my engine mixed with the howling wind masks all other noise, but I can still feel the vibrations in the air as the city explodes in a full blown revolution.

The warehouse district quickly ends, and I pursue Dante's black car as it cuts through the rain ahead, speeding downtown.

In the distance, a huge fireball engulfs a building. It's enough to make Dante's driver swerve down the nearest street. I don't know where they were planning on going before, but now I know for sure that they're not going downtown. For once, downtown is where the action is and cowards like Dante stay as far away from that shit as possible.

I race after him, patiently waiting for my opportunity. My bike is so much smaller than his armed-car that there's no point in rushing him head on, but if I can find the right spot, then I might be able to get his driver to crash...

Around the next corner is just such an opportunity. A flat iron buildings splits a fork in the road. I twist down on my throttle and speed through the hellish rain. Each drop smacks against my face like watery bullets, but I'm hardly phased. Not even the wind is strong enough to keep me from saddling up beside Dante's car.

The second I see that his driver has decided to veer left down the forked path up ahead, I burst up beside them. My bike is unsteady in the storm as I unholster my gun and point it at the driver-side window. At the last second, he veers right, away from my barrel...

But it's too late. He catches an outstretched medium and the car goes flying.

I barely avoid the front wheels as the upturned vehicle rolls across the wet road, but it's still enough to make me skid to a crashing stop.

The soaking cement greets my shoulder with an unceremonious smack, and a lightning

strike of pain flashes through my entire body. There's no time to waste, though, and I quickly, if painfully, push myself back onto my feet.

In the near distance, I see that my brother has had the same idea. He crawls out of the back door of the overturned truck, and stumbles onto the street. When he sees me nearby, he pulls the gun out of his holster and starts firing. I duck behind the flat iron as the bullets whizz through the rain.

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Dante shouts orders and I check to make sure all of my weapons are fully loaded, then I peak around my slice of cover and start firing. My brother jumps behind the upturned car as his guards return fire.

I'm forced to flee for more cover as their bullets rain down on me even harder than the tropical storm that rages around us. White lightning strikes and orange fireballs light up the night as the revolution approaches these downtown outskirts.

It can't come quickly enough. Dante's armored truck is like a clown car of enemy combatants. Half a dozen heavily armed men volley constant fire in my direction. There's no room to breathe...

And then I hear a familiar chant.

Through the rain and the wind and the fire comes a wave of my people.

Revolutionaries.

Each and every one of them is armed to the teeth. Dante's men quickly have more than they can handle. Their firepower is trained away from me as the oncoming crowd fearlessly descends upon them.

I'm finally able to step out from behind the flat iron.

There's no time to thank anyone; as much as I appreciate their help, I need to get to Dante before they do. Nobody is allowed to kill my brother but me.

“Revolutionaries!” I yell, fist held high as thunder erupts around me. Those of them who aren’t busy taking out Dante’s men turn to see me standing in the rain. A roar washes through the crowd, followed closely by a massive strike of lightning. The bright flash of light is enough for me to spot my little brother fleeing up a fire escape in the alleyway behind the swarmed car.

I immediately take off after him.

The people cheer for me as I make my final lunge for freedom.

The rails of the fire-escape are slippery and the steps are soaked, but I’m determined. Dante flops through the rain far more than I do, and by the time he’s pulled himself onto the roof, I’m close enough to take a shot.

It catches him in the foot.

Even through the storm, I can hear his curses.

I jump after him, and am immediately met with a flurry of bullets from Dante’s own gun.

Somehow, the only one that hits me just barely nicks my shoulder. Dante was never a good shot...

That doesn’t keep him from pulling the trigger over and over again—but soon enough, there are no more bullets left. His last ditch is to throw his empty gun my way, but that’s easy enough to dodge.

“You bastard!” he screeches at me as heavy rain pours down over our heads.

“Me!?” I shout back, incensed. “What did I ever do to you!? After mom and dad died,

I saved you from the streets. I gave you the life of a prince!”

“I wanted to be king!” Dante hisses. A silent strike of lightning cuts through the clouds ahead.

“Well, you got to be king... for a while. How was it?”

He scrambles backwards on his ass, blood pouring from his wounded foot, as I step closer and closer. Dante looks away, unable to answer truthfully.

“That’s what I thought,” I grumble, filled with a heavy shame. A blast of thunder shakes the world and I stare down with a heavy pity at my crawling brother. “You took my son...”

A small primal part of me desperately wants Dante to beg for forgiveness. If he gives me the opportunity, then maybe I can forgive him...

“I took more than you know!” he shouts through the rain. “And I should have had that fucking whore before you ever got your hands on her...”

“What the fuck does that mean!?” I growl, my sympathy quickly evaporating.

“You’ll never know,” he smirks, a final cruelty. “I had my men go get her and your bastard son on the roof. They had orders: shoot to kill. They’re both probably long dead by now...”

With those last words, Dante lunges for his injured foot. I spot the hint of an ankle holster beneath his pants and I hesitate enough to let him get his fingers on the small pistol inside.

This is my brother, the last of my family; can I really kill him?

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A flash of lightning fills the world with a blinding white light, and for a second, all is quiet and still.

That's when it all becomes crystal clear.

Dante isn't my family, not anymore.

I have my own family now, and they need my help.

When the flash of lightning fades, the barrel of my gun smokes and my brother lies dead at my feet.

The smoke fades with the rain and so does any last sliver of sympathy I held for my cruel brother. Slowly, sound rushes back into my ears. Below, I can hear people chanting my name.

I give them what they want.

This body isn't my brother any more, it's just a husk, a symbol of something dead and gone; something I killed, something we killed.

Dante's corpse is heavy, but all of my pain and soreness has numbed in the storm. I pick him up and carry him over to the roof's ledge. Without a second thought, I drop him to the streets below.

The cheers only get louder, but I have no heart to revel in any of it.

Nothing matters until I'm back with my true family. Nothing is complete until the other two pieces of my heart fall back into place.

I'm coming, Cat.

I'm coming, Oscar.

Daddy's back.

33

Catalina

Brand new rays of sunlight break through the light grey clouds and a beam of warmth crosses over my arms.

Oscar shifts on my lap, and I stroke aside his shiny strands of dark hair.

"How's he doing?" Juan's voice is soft and gentle. He quietly places a steaming bowl on the table before me.

"He seems to be alright," I respond, not able to take my eyes off of Oscar. "Thank you, Juan, for everything."

An open silence drifts between us before Angel's old advisor points towards the soup. "Courtesy of the wife," he offers.

"Tell her thank you, as well. I can't tell you how grateful we are for you and your family. We'll never be able to repay you for letting us stay here."

Juan waves his hand at me. "No need for repayments. We all survived the storm, and

that's what matters. Now, it's time to rebuild."

A heavy sadness catches in my throat. No one's heard from Angel since last night—though, there have been rumors that he was spotted all around the city as it burned.

From what Juan has told me so far, the revolution has been won. After a vicious fight, and with all the old generals dead or captured, what remained of the army finally surrendered. Maybe Angel was there, helping the very people he inspired?

Juan's been asking around, but so far, no one can say exactly where my dark savior went to after he left Oscar and I to escape on our own. Luckily, I was able to set off the flare he gave me and get to Aldar before any more trouble found us... but I don't doubt that Angel was steeped in trouble for the rest of his night.

Dante is dead. They say Angel killed him.

As relieved as I am, I also feel bad for my vicious hero. No one should have to kill their own brother, no matter how cruel or terrible they are... but it was the only way.

A sigh escapes my lips and I look out over Juan's property, filled with longing...

Suddenly, my vision of the horizon is interrupted by an approaching plume of dust.



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“Is that...” Juan trails off as he hurries back inside.

Just as I stand up, the full force of the half-hidden sun breaks through the grey clouds above. The light nearly blinds me, but the warmth of it somehow assures me that I know who’s coming.

I turn from the balcony and race inside. Oscar gurgles awake a

nd I smother him in kisses as we bound down the stairs.

“Mama,” he smiles, pushing into me.

“Mama’s here,” I whisper, as we step through the open front door and into the brilliant sunlight.

... And so is daddy.

My vision blurs in the brightness, and I hear the roar of the bike before I see it pull to a stop at the end of Juan’s circular driveway. Nothing can get in the way of the gorgeous hunk who breaks through the light as he runs up to greet us. He looks exactly like the man who stood me up at that stuffy gala over two years ago.

“Angel!”

“Dada!”

Angel’s lips are on mine before another word can be spoken. I sink into his kiss and

melt across his body. Butterflies kick up in my stomach and a whole flurry of them go for an endless jaunt across an open prairie field.

“I love you.” Those are the first words out of his mouth when he finally pulls away.

Even after all we’ve been through, all we’ve shared and lost, I never thought I’d hear him say it. It shocks me still, but then Oscar giggles in my arms and I know there’s only one response. The truth.

“I love you, too.”

“Dada!”

“I love you, too, buddy,” Angel laughs. His voice is low and deep and my heart rumbles peacefully under his hot breath.

The sunlight washes over us and it feels like we’re finally free from our nightmare.

... But what comes next?

Hopefully, a dream.

Angel wraps his big arms around me and we limp inside. I can feel the soreness in his muscles as we both lean on each other for support.

We’re a team. It’s how we make it to the kitchen, and it’s how we rescued Oscar from Dante’s evil grip. A younger me might not have told Angel about the call I got from his younger brother, but after all of our failures, I knew that neither of us could do what needed to be done alone.

We hatched our plan, together. We acted it out, together. We saved our baby boy,

together.

Sure, it took us over two years and a lot of heartache, but we finally figured it out. Together, we're unstoppable. Together, we're one. Together, we're a family.

"Juan's wife made us soup, let me go get it," I offer, suddenly remembering the steaming bowl I left on the balcony. Oscar is tucked away in Angel's arms as we sit at the kitchen counter. When I stand up, Angel's big hand clasps around my tiny wrist and he pulls me back to him.

"You're not going anywhere," he says, low and deep and sultry.

His lips flutter down my neck as I stumble back onto his lap. Oscar climbs up between us, using both of our shoulders to prop himself up.

"Boo-boo," he requests.

Angel's thick forearm wraps around my waist and he holds me close. "Does Juan have any formula in the fridge?" he asks, finally letting me free from his wonderful grasp.

"Yeah," I grab a bottle as quickly as possible. There's nothing I want more in the world than to cuddle up with my two boys and forget about the world... but something else weighs heavy on my mind.

"What do we do now?"

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“Boo-boo, Boo-boo,” Oscar chants as Angel brings the bottle up to his lips.

“First, boo-boo,” Angel chuckles. “Then, it’s time to run a country... and start a family.”

A content sigh escapes my lips as I lean back into Angel’s hard, hot body.

“How does that sound?” he asks, his hot breath nibbling against my begging neck.

“Nothing would make me happier.”

Ain’t that the fucking truth.

Angel and Cat’s story is over... for now.

But they aren’t gone forever!