



Vow of Sin

Author: *Callie Vincent*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Crime And Mafia

Description: "You shouldn't taste good to me, Scarlett. I shouldn't know how you taste. Do you know why I shouldn't know that, kitten?" he says, his eyes narrowed as he stares me down, "Because you married my best friend, my business partner. Dead or alive, I should not be touching you like this, shouldn't even be looking into your direction, but here I am. F*cking craving you even though you piss me off to no end."

In the dark heart of New York's ruthless mafia underworld, Scarlett Romero, the grieving widow of the revered Romero family Capo, grapples with the shattered remnants of her life following her husband's fatal assassination. Enter Nico Acosta, her late husband's enigmatic best friend and fiercely powerful right-hand man, whose dangerous allure is matched only by his handsome looks. When the heads of the family decree that Nico and Scarlett must unite to lead the Romero empire together, what once brewed as animosity between them now simmers into an inferno of longing they're determined to resist. And with every new encounter, their undeniable chemistry grows. But Nico is guarding many secrets, including one that could destroy his tumultuous relationship with Scarlett—and bring down the entire family in a storm of ruin and retribution.

Total Pages (Source): 54

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

ChapterOne

Scarlett

I'm sitting in the front row at my dead husband's funeral and all I can focus on is the chipped red nail polish that adorns my fingernails.

The pastor is busy reciting verses from the Bible so I take this time to look away and pick at my nails, flakes of red falling onto my short black dress before they finally land on the floor next to my heels. His words are becoming a faint echo in my ears, Luis' mother sobbing next to me as I continue to pick and fidget in my seat.

Luis is my husband, or I guess was my husband. I don't know if I'll ever get used to speaking of him in the past tense. We chose to have the service at his parents' house, since their castle is large enough to take up nearly fifty acres of land. They even have their own chapel, that's how rich they are. However, you'd think with the amount of money they make off of selling drugs, guns, and other illegal merchandise, that they would be able to put in more comfortable chairs in this chapel, but here we are, crying off our makeup while our asses nearly become numb from the solid wood beneath them.

Rosa, his mother, is alone like me. His father died when he was just a boy and since then, Luis has been her sole focus in life. Until now.

"Now, it is time for Luis' wife to deliver the eulogy." The pastor says, cutting through my thoughts and halting the constant picking of my nails.

Rosa pats my leg reassuringly, her tan and manicured fingers appearing as quite the contrast against my pale thigh. I sigh and stand, wiping a few stray tears as I make my way to the front of the chapel. I look up at the stained-glass windows, staring at the painting of St. Michael for what feels like an eternity. His wings are broad and stretched out, his sword nearly drawn as he gazes down at us. I always thought Luis was like St. Michael. He was a fierce protector, a devoted fighter. I always felt safe with him, even though he was the leader of one of the most dangerous crime families in the world. He never made me feel scared, never made me feel unprotected. Up until his death, I was like his princess that was locked safely away in our little tower, hidden from the monstrosities that are a part of our world.

But now, here I am, staring at a crowd of nearly three hundred people with mascara running down my face, about to deliver his eulogy.

I place my hands on the altar, staring at my wedding ring as it glitters in the light. I try to hold back the sudden rush of tears, but it's useless. People know how much I loved my husband, to hell with them if they can't handle my sadness.

"Hello, everyone. Th-thank you for coming." I stutter, my voice cracking before I clear it and face the crowd with sunken eyes.

"I don't need to stand here and tell you how great my husband was, you all knew that. Everyone that met him automatically knew of his charm and his fun loving nature. They knew he was caring and fierce. They knew that he would die trying to protect anyone he loved." I say, my tears falling at my last words.

I want to say right then that he didn't die protecting the ones he loved. He died because of his greed, his need for more. More money, more power, but this is his day and I won't ruin it. I'll stand here like the good wife that I am and deliver as much of the truth that I can about him, even if I catch myself in a lie.

“Luis Romero had more to offer than just connection and money, he had a soul that wanted to give more than it could ever take.”

Truth, not completely a lie.

“He had this light about him, this joy that would make anyone in the room feel positive, feel hopeful.”

Truth, that one’s all truth.

“He loved his mother, and he loved this family. He would do anything he could to help a stranger and if someone ever came to him in need, his arms would be wide open.”

Only somewhat of a lie.

“He made me feel loved and safe.”

Total truth.

“He gave me a life full of joy and he never made me wish for a thing.”

Now that...that is a total and complete lie.

I never really wished for much in our marriage. My parents have been a part of the Romero family since before I was born. They died when I was eighteen and instead of being forced to navigate the world on my own, Luis was there. He was there and married me to keep me safe, to make sure that I would never have to want or wish for things again. And while I thought that was true for the majority of our marriage, it was just another lie. I pined for things he could never give me, longed for a life that could never be. And he made sure to let me know that. He crushed my wish for being

a mother right from the start and continued to do it for the decade that we had been together.

I fidget with my wedding ring, twirling the five carat, pear shaped diamond before I sniff back the rest of my tears and deliver the remaining parts of my speech without pause.

It only lasts a total of five minutes. I've spent the last two weeks perfecting this eulogy rather than wandering the halls of our mansion sobbing like a lost child. Perhaps that's the writer in me, or the perfectionist. I know how much Luis strived for perfection, so I made sure to give him this. His last and remaining perfect part of me.

When I leave the altar, people pat my body on the way back to my seat. I try not to flinch from the unsolicited contact and I keep my head down the whole way until I sit back down next to Rosa, who wraps her slender arm around my shoulder.

She's always been like a mother to me. She has been open and welcoming, has kept me company when Luis would busy himself with work or go on trips to make a trade deal. She was with me during his last trade deal, the one he would never return from. And she hasn't left my side since.

The pastor dismisses everyone but the immediate family to the courtyard where the reception is held. It's not the final one however, Luis was not a simple man and always made it clear that he wanted a celebration of life whenever his time would come, we just didn't really feel like celebrating today. That can wait. Right now, I have to say goodbye to my husband.

I let Rosa go first. I walk with her hand in mine and when she starts to openly sob over his open casket, I rest my hand on her back and turn my head. When I look over my shoulder, I lock eyes with my husband's best friend, Nico Acosta, his dark eyes

boring into my mine.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Nico has been away in Spain for nearly three years, only communicating with Luis directly. Even when he was home, I rarely saw him. I saw more of his parents, who are standing right next to him along with our guards and other staff. Nico has always been a cold and rude man, a complete contrast to his childhood best friend. Luis and the Acosta family have been a part of this business for years, so I know Nico's parents are just as affected as the rest of us. Nico on the other hand, displays no emotion, which is normal for him. I look away quickly, offering a small smile to his parents before I turn back to Rosa, who's stepping away from the casket. I step back with her, allowing everyone else to get their final moments with my husband. When everyone says their goodbyes, Rosa offers to stay with me.

"No. Go get yourself a drink, Rosa. I'll only be a little while. I just need a minute alone with him." I say quietly, her head nodding before she kisses my cheek and leaves with Nico's parents.

Before I step closer to the casket, I lock eyes once more with Nico as he leaves, his gaze just as cold and intense as usual. His eyes rake my body, causing my spine to stiffen in response. He doesn't speak to me, doesn't hug me or offer me any condolences, he just stares at me long and hard, his wavy, raven black hair resting against the shoulders of his expensive suit. His beard is longer than it was before, but still kept clean and short. Luis never had a beard, he loved to be clean and presentable at all times. Nico is not that person. Nico is unkempt and wild. Like I said, a complete contrast.

He tips his chin at me before he leaves, his chocolate brown eyes nearly black as he gazes at me with unreadable eyes. The intensity in his gaze is too much, so I look back to the casket, my long, auburn red hair brushing against my bare shoulder. I hear

the click of his shoes echo against the floor as he leaves, closing the church doors as I am now left alone with my deceased husband.

I take a deep breath and walk forward, looking at my fallen soldier who lays peacefully in his forever repose. He's dressed in his typical Armani suit, his tan skin much paler than it ever was, closer to my Irish skin now. His brown hair is short and swept back, his long and dark lashes resting against his high cheekbones as his eyes remain closed. I wish that I could see his eyes one last time. They were like onyx orbs that held nothing but passion and adoration for me, even when he was frustrated with my antics.

I rest my hand on his, his skin cold and unfamiliar.

"I wish you were awake so that I could kill you." I whisper, fresh tears falling down my face as I speak.

"I wish you would've listened to me when I said this trade didn't feel right, that it wasn't right. Maybe if you chose to listen to me for once in your life, Luis, then you would still be here." I cry softly, bending over to rest my forehead against his.

"You promised that you would never leave me alone in this world, that I would always be safe and protected, but look where I am now, baby. I'm more alone than I was when you married me." I say, sniffing as I reach for the necklace he gave me on my eighteenth birthday, a simple gold heart with a red stone in the middle.

I take it off and place it around his neck, clasping it shut as it nestles against his lifeless skin.

"I'm going to take over now, Luis. I'm going to continue your legacy and make sure that your mother is safe, that your men are safe. I'm going to be my own protector now. And this time, you're going to listen to me." I say, kissing his cold jaw before I

pull back and press my hands to the top of his casket.

“Goodnight, my sweet prince. Until we meet again.” I whisper, closing the casket before I step back and hold my head up high, staring right into the eyes of St. Michael.

I wrap my arms around myself, shoving back the rest of my tears as I try to pull myself together. I have three hundred people outside waiting for me and I know my husband would be very angry if I was late.

He would be angry if I offered anything less than perfection.

ChapterTwo

Scarlett

The reception is just as grueling as the service if not more so. I’ve been out in the courtyard for nearly an hour, and I’ve already had fifty plus people come up to me.

It’s always the same too.

The same sympathetic gaze, the same grasp on my arms, the same awkward hug, the same apology. Always the same apology. And for what? It’s not their fault he died. They’re not the ones who made the choice to fly to the border and get ambushed. They’re not the ones who didn’t do enough research because they wanted more money even though they already had more money than God himself. He did that. He’s the one that should apologize. But he’s not here and even if he was, he wouldn’t.

I’m hugging my fifty-ninth person when suddenly, it all becomes too much. I look around Rosa’s courtyard filled with waiting staff and people laughing and crying with

drinks in hand. I look around until my gaze is blurred with tears and I rip myself away from the person's arms, waving Rosa off as soon as she rushes to me.

"I just need some alone time." I say in between tears. "I'll be back in a little while." I say, her saddened gaze lingering as she nods, and I run off into the castle.

This place has over twenty different rooms, but I run straight upstairs and into the bedroom that's nearest to me. I kick off my heels before I climb the stone staircase, my tears dropping against the floor as I run towards the large guest bedroom. I close myself inside and lean against the door, my purse still clinging to my shoulder. I let myself cry for a solid minute before I wipe my tears and walk to the large, ivory vanity table, staring at my smeared makeup in the mirror. When I hear my phone start to vibrate, I fish it out of my purse and frown at the unrecognized number before I accept the call.

"Hello?" I say, my voice hoarse and thick.

"Hello, Mrs. Romero! This is Cali with Tripline. We were just giving a courtesy call to remind you of your upcoming trip at the end of this month and to ask if there's any extra preparations that you may need?" The young girl's voice over the phone says, my chest audibly crumbling now.

Our ten-year anniversary is this coming Saturday and Luis promised me a trip to the Bahamas. I've spent nearly six months planning this trip and have spent well over thirty grand. Now, it's just another crushing reminder of what once was and what will never be again.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I haven't had much time to respond to the emails. My uh..." I pause, tilting my head back as I blink away my tears.

"My husband has passed, so I've been a little preoccupied." I say finally, her gasp

sounding over the phone.

“Oh, Mrs. Romero, I’m so sorry. If there’s-”

“Thank you. I’ll forward over my cancellation sometime this week. I understand the refund will only be partial. Thank you for the call.” I say, hanging up before she has the chance to offer me my hundredth condolence of the day.

If I hear the phrasethoughts and prayersones more time, I’m going to explode.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I shove my phone in my purse and walk to the large closet with it in hand, throwing the door open before I toss my bag on the floor and follow it with shaky legs. I step inside, toes touching the solid oak built in shelves as I pull my tight, black dress down to my knees and sit. I pull the door half closed and lean back, resting my head against the wall. When I place my hands over my face, I let out a sigh that I feel like has been lying dormant in my chest for the last two weeks. I don't cry. I don't scream. I just sit there in silence. The first bit of silence I've had since he passed.

But that silence doesn't last long because now, someone is rushing into the bedroom with heavy breaths and loud footsteps. Before I can sit up to alert them that I'm in here, I hear kissing. Not just any kind of kissing either. Heavy kissing. The kissing that inevitably leads to fucking.

Seriously? Out of the dozens of bedrooms, they chose this one?

"Oh my fucking god. You're so hot." A woman says, her voice low and husky, breathless as they slam the door.

I see the shadows beneath the gap move to the vanity. The man lifts her on the table, and they continue attacking each other like animals in heat. My eyes widen and I cover my mouth, unsure of what even to do at this point. I peek around the doorframe, catching a glimpse of the couple just as the faint sound of a zipper being undone echoes through the bathroom. When I find the half-naked woman on the counter, I let my eyes move quickly to the man, where they freeze. Because it's not just any man.

It's Nico.

I move away from the opening in the door quickly, scooting as far away and as quietly as possible. I hear her the minute he enters her body, her loud gasp sounding throughout the room before he starts fucking her at an impatient speed. She's moaning, loud. So loud that my ears twitch and my heart races. He grunts like an animal, but he says nothing. It's her that's doing all the dirty talk, something that I'm not used to at all. Luis was the only man I'd ever slept with and while we did it often, it was never like this. It was never passionate and hurried and there certainly wasn't any dirty talk occurring.

"Yes, Fuck me. Do it hard." she cries, her hand slapping against the counter as he fucks her.

She lets out this high-pitched cry, like an alarm almost. When he lets out one final groan and freezes, I know that they both just came.

Well, that was short lived.

I hear the woman get up and start cleaning herself up as he zips his pants, resting back against the counter.

"Thanks for making a boring job a fun one." She leans over and tries to kiss him, but he turns, giving her his cheek.

What a fucking bitch.

Sorry that my husband's funeral wasn't entertaining enough for you, cunt.

Fire blooms inside my stomach and a rage washes over me as she leaves the room. A sudden and fiery rage that I can't help but fall headfirst into. As soon as I hear the flick of a lighter, I stand and rip the door open. The joint between his lips nearly falling to the floor from his shock. When he looks at me, his eyes narrow.

His eyes narrow.

“Hey, Scar.” His dark voice chuckles awkwardly, that rage inside of me turning into a wildfire now.

I move my eyes from his to the joint and that back to this stone cold gaze.

“You can’t smoke that in here.” I say quietly, eyeing the joint as he continues to puff at it, the smoke blowing in my face.

I’ve smoked weed once in my life. I found Luis’ stash in the bedroom one time and while he was on one of his many trips, I decided to smoke it through one of his cigar tips. It was messy and I probably wasn’t doing it right, but I felt great. I felt peaceful. Until he came home. Then I became anxious. Luis liked that I was a good girl. His perfect girl is what he would call me. And for a while, I would revel in that. I loved when he called me that. Until his expectations came into play. Then, I didn’t want to be so perfect anymore.

I step out of the closet and walk over to him, holding my hand out for the joint as I lean against the vanity next to him. His eyebrows raise in surprise, but still, he hands it to me. I inhale slowly, tilting my head back before blowing the smoke out, my eyes still aimed towards the ceiling as I hand the joint back to him.

“I didn’t know that you smoked.” he says, the burn of his gaze stretching from my shoulder to my thighs.

“I didn’t know you fucked random staff members.” I say quickly, my eyes widening as the spoken words surprise me.

When I look at him, he smiles. A wide, tooth baring grin that does very strange things to my stomach. Things that I don’t wish to acknowledge. Nico knows he’s an

attractive man. He knows the effect that he has on women. I refuse to show him that I almost let him affect me. I refuse to let my gaze linger on his dark beard, on the tan, exposed skin of his chest. He ditched the suit jacket and unbuttoned the first few buttons of his black dress shirt, the sleeves rolled up his thick forearms that adorn nothing but an expensive gold watch.

“Only on special occasions.” He winks, that rage coming back even though the single hit of his joint somewhat took it away.

“You mean your best friend's funeral.” I hiss, narrowing my eyes on him as he tilts his head back and continues to look at me.

He says nothing now, just continues to smoke and stare at me, my skin nearly crawling as I stand next to him. I sigh and look away, turning and gazing at myself in the mirror. There's bits of smudged black beneath my gray eyes, nearly blending in with the dark circles I've gained due to the lack of sleep. I grab a hand towel, dabbing under my eyes before I brush my fingers through my dark, red hair. My best friend, Sofia, curled it this morning, but I should've known it wouldn't stay put. It's too thick and straight to ever hold a curl. My Irish genes are way too prevalent.

“You look as hard as ever.” Nico says next to me, killing his joint before he places it into his pockets.

I glare at him, scoffing as I walk to the closet and retrieve my purse. I throw it over my shoulder as I walk to the bedroom door, turning my head and looking back at him from over my shoulder.

“I may seem hard. I may seem like a little, quiet perfectionist who can do no wrong, but at least I'm grieving his death. At least I'm showing emotion. Unlike you.” I spit out, walking out of the room and slamming the door behind me.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I rush down the staircase, sitting on the last step to put on my black heels that I discarded earlier. When I look up, I see Sofia walking towards me, her light brown and curly hair blowing behind her like some sort of angel. Her figure is short and curvy, contrast to my slender and tall form. Her smile lights up the room, her red lips stretching when she spots me.

“There you are.” her soft voice says, cracking something inside of me.

I start to cry then, like the broken woman that I am. She rushes towards me, sitting on the step and pulling me into her arms as she rocks me and lets me cry it out.

“Do you want me to have Mama make you a plate? It might make you feel better. You’re practically withering away.” she says, a small smile stretching my own lips.

Her mother, Camila also has worked for the Romero’s for decades. I’ve practically grown up with Sofia because of this. Not only does Camila clean all of the houses, but she also insists on being the full time chef as well. So, Sofia is right. Anytime I eat Camila’s cooking, I instantly feel better. It’s that good.

“Sure. Let's go find her. But Sofia?” I ask, pulling away to frown at her.

“What is it, babe?” she asks, tilting her head at me. She really is beautiful. Much more beautiful than I ever could be.

“I need a drink too. Preferably a strong one.” I say and she laughs, throwing her head back before she helps me up and walks us back to the courtyard.

“I know just the thing.” she says.

I can't help but hope that it'll be strong enough to erase this whole day from my memory.

ChapterThree

Nico

She leaves the bedroom in a hurry, her perfectly tight ass swaying in her black dress as she closes the door behind her. I shouldn't be ogling my best friend's wife's body, but the fucker's dead anyway, so what's it matter right?

Dead.

What a goddamn idiot, falling into a trap like that. He should've known it was going to be an ambush from the start. Anyone with half a brain could have seen that coming and if I knew ahead of time, I would've stopped him.

But I wasn't there, and Luis never really had a brain. He just had anger and greed and impulsive tendencies. Hence the reason he married one of his partners' daughters. I get that he was trying to protect Scarlett, but he didn't have to marry her, didn't even have to fuck her. But then again, the woman is an temptation few could resist.

For Luis, I mean. I've had no trouble resisting this woman. In fact, it's easy for me to forget her. Scarlett Kennedy Romero is definitely the furthest thing from my mind. Or at least has been, until today.

Until she watched me fuck a waitress and then made me share my joint with her after. Maybe she wasn't such an uptight bitch after all. Maybe, just maybe, Scarlett has a bit of an edge to her. An edge that Luis never let her expose because that was his

style. Luis liked to have his fun but when it came to relationships, whether business or family related, he liked things done just so. He liked things cut and dry, so that he could save all the fun for himself. And little Miss Scarlett was the perfect girl to fill that role.

And fill that role she did. As soon as he walked the girl down the aisle, she has been nothing but his good little wife since. Following his every order, wearing the dresses that he bought her, planning his trips and taking his messages like she was his goddamn secretary. While I haven't been around for much of their marriage, I do know that the start of it wasn't typical.

There was no honeymoon phase, no intense, disgusting love that many newlyweds love to display and shove down other peoples throats. It was a matter of principle, of duty. He saw a broken girl without any protection, and he took matters into his own hands because that's who he was, nevermind the fact that he fucked whoever he wanted during the first two years of their marriage. I don't even think he fucked her during that time. I think little Miss Scarlett has spent her entire marriage longing for a man that took years to love her back.

A man that has done nothing but lie to her. A man that she doesn't truly know.

But that's not for me to dwell on. I didn't marry the woman, he did. That's his widow and his life. I'm just here to pick up the pieces, to claim this business as my own. Just as he would've wanted. Let's just hope that his red headed princess will allow that to happen without any preamble. However, I know Scarlett. I know her better than she knows herself.

And I know that she won't go down without a fight.

* * *

Scarlett

I awake the next morning with a pounding headache, still in my dress from yesterday. I remember Sofia and Camila taking me back home, since they live in our mansion as well. I also remember begging Sofia not to take me to my bedroom, not being able to sleep in the bed I shared with my husband for ten years. I haven't slept in there since the night he died, so I've taken up residence in one of the guest rooms upstairs. Sure, I have to pass by our bedroom everyday to get to this room, but at least the doors are shut. I'd lock them too if I could. Trust me.

I sigh and rub at my eyes, my fingers coming away with residual black smears. I need a shower, desperately, but I can't find the motivation to leave this bed. I just lay here like a mass of flesh and bones, my breathing slow and even as I stare at the arched ceiling. This room is equally as elegant as the rest of the house. I know this because I designed it. I designed everything.

When I first married Luis, he still lived in his parents' castle, but with having a new bride and all, he found it may be more socially acceptable to move into a more suitable place, even though it's still incredibly large. It's not like we fucked during the first year of our marriage anyway. Luis and I didn't really start a romantic relationship until our second anniversary, when I told him that I wanted him to take my virginity. He was ten years older than me, but I had been attracted to him as soon as I hit puberty. I suppose he found it weird to like me in that way, since he met me when I was a child, but once I explained that it was just as strange to marry me as it was to fuck me, something snapped.

And fuck we did. Pretty much every night that he was home, which wasn't often. If I'm being honest, during the first few years of our marriage, I rarely saw my husband. He loved to travel for new trade deals and found it was better for the head of the family to make an appearance when handling large amounts of product or merchandise. Something changed in our fourth year though. It's almost like the

lightbulb that was constantly flickering finally stayed lit. He was home more, and became more attentive to both my physical and emotional needs. He was my husband and although the sex wasn't incredibly passionate or romantic, it was still nice. It's not like I have anything to compare it to anyway.

I sigh and finally make my way off of the bed, wandering into the adjacent bathroom. It is expansive with both a tub and a walk in shower, both the floors and the countertops the same marble white as the flooring in the bedroom. When Luis gave me the job of designing this mansion, I decided I wanted it to be everything that my childhood home wasn't. Not that I didn't like my childhood home, it was just often messy and eclectic. I live better through a minimal space. I like plants and white and for things to be as they should. Perfect, as my late husband would say.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I turn on the shower and disrobe, catching my reflection in the mirror. My gray eyes are large and tired, the circles beneath them even deeper than they were yesterday. My freckles now show across my cheeks and nose, the deep Irish traits showing through without all of my makeup. My hair is a knotted mess and when I look at my body, I notice that my hip bones are sticking out more than normal. Sofia was right, I am withering away. But it's hard to really have an appetite when you're constantly thinking of your dead husband.

I step in and stand under the warm spray until it nearly runs cold, quickly washing both my hair and my body before I step out. Right when I grab a towel from the closet, I notice a shadow move near the doorway. I spin around, whipping the towel around my body just as I lock eyes with Nico, who's leaning against the doorway in a fresh, dark gray suit. His brown eyes rake me up and down, his expression inscrutable as always. I can feel the blush spread from my cheeks to my chest, my eyes narrowing in response. I can't help but let my eyes travel over his body as well. The man is walking sin and it's nearly impossible not to ogle at him. Even though I hate it. Even though I pretty much hate him.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" I hiss, holding the towel tightly to my trembling body, his eyes lingering on my exposed thighs.

"We have a meeting." he says in a low tone, his eyes finally crawling back up to mine.

"Or did the copious amounts of gin yesterday make you forget?" He smirks, his head tilting as my cheeks burn hotter.

Shit. I did forget. The family is still here from Columbia and of course they wanted to schedule a meeting with everyone to discuss how the business is going to move forward.

“No.” I lie instead, not wanting to deal with his scrutiny. “That’s why I was showering. You could’ve texted me. Or I don’t know, maybe you could’ve knocked?” I question, looping and tying the towel around my chest before I brush past him and walk to my closet.

I had Camila bring the majority of my clothes in here, however most of my gowns and more expensive dresses are still in the other bedroom. Luis always preferred me in dresses, but I kept a stockpile of more casual clothing in here for when he was gone. I prefer comfort over style, something he and I never agreed on, along with most things.

Today however, today is not the day for comfort. Today is the day for power moves, for strength. I have to convince the founding families that I am more than prepared to take over this business. That I am well equipped and knowledgeable, that I am more than able to pick up where my husband left off. Maybe even handle it better, since I’m more logical by nature.

“I’ll be down in thirty minutes. The meeting doesn’t start until eleven.” I say flippantly, scanning through my wardrobe before I decide on my burgundy shift dress and matching stilettos.

“Carlos and Andreas are here early. I’ve already made them coffee, Scarlett.” he says in an annoyed tone, my head tilting back as a sigh escapes from my lips.

“Fine. I’ll be down in ten.” I hiss, yanking my dress off the hanger before I bend to grab my heels.

I walk to the dresser to pull out a thong and a lace bra, Nico's eyes widening as he watches my every move like a predator.

"Leave." I say, walking into the bathroom before I grab the door and slam it in his face.

I have ten minutes to prepare myself for the biggest meeting of my life. This isn't just about who's going to take over. Ultimately, it's going to decide whether I'm still under the protection of this family or if I'm going to be forced out on my own. So, late or not, I'm going to fight tooth and nail for my rightful spot. I refuse to let ten years of dedication to both this family and my husband go to waste. I'm ready to fight till my death.

ChapterFour

Scarlett

I walk down the marble staircase with my ponytail whipping behind me. I only had time for a quick blow dry and to slick it back, my makeup light as well. I'm tying the sash around my dress with my heels clicking on the floor when Camila greets me at the bottom of the staircase, cup of coffee outstretched in an offering.

I give her a smile and she kisses my cheek, the mug warm beneath my palms.

"Beautiful as always, the men are waiting in his office. Do you want me to come with you?" she asks, her dark eyes worried as she looks at me.

I shake my head and tuck a stray, gray hair behind her ear, loving her comfort. Since my mother died, I've been blessed with two additional mothers, both Rosa and Camila taking me in as their own from the start. I'm forever in debt to them. I know that if anything goes wrong today, I'll always have a place with Rosa at least, but I'll

always have care from Camila.

“No, I’ll be fine, Camila. I have to do this on my own, but I also have to hurry. I’ll meet you in the kitchen after.” I say, kissing her cheek before I sip my coffee and make my way towards Luis’ office, or I guess the office now.

God, will I ever get used to this?

A sudden wave of sadness hits me, but I force it down as I open the french doors to the grand office, where a team of men sit and chatter at the large, dark conference table. They all stop speaking and look up at me, zero smiles gracing their faces as I walk in. There are at least five guards, two dealers and then Nico, who stares at me with a hint of humor in his gaze. Carlos and Andreas, the head of the family in Columbia. The two men are old and very hard to read, but they took a liking to me immediately nearly a decade ago. They’ve always admired my strength, my resilience, and my ability to keep quiet. When I walk towards them and set my coffee cup down on the table, they grab my hands and kiss them in greeting.

“Good morning, Ms. Scarlett, you look as fresh as morning dew.” Carlos says, his accent thick, but devoid of emotion.

I’m almost convinced that not a single man in this room has the capability of feeling anything. Luis was the only one that displayed any emotion, whether it was his lighthearted nature or his anger. He displayed it all no matter how carefree or ugly it was.

“Please, sit. We have important matters to discuss.” Andreas says, pulling out a cigar as I sit down, lighting it and blowing a thick cloud of smoke into the air.

Carlos and Andreas begin discussing finances and recent deals. They also mention that they have several members of the family in search of the men who ambushed and

murdered my husband along with his two guards. When they start breaching the subject of leadership, I take one final sip of my coffee and speak up.

“I assume that you know I’m more than equipped to handle everything from here. Luis taught me everything he knew and I have more than enough men to manage the trade deals that I make. Not to mention, I’m the one that handles all of the finances here in New York.” I say sternly.

It’s true. As soon as we married, I told Luis that I wanted to finish college. I got my masters in accounting as well as my paralegal certification. If I was going to be blended into my family, I wanted to be aware of the numbers I was dealing with as well as the law.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“Yes, we know all of this Scarlett. And we have no doubt in our minds that you would be more than able to handle things here in America...” Carlos says, sighing after he speaks, my gut trembling in response to his pause.

“But?” I ask, crossing my leg over my knee before I lean back in my chair, my gaze fixed on both Carlos and Andreas.

“But I’ve been handling this business alongside your husband for over twenty years and not only am I well versed in what goes down here in America, I’m also the eyes and ears for the main house in Columbia.” Nico says from the end of the table, a cigarette resting between his full lips as I whip my head and glare at him.

“But you’ve been in Spain for half a decade. How versed can you be while working remotely?” I quipped back at him, my eyes narrowed.

“More versed than someone who’s only been observing from her little castle here in New York.” he says, his voice on the edge of a growl.

That smug son of a bitch...

“Nico is right. He’s been a part of this family since conception and I have no doubt that he will be able to handle things from here.” Andreas says, putting out his cigar in the crystal ashtray near his coffee cup.

I don’t say anything for a moment. I just sit there, trying to remain impassive as my stomach nearly drops to the floor.

“So.” I start, staring at my wedding ring as I lay my hands in my lap.

I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to take this off.

“When do I need to vacate the premises?” I say quietly, not making eye contact with anyone as the words leave my lips.

There’s a pause. A long pause filled with a heart wrenching silence that nearly guts me from the inside out. Right as the tears begin to crawl up my throat, the room breaks out in a roar of laughter. I look up quickly, locking eyes with Carlos and Andreas who are shaking their heads at me.

“You’re not going anywhere, Scarlett. Don’t be so eager.” Carlos chuckles, patting my hand as I eye Nico, who looks just as confused as I am.

“You’re right after all, you’re the best damn accountant we’ve seen and we have nobody else who’s as good at studying the legal world as you are. You have cops in your back pocket, kid. We need you too much to let you go.”

“Not to mention, you’ll always be family.” Andreas adds, offering me a small smile, which is actually just a slight lift of the side of his mouth.

“So, what does this mean? Who’s running things here then?” I ask, trying not to make eye contact with Nico as I speak.

Carlos leans back in his chair, crossing his ankles on the table as he rests his hands on his stomach.

“It means you and Nico will be partners in this. Nico will stay here with you in New York, work alongside you as well as be the one to go out for trades. I think this will work out well in our favor. I have a strong feeling about it.” Carlos says and I have to

physically restrain my jaw to keep it from dropping to the floor.

I don't know how he could possibly have a good feeling about this, Nico and I can't even stay in the same room with each other for longer than a minute and even that's too much, but I can't voice this. No one dares to defy the head families orders. If you do, you might as well start picking out your own casket.

I nod and right when I do, a grunt sounds from the end of the table. A grunt that belongs to a very frustrated Nico.

"You have any questions about this, Nico?" Andreas asks, his voice cold and filled with unspoken threats.

I glance back at Nico, who's glaring at me with a hellfire gaze. He shakes his head and smashes his cigarette into the ashtray, standing and walking to the liquor cart so that he can pour himself a glass of amber colored liquid.

"Great. Then it's settled. We've emailed you a couple options for an upcoming deal with some of our former sellers, Scarlett. You and Nico can arrange a meeting with them in the next week. Please call us if you have any questions." Carlos says as everyone stands.

He and Andreas kiss my cheek before everyone dismisses themselves from the room, leaving Nico and I alone. Which is apparently going to become a normal thing.

Fuck.

"Do you have anything to say?" I ask him as he stands and stares out of the large window, looking down at the pool house.

He slams the rest of his glass before he sets it on the cart, both hands in his pocket

before he turns and glares at me, his eyes darker than usual. Quite frankly, he looks fucking pissed.

The feeling is more than mutual.

“Stay out of my way and I’ll stay out of yours.” he nearly growls at me, a scoff leaving my lips.

“That’s going to be impossible, Nico. We’re partners-”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“We. Are. Not. Partners.” He snarls, his nostrils flared as he stalks me.

He’s quick, like a lion in the wild. He reaches me in nearly three steps and when he does, he leans over me, each of his hands placed on the armrests of my chair, his breath fanning my face.

He smells like tequila. Like tequila and some expensive cologne that I don’t recognize. It’s unlike anything that Luis wore. It is dark and masculine, mysterious like the rest of him. I can’t help but be acutely aware of how close he is to me right now. I can’t help but stare into his dark eyes as he glares down at me, clearly trying to intimidate me.

What he doesn’t realize is that it’s not an easy thing to do, intimate me that is. I married Luis Romero. Fear left my body a long time ago.

“Your husband and I were partners. You...you are nothing but a secretary in this business, Scarlett. You can’t do nearly half of what Luis did, so don’t try to. This isn’t school. It’s not some assignment that you can turn in early, hoping to get a gold star and a pat on the head for your effort. This is the real world and it’s a lot more dangerous than you know, no matter how much you’ve seen. So, don’t try to be anything that you’re not. You’ll only fail and God help me, I’m going to laugh if you do. I’ll show you no mercy, offer no remorse or encouragement. I will watch you struggle on your knees and never offer a helping hand. So, stay the fuck out of my way and be the good little girl that you’ve been trained to be.” he growls, staring wildly at me as my mouth hangs open like a fish out of water.

“You arrogant bastard-” I try to say, but he silences me by placing one of his palms

over my mouth, pressing down hard and silencing me.

His skin is rough where mine is soft. It is powerful and it tastes of salt and of man. For some stupid reason, my heart rate accelerates and it's not due to being scared. It's like I'm getting some sort of sick adrenaline rush from this.

His eyes move from mine to my chest, lingering there as I take heaving pulls of air before he rips away from me and stalks out of the room, slamming the doors behind him. I sit there, nearly gasping as I try to understand what the fuck just happened.

Luis never acted like that with me, ever. Sure, he would get stern if I happened to get carried away or angry, which wasn't often. He made it clear from the start that I was supposed to be good and quiet in order to remain safe in this world. So that's what I did. But he never spoke to me like that. He never raised a hand at me or looked at me like he hated me. So, a rational person would feel afraid by Nico's words and actions. A rational, sane person would retaliate.

But apparently, I am neither sane nor rational. Because all I could think of while his hand was clamped over my mouth was how badly I wanted to feel his lips on mine. How badly I wanted to taste his hatred for me.

It stuns me into silence. It shakes me to my core and rattles me so deeply that I begin to cry. Because what woman wants to kiss her dead husband's best friend the day after his funeral?

ChapterFive

Scarlett

I finally make it out of the office and into the kitchen, where both Camila and Sofia sit and chat at the large island, spicy smells filling the air.

“Well, don’t you look refreshed.” Sofia says sarcastically as she looks me up and down, chuckling at my eye roll as I kiss her cheek before I hug Camila and sit down next to her at the island.

“I have breakfast. Let me make you a plate.” she says, patting my arm before she gets up and starts piling on eggs and bacon onto my china.

She always gives me more than I can eat, but I know it’s because she cares. She’s always hated how slender I am, especially recently.

“Don’t you have class today?” I ask, taking a small bite of eggs after Camila sets my plate down in front of me.

My stomach sours in protest, but I don't want to offend her. I think I’ve done enough of that for one day.

“Nope. On a month-long break until I start my residency in the city.” Sofia says, sipping at her coffee as she flips through a magazine.

She’s been busy with earning her doctorate, her main goal was to be in labor and delivery. Sofia has always loved babies, more than she loves taking care of people.

It’s quiet for a while, only the sound of her magazine flipping and the stir of Camila's spoon as she busies herself at the stove.

“So, Carlos and Andreas want Nico and I to be partners. Not really even wanted, it’s actually set in stone.” I say finally, staring at my plate as I fidget with my wedding ring.

Both Camila’s spoon and Sofia’s magazine pause, both of their faces aimed directly at me now.

“Are you serious?” Sofia gasps, knowing all too well that Nico and I don’t get along.

Mostly because Nico doesn’t get along with anyone, much less a female. Unless he’s fucking her.

Stop blushing at that thought, Scarlett.

“As a heart attack.” I sigh, leaning back in my chair as Sofia’s eyes widen.

“Wow. This ought to be fun.” She whistles, crossing her arms as she stares at me, Camila resuming her work at the stove.

“Fun wouldn’t be the word that I would use to describe this particular situation.” I mutter.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“Then what word would you use?” Camila asks, her focus still trained on the pot on the stove.

“Purgatory.” I say and Sofia laughs, her teeth bared as she throws her head back.

“I think we need some wine. Mama?” she says, getting up to retrieve three wine glasses and a bottle of Chianti.

“Please.” Camila says, Sofia uncorking the fresh bottle before giving us our glasses.

“Should we toast?” she asks, raising her glass to me.

I frown, tilting my head in confusion. “For what?”

“For your new purgatory.” she says, her eyebrows raised as I chuckle and clink my glass against hers, all but downing the liquid in its entirety as I try to think about how in the hell this new partnership is going to work.

* * *

I decide to take a swim later in the day, after nearly four glasses of wine do nothing for my turbulent emotions.

The outdoor pool is being cleaned, so I settled for the indoor one residing in the pool house. I dive in immediately, my red bikini clung to my skin as I sink below the surface, holding my breath for what feels like an eternity. My thoughts are racing and my stomach is uneasy, not to mention my heart is in absolute fucking pieces. When I

finally come up for air near the ledge, my view is bombarded with an expensive looking pair of Givenchy loafers.

“What do you want?” I ask, my eyes still locked with Nico’s shoes.

“To chat.” he says simply, looking down at me as I tread the water.

“I thought you made it abundantly clear that we shouldn’t cross paths. To stay out of each other’s way.” I say absentmindedly, still staring at his leather shoes.

“Am I in your way right now, Scarlett?” he chuckles, my eyes narrowing as I look up at him, the sun streaming in from the windows creating an aura around him, like some kind of dark archangel.

“You always are.” I say, swimming to the ladder before I climb out of the pool and grab my towel.

“I need your copy of this recent month's income.” he says, my eyes rolling as I pat myself dry.

“Why? Aren’t you well versed in this business?” I scoff, annoyed with his hot and cold personality.

The man makes no sense. He never has. One of the many reasons why I hate him, apart from his good looks...

Stop it.

“I am, but you haven’t turned the report in, since your husband died and all.” he says nonchalantly, like it doesn’t bother him. Like it wasn’t his best friend that just fucking died too.

“Why are you here?” I hiss, whipping around to look at him as my anger leaves my body like a flood.

“You’ve been out of his life for years, handling your side of things on your own. Not to mention, it seems like you could fucking care less that he’s gone. So, I’ll ask you again... why are you here?” I snap, my nostrils flared as my fists clench at my sides.

He tilts his head at me, offering me a speculative gaze before he marches towards my spot near one of the lounge chairs, the click of his heels stopping as he stands a breath away from me.

Why does he always have to be so close?

He’s a few years younger than Luis and his youth shows, even through his rugged and manly appearance.

“I’m here because I have a job to do and so do you.” he growls, gazing down at me since he’s nearly a foot taller than I am, even with my abnormal height.

I stare at him for a while, my eyes flicking to the gold chain necklace that rests against his exposed sternum. His skin is so dark, like he’s been lying in the sun for his entire life. His wavy hair kisses his shoulders, the strands silky looking. My fingers itch to run through them and I inwardly curse at myself for that.

“You don’t even miss him, do you?” I whisper, looking up at his emotionless eyes as he stands before me, his nostrils flared as usual.

For a moment, I think he might respond. Something flashes through his eyes, an expression that I cannot put a name to. Just when I think he might speak, he surprises me.

One of his hands rise, his thumb caressing the space beneath my bottom lip, shocking me still. My breath hitches and my heart races, hammering against my chest so hard that I'm afraid he might see it. He might rip it out of my chest with that same hand that touched my face and throw it to the ground.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

But instead, he wipes the water off of my chin and gazes at his thumb. For a second, a very brief second, I think he might lick it away. He brings it closer to his face and inspects it before smirking and wiping it on his shirt, narrowing his eyes at me as he looks at my face.

“I need the report on my desk before this evening. I’ve made space in the office downstairs. You can leave it for me when I get back.” He says, stepping away from me and walking towards the door of the pool house, stopping on his heel.

He doesn’t look at me when he speaks, but I feel the burn of his eyes still. The thickness of his voice crowds me, takes over my entire being as he speaks.

“Don’t bite off more than you can chew, Scarlett. Be a good girl and do what’s asked of you. Surely by now, you are well versed in that regard.” he says, leaving the pool house as soon as the words leave his lips.

What the hell?

“He wants to fuck you.” Sofia says from the outdoor entrance, startling me. My shriek fills the air and soon, her laughter follows it.

“Why would you even say that, Sofia?” I hiss, her shoulders shrugging as she sets her beach towel down on one of the lounge chairs, her ass swaying as she walks to the pool ledge and sits, pink manicured toes dipping in the clear water.

“Because it’s true.” she says matter of factly, splashing the water around with her feet as she sighs and leans back on her hands.

I shake my head at her, sitting next to her on the ledge as I blow out angry puffs of air.

“It’s not. Because not only did my husband just die, but that’s also his best friend.” I say, still not speaking of him in the past tense.

“So? Doesn't mean he can't imagine fucking you.” She smiles at me, her brows wagging as I frown.

“Yeah well, he doesn’t. He hates me. And I wouldn’t want to fuck him anyways.” I say, dropping my chin to my chest as I swirl the pool water around with my foot.

She raises an eyebrow at me, leaning in to whisper, “You sure about that?”

“Jesus Christ, Sof. Yes. I’m very sure about that.” I hiss, moving away from her as she laughs.

“Could’ve fooled me. That man’s been dying to be in between your legs since you first married Luis. Anyone with a pair of eyes can see that.” she says this like it’s the most obvious thing in the world, like I’m the crazy one for thinking that it’s not true.

“Dear God, what is with today?” I groan, sliding into the water and drowning out her laughter as I sink into it, holding my breath as I dive under.

Sofia is crazy and she’s only saying this to get my mind off of my sadness. She knows that my brain works well with distraction when it’s under stress and implying that Nico and I share a mutual, sexual attraction does nothing to distract me. In fact, it just makes me even more flustered because I don’t want him. I don’t like Nico. In fact, I hate him.

I hate how his eyes look like chocolate and how his hair is the same color as a wild

raven. I hate how his tan skin gleams in the light and how his gold chain tickles his dark chest hairs. I hate how strong his forearms look when the sleeves of his dress shirt are rolled up. I hate how he's the only man I've ever met that makes me feel small, both emotionally and physically.

But mostly, I hate that every time he's near, I don't think about my relationship with Luis. I think about him, about their friendship. I think about how much I envy his absence over the years, of his ability to remain close with my husband many miles away. Closer than I ever was to him.

I hate him. I hate Nico Acosta and because of that, the last thing I want to do is fuck him. Even though I know that he's really fucking good at it. Good enough to make a girl call him Daddy.

I groan under the water, bubbles rolling to the surface as I come up for air, Sofia's laughter still vibrating around me.

ChapterSix

Scarlett

I walk into Luis' office and every part of me stiffens.

I don't like coming in here and I haven't really since he died. He loved this place, in fact, most of his beloved items are held inside of here. His genuine crystal decanter, century old books in his massive bookcase. He even has a safe in here filled with God only knows what, a safe that I have refused to open.

I go to his desk and open up his computer, trying to find this month's recent bank statements and deposits that I never got. I'm scouring his files and finding some of the transactions that I need, as well as some emails from past clients so that I can

drum up the reports that Nico is asking for. It takes me nearly an hour to find everything, but once I gather all that I can, I open up my spreadsheet and start plugging everything in.

This takes me a while, a lot longer than it usually does in fact and it's not because I don't have all of the needed information, it's because we have a lot of money unaccounted for. In fact, it seems that we're missing over twenty grand and I can't figure out why. All of the deals and transactions have added up fine, but there's still this massively large amount that we're missing.

I open up a new tab and look through all of his bank accounts, crunching together every number and amount that I can find. When nothing changes, I sit back against the chair with my hands in my hair, frustrated beyond belief. Suddenly, an email pings through. An email from a bank that I do not recognize, stating that whatever account is open through them has overly withdrawn funds.

I frown and lean forward, clicking on the email and reading it fully. I copy the link attached and plug it into the search engine, the bank account locked and requiring a password that I do not have, but I try every commonly used password that I can think of. Still, none of it works.

"Fuck!" I shout, slamming my hands on the keyboard as I stand and pace in front of his desk.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I look at his file cabinets and pull them open, digging through every file until my fingers are sore. When I find nothing, not a password or anything, I slam the cabinet shut and kick it. I hear something metallic drop to the floor and tilt my head, my heels clicking against the hardwood as I approach the desk again and look under it. When I look down, I see a small, metal key sitting beneath the desk. I pick it up and stand, holding it in my hand as I inspect it. It's not a house key because it's way too small to fit inside of a door lock. I try to insert it into the cabinet drawers, thinking maybe it's for when he locks them, but it doesn't fit. I look around the room and freeze when I spot his safe sitting near the bookcase, my head tilted and my eyes narrowed as I gaze at it.

I walk towards the safe, the room still and quiet as I crouch and insert the key, turning it until the lock clicks and the door opens. When I pull it wider to reveal what's inside, my jaw nearly drops to the floor. Inside this safe, lies a few handguns, a manilla folder with papers inside and a stack of cash that's larger than my head. I pull it out, staring at the massive bundles of one hundred dollar bills. This must total to at least a million dollars. What I don't understand is why all of this is here. Sure, it's important to keep things locked away in case of an emergency, but Luis told me everything. Surely he would inform me of this in case I needed to access it. In all honesty, I just thought this safe held stolen firearms, or ones that were used in homicides.

I put the money back inside and grab the file. I hold it to my chest as I walk back to Luis' desk, sitting in his massive, leather chair as I lay the folder down on the desk in front of me, my hands shaking as I rest them atop it. I don't know what kind of Pandora's box I'm about to open, but I do know that I'm nervous. Nervous mostly because Luis never told me about this, so it could be something really, really bad. Or

something to do with this business that I either won't know how to handle, or won't be able to stomach. I take a deep breath and open the folder, a frown lowering my brows as I stare at its contents.

Inside of the folder, lies several bank statements from the account that I didn't have access to, the last four numbers matching to the one in the email. They date back to seven years ago, each month totaling to over twenty grand withdrawn. I guess that explains why the account is negative, he hasn't been around to replenish the funds to this secret account. I put the statements aside, freezing when my eyes land on a small, black and white photo. It is of Luis and a woman that I do not know. He looks young, the photo was taken at least ten years ago. The woman in the photo is smiling up at him, her teeth straight and perfect, her eyes glittering as she looks up at him from where she stands in his arms. I nearly gasp when I look at his hands that are settling on her waist, tears filling my eyes when I spot his wedding ring on his left hand.

Who is this woman? Was Luis having an affair all this time? Why is there over one million dollars missing and documented in this folder? Was the money sent to her?

My heart starts to race in my chest, pounding as if it's trying to escape from my body. My eyes fill with unshed tears, my vision blurring as my hands shake while holding the photo. I set it to the side to look at the picture that sits in the folder. It is small and is of a little boy, a toddler. He has dark brown hair and golden eyes, his face becoming more familiar the longer I look at it. When I grab the other photo and hold it next to the one of the small boy, a cry of anguish leaves my throat. This boy looks exactly like my husband, like a younger, cloned version of him. I flip the photo of the boy over, elegant handwriting spelling out the name Frankie on it. There is no date or any other information, just the name.

I shove everything back into the folder and slam it shut, pushing away from the desk and sobbing into my hands as the shocking revelation of my dead husband's affair that definitely resulted in a love child hits me like a box truck. This explains why the

safe is here, why there is a secret account. It explains why so much money is missing, why there is a stack of a million dollars sitting inside there. It's all for her and for him, for the little boy and the woman he tried to keep from me.

I get up from the chair and walk to the safe. I shut it, lock it and then I grab the key and set it inside the folder before I tuck everything under my arm and walk to the door of his office. I look over my shoulder, tears still clouding my vision as I scan the office one final time before I slam the door behind me and walk up the stairs and into my bedroom. I sit down on the bed, setting the folder next to me as I sigh and wipe my tears. I want to talk to Sofia, but I can't involve anyone until I have more details. I doubt that he would tell Carlos or Andreas or really any of his workers, but then again he lied to me, so who can I really trust or believe?

Then Nico enters my mind. The best friend that has stayed away for years only to return the day of Luis' funeral. The best friend that is quiet, but demanding. The man that has refused to give me full control of this business.

That is the man I need to talk to.

* * *

Nico

I enter the mansion with an audible sigh, today's bullshit weighing heavily on me.

The sun has set and I smell Camila's cooking as soon as I enter the mansion. That is the one good thing about being here, there's always food, but with the food, comes people. And I really fucking hate people.

Especially the tall red head with a perfect ass that constantly makes my life a living hell.

I undo my tie and throw it on the end table in the foyer, bits of blood marking my cufflinks as I remove those as well. We had a small inconvenience during a deal today, one that left my designer suit in need of a good dry cleaning. Surprisingly, that wasn't enough to piss me off. In fact, I was relieved to blow off some steam after my run ins with Scarlett today. That woman is enough to drive any man mad, no wonder Luis kept so much from her.

I'm walking through the foyer and about to round the corner towards the kitchen when I hear someone sniffing in the adjacent living room. I walk in there and freeze in the doorway when I spot Scarlett sitting on one of the designer couches, her eyes red as she brings a glass of amber liquid to her mouth. When she spots me, an intense glare covers her face. Judging by the blush of her cheeks, I can tell that's not her first drink of the day. She looks tired, overwhelmed even and while I could easily chalk that up to grief, I can tell that's not the cause of her distress. The air in the room is tense, charged with animosity that is now directed fully at me.

"What's happened-" I try to ask, but she cuts me off with a wave of her hand.

"Who is she?" she asks, eyes narrowed and voice thick, trepidation washing over me as her words sink in.

I look to the coffee table and try not to growl when I see an open manilla folder. Bank statements and photos are scattered in and around it, a black and white photo of Luis and his older lover, Elena, sitting atop all of the papers.

Shit.

"Do I need to ask you a second time, or have you recently become deaf?" She sneers, slamming the glass down on the table next to the papers, her tall body coming into view as she stands from the couch.

She's wearing a tight, dark grey dress, the color making her eyes pop. Her hair is kept long and straight today, stopping at the middle of her back. If she wasn't so clumsy in nature, she'd make the perfect model. She walks towards me, her heels clicking against the ground before she stops a breath away, the fires of hell displayed over her striking face.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I say, my voice low and void of any emotion.

Something in her snaps then. A million emotions flutter across her face and a rush of air leaves her chest. Her manicured fingers come into view before she lands a solid and quick slap to my face, the sound echoing off the walls.

"Don't you fucking play dumb with me, Nico! I've found everything. Everything. And I know for a fact that you know about everything. You were his best friend. And you're a better liar than you ever were a friend. Except for right now. So tell me the goddamn truth!" She roars, fresh tears forming in her turbulent gray eyes.

For a moment, I want to let myself feel bad. I want to pity the woman my best friend lied to for years, but I don't allow myself to. This isn't the moment for pity or for comfort. It's the moment for truth, especially since the woman he cheated with is dead. It's not like she can get answers elsewhere.

I walk to the bottle of bourbon that rests on the coffee table, grabbing myself a new glass from the tray and filling both mine and hers. I hand her the glass and sit down on one of the leather arm chairs, drinking from my glass as I stare at the floor. If Luis was alive today, I'd knee him in his balls for putting me in this situation. I have enough of his messes to clean up, I didn't want to deal with this one too.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, holding the glass in my hand as I look up at her, her slender body shaking with rage and confusion.

“Who is she?” she asks again, her voice quiet, but just as lethal as it was before.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I take one sip, staring at the liquid in my glass. “Her name was Elena De Luca.” I say and she tilts her head at me, her auburn hair falling over her bare, porcelain shoulder.

“Was?” she whispers, her eyes narrowed as she stares at me from her spot in the doorway.

“Yes, was. She died long before he did.” I say and she sighs as she walks to the couch next to me.

She sits down, one long leg crossed over the other as her spiky black heel gleams in the light. The woman really is beautiful, it’s a shame she’s such a bitc—

“When and how did she die?” she asks before taking a small sip of her drink.

Be smart, Nico. Luis’ voice echoes inside of my head as I stare at his striking widow.

“Car accident. Nine years ago.” I say, narrowing my eyes as I look at her, a broken sigh leaving her full, red lips.

“So, he was cheating on me.” she says and I shrug.

“During the first year, if you even want to call it cheating. You both married due to obligation. If I can recall correctly, you didn’t really have any intimacy during the first couple years of your marriage.” I say and her head snaps up, narrowed eyes pinned to me like gray daggers.

“It doesn’t matter when we were intimate, we were married and he was fucking

somebody else. Somebody that clearly loved him. He could have told me. Heshouldhave told me. We were friends long before we married, I am at least owed that, don't you think?" She says, her broken voice filling with anger once more.

I sit there for a while in silence, sipping my drink as the wheels turn in her head. When I see a lightbulb go off, her head tilts in wonder.

"De Luca. I know that name. They're the Italian family that has reigned over parts of Manhattan. They hate us." she says, her eyes still narrowed and she sorts through all of this information mentally.

"You can see now why he kept it a secret. Not just from you, but from everyone." I say and she leans forward, her teeth biting down on her bottom lip.

I have no idea why, but my fingers itch to pull it free.

"But not from you." she says, her hand digging through the papers on the table before she pulls out a photo and tosses it in my lap.

It is of a boy, but not just any boy. It is Frankie.

"Tell me about him." she says, leaning back in her chair as Luis's voice continues to echo through my head.

How in the fuck am I going to lie my way out of this one?

ChapterSeven

Scarlett

I watch him stare at the photo for several minutes, lies already being rapidly

constructed behind his dark eyes. He holds the small picture in his large hands, his fingers dark and rough. He pinches the photo between those thick fingers, his breathing deep and even.

“I already know it’s his son, Nico. So, spare me the bullshit. He’s practically Luis’ clone.” I hiss, a chuckle leaving his lips as he brings the glass to his mouth and drinks.

“So, what do you want to know then? Seems like you have enough knowledge already. Quite frankly, I don’t even know why I’m here?” he says and I feel fire building in my stomach and stretching across my skin.

“Enough.” I bark, my body shaking with rage.

“I want to know when he was born.” I say, my hands in my lap as I stare at the dark, menacing man sitting across from me.

“Before you both married. He must be at least eleven now.” he says and my heart breaks apart in my chest.

If this is true, that means Luis had this boy with a De Luca a year before we even married, when my parents were still alive. Why didn’t he tell me this? I wouldn’t have judged him for having a child with the enemy, we all have baggage. But now, this baggage is more than just complicated history. It is a decade long lie that has completely blown up in my face just days after burying his body.

“Does anyone know that Luis is his biological father?” I ask and Nico shakes his head at me.

“No. He made Elena tell her family it was from a one night stand. Nobody even knew that they were together. If they did...there would be a lot more trouble than just a

widow finding out about infidelity.” He sneers and I want to choke him.

I want to stand up and punch him repeatedly not only for his crude words, but for the fact that he and my husband lied to me for years. They both played me for a fool and he has the audacity to speak to me this way? Fuck him.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“If she’s dead and the boy is believed to be a bastard child, then who is receiving all of the money that’s been sent? How is the money not explained?” I ask, his eyes narrowed as he stares at me.

Got you, asshole.

“Lorenzo De Luca, Elena’s father, agreed to not track down the man she had Frankie with if he received funds each month. The account is under a fake name so that Luis’ contributions couldn’t be traced. If there’s one thing Lorenzo loves more than killing, it’s money.”

I look at him now, really look at him. And what I see is a dark man that not only holds his own secrets, but the secrets of others as well. Perhaps Nico is the right one to rule this business. He’s a damn good liar and great at withholding information. He’s the perfect man for the job. He’s the perfect man for stabbing someone in the back and then turning around and lying his way through it. I guess if someone can get away with murder everyday, they can get away with withholding the truth about his best friend’s infidelity.

I can’t believe I let myself become attracted to him, to let my body feel lust for him. He may be beautiful and made for fucking, but he’s a demon in disguise. He’s a person that can make you feel pleasure, strong enough to fuck in a bathroom during a funeral, but he’s also the person that can smile at you one minute then shoot you in the head the next. He’s the goddamn devil and quite honestly, he’s probably even worse than my dead, cheating husband.

I stare at him for a while, all of this information swirling around in my head like a

tornado. Honestly, I feel like I'm either going to pass out or get sick. I don't think I can handle anymore, so I decide to stay silent while I finish my drink. I uncross my legs and stand, smoothing down my dress before I gather all of the statements and photos and set them back in the folder with the key. I close it and slap down the expense report on top of it before I toss it all into his lap.

"Here's this month's expense report that you asked for. I'd say that the missing twenty grand should be investigated, but we both know where that went." I hiss, setting down my empty glass on the antique coffee table before I turn and walk to the doorway.

When he calls my name, I turn and look at him over my shoulder. He is frowning and the longer I look at him, the more I realize that he's telling the truth. He looks exhausted right now, beaten down and angry with the fact that he just had to tell me everything. Poor fucking Nico.

"This is why you're here, isn't it? To keep his secrets and clean up his messes." I say, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat as he swallows and stares at me.

"Don't be stupid and run off telling everyone, Scarlett. It will start a war that neither of us are prepared for." He warns and I can't help but laugh.

"I'm not a stupid woman, Nico. What I am now, is a liar. Because of the both of you." I say, rubbing my jaw as I bite my lip and look up to the ceiling.

"He always did get what he wanted, didn't he?" I ask, sniffing back all of the unshed tears before I leave him in the living room and walk through the foyer.

When I reach the staircase, Camila rounds the corner with a wide smile on her face. I want so much to go to her and hug her, but I stop myself. As much as I want someone to talk to about this, Nico is right. It would start a war. The De Luca's are ruthless

people. They kill for sport and right now, our family is considered weak since we've lost the head of our organization. I am not prepared to deal with the repercussions if this information gets leaked.

"Scar! I almost have dinner ready, my love, but I wanted to ask you something while I have you here." Camila says, her hand resting on my arm as I offer her a fake smile.

"Of course, what can I help you with?" I ask.

"I know that Luis' celebration of life is this coming weekend, I just wanted to see if there was anything you needed help with?" she asks and I swear, I have to physically stop myself from letting more tears rush forward.

After today, the last thing I want to do is plan an event celebrating the life of a liar, of the man that has single handedly ruined everything for me in a matter of weeks. I really don't have it in me to go through all of the preparations right now. Quite honestly, I want to pack all of my belongings and run away to start a new life, but I know all of that is impossible and is just wishful thinking.

"Actually, yeah. Can you call the event planner and give her the details that I have? There's a folder in my purse that she can pick up along with the credit card for payment. That would help me out a lot." I say and she smiles as she nods her head at me.

"Of course, do you have a location in mind?" she asks and I think for a moment.

I originally wanted to have it here, but right now, I don't think I can take any more memories of him in this house. Right now, I want to wipe all of them clean.

"Yeah um...the country club downtown." I say, Luis's favorite business being the best location for something like this, especially since it's one of the businesses I

never go to.

It's for Manhattan's elite, a place that I've only gone to when he wanted me to, to serve as his arm candy. Which now appears as the only thing I ever was to him, arm candy. Not a wife or a partner. Certainly not a person that he loved enough to trust.

"Perfect! I'll call her now and arrange for her to pick everything up tomorrow morning. Come, dinner is about done." she says as she turns towards the direction of the large kitchen.

"I'll be down in a minute." I say. "I just need to freshen up." I smile at her and she nods as she walks off towards the kitchen, calling over her shoulder as she disappears from view.

"Don't be too long, Sofia is on her way and Antonio is starving." she says and I sigh.

Antonio is an old guard we had promoted to one of the business handlers. He's a long time friend of the family and a very special friend to me. Many of the nights that Luis would be gone and Sofia wasn't able to come around, Antonio was there to keep me company. He taught me how to count cards and throw a nasty right hook. He's also able to see through people's bullshit, especially mine. He's better at it than Sofia and now both of them will be in the same room with me, just hours after I found out all of this bullshit.

"Sounds great!" I holler, rubbing my forehead as I climb the stairs to my bedroom.

I pass by Luis and I's old room, staring at the double doors long and hard before I grunt and push them open. I slam them behind me and walk to my closet, ripping away all of my clothes and throwing them on the bed with my shoes, purses and jewelry. I empty out everything that is mine and throw it into my designer luggage. When I have four bags zipped up and by the door, I scan the room. It feels like it

belongs to a stranger now, which I guess in theory, it always has. I spot the photo of us on our wedding day that stands on his nightstand. I walk to it and hold it in my hands, that fiery rage building inside of me once more. A million memories flash through my head and before I can bear anything else, I throw the frame at the wall, glass shattering onto the floor with our photo. I rip my wedding ring off and throw it in one of his drawers before I slam it shut.

Then, I grab my luggage, open the doors and set it in the hallway. I turn around and go to one of the spare closets in the bedroom, pulling out a chain, lock and matching key before I walk back into the hallway and slam the door behind me. I wrap the chain around the door handles and put the lock around it before I lock it with the key and throw that into one of my bags. I turn away from the room and walk to my new bedroom, throwing all of my bags inside before I shut the door and sit on the bed.

Fuck Luis Romero for all of his lies and his bullshit. Fuck him for making me play the part of the perfect wife while he was off being an asshole of a husband. He may have had a love child with the woman he was in an affair with, but that was years ago. Who's to say the man didn't fuck anyone else? Honestly, I know for a fact that if he did, the women only wanted him for his money. Sure, he was good looking, but he was terrible in bed. And that says a lot, considering the fact that he's the only man that I slept with.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

With that thought, a wave of nausea hits me. I'm going to need to make an appointment with my gynecologist as soon as possible. I could have a disease now, something I thought that I would never have to worry about.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror by the nightstand, my face drawn and pale. If I have to lie to everyone, I have to become good at it, great even. I have to play the part of a sad widow, not of a betrayed woman. I get up and grab my make up, redoing my face until I look polished and perfect. My lashes are long and black, my dark eyebrows thick and perfectly aligned above my eyes. I gave myself a smoky look with my eyeshadow and reapplied my red lipstick.

I brush through my hair, making sure every strand is silky and straight. I look pretty great, but I still don't feel it. I need to feel confident and powerful. I need to feel like a damn good liar, one that people believe. I need to be better than Nico and Luis combined.

I need my red dress.

I grab my red dress from one of my bags, stepping out of my gray one and into the tight new number that hugs my body perfectly. The slit goes up my thigh and I feel powerful every time I wear it. I'll need all the confidence I can get tonight, if I want people to believe me.

I need to harness this power and keep it forever. It's the only way that I can move forward.

ChapterEight

Scarlett

I make my way to the dining room with a glass of Chianti already in hand.

I can hear laughter growing as I near the door, the long, ornate table completely set underneath the glittering chandeliers. I designed this room from scratch, the red, velvet chairs matching the running, lace tablecloth. I guess you could say it's my favorite color.

"Scar! Glad you could finally join us. I somehow traveled further than you did, yet we've been waiting for nearly an hour." Sofia says with a sarcastic smile, her eyes sparkling as she rests her chin on her hand.

I roll my eyes at her, walking fully into the dining room now and freezing when I see Nico chatting with Antonio at the end of the table, dressed in a black, designer suit. Antonio looks up and grins at me, his hazel eyes shrinking as he smiles. He's had a hair cut recently, the dark brown buzz cut different since I last saw him a week ago. I didn't have time to find him at the funeral, considering I was hiding in the bathroom listening to Nico fuck one of the waitresses.

"Hey, Antonio." I say with a tight smile, walking around the table to sit next to Sofia.

"Where did you go earlier?" I ask her and she shrugs at me while sipping from her glass of wine.

"Had to meet some of the nurses I'll be working with during my residency." she says, her voice tinged with a tightness that I've mastered detecting.

"How were they?" I ask, setting down my wineglass and Camila walks in with a tray of steaming food.

“Ah, the usual snobby white women. Pissed that a young Latina is going to be their new doctor.” She winks at me and I feel the air shift as Antonio scoots closer to me, his hand gently brushing my thigh from beneath the table.

“How are you, Scarlett?” he asks, his New York accent barely present, but always present when he speaks to me.

Antonio has always been a strict, professional man. I guess that is what’s expected when you’re ex-military. However, when he’s near me, it’s almost like I get to see a part of him that no one else does. A soft part, a carefree part. Perhaps it’s the real him.

“As good as I can be.” I say, looking into his hazel eyes as Camila serves the seafood paella that she prepared, the smell of clams and spices making my stomach growl.

Antonio looks down at my stomach, a small, disapproving expression crossing his face. The man may have a gorgeous face, but his body is even more intense. He’s nearly two hundred and fifty pounds of solid muscle. And he’s constantly reminded me that I need to eat more, and offered for me to eat with him during his six meals a day so that he could fatten me up. I used to laugh, but now, I just feel sad for some reason. Maybe because he knows that I’m feeling lost and I can’t really tell him the truth as to why.

Camila takes her seat across from us, offering refills of wine as we all start to eat. I take a few bites of the rice, opening the clams and devouring those too before I toss back the rest of my Chianti, a smile on Antonio’s face as he eats his meal.

“Good girl.” he whispers and I know that most women would drop their panties to hear him say that to them, but I feel nothing.

With him, all I’ve ever felt is friendship.

“How have you been? I heard both the store and the country club are doing well under your watch. We’ve had twenty new memberships just this month.” I say, dabbing my mouth as I lean back in my chair while Camila pours me a new glass of wine.

“And over two million in jewelry sales. Surely, you haven’t forgotten that. Since you’re the accountant.” Nico says from the end of the table, his leg crossed over the other as he rests in my red velvet dining chair.

I stare into his dark inscrutable eyes. His hands look massive as he holds his glass of bourbon, his platinum watch gleaming under the light of the chandelier. I narrow my eyes at him, grabbing my wine and taking one long sip before Sofia redirects my attention.

“Mama says we’re having the celebration of life at the club and not here?” she asks, my eyes snapping to hers as a dark chuckle leaves Nico’s lips.

“Yeah, I didn’t really want the house to be filled with people. Not so soon. I’m finding I like it best when it’s quiet. More time to process.” I say, a bit of tightness in my voice because my words were really meant for Nico and not her.

“Are you sure?” Sofia asks, her soft eyes looking into mine. “I figured maybe you would like the company, some positivity perhaps.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I set my glass down and rest my hand on hers, loving my best friend for her constant empathy and softness. I'd be lost in this world without her or her mother.

"He'd want it to be at the club." I say, trying not to feel angry as I say the words, since memories of many of my sleepless nights occurred because he would constantly be there and not at home.

"You're right, he would. He always loved that place. It's probably why so many of Manhattan's businessmen have joined recently, in honor of him." Camila says proudly, swiping a tear from her eye.

Poor, innocent, naïve Camila. If only you knew. Or maybe you did? Maybe everyone fucking knew about his secret life and I'm just the fool walking around blind, but I can't say anything about it. I can't have an outburst. Because they could all be fools too.

"That's exactly why. Everyone looked up to him. He was a special man, wasn't he?" I ask her and she smiles fondly at me as she nods her head.

"So, I hear you and Nico are tag teaming the business together now." Antonio says and I have to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

"Yeah I guess you could say we're partners now." I say with a sigh, a snort bursting from Sofia. I nudge her in the side with my elbow and she glares at me.

"I think everything will be fine with the new arrangement. You were always great with numbers and legal matters, just as Nico is with deals and being...out there."

Antonio says and I don't respond, I just look at Nico who sits with his leg still crossed over his knee, a dark expression brewing in his mysterious eyes.

I don't know if it's the two glasses of wine or the months of abstinence, since my husband was out probably fucking the models of Manhattan while I laid in bed waiting, but I can't stop the rush of wetness that surges through my pussy when I look at him. His shoulders are broad and his beard is thick, as dark as the long, silky strands that fall from his head. I hate how full his lips are, how they wrap perfectly around the lip of his crystal glass. I hate how his Adam's apple bobs in his dark throat as he swallows the amber liquid. I hate how every move, every sigh, has a reaction on my body. Because I really fucking hate him.

"I want you to come down to the store tomorrow, Scarlett. We have some new pieces in and the appraiser is meeting with me. I want you there to go over numbers, see if he's full of shit or not. You know how greedy these bastards can be. One exotic jewel from the homeland will have them salivating and lying through their teeth for a chance to buy it from you at a way lesser price. You can see through his bullshit. You've always been good at that." Antonio says, his words nearly making me chuckle as I look at him now.

I wish I could say that he is right. When Luis was alive maybe his words would be true, but right now, right now I'm kicking myself in the ass for not seeing through his bullshit facade sooner.

Still, I say, "Sure thing. Does noon work?" He nods and pats my arm, his warm hand settling there for a few seconds longer than normal, Nico's eyes now pinned to where Antonio's skin touches mine.

Camila is about to say something when Nico uncrosses his legs and tosses back the rest of his glass. He sets it on the table along with his napkin, standing abruptly as he fixes his cufflinks.

“I’ll be in my office.” he grumbles before striding out of the room, my head tilted in confusion as everyone watches him leave.

“What’s up his ass?” Sofia says, my shoulders shrugging in response.

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s been lodged there for centuries.” Everyone chuckles and when I catch eyes with Antonio again, his sparkle in return. He licks his lip as he stares at my face, his hand slowly moving away from my arm. He winks at me and even though this can be misconstrued as flirting, I refuse to believe it.

Antonio is like a brother to me, a friend and male guardian when I needed one. I feel no attraction towards him and even though it should be because he’s my dead husband's friend, I know that’s a lie. Because right now, regardless of how angry I am, I’m still lusting after his business partner, his best friend.

* * *

Dinner ends and I have to refuse dessert even though Camila’s cinnamon tres leches cake looks divine. In truth, I am exhausted after today and am in serious need of some rest. I opt for a bubble bath in my new bathroom, the floating, stone tub barely even used since this room has been both used and designed as a guest room. I decide to indulge myself with the luxury bath set I had out for our next guest, leaning back with a sigh as the vanilla bubbles surround me in the massive tub.

“You forgot to add in the funeral expenses to the report, those are required as well.” Nico says from the doorway, my eyes snapping open as a loud gasp of shock leaves my lips.

I cover my breasts with my hands, the bubbles covering the rest of my naked flesh as I look to his spot in the doorway. He’s leaning against the frame, his suit jacket gone. His thick, tan arms are exposed since his black shirt is rolled up. They are crossed

over his broad chest, his height nearly overwhelming as my heart pounds in my chest.

“I had my bedroom door locked. How did you get in here?” I hiss, his eyes glittering as he pulls a key from his pocket and holds it in the air.

“I got keys too, kitten. And you didn’t answer your phone.” he says and I frown at him.

“Obviously because I’m a little preoccupied.” I sneer and he shrugs, walking towards the tub before he stops and squats nearly a foot away from me, his lips a breath away as I stare at them.

“This business doesn’t allow down time.” he says and I narrow my eyes, still staring at his perfect, infuriating mouth.

“Luis had a lot of down time. Years of it in fact.” I say, his head tipping back as he glares down at me when I finally meet his intense gaze.

He stares at me for a while, my face heating as his eyes roam over my body from where it lays in the tub. He tilts his head at me now, his eyes slowly lifting back to my face as a smirk plays with his full lips.

“Shall we talk about how Antonino wants to fuck you?” he says and I swear, if I wasn’t already shocked, I definitely would be now.

“One, we don’t talk. And two,” I say, swallowing slowly as I avert my gaze and stare at my knees poking through the bubbles.

“He doesn’t want to fuck me. He’s my friend. Sorry if you get empathy confused with lust. I know the former is unknown territory for you.” I say, holding my breasts a bit tighter even though my womb is fluttering from his closeness.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

He's so close and he smells so fucking good, like whiskey and cologne. It's a heady combination that has my body craving him like a drug. I can't help but wonder how his lips would feel on mine, on my skin, on my cun-

Stop that!

"You can still care about a woman and want to fuck her dizzy." he says and I might just pass out from embarrassment alone, but the heat within me is too strong.

I hate how his words makemedizzy, make me want to become unhinged. I hate how he, mixed with the wine I've had today, makes me want to launch myself from the tub and into his muscular arms.

"How would you know about caring for a woman while fucking her?" I ask, looking into his eyes now as I speak.

He's quiet for a moment, his jaw working as he glares at me. Suddenly, he stands, his massive height towering over me as I shrink beneath the bubbles in the tub.

"I'll need the updated report by in the morning." He growls, turning on his heel before he marches towards the door.

"Don't worry, I'll have it in the next couple of hours,boss." I hiss and he shakes his head at me, walking out of the bathroom and then my bedroom, the door slamming behind him.

Will I ever get used to both his intensity and confusing behavior? One could only

hope. I let myself slide beneath the water, bubbles covering my face as I hold my breath and sink beneath the surface. I hold it until my lungs grow weak and my mind gets hazy, the day's atrocities blurring away as I let myself become numb and lifeless.

I can't help but wonder if things would be better off if I was the one that died and my husband was still alive.

ChapterNine

Scarlett

I spent the rest of the night in my pajamas, editing the report on my laptop while shoving cake into my face at the kitchen counter. I sent it off in an email to Nico, adding a middle finger emoji as the subject line.

Now, I'm sitting outside of the jewelry store I own in a Mercedes that Luis bought me for my twenty-fifth birthday. I had always wanted one. A pearl white, coupe with red leather seats to be exact. And he bought me just that. Then, I was over the moon with joy. He kissed me while I jumped into his arms, spinning me around the room before he threw me on the couch and fucked me for three minutes. Like always, I pretended to be satisfied, even though I knew as soon as he would leave for the club, I'd just end up on our bed spending some quality time with my vibrator.

That memory used to bring me sadness right after he died. Now, I don't feel anything. I feel completely numb as I step out of my car and onto the sidewalk of downtown Manhattan, staring at the large jewelry store as I smooth down the dark purple skirt of my sheath dress. My nude heels click against the pavement, the door chime sounding off as I pull open the glass door and step inside of the building.

One of the young, blond jewelers steps forward with a sympathetic smile. Her large fake tits on full display in her tight, hot pink dress as she walks to me with open arms,

pulling me in for a hug as my eyes widen in surprise. Luis always did like his staff to be young and beautiful. Not to mention, fake in every sense of the word.

“Mrs. Romero, I am so sorry for your loss.” Her high pitched voice says as she pulls away and holds my thin arms with her tan hands, her acrylic nails practically biting into my skin.

“Please, if there is anything, anything at all that you need from us here, don’t hesitate to ask.” She smiles a plastic smile at me and I return it with a small one as she turns on her stiletto and walks back behind the counter, leaning over as a customer stares at her cleavage while she retrieves the ruby necklace we have, retailing for nearly fifty grand.

I used to love this place. Now, it just feels like a chore. Almost everything at this point feels like a chore. Is it too late to run away and find a new name to hide under?

“Scarlett! Right on time as always.” Antonio says as he walks towards me from his office, his dark gray suit stretching across his muscular frame.

He’s a few inches shorter than me, something we’ve always joked about even though his weight doubles mine. He kisses both my cheeks, grabbing my bag from my shoulder before he turns and gestures for me to follow him.

“Mr. Glenstein is waiting in here, looking over the new pieces from this month.” he says, his voice containing a bit of stress as I sigh and follow him into the large office of Romero’s Gems.

He’s done well with the place. Antonio has taken it upon himself to branch out and contact miners from around America and in Spain for the most natural gems that they can find. Once he receives them, he meets with the design team to craft some of the world’s most exotic jewelry pieces out there. Today, there’s a few stones that need

appraisals and like he said last night, anyone will lie through their teeth to get the right gem, no matter how handsomely we pay them. However, when I walk into the large office and look at the appraiser sitting across from Antonio's desk, his appraisal kit out and ready, I don't really get the vibe of a liar. Then again, I just found out that I'd been lied to my entire marriage, so who am I to tell?

"Mr. Glenstein, this is Mrs. Romero, owner of the company." Antonio says, the short, bald man standing with a small smile before he grabs my hand and shakes it.

"Pleasure, Mrs. Romero. You have some unique stones here today. To be quite honest, I don't know if I'm the right man for the job." he says, shrugging as he turns back to his kit and sits down.

"We heard you were the best in the country." I say, sitting next to him as I cross my legs, Antonio's eyes on me from across his desk.

"True, but these, ma'am...these are unlike anything I've seen before. And I've been in this business for well over three decades." he says, handing me a glove to put on before he hands me a large, palm sized stone that is the most unique shade of blue that I've ever seen.

I hold it in my gloved hand, staring at the jewel that has mixtures of both sapphire and indigo inside of it. It's like the deepest parts of the ocean that no naked eye has seen before. It sparkles in my palm and nearly mesmerizes me as I gaze at it, the heavy weight of it making me feel nervous so I hand it back to him.

"Yeah I see what you mean." I say, staring at the other gems that line his towel.

There's a few small pieces of topaz, some rubies and then my absolute favorite, fire opals. I freeze when I spot one at the end. It is the most unique fire opal that I've ever seen, amber in color with bits of red and turquoise. I immediately point to it.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“Whatever we decide today, don’t appraise that one. That one’s mine.” I say, staring at the small gem with a smile, the first smile I’ve had in weeks.

“I need a new ring anyway.” I say as the appraiser hands me the gem, the small stone resting in my palm as I feel Antonio’s eyes shift to me.

I look up for a moment and realize that his gaze is locked on my bare ring finger, a question in his eyes as he stares. Rather than diving into that, I hand the stone back to Glenstein and smile.

“Keep that one in the safe for me, Antonio. I’ll come up next week and go over design options.” I say, leaning back in my chair as I grab my bag and pull out my laptop.

“Now, let’s try to crunch some numbers.” I say, powering up the laptop before I fall into hours worth of boredom that has my attention running wild.

* * *

It’s been five days since the appraisal and I’m sitting in the bathroom at the country club, staring at my reflection for the fifth time this evening while my late husband's celebration of life continues outside.

I’ve given a speech and it was perfectly crafted, just as he would have wanted. I rehearsed it several times throughout the week, practicing my fake smiles to make them appear genuine. People expected me to be broken today, but I refuse to be anything other than strong since I’m the new face of this family. Well, one of the new

faces at least.

Nico has done everything in his power to steer clear of me. We've only shared a few passing glances over the last few hours and days, his intense stare always making me feel wired and alert. I don't know why, but whenever I look at him, it's like my entire body wakes up and I'm completely aware of every reaction that it has to him. And God, do I fucking hate it.

I continue to stare at my reflection as Manhattan's elite mixed with family and old friends mingle outside, their voices and music both loud and overpowering. I fix my mauve lipstick and toss my curls around, making sure I'm put together. Thankfully, not many people have asked me questions or really tried to mingle with me. They've offered their condolences, given a quick kiss to the cheek and shared memories that they had with Luis. Memories that have my brain shifting to autopilot every time I hear about them.

I turn and open the door, stepping out of the luxury bathroom and onto the top floor of the club. It is a large mansion that sits on over five acres of land, many golfers coming here from around the world to practice. I won't lie, it's beautiful, but then again, everything in Luis' life had to be beautiful. There was never any room for anything less than perfect.

A waiter passes by with a tray of champagne and I take a glass, smiling at a few people and chatting with the men and women that approach me. Sofia catches my glance from her spot at the bar, her eyebrows raising in an expression that usually means, are you okay? I nod at her and she smiles, turning back to the man in the suit that's talking to her. She throws her head back on a fake laugh, her tan hand meeting her soft chest as her chin rises and teeth bare. Her long curls brush her spine and I swear, I wish I could be that effortless. That beautiful. I wish it came that naturally. People just see me as the skinny, lifeless accountant wife. The woman married out of duty and kept for comfort. I can't help but wonder if I'll ever be anything more than

that.

I walk out onto the balcony, staring at the massive golf course as I sip my glass of champagne and enjoy the nice spring air of New York. The birds are chirping and the sky is clear, nothing but blue and green all around me. For a moment, I feel peace. That is until an older man, one I've never seen before approaches me. He stands by me, his hand on the balcony as he smiles a tight smile at me, his gray suit clean and crisp and most definitely worth thousands of dollars.

"Nice day, isn't it?" he asks conversationally, tilting his head at me as I swallow my champagne and smile.

"It is." I say, wondering who this man is. Maybe he's one of the new members.

Shit, does that mean I need to introduce myself? This is now my club after all. Then again, it's the celebration of life for Luis, do I really need to be doing introductions regarding business today?

There's no down time in this business. Nico's words echo inside of my head and I have to stop myself from groaning. I set my glass down on one of the balcony tables, turning to the man and offering my hand out for a shake. He stares at it for a moment before he nods and takes it.

"I don't believe we've met. My name is Scarlett Romero." I say and he chuckles as he lets my hand fall away from the shake, the wrinkles in his forehead moving as he raises his eyebrows.

"Oh, I know all about you, Mrs. Romero." he says, his voice painted with an emotion I can't identify. "You're Luis Romero's widow. I'm sorry for your loss. Luis had a knack for being impulsive and getting himself into danger." he says and for some reason, my spine straightens and chills spread throughout my body.

He knew my husband and he knew him personally.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.” I say as I tilt my head at him, his black eyebrows lowering as he stares directly into my eyes, intimidation encroaching upon my senses.

“That’s because I didn’t give it, but perhaps it might ring a bell when I do. First, I’d like you to meet my grandson.” he says, turning towards the door of the club and shouting. “Come here, son. I’d like for you to meet Scarlett.” he says and I turn to look at the door.

When a young boy, probably no more than six or seven years old steps forward, my heart nearly plummets straight into my intestines. There, walking towards us, is a boy that looks so much like Luis in his childhood photos, it’s almost like I’m staring at a clone.

Frankie.

There’s no way. There’s literally no way. Nico said he was conceived before Luis even married me. He should be around eleven or twelve now, but this boy...this boy was nowhere near that age. Wait a minute. If that’s Frankie ...then that must mean this man is-

“Mrs. Romero, I’d like you to meet my grandson, Frankie. And I’m Lorenzo De Luca. It’s a pleasure to officially meet you.” he says with a tight smile, Frankie’s suit nearly two sizes too big for his small body as he reaches us, his grandfather’s hand falling on his shoulder.

Lorenzo gives me a tight, emotionless smile and I have to try my best to maintain my composure, even though I want to come apart right here and now.

“Yes. It is very nice to meet the both of you.” I say in a low voice, glancing at Frankie’s golden eyes and light brown hair, his crooked little nose the same as Luis. I really want to cry just looking at it.

“How are you today, Frankie?” I ask, his nose scrunching as he looks at me.

“Well, the food here tastes really bad, but Papa let me have soda. So I guess I’m okay.” His small, boyish voice says.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Even though I want to cry, I let myself laugh at his words. Of course he's honest.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" A baritone voice says from the doorway, Frankie shrinking back in fear when he hears it.

A baritone voice that belongs to a very angry and pissed off Nico.

Lorenzo gives him a snake-like smile, holding Frankie close to him with his large hands.

"Seemed like a perfect day to join a celebration. Because after all, there is a lot to celebrate today, isn't there, Frankie?" he says, looking down at his grandson as Nico growls and walks closer to me, stepping in front of my body to face Lorenzo head on.

I can't help but feel both safe and relieved when he does this.

"Did you really think that I wouldn't find out after all this time, Nicolas? Bank accounts aren't that hard to trace, Acosta. Even when they're created under a fake name." Lorenzo hisses, morphing into a full snake now, the hairs standing on the back of my neck in response.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but whatever it is, it can wait and be scheduled in a meeting, not at this event. Leave. Now." Nico orders, Frankie looking like he's about to cry in his grandfather's arms as Lorenzo scoffs.

I know he's the lovechild of my lying, cheating late husband, but I feel sorry for him. He's just a boy.

“Sure thing. We’ll schedule a meeting.” Lorenzo laughs, straightening up and ushering Frankie to the door, his nose nearly touching Nico’s chin as he glares and speaks to him.

“But know this, Acosta. I know the truth. And with Luis being gone, we all know who this business really belongs to. Who the heir really is. So, don’t wait too long. I’ve been patient for long enough.” he snaps, grabbing Frankie and disappearing into the club, my heart pounding and my head spinning as I stand on the balcony with Nico.

He turns on his heel and looks at me, his dark eyes narrowed.

“Did you say something to him? Did you do something stupid, Scarlett?” he hisses and now, all of my anger resurfaces, my betrayal coming along with it.

I step closer to him, my tall height nothing in comparison to his.

“I said nothing, but there is something you should tell me, isn’t there?” I sneer, his chin tipping as he glares down at me, unresponsive and pissing me off even more.

“That boy does not match the age that you told me. He can’t be anymore than seven years old. So, the affair had been ongoing and he was born during our marriage, you lying sack of shit!” I cry, slapping him hard across the face as his head whips to the side, his jaw working before he cracks his neck and faces me again.

He grabs my wrist then, tightening his rough hand around it as I can’t help but gasp in pain. Before I can yell, he drags me to the staircase leading off the balcony. He pulls me behind him as he rushes down, forcing me into the empty, downstairs of the country club. When we walk inside, he slams me against the wall and grabs my hands before he pins them by my head, his lips a breath away from mine as he growls.

“That’ll be the last time you do that, kitten.” he says and I search his gaze, a million emotions rushing through me.

Right then, I do something unexpected. I do the stupid thing that I know I shouldn’t do. I lean forward and kiss him.

Chapter Ten

Nico

When her lips latch onto mine, the entire world freezes on its axis.

I am stuck, frozen inside of this space that we breathe in, her warm, red lips plastered against mine as her scent slams against me like a truck. Her breasts are soft and brushing against my chest, her long lashes fanning over her cheeks as she closes her eyes as she sighs.

I have a choice in this moment, a choice to either back away and scold her some more, or give in and kiss the mouth that has been haunting me for nearly ten years. Of course, my dick overrules my brain and I go with the latter. I kiss her back with all of the intensity and anger that my body has been harboring for weeks.

She moans then, the sound causing my cock to harden like steel. It is soft and it is needy, all woman. I move one of my hands to wrap around both of her wrists that are pinned above her head, my other hand moving down to wrap around her slender throat as I kiss her with a ferocity that is unlike anything I’ve known before. It is intense and all consuming, but I give in because strangely, my body feels relief. When my large hand squeezes her throat slightly, her eyes snap open and lock onto my own, those pure grey orbs staring me down with desire and a little bit of fear. For a moment, I think she might push me away, but she surprises me. She tilts her chin up, her auburn hair sliding down her shoulders as she bites down on my lip. It is not

hard, but it is passionate. I almost growl in response, but I just sit there and stare at the fiery minx that I have plastered against the wall and pressed against my lengthening dick.

I let my tongue slide out, slipping it past her teeth and into the warm recess of her mouth. She groans when it makes contact with her own tongue, those gray eyes shielded by her lids once more as she lets me explore her. I wedge my thigh between her legs, the evidence of her warm arousal pressing against the fabric of my pants. When I feel it, I let out the growl that's been buried in my chest. I let the animal inside of me that has been howling for her finally rip free. And when it does, I swear my own morale goes with it.

This is my best friend's widow, my dead partner's lover. Sure, Luis fucked around on her and did some shit that I wouldn't even do, but that doesn't make it any less okay. And even with that knowledge looming over me like a dark cloud filled with heavy rain, I still don't pull away. I just kiss her harder. I bite down on her full lips and lap at her tongue like a wild animal while she mewls and writhes on my thigh, her smell intoxicating me as I nearly swallow her whole. It's like an addiction, a compulsion. A sick and dark need that I can't help but give into. I'm about to move my hand from her throat to grab onto her breast when she goes still. She halts all of her movements and her eyes snap open, wide with both regret and terror, with disgust.

Ah, so we're back to hating me again. Good to know.

I narrow my eyes at her as she rips her lips away from me, my hand falling away from her throat while the other remains wrapped around her pale, slender wrists that are still hoisted above her head. Her lips are swollen as she rests her head against the wall and looks away, as if they had been stung by a bee but instead, by my own mouth. I move the hand that was around her throat to my face, wiping off her red lipstick with the back of my hand. Her eyes follow the movement, a strange emotion filling them as she watches me. It almost looks like anger. Is she mad that I'm wiping

her off of my lips? Or is she mad that she kissed me in the first place? Whatever it is, I don't care. I want to know what went on between her and Lorenzo. I want to know why that bastard was here.

"I shouldn't of done that." she whispers harshly, her eyes cast down to the floor as she speaks.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

She's a tall woman, even in her black pumps, but she is still no match for my height. When it comes to me, she is small and she is vulnerable, but her attitude and massive fucking ego won't allow her stubborn brain to grasp that concept. Grasp the fact that I could truly ruin her if I wanted to. And sometimes, I really do, Especially after that kiss. Now I want to ruin her in all of the delicious, dark ways that my mind can conjure up.

"Shouldn't have kissed me or shouldn't have invited that bald asshole that had no reason being here? No no, don't get defensive, kitten. If I were you, I'd answer wisely." I hiss as she glares at me, that burning fire now back into her smoldering gray gaze.

She lifts her lips in a snarl, her pert nose scrunched as a deep, red flush colors her small cheeks. If she wasn't such a brat all of the time, I may actually find her anger sort of cute.

"I fucking hate you." She spits out, her wrists twisting in my grasp as I snort at her.

"Didn't seem like that a minute ago when you were grinding your wet pussy on my suit pants." I say, that deep flush turning crimson now, my cock nearly weeping with need to be let out, to be inside of her.

"I didn't invite him here, Nico. I don't even know who the fuck he is. I certainly didn't know about the seven year old love child that you lied to me about. To be quite honest, if anyone in this room has some explaining to do, it's you. Isn't it?" she seethes, her eyes narrowed to slits as she glares at me.

I want to lash back at her. Frankly, I'd like to bend her over my knee and slap her delectable ass repeatedly until it turns as red as the lipstick that's smeared around her mouth, but there isn't time for that. Right now as I stare into her angry eyes, I know that she's telling the truth. She didn't invite Lorenzo here. So, that means I have some digging to do. He's obviously here for a reason and that reason is clearly to stake claim over this business. And he's wanting to stake claim because he knows Luis is the biological father to Frankie De Luca, the boy I've continuously tried to hide for my best friend's sake. The boy that was created and born during the first few years of marriage to the same woman I have pinned against the wall right now, the woman who's glaring at me and demanding answers.

Goddammit, Lu. If you were here right now, I'd kill you myself.

"Answer me, you son of a bitch!" Scarlett roars, her gray eyes now filled with tears as she stares at me, all broken, lost, and entirely vulnerable.

Fuck sake, I cannot handle this right now.

I let go of her wrists and back away from her place on the wall, her chest heaving as she blinks back her tears and stares me down. She looks so small right now, even though she's trying her best to stuff down her anger. Even when her husband died, I haven't seen her like this. That grief was new and terrifying in its own right, however this...this is different. This is grief mixed with betrayal and as heartless as I may sound, this isn't my concern right now. I have bigger fish to fry and quite frankly, the fish I have in mind is a foot shorter than me with a receding hairline and a massive fucking god complex.

"He was with her while we were married, wasn't he? He knew about the boy and he tried to keep him hidden, while he was fucking me at home...while he was married to me?" she whispers, her voice broken and shattered, like glass all over the floor around us.

I don't know why I feel the green monster inside of me poke out when she mentions fucking her dead husband, my own goddamn best friend. I have no right to even look at her with desire, yet here I am, even more pissed that he got to take her virginity. That he fucked around on this beautiful, frustrating woman with the literal enemy. In fact, I blame this little green monster inside of me for the next words that leave my lips.

“Yes. All of that is true. And if you want me to be even more honest, if you want to hurt even fucking more, he would've kept seeing her if she didn't die giving birth to his son that he didn't want to have.” I hiss, the words much harsher than I intended for them to be, but once again, that's the green monster talking.

She covers her mouth with the back of her hand, her red hair shifting as she shakes her head in disbelief and turns her slender back to me, the sounds of her soft cries filling the room as I stand there like a fucking idiot. I don't move, I don't even breathe. I just stand like a statue and watch this woman fall apart in front of me, a bit of guilt trying to enter it's way into my heart because I help contribute to this pain she's feeling. I'm the bastard that kept up her cheating husbands lies, but I did it for him. I did it for our family.

Time passes and her tears subside. She takes a deep breath and looks up to the ceiling, her fists balled at her sides as she turns and stares at me with an unreadable gaze. She may be frustrating as hell, but this woman is a master at composure. Then again, with the man she was married to, she almost has to be.

“Why was he here? That man.” she asks, one of her hands moving to wipe the corners of her mouth that are still smudged with her lipstick, lipstick that I would have no problem licking off-

“That's what I want to find out.” I say, straightening my jacket before I smooth back my hair, her eyes following the movement with a bit of fire in her gaze.

“You can do whatever digging you want, but we both know why he was here, don’t we, Nico?” she asks, a scoff leaving her lips as her heels click against the floor, the space closing between as she walks to me.

“If I had to make an educated guess, you and Luis both were obviously bad at covering up the truth. He knows Frankie is his son. And he knows with that fact alone, he can take all of this with one quick DNA swab. Isn’t that right?” she hisses, looking me up and down as I glare at her, that burning rage mixed with desire filling me once more.

How is it humanly possible to want to scream and fuck someone at the same time?

“Take your time, I don’t need an answer. We have it already. What I need you to do is stay the fuck out of my way while I sort some of this out. Get as much intel on Lorenzo as possible. I don’t care if you have to use some of our own contraband in order to stay awake for the next few weeks tracking that bastard, but get it done.” she commands, turning away from me and walking to the door.

When she rips it open, I try not to stare at her ass as it shakes. My palms are already itching to have her wrists against them once more. This woman is a test to every ounce of my being and as much as I want to punish her for the way she is speaking to me, she is right. Lorenzo needs to be tracked and he needs to be kept away. We need to figure something out before the De Luca’s come storming in and take everything that we’ve all risked our lives for.

“The heads of the family cannot know of this, so keep your mouth shut, Scarlett.” I growl and she throws me an empty, sinister smile.

“No shit, Sherlock. I may have been dumb enough to fall for both you and my dead husband’s lies, but I’m not a complete idiot.” she says and I fall silent.

“An entire lifetime of cleaning up his messes and still in his absence, you continue to do so.” she scoffs, shaking her head before she tilts it at me.

“Aren’t you tired, Nico?” she asks quietly, but I don’t answer. I just remain silent and stare at the broken woman before me that tries to pull herself together as she walks out of the room.

“God knows I am.” she says before she slams the door behind her, leaving me with a still, but angry silence.

And as I stand there with my fists clenched and my jaw clamped down, I realize that for the first time in my thirty-nine years of living, I am beyond angry with my best friend. With the man that I am still cleaning up after even though he’s fucking dead.

ChapterEleven

Scarlett

I'm at the bottom of my bottle of Chianti when Sofia walks into the kitchen. It is nearly midnight and after the mass confusion and bullshit of today, one would think that I would be exhausted enough to sleep for an eternity, but here I am, drinking away my sorrows in a silk slip against the kitchen counter.

My friend eyes me up and down, confusion filling her beautiful eyes as I shrug and down the rest of my wine. I'm so worn down that I don't even feel drunk and how fucked is that?

"Long day?" she asks as she bends at the bar before retrieving a new bottle.

"The longest one yet." I sigh as she grabs two glasses and places them before us, opening a fresh bottle and pouring its content into the two glasses.

"Wanna talk about it?" she asks as she sits across from me and right then I have to use every bit of strength that I have left to lie to her, because I really do want to fucking talk about it, but I can't.

Now, I am a liar too. Just like Nico. Just like my dead, cheating husband that got me into this mess.

"Just an exhausting couple of weeks." I say, sipping the fresh glass of wine as she offers me a sympathetic gaze.

"I can imagine, Scar. I am so sorry you have to go through all of this, but you're

handling it like a champ.” she says and more than anything I want to run into her arms and sob out the truth that has been weighing down on me like a thick cloak.

“I feel weak.” I offer instead, shoving down the tears that threaten to fall.

She reaches across the counter to rest her hand on mine, the touch warm and comforting, unlike Nico’s brutal touch that I received earlier today, that I internally begged for while I was grinding against his thigh like a cat in heat.

“You are not weak, Scarlett. You are the strongest person I know and considering the pain and loss that you’re working through, you’re handling it better than most.” she says gently and I want to laugh harshly, but I resist.

I’m not handling it better than most. I was ready to sleep with my dead husband's best friend during his celebration of life, even though he was still lying to me about the bastard child that my dead husband fathered during our marriage. I used that as my reason to give into the overwhelming temptation that is Nico Acosta. The desire felt justified, felt right. I wanted to hurt Luis like he had hurt me, but of course, the only person that will ever be hurt during this shit storm is myself. And I’ll be even more hurt if I give my body to Nico. Then, I really will be weak. I’ll die before I give myself to another lying bastard. I will not go through betrayal like this ever again.

“Can I ask you something?” I say, resting my chin on my hand as I stare at Sofia while she takes a generous sip of her wine and nods.

“Anything.” she says.

I can feel the blush heating my face before the question even leaves my lips, but I blame it on the wine. This is Sofia, for godsake, my childhood best friend. I don’t have to give her the nitty gritty details, but I can pick her brain on a topic that has been gnawing at me like a rabid wolf.

“What’s it like fucking someone that you don’t love?” I ask and she nearly spits out her wine that she tries to drink, a devious smile stretching her full lips.

“Scarlett Romero, I cannot believe that just came out of your mouth! I never thought I would see the day!” she gasps dramatically and I roll my eyes at her.

She’s shocked because I never really have talked about sex with her, nonetheless sex that doesn’t concern my late husband.

My sex life with Luis was bland at best, which isn’t a lot to say considering the fact that I was a virgin before I met him. I never really brought it up because I never really knew what to ask, what to discuss. What was wrong or right or what needed fixing. It felt like a duty, fucking him. It felt like I was doing what a wife should do and there was no need to talk about it because it was just the way of life. But after feeling the powerful lust that I felt for Nico today, I know all of that is wrong. And now, even though I am going through turmoil, I can’t help but feel curious after having his lips devour mine, after feeling his powerful hand wrapped around my throat.

“Are we talking like one night stands or fuck buddies or what?” she asks, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

I shrug, because I truly don’t know and I really don’t want to say his name.

“We’re not talking about any of those things, are we, Scar? We’re talking about Nico.” she says, curiosity long gone and now replaced with complete mischief.

I sigh, unable to lie to her now. I can cover up Luis’ bullshit because it’s for her own safety, but this...this is different. This is something I need to talk to my best friend about.

“I fucking knew it!” she squeals, clapping her hands together, wine spilling from the

glass her elbow bumps into.

“Keep your voice down!” I hiss, my hand snapping out to quiet her own as she giggles and shakes her head at me.

“Relax, princess. The entire house is asleep. Nico isn’t even here.” she says, rolling her eyes before she leans forward on her elbows as she stares me down.

“Spill. Now.” She commands and lord help me, I do.

I tell her about the kiss, about the way my body felt. I leave out details of Lorenzo or how it even started and replace those words with others. I tell her all of the grief and the loneliness that I feel had been building along with my attraction to him. I tell her how my body responded, how my skin grew tight and my womb clenched the minute my mouth touched his. I tell her about how strong he was, how he commanded me and took complete control. I tell her that for once in my entire life, I felt like a woman. I felt wanted. And god help her, but she takes it all in with focused attention and wide eyes, her own skin flushing as I spill all of the details she asked for.

“Wow.” She huffs out after a while, silence filling the kitchen. “That sounds really intense.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“It was. I’m still not right after all of it. I can’t get him out of my head, no matter how much I hate him.” I sigh and she tilts her head at me.

“And may I ask why exactly you do hate him?” she questions and I can’t help but scoff at her.

“Um, hello, have you met him? He’s rude. He’s arrogant. He’s got serious fucking mood swings and not to mention, he’s a complete and total asshole.” I hiss, but she just smiles widely at me.

“And?” she asks, her fingers drumming against the countertop as she stares me down before I give in and sigh.

“And he kisses like a total god and I swear, I have never felt my knees shake like that before. I had to change my underwear for godsake, Sof. I’ve never, ever felt like this before. It’s like he awoke something that I didn’t even know existed inside of me.” I admit and her smile widens so much that I fear her face might actually split in two.

“So, what’s the problem then?” she asks and I frown at her.

“The problem is that he’s my dead husband's best friend. That he is my business partner. That I can’t fucking stand him yet somehow, I want him to fuck the life right out of me.”

She chuckles and shakes her head at me, her hand wrapping around the stem of her wine glass before she lifts it and swallows the rest of the red liquid inside of it.

“Those don’t sound like problems to me, Scar. They sound like excuses.” she says and I’m about to start the rebuttal, but she stops me.

“They are excuses, Scarlett and you and I both know it. Luis is gone and I know it hurts, I know it seems wrong to want Nico because of it, but he’s gone. Everything here is yours now, so do what you want with it. Including his best friend.” She winks at me and I try to swat at her, but she dodges the blow.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of, babe. We all know he’s hot and I know more than anyone, that Luis wasn’t fulfilling your needs. In and out of the bedroom. So, if it’s someone’s blessing you need, then you have mine. Fuck his friend and fuck him good.” She winks and I swear I might actually die of embarrassment.

She gets up from the counter and makes her way to where I am sitting, her small hand resting on my bare shoulder as she bends to kiss the top of my hand.

“It’s your life now, Scarlett. So do what you want with it. The only person judging you is yourself. You’re free now, to do whatever brings you happiness.” she whispers and I try not to cry from her sweet words.

God, I really love this woman. I would be lost without her.

“Even if that happiness comes in the form of multiple orgasms from his best friend.” She chuckles.

Never mind.

“Goodnight, Sofia.” I shake my head at her, my hand patting hers as she gives me one more kiss before she walks out of the room and leaves me with my loneliness once more.

I finish my glass of wine and seal the open bottle. I walk it to the bar and set it on the shelf and before I turn around, I hear footsteps walking away from the kitchen. I look around, confused and just chalk it up to Sofia lingering before going to bed. It's nearly one in the morning and everyone is already in dreamland, a place where I most definitely need to be right now.

I turn the lights off and make my way through the foyer and to the grand staircase. When I see that the front door is locked and that the alarm is set, I turn on my heel and walk up the staircase and to my new bedroom. My black dress is still laying on the bed, my heels scattered across the floor. I shut the door behind me and begin tidying up. I hang my dress and put away my shoes in the walk-in closet, staring at my suitcases that still carry my clothes and stand in the large space. I should put all of them away, solidify the fact that this is now my new, lonely future, here in this room. I should, but right now, I am fucking exhausted and really flustered from the conversation I just had with Sofia. Flustered because once again, Nico Acosta has slithered his way into my mind. Will I ever know peace?

I turn out of the closet and make my way to the bed, freezing when I lock eyes with a pair of freshly polished Italian loafers dangling off my queen sized mattress. Loafers that are worn by a pair of very large feet, feet that are attached to the strongest and longest legs I've ever seen.

"It's awfully late, isn't it, kitten?" Nico asks, his dark and rough voice filling the quiet space of my bedroom.

I feel my skin tighten and my pulse quicken, every hair on my body standing as my womb twitches in response to his nickname, a nickname that I should hate as much as him.

"Why are you here?" I ask, my eyes narrowed as I cross my arms, doing my best to shield my hard nipples that threaten to poke through the thin fabric of my white, silk

slip.

He stares at my chest hard, his dark eyes void of any emotion as he looks me up and down now. He shifts on the bed, scooting to the edge and resting his long arms on his bent knees, his feet planted against the floor as he continues to stare me down. A long strand of his dark hair falls over his brow and for some reason that doesn't make any ounce of sense, my fingers twitch in hopes to move it away, to touch him.

"You know why I am, Scarlett. We have things to discuss." he says and I roll my eyes at him.

"It's one in the morning, Nico. I'm not in the mood to talk about Lorenzo. I've had a long day and it can wait until morning." I say, moving to walk around him towards the other side of the bed.

His arm snaps out, his rough hand wrapping around my thigh before he pulls me between his open legs. I freeze then, my entire body trembling from his sudden and rough touch. I don't even dare breathe because I fear he might sense it, this overwhelming desire that I feel for him.

"I'm not here to talk about that bastard. I'm here to talk about what happened between us at the clubhouse." he says, his voice low and thick, wrapping around me like a snake.

"I don't want to talk about that. Quite frankly, I'd like to forget it even happened. It was a momentary lapse of judgment-"

"A momentary lapse that had your knees weak and your womb tight? Because I kissed you like a god?" he growls, my eyes widening as he repeats the words I whispered to Sofia just minutes ago.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

There was someone outside of the kitchen. I fucking knew it.

“You can lie to almost anyone, Scarlett. You can be the cold hearted ice queen that you’ve molded yourself into over the years, but I know better.” he chuckles, his rough hand sliding up the soft skin of my thigh and under my slip, his fingertips brushing against the band of my panties.

God that feels so, so good.

“But you can’t lie to me. And even if you try to, I know the truth. This fucking body says it all.” he groans, his fingertips sliding to the front of my panties, pressing into my clit as I tilt my head back and sigh.

“And what does it say?” I ask. “My body?”

He freezes then, the room quiet except for my heavy breathing and his deep sigh. It feels as if the world has stopped spinning, that life itself has frozen completely. All there is..is here and now. Is me and him.

“That it’s mine.” he snarls before he pulls me down over his lap, his hands on my face as his lips begin to devour my own.

ChapterTwelve

Scarlett

I get lost in this kiss that Nico is giving me.

He's eating my mouth like it's his last meal and all I can do is sit here and take it. Oh fuck, who am I kidding? I'm not sitting and taking it. I'm grinding and writhing on his lap, my nails digging into his clothed biceps as I moan into his mouth and relish in the feel of his lips on mine. His hands move from my face to my ass, gripping it tightly as my slip raises, his warm, rough fingers pressing into the skin of my butt.

"You taste so fucking good." He growls, his tone sounding frustrated.

I want to pull back and ask him what's wrong, why he sounds angry with me, but he beats me to the punch.

He moves one of his hands to my hair and yanks it back roughly, angling my face just an inch away from his as he pulls his mouth away from mine, his eyes angry and passionate as he glares at me.

"You shouldn't taste good to me, Scarlett. I shouldn't know how you taste. Do you know why I shouldn't know that, kitten?" he says, his eyes narrowed as he stares me down, heavy breaths leaving my lips as I shake my head slightly, his grip not giving me any room to move.

"Because you married my best friend, my business partner. Dead or alive, I should not be touching you like this, shouldn't even be looking into your direction, but here I am. Fucking craving you even though you piss me off to no end." he says, his face moving in on me as I bite my lip and watch his nose press against my chin.

I sigh when I feel the contact, his nose moving from my face down my throat, breathing me in as I stay immobile in his grasp, my pussy practically weeping for him. He allows his tongue to snake out and lick from my collarbone to the hollow of my throat, my spine tingling as he does it. Just when I think he might slide back up and kiss me again, he surprises me. He bites down on the tender flesh of my throat, my gasp of surprise leaving my lips and echoing out into the room.

“You shouldn’t smell good. You shouldn’t look good.” he groans, licking the spot that he just bit as I writhe in his lap, desperate for friction.

“You shouldn’t be anything to me, Scarlett, yet here you are, grinding against my cock because as much as you hate me, you want it too.” he says, the hand that’s in my hair now pulling it tighter, the pain hitting my scalp, but I don’t yelp. I don’t yelp because I like it.

“You fucking want it too and isn’t that just terrible?” he seethes, staring into my eyes now as I blink at him, my tongue running across my lips to wet them.

His eyes track the movement, darkening with so much lust that I may just evaporate into thin air because of it’s intensity.

“Answer me.” he yanks my face towards him as our foreheads press together.

“Yes.” I whimper, sounding small, sounding weak.

“Yes what?” he asks, his gaze so intense, so close. How did we get here? How is this happening?

“Yes, I...I want it.” I gasp, my words trembled and rushed, the confusion inside of me now mixing with my desire. “And I have no idea why.” I whine, angry that I’m being honest with him, that I’m giving in. I really am a weak woman.

He stares at me long and hard then, our heavy pants mixing together as our skin grows hot from where it touches. I have no doubt that his fingertips will leave marks on my ass by morning, but at this rate, who cares? I want him so much that it hurts more than his embedded fingertips, than his hand pulling my hair.

“Me either, kitten. God is going to damn us both.” he curses before landing another

hot, all consuming kiss to my lips.

He flips me over then, my back landing on the bed as my legs wrap around his waist, the white slip now riding up to my hips, exposing my lace underwear. He doesn't stop as he moves me and settles in between my legs, he just continues to kiss me for all that I'm worth as I lay there with my hands tangled in his hair. He's still fully clothed and when I finally take a deep breath in between his kisses, I finally inhale his scent. He smells like woods and whiskey, like dark, expensive notes that somehow only smell good on him. I blame that as the reason for my sudden intoxication. It's his scent. He's a walking drug and I am nothing but a junkie.

He pulls away then, kneeling above me as his chocolate brown eyes land on my exposed hips. A growl vibrates his chest and his deep onyx hair falls around his face. He's so fucking beautiful it hurts and I hate that I'm seeing him this way, that he has an effect on me like this. He's right, God is going to damn the both of us.

He moves his hands away from me, pulling at his black tie before removing it from around his neck. For a moment, I swear he's going to throw it to the floor and start undressing, but he shocks me with what he does next. Instead of disrobing, he leans forward and grabs my hands. He pins them above my head on the large bed and knots the tie around them, tying it tight as my arms are now raised above me. My eyes widen and he cocks his head at me, a darkness in his eyes that I've never seen before. It's like this has made him hotter, more intense than he already is. He must like the sight because I feel his hardening dick press against my lace covered center, my back arching involuntarily. He's like a puppet master.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“Something to say, kitten?” he asks, his words like a taunt as he stares down at me.

I don't answer him for a moment, I just stare at this dark man above me, looming over me like a monster that perplexes me rather than scares me. Finally, I shake my head at him, his tongue licking around his lips as his eyes move from my face back down to my hips. They freeze there, the air in the room charged with intensity. He bites down on his bottom lip as his hands wrap around my hips, yanking them towards him as he lowers the upper half of his body to the bed, his eyes now level with my pussy.

What is he doing?

Before I can mutter the question out loud, he opens his mouth and bares straight, white teeth, biting at the fabric of my panties before he starts to pull them down my legs. Right then, I think I'm going to black out from all of the foreign pleasure that courses through my entire being. I don't move, I don't breathe, I just lay there as he slides my underwear down my legs with his teeth before tossing them to the floor. He doesn't look at my face when he returns to my hips. No, all he does is widen my legs with his hands on my knees before he presses his large nose against the top of my cunt.

Oh. My. God.

“Wait!” I cry out, feeling embarrassed suddenly.

He looks up at me in question, his head tilted as confusion fills his gaze. My face is red with embarrassment and I can't even release the words that are trapped on my

tongue. Luis never did this for me, never even brought his mouth anywhere near that region of my body. He always said that it was gross, unhygienic, but now with the sudden knowledge of his ongoing affair, I have no doubt in my mind that he did it with her. That he just didn't want to do it for me. And now, on top of my embarrassment, grows a new and sudden rage. A rage that Nico picks up on immediately.

“Did he never kiss you there?” he asks, though his words sound harsh when they leave his lips.

I swallow audibly before I shake my head, unable to speak in this moment because so many emotions are running through me. As soon as he watches my response, he scoffs and shakes his head.

“He really was a fucking fool.” he says, his beard tickling the skin of my thighs as he shakes his head, shivers erupting throughout my entire body in response.

Somehow, I gather enough courage to speak.

“Are you...are you going to? Kiss me there I mean?” I stammer, my words rushed and low as they finally leave my lips.

“No, I'm not going to kiss you there, Scarlett.” he growls and immediately, I feel the rejection.

I feel the sting straight to my heart and my libido and I try to push away from him with my legs, but his hands only grip my thighs harder, halting me.

“Let me go, dammit!” I hiss, wanting to get far away from him because the embarrassment I feel is too intense to bear.

“You didn’t let me finish, kitten.” he says, his breath hitting my exposed, wet flesh as he brings it closer to his mouth, my eyes squeezed shut because I can’t even look at him right now.

“Open your eyes, Scarlett. Look at me.” he says, but I don’t, I just squeeze them tighter.

He removes one of his hands from my thighs and lands one quick and harsh slap to the skin of my pussy, my eyes snapping open in response before they lock with his.

“I’m not going to kiss your pussy because I’m going to fucking devour it, am I understood?” he says, my breath frozen in my chest as I stare down at him.

He lands another quick slap to my heated flesh and I all but moan in response.

“Answer me.” he mutters and I nod my head abruptly.

“Yes, yes I understand.” I whisper and as soon as the words leave my lips, he licks me from my opening to my clit with one long, wet swipe of his tongue.

“Fuck!” I cry out, feeling otherworldly as he starts to eat at my pussy with the same ferocity he kissed me with just moments prior.

He swirls his tongue around my clit before he sucks it into his mouth and bites down on it gently, my hips rising to greedily meet his lips as he does it. He repeats the movement a few times before moving down to lick at my center, his tongue sliding inside my entrance as I gasp and arch my back off the bed, my eyes nearly rolling into the back of my head. He begins to fuck me with his tongue then, pushing it as deep as it can go before pulling it out to swirl it around my clit, my body trembling with my impending orgasm.

This is going to happen really fast and I don't really know what's to come. I don't know what's to come because truthfully, I don't think I've ever really had an orgasm before. And here I am, about to come all over my husband's best friend's tongue. Especially when he grabs onto my hips and moves them quickly, forcing me to slide my pussy all over his mouth at a ferocious, punishing pace.

I feel my thighs tremble and my pulse quicken, my fingers desperately trying to grip the sheets from where they are tied above my head, burning for some sort of grasp so I don't skyrocket into oblivion. I start to shake violently, uncontrollably as he fucks me with his mouth, the moans that are tearing free from my lips sounding like they're coming from an animal and not from my own vocal cords. And just when I think he's done it all, still, he surprises me.

Just as I am about to burst through those clouds of release, he moves one hand from my hips to slide two, thick fingers inside of me. Quickly and roughly. And when he does it, I swear I see stars. I ascend straight into heaven and God lets me right through the golden gates and into his kingdom of bliss. Every muscle in my body grows tight before I suddenly become a pool of melted lust. I become boneless, weightless, fucking mindless as Nico gives me the very first orgasm that I've experienced from something other than my own fingers. He sends me straight to heaven to meet God himself so I can solidify our eternal damnation for this. And quite honestly, I could fucking care less because this feeling is unlike anything I've ever known before.

And when I feel myself finally come back down to Earth, when my brain suddenly becomes clear of the intense fog that clouded it, everything goes cold. Everything is tense and unsure, mostly because as soon as I come, he's removing his tie from my hands and climbing off of the bed, leaving there with my legs spread wide and my body still trembling with aftershocks.

I sit up then, pulling my slip down and staring after him as he walks to the door and

yanks it open.

“Nico, where are you going-” I try to ask, but he cuts me off with a sharp flick of his hand, silencing me.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“I need to be away from you, Scarlett. Right fucking now.” He growls before leaving the room and slamming the door behind him.

I sit there on my bed, staring at the closed door as tears threaten to spill. I feel confused and dejected, I feel like I repulsed him. No wonder Luis never did that for me. Maybe I really am awful in bed, awful to taste and to look at. Maybe that’s why he cheated on me for so long, why he barely even touched me. Maybe that’s why Nico just stormed out on me after giving me the most intense climax of my life. Because I am disgusting.

I wipe the unshed tears and get up from the bed. I walk to the door and lock it, grabbing the chair from my vanity and propping it under the door handle just in case he tries to come back and fuck with my head some more.

I’ve had enough of the whiplash from him and my late husband's bullshit. Now, all I want to do is sleep and forget about the lonely tragedy that is my new reality.

ChapterThirteen

Nico

It’s been three days since I licked Scarlett’s sweet pussy and I’ve nearly consumed four bottles of bourbon just to try and erase the memory of her.

She’s haunted me like the most delectable ghost, taking up residence in my mind and manipulating my thoughts like some sort of witch. I’ve been dwelling in the basement like a troll in order to steer clear of her. Because I know one look in her gray eyes or

at that delectable body will have me sneaking right back into her bed and I fear that this time, I may never fucking leave.

I cannot be distracted by her, consumed by her. I have an entire business to worry about and right now there is a looming threat that it may be stolen right from under us, not only costing us our jobs and our homes, but our very lives as well. Not to mention, she is now my new business partner and also my best friend's fucking widow.

I dress in a fresh Armani suit today, tucking my gun into my trousers before I dab on some cologne and smooth my hair back. I look in the mirror and stare back at my reflection, the man on the other side looking powerful and confident, but I feel anything but. Right now and for the past three days, I feel annoyed. I feel agitated and pent up and as much as I want to blame it on the blue balls Scarlett gave me, I know it's actually because of Lorenzo De Luca and the fact that Luis just had to get his dick wet with the enemy's daughter. Not only was he stupid enough to cheat on the firecracker that is Scarlett, but he was also dumb enough to do it with the enemy and then knock her up when he was done.

She was right the other day when she said I must be tired of cleaning up after him. I am tired. In fact, I'm fucking exhausted. If he wasn't also stupid enough to get himself killed, I'd still be in Spain, sipping my authentic tequila while women threw themselves at my feet. Women that were definitely not Scarlett fucking Romero.

I leave the basement office and take the elevator up to the main floor of the mansion. When I step out into the foyer, I plan to grab my keys and leave, but a pair of voices coming from the adjacent room grabs my attention. I turn in the direction of the dining hall, peering over the corner and watching Antonio take a seat next to Scarlett and the dining room table. She's wearing a dark blue, skintight dress today that stops at the ends of her shapely thighs. The same thighs that were pressing against my temples on her bed the other night while I licked her pussy until she came all over my

tongue. The memory instantly hardens my cock, but still, I remain a shadow as I listen to their conversation.

“How are you holding up, Scar?” he asks, his voice etched with concern however, I know it’s only present because he wants to dive into her pussy and has wanted to for years.

“I’m tired today, but I have a lot of reports to file and a couple meetings with some potential buyers for a few of the properties Luis wanted to flip.” she says and my eyes narrow instantly.

She was going to make a crucial fucking business move without my presence, without my knowledge? She’s the goddamn accountant for christ sake!

Luis, I really fucking hate you for this.

I also hate him for the fact that he never took the time to please his own wife, to taste her sweet flesh. Because as soon as I did, she launched like a fucking rocket.

“Would you like me to go with you? We have enough staff at the store today.” Antonio offers, my agitation ratcheting even higher now.

She shakes her head at him, her long, auburn hair piled on the top of her head in an elegant bun. She’s wearing minimal makeup today, however her lips are painted siren red as usual. It’s the same lipstick I ate from her lips just days ago in the country club, just days ago when she was writhing against my body and mewling like a kitten.

Stop it, Nico. Focus.

“No, but thank you, Ant. I need to do this on my own.” she says, sighing as she shifts uncomfortably in her chair because Antonio keeps moving closer.

If he moves another inch, I'm ripping the seat out from under his stubby legs.

"You're not wearing your wedding ring." he says, a twinge of excitement in his tone.

Excitement that now has my fucking blood boiling for some stupid, unconceivable reason.

Scarlett stops then, her eyes locking with mine suddenly from where I stand in the doorway. She doesn't move or make a sound, just flares her small nostrils and stares me down as she mutters her next words.

"No. Suddenly, it doesn't feel right anymore." She all but snarls, scooting her chair back before she stands, Antonio's eyes traveling up her body as the rage inside me begins to seep out of my pores.

"Excuse me." she says, marching away from him and straight to me.

She walks past me and into the foyer, turning her gaze away from me as she grabs her purse from the table and her keys, her dark blue heels clicking against the tile and echoing around us. When she yanks the front door open and marches outside, I immediately follow her. This rage needs somewhere to go and right now, she's the perfect fucking outlet.

"Don't follow me, Nico!" she shouts from over her shoulder as she nears her black Audi, my long strides catching up with her in a matter of seconds, my hand clamping around her bicep before I yank her to me.

"Why? Afraid I'll stop you from making a decision that requires the both of us? Jesus, Scarlett, how stupid can you be? Luis just got fucking killed after going on a run that wasn't heavily monitored. Have you no common sense-" I try to finish my sentence, but her hand is raising and ready to slap me before my own stops the sudden

attack.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I grab her small hand and cover it with mine, backing her against her car as I trap her against me. I glare down at her, her gray eyes narrowed and filled with fire. Right now, I want to kiss the fuck out of her, but I also want to spank her repeatedly for thinking of doing something so stupid.

“Get off me!” she shouts, pushing against me and stomping her Jimmy Choo’s into the dirt like some spoiled five year old throwing a temper tantrum. If I wasn’t so pissed, I might actually find this cute.

“I told you, kitten, the last time you slapped me would be the last time for good. Don’t fucking test me right now.” I hiss, my anger spiking as she stares at me definitely.

“Or what?” she asks, the words causing my cock to harden even more, but instead of kissing her like I want to, instead of shutting her up with my lips, I just move my hand from her bicep and wrap it around her throat.

“Or I’ll drag your tight ass right up to your bedroom and fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to walk out of the door on your own again.” I growl and she shuts up instantly, that same blush that was spread over her chest nights ago returning once more, beckoning me, calling to me like a siren.

It’s silent for a moment, the air around us charged with electricity as we glare at each other. After several minutes pass, she sighs and sags against her car, defeat washing over her.

Thank fucking God.

“What is it that you want from me, Nico? Quite frankly, I don’t get it. I don’t get why you hate me or why you’re so hot and cold. Why you look like you want to devour me one minute and then like I have the plague the next. I don’t get it and I am tired, so fucking tired of all of this that right now, I don’t want to get it. I don’t want to be bothered with this, with you.” she says finally, her voice filled with that same exhaustion that she’s speaking about.

And I know how she feels. I know exactly how she feels because I’m feeling the same thing, only my exhaustion is replaced with rage. A burning rage that somehow scorches when she’s gone and transcends into an inferno when one of our staff members tries to hit on her at the dining room table.

“You don’t feel that way with Antonio.” I hiss, the green monster inside of me poking his head out right when I try to slap him away.

She scoffs at me, her hand waving in the air as my own tightens around her delicate throat.

“I don’t feel that way with Antonio because he isn’t an asshole with me. He doesn’t play with my head and use my body after lying to me about my husband’s ongoing affair that resulted in a fucking lovechild that is now used as leverage to take control over our family!” She shouts and my free hand snaps up and clamps over her red painted lips.

“Keep. Your. Fucking. Voice. Down.” I bite out, her eyes narrowed once more as she stares at me, her teeth sinking into my palm as she bites down on my skin, but I don’t pull away. I don’t show her that she’s affected me, even though now I really do want to punish her. I want to tie her to her bed posts and slap her ass so hard that it becomes the same shade of red that she paints her lips with.

“You don’t feel that way with Antonio because he didn’t eat your pussy well enough

to have you seeing stars. He didn't get to feel the way your legs shook against my face or the taste the sweetness of your come as it hit my tongue. I did. I got to have that. And I will continue to have that. However and whenever the fuck I want." I say in a dark voice, looming over her as she stares at me with wide, gray eyes.

I hate that I like the expression on her face right now, that she's clearly affected by my words probably because she's never really heard anything like them before. Luis was an ass to her for sure, but I know for a fact he didn't make up for it in anyway, especially not in the bedroom considering how hard she came against my mouth the other night. He bought her flowers on rare occasions and gave her jewelry that didn't really cost him a dime because of the warehouses and shops we have control of. Right now, as I look into those gray eyes glossed with strange amazement, I know for a fact that he never fulfilled her darkest desires, or any of her desires for that matter.

This woman is hard and cold, but given the right amount of dominance and coaxing, she can submit instantly. She can melt like butter in a hot pan and become the perfect woman to fuck, to lose yourself in. I know now, that one night with her would never be enough. It would only just barely scratch the surface of what lies inside of her. There's a wildcat in there, with claws even sharper than the ones that she shows to the real world, but there's also a soft, submissive woman in there just begging to be fucked in all of the right ways. And God help me, I want to be the one to unveil it all even though I shouldn't.

"You're giving me fucking whiplash, you know." she hisses, breaking my dark thoughts and redirecting my attention back to the present moment.

I know that I am because I fucking have it too. My head is all twisted and turned in the wrong direction, derailed with overwhelming thoughts of her, of the woman I cannot and should not have.

"Join the club, sweetheart." I hiss before I rip my hand from her throat and yank her

away from her car door before I pull it open.

I grab the gun that I placed in her center console days ago and load it up with ammunition before I stand and toss it to her with the safety off. She catches it with a glare, her lips pursed in a snarl as she stares me down. I cock my head at her, waiting for her to tuck it into her purse, but of course, she defies me and stands there for a moment longer, staring me down with the gun in her hand as that sweet, fiery blush slowly washes away from her pale skin. When I cross my arms and rest against the car, waiting, she finally sighs and shoves the handgun into her purse.

I swear to God, this woman is going to be the end of me and she's not even my fucking wife. I haven't gotten my dick inside of her yet and she's still trying to get the best of me. I'm going to go gray by the end of all of this. And it's going to be her doing. She is going to be the reason for my demise. Not some ambush, not a gun to the head, but fucking her.

"We'll finish this discussion later, Scarlett. Right now, we have to meet these buyers that you better hope won't shoot our heads off. Get in." I growl, grabbing her keys from her hand before I slide in her Audi and start it up.

She rolls her eyes and walks around the vehicle, opening up the door before she slides in and buckles her seat belt. Her tits look absolutely phenomenal in that dress, but I avert my gaze and focus on the road as I peel away from the mansion.

ChapterFourteen

Scarlett

I look over at the man currently driving my car, warring with myself whether I want to wrap my hands around his neck or kiss him.

I've never met someone so infuriating in my life.

My hands tighten around the straps of my bag as I tell myself to keep my mouth shut. If there's anything I need to do right now, it's focus on the business.

Nico isn't wrong about not knowing what I could be getting myself into. This was a deal set up by Luis, before his death I would have trusted any meeting he arranged. But after everything I found out about him since, his judgement was never trustworthy.

The problem is that keeping my thoughts to myself was never my strong point. Who does this man think he is? Telling me what to do and who I can meet with. We're supposed to be partners in this. Partners. Not Nico leads and I follow.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

The more I let my mind focus on it, the angrier I get. The rage I feel bubbling right below the surface until I can't keep my mouth shut any longer.

“Who the fuck do you think you are to tell me who I can and can't meet with?”

“Who the fuck am I?” he snarls at me. “Right now, I'm the man keeping you from following your dead husband to your grave.”

“You asshole,” I snap.

“I think we've established more than once I'm a complete asshole. I'm such an asshole that I refuse to let you head off to a meeting with who the fuck knows.”

“Luis knew them.”

He scoffs. “I'm also sure that we've learned that Luis' decision making wasn't the most sound. The last time he trusted someone to meet with them he ended up six feet in the ground.” He adjusts his hands on the wheel as he merges onto the highway. “And right now, your judgement is obviously not much fucking better.”

The pain I felt days ago hearing his name no longer fills me, instead it feels as if my skin is on fire. I want to yell, to scream. It's an all consuming rage. One I've never felt before, and right now, there is only one person to direct it at.

“Well of course my judgement isn't great. Apparently, my husband would rather sleep with the enemy. I'm nothing more than a trophy to either of you,” I yell. “Something pretty to show off.”

“A trophy?” he growls. “What fucking prize do you think I’m winning by fucking my best friend’s widow?”

Memories of the night he left me in my bed after the first true orgasm of my life flood through me, bringing the embarrassment of being discarded once again, by not one, but two different men. “You haven’t fucked anyone.”

Nico’s hand darts out and he wraps his fingers in my hair near the base of my skull. “If we weren’t driving, I’d shut you up with my mouth. Since I can’t I know somewhere better you can keep those lips occupied.” His tone is forceful, commanding.

He tightens his grip in my hair, forcing my head toward his lap. I could resist. Tell him to fuck off and get his goddamn hands off me, except I don’t. Something in his words makes me want to listen. To obey every word out of his mouth.

I come face to face with his fabric covered dick when his voice fills the car again. “Undo them.”

I reach for the buckle, pulling the expensive leather from the loop and letting it fall to the side. Before he can tell me to keep going, I reach for the button. His hand tightens in my hair when I take the zipper between my fingertips and pull it down.

A small voice in the back of my head tells me to sit up, tell Nico to fuck off and hold my head high. I want to lead this family and I need to prove it.

But I can’t.

For some reason, I’m under his spell. Maybe it’s the need that’s been crawling at me since the night he left my bed. It could be something deeper. Whatever the reason, I can’t stop myself from obeying every word that comes out of this mouth.

“That’s it sweetheart. Take it out and wrap those pretty lips around it.”

I run my finger along the seam of his boxer briefs, feeling the slickness as my fingers brush the tip of his dick. Wrapping my fingers around his wide girth, I’m shock at the size of his cock. With Luis as my only experience, I feel lost at the sheer size of him.

Will I even be able to take half of him before he slams into the back of my throat?

I push the fabric aside, the wide purple head calling to me. Heat sears me at the soft velvety feel of his skin as my fingers curl around the base and I direct the head of his dick toward my mouth. I stick my tongue out and get my first taste of Nico.

“Not just your tongue, sweetheart. Fucking take it all.”

I open my mouth wider and slide his hard length across my tongue. My lips are stretched wide. Wider than I ever imagined they could go. I start to move my head back when his fingers flex again, the pressure forcing my lips down to the base of his dick.

I try to gag, but he holds me there for a moment before releasing me only enough to get a little relief, then pushing me back down again. “That should keep you quiet for now.”

Tears spring to my eyes. I suck as hard as I can while his hand keeps the rhythm going. A rhythm I eventually fall into. Grunts and groans echo through the car.

My panties are soaking wet. Each sound, each small taste of him making me crave him pulling over and bending me over the hood of the car. Every nerve ending is on fire, even as his punishes my mouth with his cock.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck,” he chants. “Take it all sweetheart.”

As the words leaves his lip, jets of cum hit the back of my throat. His grip still too tight to pull off and I swallow it down.

The first time in my life that I ever swallowed a man's cum. Luis always like to finish by coming on my face and chest.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

By the time Nico release his grip, I lift my head and pull in a long breath of oxygen. My chest is heaving. Need curled tight in my belly to have more. More of him.

Silence fills the car. I worry that I've disappointed him. That once again, a man I've given pieces of my body to is going to throw it away again. Slowly, I lift my head, Flashes of the way he ran from my room dancing in my memories.

When my gaze finally meets his, his eyes are trained on the rearview mirror. I move to turn in the seat.

"Don't," he snaps. "Keep your eyes forward." His tone is no longer sultry and deep. It's hard and cold.

"What—"

"Shut the fuck up for five seconds."

I open my mouth to argue and immediately stop. His eyes dart back and forth between the road and the mirror. A thin line mars his lips. Without moving my head, I look out of the corner of my eye to the side mirror and see a black SUV a few cars back. When Nico changes lanes, the SUV follows.

"We're being followed."

"Yes," he grits through his teeth.

"Can we lose them?"

The car lurches forward, the speedometer climbing. I grip the side of the seat as Nico weaves in and out of lanes of traffic, hurtling down the highway. We pass a couple of exits and just as I think he plans to stay on this road, he darts across two lanes of cars and barrels down the exit ramp. He makes a quick left and continues down the highway.

I want to ask, to know if they are still trailing us. I'm afraid he won't answer. Not that has ever stopped me before.

"Are they—" I start when Nico yells, "Scarlett!"

The crunching of metal hits my ears as the black SUV rams into the back of the car. My entire body slams forward.

Nico hits the gas, but it's not enough. Another SUV comes from a side street and before I can warn him, it slams into the passenger side of the car, sending us careening sideways across the road. Glass flies across my face at the same time I slam into the center console.

Silent screams try to leave my throat as the car tilts and rolls into a ditch on the side of the road. The screeching of tires pierce the air. The next thing I hear is ringing in my ears. My vision is hazy.

Smoke and dust surround us. "Scarlett?" The panic is clear in his voice. "Scarlett, are you all right?"

"I'm..." Right as I move to face him, pain shoots up my side and I groan. "Fine."

"Bullshit." Nico moves next to me, bringing his feet up and slamming them against the front windshield.

“What...” I trail off as his feet slam into the windshield again. A spiderweb crack forms. Once more he hits the glass and it shatters out onto the hood. Carefully, Nico climbs from the wrecked car. I lose sight of him for a moment. The next thing I know, he’s standing next to what’s left of my door.

He yanks on the handle a few times. “There’s too much damage,” he says through what’s left of the broken window. “Close your eyes.”

Nico pulls out his gun, gripping the barrel in his hands. I slam my eyes closed and turn my face away. I hear the last pieces of the window break away and fall into the car. “Now, carefully, unhook your seatbelt.”

He wraps an arm around my waist as I push the small black button. Pain courses through me when his grip tightens. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming out. Nico helps me from the car. That’s when I get the first good look at his face.

“You’re bleeding.” There’s a stream of blood running down the side of his face. The collar of his shirt is soaked through.

“It’s fine.” He brushes my hand away when I reach up to check the cut.

“It isn’t.” I grab the knot of his tie and pull it loose. Folding it up, I move his hand and press it against the cut. It doesn’t look bad, but he might need stitches.

Once I’m sure the tie is pressed tight to his head, I reach into the car for my purse, we need to get out of here. I ignore the pain the pressure on my side caused. I start dialing when a hand covers mine. “Who are you calling?”

“Sofia. We need to get the hell out of here before they come back.”

He lets go of my hand. She picks up in less than a ring.

“Hey Scar.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“Sofia, I need you to come pick me up. I don’t have time for questions, just get here quickly.”

I hear the rattling of keys. “Where’s here?” I look over at Nico who rattles off the directions from the exit we took. “I’ll be there soon.”

She hangs up without another word.

Nico reaches into the glove box, taking out all the paperwork for the car. The road we’re on is quiet, but who knows how long that will last. He pulls a lighter from his pocket and sets them ablaze right next to the car. Next, he yanks off the license plate and shoves it behind his back, right into his belt loop.

He gaze focuses on the driver door that is flat against the ground. “Please fucking tell me that he changed the VIN numbers?”

“On every car. There isn’t anything left to tie this car to us.”

He grabs my hand and practically hauls me down the street, away from the mangled piece of metal. “We wait away from the car in case anyone comes back.”

We move into the woods and stand behind a couple of trees. Enough to give us cover from people coming down the road, but still let’s us see who’s coming. Once we stop, I can hear my heart pounding in my chest. The sound loud enough, I worry others will hear it and know where we are.

“Who do you think—” Nico cuts me off by placing his hand over my nose and lips.

Even after being run off the road, the scent that is distinctly Nico fills my senses.

“Later.”

And I listen because I know he’s right. We need our entire focus on our surroundings. A couple of noises have me reaching into my purse to wrap my fingers around the handgun.

The moment I see a car turn off the highway, every muscle tenses and I wait. It isn’t until I see Sofia’s college license plate cover come into view that I let myself relax. She comes to a stop when she sees my car on its side.

She steps out of the car and Nico races from the trees. “We’re fine, but we need to get out of here.”

“Fuck, you’re bleeding.” She stares at Nico. When she turns to me, she takes my face in her hands. “Are you okay?”

“I will be when we get the hell out of here.”

She nods and turns to get back in the car. Nico and I climb into the back seat. The adrenaline begins to wear off. Each and every ache and pain I’ve ignored for the last thirty minutes begins to rear their ugly head. I grit my teeth and try to focus on something else until we can get home.

ChapterFifteen

Nico

The car is silent the entire drive home.

My thoughts are all over the place. I can see the tightness in Sofia as she speeds back to the mansion. She knows what happened and if there was anyone else I trusted, I would have called them, but Scarlett was right, she was the only one we could call. Or at least the only one I was willing to let her call. Not a single fucking chance I want Antonio anywhere near her. She doesn't need anyone fawning over her, but me.

Isn't that some fucking shit? The woman that has made me crazy every step of the way. The woman who stands between me and running the family is the one I want to protect.

Fuck you, Luis. If you had seen this woman for who she really was maybe none of us would be in this mess.

Sofia pulls into the drive and I take in my first easy breath since I saw the black SUV following us on the highway. Without a word, we get out of the car and walk into the house.

Scarlett is holding her side. The moment the door shuts, Sofia turns to Scarlett, tears in her eyes. "What happened out there?"

"Someone ran us off the road." Sofia takes Scarlett's hands in hers.

"This wasn't an accident." she says it so clearly, I know it isn't a question.

I wait to hear Scarlett's answer. She knows that we can't tell a goddamn soul what we probably both know. The DeLuca family only has one person in their way of claiming all of this. They need the fiery red head standing next to me dead if they're going to be able to claim Luis's empire for Frankie.

I listened, waiting to intervene if I had to. "I probably shouldn't have trusted the buyers Luis set up for the property."

“After everything that’s happened, why would you think that you could trust any deal he was about to make? I’m just so glad that you’re both okay.” She wraps her arms tightly around Scarlett, a screech of pain leaving her lips.

“You are not okay. Let me see your ribs,” I demand.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Angry green orbs flash in my direction. “You can look at me like that all you want, but you are still going to let me see.”

“I’m not stripping in the foyer of my home. If you want to see, follow me.”

She turns on her heel and heads for the stairs. Taking them carefully, one at a time.

I look over at Sofia. “Run her a hot bath and get some ice.”

She seems taken aback by my tone but right now I don’t give a fuck. We have too many problems trying to attack us from every direction for me to worry about how I’m speaking to others.

I don’t give a chance to argue, turning toward the stairs and taking them two at a time.

When I reach her room, Scarlett has already removed her dress and is tying the belt on a silk white rope.

“Open it.” I shut the door behind me.

“I’m fine.”

My hands clench into fists at my side. “Open the motherfucking robe now!” I snap, done with being nice.

Her lip curls into a snarl. Thankfully she keeps her mouth shut and tugs on the tie of

the robe. She pulls the flap to the side and I see the bruise already forming on her ribs.

I reach forward and she flinches the second my fingers graze her skin. “Did that hurt?”

“No.”

“Then, what’s with the flinch?”

“Nothing.” She turns her head away.

I cup her cheek and turn her gaze back to me. “I’m thankful as fuck we’re both alive, but I need to make sure nothing is broken.”

She nods and I step closer, pressing my fingers into her side. She sucks in a breath. Nothing feels like its moving. “Does it hurt to breathe?”

“No.” She shakes her head at the same time. “Only when I move in certain ways and when you press on it.”

I nod. “I don’t think anything is broken just bruised. I’ll send Sofia up to wrap your ribs once you’re out of the shower. Make sure you ice them.”

I turn to leave when she grabs my hand. “What about you?”

I shake my head, but don’t turn to face her. “Just some cuts and bruises. I’ll be fine.” It wasn’t the first time I’ve dealt with injuries and in this life it sure as fuck won’t be the last.

“You’re—”

I snatch my hand out of hers. “I said I’ll be fine.”

I leave the room before I let her see anymore of the fear that keeps trying to consume me.

I slam the door behind me and storm down the hall to my own room and head straight for the bathroom.

The cuts and scratches on my face will heal in no time. The one on the side of my head near my hairline worries me a bit more. I rummage through the medicine cabinet until I find a butterfly bandage.

A shower will be the easiest way to get make sure there is no glass still left inside. I drop my clothes to the floor. As much as I want a hot shower to relax the tense muscles in my shoulder, that’s not the answer. I turn off the pressure on the jets and let the cool water run.

Bracing for the temperature, I step under the spray, tilting my head, and letting the water run through the cut.

Red tinted water fills the bottom of the tub. I keep my head under the water until the water runs clear. Then I work on the rest of my face and body, inspecting every inch, making sure there isn’t anything that I missed.

Satisfied that I’ve cleaned the cut thoroughly, I step out of the shower and carefully dry my head and face. I pinch the larger cut closed and place the bandage over it.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Dressed, I head downstairs to the office. I want to lay in bed or check on Scarlett, but I know I need to find out who did this. I slam the office door behind me. My head is fucking pounding and all I want to do is punch something or someone.

I grab the brandy decanter off the side table and pour myself a glass. The alcohol burns as it slides down my throat. It brings with it a sense of calm. I still want to kill a fucker, only now I can focus on my target.

Would the DeLuca family be so bold to come after us in broad daylight? Fuck, if I knew the lengths Lorenzo DeLuca was willing to go to get his way.

The man wasn't stupid. Ruthless? Yes, but not stupid. He wants to control the Romero empire but he can't with Luis' widow still alive.

My instincts tell me that this is all Lorenzo's doing. It's not like I can go after him without proof. The heads of the family will kill me if I start a war with the DeLuca's

Revenge is the only answer. Quiet revenge.

If I'm going to get my hands on Lorenzo DeLuca, it needs to be without anyone else knowing, even Scarlett. Even though I want to argue with myself that this is about protecting the family and the family's assets, the voice in the back of my head keeps screaming this is all about Scarlett. About protecting her.

I tell the voice in the back of my head to shut the fuck up. Nothing good ever came from listening to those voices.

I sit down at the desk and turn on the computer. If I'm going after Lorenzo DeLuca, I need to know more about his family.

* * *

Scarlett

I finish in the bath and send an obviously upset Sofia back downstairs to get me a drink. I need a moment to calm my thoughts, which have been all over the place since we stepped back into the house. Sofia's fawning hasn't given me a moment to do that.

I rack my brain and try to figure out exactly what Luis would have done in this situation. What he might have done if he made it home from the deal that had gone wrong.

I knew.

Hell, if I didn't know exactly what he would have done.

This is my family, and partner or not I have to protect it. To do that I have to go into the city. Make my presence known to anyone who may be there. It needs to be something big, something with a lot of people. They have to see we aren't scared.

I pick up my phone and log into social media. The best place to find large events when you haven't be directly invited to one.

It only takes a few swipes of my finger to find a Fish Fry at the Italian Club in Queens.

What better way to show everyone that I don't scare so easily than to walk into the

enemies' territory for dinner.

I stand from the bed and walk to the closet. My side protests the movements. I ignore it and keep going. Better to practice hiding the pain in my side now rather than later. Can't let them see that they got to me.

The first dress I try on is too tight, pushing the wrap farther into my ribs. Something with a low belt should do the trick. A blue knee length in the back of the closet catches my eye. It's the same one I wore the day I learned of Luis's death. I hold the sleeve of the fabric in my hands for a moment before I tug it off the hanger.

There's no time to dwell on what outfit I wore when. Right now, if I don't look my best, I lose. With half my clothes still in the suitcase I brought from my old room, I can't bother looking for something else.

I drop the white robe to the floor and slip on the dress, careful to keep the fabric away from my ribs as it glides down my body.

Belt tied, I look in mirror. The slight puff to the bottom, near the belt is the perfect way to hide the bandages around my ribs.

Next, I have to focus on the scratches and light bruising on my face. I move over to my vanity and take a seat.

It takes me a little longer than normal to cover everything and complete my normal makeup routine, but in the end I'm happy with the way it looks.

After brushing my hair, I head downstairs in search of Nico.

I haven't seen him since he stormed out of my room. Asshole can make any woman crazy. And if we weren't in the circumstances that we are, I would leave him to rot in

the office all night. It just isn't an option.

Without knocking, I push the door open. Nico is sitting behind the computer, staring at the screen.

“We’re going to dinner,” I announce and his heads snaps up to look at me.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“The fuck we are. We almost got killed earlier. We’re—” he gestures his finger back and forth between us “—not leaving this fucking house.”

I keep my gaze on him as I walk across the thick carpet to the other side of the desk. “Yes, we are. The only way they know they didn’t scare us is by showing our faces. You know that, or did you forget?”

He slams his hand on the desk. “I didn’t forget shit. I said we’re not. Not I’m not. You aren’t going anywhere.”

This man, with his dark hair and eyes knows exactly how to piss me off at every turn. He’s not getting his way this time. I roll my shoulders back and stand straight to my full height. While I’m considered tall for a woman, my stature doesn’t begin to match his. He hasn’t bothered to get up from the chair.

“I will not be kept in this house while you run around pretending you’re in charge. We are partners. We both go,” I shout, matching his tone.

“No,” he says with finality and turns back to the computer. He’s done arguing. Well, so am I.

“Fine. You can stay here and pour over the computers. I’m going to Fish Fry at the Italian Club in Queens. Sofia and Camila will be joining me. Don’t wait up.”

I leave the room and go in search of Sofia to see if she’s ready to leave.

I find them waiting for me in the foyer. Both dressed and ready to go. I pick up my

purse and keys, my hands tremble a bit as I wrap my fingers around them. Sofia takes them from my hand.

“I’m driving.”

The heels of Nico’s polished shoes echo as he storms down the hall. Even though I hear him coming, I don’t race to get out the door. I know he won’t let us leave without another fight.

He snatches the keys out of Sofia’s hand the moment he reaches us. “No one is going anywhere.”

“Yes, we are.” Without thinking, I lay my hand on his arm. “You know we have to.”

He runs a hand over his hair. “This is fucking insane.”

“Yes, but it’s what we do to survive. We show them we can’t be taken down so easily.”

He sighs. “I think Luis’ beliefs might have rubbed off on you a little too much.”

I don’t want to think about Luis rubbing off on anything after everything I learned about him. “What’s it going to be?”

He glances at the expensive watch on his wrist. “Give me five minutes and we’ll leave.” He glares over at Sofia. “I’m driving.”

He storms off in the direction of the stairs. Having won the battle, I wait like he asked.

Sofia leans in, away from Camila who is standing closer to the door. “I can feel the

tension surrounding you both. You know today scared the shit out of him, right?"

"Of course, having your car run off the road would scare anyone."

She shakes her head. "That's not what I mean. You getting hurt scared the shit out of him. He doesn't want anything to happen to you."

I scoff and begin digging through my purse. "He gets everything if I'm out of the way."

"He may have wanted the heads of the family to let him take over, doesn't mean he wants anything to happen to you to get his way." She grabs my hand to force me to focus on her. "I saw the way he watched you on the drive home."

I start to argue only to be stopped by the sound of footsteps approaching. She glares at me as Nico opens the door gesturing for us to lead the way.

Somehow, Camila convinces Nico to let her drive, which leaves the two of us riding in the back and Sofia in the front. At least this time she can't watch us through the mirror without being obvious.

Camila pulls up in front, stopping at the valet. They step out of the car and move to the side, waiting for us. My eyes dart around, looking for any sign that someone might be here to finish the job. Nico must notice my trepidation. He steps out of the car and reaches back inside, giving me his hand.

With trembling fingers, I slip my hand into his, ignoring how it makes my heart speed and my nerves calm. I climb out of the car and follow him inside, reminding myself the only reason he offered is for solidarity. We have to keep up appearances. Although, I'm not sure what appearance it is when the widow and best friend are holding hands.

We reach the hostess stand and I see Sofia and Camila being led to a table already. I start to follow, but another hostess stops me.

“She said that you wanted a separate table please follow me.”

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Nico's brows draw together, watching me, except I'm glaring at Sofia, a satisfied smirk lifting the corners of her lips. Her and I will be having a chat later.

I take a seat at the table we've been shown to and Nico does the same. The entire room is full of delicious smells and the food on the other table makes my stomach grumble. I realize I haven't eaten since breakfast. It's been weeks since I've eaten a full three meals a day.

I run my finger along the top of the menu and watch as Nico reluctantly picks up his.

"Can I get you a drink?" A young voice asks next to me.

I look over and freeze.

"Fuck," Nico says quietly.

Standing next to me is none other than Frankie. I can see the vein pulsing in the side of Nico's face. If anything I need to keep him calm. My eyes dart around the room. Lorenzo DeLuca is nowhere to be seen. This poor boy isn't going to do anything to us. I remember the fear I saw in his eyes with his grandfather's threats At Luis' celebration of life.

"Hi, Frankie," I say, remembering that is what DeLuca called him. "Do you remember me?"

He nods. "I saw you with my Grandpa."

“You did. What are you doing here tonight?”

Nico opens his mouth so I kick him under the table. He needs to let me handle this. Nico was just as scary as his grandfather to this boy.

“My communion class is volunteering tonight. We’re supposed to bring water to the tables.”

“You’re doing a great job,” I say calmly. “We’d love two waters, please.”

He nods and walks off to get the glasses.

Nico leans toward me. “Have you lost your goddamn mind? Why would you bring us here when you knew he’d be here.”

“I didn’t have a fucking clue he was going to be here. I’m just as surprised as you are.”

He watches me for a minute. “Fine. Then let’s go.”

“No. Look at him.” Frankie is standing on the side of the room, talking to an older couple. The man laughs at something he says. Frankie practically skips his way over to the water station. He brings our water back.

“Enjoy your dinner.”

When he leaves again, I face Nico. “Watch him. He’s a good kid. Helping others, making them laugh.”

It’s silent for a few moments as I watch Frankie make his way to another table that has just sat down.

“Antonio’s right. You are good at reading people.”

“What? You finally trust me?” Nico doesn’t answer, so I continue. “Either way, I’ve been that boy. I know what it’s like to lose both parents and everyone who wants to ‘watch over’ you is only doing it for themselves. I want to protect him from that.”

I can’t believe the words that are coming out of my mouth. This boy is the product of Luis’ affair with Elena, yet I can’t stop myself from wanting to save him from the same fate as me. Giving your love to people who only want to use you.

“You’ve lost your mind. That’s a fucking bad idea. The last thing we need to do is draw more attention from the DeLuca family.”

I couldn’t help but shrug and open my menu.

ChapterSixteen

Scarlett

Nico didn’t say much through the rest of dinner. I didn’t let it bother me since I kept my eyes on Frankie. Watching him interact with others in the club.

Laying in bed later that night, I can’t help but think about Frankie. How the sweet boy will be forced to turn into a hard, cruel man considering the man that is raising him.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I want to see him again. Find out more about him.

Nico lectured me the entire way home to forget about Frankie.

He grabs my arm, not too hard but enough to get my attention. “Put that boy out of your head. Nothing good comes from chasing the enemy. After everything that’s happened, haven’t you learned that already?”

Sofia and Camila go inside first. By the time we reach the foyer, its empty. I slam the door and whirl around on Nico.

“I’ve learned a whole fucking lot the last few weeks. More than I ever needed to know. And you know what, I leaned more than anything.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “What is that?”

“That most people who do things in your best interest only want something for themselves. They’re not in it for you, but what they can get from you.”

He narrows his eyes at me. He knows I’m not just talking about how Luis treated me. Being around him has been like riding a seesaw. You never know when the person on the other side is going to manage to throw you off.

“Bullshit.”

“Not bullshit. Truth, whether you want to hear it or not. And you know what else, I want nothing from that boy. Nothing. Except to see him happy. To not be taken

advantage of.”

Nico grabs me by the arms, holding tightly to my biceps.

“Goddammit. Listen to me. You are not to go anywhere near that boy again. I will not tell you again.”

He shoves me away from him and storms down the hall. I think about going after him, then stop myself. I’ve had enough of Nico for the night.

I shake the memory from my head. Nico’s wrong. That boy needs someone to save him. To show him that he matters, that he’s not a pawn in some fucked up war.

The only problem is, I can’t figure out how to see him without getting caught by the DeLuca family.

The ceiling of my room holds no answers. I think back to everything I learned about Frankie tonight. He was there to help his communion class.

Communion.

That’s it. I can go see him at the church. Not one member of the family will do anything to me in the house of God. It will give me the chance to talk to him. Learn more about who he is. The only thing is I can’t tell him is who his father is.

I go through the motions the next day, keeping my plan to myself.

My alarm sounds early Sunday morning and I quickly turn it off. No one else will be up for a while, giving me a chance to slip out of the house without answering any questions.

Quietly, I slip out the front door. Thankful that our security system can be turned on and off from my phone. My heart races in my chest. This is the craziest thing I've done in my life. All of those moments of keeping up the perception of perfect for Luis have faded into memories the last few days.

First, it was about survival. Now, it is about what I want. For so long I focused on what Luis wanted. What was best for Luis and the family and in the end, he didn't give a shit about me or my wants.

He so easily pushed aside my desire to have my own children, but spent years hiding his illegitimate baby from me.

Even after everything, I found the desire to protect Frankie, to get to know him overwhelming.

I drive farther into the city. The Catholic church is only a few blocks over from the Italian Club. Even though there are others in the city, this one makes the most sense considering them waiting tables at the club last night.

I stay in my car until almost everyone is inside. The less attention I draw to myself the better.

The air is cool when I step inside, finding a seat in the back of the church. There's not much of the service that I pay attention to. At least, not today. Today, I only care about one person in the entire building.

The entire place is full. It doesn't deter me from continuing to look for him.

The choir starts singing and my attention is immediately drawn that way.

There he is.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Standing in the front of the group, Frankie, looking so much like Luis, sings his heart out with rest of the group.

His dark hair and even darker eyes make me wonder what it would have been like having a child with Luis. With my red hair and green eyes, would his dominate genes have taken over, exactly like he'd taken over my everything else in my life?

The choir finishes their hymn and I can't pull my eyes away from the little boy. The pain of learning I never meant anything to Luis is overshadowed by the little boy at the front of the church.

Mass ends and I watch the others file out of the church from the front first. They cross the hall and I watch as the first few people take a staircase to the left down a flight of stairs. Most of the other parishioners follow, a few others leave out the front door.

I know I can't go downstairs. It's probably a Sunday luncheon, even that is pushing my luck a little too far. I turn to pick up my bag when I notice a head of dark hair at the front of the church.

Frankie is still standing at the front with a bunch of papers in his hands. I take the opportunity I've been given. I pick up my purse and walk to the front of the church.

"Hi," I say quietly, hoping not to scare him.

He jumps and quickly turns. He looks like he's about to run when he stops and really looks at me.

“Hi, Mrs. Romero.”

Shock fills me. “You know who I am?”

He nods and sits down on the front pew. “My grandpa made me memorize yours and your husband’s faces since I was little.”

I want to tell him he still is little, but I don’t. “Why did you have to do that?”

He looks at me sheepishly. “He says that they two of you are dangerous. He told me I don’t have to worry about your husband anymore.”

Pain fills my chest and just as quickly, I force it away. There’s no room or time to let my heart break over Luis Romero anymore. He never loved me anyway.

“What do you think? Do you think I’m dangerous?”

He pauses for a brief moment, watching me. “No, I don’t think so. If you wanted to hurt me, you already would have.”

I give him a soft smile. “You’re right. I don’t want to hurt you. I actually want to know more about you.”

He fiddles with the papers in his hand. “What about that man you were with that first night?”

“Nico?”

He nods.

I thought about the way Nico tried to protect me. Even if he had to lie through his

teeth. The way his lips felt on mine. How he pulled me from the wreck the other day. “Well, he can be scary, but only when he’s protecting people or things he cares about.”

“You mean like money and jewels.” He doesn’t phrase it as a question.

“Do you know what we do? What your grandfather does?”

He looks at the floor. “I do, but I don’t want to do that.”

“I can understand that. I never expected to end up where I am. Did someone tell you that you have to work in this business?” Neither of us say it out loud. Just as I was raised to only talk business in the house or specific locations, it seems that Frankie has been taught the same.

“My grandfather says I have to take over for him someday. That’ll he teach me everything as I get older.”

“What would you like to do instead?”

“I want to be a doctor and help people.” It’s hard to miss the way he scoots closer to me. The woman who he’s been taught practically since birth is his enemy.

“I think you’ll make an excellent doctor someday.”

Bright, white teeth shine as he smiles at me. A smile very reminiscent of his father.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

A notification sounds on my phone and I peek in my bag and see that Sofia is trying to find me. I know that I can't stay away from the house any longer today without drawing suspicion.

"It was nice talking to you," I say as I stand. "I hope we can talk again sometime."

"Me too." He hops up from the bench and grabs the last few papers on the music stands.

We walk down the main aisle together in silence. When we reach the exit, Frankie heads toward the stairs, waving as I turn to the door.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as soon as I step out the front door. It's not like I brought any of the guards with me. I came alone for a reason. Paranoia is getting the best of me. Stopping, I take a deep breath, then continue walking to my car with my head held high. If there was one thing I learned from Luis, it's that image is everything.

They can watch all they want. The only thing they'll see is overflowing confidence. I tug open the door and climb inside.

The sadness in Frankie's voice eats at me the entire way home. Why should any of us be forced into this life because it's what we grew up with. It's full of pain and heartache and sometimes absolute fucking misery. No one is ever truly on your side and you always have to watch your back. Frankie doesn't deserve any of that.

He deserves to have the chance to grow up and be a doctor. The chance to step away

from this life. Luis would never let me have children of my own and maybe that was a blessing.

If my child told me they didn't want to run the family, I would move heaven and earth to make that happen.

I'm going to make that happen for Frankie. He deserves better. He deserves the world.

The mansion is still quiet when I return. I expected to see Sofia the second I walked back in the door. The accident made her worry more than she already did. My mind is still whirling with thoughts of Frankie.

I decide a nice Chianti should help and head to the living room to grab a bottle from one of the display racks.

My feet come to a halting stop when I reach the entryway.

Nico sits in one of the chairs, a tumbler filled with amber liquid in his hand. The first few buttons of his shirt are undone.

I pretend his presence doesn't bother me. He's been the master at keeping secrets, well now it's my turn. There's not a chance in hell that I'm telling him where I went today.

Shoulders back, I walk toward the wine display rack behind his chair. The scent that is uniquely Nico surrounds me. My heart races and my insides clench the closer I get to him. His empty hand shoots out and grabs hold of my wrist.

"Let me ask you a question." I don't answer, just simply stare at his fingers wrapped around my wrist. "Are you rushing to be buried next to your husband?"

ChapterSeventeen

Nico

Of course she has to walk in the door, in a black dress, modest enough for church but accentuated every curve of her figure. She glares down at me and I push thoughts of her warm flesh from my head and focus on what I'd been sitting in the living room simmering over.

She's lucky I didn't drive across the fucking city and drag her ass back to the mansion.

"Why did you do it?"

She yanks her hand out of mine, her green eyes glittering. "Why did I do what?" She saunters over to the custom wine rack prominently displayed in the living room.

I leap from my chair, grabbing her shoulder I whirl her around to face me. "Don't play fucking stupid. You are not a goddamn moron. A calculating bitch maybe, but not stupid."

Her lip pulls up in a sneer. "So we're back to insults."

I take a step forward backing her into the wall. "Yes, when you do something so phenomenally stupid."

"I went for a drive."

"Don't fucking lie to me," I yell, the sound echoing off the walls of the spacious room. "A drive all the way to the Catholic church. The same church where Frankie is making his communion."

Her eyes narrow at me. “Did you have me followed?”

I laugh, the sound evil coming from my lips. She can’t be that naïve. “Why would I do that, when I can track your car?”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“Track my car?” She really has no clue that Luis had GPS trackers installed in each of her cars.

Sick bastard was allowed to cheat on her, but he’d be damned if she could step out on him. Not that she ever would. She loved him and honored their marriage vows, even if he treated it like a nuisance behind her back.

Just another lie I have to keep from this woman. God, how I wish you were here so I could kick in the balls and kill you myself.

“Luis had trackers installed in all your cars. All I had to do was pull up the app.”

She shoves past me. “Of course he did. Who knew that I could have tracked him while he was fucking around on me during those early years.”

My gut tightens. I sent Sofia and Camila out a while ago so we could have this conversation without an additional ears listening in. “Not all the cars. Yourcars.”

Realization dawns. The pale skin of her face brightens with a red tint. “That asshole. I guess he could stick his dick anywhere as long as I was waiting at home like a good little wife.”

“Yes. That doesn’t change the fact that you walked into the DeLuca’s church this morning. And I want to know what the fuck were you thinking?”

“No matter how that child came into existence, we need to protect him. He doesn’t want this life and he should have a say of whether or not he’s in it.”

“None of us get a say. You know that.”

“Yes. And how I wish things were fucking different right now, but they aren’t. I can’t change the past. I can help him. Protect him.”

I grab the glass I set down on the side table and hurl it across the room. “We need to protect ourselves and being near that kid will only get us killed. I can’t believe you’d be so stupid.”

“Stupid?” she says, her voice is cold and calculating. “You’re an even bigger asshole than Luis was.”

I hear her heels, her footfalls heavy as she storms across the floor and up the stairs.

How dare she accuse me of being worse than Luis. I’m the only one who’s told her the truth. Well most of it anyway. He would have continued lying to her every day of their marriage if he had the chance.

Done with her bullshit. I storm up the stairs to her room. When I try the handle I find it locked. How quickly she forgot that I had keys to all the rooms. I yank it out of my pocket and unlock the door before throwing it open.

“Do you dare compare me to him?”

She spins around, her arms covering her breasts. The anger was riding me so hard when I stormed in, I hadn’t even realized she was naked. Now, that I can see all of her soft creamy flesh practically laid out before me, the blood that was thrumming through my temples turns south to my cock.

For days, I’ve wanted to know how this woman would feel wrapped around my aching dick. I kick the door shut again and turn the lock.

“When you act like him, thinking I’m too stupid and weak to defend myself, what do you expect. I’m not a goddamn perfect doll you can control at your heart’s desire. Now, get the hell out of my room.”

Ignoring her request, I take one step toward her, then another. I’ve zeroed in on what I want and it’s being buried in that soft pussy until she screams my name.

“Oh, I’m nothing like Luis. And I’ll prove it to you when I take that sweet cunt and make you scream and curse until you can’t take it anymore.”

Her mouth falls open and I take the opportunity to reach for her. Running my hand up her bare shoulder and around the back of her neck, I weave my fingers into her hair. Her emerald eyes burn. She won’t admit she wants this. Wants me to fuck her the way Luis never had the guts to.

I tighten my fingers in her hair, pulling tight, I yank her head back and capture her lips. The taste of her that has haunted me for the last few nights makes my cock throb behind my zipper.

I push my tongue into her mouth, tasting every inch that Scarlett has to offer. She moans into my mouth and I suck it all down. Visions of her sucking me off in the car when I was unable to watch flash before me.

“On your knees,” I command after I tear my lips from hers.

Her eyes narrow and I use my grip on her hair to force her down. The woman is full of fire and passion and if I can get her to submit to me we’ll both go up in flames from the heat of it.

With my other hand I quickly undo my pants, letting them fall to the floor. The outline of my cock strains against the boxer briefs I’m wearing. I shove her face into

my crotch. My dick pulses when she opens her mouth and blows on me through the fabric. Her tongue darts out licking up the fabric. I reach my thumb into the waistband, pushing them down until my cock slips free.

Hungry eyes meet mine. Her mouth opens wide and she sucks the head to her mouth. I punch my hips forward, using my grip on her hair to hold her tight. I can hear the way she gags on my dick.

“Take every fucking inch of me. Or I’ll do it myself.” Her eyes flash but with her mouth full she stays silent. I don’t let her move back, holding her tight to my groin. She pushes at my legs, trying to get away. “Breathe through your nose.” I command.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I feel the warm air hit my pubs and her resistance ends. That's when I really let go. Slamming into her mouth over and over again without letting go of my grip on her hair.

The slick sheen of her saliva shines in the light of the room as I watch her take each punishing thrust. Fuck. I never imagined how sweet it would be to see Scarlett Romero at my feet and under my control.

My balls tingle. Too soon. I refuse to come until I'm deep inside her. I pull my dick from her mouth and yank her up from the floor. The way her lips are swollen, the precum marking her lips makes me wild.

I slam her up against the wall.

"Nico," she moans.

"I won't be finished with you until you're screaming my name. Now, undress me."

I capture her swollen mouth once again, forcing her lips apart with my tongue. The buttons on my shirt come loose and she pushes it off my arms to fall on the floor. I don't give a single fuck where any of my clothes land. She breaks her mouth away. Her long fingers take hold of the hem of my boxers that rest below my hard dick and shove them to the floor.

Breathing hard, I can see the heat in her eyes. It's all I need.

I use my entire body to cage her against the wall. Her hair falls all around us. I wrap

my arm around her thigh, lifting her open for me and slam my dick into her slick pussy. She cries out. Each thrust forward rattles something until I hear a crash and glass breaking.

Now, that know what she feels like wrapped around me, I can't stop. I pick up my pace, pushing into her mercilessly. She claws at my chest, begging and pleading.

Deeper. I need to go deeper.

I step back my dick falling from her body. I don't give her a second to breathe before I shove her onto the bed on her stomach. I grab her hips and lift her core off the bed until she's waiting there on her hands and knees for me.

How fucking badly I've wanted to smack her ass when she doesn't listen to me. I wrap my hand around her throat, bringing her head up. The vanity mirror happens to be perfectly placed where she can watch as I take her all for myself.

"I can't tell you how long I've waited to do this," I whisper in her ear, right before my hand comes down hard on her ass. I slip my finger into her wet cunt and she moans. I do it again on the other ass cheek. Pink blooms on both cheeks.

I give her one last smack and slide my dick inside at the same time. "Nico," she shouts.

My name from her lips is all that I can take. I grip her hips tightly and thrust deep inside. The way her pussy grips me is unreal. I pick up the pace needing to mark her with my cum. She claws at the mattress. Her body begging for the same thing as mine. My balls draw tight to her body.

I reach around and pinch her clit hard. A guttural scream leaves her lips. Her body clenching around me like a vice. I thrust into her one last time. Jet after jet of cum

pours from me into her tight body.

She collapses below me and I follow her down. Never in my life had I fucked someone to the point of draining every ounce of my strength. Not unless we fucked for hours and hours on end.

Her eyes are closed and I allow my own to follow suit.

* * *

Scarlett

I'm not sure how long I slept for when I open my eyes. Never in my entire life have I had a man turn me inside out, the way Nico did tonight.

Not that I have much experience. He used my body and I loved it. Luis was always so careful, so controlled when we were in bed. Nico managed to take the fire burning inside of me and turn it into an inferno.

I never imagined a time I'd want a man to command me in the bedroom, yet every word from his mouth made the wetness between my legs grow. Even sitting here thinking about the way he touched me makes me damp. I touch my fingers to my lips and can feel that they are still swollen from the way he used my mouth. Even my pussy and clit still tingle. If I would have known what sex could really be, I'm not sure I would have been able to settle for anything less than explosive.

It seems that things I thought were acceptable before have now become subpar by a man I thought I hated. A man who drove me insane. Maybe that was simply the passion that had been missing between me and Luis. They always say there's a fine line between love and hate.

I glance next to me where Nico still dozes and I can't help but watch him. His long, dark lashes sit peacefully against his cheeks. Even in his sleep, I can see the edge to him. I know I'm falling for him.

And it has nothing to do with the most incredible sexual experience of my life. I've been falling for Nico for a while, longer than I actually want to admit.

Except, I can't. I can't fall for him.

There's too many obstacles. Too many issues.

I don't know if I have it in me to trust someone again. To hope that they will love me enough to be faithful. The heartbreak of losing someone twice has been too much for me. First losing Luis, then losing the innocence of what I thought we had together,.

Page 37

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I need to protect my heart. The only thing I can give this man is my body. To enjoy things while I can.

My focus must remain on Frankie.

I take my phone from the night stand and pull up the church's social media page. I scroll for a few moments until a picture of the choir comes up. Standing in the front row, exactly like he was this morning. I zoom in on his face.

The smile so familiar, yet so unique shines back at me.

He's who I must focus on. I need to protect him without hurting myself.

I hold the phone to my chest, thinking about all the ways I can help. Finally, I set the phone on the dresser and curl into Nico's side, enjoying his warmth as it seeps into me.

For the first time in weeks, I fall asleep feeling content. My heart is safe as long as I don't give it to Nico.

ChapterEighteen

Scarlett

The house is buzzing when I get up the next morning. I woke up yesterday to empty sheets. They were cool to the touch. After that, I didn't see Nico for the rest of the day. He didn't come to dinner, nor did he come back to my bed later that night.

When I reach the bottom of the stairs, why Nico disappeared becomes quickly evident.

Camila meets me in the hall with a steaming cup of coffee.

“I was about to come get you. Carlos and Andreas have arrived for your meeting.”

“Meeting? What meeting?” I didn’t arrange a meeting with the heads of the family. There’s no doubt in my mind who did set up the meeting..

“I don’t know, but they’re waiting for you in the office.”

“Let me guess, Nico is already there.” She nods. “Thank you.” I bend down and press a kiss to her cheek. Then, I look down at my dress, a little more casual than I would have worn had I know they were coming. Not that I have time to change. I straighten my back and walk to the office. I will deal with Nico going behind my back later.

I push open the doors and find the three men seated around the table on the side of the room. Carlos stands immediately and walks over to me.

“We were worried when Nico called and said you’d been ambushed and run off the road.”

My gaze darts around Carlos’ shoulder to Nico, who sits back in his chair, one leg propped up on his knee as if he doesn’t have a care in the world. If I could murder him with only my eyes, I would. He doesn’t seem to be the least bit phased by me glaring at him.

“Thank you. We took care of the evidence and left the car.”

Andreas pulls out the other chair. “While we appreciate that. We’re glad that we’re

not having to hold another family funeral.”

He didn’t need to say it, but I know that he’s more worried about the weakness that would show than being concerned about our actual deaths. They need to protect their business at all costs. Both heads of the family turning up dead does not make good business.

I take my seat. “Now that you’ve seen we’re both okay. I’m surprised to see you both. What would you like to discuss?”

Carlos inclines his head. He always appreciated getting down to business. “We flew in this morning. With new leadership in New York, we were concerned about the DeLuca family trying to take over. We weren’t sure if they would do anything, obviously we were wrong. After Nico informed us of his concerns about the DeLuca family, we feel it’s important to increase security while we figure out exactly what they want.”

I glance over at Nico, wondering exactly how much he’s told them. Last night I laid their worrying about falling for him and know I want to kick him in the balls. How could he not tell me it was the DeLuca’s who ran us off the road?

Nico shakes his head slightly and I take my cue and keep my mouth shut about Frankie. Ruining everything for him right now won’t help either of us, I remind myself over and over again.

“We want additional guards on both of you when you leave the house,” Andreas interrupts my thoughts. “Neither of you are to leave the house alone, for any reason.”

How can I protect Frankie, if I can’t get near him without additional guards reporting back to everyone. I can’t even tell them I’m going to see Luis’ son. Under normal circumstances I would agree with their plan. Hell, weeks ago I argued with Luis

about taking extra guards with him. He might still be alive if he had listened. Yet, here I sit balking at the same request. This is not a request I can say no to. The decision is being taken out of my hands and I won't go up against the heads of the family.

I dip my head. "We can do that."

The conversation continues around me about additional security measures being added to the house and to every car to make them able to withstand more hits.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I ignore it all. I know they are doing it to keep Nico and I safe. What it doesn't do is keep Frankie safe from his own family.

Carlos claps his hands together. "I could smell something wonderful coming from the kitchen when we arrived. Let's see what Camila has made for us."

Andreas and Carlos stand. Nico and I follow them out of the office down to the dining room where Camila has set out a feast for breakfast.

Sofia is already seated when we enter and I notice there is a mimosa sitting, waiting for me. She always knows exactly what I need when I need it.

I take my own seat and immediately pick up the glass, taking a sip.

Carlos and Andreas rave about her cooking like they always do. I force down a few bites to keep up appearances. My mind is racing on how I can help Frankie under the new circumstances.

It's probably what Nico planned all along. He kept telling me that being anywhere near Frankie was dangerous. Since I didn't listen, he decided he knew better than me. Same story, different main character.

I join in the conversation to not draw attention to myself.

Eventually Carlos and Andreas stand to leave. "I'm sure DeLuca is flexing his muscles since Luis is gone. He wants to see how far he can push until you push back."

He kisses my cheek and follows Andreas out of the door.

I grab Nico's arm. "I need to go over a few reports with you in the office." Sofia isn't fooled with the way her eyes track my moments. It's not something I can worry about right now.

Nico doesn't argue. He gestures for me to exit the dining room first. When we are safely behind the locked doors of the office, I turn on him. "Even Carlos can't pull off that kind of lie. He might not know exactly why DeLuca is after us, but he has to know the amount of arrogance it takes to show up at Luis' celebration of life."

He saunters over, unbothered to the bourbon decanter. "About the same amount of arrogance it takes to go to his church and talk to his grandchild."

"Luis' son."

Nico drains the glass. "He might be Luis' biological son, but he has never been Luis' son in the true sense of the word."

"He might have—"

"Don't kid yourself. Frankie was a complication to Luis and now it's a really big complication for us. Hopefully, they won't find anything out when they dig into the DeLuca family."

I grip the back of the chair in front of me, my nails digging into the soft fabric. "If you didn't want them to learn anything then why would you call them."

Nico drops down into the chair. Exhaustion is etched into every one of his features. "If you won't protect yourself from bad decisions, then I will find a way to protect you. The only way I can keep you from going back to that church is with more

security.”

“Asshole.”

“I’m definitely that.” He pours himself another glass. “While I know you wouldn’t take extra security assigned by me, I also know you won’t tell Carlos no.”

“Well aren’t you a manipulative fucker.”

He raises his glass in my direction. “I always get what I want.”

I leave the room. The man is completely infuriating. I thought I made it clear I was done being told what I can and can’t do. Apparently, Nico didn’t get the memo. I drag my ass to the kitchen, hoping to find something sweet or more wine, either will do.

Sofia is seated at the counter, one of her textbooks open in front of her. She looks up from the notes she’s taking when I walk in.

“Should I get you another drink?”

“Unless there’s more of your mom’s cinnamon buns. Hell, I’ll take both at this point.”

Sofia gets up and brings back a tray of freshly baked buns. After getting two glasses, I get the juice and champagne from the fridge.

I’m halfway through my first drink when Sofia puts her highlighter down.

“Something has changed about you.” She’s watching me closely and I can’t deny it. There just isn’t a way for me to explain it without spilling the secrets I’ve been forced

to keep. The rose colored glasses are off and I can see my life for how it really was.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“I think I’m learning to find my own way.”

She picks up her pen and taps the end on the table. “I think that’s true. I also think you’re starting to fall for that man and it has me a little worried.”

I stop with my glass halfway to my lips and bring it back down to the table. “Nico? I’m not falling for Nico.”

“You may want to the world to think that you want to wrap your hands around your neck and strangle him, but I know better.”

I pick up my glass. “He’s absolutely infuriating. Thinks he can make all of the decisions he wants, when he wants.”

‘And the way he turned you inside out yesterday meant nothing.’

My jaw drops open. “How do you—”

She waves her hand all around. “It’s written all over your face.”

“I can’t fall in love with Nico. I can’t fall in love with anyone right now. I need to protect myself.” What I don’t say is that I have to focus on Frankie and how to help him. I can’t be concerned with my feelings for Nico. Feelings that I push down and lock deep in a box.

If I don’t change the subject, Sofia isn’t going to let the topic go. I pick my phone up and open social media. “At some point, you have to move on. You’re too young to be

alone for the rest of your life.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her pick up her pen again, her attention back on the textbook. The discussion isn't over, Sofia won't let it go forever, for now though she's letting it go.

My attention is immediately drawn to the picture on my phone. Out of habit, I had gone right to the church's page again.

This time, it's not just Frankie on the page. I click on the picture and zoom in. My stomach instantly revolts. The woman standing in the photo isn't unfamiliar to me. I've looked at her picture enough to know who she is.

Elena is alive.

Nico lied to me. At every turn he protects Luis and his secrets. I dig my nails into my thigh, not wanting to show any outward signs to Sofia, since there's not a single question I can answer.

Determined to dig deeper, I stand up from the counter. “I'm going to go relax. I'm starting to get a headache.”

I can feel the blood rushing through my head, so it's not totally a lie.

Sofia looks at me with quizzical eyes. “All right. Do you need anything?” The worry is back in her eyes.

I wrap my arms around her shoulders from behind and press a kiss to her cheek. “I'm okay.” I'm nothing close to okay. “I just need a little rest. It's been a long couple of days.”

She gives me a soft smile. “It has and I’m really proud of the way you’re handling it. For a while I worried that you would drown in sadness if I let you.”

“Taking it day by day.” With that, I leave the kitchen and head directly to my room.

Warm water fills the tub, steam rising to cover the mirror. Phone in hand, I step into the water. This can’t be the only picture of her. I’ve been so focused on pictures of Frankie, that I failed to notice anyone else in them. Mostly, they were group pictures.

I continue scrolling looking through each picture. The water begins to turn cold during my search. A few more pictures of Elena pop up on the page.

All this time. He never had any intention of really being a part of their marriage. Maybe he broke it off with her. After all, things had improved between us dramatically around the time Nico had said she passed away.

Part of me wants answers, where the other part is afraid to hear them. The realities of my world have continued to be crushed every moment since Luis’ death. Nico spends the day looked up in the office and I don’t bother going to find him. I don’t know what I’ll do if he tries to lie to me again.

I go through the motions of my day until I can feign exhaustion and go to bed without anyone worrying about me.

No sooner do I shut the door, the knob turns and the door opens again. Nico strolls into my room like he has every right to be there. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up on muscled forearms. My body begs for me to strip him down. To let him make me come multiple times before he fucks me into slumber. It’s probably the only way I’ll get any sleep.

When he moves to wrap me in his embrace and places his lips on mine, my mind

wins out over my body. I shove him away.

He stumbles backward. “What the fuck, Scarlett?”

“You lied to me.”

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

He leans back against the door and crosses his arms over his chest. “And what did I lie about? Because I know it wasn’t about making you scream my name. The harder I sucked on your clit the louder you got.”

My panties grow wet from his voice and words. I do my best to ignore him and grab my phone off the bed, opening it to the picture of Elena.

“She’s still alive.”

He looks to the ceiling and mumbles something under his breath I can’t quite understand.

“She is.”

* * *

Nico

Goddamn, motherfucking Luis.

Couldn’t keep your dick in your pants when it came to Elena. I will never understand how you had this sexy, spitfire beneath your roof and ignored her for that coldhearted bitch.

My chest aches. For the first time in my adult life, I feel guilt for lying to someone. Not just anyone though. Lying to Scarlett. She deserves so much better than what Luis gave her. I could have been better for her.

I'm falling for her and even I'm not arrogant enough to lie to myself and say that it's new. I've always loved Scarlett.

I took a step back because I thought my best friend loved her. What he really loved was her ability to adapt to his idea of perfection, a feat Elena could never match.

For the thousandth time, I wonder why I kept Luis' secrets all these years. He didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve her.

I hate that I'm falling for her. I hate that Luis' piss poor decisions hurt me because they hurt her. Even though I don't want to, I have this deep seeded need to protect her and there's only one way I can do that. I need to lay it all out on the table, no matter how badly it hurts her. She'll never trust me if I don't.

"How is she still alive?" she demands.

"She's been alive the entire time." I run a hand through my hair and reach in my pocket for a smoke. Anything to take the edge off. I light it and draw in a lungful, then blow it back out, offering it to Scarlett. She pushes my hand away.

"Answer my question."

"I don't think you want the answers, but let's do this."

I take one more hit before gripping the tip between my fingers to put it out. "Luis has been with Elena for years. Long before your parents died. After their deaths, he married you."

She takes a menacing step forward. Her fiery red hair flowing in waves down her back and the emerald of her eyes flashing in the muted lights of the room. "Get to the part of the story I don't know," she hisses between her teeth.

“Fine. He married you but kept her comfortably to the side. Frankie was the result of a broken condom, at least that was Elena’s version, about three years into your marriage.”

She wraps her arm around herself. “Three years?”

“Yes, right around the time he started treating you like a proper wife and not some charity case.”

She takes a two steps back this time. “Seems like you know an awful lot about my marriage. More than I did.”

“I know everything,” I yell, frustrated that I’ve been put in this position.

“Yet, you keep lying to me.” Her voice rises to match mine.

“Yes,” I roar. “DO you really want to know how he preferred her pussy over yours? That every fucking night he was gone, he was in her bed making her come with his mouth and tongue?” I move toward her. The anguish on her face making my chest ache, but knowing this is the only way to keep her at arms length. “How about the stories he told me about destroyed hotel rooms because they couldn’t keep their hands off each other? Is that what you Fuckin’ want to know?”

She reaches behind her, grabbing the vase off the nightstand and hurls it into the wall.

Glass shards scatter across the floor. “Get out of my room. I never want to see you again.”

It’s exactly what I knew would happen when I pushed her. Makes it easier to not fall for you when she hates you.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Without a word, I turn and leave the room. The sound of the lock clicking into place makes me smirk. That woman will never learn.

I take the stairs two at a time down to the living room. The decanter of brandy calls my name. I fill the glass and take a sip, enjoying the burn. Weariness overcomes me and I take a seat on the couch. Keeping all of Luis' secrets is taking its toll on me.

Not anymore. Everything is out in the open. No more hiding his deception and lies from the one person who should have mattered most to him.

Memories of the way her face grew even more pale with my words only to have her put on a front of anger by throwing the vase.

Another face for the world to see.

That woman has been putting a show on for everyone in her life as long as I've known her. Why in fucking hell do I need to care? I don't want to fall for her. She's my best friend's widow.

I should say supposed best friend. How could he expect me to keep all of these secrets after his death. Oh right, dumbass was too arrogant to think that he could die before he was old and gray.

No matter how much I don't want to fall for her, I can't stop it. The thought of her lying alone upstairs makes my gut clench. I'm not the apologizing type, but I can show her what happens when a man truly does care.

I throw back the rest of my drink, leaving the glass on the table and head back upstairs. The keys jingle quietly when I pull them out of my pocket to unlock the door, which won't open when I push on it.

Motherfucker. She didn't only lock it, she blocked it with something else.

I bang on the outside. "Scarlett, open the fucking door."

I grip the handle tighter, ready to rip the door off it's frame and stop myself. Breaking into her room is just going to make things worse.

"Go to hell."

Her voice isn't as strong as I expect it to be. I listen closer and hear the sharp intake of breath. That when I hear the sob come from her room. It's muffled, probably by her pillow.

What I hate the most is that her pain brings me pain. I may tell it not to, but my heart aches to go and comfort her.

With the last remaining grip on my temper, I back away from her door and go to my own bedroom.

The two of us will talk tomorrow after we've both calmed down.

ChapterNineteen

Scarlett

The dreams from the previous night try to hold me under. I force my eyes open refusing to let their grip on me continue. In all of my dreams, Nico kept taunting me

over and over again about Luis and his affairs.

It took me hours to stop crying and fall asleep. How many more tears do I need to shed over a man who never really loved me in the first place?

I climb from my bed, muscles stiff and go right to the bathroom. The vision staring back at me from the shower looks like the same woman from the night of Luis' funeral. Only she's a lot wiser now.

I throw some cold water on my face. The heat of the shower relaxes my muscles and I go a little heavier on the makeup to cover the dark circles under my eyes. I refuse to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me upset over him ever again.

My favorite red dress hangs in the closet. It's the confidence boost I need. I pull on the soft fabric, sliding it down my hips and over my thighs. I choose heels to match that elevate my already tall frame higher.

No longer will I let men control my destiny. Not Luis. Not Nico. They can all go to hell.

Hair blown out and framing my face, I walk down the stairs, taking my time, letting them all see.

I hear a whistle to my right as I reach the landing. I glance over and see Sofia coming down the hall.

"You look like bad boss bitch vibes today."

"From now on that's exactly what I'm going to be."

She looks me up and down. "I'd ask what man put that smile on your face, but I have

a feeling that not a single one did. This is all you.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

“You’re damn right it is.”

She leans into me. “So I take it no Nico in your bed last night?”

“Nope, and it’s a place he’ll never see again.”

Sofia’s eyes widen. “I take it we’re back to purgatory?”

“That’s exactly where we are.” I take a step toward the kitchen. “Let’s get breakfast. I have work to get done today.”

“Let’s do it,” Sofia falls into step next to me.

The dining room is quiet when we walk inside. Antonio is sitting on one side of the table, with Nico directly across from him. Antonio is either ignoring or oblivious to the glares from Nico. I walk over and pull out the chair immediately next to Antonio.

His nostrils flare, his fingers tightening around the knife in his hand.

A smile lights Antonio’s features when he turns to me. “I have a few new pieces I need you to look at when you get a moment. The designs for your ring are ready as well.”

“Designs for a ring?” Nico asks. I ignore his question since it’s none of his business.

“I’d love to see them. I have a few things to do this morning. How about I come down to the store this afternoon.”

“Wonderful.” Antonio lays his hand on mine. “Both designs are gorgeous and will look absolutely stunning on you.”

“Scarlett.” Nico slams his hand onto the table making Sofia jump.

“What?” I snap.

“We have meetings today.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “There’s nothing on my calendar.” Nico’s attempt to keep me away from Antonio is childish at best. “If we have business we need to discuss, it will have to be done this morning.”

It’s not often that Nico loses his cool. Today is not one of those days. He pushes his chair back so hard that it falls to the floor. Without a word, he strides from the room, his footfalls heavy like his stomping.

“Is he okay?” Antonio asks

“Probably not,” Sofia mutters under his breath.

“Does it matter?” I shrug. “He doesn’t like when he doesn’t get his way.” I pick my fork up, ignoring the side eye I can feel on me from Sofia. “I’m starving.”

I push Nico’s behavior from my head and force down a breakfast I have no desire to it. Camila’s cooking can’t compete with the turmoil inside my head.

After breakfast, I go straight to the office. Half way through the first report I have to complete, the door to the office flies open, then slams back into its frame. I don’t bother looking up. No need to, only Nico would behave that way. At least the Nico that’s been here for the last couple of weeks.

“I thought you were a man who prides himself on keeping calm?”

He stalks forward. “It seems that around you my dear, it’s almost fucking impossible to be calm.”

I ignore his scent as comes closer to me. The mixture of cologne and something uniquely Nico. It makes me think about the scent of my sheets after the night he fucked me into the mattress.

A place I would never be with Nico again. “Is there something you want?”

“Are we back to tempting Antonio into your bed so you can finally see that he can’t satisfy you the way I can.”

I don’t bother looking up at him. “As I said before, is there something you need? I have work to do.”

“Scarlett, I will not let you blow me off.”

“Since it’s not your say what I do or don’t do, I guess you’re in a bind. Now, if you don’t have any business to discuss, I’m getting back to work.”

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I can feel the blood thrumming through my veins. Standing my ground against this man who has found away to turn me inside out isn't easy. I turn back to the computer ignoring him.

"Fuck it."

He leaves the room, the door crashes into the hinges on the way out. I wasn't kidding with Sofia this morning. This is absolutely going to be my new purgatory.

I spent the last few days either avoiding Nico or actively causing fights with him. His buttons are easy to push. Anything to keep from having to deal with him. For year Luis lied to me, I should be used to it by now. Which is why I can't explain why it hurt so much more to find out that Nico had continued to lie to me over and over again, even when he swore he'd told me everything.

Nico isn't just as bad as Luis, he's worse. At least worse for me. I thought I loved Luis, now that my heart wants Nico, even after everything he did, I know he could hurt me much more than Luis ever could, even in death.

Arguing and snapping at him seems like the better solution to my problems at the moment. At least until I can't take it anymore. Sofia's words "you're falling for him" chasing me everywhere I go in the house.

After days of arguing, I need to get out of the house. Away from everyone.

Since it's Sunday, I decide to go to church. I dress and head downstairs, hoping my attitude the last few days keeps everyone at a distance until I'm out the door.

When I turn to the door, I find the additional guards waiting, not necessarily for me, by the door. This is their job and somehow I need to convince them not to do it.

“Good morning, gentleman”

“Morning Mrs. Romero.” I bristle a little at the name, no longer feeling like it’s a part of me. “Where do you need us to take you.”

“I’m going to church this morning. Neither of you need to come, I’ll be fine.”

Juan stands up from this seat. “We can’t let you go alone. Orders directly from Carlos and Andreas.”

“I know. And normally, I would have you both up front in the car. Between time at the jewelers and the other business that we’ve had, you deserve a morning off.”

They still don’t look convinced, so I keep pushing. “It’s only church. What could possibly happen to me there. I’ll leave right after mass and be back here in no time.”

They both look at each other, then back at me. “All right Mrs. Romero,” Juan says. “Church should be perfectly safe, but call us if you need anything.”

I smile. “I will.”

I step out the door and let out a deep breath. For some reason get past the extra security seems more daunting than walking into the church of the DeLuca family.

The time I have out of the house without someone coming to look for me is short. I don’t waste anytime climbing in the car and taking off down the road.

Church is the same as when I was here last week. The mass is simple and I spend the

entire time with my gaze on Frankie singing at the front of the choir.

The church's page mentioned another luncheon immediately following church. I wait as the people file out, hoping that Frankie will hang back again to clean up the papers.

For the briefest of moments I think he is going to follow the crowd, then I see him wave to someone and go back to the papers. My instinct to come was right. I get up from my seat and walk down the aisle.

About halfway to the front everything goes black.

* * *

Where am I? What happened?

I try to open my eyes and can't. Too much pain. I feel like I'm moving. Moving where? I attempt to focus. The darkness is pulling me back under. There's no stopping it, so I let it take me into its sweet embrace once again.

* * *

A throbbing pulse pulls me from a dark hole. It's not the soft wake up from sleep or even the brightness of a morning with a hangover. My head pounds at the back of my skull.

The last thing I remember is seeing Frankie at the front of the church. My heart races in my chest. Something's wrong. I open my eyes and nothing. Everything is dark.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. My heart races in my chest and I worry that it is loud enough for whoever hit me over the head to hear.

Page 44

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

A light flips on illuminating the room. It's so bright that I have to shield my eyes to keep the pain to a minimum.

My eyes slowly adjust. It's cold and damp, mostly likely a basement. On wobbly legs, I force myself and notice the old mattress I've been left on. It's stained. Many of them a dark brown, the color that you normally find with dried blood.

I can see the lightest reflection of the mattress next me. I reach out and my hand comes into contact with the cool glass, but there's no window on the other side, only cement blocks. Quickly, I turn around. I'm completely incased in a glass room. The walls are close enough that I can touch both of them with my arms out.

I see the outline for the door and reach for it.

"Don't bother. You don't think I'm stupid enough to leave it open?" I whirl around, instantly regretting the decision, the pain in my head increasing tenfold.

At first, I don't see where the voice comes from, but then a figure leans forward, pushing their face into the light.

"Elena," I whisper.

Her long black hair, tumbles in waves over her shoulder. The picture of her on the church page is deceiving. Even in the dark and with my head pounding, I can see the hatred in her eyes. "Good. You know who I am. Did you really think you could come have a chat with my son whenever you liked. That I wouldn't find out?"

I roll my shoulders back. There's no way in hell that I will let this woman see me cower in fear. "You mean Luis' son?"

"My son," she snarls. "Luis is dead."

I step closer to the glass, doing my best to stare her down. Let her know that she doesn't scare me, even as my insides turn themselves upside down. "I think I know that better than anyone."

"Considering how much you don't know, it wouldn't surprise me if you didn't."

"You bitch. You steal my husband from me, now you want to lock me in here and insult me."

"I didn't steal your husband," she spits the word out like poison, "You never had him. He loved me. Spent his nights with me." She stands up and comes to the glass directly across from me. For the first time, I get an up close and personal look at Elena DeLuca. She's nothing that I would have expected from the pictures. If people think I'm cold, I have nothing on her. "The only reason he married you was to keep you away from Nico."

"Why the fuck would he care about keeping me away from Nico?"

She taps the glass making me feel like I'm an animal in a zoo exhibit. "Guess you don't know everything do you? I'll tell you a secret," she says with a conspiratorial wink, like she's suddenly on my side.

"Let me guess, you're going to tell me where the key is?"

Her laugh is menacing. "No, but you don't need to worry about that. You are the only thing standing in my way of having everything that should have been mine years

ago.”

“Your family has their own empire.”

“We do and I want to control both. Luis loved me. He knew that once my father died, we could be together.” She pushes her dark hair back. “With you gone, I can finally give my son his empire. Frankie will control it all. He’ll be a man no one messes with once I’m done teaching him.”

Elena’s plan to exploit her son makes me sick to my stomach. How could anyone want to turn their child into a ruthless killer, especially one as innocent as Frankie.

This bitch is as sick as her father. I’ve seen the fear in that poor boy’s eyes.

“Nico will stop you from taking over the family.”

“Don’t worry about Nico, we’ll make sure he doesn’t suffer too badly.” She turns on her heel and walks back into the dark. “Now, stay here like the good little girl you are. There’s so much more I need to learn from you.”

And with that I hear footsteps echo up what I can only guess are stairs before the room is plunged into darkness once again.

ChapterTwenty

Nico

Sitting in the living room, I lean back with my feet up. It’s the first morning in a few days that she hasn’t found me to start a argument. In what seems to be her new way of dealing with shit, she pushes my buttons until I lose my cool, then walks away like it’s all my fault.

How the fuck did I think keeping all those secrets would end up for me? None of it has gone well.

I lean my head back on the chair and try to push thoughts of Scarlett out of my head. As much as she wants to piss me off, I can't help but see it as her own defense mechanism.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

How many hits can a person take until they break? It kills me to see Scarlett like that. The spirit that once pissed me off to no end, now is something I admire about her. I have to wonder if I've killed it by protecting Luis.

“Have you seen Scarlett, she's not answering her phone?”

I crack an eye open to see Sofia standing in the entryway of the living room. “Why would you think that I know where Scarlett is? Do you hear yelling coming from the room?”

She crosses her arm over her chest. I always admired Sofia's ability to stand up to people even when she is much smaller than them. “No, but I figured since she left this morning without any protection, you would know where she had gone.”

My head snaps up. “What the fuck do you mean she left without protection?”

“Considering both guards are in the dining room eating and her car is missing, I can put two and two together.”

I leap from my seat and race to the dining room. “Where the fuck is Scarlett?”

Both men turn in my direction. “Church.”

Fuck.

“And you let her go alone?”

Juan shakes his head. “She wouldn’t let us come with her. Said she didn’t need protection in church.”

“Goddammit..“ I yank my phone from my pocket and pull up the GPS for her car. Thankfully she took her car. We haven’t had a chance to get all of the cars connected. I know before the little dot appears on the map, exactly where she went.

“Let’s go.” Both men jump up from the table.

Sofia grabs my arm. “Is Scarlett okay?”

“Hopefully.” I don’t have more than that to tell her. If the DeLuca’s have her, who the fuck know what they’ve already done to her.

I climb into the backseat of the Bentley, telling Juan where the church is. My foot bounces up and down, getting faster the closer we get to the city.

We arrive at the church and it’s silent. No one has been here for hours.

We find her car about a block down the street and the hood is cool to the touch. This is the worst idea ever. Doesn’t stop me from going inside. Wherever they have Scarlett, I need to find her.

If they have her.

I want that to be true. Deep down, I know it’s not. I yank the door open and walk into the church. There are very few lights on, giving the room an eerie glow from the light of the stained glass windows.

“Search it. Find any sign of Scarlett.” The men split up. One taking the front of the church, the other taking the back. I start in the center, looking up and down the rows

of seats.

When I move to the next row, a light catches my eye. I bend down and realize it's a reflection of a diamond earring. "This is Scarlett's earring."

Juan points to a spot about a foot away. "That looks like blood."

"We've got to talk to Carlos." I get us out of the church as quickly as possible. They already have Scarlett, I don't want to add more targets for the DeLuca family.

I text Carlos on the way back to the house. This is not a conversation I'm having in front of guards. We reach the house and I race for the office, locking myself inside.

I connect to the secure video channel that Carlos has sent. Both his and Andreas' faces appear on the screen.

"What's the problem?" Andreas asks, a cigar clamped between his fingers.

"The DeLuca's have taken Scarlett."

Carlos sits up in his chair. "How the fuck did they get to her? Where was her protection?"

"She was going to church and left the mansion without protection."

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Andreas seats his cigar in the ashtray next to him. “She chose to leave the mansion without the additional protection we assigned?”

“Yes,” I ground out, frustrated by this line of questioning and wondering why they aren’t immediately sending more guards this way to go after her.

Carlos sighs. “I thought she was smarter than that. Looks like you’ll need to take over the New York business completely.”

Wait. “What do you mean take over the business? What about Scarlett?”

“Unfortunately, she has become collateral damage. She chose to leave the house without protection. We will not start a war with the DeLuca’s when she is unwilling to follow simple instructions.”

These men have no ideas of the danger the DeLuca’s having Scarlett poses to their business and I can’t tell them a goddamn thing.

Knowing that she’s the key to keeping Lorenzo from claiming the business for his grandson would be enough to send an army after her. Then again, it could also be enough that they have both of our heads and the boy’s. Their answer is firm and I know there’s no changing their minds, which leaves saving Scarlett in my hands.

“I’ll take care of it.”

“Nico?” Andreas says, an edge to his voice.

“Yes?”

“Do not disappoint us.”

“I won’t.” And with that I disconnect the call before anything else is said. No lies were told, I will take care of it, just not in a way that they expect.

There’s no way in hell I will leave Scarlett to suffer at the hands of the DeLuca family. I’ve tried to avoid it, pretend it doesn’t exist, there’s no more denying how much Scarlett means to me. Even when she’s intentionally trying to drive me crazy.

I’m the only one who can protect her and that’s exactly what I’m going to do. I pick up my cell and call a few of my contacts. Men who aren’t loyal to me or Luis, they’re not even loyal to Carlos and Andreas. What they are loyal to is money. Pay them enough and they’ll get any information you want and not tell a fucking soul they got it for you,

Now, it’s just a matter of waiting. My hands are tied until I know where they might have taken her. I refuse to even entertain the idea that she might not be alive. She has to be.

I pace the office floor my nerves getting the best of me. If I’m going to save Scarlett, I have to find a way to focus on the task. I walk over to the side wall and pour a glass of bourbon.

There’s a light knock at the door. “Come in.” I say louder enough for the person on the other side to hear. The door swings open. Sofia and Camila stand on either side of Rosa.

“Where’s Scarlett?” Sofia has an arm wrapped tightly around Rosa’s shoulders. It kills me to see Rosa hurt again, but I don’t let them see it. I maintain the façade of

calm everyone is used to seeing from me.

Scarlett and I are more alike than I realized.

“I don’t know. I’m pretty sure the DeLuca family has her.”

Rosa begins to sob and Camila holds her tighter. Tears form in Sofia’s eyes. “Why are you here then?”

I look at Sofia and hold her gaze, hoping she sees what I can’t say out loud in front of the others. “The family heads don’t have any intention of going after her. She made the choice to leave without protection. They won’t spend resources bringing her back.”

Sofia watches me for a moment. Normally, she’s intuitive and can read between the lines, at least from what I’ve seen and I’m hoping she can do the same right now.

She nods. I understand. “Mom, let’s put Rosa in one of the guest rooms so she can lie down and rest.”

Camila looks between us then nods. Her trust in her daughter is immense.

The family may not be willing to use resources to save her, but I will go after her. I can’t leave her in their hands, not knowing what they might do to her.

It’s not just about protecting the family. It’s about protecting her.

Once Sofia and Camila lead Rosa up the stairs, I go back into the office. If there’s any way possible to save her, I need to know where she is.

While I wait for answers, I fire up the computer in the office, wondering if Luis was

dumb enough to keep any files on it that might help me figure out where they might have taken her.

I scan each file, ignoring the name on them. Anyone could search this computer at anytime. An hour later and I still have nothing.

Page 47

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I switch from files to social media, scouring profiles from the entire family. Not that there's much to see. I can't remember where Scarlett found that picture of Elena and Frankie.

I rack my memories. I only saw it for a brief moment, but maybe it could lead me to other clues.

The church.

The post was from the church's page. I scroll down and find the picture. Elena stands with her hands on Frankie's shoulders. The smile on her lips doesn't reach her eyes. She may paint the picture of a kind and caring mother for social media, but the bitch is as cold as one can get. Would sell her own son to save her ass.

"Goddamn you, Luis." I knock the pen holder across the room, pens flying everywhere. "How could you put us all in fucking danger like this? Your inability to stay away from this bitch might just get your wife killed," I shout into the empty room. I know Luis isn't here, but if that motherfucker can hear me from the grave, I want him to know how much he fucked up.

How his actions might lead to the death of the one woman he swore before God and witnesses to protect.

If you weren't already dead, I'd kill you myself.

Hours pass. I alternate between pacing the room, staring at my phone and staring out the window. They can't be that good at covering their tracks.

Hell, they left the blood and her earring behind. An earring that Luis had custom made for Scarlett before they got married. The intricate pattern of gold around the diamond gave it away immediately.

Why would she be so reckless? I warned her that going near that church and the boy was entirely too dangerous. Lorenzo had already made his intentions clear at Luis' celebration of life and again when he had us run off the road. How much more proof did she need?

We need to protect him.

Her voice floats through my head and I know this is not about her proving anything. It's about trying to find a way to protect Frankie from his own family.

My phone rings, pulling me from my thoughts. I answer it on the first ring.

"Nico."

"I know where they're keeping her."

I open up the bank app on my phone and transfer the money. "The rest of the money is in your account. Now tell me where they have her."

"She's being held at the DeLuca safe house." He rattles off the address and the call ends.

I pull the address up on a map. It's not far outside the city. I switch the view so I can see exactly what the street looks like, not only lines on the map. Knowing what I'm walking into will keep us from both getting killed.

Daylight is still shining brightly from the window. There's not a goddamn thing I can

do until the cover of night. The guards are here to protect us, but I'm not stupid, they work for Carlos and Andreas, not for us.

I can't risk one of them trying to stop me or tipping off Carlos of my plan. If I can bring her back to the house safely, we don't need to say a word about how she escaped.

Another secret to keep. One that will keep both of us alive. I can go after her tonight.

Please be safe until then.

I leave the office and head to the kitchen. Bourbon helps with the nerves, not the clear head. Camila is nowhere to be seen. There's no need to bother her while she takes care of Rosa. I'm capable of making my own pot of coffee.

My watch feels like a noose around my neck, Cutting off my air with each hour that passes with her in their hands. To keep up appearances, I go back to the office after dinner. It gives me time to plan.

With a little more "help" I was able to get my hands on the blueprint of the house.

It's not a large structure. Only one story with a basement. Unless there's been many modifications to the plans, there should be at least one window in the basement. The only other entrance is from inside the house.

Going through the window is ideal over trying to get into the house itself. Night begins to fall and I head up to my room, away from prying eyes.

It's hours later when I'm sure everyone in the house is in bed. Three in the morning, only gives me a couple of hours to get there, get Scarlett out, and get back to the mansion.

I bypass the security system with my phone, turning it back on the moment, I'm outside the house. A car will draw too much attention and slow me down.

I throw my legs over one of Luis' motorcycles and tear down the drive.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Pushing the bike over a hundred miles per hour, I reach the small safe house in less time than expected. Every window is dark, leaving me to wonder if she's even here. I drive around to the side of the house, looking for the basement window. I stop when I see it's not blocked by anything.

That's my way in.

ChapterTwenty-One

Scarlett

The darkness closes in on me now that Elena is gone. Leaving without the guards was the worst idea I've ever had. I had to see him though.

I won't regret trying to talk to Frankie again. The boy needs my help. Not sure how to give it though surrounded by glass walls and darkness.

I drop down onto the mattress. It's closer to me than the chair. Everything seems pretty fucking hopeless right now.

Nico doesn't know where I am. And who knows if they family will be willing to send anyone to my rescue. The won't take kindly to me ignoring their orders to go to church. I knew that when I made the decision to go.

Not that I ever expected an ambush in the house of God. Maybe Elena is right, I don't know everything. And in my naïveté, I'm about to get everyone I care about killed.

I finally admit, that Nico is more to me than a business partner. Elena's words parading through my head. Did Luis realize that I wanted Nico when I was younger. Even I hadn't figured that out. Or maybe it was that Nico wanted me and Luis knew I'd fall into his arms if given the chance.

No matter the reason. I need to find a way to tell him everything. No more lies. Luis was hiding more than another woman and a child.

That poor child. Did they make him sit there and watch while they carried me out of the church? Was I just the first step in his initiation into a world of crime?

Damn you, Luis. How could you put us all in danger?

Did he really plan to leave me once Elena's father was dead? The man I knew would have known that the family would never let him get away with that. He may have seen himself as the head of the family, but we all really know that we serve at the whim of Carlos and Andreas. They allow us to run the business in New York.

If they thought for one second that Luis would try and merge their New York empire with the DeLuca's, they would have killed him themselves. Luis knew better.

At least, I thought he did. If I've learned anything the last few weeks, it's that I truly knew nothing about my husband. He's a complete mystery to me.

An asshole. That's what he is. An asshole whose name I will no longer defend. He risked all of our lives for a woman and never gave a shit about his son. Well, I refuse to do the same.

Frankie needs our help. Our protection.

I lean back against the glass because right now I don't see any way to get myself out

of this glass box.

For a while, I heard footsteps walking around upstairs, then nothing. A rumble of an engine got farther and farther away.

I've been sitting here, on this dirty mattress trying to figure out what to do. That ruthless bitch will have my head if I give her the chance.

A chance that I'm not going to give her. She may have had my husband's heart, but that is the only thing she will ever get from me.

I still don't know why Luis was determined to keep Nico away from me. That's a problem I can solve when I get out of this place.

The only way that I can protect Nico, Frankie and myself is to escape. I have to get out and warn them. Elena was alone this time. Who knows who she brings with her when she comes back.

Darkness surrounds me. My eyes have adjusted, but light from the moon outside makes it easier to see.

The moon.

I get up and walk in the direction of the moonlight. High up on the wall is a small window. Not small enough that I can't fit through it. The bigger problem will be reaching it.

Then again, I won't need to reach it if I can't find a way to get out of this cell. I pick up the small wooden chair in the corner and slam it against the glass. It bounces off the glass and flies to the other side of the cell and I'm not in the least bit surprised.

Why would they place a chair in here if it could break that glass? Didn't mean I wasn't going to try it. I have to make every attempt to get out of here.

I won't let sweet, kind Frankie succumb to his mother's plan. She will ruin everything that is special about that boy if she tries to turn him in to a cold, ruthless bastard, like her and her father.

Page 49

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

The door seems to be my only way out. I examine the lock, wondering if I can pick it. For a glass cell, I'm surprised to see such a simple lock on the door. There's only one piece of metal that I have on me at the moment.

I tug my hands into the sleeve of my dress and pop the hook on my bra. The straps fall down my arms. I take my arms out of the straps and push them back through my sleeves. I lift the cup to my face and begin pulling at the seams on the bottom with my teeth.

If I can get the wire out, I can sharpen it by rubbing it across the cement floor and using the point to pick the lock.

One seam breaks and I move onto the next. Then the next. I bite into one thread after another until I've broken enough to pull the fabric apart with my fingertips.

I slip the curved piece of metal out and toss the bra to the side. The end is squared off. I squat down and place the corner onto the floor, rubbing it back and forth against the rough concrete. The sound hurts my ears, but I don't stop.

Who knows how long it will be before Elena returns and I don't want to be here when she does. After inspecting the one side, I'm satisfied with that one and flip it over to the other side, doing the same until center comes almost to a point.

I slip the metal into the door and realize the curvature is stopping from getting the point into the correct spot. Back and forth I bend the metal over and over again until it snaps apart in my hand. I immediately go back to pick the lock. This time the piece is small enough to fit inside.

Antonio taught me years ago how to pick a lock. At the time the lessons seemed unnecessary. Right now, I'm so grateful that he did. I twist the metal to the right one last time and hear the distinct click of the lock.

In no time, I'm on the other side of the cell door, searching around the room for something to stack by the window. It's the only way I'll be able to reach it.

The chair from the cell isn't tall enough. When I stand on the top, I can barely reach the bottom of the window. It's not enough for me to pull myself up and out it. I simply don't have that kind of arm strength.

When I get home, I will never leave without the guards again. Had they been with me, I wouldn't have found myself in this situation.

The chair Elena sat in. I didn't see her take it from the room when she left. I race to the side of the room she was on and find the chair. I carry it over and stack one chair on top of the other.

Nothing about my makeshift ladder looks stable. There's nothing else in the basement that could possibly help me. After kicking off my heels, I carefully climb on top of one chair, then the other, all the while hoping I don't fall and break my neck.

I reach the top of the second chair, kneeling to push on the bottom of the window.

Here goes nothing.

At first when I push, nothing happens. I add a little more force and breath a sigh of relief when the window opens.

It isn't easy to push myself up and out the window. As I'm sliding my legs out, I feel something sharp run across my skin. I almost yell out into the night, but I don't want

to draw anymore attention to me.

I bite the inside of my cheek and continue. When I'm far enough out, I grab hold of large handfuls of grass and use them to help pull me the rest of the way out.

I look in every direction, trying to figure out which way would be the best to run when I spot Nico sitting on one of Luis's motorcycles.

I don't want to think about how sexy he looks straddling the bike. I'm too happy to see him to care about anything that has happened in the last few days. I take off at a full sprint to meet him.

Pain instantly shoots up my back. In the back of my hear, my mind recognizes the sound of a gunshot.

I fall to the ground. The moon that seemed so bright only moments ago is now dull and muted.

"Scarlett." Nico's voice reaches me before he does.

He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I want to reach out and touch his face.

My arms feel like lead weights. I can't lift them. Nico puts his arm behind my head and hugs me to him.

"Scarlett, you have to be okay."

"She told me why."

He brushes the hair back from my face. "Why what?"

I know we should be in a rush. We need to get away before Nico gets shot, but I have to tell him this first. “Why Luis married me.”

“You know that. He wanted to protect you after your parents died.”

Page 50

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

I try shake my head even though it barely moves. “No, she said...she said.” It’s getting harder and harder to put words together.

The edges of my vision are closing in. I love this man. He has to know the truth.

“She said what?”

"To keep you...keep you away from me.”

After that, everything goes black.

* * *

I’m sorry!!! I know it’s a cliffhanger, but you guys know me and the next book is coming VERY soon!

Want to be the first to know? Sign up here! or visit my website:<https://authorcallievincent.com/>

Want a Free Book?

Grab Monster, the first book in my Dark Mafia Captive Romance series today!Click Here to Grab Your Free Copy!

Blood and Beauty Free Preview

“You’re mine, Esmeralda.”

His amber eyes track me as I move away from him slowly. He's a predator in the wild and I am his next meal. His scent and presence are so overpowering that it makes my knees tremble in anticipation.

Never have I been this attracted to a man, especially a man that I should hate. Especially from a man who's taken everything from me.

Esmeralda is just one semester away from graduating college and on her way to opening the restaurant of her dreams. Dante is a ruthless mafia monster that walks in the daylight. Neither of them would've ever crossed paths until Esmeralda's mother makes a dire mistake that leaves them both merciless to the cartel and the whims of its captivating leader.

Blood and Beauty is a dark, modern-day, mafia spin on Beauty and the Beast. This is the first book in the new 'Owned by The Don' Trilogy from author Callie Vincent.

Chapter One

Esmeralda

The house is dark, but I hear the faint buzz of the television echo quietly onto the porch. As I place my fingers on the door handle, I steady my hand and inhale the cheap metallic smell from the fake plating. I take a deeper breath and prepare myself for what's inside, though my feet stay firmly planted on the ground beneath me.

It's like this most times.

Every time I decide to come home, whether from a friend's house or college, it's always a preparation. A steady brace for the war that awaits me in the living room.

She's there most times as well. Although there have been a few occasions where I've

picked her up from the bathtub or kitchen floor, it's almost always the cheap blue couch that sits in our tiny living room. Television blaring and a cigarette dying in her hand, while I'm left wondering if she's actually dead or not.

Twenty years of my life have been composed of these moments, these deep breaths and planted feet. I should've taken the chance when I first went away for school to wash my hands clean of this woman, but she is blood and I'm beginning to think I have a savior complex.

I run my nose along the crack of the front door, trying to catch any other scent besides old metal. Maybe weed, maybe the biting fumes of meth, or maybe the silent stench of blow. It's mysterious, this house. Much like the woman who owns it.

I'd like to say it wasn't always like this. I'd like to say I'm the typical bastard child that had a single mother who gave everything she could to her daughter, but I'd be lying. And if that woman has taught me anything, it's to not be a shitty liar. And she's made me nothing but a bastard child by both her and my absent father. She's made me a single mother since my birth.

I catch my reflection in the window, the shades are down and I stare absently at the woman before me. She is young, but tired. Her green eyes bright, but haunted. Her dark hair is a veil of shadows around her.

I guess you could say it's a blessing that I don't look like her, my mother. Though we share the same eye color, I am the exact replica of a man I've never known. Which is my curse. One of many to be exact.

I've never asked her the story of this shadow man, this hole in our lives that is always gaping and pulling her into its abyss. If I've ever even tried to mention this mystery sperm donor, it's a swift smack to the jaw or a missile of curse words that billow out with stale cigarette smoke.

She sounds like a ray of sunshine, right? A queen in her own castle of misery. I'm not a slave to this house, not its keeper or ghost. I'm not even its caretaker. I'm hers. As much as I hate to be, I've been hers and I always will be hers. Her captive, her child, her mother, her blood. As much as I try to escape and rid myself of her, I can't. Because she's the only thing that's ever been mine.

I look away from my reflection and decide against my better judgement to open the door, waiting to see what new hell awaits me.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

Immediately I'm overwhelmed with the smell of both bleach and Marlboro lights, a stench I've spent months trying to forget. The living room is empty, its small and dark corners vacant except for a couch, a couple of end tables and an old television that's set to the local news station. I drop my keys on the table by the door and set my bag on the couch, walking through to the kitchen while my ears pick up the news report.

"Welcome back Los Angeles, today on News channel nine we have a special report on the ever-present drug epidemic."

I look over my shoulder to the chubby man on the screen, he is grey and balding, but his voice sounds like he could control a room within seconds.

"Local authorities have seized control of a building on the fifth block of Skid Row in downtown LA today and the findings are enough to attract even the attention of our beloved President."

I linger for a second longer to finish the report before I continue the search for my mother.

"Yes, today at around three in the afternoon, the LAPD arrested over twenty-five fugitives and obtained almost four million dollars in contraband that included several pounds of cocaine, heroin and over two hundred firearms."

The camera pans over to a blond woman in a red blazer, her cherry lipstick matching it almost too well.

"Yes, Joe, that's right. Our local authorities completed one of their biggest operations

yet against the ever-growing battle with the Columbian drug cartel in over a decade. The authorities are saying that they may even lead to finding the head of the illegal operations, none other than the notorious El Oscuro."

She looks smug, proud even, as if she was a part of the crew involved in the bust. I roll my eyes and find the remote on the floor next to the couch, noting ashes on top of the buttons. I turn the volume down and set it on the cushion that's filled with both my mom's cigarette burns and my soda stains from when I was a kid. I still feel the sting of her palm on my shoulder from the incident and it was nearly ten years ago.

I hear the back door slam open and brace myself for the headache that is my mother.

"EMMIE!"

Her speech is slurred, but her movements to me are quick. I see a flash of red hair and then I'm being choked by both her clumsy hug and the stench of vodka. She pets my hair and starts humming enthusiastically.

For a moment I let myself fall into her. For a moment I let myself feel like a normal kid coming home from school to a mother that missed her. For a moment I let myself lie.

She pulls back and grips me by the tops of my shoulders. She's smiling but it doesn't reach her tired green eyes. I notice that more wrinkles have formed since I last saw her over six months ago. She's only thirty-six, but both the drugs and liquor have aged her another ten years.

I swallow the lump in my throat and put on a tight smile, trying to not let my annoyance show.

"Hi, Mom. It's good to see you. Have you eaten?"

I want to distract myself with cooking, my only joy in this house, but I already know her answer.

"No, baby I'm already on my afternoon cocktail, don't want to mess up a nice buzz while it lasts!"

She's on her fifth afternoon cocktail, not her first. I search her eyes to see if maybe she's dabbled in something else, but I only see a drunken haze. My eyes glance over her arms quickly, not noticing any new marks or sores.

I make my smile tighter as she releases my shoulders and grabs a beer can from the table closest to the kitchen. She tilts it toward me in offering and I shake my head slightly, already picking up my bag from the couch and making my way towards our small yellow kitchen.

I look around at the walls that are colored from both paint and smoke, smiling slightly to myself in remembrance of the first time I cooked pancakes on my own, to the time when I made my own twist on a traditional Tres Leches cake.

My mother is not the same as me in many ways, but one of the biggest is heritage. Though my Hispanic roots come from my biological father, her Irish genes have culturally taken over my upbringing.

My best friend Ricky was born in Polanco and moved to America when he was three. His family is the closest thing I have to both my ancestry and a family itself. I've spent many nights at his house, flipping through his mother's cookbook and memorizing recipes to take home.

My mom, of course, never ate anything unless I forced it down her throat after another late night at the bar or God knows where, so I never got a real opinion on how my home cooking tasted, but Ricky was always happy to oblige.

I realize that now, standing in our small kitchen, is probably the best time to tell her why I'm actually here. Why I've decided to disrupt my peace with the personal hell that is this woman and this house. I need a signature to continue my third year of school, the tutoring program I did in high school has lasted me until my junior year of college and this is the last time I'll ever need to ask her for anything, which I know will already be an issue.

"Mom, there's a reason why I've come home early. I need you to sign off on my last tutoring installment so I can continue this next semester."

She immediately chokes on her sip of beer, and I want to rip my hair out in response, but I maintain my composure.

"Let me just grab a pen really quick. I have it all right here, and when you're done I'll make some dessert."

Maybe if I bake, I can get through this one night of bullshit and be on my way back to my new life, back to my blossoming future that I've fought tooth and nail for.

I set both the paperwork and a pen on my table and looked up, not liking the sight before me. She looks paler, her balance faltering and her face full of arrogance and maybe a twinge of...guilt.

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

What the fuck now?

"I've been meaning to tell you, Emmie. Some things came up and I needed to dip into your USC fund a little bit."

I feel the heat rising to my face and coming out of my ears. I clench my fists and nod for her to continue.

She throws her hands up, exasperated by my short and silent response.

"I needed it for bills honey, no worries. You'll be fine, the market down the road is still hiring and would love your help for the summer, I'm sure!"

Her words were slow and slurred. I maintain my composure, though I'm dying to combust at this given moment.

"How much did you take?"

She looks down and shrugs. Throwing her now empty can of beer in the overflowing trash can, she turns to grab a new one from the fridge. I rush in front of it, forcing her to stop and look at me. What I see, I don't like.

"How much did you take, Mom?"

She rolls her eyes, because she's the one that should be annoyed.

"How. Much. Did. You. Fucking. Take. Mom?"

Her face is flushed and there's a fire in her green eyes. I notice that I'm shaking now, my anger and weariness mixing in the pit of my stomach.

Please, please don't say it, Mom.

She looks up, her chin jutting out in defense.

"All of it."

I realize now that this is the moment when I will commit my first murder.

I can't hold it back, the rage. It's an ugly monster rearing its head and rushing out after twenty years of this bullshit. Of her bullshit.

"WHAT!?"

I push her back against the kitchen wall, slapping at her like a mad woman, knocking down the calendar behind her.

She's defenseless and drunk, a shit opponent to say the least, which works well in my favor because I'm about to kill this bitch. I'm about to beat the life out of my mother because she just confessed to ruining mine. Once. Again.

"Esmeralda May! You're assaulting your own mother!"

She sounds lifeless to me, her voice a void of no emotion. I'm shaking and crying and screaming and slapping. I want to kill her. I want to die. I want it all.

This was my last year. My last trip back home to her. My last stop before I sailed away to a life without her, towards a life with peace.

I should've known it was too good. There's no escaping this monster, this plague of a mother that God punished me with.

I'm about thirty slaps in when we hear a sudden pounding on the front door, stopping both me from hitting and her from screaming.

I release her and she runs to the door, letting me fall to my knees in despair. I am about to lay my head into my hands when I hear her scream again.

Two large men in black suits and sunglasses are in the living room, their hands holding my now unconscious mother.

I back away slowly, my heels tripping over one another. I'm on a rollercoaster of emotions that started with anger and have now led me down the path of fear in its purest form.

The men have a powerful air around them. They practically ooze fear itself and I'm praying to God to both save me and not let me piss myself.

I bolt for the back door, but only make it five steps before something hits my head and everything goes dark.

Chapter Two

Esmeralda

My head is throbbing, and my stomach feels full of lead. I can't bring my eyes to open. The pain is too strong, and I think I may vomit.

Open your eyes, Esmeralda.

I hear a voice and it feels like chocolate. Can a voice do that? Can a voice even feel smooth?

As much pain and confusion as I am in, I want to find the source of the voice. I want to crawl into it and let it wrap around me. It sounds warm and deep, comforting in a time where the last thing I should feel is comfort.

I slowly lift my lids and let my eyes adjust to the light and room around me.

I'm in a board room. A fucking board room? There are two expensive leather couches seated across from one another in front of a large, stone fireplace. The heat of the flames lick my skin and I still shiver.

I look around the large room and spot a large, expensive looking desk. The wood looks rich and the leather chair behind it looks genuine, I think I can even smell it. It smells deep and spicy, even luxurious. When have I ever smelled luxury before?

I hear a grunt to my right and realize my mother is next to me, sitting with her hands

tied behind her back. The sight of her makes me aware that we are both fully bound with rope and gagged with cloth.

I know better than to scream at this moment, I know we're in trouble and somehow I know that it's Cristina Ellen May, my piece of shit mother's fault.

She starts to flail and whine, pissing off the two guards that stand before us. I refuse to lift my eyes to theirs, and I sink further into the floor and stare at the burgundy, ornate rug beneath me.

It is when I decide to shrink into myself, that I hear the clicking sounds of leather shoes against the hardwood floor. I see them walking towards us and they, too, look expensive.

The shoes stop right in front of me, and I will my body to not shake in fear or move in any way. I realize now that I am a mouse trapped in a lion's den and if I make a sudden movement, I could very well die.

The shoe creeps toward me and the tip of it touches my chin, lifting it up to look at the man occupying it. Though I am gagged, I am left speechless.

The man before me was like a giant demigod, or I guess in this case, the devil.

He was large, much larger than the men behind him. Large enough to take up the entire space of a doorway. His shoulders broad, his arms thick. His dark hair slicked back in a sophisticated sort of way, but still curled at the ends around his jawline.

Which was strong and precise. It looked like a jaw that was hard to break. Though I'm sure nobody in their right mind would ever attempt to break this man's jaw. Dark hairs dusted over it and for some stupid reason, my fingers itched to touch his short beard.

He leaned down to get a better look at me and I immediately wanted to cower away from him, but my instinct told me that was probably not a smart decision to make. His eyes were intense. So dark, but golden in their own way. Almost...amber.

Is this the devil? Does the devil dress in Armani and smell like sex and whiskey?

His scent and presence made me drunk with confusion and fear, yet I was still pulled to him. He was beautiful. In a dark and lethal sort of way.

His full lips moved as he spoke his next words, my eyes drifting towards his strong nose that seemed crooked the closer he got.

"Buenas noches, pequeña." Good evening, little one.

My mother may have raised me to be illiterate in my own culture, but my minor is in Spanish.

His voice is rich, the source of that chocolate sound I wanted to melt into earlier, the sound that roused me awake in the strangest way.

"Are you wondering why you're here in my office, pequeña? You may nod."

I held his eye contact a second longer than I wanted to, the color both confusing me and alluring me all at once. Slowly, but surely, I begin to nod.

His mouth twists into what seems like a ghost of a smile, a sinister one that vanished as soon as it showed. He drops my chin abruptly as he places his foot back on the ground, walking away from me and to my mother.

I keep my eyes down, wanting to shut them forever. This can't be happening. This can't be happening. What have you done now, Mom?

"It seems mommy dearest has been stealing from me,Esmeralda." He says my name as if he's trying it out for the first time, as if it fits his lips just right. I almost feel sick again.

Page 54

Source Creation Date: July 14, 2025, 2:04 am

My mother starts whining and flailing again, I can tell every one of us are annoyed by her attempts now. It only lasts a few seconds before the devil man wraps his hand in her hair and jerks her head back, the movement making the lead in my stomach sink deeper.

"I'm going to ungag you. You have one chance to be honest about what you've stolen. I'd choose your answer wisely."

He removes his hands from my mom's hair and slowly unties the gag and pulls it away from her mouth. Within seconds she's panicking and pushing out nonsense.

"I promise it wasn't much! I just needed some cash and some blow to get me by! Everyone at the club was using that stash! I swear I didn't do much wrong at all!"

I hear the cracking sound of his smack before I see it. Her cheek plants against the floor and for a second, her weary eyes meet mine.

He tips his chin at the men behind him, and they bend down to my mom, one gagging her again and the other pulling her head back, forcing her to look at the devil in the Armani suit before us.

"You've stolen almost three thousand dollars in both money and cocaine, Ms. May. I've been watching you since you stole your first bump."

Her eyes widen and I curse silently.

Stupid, greedy bitch. When will anything ever be enough?

He dusts off his dark blue suit jacket and stands, the fabric of his jacket hugging his arms as if it was stretching to be free of him.

I look down again and hear the click of his leather heels walk towards the direction of the antique, wooden desk. The squeak of his chair echoing as he takes a seat and folds his hands behind his head, leaning back as if he was on a vacation, not holding two women hostage.

Maybe this was a vacation for him.

"You do not need to worry, Ms. May. While your sticky fingers have been in my establishment, I've already thought of a way for you to repay me."

My head snaps up in his direction and he clicks his tongue at me, letting me know not to make any further movements.

"I have many whores that can do many jobs at my businesses, but it seems my maid for this house that I'm residing in has also dabbled in sticky theft as well."

His eyes light up and I immediately wonder where that maid is now.

"You and your daughter will stay here under close watch until the debt is paid, until you are deemed worthy of forgiveness."

My mother and I look at each other, my eyes filled with confusion and hers with fear.

He abruptly straightens in his seat and I almost flinch.

"Where are my manners? Forgive me, I forgot to introduce myself."

He walks slowly to the space between both my mother and I, reaching down with his tan hands out in offering, as if to shake our bound ones.

"The name is Dante, many call me El Oscuro. If I were you, I'd just stick with Master. Welcome home ladies."

He winks at me, and my world goes dark once more.