



# Wicked Union

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Crime And Mafia

**Description:** SHE'S MY RIVAL, MY WIFE, AND THE BEARER OF MY HIDDEN HEIR.

I brought her into my world with blood on my hands.  
Her brother's blood she knows nothing about.  
With a ring and a deadly secret.

Despite our mutual distrust, we found something unexpected.  
Power.  
Passion.  
A fragile alliance.

But it was all built on a foundation of lies.  
A hitman's calculated deception.

She made me question everything...  
While hiding a truth of her own.

I'll defend what's ours, no matter the cost.  
Then I'll uncover why Aria guards her belly so fiercely...  
Before she discovers the truth that could destroy us both.

**Total Pages (Source):** 43

1

ARIA

Marry a man ten years older than me to save my family's businesses and bring peace? I wouldn't be doing this unless I believed it was the only way.

I stand outside the dining room door listening to my father speak. I know he means well, but he's overselling me. I'm not going to be someone's model wife and soften their rough edges, least of all a man who's probably slept with more women in the past year than men I've dated my whole life. I scowl and press my ear to the pocket door, hoping to hear something worth listening to. I'm not happy, but I have no choice.

"Yes, well, Tito needs a good feminine influence to soften those rough edges, if you know what I mean." The older man, Mr. Donatello Ramiro, chuckles, and I hear the effects of the brandy they're drinking on his words.

My father invited this man into our home only after I agreed to the arrangement. Melody is much too young to be married off to a man so old, so the obvious choice is me. I don't relish the idea, but marrying for love in this family is out of the question. Mom says the day I was born, I became a bargaining chip for my father to ensure his legacy stays alive and well. With the money struggles we've had lately, it became apparent to everyone that it was time to start bargaining.

"So you understand my situation." My father's voice is grave, full of solemn emotion. I know he loves me so much, and he hates what this is doing to me. It's not so cut and

dry as some folks may like to think. I'm not just a pawn. I have my father's heart. But I've been raised with loyalty and honor in my blood. It was my idea.

"I do, and I'm sorry to hear how you're struggling. Our Families have cohabited Los Angeles for so long. It's such a shame to hear how your businesses are shutting down. Strange, the way a global health crisis can really cripple an economy." Mr. Ramiro does sound sympathetic, and he's right. We've lived side by side in peace with the Ramiros for a long time, though Father's influence has always been dwarfed by the larger family. We coexist by diversifying, offering services and goods not already supplied.

"So, the deal is a good one? You receive my daughter's hand in marriage and forty percent of the decision-making power in our business. Of course, the latter is for a period of ten years while we get back on our feet. And we receive your financial backing as we rebuild."

My heart squeezes inside my chest as I think of it—marrying a man I don't even know, let alone love. I always dreamed of my wedding day as being special and romantic. I hoped to have a horse-drawn carriage, white roses, and a honeymoon for the ages. This will be a simple ceremony followed by a polite dinner and probably first-time introductions. If I'm lucky, they'll let me see a photograph of the man before I have to walk down the aisle.

"It's a reasonable deal. I believe we should have our lawyers look into things in more detail, but my son will do as I say. I've taught him right. He will respect your daughter, and maybe as you have with your wife, this will grow to mutual respect, and someday, to love."

Mr. Ramiro speaks as if he knows what I'm going through, what emotions I'm wrestling with. How will I ever grow to respect a man who will never have an inborn sense of loyalty to me? I'm not going to be the center of his life, a woman he adores

and worships. I will be a tool to produce offspring for his name. Though my father says he will write into the agreement that my firstborn son will be in line for his throne first, not the Ramiro throne. I'm not sure that matters much. Jasper will take my father's place long before any child I birth is old enough to think about it.

"Then we have an arrangement?" I hear my father's chair squeak, and I cringe. I know they're shaking hands even though I can't see them. And a handshake in this family may as well be a blood oath. I press my eyes shut and will the tears not to begin yet. I'm doing this for my family. I have to remind myself over and over. It will be okay.

There is some mumbling on the other side of the door before it slides open and Mr. Ramiro walks out. He stops in front of me and looks at me with a very stern expression. His eyes rake up and down my body, and suddenly, my loose-fitting T-shirt and blue jeans don't feel like they cover me enough. He's a handsome enough man, though aging and sickly looking. If his son takes after him, it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. But my heart aches just seeing the way he ogles me.

"Bellissimo pezzo di culo che sei." He cups my cheek and pats it, and I cringe. I'm not a beautiful piece of ass, not to him or to anyone else. He can take his backward compliment and shove it.

But I answer respectfully, "Grazie per la visita." I'm not grateful, though, not even a little thankful he's visiting. I'm raging inside, warring against my own stupid idea that to save my family from closing any more of our line of restaurants and bowling alleys, an arranged marriage would suffice. Believe me, I thought about this long and hard before even suggesting it. When Dad shut the fourth restaurant this year, I knew I had to say something.

The man shuffles down the hallway with his smoker's cough and wobbling gait, and I cover my face and sigh. This is really happening. I'm really obliged to marry a man I've never even heard of, let alone met.

"You may come in now, mio caro." Father's tone is rigid as usual, but I'm used to it. I know his love for me runs so deep, he will call this all off the instant I show any trace of distaste for it. Which is why I rub the emotion off my forehead and down out of my cheeks.

I love him. I'm doing this for our family. He is my world, and if this is what I must do to save us, then my life is not my own. It's the right thing to do.

My little pep-talk bolsters some of my courage, and I put a smile on my face and walk into the dining room. He's seated at the table with a glass of brandy in front of himself. The decanter is over halfway empty, which just goes to show how much Mr. Ramiro indulged this afternoon. He gestures at the empty seat, and I sit quietly. It's still warm from the previous occupant, reminding me of how my privacy and the sanctity of my body will be invaded in this entire thing.

"Papa..." I start, but I'm not sure how to even continue. I see the pain in his eyes. He hates this more than I do. We've had long talks about this topic many times. There were even a few times when we discussed specific men whom I may marry, but those never came to fruition. One way or another, he worked out the situation without need for this arrangement to happen.

As it turns out, I'm twenty-nine and still single, though I had one serious boyfriend I thought I might marry. Jasper chased him away when it got too serious and pointed out how awful the man was. I was grateful but heartbroken at the same time. Now, things are different, and like it or not, this is what is required of me. I know Jasper has his thoughts about this new man too, but he hasn't shared them with me yet. Only our father.

"You shouldn't stand and listen to me discuss business, Bella. You will only begin to feel like an object, and I never want you to think of yourself as an object. You know I love you more than that."

He reaches for me and places his hand where only moments ago, Mr. Ramiro's hand touched and made me bristle. But I lean into the warmth of his palm and sigh. Times like this are few and far between, and I will miss them when they're gone.

"I'll never think that of you, Papa. I know this is what has to happen. I'm here to serve you." I pat his hand and smile at him, but the tears glisten in my eyes. I just don't know if he's observant enough to see them.

"It's not too late to stop this." He rubs his thumb over my cheekbone, and his forehead creases.

"It's okay, Papa." I remove his hand from my cheek and clasp it between my hands and smile. "Mr. Ramiro is a good man. His family is faithful to him and loyal. He does good business. I'm sure his son is just as good. I'm sure I will be in good hands. And it will mean that you don't lose this house or our pride... your dignity." The unlikely alliance is inevitable. If we're proactive, we will retain ownership of our assets. If we wait, they will take it by force, anyway. In this way, I can save my father and mother a lot of heartache. And who knows? Maybe it won't be so bad.

"I love you, Aria. You know that, right?"

I turn into his palm and kiss it, then lay his hand on the table. I have to get out of here before I break down crying. "I know you do, Papa. I'm going to go plan my wedding with Melody. She has a knack for selecting flowers."

I stand and leave without asking permission to exit, and he says nothing. It's like he can see the pain in my eyes and knows I have to leave to cry. I pass silently through the halls, ascending the stairs before the first tear streaks down my cheek, but it isn't sadness I feel. It's anger. I'm not angry with my father. I'm angry with the world, with the situation, with how helpless I feel in this mess.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I slip into my room and shut the door, hoping to be alone, but Melody comes in first, then Jasper. I sob into my pillow as my younger sister rubs my back. She has no words to say to me, nor does Jasper, but they are present, and that's enough. It's this unspoken grief we all bear together, the things we do to make our family strong, though none of them as severe as what I will go through this time.

"Hey," Jasper coos. He climbs onto my bed and pulls me toward him. I lay my head on his lap, and he pulls my hair back around my ear. "Remember that time we got into Dad's bourbon when we were just preteens?" He speaks with a hint of nostalgia in his tone. It's a good memory. He was twelve. I was ten. Melody was only eight years old and far too young to be drinking with us, but we all had a few sips and giggled for hours.

"We thought it was laughing juice," she says fondly, and her hand continues to smooth circles into my back.

Gone are the days of childhood fun and games. We're in the real world now. A world where whiskey drowns heartache. "I could use a glass or two..." I tell Jasper, and he nods at Melody, now twenty-five and totally in love with a good man. I would never take that from her.

"I'll go..." she whispers, and then she's gone.

"Jasp?" I turn and look up at him and see the anger in his expression too. He hates that I'm trading myself to save our family as much as I do.

"Yeah, Ari?" He plucks more hair out of my eyes and curls it behind my ear with the

others.

"If this man's a douche bag and turns out as awful as I'm afraid he'll be, you'll rescue me, right?" I'm barely holding it together now. Jasper has rescued me more times than I can count. More times than I care to admit.

"Aria Elaine, if this man doesn't treat you like the queen you are, I will slit his throat myself and burn down his whole empire."

And I believe him. The minute he takes command of our family, things will change, but all in good time. Dad has a few more good years in him, and we have to get the financial situation we're in sorted or there will be no organization for Jasper to take over. I nod at him, but the tears continue to flow.

Now where is Melody with that drink?

2

TITO

I can't get enough whiskey in my body fast enough. I've been listening to my father ride my ass for years about getting married. Thirty-nine isn't too old to be a bachelor. Besides, tying myself down to one woman seems pointless when I have such God-given looks. A different woman every week has been my way of living for as long as I can remember. I don't have to get attached. I don't have to put money in their hands, and I don't have to deal with their emotional issues.

"I'm just saying, I don't see why I have to have a woman on my arm in order to lead." The idea that a wife will somehow make me more well-rounded or level-headed is preposterous. My father has lived the past twenty years without my mother on his arm, though he was happily married for twenty before that. The whores in and out of



his bedroom destroyed that, which is one reason I think this will turn out to be a sham. Sex with one woman for the rest of my life? Who can ever commit to that?

"Because you're my son and I will not give you the keys to my kingdom unless you follow my orders." Dad's shout is louder than it needs to be and causes a pointless coughing fit. His lungs aren't getting any better no matter how many rounds of chemo and radiation he has blasting through his cells.

Scowling, I set my drink down and walk over to him, one hand on his back, the other on his hand. I lead him to the couch where he slowly settles in and takes his handkerchief to cover his mouth as he continues to hack. Blood dots the white cloth. I know his time is almost up, and I'll be the leader of this family. My attitude and rebellious nature just come out of me. I can't stop them, though I know I should.

"Dad, you need to stay calm. Getting so worked up that you shout only makes this coughing happen." I pat his shoulder as he hunches over, breathing and hacking into the handkerchief, but he comes up for air and continues his lecture.

Albeit, this time, his voice is callous and gravelly. "Tito, the Peralta girl is the ideal candidate. Not only does she come with access to a greater reach of territory and authority, but she also has good genes. She will produce an heir, expand our territory, and make you more powerful than all of our enemies. And she was raised in the same life you were. She knows about the business. She won't be frightened when you come home soaked in blood."

The idea of coming home to someone doesn't necessarily deter me, but it doesn't sweeten the pot. However, the idea of larger reach, more territory, more money, more power—all of that has me listening intently as he describes the arrangement. What can I do, anyway? If I don't marry her, Carlos will, and if that happens, I will lose my right to lead this family. Carlos isn't the leader we need. Everyone knows I am. But with this ridiculous stipulation that I be married to ascend the throne, it's the only way

to assume my power. What happens after his death is another story. Divorce isn't off the table.

"Alright, Pops. Just take a deep breath and try to stay calm." I pat his back again and stand to retrieve my drink. The swirl of alcohol in my head only calms me slightly. I wonder if Ms. Peralta is okay with this arrangement or if she's being forced. A woman in her twenties in a family like hers, I bet she's being forced. That brings a smile to my lips for some reason. Call me a sadist.

The doorbell rings and I know they're here. Mr. Peralta and his daughter whom I have yet the pleasure of meeting are slated for a visit to make this official. I'm vocal with my father, but I'm not one to rebel against his direct orders. Until now, his "encouragement" to select a wise partner for my life has been suggestion. Now it has become my only option, and because none of the women who frequent my bed suit me, I'm stuck with the one he has selected.

"They're here," I say, finishing my drink. I don't bother sitting back down. I'll be forced to stand when they walk in anyway, but I do head to the liquor cabinet in my father's office to refill my glass, which I sip on as I wait.

Chris leads them in, and my very first impression of the woman to whom I am now obligated is shock. She stands a few inches taller than her father, though not at all towering in height. Her slender form is hugged by the suit she wears, a dark navy color that isn't flattering to her warm skin tone at all. But the long, dark braid dangling over her left shoulder is alluring, making my fingers itch to undo it and see how that hair would fall around her face as she rides me.

"Ah, Mr. Peralta," my father says as he stands. Only moments ago, his coughing was so bad he could hardly speak, and now he bolts to his feet with renewed vigor and strength. I'm always in awe of how he pulls himself together even in his pain and misery. I'm learning from him every day. He's the sort of man I want to embody at all

times.

Mr. Peralta reaches out his hand and shakes my father's, but Ms. Peralta only stares at me. I can't read anything in her expression, either—no fear, no malice, not even a hint of attraction, pleasure, or uncertainty, for that matter. Intriguing that she's so stoic when faced with such a harsh punishment. I wonder if her father trained her to be this way or if she is just that good at maintaining her composure. Either way, it's impressive.

"Aria, you remember Donatello." Mr. Peralta nods at my father, and Aria reaches out a hand. Judging by the look in my father's eyes, if he were ten years younger and in good health, he'd have her bent over his desk before day's end.

"I remember. Nice to see you again," she says, and her voice is symphonic, setting off ripples of arousal inside me. I have to wait days to be wed to this beauty? Such a shame I can't invite her to my bed this evening.

"And this is my son..." Dad's hand gestures at me, but his eyes stay fixed on her. I don't blame him. She's exquisite. The way her shirt is slightly too tight makes the spaces between her buttons bulge, giving me only the faintest peak at the soft curve of her breasts, but I like the mystery of it. "Tito," Dad says, and I step forward, extending my hand.

Aria places her delicate fingers on mine, and I bring them to my lips and kiss them gently. This might not be so bad after all. A woman this gorgeous who is all mine to do with as I please, who must obey me or suffer consequences—this could be fun.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Mr. Ramiro..." Aria's tone shifts as she speaks to me, but I'm not foolish enough to believe it's me who is influencing the introduction. She watches my lips caress her skin, but I notice her rubbing the back of her hand when I release her fingers.

"Well, we'll let the two of you chat a bit." My father gestures at her father and starts toward the door to the hallway. "I have a sword collection you may find fascinating, Hector. Come this way." The two head off, leaving us alone, and my body is charged up. I didn't assume I'd be marrying a beast of a woman, but I never expected this beauty.

I stare at her, admiring her poise and the curves of her body for a moment, and when we are alone, I let myself relax a little. She's striking, but so is a pit viper when you see one in nature.

"Aria, is it?" I ask, bringing my drink to my lips to sip.

"It is." She looks around my father's office at the wall of books and the large, chunky leather furniture. "Your father's house is pleasant." She takes a few steps toward the books, and I click my tongue. He hates when people touch his books. Aria looks up at me in annoyance and scowls. "Am I your dog now?"

I chuckle a deep baritone that rumbles into the room, and she scowls harder. "Not yet," I tell her, and I'd make her my little pet. God, the things I'll do to her. "The books aren't for touching, but I have something you can touch..." My dirty insinuation isn't missed by her, and we're off to a good start. I'm riling her up, seeing what she's made of. I like a challenge, and she proves to be exciting.

"Mr. Ramiro, let me make one thing clear. I am no one's toy. I'm not here to please you or serve you. I'm here to align our families for success and for no other reason. While copulation is inevitable, do not think for one second that I will enjoy it." Her eyes claw their way up and down my body in one swift motion, but the way she swallows hard as she does it only betrays her. She finds me attractive. In fact, I can see the look in her eye that she's turned on by me.

"Hmm," I breathe out in a short, staccato tone. I move toward her and she doesn't back away. Good, she's not intimidated by me yet. I like that too, the idea that I can tame that out of her. "Ms. Peralta, make no mistake, you are my toy. And believe me, you will enjoy it. I will devour that body of yours, drink from your pussy until your insides shake, and break you down until you beg me for more." I stand too close. My body thrums with desire for her, but I will contain myself. This is about making sure she knows who I am and what I expect. I can't marry a woman who is faint of heart.

"Be careful who you think may break, scemo. And never underestimate me." Now she has my juices flowing. Trading insult for insult isn't my game, though. She may call me a fool, but I am no one's fool. I smile and back away. I may have met my match.

"You're intoxicating," I tell her, and she doesn't know I can tell, but she breathes a sigh of relief. Maybe she bit off more than she can chew with this little arrangement of ours. I'm happy to help her chew that up and spit it out, though.

"You're a buffoon." Her arms cross defiantly over her chest, as if willing her tits to vanish so I'll stop looking at them.

"And you're gorgeous when you're angry. We'll make adorable babies, won't we?" I chuckle at her just as I hear my father's voice up the hall. He's returning, and my future bride is flustered and red in the cheeks.

I actually like her a little. She's hot under the collar, fiery, and not afraid to stand her

ground, and if I'm not mistaken, she's here of her own accord. The bold nature of her personality strikes me the right way. If we met under different circumstances, I may have been able to tolerate her longer than a week or two. This might not be such a bad match after all, which is why when my father brings out the contracts, I'm more than happy to sign my name on the line, right above Aria's.

My life just got a whole lot more interesting. Not only will I have more territory and influence, but I'll also have a foxy new wife to bang every night. The boys at the club will nut when they hear about this.

3

ARIA

"Yes, Papa." I kiss my father on the cheek as he grips my head between his thick palms. His eyes search mine, and while I can't hide every emotion I'm feeling about this wedding, I can at least reveal the ones I feel toward him. "I give you my word that I'm okay with this arrangement. It was my idea, wasn't it?" Even as I say the words, I cringe inside.

My neck is tense. My shoulders so tight I can't relax them. Tito Ramiro is wickedly handsome, and his scorching good looks may fool some women—they almost fool me. I just can't see past the way his family looks at this union as if their territory will expand. Father may be relinquishing some of his control for a portion of time as outlined in the contract, but Jasper will reclaim control of the entire organization in ten years, and nothing they do can stop that.

"Mia cara," he whispers, his forehead creasing in deep emotion. "If you say the word, I will pull the plug. We can find a way. We don't have to do this." His eyes continue to search me fervently, but I will not betray him by backing out. I hate this entire plan, loathe the very concept of arranged marriages with my whole being, but if I

don't do this, Father will lose everything he's built since he was only my age.

"Go, please." I smile at him and pat his hands, pulling them away from my face. My eyes sparkle with emotion, but not the way a bride's eyes typically do on her wedding day. These tears are screaming for him to save me, to cut the contract in two and back out, but they will never be heard. "I have a wedding to prepare for, and my groom isn't one to be kept waiting. Besides, you love cake."

He backs away, but I know he's still uncertain. This is my choice. I am saving my family in the only way I can. I can't rob a bank and steal millions to bail him out, and though Jasper is more than capable of pulling off a heist to do something, Father won't allow it. It's too risky. The family needs him to lead someday, and Father isn't getting any younger.

I watch Dad walk down the hallway toward the sanctuary of this massive cathedral the Ramiros booked for our impromptu ceremony, and I feel Melody slip her hand into mine. She lays her head on my shoulder and sighs, and I shut the thick, arched wooden door. I can't cry in front of my father because I know he'll back out and save me rather than himself, but I can cry in front of Melody, so I do. The tears stream down my cheeks without reservation, and I turn so she can wrap her arms around me.

"Heavens," Mom says, rushing toward me with a tissue. "I just finished your makeup, Aria. You're going to smudge it."

My chin rests on Melody's shoulder, and Mom dabs at the tear streaks on my cheeks, but I can't stop the tears. I may have to wash my face and redo all of Mom's hard work, but for now, I let the emotion out.

"Hey, it's okay. Dad's right, Ari. If you want to call it off, you should." Melody has one hand rubbing my back and the other still gripping mine. I don't think I can get through this without her.

Mom continues to dab my cheeks as I cry. She silently supports me, though I know she understands this pain I'm feeling. I'm given the choice, and I am making it freely of my own accord. She was never given the choice, though now, she and my father have a good, loving relationship. But he is a good man. Unfortunately for me, the man I'm set to marry is a monster.

"Aria, it will be okay." Mom pats my cheek, and I straighten and sniffle, taking another tissue from her as I walk away from Melody. "Marriage isn't always a partnership in love. Sometimes, it is a sacrifice." Her words do little to calm me or assuage my anger.

I can't blame my father. Life can't be controlled, and things are completely out of his hands. I know if it were up to him, I would be free to select my husband, and I am the one doing this. I just wish the arrangement fell to a kinder man, a man like my father. Tito Ramiro proved his unworthiness by his comments when we met last week. He thinks of me as nothing more than a toy, which is the weight I carry on my shoulders as I slump into the white leather armchair situated at the vanity.

"Just tell Papa you don't want to do this, Ari." Melody drops to her knees at my feet and uncrumples part of my white satin gown, and I blankly stare at my melancholy appearance in the mirror.

Dark circles ring my eyes, barely hidden by Mom's makeup job after crying so much. My lips are chapped—evidence of dehydration brought on by the depression I've sunken into. The gown is modest too, covering any hint of cleavage. I don't need to give that snake something to look at any sooner than I have to. He doesn't deserve it.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

Mom is here too, pulling a chair up beside me and taking my hand. We only have half an hour before it's time to walk down the aisle and give my life away to a man who won't cherish me as a husband should. Nothing either of them does can turn back the clock or change the future. I'm the only one with that power, but how do I sentence my father to bankruptcy and losing his power? Not only would that mean losing his home and organization, but it will mean his enemies can move in and harm him physically.

"Aria, I will support whatever choice you make. Seeing my daughter hurt like this is the worst pain imaginable." Mom's hand squeezes mine, and I look at her. "You have your whole life ahead of you. Our lives are almost over. We made the choices that led to our difficulty. You shouldn't pay for this." Even Mom's eyes mist over.

"You're wrong." I firmly square my shoulders and take a deep breath. "You and Papa only want to support me and love me, and Mel and Jasper too. You've done everything to raise us properly, to do the right thing, and now it's our turn to love you. This is how I pay you back."

I know she wants to talk me out of this, but she can't. I won't change my mind. Tito may be a vile pig, but he will be my husband. I may find a way to capitalize on his wealth and remove him from the picture, but in order to do that, the money transfers must go through. Before any money is sent, the wedding must happen. And if I can take him down, and his family too, from the inside out, I will.

"Now, please fix my makeup so I can go marry Mr. Ramiro and serve my family in the only way I know how." I square my shoulders and turn back to the mirror, ignoring the despondent expression on Melody's face.

She is my sister, but she's my best friend. She knows me well enough to know that once I've made up my mind, no matter how I feel about things, there is no changing it. Getting me sloshing drunk last week wasn't enough for me to renege, and her pleading today won't be, either.

As Mom fixes my makeup, she tells me about her arranged marriage to Dad, how her father sold her off as a bargaining chip to stop the warring between his family and my father's. Mom, a Bratva princess in her youth, became the comare of the Peralta Family. It was a promotion, but not without its drawbacks. I see the love in their eyes though, something I will never have with Tito. I don't even respect the man. How could I ever love him?

"It's time..." I hear a voice and turn to see Mr. Ramiro at the door. His bushy, graying eyebrows are drawn into a line and he scowls unnervingly. His son gets that hateful look from him. "Don Hector is waiting for you, as is my son."

My chest tightens and my throat constricts. I can't respond to him. Melody does it for me. "Thank you, Signore." She stands between me and the door, blocking my view of the older Ramiro as he walks out of the room, and then she pleads with me yet again. "Ari, please don't do this. Please just call it off."

And just like that, a switch is flipped and I rise, taking the bouquet of roses and baby's breath from my mother. I plaster a bold smile on my face and blink slowly. This is my choice, I remind myself.

"Let's get married." I press my lips into the plastic smile that will remain on my face until I am whisked away from the wedding hall later this evening and forced into privacy with my new husband.

Melody's shoulders slump, but she stands aside. Mom hands her the flowers she will carry and falls in line behind us as I move toward the door with Melody in tow. The

satin of my dress swishes over the short Berber carpet. I stand aside as Melody opens the door, and the burst of cool air rushes in around me, ruffling my hair.

If I could wear black, I would be. Instead, I've allowed my raven tresses to cloak me in their sorrow. They frame my face and shoulders, thus covering even more skin. I step into the hallway and pause a moment while my mother and sister fold the thick tulle veil across my face. This feels like a funeral and my bridal veil one of mourning. I nod at them and proceed to the double doors that stand open to the crowd of guests from both sides of this alliance.

"Ready?" my father asks as I come to stand next to him. He holds out an elbow, and I hook my hand around it.

"No. But now is the time. Let's save the Peralta name, Papa." With sure steps, I glide the last few paces to the door. My train drags across the marble floors. Melody walks around me and through the double doors. Mom stands on my other side, and I take her arm. I want it this way—for every last Ramiro in attendance to see my arms lovingly wrapped around those of my parents. It will speak to them when they doubt my motives in bringing their entire organization to its knees. Because I will. They put pressure on my father for far too long, and only now that I'm aligning to their desires—to allow them control of our organization in any part—have they backed off.

Well, two can play at this game, and if Tito thinks he's going to have a docile woman who just lies down to take whatever she's dealt, he's wrong. I'm going to give him a run for his money, and then I'll take that money and spend it on ways to destroy him.

Wait and see...

All the papers are finalized between our businesses, and I watch Aria Peralta's family drive away from the church to head home and collect her things. It's absurd to me that she isn't ready to come straight to my house, but we aren't a typical couple and this isn't an average wedding. Business transactions are concluded in different methods, but that kiss was anything but business. I touch my lips and think of it again, how she didn't even resist me, the suppleness of her skin.

"Let's walk," my father says, and I fall into step next to him. His car awaits us at the curb, his driver having pulled up as the Peraltas left. His agreement with Hector Peralta may be binding, but I am merely playing a role, one that I am more than happy to play.

"She's tart," I tell him, using the best word I can think of to describe my blushing bride. Though I'll be the first to admit that the blush on Aria's cheeks isn't at all embarrassment or flattery. She's outraged and infuriated by this agreement, whether she was forced to participate or came willingly. I've never tasted more venom than on the lips of a coerced lover.

"Play nice and you'll end up owning the city, Tito." Father's driver opens the door for us, and we slide into the back seat side by side. Dad immediately lights a cigar, and the car begins to fill with smoke. I open the window when the door is shut and wait for him to start coughing again. He knows better, but he won't kick the habit.

"Their failure is inevitable. You and I both see that. But I'd like to move things along. I'm not waiting ten years for our agreement to be up to take them hostilely." I fold my hands in my lap and wait out the coughing fit as he dabs his mouth with a handkerchief. My mind has been spinning since he first mentioned the supposed alliance.

The Peraltas offer nothing in the way of help to our family. The Ramiro tribe is strong, boasting four hundred men, dozens of businesses grossing multi-million

dollars per year, and dominating in terms of territory. The only thing Hector Peralta's family could begin to supply to us would be frontage, and even then, we could have just taken it.

"What are you thinking?" Dad sighs and then takes a drag of his cigar again, this time without the coughing fit. His lungs take a battering every time he lights up. It's a good example of what not to do.

I peer out the window as the car rolls down the street carrying us toward his house. I have a few hours to prepare myself before Aria arrives at my home, and now that the wedding is complete, I can begin to make moves. Our money will be in their accounts by the end of the day tomorrow, infusing their business with much-needed capital, and Aria will be in my home as a token of good faith. But I want more.

"I don't know how I'm going to manage it all, but I'm going to drain them one way or another." I turn to him as he blows a stream of smoke out the window and chuckles.

"You're so wise, then? Don Hector is not a fool, Tito. He'll see you coming from a mile away." The cherry on the tip of the cigar glows a bright red as he sucks on it, then coughs a little before continuing. "He has made it very clear that his businesses will remain his. You will get some decision-making power, but he will have the final say. And he's not going to be intimidated or threatened by you. He's been in this game longer than we have. There is a binding contract of business." He pats his chest as he speaks, and indignance rises in my chest.

I've thought of this up one side and down the other relentlessly. Don Hector Peralta is a formidable enemy. That much is certain. But his son is not. If Jasper Peralta takes the helm of his family without being prepared, he will make foolish mistakes, overlook things he should be focused on, and otherwise fail to lead successfully. Taking over their organization will be like taking candy from a baby. Jasper will practically beg me to take the reins.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"I know what you're thinking but killing Hector Peralta isn't a good idea. Think about it. If and when it gets tracked back to you, you'll start a war with your allies. And the enemy of your enemy is your friend." He points two fingers at me, cigar pinched between them. "Don't think the Uhkovs aren't watching this alliance unfold. Peralta's demise would mean the Uhkovs and Peraltas join together, and who will fight against them then?"

I'm unsettled by his statement, but I do understand what he's getting at. If I anger the organization as a whole, they don't truly pose a threat to me. But If I anger them enough that my enemies take notice, I'll be buried. The Uhkovs aren't above befriending another syndicate in the city to take me out. Right now, we are kings, but it would only take a minor blunder to bring us down.

"I'm going to do it. I'll figure out how and when, but Hector Peralta's entire territory, his businesses, his trades, the frontage, all of it will be mine. And his men will either follow suit and align with the Ramiro family or they will be terminated."

"And the heir?" Father asks, lowering his hand to his lap. His fingers shake, but it's not from the way the car rumbles over potholes. He's getting sicker by the day and refuses treatment now. I will be taking over more and more of the business on a daily basis, and I'm ready for that.

"Do you mean Jasper? He will fall in line like the rest. If he's well behaved, I'll give him a seat of honor at the gentlemen's meetings. If not, he's out. If you're meaning Aria's firstborn... Do you think I'll ever let my son sit as the heir to another man's throne?" I scoff. "Not a chance in hell my son will ever run Peralta's organization unless he runs mine at the same time—as one unit. This city isn't big enough for two

Italian Families. Hector has to know this. He's doing the right thing by coming to us, and he knows my plans. He has to see it. It's the only thing that makes sense. I will rule both families by year's end. You'll see."

The car continues its journey toward my father's home, and all I can do is revel in the fact that my life is about to change for the good.

5

ARIA

I shove the clothing into the bag knowing it will never come back to this house. I've already packed several boxes this week, which thanks to Mr. Ramiro are being delivered to my new house any minute. It's not a home, not to me. My home is here where my heart is. With my family.

"I know you're not happy about this, cara, but there is so much to be thankful for even still." Mom takes my hand, and though it's balled up into a fist, she holds it. "I'm proud of you for doing this for your family. I know that God himself is smiling at you."

The idea that any god would allow any of this to happen is preposterous, but I leave my thoughts about the spiritual silent. I don't need to jump into that debate right now when my heart is already so heavy with grief over what I've just done.

Marrying myself to a family that has been pressuring us to forfeit our power and territory for years is, in my mind, the worst idea in the world. But with no other bargaining chips or way out of the mess, it was all my father could do.

"God has a funny way of showing how proud he is." I pull my hand away and reach into my dresser to take a stack of clothing and carry it to my bag. "You think he'll be

smiling at me when that man is using my body as his personal sex toy?" The comment is off-color, and Mom doesn't respond to me. I wonder if she ever felt like that in the beginning, when she first married my father. I know what Tito Ramiro wants tonight, and I'm not sure how I feel about it.

"There you are, mio caro." I hear my father's voice and turn immediately with a smile on my face. It's not as fake as it could be because my father really is the light of my life, and I really will do anything to please him and serve him. He's a good man, with a good heart. "You look so radiant."

He moves toward me with both arms extended until they wrap around me in a tight hug. I pull away and nod at the clothing in my hands. I'm afraid to speak for fear that my voice will crack and the hot, angry tears will fall. Dad doesn't need to see me break down. It will only cause him guilt, and this is all my doing. All my choice.

"Is he sending a car?" Dad asks, and I hear him following me. His soft footfalls are so quiet all the time. He's practically a ghost.

"Uh, no." I look up at Mom, whose distress is very obviously scrawled on her face. She doesn't seem to get the point that the reason I'm doing this is to alleviate my father's worries and stresses. A man his age should never have stress like this. His heart might be a ticking time bomb. "Mom's driver will take me." I set the clothing into the bag and turn around to face him. His eyes are looking at Mom.

"We can still back out of this. It's not too late. An annulment is possible." Now his eyes are pleading with me to change my stance, and I can't take it. If he asks me one more time, I'm going to cave and quit the whole arrangement.

"Papa, please. This marriage is good for you, for our family." My eyes burn with unshed tears which I blink back, but I move toward him with a smile. "It's a good thing. My life has purpose and meaning now. I'm bringing new life to the Peralta



name." I cup his hands in mine and look him directly in the eye.

"Oh, dear, you seem so unhappy." Mom's exasperated plea doesn't help my case.

"I'm perfectly happy to know my family is saved. You both gave me so much life and wisdom, and I can repay that here and now." I pat Dad's hands and turn to zip up my bag. "I'm ready when you are."

Perhaps the only thing missing from this interaction is that my siblings aren't here. I don't know where they are, but Melody did mention not having the heart to see me packing up. We've spent so long under this same roof. Even when Jasper moved out, we cried. He lives with a few buddies in Santa Monica now in some big, ritzy house, but Melody will miss me dearly.

"Well, then," Dad says, and his smile is slightly deflated. "Don't be a stranger." He pats my shoulder. "We'll have a family dinner on Sunday evening if you don't have plans."

"I'll talk to Tito," I tell him, as if I even care what that ogre thinks.

It's a rough few minutes of goodbyes until my things are loaded into Mom's car and I'm seated in the backseat with her. Her driver pulls the car into traffic and turns toward the highway, and I wilt. I can't keep complaining to her. Every time I do, she tries to convince me to give up. I have to keep my negative feelings to myself because now I know it isn't just my father's heart I'm protecting. It's everyone's. They all have to see that I'm happy to do this, even though I'm devastated.

"It won't be so bad," Mom says, still trying to cheer me up. I don't say a word. I just let her speak her mind. "You'll see. A man has certain duties toward his wife. You won't have to work if you don't want to. You'll never lift a finger around the house. I'm sure he has maids and servants, as we do."

I roll my eyes but I don't let her see it. That sounds like just about the most boring existence I can fathom.

"Soon, you'll have a child to care for, hopefully a son. He will be the heir to your father's fortune and organization one day, and you'll see how loved he is. Things will change then. Your husband will respect you more."

Is that how it went for her, I wonder? She bore a son and finally, she felt wanted in the marriage by proxy, not by right? I keep my thoughts to myself, and soon enough, we are parked in front of the Ramiro house. It's much different from his father's sprawling estate. Tito's home is new and modern, though it looks like it cost a fortune.

I climb out of the car without waiting on the driver to open for me and stand in front of a narrow swath of property with a tall property fence painted gray. The black Range Rover parked in front has chrome trim and rims that spin even when it sits here parked and off. It's flashy and obnoxious, just how I imagine Tito is in every way.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

The home itself is white stucco, square and tall, hidden behind vehicles and streetlights. There is absolutely no curb appeal, which means the inside must be nothing but over-the-top pretension. It disgusts me, but it's not my job to decide how he lives, only to meet my portion of this agreement. Marry the man and bear a child and stay with him for ten years. That's enough responsibility for me.

"Here you are," Mom's driver says, setting my bag next to me on the sidewalk. Mom climbs out and wraps her arms around me tightly one last time.

"You are my sweet, precious girl. If you need anything, you call me." She places my phone charger in my hand and kisses my cheek, and I nod.

"Thank you. I will." And with a brave face, I pick up my bag, knowing the driver will crate the rest of them into the house, and walk around the back of the Range Rover and toward the front door.

The concrete steps offer no place to welcome guests. I already hate this place. I ring the doorbell and wait, and a young Latina woman with bold brown eyes and a warm smile opens the door for me.

"Mrs. Ramiro, welcome to your home." She swings the door open and steps back as I enter, and someone whisks in to take my bag from me.

The home is larger than it looks from the front. Deep, swelling rooms with high ceilings are decorated in modern furniture and paintings, though none of them are extravagant. I'm mildly surprised by the modest look of the place, and I wonder if I'm at the wrong house, mostly because she called me Mrs. Ramiro and I've only ever

been known as Ms. Peralta before this.

"Ah, my beautiful wife," Tito says, and I spin around to see him standing near a gas fireplace that's turned off. He holds a glass of some sort of amber-colored liquid and has a cynical smile.

My belly flutters with nerves, and I clutch the phone charger in my hand so hard the plug bites into my skin. He's staring at me like a piece of meat again, and last time he did this, it made my body do things I hated. But this time, he's going to make my body do things I like. I just know it. And what if it makes me think differently of him?

"Mr. Ramiro," I acquiesce, nodding. But he scoffs and shakes his head as he moves toward me.

I glance around, wondering why he looks like he's amused and stalking me all at once, but I'm alone. The help is gone, off to God only knows where, and he is now inches from me.

"Mr. Ramiro is my father. I'm your husband. You should call me dear, or honey, something lame like that. Don't you think?" With a single pinky, he touches my eyebrow, drawing a line across my forehead until the hair is off my face and I'm no longer veiled.

My heart pounds against my chest with rage. I don't want to feel turned on by him, but I do. He's bold and commanding. He owns me, and I have to do what he says, even if what he says is something I wouldn't otherwise do—for him or anyone else. And he smells good, like a god descended from the heavens to bring my every pleasure to the surface and sate me.

"Dear," I say through gritted teeth. The anger resurges—anger with myself for

noticing how the top few buttons of his dress shirt are undone, his tie missing. Anger at myself for letting my groin warm at the thought that he will request sexual favors from me, most likely tonight, most likely soon. It's been a while. My body is tense.

"Now see, that wasn't so hard. Not as hard as my cock." His smirk is painful to look at. I steal my gaze away from his face and stare at the wire in my hands. "They've brought your things to my room. Up the steps, third door on the right. If you don't have some sort of negligée, then wear nothing. I'll be up in ten minutes." He waves his hand as he speaks, and I feel my face contort into a glare. "Be naked when I get up there."

I scoff, and he raises an eyebrow, and I know I'm not getting out of this. The disgusting part is that I want to do what he says. It's like he has a power over me that I can't fight, as if he's climbed into my mind and is manipulating even my desires. I feel my cheeks warming, and my lower belly is set ablaze.

"Go on," he says, flicking his wrist, and I turn and stomp up the steps. What the hell have I gotten myself into?

6

TITO

The cute little huff Aria gives me before stomping away makes me laugh, and I watch that ass of hers shake. I like the fire that bubbles beneath her surface just waiting to come out. It's women like her who make for the best fuck, and I fully intend to lean into that fight when I fuck her. I've been fantasizing about it since the minute we met, bending her over and leaving red handprints on her ass.

I sip the whiskey in my glass and retreat into my den. The long day has me fatigued, but not too tired to indulge in Aria's body. It's one of the perks of this arrangement I

believe I'm going to enjoy most. I've never had trouble finding women willing and available for my pleasure, but there's something about knowing this one is being forced to be here, with or without her consent. It gets my blood pumping.

I down the rest of the whiskey and set the glass on my desk. I've instructed my help that I'm not to be bothered this evening. I've thought of how I will consummate this marriage probably a hundred times. All of those ideas have boiled down to only one possible scenario, which I'm eager to play out.

Aria needs to know who I am, what I'm about, and how I expect to be respected. The best way to teach her that is if she is vulnerable, and the most vulnerable position any woman can be put in is to be stripped naked and fucked into oblivion. It opens them right up to education, which I will provide for my new bride tonight.

I make my way upstairs slowly, savoring the sensation of pressure building in my groin. Just the anticipation of what I'm about to do with her makes my dick swell, and I know she already holds power over me. I hate to admit it, but marriage isn't going to be as bad as I thought. I'll get off on controlling her, mapping every line on her body and dominating her. But I'll also enjoy the comfort of knowing she must submit no matter what I ask. Maybe that's just my pride talking.

At the bedroom door, I wait, listening to what's happening inside the room. I hear a drawer open, then shut. I hear her muttering things under her breath. She sounds hostile and angry. That will work in my favor. Breaking someone is so much more fun when they fight you. Besides, it's a turn on. Not that I would ever force a woman to have sex with me. I'm not evil, but I do like to convince them, and I always have them begging for it.

The door pushes open easily, and I lean on the jamb and watch her jerk back from one of the drawers and shut it quickly. She's snooping, but she won't find anything. What on earth would she be looking for, anyway?

"Mi casa es su casa, Aria." I push off the jamb and walk deeper into the bedroom. "Anything you want to know, you can ask." My hands slide into my pockets as I take her in, still clothed and glaring at me. I knew she would be. She'll be a tough nut to crack, but I'll do it.

"I don't want to know anything," she says hastily, folding her arms over her chest.

"Then why were you rifling through my underwear drawer? Trying to find out whether I wear boxers or briefs?" I chuckle and cock my head at an angle.

Aria only continues to glare at me and puff her chest out as if she has something to prove. It was her family who initiated this arrangement between the two of us, so it's very possible she is feeling slighted by her father's wishes. Our parents only do what's best for us and for our families. I myself have been at the receiving end of some such situations, so while I don't enjoy her attitude, I can at least sympathize. Still, she must learn the ropes, and teaching her will be fun.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Why are you wearing clothing?" My fingers itch to undo the buttons on that cream-colored silk top. I've been craving the sight of her flesh laid out before me for days now, and that wedding gown she chose didn't do her any favors. This would have gone a lot easier for her had she not tempted me so much by covering herself so thoroughly.

"I don't take orders from you. You may be my husband but you're not my superior. The Peralta family?—"

"Enough!" I shout, cutting her off. I'm not angry, not even riled, but it startles her. Her hands curl into fists, tightly tucked beneath her arms. She looks down at her feet as I continue. "You take orders from me and you do what I tell you to do because I own you. Do you understand?"

Aria says nothing. She doesn't even move. I can see the rage simmering behind her eyes, ready to burst out in an explosive display, but she's good at containing it. That's a good thing. Any wife of mine will have to have excellent self-control of her emotions. This business isn't for the faint of heart or the weak of conscience.

"Now," I say, walking up to her. I cup her cheek, pushing some of her long, dark hair behind her ear. "I want you undressed now and spread on my bed, or I will own your entire family's organization—the businesses, the bank accounts, every asset in title and deed, and I will bury them."

She draws in a sharp breath and meets my gaze with fury burning in her eyes. "You can't do that. You have no right. We have an agreement."



Has no one told this woman anything? I roll my eyes at her and move to my dresser. The drawer is tossed when I open it. Some of my old photo albums and memories of my mother which I keep in this drawer are no longer organized. She has been through my papers, but this agreement was clearly not what she was looking for. She probably thinks she's read it all and only glossed over the fine print.

I pull the marriage contract out and flip to the fourth page, where her first lesson will be found. Tapping the center of the page, I thrust it out toward her. "Read it," I bark, and she scowls at me, but with wide eyes she looks down. After a few seconds, she takes the paper into her hands and sinks onto the foot of the bed.

Her eyes pore over the lines of contract, one specific clause indicating that as my wife, she will do as I say or she will forfeit the agreement, and defaulting on the agreement will mean her family relinquishes everything to me. It's standard for agreements like ours, where one party's loyalty to another may mean a great financial risk. I myself have a clause in the agreement that details how any physical harm done by me or on behalf of me against Aria will result in forfeiture of any assets I've invested in the Peralta organization.

Her eyes sweep over the document and her shoulders drop. Aria says nothing, but I can see she understands now. She is mine to do with as I please, and if she does not obey my every whim, I own her family. It's so much better to own her, which is what I'm looking forward to doing next.

"Now, are we clear?"

Again I'm met with silence, but she does jut her chin out in a very defiant expression, tears misting in her eyes. She stands and stares at the window across the room. The city's skyline in the distance twinkles. It's a breathtaking view, but she's not admiring its beauty. She's avoiding eye contact.

"Take your clothes off," I say again, and I see her lower lip quiver briefly before her hands rise to the buttons on her shirt. She slowly begins to undo them, one at a time, painstakingly caring for the delicate pearl buttons and soft silk beneath. "Not like that," I tell her, moving toward her in frustration. "Like this."

With both hands, I grip the shirt and tear it open down the middle. Buttons fly, landing God only knows where, and she gasps and frantically tries to cover herself. The white lace of her bra against the warm tone of her Italian skin is breathtaking, but she covers it.

"Bastard," she spits out, but I pinch her chin and look her in the eye.

"Strip for me now, and your father can keep his home." She doesn't realize I already have her figured out. She's Daddy's little girl. She'll do anything to make sure Father Dearest is cared for, and now that I know her weakness, I can wield it like a sword.

"What, no music?" she says sardonically, and I step back to watch the show.

She's no dancer, but the way she peels layer after layer of clothing off still turns me on. She hesitates when she gets to her bra and panties. They match perfectly, and the lace hugs her ass like a glove. She stands in front of me twisting her fingers together as if she's a fucking virgin, but I know better than that. No virgin kisses the way she kissed me at that church this afternoon.

"Naked, now," I order, and her shoulders drop farther, if that's possible. She's so meek now, putty in my hands.

"I hate you," she mutters, but she does as I say.

Her tits are perfect, symmetrical and evenly proportioned to her body. Her nipples are just the right size, not too large, not too small, and the scent of arousal wafts toward

me when she shimmies her panties down. This is having the right effect on her.

"You will obey me now?" I ask her, knowing she will.

She drops the final vestiges of her clothing onto the floor in the pile and stands in front of me stark naked. I reach for my groin, rubbing the solid tool beneath my slacks with the heel of my hand. She's made me rock hard, and God, I want to fuck her, but she still has some things to learn.

"Now, turn around and bend over. Spread yourself so I can see your pussy drip."

Again there is hesitation in her expression, but something else is there too—desire. She's attracted to me, and she likes when I order her to do things. But it's a hidden desire she'll never tell me about. I'd almost guarantee it.

Aria waits long enough that I grow impatient. She's testing me, and she won't like the way it makes me react.

"I said, turn around and bend over, now." My voice is raised, my chest tight, and she purses her lips as she turns and bends over the foot of the bed, reaching back with one hand to spread herself and reveal those holes I want to do very bad things to.

Her pussy glistens with the sweet moisture of her arousal, and my job here is done. Now to enjoy the fruits of my labor.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I'm ashamed of myself for letting him get me so worked up. I told myself coming into this that I would eventually relent and have sex with him. He is, after all, my husband. I just had no idea he was going to demand it within minutes of my walking across that threshold. I'm more irritated that I've backed off my own principles and I'm doing what he wants. I'm supposed to be stronger than this.

"That's it, like that." I can't even look at him, mostly because the way his eyes devour me makes my body feel things. I like feeling them, too. I just don't want to admit to him that I feel them. I'm not supposed to like this arrangement, at least not in my own mind. I'm supposed to be enraged and take him down, which I will. I will find dirt on Tito Ramiro and take him down from the inside. I just can't seem to find the thread of hatred I have toward life right now, not when he's stroking himself and ordering me to pose in provocative positions for him.

"Bend over the bed farther, baby." The baby part is what gets me going, makes my heart beat oddly, and I hate myself for it. I do it anyway because I need to uphold my end of the contract in order to protect my family. His voice makes me wet, how he purrs it out in my ear. Gripping the edge of the bed, I stick my ass out, arching it just enough, accentuating my curves. "Yes, that's it." Hearing him moan is an ego boost, and I can't help but feel a bit smug. I'm doing something to him too, not just the other way around. I have a certain power over him, perhaps one I can use.

I close my eyes and think of anything but the way he's touching me, how his fingers brush across my thighs and up my spine. His body is hard pressed against mine, and I can feel his erection against my ass cheeks. I grit my teeth together as his hand tangles in my hair and pulls my head back. His hot skin across the backs of my thighs makes me clench. When did he undress?

“Look at me, Aria.” His voice is dark and dangerous, making my insides quiver with anticipation. I am a sucker for danger and he reeks of it. “Open those pretty eyes and look at me.” My breath hitches in my throat as our eyes lock when I comply with his demand, the intensity in his gaze stirring something I knew was dormant deep inside me. “I own you.” His hand trails up my back, then back down. He slides two fingers into my pussy and grips it hard. “I own this.” Then he pushes a thumb right into my ass and clenches his fist again. “And this,” he growls, his hips now grinding his hard dick into the back of my thigh.

“Do you understand me?” he asks, and I look away, quivering with expectation.

“You own nothing,” I say sternly, goading him. I want to test this theory I have, that my rebellion against him is what he’s anticipating. He wants me to fight him because he thinks it makes him powerful. But if I give him what he wants, then I’m the one with power. And when I withhold from him, he’ll feel it. It will bring him to his knees.

Tito pushes me hard, and I face plant onto the mattress. Before I can react, he flips me over and he’s on top of me, pinning me down. It sends a surge of adrenaline through my body, but I’m not afraid. His lips crash into mine hard, kissing and nipping at my lips. I kiss him back too, now clawing at his sides and back. I can feel the corded muscles beneath his skin tightening and flexing as he forces my knees apart so he has access to my core.

“I own you, and I’m gonna own every inch of this pretty little pussy,” he growls into my ear and slides two fingers into me, curling them inside me. I moan as he thrusts them in and out, stretching me to prepare for his dick. “Gonna fuck you so hard, you won’t be able to walk without thinking about me.”

“Fuck you,” I grunt, though my hands now scratch the comforter, cobbling together a little bit of my sanity that remains as he sucks the moans of pleasure from my mouth.

“Oh, I will.” His hand works harder, thrusting fingers into me, the heel of his palm rubbing my clit. “I’ll fuck you so hard, you’ll want to stay,” he growls before removing his fingers and licking them clean.

Somehow, I want him. All the reservations I’ve had, all the anger over my lot in life, saving my family, doing the “right thing”, and I still fucking want him. I want his dick in me. I want his mouth to devour me. I want him to keep his word and fuck me so hard I can’t walk without thinking of the amazing things he makes me feel.

“Fuck you!” I spit again, but he grips my throat hard, so hard I can’t breathe. I look into his eyes, not knowing how to react. I’ve never had a man be violent with me, not like this, and I don’t have a death wish.

“No, Aria. I’m fucking you. And you’re going to remember this...” His hand squeezes harder on my throat, and I grip his wrist with both hands, uttering a gurgled response. I can’t even exhale. “Hold still,” he tells me as his other hand continues to work my pussy to a frenzy. “You see, it just takes a little effort here.” His fingers flex and curl into me, the heel of his hand still stimulating my clit, and I feel lightheaded. “And here,” he says, squeezing my neck ever so slightly more, “and suddenly, you’re putty in my hands.”

I’m not just putty. I’m melting, spiraling toward the abyss of darkness that wants to claim me. I can’t breathe, can’t utter a response to him, and his hand isn’t letting up. My fingernails dig into his wrist and I let my eyes flutter shut. My heart is pounding so hard I think it will explode, but he’s still driving me to the edge. My pussy is on fire, clenching and building my coil so tightly I could cry.

“You see, Aria, hypoxia is a beautiful little trick. Lack of oxygen to the brain makes the sensation of orgasm so incredible, you’ll never want to do it the normal way again.”

I'm going to pass out, going to lose myself and die, and my body is betraying me, puddling into his palm as he coaxes the orgasm out of me. It comes crashing over me, rolling in wave after wave of pleasure. I arch my hips up and meet his thrusts and wonder if this is how I die, if he'll tell my family how he murdered me during sex, and as the pounding pleasure sucks me deeper and I succumb to the ecstasy, I don't even care. If this is how I die, then don't resurrect me. The sensations are so glorious when he lets my neck go and I suck in that first breath that I shudder violently from head to toe. There is no stopping the convulsions.

"Fuck, you're so hot. Look at those tits shake." Tito's hand is still buried in my pussy, working my G-spot like a fucking godcreating life inside me, and I'm a blubbering, whimpering mess. Never in my life have I felt such pleasure.

"Oh, shit. Oh, fuck..." I'm lost, trembling at his touch, panting for more, and he's got a smug grin on his face. I don't even care. This is incredible. "Oh, my God," I moan and lie completely vulnerable before him as he lowers his face to my groin and begins to suck and nip at my folds.

My hands go instinctively to his hair, and I realize what a dangerous game I've been playing. He has the power. All the power. I have nothing, and I want nothing more than to be ravished by him again and again. What the hell is wrong with me?

His teeth scrape across my lips and bite down hard. I wince and shudder, but I want more. "Shit, oh, fuck... Yes, eat me," I moan, lifting my head to watch what he's doing. His hands splay on my thighs, pushing them apart, letting me watch him work. He is a god, a master at what he's doing, and he knows it. This is his power over me, that he can make me betray my own conscience and enjoy it at the same time.

He bites again, and again I feel myself building into another orgasm. The first one was intense, but this one is going to be earth-shattering.

I'm crying out, clawing at his shoulders, and when he sees my reaction, he comes off with aPop. "No, I'm not done," I pant. The burning in my groin is so intense, it's like I haven't even come yet.

"Oh, but I am." His cock is hard, so hard I can see the veins pulsing, and I don't care about anything else but having him inside me.

Tito pushes inside me, splitting me apart like a ripe fruit, and I gasp for air. He's huge, and he's right, he does have the power. His thrusts are slow and deliberate at first, his eyes boring into mine, daring me to look away. But I won't give him the satisfaction. Instead, I grip his biceps tightly as he slams home, over and over again. He knows exactly how to angle himself to hit that spot, and I gasp and moan his name, a litany of profanities and praise mixing as we rock together.

"Fuck, you're so tight," he growls. His hand finds its way back to my throat, but this time it's not a chokehold. His grip is firm, possessive as he guides my head back. "I want to see your eyes," he pants in my ear. "I want to see the moment you come apart for me."

I don't know how much more I can take. His hands are everywhere, his cock is on fire inside me, and I feel like I'm going to shatter into a million pieces. A sob escapes my lips as I arch my back, offering myself up to him fully. Tito obliges, one of his hands traveling down to where our bodies meet, rubbing my clit.

"That's it, Aria," he grunts. "Come for me. Let me see you come."

The orgasm hits me like a freight train, and I scream his name as I feel myself clenching around him. Tito's grip on my throat tightens just a little more, but the pain only heightens the pleasure. My entire body is on fire, every nerve ending in my body alight with pleasure.



Tito's hips stutter against mine as he comes, filling me with his hot seed. We both pant for air, our chests heaving in unison. He collapses on top of me, his weight pinning me to the bed, but I don't mind. For a brief moment, I feel safe in his arms. Never in my life have I ever felt so alive or so betrayed by my own body. A strange mixture of satisfaction and shame washes over me as he rolls off, and I feel his sex drain from me onto the comforter I just had fisted in my hands.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

Tito swipes his clothes off the ground and vanishes into the bathroom, and I can only lie here feeling ashamed of myself for letting my body have what it desires. I stare at the swirls in the textured ceiling and cover my face in shame. I'm supposed to hate him and find a way to keep his money so my father's businesses can stay afloat, while freeing myself from this contract. I know it's not what my family expects. They think I'm married and will be content being some man's slave, but if I didn't think there was a way for me to get out of this, I'd never have agreed.

I roll to my side and listen to the water run, Tito's shower steam already wafting into the bedroom. But my mind is now churning, plotting out how I will get him to break the clause of the agreement that hands us all his wealth with no strings attached and terminates the marriage. It's there, written in black and white, just as plainly as the words that bind me to obey whatever he asks of me or he owns the businesses into which he's pumped funds.

There's no way Dad read that whole contract and agreed to it. He had to have been so out of his mind with worry that he skipped parts. I know he'd never doom me to this life. I just have to read that contract and find the loophole. I'll walk away having secured the money from Tito's family and be done with this forever.

"Aria, round two..." Tito calls, and shame creeps into my thoughts at the sound of his voice. As much as I want to say no, I can't. He does own me, just like he said. And unfortunately, my pussy likes that. It's my heart that will be destroyed in this process.

The door to my den is cracked. I sit with my brother and two of my men around the low, glass coffee table that hosts our drinks and an ashtray for their cigars. We share a round of laughter at a joke Carlos tells and sip our whiskey. Tonight's meeting is essential for our business, though. It's not all just fun and games. The more I take over Dad's responsibilities, the more I see how hard the man really works, but work is always more enjoyable with a cold beverage.

"So, how about the arrangement?" Tony leans forward and rolls his cigar on the rim of the ash tray, dropping a load of ashes into the glass bottom, and Carlos tents his hands in front of himself, fingertips pressed together.

"We're meeting the buyer at our normal location, but we're pushing for twice the load this time." Carlos taps his index fingers together as he speaks. "Tito has some rich idea about making more money and taking more land." My brother isn't a fan of my business ventures at times, but I have Dad's approval to move forward with my plans.

"That's right," I tell them, confirming what Carlos already said. "We'll begin distribution as normal and flood the streets with our mix. Our customers will like what we provide more than they enjoy the sludge the Peraltas are shoveling out there, and we'll move deeper into their territory."

As I pick up my glass tumbler to have a sip of my drink, I notice movement in the hallway. I can't make out any distinct details, but a shadow passes by the door and it intrigues me. I stand and sip my whiskey as I move toward the door, and the shadow is gone. When I look out, I see nothing, as if only a ghost were here eavesdropping, but the only people in this house to listen in are Aria and my maid.

Puzzled, I turn and head back to the stiff wooden chair, still warm from my body. I notice Carlos seems fidgety tonight too, irritable over something. His eyes dart around at the men, and I make a mental note to speak with him about why he's so jittery.

"You think Peralta is just going to let you walk into his territory and take over?" Sal scoffs at me and drops ashes into the ashtray from his cigar. The smoke floats upward toward the ceiling, probably staining it, but a meeting like this without the comradery of a shared cigar and glass of whiskey wouldn't be the same.

"No. I'm not a fool, Sal." I watch the amber liquid swirl in my glass and narrow my eyes at him. "Peralta isn't a fool either, so when our superior product begins to flood the same streets he services, he'll see that it's in his best interest to purchase his narcotics from our suppliers. It will be the only way he can compete with us, and we'll have him by the balls. It will start with price gouging, then cutting the supply with whatever we can find that will bring a shadow over his organization. He'll come crying for help."

Carlos's brow furrows, and now the shadow is over his eyes, not at my door. "That sounds like the long game, Tito. You know we can just walk in and take what we want, right?" He rolls his eyes and again scoffs at me, but I'm confident my plan will work.

"Rome wasn't built in a day, Brother. Anything worth doing is worth doing right. We'll take our time and in the end, we'll own it all." He has to know I'm serious about my way being respected. As of right now, he answers to our father, but soon, he will answer only to me. And if he can't fall in line and support my strategies, he may be looking for his own tribe. Blood or not, I won't tolerate disrespect or dissent.

"Hey, I think it sounds like a decent plan." Tony sucks on his cigar, making the cherry on the end light up. He coughs a little, and the smoke spurts from his mouth like a dragon's snort. "It's as simple as solution selling. We create the problem and they come to us for the answer. Business 101."

Tony and Sal will always be on board with anything I say because they understand the chain of command. Carlos will always rebel against everything I say because

despite the chain of command, he believes himself the better leader for this family. He can't stand it that I'm older by fourteen months, making me the heir and him nothing. Oh, my father respects him and he's given Carlos a fair share of responsibility.

But the way he covets my authority is always visible, almost tangible. He challenges every thought I bring to the table, every order I give. I'll continue to humor him for now, but he isn't going to like me when I'm fully in charge. That much is clear.

"And what do you think we'll do when Peralta calls the bluff, goes to another source for his drugs?" Carlos leans forward and picks up his glass, downing the entire glass in one swallow. "Because the way I see it, you fucked us by marrying into that family. They want to sap strength and money from us, and in the end, they'll be strong off our backs and we'll have another enemy."

His righteous indignation isn't far off the mark, but he's not looking at the big picture. We gain far more from this arrangement than the Peraltas. They are saved temporarily by an influx of money, but we have access to every single financial transaction that they make. We'll know them so well that even if the full ten years of this agreement plays out in a peaceful manner, they'll be brought to their knees in a heartbeat when it's over. I just don't see it lasting that long. I'll own it all long before then.

"Carlos, you have a lot to learn, which is why I'm in charge and you report to me." I finish my whiskey and stand. "Now, make sure the drop location is set and the time confirmed."

Tony stands with me, reaching across the table to shake my hand as Sal slowly clambers to his slightly drunken feet. "Second street warehouse, Tuesday at four," Tony says, and I nod.

"Then it's settled." I turn to Carlos, who still sits in his disrespect and hatred, glaring at me. "And we have our best men on it? Vinny and Tex?"

He raises and lowers his eyebrows in a single wag indicating he's done his job as ordered, and I clap my hands once and fold my fingers together. "Well, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'd like to find my beautiful new wife and see what she's up to this evening." Or more accurately, what she's been listening to. Something tells me it was her at my door eavesdropping on me, and I don't like that. Not with the sensitive topic we've been discussing.

I let myself out of the den, trusting they can show themselves out, and head upstairs. The bedroom door is open, and Aria isn't there, so I move on, toward the back of the house. Two guest rooms line the hall, followed by the fourth and largest room where I sometimes spend my mornings. My library door is open, and soft music vibrates out to meet me. The light glowing in the room reaches toward me as I open the door wider and see Aria curled up on the leather loveseat with a plush white blanket draped around her shoulders, book in hand.

"Find anything good to read in here?" I ask her, knowing the hundreds of books I have on these shelves will certainly entertain her for months on end. I walk toward the far wall of the small room and touch the leather bound cover of the first edition *The War of the Worlds*, by H.G. Wells. Then I turn to her and see she hasn't even looked up. She's engrossed in a thick volume of poetry by Hemmingway. It isn't a special edition, but it's a good book.

"I said, did you find anything good to read?" My questions never go unanswered, at least not with people who know me, so I give her the benefit of the doubt because she doesn't know me or what I'm capable of.

Aria looks up at me dryly and holds the book up so I can see the cover, but I already know which book she has. It's a rude way of answering, but it's an answer.

"Were you downstairs a short time ago? Near my den?" I cock my head in curiosity as she pulls the book back down to her lap and lets her eyes skim over the pages. She says nothing for a second, as if preparing her response, but so nonchalantly that I'd never suspect a thing if I weren't suspicious.

"I've been reading..."

And just like that, she goes back to ignoring me. She turns a page and shifts in her seat to get more comfortable, and while she does appear to be quite cozy, as if she's been here for hours, I'm not convinced. My gut tells me she heard me speaking to my men and is keeping that bit a secret. It won't make a difference. I'll still enact my plan, and it will work regardless of whether Hector Peralta knows ahead of time.

I move toward her, sitting on the loveseat next to her. My arm draped across the back, my body reclined sideways, I cross my left leg over my right and hook a finger on the book, pulling it down so I can get her attention.

"You know, when a man like me talks, most people listen."

"I'm not most people," she snarls, and I like that feisty attitude. I chuckle.

"I can see that. You're quite the handful, aren't you?" Taking the book from her hand, I fold it shut and lay it on the cushion between us. She glares at me and pulls the blanket around her shoulders more tightly. She really is an exquisite creation, beautiful in so many ways, and I'm lucky enough to own her. Like my collection of rare books, Aria brings value to my life that I can't get any other way. It's not just the power I wield over her father. It's more than that. I can't place my finger on it.

"What do you want? I'm trying to read that." She reaches for the book, and I place my hand on it, palm splayed over the cover.

"How do you feel after last night?" Our marital bed was practically volcanic last



night. I had her trembling under me no less than ten times, and while my own body has its limits, making her explode back to back is nothing short of an ego boost.

"Do you mind?" she snaps, grabbing the book and opening it up, searching for the page she was on.

So she wants to bite and claw? I'll put a leash on her.

I stand and walk to the door, pausing to look back at her. She's curled around the book like it's a life preserver that will keep her afloat in the storm surge, but I'm a tidal wave she won't ever see coming.

"Don't worry. I'll make sure tonight's performance is more spectacular," I tell her, and I see her shoulders tense as she hears my words.

My little toy has only begun to see what I'm capable of.

9

ARIA

If Tito thinks he's going to pull a fast one on my family, he's wrong. I've already told my father what my new husband is planning, the dirty drug deal and moving into Peralta territory. Dad is wise to it, but that doesn't mean he'll be able to do much about it when Tito comes hunting for results. Jasper will have to reach out to his connections in San Francisco to help him.

I sit at the large marble island in Tito's kitchen—well, our kitchen. I've been here five days and I still haven't gotten used to it being my home yet. I don't want it to ever feel like home. Yes, Tito can fuck the living daylights out of me and make me come so hard I piss myself—he's proven that twice now—but that doesn't mean I'm his

property. And it doesn't mean I'm happy in this arrangement. I can't even call it a marriage anymore. It's not. It's more like prison.

The tea bag has steeped long enough, but I stare at the way it floats in the mug listlessly like a raft on a pool in the summer sun, and I wish I were anywhere but here. My desire to gain information and take Tito down from the inside out isn't going as well as I planned. It's like his home is isolated from his work. Other than a few meetings he's had, ones I've overheard portions of, there is nothing in this home to connect him to the crime syndicate he leads. It's useless.

The only thing I've even found that may be useful is the fact that his younger brother, Carlos, seems all too eager to disrespect him at any turn. I'm sure it's nothing more than a case of sibling rivalry, but there may be a chance for me to twist the knife and help Carlos get what he wants while procuring what I want.

Which is why I'm sitting here now, staring at my tepid tea. I'm waiting for Carlos to come back to this damn kitchen to get another beer. He's been out back with Tito, sitting by the pool and enjoying the evening heat. Three times now, they've ordered me to put on a bathing suit and join them, and I refuse. I won't be paraded around in front of Tito's brother in that slutty scrap of material he calls a bikini, but that doesn't mean I don't want to speak with Carlos.

I have to reheat the tea in the microwave twice before Carlos comes in. I want it to appear casual, as if I'm only just letting the tea finish steeping before I retreat to my safe place here in this house—the library. I'm fascinated by all the books Tito has, and I'm amazed that a man like him has taken time to preserve literature the way he has. Some things I've learned about him are surprising, to say the least.

"What are you doing here?" Carlos growls as he walks in. "You know my brother wants you out there." He stomps over to the refrigerator and opens it. The bottles and jars in the door shake and rattle under the movement.

"Your brother wants a lot of things he can't have." I pick up the tea bag by the string and dunk it. I'm not even going to drink this drivel, but I have to put on a good show.

Carlos bends and reaches into the fridge and then straightens and turns toward me, letting the door shut. He has an ice-cold beer in hand, which he opens and takes a sip from.

"Yeah, I hear that." Carlos is a large man, larger than Tito. I bet if they were to square off, Tito would have his ass handed to him, but just like in my family, Tito's family operates on a matter of respect. They both honor their father as the leader, and something tells me Daddy Dearest would skin them or disown them if they started shit. They probably learned this the hard way when they were kids.

"You sound bitter..." Here I am, planting seeds like I have a green thumb. I look up at him through my lashes and notice the storm in his eyes. It's always there. It was there the day of our wedding when he watched Tito kiss me at the altar. It was there earlier this week when I snuck up to Tito's den and watched a few moments of his stupid meeting.

"Bitter isn't the word for it." He takes another sip of his beer and then leans forward on the island. The white and black marble is a stark contrast to the bronze of his sun-kissed skin. These Italian men are obsessed with their appearance and it shows.

"Is he a good leader?" I ask, hoping to come across as a curious wife, not an unsuspected double agent. I'm hardly a spy, but a girl has to do what a girl has to do.

Carlos stands again, squared shoulders, rigid jawline. I see the way he wants to trust me, but he's a trained soldier. "Tito is my older brother. He's blood. That's all I can say." He wants to come across as loyal, but under the surface, I see his wheels turning. He wants that position of leadership, and it's so obvious even Tito probably knows it.

"Oh, come on. You're brothers. I'm sure you've seen him be irresponsible. You really think he is the one who deserves to lead the family?" I pinch the tea bag and the liquid drains out, then I set it on the plate my mug rests on. "You've never once thought the rightful leader of this family should be you?"

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"What are you doing, lady? What are you up to?" He walks toward me, looming menacingly over me. I don't flinch or cower. I have no reason to fear him at all. I'm not breaking my marital contract by placing seeds of doubt in Carlos's mind. If Tito can scheme and plot against my family, I have no shame in doing it to him.

"I'm saying, you seem to be the one fit for the job." Not even looking at him, I can sense the room shift. It gets ten degrees hotter, maybe because despite being confident in what I'm doing, I'm starting to sense that I'm treading in shark-infested water.

"Yeah? How so?" Carlos stops, his shadow cast across my cup, and I look up at him.

"Well, you make sense and he makes messes. Isn't that what you told your father the night of our wedding?" He has no idea I overheard that little spat between him and the older Ramiro. "What if we can work together to get you what you want, and me what I want?"

There is a long, pregnant pause. He's thinking it over now. I have him right where I want him. I know men like him. He's going to take the bait, even if he doesn't do it now. His ego is too large to allow Tito to run the show and get all the credit. Carlos isn't happy being second in command. He wants it all, and I know I can convince him to take it.

"And if I said yes, what is it you think I want? And what is it that you want?" He hasn't told me off yet, so that's good. I turn in the seat and look up at his stern expression. It's amazing how much the brothers look alike, though Tito is by far the more handsome of the two. But who knows, maybe Carlos is the smarter one.

"You want the leading role, and I want to go home to my family and for my father to retain full ownership of his businesses—completely bailed out."

I can almost hear the wheels turning in Carlos's mind. He's thinking of it, but before he can answer, Tito's voice booms through the back door, making me jump in right.

"Fuck! Goddammit! Carlos, we have a problem." His shout is so loud it rattles my nerves, and I turn to look down into the cup again. Focusing on anything besides Tito's anger is what I need to do. I can't let him see me anxious or flustered like this. He'll know I'm up to something.

When he questioned me about whether I had been eavesdropping on his meeting, I was certain he was going to corner me and force me to tell him the truth. That hand around my neck when we fuck won't be so nice if it's there for any other reason. I can't give him any excuse to want to harm me. Tito is strong. He could crush me.

"What the hell?" Carlos barks out, then he turns and walks into the hallway off the back door, meeting Tito as he bursts in. As they walk up the hallway, I hear him shouting about the drug deal.

They can't see my face, and I'm glad. My lips curl into a smile at the mention of his deal being interrupted. Of course it's interrupted. Jasper and I concocted a plan to leak the information to a few friendlies we have on the police force. There was never a chance that deal would go down as Tito planned it to. I won't let his drugs flood the market and create the "problem" to which he could provide the solution.

Yes, I heard every single word of that meeting and raced up to the library before he ever suspected a thing. Or maybe he suspected it. Maybe he still does, but he can't prove it. Now he's irate and screaming about revenge and finding out who did what, and I pick up the tepid tea and sip it, grimacing at how awful it tastes.

When the sound of Tito's shouts fades, I pull my phone out and call Jasper. I want someone to celebrate with. This tiny victory is mine, and while my brother has no clue that I'm scheming to get Tito to back out of this arrangement, he can appreciate that I'm a troublemaker. Besides, it saved my father this time, though next time, I may not be so lucky.

"Aria, how are you?" Jasper says after answering on the third ring.

"Big brother," I say, grinning. "It's done. It worked." I am positively giddy, bouncing in my seat so much that the tea sloshes on the marble and I have to grab a paper towel to wipe it up.

"Slow down, Ari. You know you have to be careful. Your husband is a dangerous criminal. Your overexuberance will get you caught." Jasper sounds like a parent, not a partner in crime, besides the fact that as the heir to my father's throne, he is Tito's counterpart. As if I'm unaware what my own brother is capable of. I roll my eyes.

"God, just celebrate with me. And don't call that bastard my husband. He is nothing more than a contracted relationship." I wipe up the tea, but as I say the words, my gut churns. It's not altogether true. When Tito slides into me and makes me look him in the eye as I come, I feel something. There is some sort of sick fuckery that goes on in my mind, connecting me to him, and I hate that part of me.

"Well, don't be so quick to claim the victory. We won a small battle because your ear was tuned in. If this continues to happen, he'll become secretive. His little plots against our family will be carried out without your ever knowing of them. Then how will we defend ourselves?" Jasper asks, and I already know.

"I'm going to ask Sergeant Nix to get me a few bugs to plant on him, in his car, around this house. I can have access to take down other deals too, not just ones that

pertain to our family. I have to make him look bad in front of his father." The plan begins to come together in my mind seamlessly now. If Carlos is on board, all we have to do is make Tito look foolish in front of his father. Mr. Ramiro will choose Carlos to lead the family instead of Tito, and all I have to do is get my "husband" to fuck me so hard he leaves bruises on my neck, then claim he tried to kill me.

I know it will work.

"Aria, you have to be careful. You don't know who you're dealing with." Jasper's warning comes in hushed tones, and I get the feeling my parents are nearby, or at least one of them.

"Don't worry, Jasper. I know exactly what I'm doing. And I'm going to do it right. Hopefully soon, too." The shouting has started again, in the other room. Tito is furious. "Listen, I have to go. I have to hide or something. I'll call you later."

I hang up knowing my overly concerned brother is probably worried sick. It just shows how close we really are. He cares about me so much, he would storm the castle and save me, but this time, I'm saving him and myself. All of us, really. And I'm not going to stop until my job is finished.

10

TITO

Aria has been nothing but snappy and stubborn since we walked into my father's house. We're gathered for a family meal, as requested by Dear Old Dad, who knows he's on his last legs. He wants us all together. I think it makes him feel like death isn't so imminent, that he is still strong enough to lead, but we all know he's been fading lately.



She remains firmly on my arm, dressed in white dress slacks and a pink floral top. The lighter colors only make her thick, dark hair all the more alluring as it curls around her shoulders and drapes over her chest. The plunging neckline of the top is a hit with most of my cousins, though I'll pry their eyes out with my thumbs if they even so much as look at her with attraction. She is mine alone, and I'm actually feeling proud to have her tonight.

"Do you have to have such a cold expression on your face? This is a party—smile." My gentle chiding seems to irritate her. I'm not one to coddle, either. She will get her act together or I'll be forced to put her in her place.

"Do you have to be such a bore?" The sardonic drawl of her tone makes me clench my jaw. "And it's a family gathering. The only way this would be a party is if your father kicks the bucket tonight."

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I squeeze her hand so tightly she winces and tries to pull away. I'm not fond of the vitriol at all. Her callous remarks only show how little she knows about this family. We are thicker than blood, bonded with an ancient tradition of honor and loyalty. Even if he weren't my father, I would still respect him more than she does, simply because it is the way of this organization.

"Watch your mouth," I tell her as we approach one of my uncles who's had his eyes on me all night. Unable to attend our wedding festivities, Uncle Tommy has yet to meet my new bride. She's respectful at least when speaking to other people. It seems to be me she abhors, and probably because she blames me for being forced into marriage against her will.

"Uncle Tommy, this is Aria, my wife," I say, a note of pride in my voice as I present her. He shakes her hand, and she bows at the shoulders before they engage in polite small talk. At least she can play the part when she needs to.

"Aria, I hear your family has chosen an alliance with the Ramiro tribe. They are very wise for leaning into the strength of our family." Tommy grips my elbow and nods his head. The gray hairs sprouting from odd places on his face and in his ears attest to his age. He's older than my father by a few years, but just as faithful to the time-honored tradition of passing the torch. Their father chose mine, and he chose me. Tommy was never like Carlos, though, never coveting my father's authority.

"Mr. Ramiro..." She pauses and smiles. "I'm sorry, there are so many Mr. Ramiros here this evening, it all becomes a little too overwhelming."

He chuckles at her and releases my arm. "Tommy is fine. You're part of the family

now, Aria. Feel free to call me Uncle.”

I relax a little, relieved she isn't going to cause a scene in front of my uncle. There will be time for that later when we are alone and I can explain her place without unscrupulous ears listening in.

“Thank you, Uncle Tommy,” she says with a genuine smile on her lips that makes my heart ache with longing. Why couldn't she always be this way? She is resilient and strong, quick-witted and short-tempered, everything a Ramiro wife should be, but she allows her hatred of my name and authority to keep her at arm's length. I stand convinced the only reason we have such passionate sex is because she's never had a man make her body feel the way I do. Otherwise, she would still be fighting me on that too.

“May I steal her away for a moment?” I say to Tommy, and he pats Aria's hand and nods.

Carlos appears with his wife on his arm. They make quite a picture together. Marcela is pretty in her own right with her auburn hair and hazel eyes that seem to sparkle all the time. Her hand settles on his forearm as he leads her toward the table where Dad's staff has the drinks situated. I need to speak with him about certain matters, but Aria's presence makes that challenging.

“Go get a drink,” I tell her, but the plastic smile on her face, showing only a smidgen of her pearl-white teeth, is so tight I know she's about to rebel again.

“Go fuck yourself,” she says, and she looks up at me so adoringly that if I didn't know better, I'd have said she was in love with me. “I don't know any of these people. I'm staying with you.” Hertalons wrap around my arm more tightly, and she clings to me. She's been nothing but a pain in the ass for the past two weeks of our marriage, and I'm fed up.

I turn to her and lift my hand, cupping the side of her neck. I smile at her adoringly as I press my thumb into her pulse point. She gasps quietly and stiffens even as I wrap my other arm around her waist and pull her into my body. Anyone else in this room will think I'm just showing her special affection. None of them will pay any attention to me because watching their soon-to-be boss kissing his wife would be seen as disrespect, and no one will ever disrespect me.

But Aria doesn't know that. The hands that gripped my bicep only seconds ago now grip my wrist as I push my thumb in harder and lean in closely to brush my lips over her cheek. Then I whisper into her ear, "Do not test me." I keep my grip firm for a second as she nods, and her grasp on my wrist loosens.

"I was just saying I don't know anyone, and I'll feel more comfortable with you."

My hand slides down her neck and across her shoulder to her lower back where I lace my fingers together as if it is the most comfortable thing. She plays with my tie, straightening it and fidgeting. She's shocked and maybe a little afraid, but she won't cause a scene. She knows better.

"I'm sure you will be fine, Aria. Go mingle while I speak with my brother."

Luckily, she has enough sense not to argue further, and she melts into the crowd, cozying up to a group of women her age who've been eyeing us all night. Good, let them have her for now. I have business to attend to, and as much as I hate to admit it, some space from my new bride will do us both good.

I make my way toward Carlos, who now has a drink in his hand and stands with Tony and Vinny. The two of them are dwarfed by Carlos's size, appearing like mini versions of him in nicer suits. They are huddled in deep discussion about something, and I know what it is. Carlos is having difficulty with a few of his business ventures, and partnering with my cousins is the only way he can work things out. He hasn't

brought it up to me yet, but Sal has, and I'm waiting to get involved until Carlos asks me to help.

"Brother," I say, slapping him on the back as I step up beside them. He winces and closes his eyes for a moment before turning with a half-smile.

"Tito," he acknowledges me, and then he nods at the others. "We were just talking business."

"At a party?" I ask. My feigned playful tone makes the other men smile and chuckle. "What could be so important with business that you have to discuss it here on a night we're celebrating our father?" My words are meant to drive the dagger home. He's being secretive about his ventures, and I want to know what's going on in detail. As his leader, I deserve that respect. After all, what he does will inevitably reflect on me as the boss.

"It's nothing to be concerned about," Carlos says, waving off my concern, but I won't be assuaged so easily.

"Come now, do tell. What's the matter?" I turn to Sal, who pushes his lips out thoughtfully.

"Carlos needs a little reinforcement. That's all, Tito." Sal shrugs a shoulder and nods at Tony, who offers nothing more than a nervous snicker.

"If you must know, we are going to partner together to run things and we're looking for the best option. That's all." Carlos is irritated by my insistence, but he would do well for himself if he just communicated with me openly. I'm his brother. I have no problem supporting him. He just got offended over the fact that as the eldest, I was chosen and not him.

Dad chose the right leader, as did his father before him. Carlos expected our father to do what his father did—choose the younger son. But the tradition was never choosing the younger son, but rather, the best son.

"I see. Well, I believe you will work it out easily, then. If you're all on the same page." I slide my hands into my pockets but feel the familiar feeling of hands wrapping around my elbow. I look down, and Aria is back, this time holding a drink in her hands.

"I couldn't help but overhear your conversation, dear." Her tone is overly familiar. She's up to something. I can see it in her eyes. "Carlos, you know many large corporations use mergers to maintain their status and grow. You should consider merging all of your finances. Let the wealth of one business flow to the others like liquid gold. In time, as one grows, they all grow, and when one is weak, the stronger ones will support it."

Carlos's eyes widen with revelation and he then furrows his brow, as if questioning to himself why he hadn't thought of that. Sal and Tony nod and grunt approval of Aria's wisdom, and I have to admit that having only heard a bit of the conversation, she was spot on. It would have occurred to me and Carlos too at some point, but she was quick to know the answer, and even in this, she impressed me.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"That's a real good idea," Sal says, raising his drink to her. "Mrs. Ramiro, you are one smart lady."

Indeed, my wife is brilliant, and that brilliance makes me wish she wasn't so averse to the idea of being my wife, fighting me all the time. I excuse us from the conversation again and lead her away from them. She's heard enough of the family business for one night. I'll be taking her home soon, after a little more elbow rubbing. She may yet surprise me again, and I'm not a man who is easily surprised.

11

### ARIA

I saw the way Carlos's eyes lit up when I offered my convenient bit of advice to him. It's what makes sense to me, to merge the finances of the businesses those men own in order to save the weaker ones by leaning on the strength of the ones doing better. I've heard my father speak of this before. It's a crutch to get the at-risk company through the worst of the decline while tapping into capital elsewhere, though it's not typically done unless the business owners are entirely on board with a full merger.

Now at home, all I can think is how easy it will be to convince Carlos that he doesn't need his brother's leadership, that he's more than capable of assuming that authority and power. And, of course, how strange it is that Tito gave me only the deepest respect after that moment at tonight's party. He was a changed man, ushering me around from couple to couple, introducing me to his family and doting on me. It's like something in that conversation sparked pride in me or something.

I step into the flow of water, my party clothes left in the hamper. The water is steaming hot, relaxing away my fatigue. As soon as we got home, I came up here to shower. Tito's cologne clings to the clothing and my skin, and while it's not the worst scent in the world, it just reminds me that there are too many things I don't hate about him. That I'm really not the one with the power in this relationship.

I soak my hair and add a bit of shampoo, lathering it up before rinsing it out. Sometimes, I don't know what I'm doing here, like I'm being torn down the middle. My family supports me, and if I told them my plan was to wait until my father's businesses were running well, then somehow find Tito in breach of the contract, they would support that. Dad and Jasper would caution me against anything too nefarious for fear that Tito would harm me, but they would at least help.

At times, I think my mom really wants me to hang in there, hoping that Tito will be to me like my father is to her now, years after my parents' marriage. I can't ever see Tito being like that. Tonight, all I wanted was to stay on his arm where I felt safer, because I know him and I don't know his family at all. He pushed me away. I wasn't allowed to hear his "business talk", apparently, but when I did, it wasn't like I stole family secrets. And he was impressed by my knowledge, or that's the way I see it.

And for that reason, I feel like maybe I'm wrong about Tito. Maybe there is more to him than just really good sex and a nasty, controlling attitude.

The door creaks, and I look over to see him walk in. He's halfway undressed, his coat and tie somewhere else. Bare feet pad across the white tile floor as he undoes his belt and slips his slacks off. I cringe as I realize he's going to shower with me. He has no idea I've been attempting to lure his brother into an alliance with me to push him out. I suppose for the time being, that's good for me. I'm not in danger, and Tito's magical fingers can make me feel things no other man has ever made me feel.

"Mia cara," he mews as he steps into the shower, letting a burst of cooler air into the



glass surround. It's something my father calls me, so it feels odd hearing him say that. I must really have charmed him with my intellect this evening. He doesn't compliment me like this.

I turn my back to the water and face him as he moves in. His hands rest on my hips and make me tingle with desire. He's not just here to get cleaned up. His dick is half chub and there is a sea of lust in his eyes. He's staring at my tits, water droplets racing across my creamy skin.

"My God, you look incredible." His tight grip pulls me in, and I rest my palms on his chest.

"Am I supposed to thank you for that?" I ask in a sarcastic tone. I'm not sure why, but this feels different from normal. He's pushy and demanding, not complimentary and seductive. But his hips sway against mine, and his thickness squeezes between our pubic bones, making my groin pulse with ache.

"You don't have to say a thing. You were fabulous tonight." Tito leans in and nips at my earlobe. The rumble of his baritone tickles my ear as he continues, "Not only is that ass of yours fantastic in those pants, but you impressed my family." He scrapes his stubble along my jawline as he sucks on my earlobe and then grinds his dick against my pelvis.

"I'd have thought you were going to smack me for being stubborn and mouthy." My instinct to push back just never goes away. I'm sure if he were a man I fell in love with, I'd feel much differently about this interlude in the shower. Besides, Tito is acting weird. One of us needs to be normal.

He chuckles, a deep, growling sound that threatens to melt my insides. His chest rumbles mine, and my fingers itch to claw at his shoulders and push him lower to where his mouth meets my core.

"You are sassy, I'll give you that. And a little sass is a good thing." His lips trail down my jaw to my mouth, where he captivates me in a breath-stealing kiss. My hands lazily walk up his chest and lock together behind his head. It's getting so hot in here, I can hardly breathe.

"Mmm, so you like when I talk back? You could have fooled me tonight." I arch my head back under the water as he nips at the skin on my neck and throat. His hands knead my hips, pulling me against him then gently pushing me away in a steady rhythm. I feel his dick getting harder by the second.

"A woman has to be strong, Aria. You are anything but weak." That's his nice way of saying I'm a bitch, and I'll own that. I am, and I don't intend to be anything other than that to him.

I press on his shoulders, hoping he'll go lower, but he sucks on the tender bit of skin just inside my collar bone as one hand slides up to my left breast to pinch my nipple. I shudder and moan softly, letting the water rush over my face. He knows how to draw pleasure from me no matter what mood I'm in.

"I think you and I would be amazing together, you know?" he asks, pulling away. He slides his dick between my legs where it can caress my slit and spread my moisture but not penetrate me. "We would make a perfect team, husband and wife, leading our organization to be the biggest in the nation. You just can't seem to respect that about me, but hopefully in time, you will."

He is all talk and no game, and right now, he's driving my pussy mad with desire. "Are you going to shut up and fuck me, or do I have to use the shampoo bottle to get off?" My snark knows no bounds. He smirks at me and kisses me again, this time letting his lips trail lower and lower.

I moan as his tongue flicks over my clit, his fingers parting my lips to give him better

access. He lifts my leg up, and his tongue probes deeper into my aching pussy, drinking every drop of my arousal. His fingers slide inside me, fucking me as he sucks on my sensitive nub, sending me into a tailspin of bliss. The water hits his back and runs across it, leaving us beneath the waterfall of heat and steam

My moans echo off the tiled walls, my power being sucked from my lungs, and I have no way to stop it. The things he does to me make me want him to do them all that much more. And when he does them more, when I moan for him to give me greater heights of pleasure, I offer him more of a hold over my mind and body.

"Oh, God, Tito. That's it. Right there, don't stop," I gasp, my nails digging into his back as he devours me like he's starving and I'm the last woman on earth. He growls against my pussy, his fingers picking up a punishing pace as he sucks harder. My back arches, my core tightening around his fingers as he presses against an unknown spot with his tongue that has me seeing stars.

I press my hands to his hot skin, leaning over him as his stubble scrapes against my sensitive parts. The water hits my head and makes my hair fall like a curtain around my face, but I'm a quivering mess. His fingers work my pussy to a frenzy. I'm melting around him. I can feel the slick juices my pussy makes for him, so much that he can't even drink them in as fast as I make them.

I'm on the edge and I can feel the orgasm rip through my core, the waves of pleasure crashing against me like a tidal wave, pulling me under its grasp. "That's it, mo miúrín, come for me," he growls against my aching core, and I arch my back as convulsions ripple through every cell of my body. My pussy clenches around his fingers, milking his fingers for all their worth as I ride out the waves of my orgasm leaned against the tiled wall.

He slowly pulls out his fingers, and I can't help but whimper. My pussy still clenches, aching for more of him inside me, to feel him fill me up. He stands up and lifts me up

against the wall, my legs wrapping around his waist as he positions himself at my opening. "I'm going to make you mine, Aria, in every single way possible. And when you finally come to the realization that we are better together, I hope it's not too late for you."

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

He lets me slide lower, sinking onto his thick girth. It slips in me easily as far as he can go and pushes into my back wall so hard I'm seeing stars.

He growls, his grip on my hips tightening. "Fuck, you're so tight. You're so fucking tight. I love the way you feel around me, Aria. You were made for this, for me." His thrusts are angrily slow, like he's trying to imprint his presence into my very soul, to brand me as his for all eternity.

My nails dig into his back as he buries himself inside me over and over again, each thrust hitting that spot that makes my toes curl. I can feel the orgasm building up again, and it's too soon. I can't handle this much pleasure so soon after my first one.

"Tito," I moan, grinding my hips into his in a silent plea for him to stop or at least go faster, anything to finish this torment and get it over with before I combust on him. "Tito, please," I beg, my orgasm barreling toward me like a runaway train and I'm trapped on the tracks. His lips find my earlobe and his tongue teases it, his other hand cupping my breast. "Say it, Aria. Say you're mine and I'll finish this for both of us." He whispers hoarsely in my ear, his thrusts a little more harsh, a little harder, making the orgasm that much closer. "Say it, momiúrín."

"Tito, please," I whimper, my control slipping fast. This isn't how I pictured my surrender to be, but here we are, him fucking me against a tiled wall while the water washes over us both. His hands squeeze my ass cheeks, pulling me closer to him as he thrusts in deeper, his dick hitting spots I didn't know existed. I can feel every single ridge of his cock on the walls of my tight pussy, creating a delicious friction that's driving me insane.

He lowers his head, sucking on my neck roughly, sending shivers down my spine each time he does it. "Say I own you," he growls against my ear. His hand leaves my ass cheek and travels upward to find my clit. He rubs it in circles that leave me gasping for air.

"Oh, God," I moan loudly, "yes, you own me."

That's all he needed to hear. His pace quickens, slamming into me with a ferocity I didn't know was possible. He pounds into me mercilessly, his hand never leaving my clit. Lightning-fast bolts of electricity course through my body, his thrusts and his fingers working in tandem to bring me crashing over the edge again. My pussy tightens around him, milking him for every drop as I scream his name. He growls out my name, his hips jerking as he shoots his seed inside me. The hot exchange runs down my inner thigh, and only then do I realize the water is getting cooler now.

He pulls out of me, both of us panting heavily as I let my feet down, tiptoes touching the tile floor. He still has me pinned against the wall, though, kissing my shoulder and neck. His hand trails up my sides to my ribs, and the water begins to wash away the evidence of our sex. For a split second, I'm captivated by him, drawn in by the power and the allure. Tito is the head of his family now, or will be any day when his father finally dies. That is a lot of power, power I'll never have in my life.

"Think of what we could do as we lead both of our families, Aria," he growls again, hands now kneading my tits, mouth hungrily clawing at my skin. But I can't.

I can't let his temptation to usurp my brother's throne and oust my father's wishes get into my head. I push him hard, and he backs away. My hand has a mind of its own, flying up to smack him across the face.

Tito looks stunned as his hand covers his cheek and I slip out of the shower, grabbing a towel. He doesn't even protest my flight. I wrap the towel around my body and rush

out into the air-conditioned bedroom. Sobs reach up out of my throat and erupt into the night as I dive into bed and cover myself, dripping hair and all.

Isn't it every girl's dream to have a husband who will love and cherish her? Being his partner isn't what I want, though being the head of my own family isn't entirely a horrible thought, and that is what makes me feel like I'm going to throw up. My father deserves better, and I have danced with the devil himself, and almost sold my soul to him, for that power. I'm not fit to be the daughter of Hector Peralta, not if I allow Tito Ramiro to tempt me into assuming power that isn't my own. No, I can't be his partner. I can't let his persuasion get to my heart. My father needs me to be strong, not to fall apart because a man can fuck me so well I forget who I am.

I have to keep Tito out of my head. My father's life depends on it.

12

TITO

My first time at the Peralta home and I'm very impressed. My father has this old-world charm about everything he does. His home screams vintage 1930s, but the Peralta estate has been updated to something more akin to the Twenty-First Century charm I prefer. Though, there are hints of Don Hector's age in the artwork hung on his walls and the curtains draped across his marble floors.

A staff of two maids and a butler greet me at the door when I arrive. They're dressed in black with nametags pinned to their shirts as if I'd ever need their names for any reason. I wonder if Hector is losing his sanity, beginning to grow forgetful as he ages. My father is sharp as a whip, no hint of memory issues or other age-related issues creeping in. If only his lungs hadn't been invaded.

"Mr. Ramiro, it's so good for you to come." A petite woman with dark skin and eyes

smiles at me warmly and gestures for me to follow. The woman next to her, with honey-colored hair, nods. "This way, please." She starts off across the large entryway, and I follow behind at a casual pace. The second woman and the man, who says nothing, follow behind me.

When Hector asked me to join him and his son for a short meeting about some business items, I couldn't say no. The man's money troubles precede him in every way. Every crime boss in LA knew he was struggling. It was only a matter of time before he either folded or reached out for an alliance such as the one we created, and I am the lucky one for having crossed his mind at such a dire moment for his family.

The maid leads me to a large open room with windows that stretch from floor to ceiling. Thick, heavy curtains hang from silver rods and puddle on the floor below the windowsills. The room is sparsely furnished, with only two chairs and one table that sits between them. Along one wall is a bookshelf with only a few titles on it, and at the other end is a portrait of Hector and his wife. In their arms is a young baby, and in their eyes is a deep mourning. Aria never told me she had a sibling who died, but I can see it in the eyes staring back at me from that portrait.

"Ah, so nice to see you, Tito." I turn around to see Hector enter. He walks with a cane. A bulge around his right knee beneath his trousers is indicative of an injury. "You remember Jasper," he says, gesturing to his son who walks in after him. The younger Peralta is stern-looking with pursed lips and angry eyes. He and Aria could be twins if he were a few years younger.

"Mr. Peralta," I say, nodding at the younger man. I extend my hand, but he disdains it so much that he doesn't even look at my offer for civility. Clearly, he gets his hatred for charity from his mother, perhaps where Aria gets it as well. Hector has been nothing but open and welcoming.

Hector walks over to the chairs and takes one, holding his hand out toward the other.



I also walk to the chairs and have a seat. Jasper stands behind his father, a looming shadow over our conversation. But the younger man, probably ten years my junior, will take over for his father one day, and he'll need to know the ins and outs of things. Or so he thinks. I'll have controlling interest of every business the Peralta family owns in less than two years, and they'll never see it coming.

"So, what brings us here today?" I ask. I unbutton my tie and lean back in the chair, crossing one foot over the other. The black linen upholstery is stiff, the chair's arms rigid and unforgiving. They remind me of my father's personality, of the way he trained me to be.

Hector wrings his hands in his lap after setting his cane to the side. It leans against his chair as he languidly reclines and closes his eyes. I wait for him to speak because while I already have my prepared solution for their situation, I want him to think it's his idea. It's the only way to ensure my plan is fully successful. He has to ask me for it, and when I give it to him, it will only be his fault.

Jasper, however, is ten steps ahead. If Hector listens to his son's rebuttal—the one I see is already swirling in his thoughts, I'll get nowhere fast. I'll have to go back to my drawing board with a new plan, which will take more time. I just want this all to be over with before my father passes so he can see the man I've become and be proud.

"Tito, I'm going to be honest with you. Things are worse than we once believed them to be." Hector presses his fingertips together and purses his lips. His hands, in prayer pose, float toward his face and lightly touch his lips before dropping back to his lap and turning to fists. "We need more help than I was willing to admit."

Jasper has the same smug, defiant look in his eyes that Aria gets at times. I wonder how hard he's going to resist my advice and suggestions. Hector will plead for my help and fall on his knees in gratitude when I tell him I have a solution for him. He's ready to cry even now before he's even spilled the full issue.

"Alright, well tell me what we're dealing with. There is no problem so large that we can't find a solution for it if we put our minds together." I sit straighter as the same maid returns to the room with a tray. On it there are three glasses full of what appears to be lemonade and a pitcher coated in a thick swath of condensation.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

She nods at me, then Hector, as she sets it on the table between us, and I take one of the glasses. "For you, sirs."

"Thank you, Marta," Hector says, but his glass and Jasper's remain on the tray as she retreats.

I sip the lemonade and show my gratitude for the hospitality, but I can't help but wish it were whiskey. It may very well be a testament to the reason there is no furniture in this room. Perhaps they've been selling things off because they're unable to afford the finer things anymore. All the better for me and my plan.

"We have several businesses that are beyond the point of breaking. We will lose them, I'm afraid. We're letting staff go, a reduction in force, but we're talking assets being sold off now. Our customers and current orders can't be serviced. Tito, we need your help." His trembling hands rest on the arms of the chair and his eyes offer a pleading expression. This is exactly what I need.

"I see," I tell him, then I set the glass down. "And what help is it that you believe you need from me? I've already infused these businesses with the funds to help them get back on their feet... That was in the arrangement, right?" But little does he know there are men inside his businesses siphoning money away to make it appear worse than ever. All part of the setup, which based on the way things look, I never needed to put in place.

"Yes, you did." His head drops and he shakes it. Jasper is now staring off into space with an angry glare. He hates humbling himself. I hate that too. I think it's common to any man in authority the way we are, the way he will be if his family survives my

plot. None of us like to show weakness.

"Certainly, you can apply the capitol in responsible ways to ensure your businesses grow." I'm making this painful for him because he has to want it bad enough to beg for it.

"We've done that, Tito. It's just not enough." The words are like knives for him to say, and I can see the pain in his eyes. Jasper still hasn't said a word.

"Tell him, Jasper. Tell him why we're here," Hector says, his voice a tired whisper. This conversation is costing him all of his energy, and I have to hand it to him. He's holding up well, considering the man before me is a hollowed-out version of himself. Jasper opens his mouth and closes it again. He sighs, then runs his hand through his hair and lets out a defeated sigh.

"It's alright, I understand." I hold my hand up to halt the undue misery of the younger Peralta man. It's obvious he refuses to humble himself.

Hector says as if reading his son's mind, "Tito, I'm sorry to say this, but we need more than just an infusion of cash this time. We need more than that. We need a miracle." I act surprised, but I already know what the next words out of his lips will be. This is my chance to make sure they owe me everything. The time for charity is over. It's time to cash in on my investment into their company.

"What exactly do you have in mind?" I ask, feigning innocence.

Hector looks at his son, then back at me with resignation in his eyes. "We need you to take over the reins, Tito. We need you to take control of our businesses until we can repay you."

Jasper explodes, "Father, I won't let you?—"

Hector silences him with a glare that could freeze hell over. I've never seen this side of him before, and it catches me off guard momentarily. This is the Hector Peralta I remember from when I was a boy, the one who wouldn't be trifled with.

"Enough, Jasper. You don't know what you're talking about." Hector turns to me, guilt written all over his face. "Tito, if you're willing..."

My outward reluctance is an act, but inside, I'm doing a victory dance. "Well, I see us more as partners." My offer will be brilliant, really. He wants me to lead, but in offering joint leadership, it says to him that I'm to be trusted.

"Partners?" Jasper scoffs. "And exactly what would you want in return for your 'help'?"

Hector glares at him again and he falls silent. He's on to me, but his father is all too willing to be putty in my hand. "Forgive my son. He doesn't understand business the way I do. Now, what do you have in mind?"

I lay it all out for him. I merge our empires, my businesses and his. The cashflow is liquid, ensuring mutual success. I spell it out for him the way Aria advised my brother only days ago, and he eats it up like candy right from my hand. He's almost euphoric by the time I've said it all and thrusts out his hand, to the great disdain of his son, only moments after I finish.

"I'll have the lawyers draw up the paperwork, Tito." He shakes my hand vigorously, and I smile.

"We're family now..." I won't stoop to calling him Dad, though if it meant sealing the deal, I'd have to. The look on Jasper's face tells me he'd pull a gun on me if I tried.

We finish the chat with some small talk, and I walk out of his house a victorious man.

Everything worked exactly how I thought it would. I now have controlling interest in his business's financial decisions, and soon, I will make all the decisions myself.

On the way home, Tony calls me, and his tone tells me how angry he is before he even tells me what's up.

"Hey, yeah, Tito, we have a problem."

The car bounces along the road, carrying me toward my house where I'll celebrate with a glass of anything besides lemonade. "What's the problem?" I ask, watching the city zip past out the window.

"That tip to the cops, the one that made us fuck up the deal of a lifetime..."

"Yes, what about it?" If they've discovered who it is, I will personally end the man responsible.

"It came from inside the Peralta family."

Tony's words still my thoughts for a second, but I know he's not blowing smoke. Hector would never give this order, not knowing how desperately he needs my help, which means there are men below him who aren't faithful. The right thing would be to bring my accusation to him personally and let him handle it, but I'm not the sort of guy who does things the right way.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"You're certain?" I ask, but I know he is.

"Positive..."

"Then deal with it, hard and fast. We don't have time to deal with snakes lurking in the grass." I hang up knowing my orders will be followed. If he's caught, there may be fallout, but I'm prepared to deal with that now. After all, I have a firm contract and I hold the purse strings now.

13

ARIA

Tito's staff prepared the food and coffee for my brunch, but I order them away before Mom and Melody arrive at the door. I answer it myself and feel overwhelmed with emotion as they step into his ultra-modern home. Melody is wowed. I can see it in her expression. But Mom's only focus is on my face, which holds a broad and genuine smile. I'm so happy to see them.

"Mia cara," Mom purrs as she wraps me in her arms. Melody steps into the entryway and shuts the door behind herself, waiting for her chance to hug me. When Mom finally lets go, I squeeze my younger sister's scrawny body in my arms.

"Gosh, I miss girl talks," I tell her, and she snickers.

"You can tell me all the details when Mom uses the toilet." She holds me back and looks into my eyes. "You look happy."

"To see you..." I pull away, not wanting my true emotion to well up and burst out. I've been more tired than usual, and it's beginning to make me emotional at times. I take her hand and pull her deeper into the house. "Come on, I have things set up out back."

Mom follows behind us as we weave down the hallway through the dining room, into the kitchen, and out through the back door. The sun beats down on the patio, but the large umbrella shades the table and food spread on it, offering enough break from the sun to shelter our conversation too.

"Oh, Aria, this looks so delicious. Mr. Ramiro's staff have done a fabulous job." Mom pulls out a chair and sits, placing her purse on her lap as she reaches for the lid of one of the trays laid out. I agree with her. I couldn't have done it better myself. Just looking at the colorful spread makes my stomach rumble and turn.

Melody chooses to sit next to Mom with me across from them. We chat about the beautiful weather as we load our plates down with fruits and brioche. The tiny puff pastries are topped with sliced strawberries, and they even put juice and coffee out. I am hungrier than I thought I was, so much so that I feel a little nauseous.

"So, you've been married for a month now. Is it as bad as you thought?" Melody breaks the ice with the hard questions, but I've prepared my answer ahead of time.

When we first discussed the arrangement six weeks ago, I had so many emotions about it. Emotions I wasn't able to hide well or put away, except in my father's presence. Mom and Melody tried hard to console me, but it was impossible not to complain and let them know how much I hated what was happening. Now, a month into the agreement, I've managed to make peace with it, but only because I know it will be short lived and I will emerge a victor.

"It's exactly as Mom said." Putting a slice of pineapple into my mouth, I chew



carefully but give them an expression of calm surrender. After swallowing, I say, "In time, things will grow and change, maybe to respect and fondness. We'll see."

Melody snickers as she chews and Mom looks at her with curiosity. "What are you laughing at?"

"What she means to say is that the sex is bangin'." My younger sister has to hide her chuckles behind a hand when Mom glares at her. My cheeks start to burn, and I shove more pineapple into my mouth to hide my embarrassment. That's the sort of topic we'd discuss when Mom uses the facilities, not while she's sitting here.

"Melody Anne Peralta, that's enough of that." Mom scolds her and then changes the subject. "Dear, I'm so proud of you for seeing this through. I just knew you'd settle in after a while and see that it isn't as bad as you think. Mr. Ramiro is such a wonderful man. I've heard such good things about him. I imagine his son is just as incredible." She picks up her coffee and sips it, then scrunches her nose and sets it back down. I watch her doctor it up and decide it's time to change the subject to something I'm more interested in.

"How is Dad doing? The business?" The entire point of my marrying Tito is so he will help my father fix what's been going wrong in their financial situation. I want to know how that's going, whether Tito is upholding his end of the bargain. After overhearing how he plans to move in on Dad's territory, I'm not convinced this was the best idea.

"Oh, honey, it's so good." Mom stirs the doctored coffee and smiles so politely you'd think she was a nun. She really is good at adapting to whatever circumstance she's been put in. No wonder her marriage to my father turned out to be such a success. "Tito has made so many positive changes already, and things are really turning around. Your father is finally at peace, though Jasper doesn't seem to be taking it quite so well." She sighs. "But he'll come around too."

Positive changes? Tito is making changes now, not just giving Dad money? I didn't know this was a thing, which means he has to have gone to my father to make more arrangements behind my back. My insides are raging but my exterior remains calm. It has to. I can't let Mom see how upset I am. I know she'll only report back to Dad, and he'll come snooping around. I need him to see me as happy and willing. I can't make his heart ache any more than it already does.

"Changes?" I ask as I spread a pat of butter on a slice of bread.

"Oh, yes, dear. Tito and your father are merging everything. We've already brought back half the staff we laid off previously, and when we get a month or so more under our belt, we're certain things will be flourishing again. In one year's time, we believe we can separate from the Ramiro family and be self-sustaining."

Mom sounds so assured of everything, and Melody looks content enough, but I see the apprehension in her eyes too. I feel the need to warn them, but Mom only sees the world through rose-colored lenses. When things are good she only sees the good, and when things are bad, she only sees the potential for change. Inwardly, I groan and take a bite of my toast and wish I could fade into thin air and hover over Tito right now, see what he's plotting next.

The back door opens and Carlos walks out. He has a thermos in his hand and a scowl on his face. Mom and Melody look up at him, and Melody blushes. I can see she thinks he's attractive, but he's a married man and she has no chance.

"Aria, can we talk?" he asks, and though I'm enjoying brunch with my family, I welcome the excuse to step away before my inner thoughts come out and give away my bitterness toward this whole situation.

"I'll be right back," I tell them, standing and leaving my napkin on the table. I follow Carlos into the house through the back door and down the hall into the kitchen. I

don't know what he wants, but I hope to God he's decided to listen to me and help me. If Tito merged everything with Dad's businesses, it's only a matter of time before he sinks them and takes over.

"What is it?" I ask him the instant we're in the dining room, far enough away from either end of the house where no one can hear us unless they're standing right outside the door.

Carlos walks over and glances in the hallway, then turns and slurps from his coffee thermos. "I'm in. Tell me what to do." His thick brows nearly touch in the middle, his expression so stern it's scary.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"What do you mean, you're in?" I need to make sure he understands what we're doing here. What I need him to do. If Tito finds out I'm working in concert with his brother to bring him down and make Carlos the leader, not only will it void our agreement, giving Tito full control of my father's organization, but I'm certain he'll kill me. Men like him don't mess around.

"I want my father to see that I'm the rightful leader of this family, not my brother, and I want it now." He stalks toward me and squares his broad shoulders. His barrel chest intimidates me. This man could crush me himself if he doesn't like what I say.

"And you trust that I can deliver this for you?" I ask, playing the part. He's eating out of my hand now. It's exactly how I want it to be. I could care less whether Carlos is the leader. I just want Tito out of my life and for my father to be happy and whole. I know I'm playing with fire. Maybe I want to be burned. Maybe I have a death wish.

"It's been two weeks since I did what you said with my businesses, and things are turning around. You had no reason to give me that advice or help, but you did. I think you're smarter than my brother gives you credit for. I think you will be able to help me show my father how foolish Tito is and make me the leader of this family the way it's supposed to be."

I don't know the next step right now, but Carlos is on board and that's all I need. Together, we will make him look like the god of this family and their dying father will have no choice but to give the blessing to him and not his brother. Sure, Tito is already in charge of a lot of things, but so is Carlos. And there is nothing that says Donatello can't change his will at any moment.

"Good. Well, we have a lot of work to do then, but getting your businesses with your cousins secured is a good first step. I'll need you to give me anything you can on Tito. Dig up dirt, his weaknesses, the mistakes he's made in the past that would point to his being less than productive or loyal." I tap my finger against my lip and look up at him. "And let me get a plan together. We're going to do this."

Carlos sets the thermos down on the island and leans on it, his hip resting against the marble. "I want to make it clear to you that I won't harm him. Humiliating him is one thing, taking leadership another, but I'm his blood. I won't see him get hurt." The tone of his voice shakes me to my core. I don't intend to harm Tito, but if it happens, it happens. Still, with this threat, I'm sobered.

"Of course," I tell him as I turn to walk back out to the patio. "No harm, just humiliation. And when it's done, my father keeps his businesses and Tito is your gopher. Everyone wins." I try to keep the edge to my tone, but my voice cracks. I hope he doesn't hear it, but if he does, he says nothing.

When I step out the back door, Mom is in tears, her phone pressed to her ear. Melody is collecting their things. The half-empty plates of food still sit on the table, and I don't know what's happening. Mom looks devastated and distraught. She's sobbing so hard, she's having a difficult time breathing. I rush to her, but Melody pulls me back.

"What's going on? What happened?" My heart is racing and my hands shake with adrenaline. Whatever it is it can't be good, and whatever it is, I get the feeling that Melody doesn't know either.

"I don't know. Mom got a call from Uncle Matt." Melody clutches Mom's purse as they start to move toward the back door. I move ahead of them, getting the door as Mom lowers the phone.

"What is it, Mom?" I ask, and Melody mutters the same question. Both of us are on

high alert, needing to understand her pain. If it's affecting her this way, it will affect us too.

"It's Jasper..." she blubs. "My God, he's dead. Someone..." She heaves out a sob, and through very broken stutter-breathed words, I learn my brother has been murdered in cold blood, a car bomb under the driver's seat of his car this morning before work.

My heart stops dead and I know what's happened. Tito found out it was Jasper. He's retaliated for his drug deal gone wrong, and this is my fault. It's all my fault.

Melody and I explode into tears, going with Mom out the front of the house and into her awaiting car. I have to be with my family at a time like this, though nothing will lift the weight of guilt now pressing down on my chest. What have I done? And what has Tito done? He deserves so much more than just humiliation.

14

## TITO

When I ordered Tony to take care of our little rat infestation, I had no idea it came from the heir to Hector's throne. Though I can't say I'm surprised at all. After our meeting about merging things, I know how he feels. Hector forced his family into this situation by marrying Aria off to me. His children clearly don't agree with his business tactics, and now he has no heir to his throne, so all the hard work he's doing to ensure his organization thrives beyond his lifespan is for nothing.

Dad coughs hard, covering his mouth with a handkerchief and doubling over. His days are running out, like sand in an hourglass. If I pay too much attention, I can count the grains of sand as they drop. Watching him waste away as the cancer devours his strength is painful. If it were me, I'd want someone to put a bullet in my head to stop the suffering, but he is determined to fight until the end.

"Sit down, old man," I chide him gently. I take him by the elbow and guide him to his sofa, where he plops down a little harder than normal. He sleeps more than usual, and his meetings are now in his bed chambers, not his living room or home office. He's slowly retreating into a deeper place within his home, leaving the rest of the house largely untouched on a daily basis.

"Stop coddling me. I am doing fine." He swats at my hand and with a shaking finger points to the stack of papers on his desk. "Get them and bring them here." He wheezes as he talks now too, another effect of the disease ravaging his body.

I collect the papers he requested and return to sit next to him. I can see by the contract on the top of the stack of papers that this is legal documentation indicating to his business partners that I'm taking things over. It's merely a formality now. He can't run anything. Carlos and I have been in charge for weeks. As I hand him the papers, I think of how letting go will be painful, putting his body into the ground, knowing he won't be here.

Over the past few days, I've seen Aria grow listless and depressed. When she isn't at her parents' house mourning with them and helping plan the funeral, she lies in bed and cries. It's painful to watch considering I am the one who gave the order to pull the trigger, so to speak. It's just business until it hurts someone you care about, and I've found that over the past month of our marriage, I've grown to care about her in certain ways. I guess this is one of them.

If she knew it was me, she'd hate me. Our arrangement would be terminated and I'd own the Peralta organization legally, but I can't bring myself to confess to her. I don't want her to leave. I want that fortune, the power, and the territory, but not at the expense of losing her.

"What's all this?" I ask him, and he coughs a few times before pulling a pen out of his breast pocket and scrawling his signature across the forms.

"This is a bit of busy work I've been meaning to get to but I've been so tired." So tired, in fact, that he doesn't even offer a smile when he looks up at me. "You're the rightful owner of these businesses as soon as these contracts are filed with the board. I've seen the way you're handling the Peralta family, and I am proud of you. When you told me you were going to take them over, I never expected you to get Hector to beg you to do it."

Dad pats my arm and then flips a few pages to sign his name on more signature boxes. I wait for him knowing when he's done with this, he'll have to lie down. His in-home nurse will be here to give him his medications soon, and I will head home to see my wife lying in bed, only a silhouette of the powerful woman I know she is.

"You know that was Aria's idea. I can't take the credit. She's a brilliant woman." I take the papers from him and await his order.

"I can see that from her. She is feisty." He chuckles, which brings on more coughing, and he heaves as he points at his desk. I look there to see a glass of water, and I rise to put the papers back and get his drink. As soon as he takes a sip, his coughing calms and he catches his breath.

"I need to rest now." Dad hands me the glass, and as I place it on his desk, he lies down. No matter how tough or strong a man is, he needs his father. I'm at the point of losing mine, and it makes me sympathize with Aria on her brother's death. I need to go be with her.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"I'll leave you now. I have to go see to my grieving wife." Heading toward the door, I pause when he calls my name.

"Tito..."

"Yeah?" I turn over my shoulder, and he winks at me.

"All's fair in love and war." He knows I ordered that hit and he's on my side.

"Rest, Dad." I leave knowing one of these visits will be my last, and I savor each of them even though we aren't exceptionally close.

My driver escorts me home after a long day. I don't know what to expect from Aria tonight. For the past seventy-two hours, she has barely spoken to me. After having lost a sibling when she was younger, I know this is destroying her. For that, I regret having ordered the hit, but the boy deserved it. He thought he could turn on me and things would be okay. I already own the Peralta name. I just can't assume control that way. I want Aria at my side, especially after seeing her in action, knowing the strength that lies in her. She may not see me as a life partner yet, but every day, more and more, I'm seeing that in her.

When I walk in the door I hear hushed voices, male and female. I don't know who is in my house with my wife, but she is the only woman who'd be in my living room at this time of day other than my help, and they're off duty this time of night. I stroll up the hallway, turning into the doorway, and see Carlos and his angry eyes staring down at my wife, who looks just as defiant.

"Hello," I say, interrupting them, and Carlos runs a tired hand through his hair. "What's this about?"

My brother scowls at me and shakes his head. "I'm leaving," he says, and for some reason, I get the feeling that something is going on between them. She would never cheat on me with my brother, and Carlos would never hurt his wife that way. At least not unless there were some ulterior motive involved, a deal or conspiracy.

I eye Aria and watch her demeanor go from upset to despondent in the blink of an eye. Carlos storms out, and Aria sighs and hugs her arms over her middle. Of course she's on edge. Her brother died only three days ago, and they have no clue who did it. Tony did such a good job at covering his tracks that there isn't even a hint that it can be tied to the Ramiro clan.

"He wanted more business advice and I can't think straight." Aria looks down at her bare feet and her shoulders droop. I still feel like something more is going on, but it makes sense. Carlos and his financial issues are always something to worry about, and with how successful her advice was last time, I can see him being angry with her for not producing more high-quality advice. "Can you take me to bed? I'm feeling off."

She moves toward me, and when she lays her head on my chest, I'm even more suspicious. Either this tragedy is making her more open to me or she's up to something, trying to distract me from overthinking things.

"Not feeling well on top of grieving?" I ask her as I wrap an arm around her.

"Just tired and sad. I want to feel something other than hollow and angry." Her chin tilts up and her gaze meets mine. "And you make me feel things—powerful things."

Lust flashes in her eyes. She's definitely hiding something, but when a man's wife

initiates sex, he doesn't deny her. He indulges in that.

"And you want me to make you feel those things tonight, right now?" I hide my suspicion behind a compassionate façade but make a mental note to think about this more later. What could Aria and Carlos be talking about that they don't want me to know?

"Please," she says, gripping my dick through my slacks.

It's a hasty march up the stairs, lips locked together as we tear each other's clothes off. They're strewn over the floor as we stumble into our bedroom, and she practically throws me onto the bed. Aria's mood has shifted from melancholy to... hungry. She's never been this desperate for me.

"I need you inside me, now," she growls. Aria usually isn't this assertive in bed, preferring to let me take the lead with a few soft-spoken requests here and there.

"You want me to fuck you?" I say, my voice gruff with arousal. She nods, her chest heaving and eyes darkened with lust.

"Yes, fuck me, Tito." She thinks she plays the part of the vixen well, but she wants to be dominated, and I want to oblige her.

The head of my cock teases her entrance as she squirms below me, her nails raking along my back. I relish the sensation and grip her wrists, shackling them above her head. "Ask me nicely, Mrs. Ramiro."

Her eyes flash with defiance before she submits. "Please, fuck me, Tito."

"I'm going to fuck you so hard you'll have bruises to your knees," I growl in her ear, and she moans in response.

The first thrust is all-consuming, burying me balls deep into her tight heat. Aria cries out my name as I start a punishing pace of thrusts. She's so wet and so warm around me, squeezing my cocklike a vise. Her nails dig into the headboard as she calls out my name.

"Say it again," I order, my hand wrapping around her neck, applying just the right amount of pressure. She throws her head back, lipstick smudged and hair a mess from our rough play. "Say my name."

"Tito!" she chokes out as I pound into her, driving her toward her climax. Sweat coats both our bodies, and our breathing is ragged. My hand comes down hard on the side of her thigh, and she shudders. I feel her pussy clench around me as I tighten my grasp on her neck. This is what she wants, the feeling she wants to feel. Like death is imminent, but when relief comes, it's a wellspring of life, oxygen pouring into her lungs to make the orgasm that much more powerful.

"Tito!" she gags out again, her entire body tensing up before her legs give out, one foot still wrapped around my calf. I can feel her walls milking me, and it's all I can do to hold back. The way she convulses is erotic, hands clawing at my wrist. I push her to the brink, her face bright red as she slowly goes without air until I release my grip and she gasps in, then moans loudly.

"What a good girl," I praise her as I keep pounding, driving her higher and higher. "You're my good girl, aren't you?"

Aria nods, unable to form words as she orgasms again, this time louder than before. Her pussy clamps down on me, milking my dick for all it's worth as I fill her up with my seed. Giddy, I collapse on top of her, both of us panting and spent. She feels different, softer somehow, but I don't trust it. Not after what I saw happening in my living room.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Hold me," she mews as I roll off her and she rolls to her side.

I don't hesitate. It's not like me to lie here patiently when I feel like there is an enemy in my camp, but at times, I have to let my friends be close and my enemies closer. Sometimes, so close they can feel the beating of my heart against their skin.

"Sleep now," I tell her, waiting for the moment she begins to snore so I can slip down to my office and start trying to figure out what my brother is up to and why the fuck my wife is involved in it. If he told her about her brother, I'll kill him myself.

15

ARIA

The atmosphere at my parents' house is gloomy. Everyone moves more slowly than normal, even Melody, who plays the part of the strong daughter by serving every visitor and graciously accepting their gifts of food and flowers. I'm hollow inside, just an empty husk right now. I stand near the fireplace looking up at the portrait of our family that hangs above the mantel. We had it taken when Jasper was only seventeen, when our family was whole, before either of my brothers died. Now there are only two of us left, me and Melody.

"Do you want some water?" Melody asks me, but I look at her blankly, unable to answer her question.

Do I want water? No. I want my brother back. I want the hands who stole his life to be cut off and the person to whom they belong openly executed. My soul is crushed,

suffocating guilt paralyzing me as I blink and look back at the portrait. Melody floats away to busy herself serving someone else, and I shut my eyes, sending a wave of tears across my cheeks.

Tito isn't here—had business to tend to this afternoon but promised to return to be with me and the family this evening. My father understands. He'd never make a man as important or busy as Tito Ramiro deign to darken his doorstep to wallow in mourning with us when we all know Mr. Ramiro gives exactly zero fucks about this. He, after all, is the one who did this. I can't prove it, but I know it. But more accurately, I was the one who did this, and for that reason, I say nothing.

I can't even carry the weight of that guilt myself—that I pulled the strings that pissed my husband off and ruined his drug deal. That I am the person he is really angry with, but he doesn't know it. That Jasper died because of something I did, and now I can't give my father his eldest son back, his heir, his life.

"Bella," he purrs, and I turn to see him approaching me.

Dad's eyes are red-rimmed and puffy, his nose chapped and cracked from being blown so often it's been rubbed raw. He's lost a bit of weight in the past few days. I can see it in his face, the way his eyes are slightly sunken. He hasn't been eating. He's been too busy trying to find out who killed his son so he can retaliate. But if I tell him my suspicions, he will pull out of this deal with Tito, losing everything. Or worse—he'll try to avenge Jasper and get himself killed.

"Papa," I say affectionately, and I bury my face in the crook of his neck as I wrap my arms around him. He smells like pipe tobacco and whiskey, two familiar scents I often think of when I miss him. "How are you today?" I ask him, and I already know he will lie and say he's fine. It's only been four hours since the funeral concluded. No one is fine.

"Aria, don't worry about me." He pulls away, gripping my shoulders and looking me in the eye. "Tito is a good man. He's running everything right now, so all we have to do is grieve." There is a surety in his expression, confidence that he's in goodhands. It makes anger stir in my chest. Dad has no idea what Tito is up to.

"What do you mean, he's handling everything?" I ask, but I keep the anger inside me to myself. Dad doesn't need to know that I'm suspicious yet. He'll see that soon enough. "How can he run everything without access to your finances and if your employees don't know he isn't truly in charge of things?"

I'm confused and cautious as Dad's hands slide down my arms and take my hands into their grasp. Dad's face relaxes, and a soft smile passes across his lips.

"He is in charge of things, mia cara. Just last week, we merged all of our companies together. His assets are shifting our entire outlook. We haven't been this healthy as an organization in years. In just a few short months, he will have effectively turned every individual business around. And for now, with the incident..." Dad chokes up but doesn't let any tears escape. He can't even speak of Jasper's death right now. "Well, Tito isn't affected as emotionally as I am, so I've given him full reign for the time being."

The python coiled around my chest constricts and threatens to make me explode. I bite back my hateful thoughts about how Tito will only control everything faster now and try to think of my father in this situation. Of course he can't run businesses. His son was murdered in cold blood in a very gruesome way. Logically, this makes sense, and that's why he is doing it, but I know Tito's ulterior motive is to own it all, the territory, the businesses, the loyalty of my father's men.

"Papa..." I can't just let Tito walk in here in my father's grief and steal from him. He's already been brought to his knees. This isn't supposed to be happening. My plan isn't working fast enough. I need to get Tito out of the picture but keep his money.

"I know what you'll say. Jasper had his thoughts about this too..." Dad pats my cheek and walks away. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a stick of gum, unwraps it, and pops it into his mouth. When I follow with a look of concern on my face, he says, "Mother is making me quit smoking." His smiled grimace makes me chuckle, briefly pausing the heaviness in my heart.

"Papa, do you think it's wise to let the leader of a rival organization take the reins of your business with no oversight, simply because you're grieving? Isn't there someone we could put in your place for a while? Uncle Gino, or one of my cousins?" I follow him all the way to the couch where he sits and sighs hard.

I sink onto the leather cushion next to him and drape an arm over the back of the couch, sitting sideways so I can see every minor inflection on his face. He seems so content with this choice, as if nothing in the world can go wrong.

"Aria, who better to trust in this time than a man who has offered his hand in marriage to my daughter? He knows the business well, understands the risks. And he will sire my heir." Dad narrows his eyes at me and rests a hand on my knee. "Maybe he already has?" he asks, and I feel my cheeks burning.

Not exactly what I want to discuss with my dad at this moment. What does he want me to say? Yeah, Dad, I fucked the man I was forced to marry? Hardly a good topic for discussion the day of your brother's funeral.

"I'm just saying, he has a lot of motivation to be unfaithful to you, or disloyal to your wishes." I hope my words of wisdom don't come across like the accusations or suspicions they are. But I also hope Dad heeds my fears.

"Let me worry about it, Aria. You need to trust your husband. You just worry about keeping your heart from being too overwhelmed. I know how close you and Jasper were. Heavy emotions like this can't be good for anyone, let alone you in the delicate



position you're in. And if you're with child..." He takes my hand and squeezes it.

"God, Dad. No one says 'with child' anymore." I roll my eyes and force a smile, and he nods at me.

I'm not going to get through to him this way, which means the only thing left I can do is push this partnership with Carlos a little further. If Dad is letting Tito take the lead so early into this agreement, I'm never going to see the day my father leads his own organization with pride again. Tito will build things up and my father will lose it all.

"Well, I say it," he says, and then he sighs and the grief returns to his expression. It's so heavy, a weight no one should ever bear alone, and mine is doubly heavy. "We have to go to Jasper's house later to clean it out. His landlord would like to find new renters even though I offered to pay out the lease in order to not lose the funds." Dad speaks, and his hand waves in the air in a frustrated gesture.

"I can go help," I tell him, and I grab his waving hand and press it to my chest. "You and Mammi shouldn't have to do it alone."

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

The leather squeaks as he readjusts his position on the couch, and I lean forward and lay my head on his chest. His arm comes up to surround me, pushing hair off my shoulder and rubbing circles on my back. It's brutally painful to even think of going to Jasper's home and seeing the evidence that he was there only days ago. There will be laundry on the floor of his bedroom, dishes in the sink. And the police caution tape is still there on the street corner too, the investigation still active.

"Melody will go..." Dad's grief is so tangible, I can feel it seeping into me through osmosis. I feel so ashamed. I want to confess to him that it was my fault, but even if I told him everything, he would still say that life is this way sometimes. He'd never be angry or blame me.

"I want to go too." My decision is final. Tito won't care. He doesn't seem to care what I do right now, and for a while, I thought that was because he was busy with his work. Now I know he's busy taking my father's organization over—with Dad's permission to do so.

"Alright, then, we'll go." He rubs my shoulder, squeezing and petting me as if I'm a lap dog. I want to go find Mom and see if she's alright, but right now, Dad needs this moment.

My thoughts linger on the triggering sight of that caution tape stretched around traffic cones and trees, surrounding the burnt-out car and crumbled cement from the aftermath of the explosion. Police cleared the block moments after it happened, and no one is allowed to park within twenty feet of the cordoned-off area.

"Do you think they'll find who did this?" I pick at a loose thread on my father's shirt.

It dangles from a button and annoys me. It's something to keep my waffling mind steady as I listen to Dad talk about the police and what they know.

"We have our guys in the lead, but the best they can see is that it was related to our organization. Gang violence is at an all-time high, blah, blah..." Dad sounds about as convinced as I am. "One of them tried to tell me it was a Ramiro, but I'm no fool. Donatello would never remove my heir after signing that contract. He'd be a fool. It's a breach of our agreement. All the money they've poured into things already, along with the wise business principles put in place by Tito—they'd be stupid to make such an egregious error."

Dad is so confident, and for a single second, it actually makes me hopeful. He's right. If I can prove Tito ordered the hit, it means he's broken the alliance and Tito and I are finished. But if Tito finds out I'm the one who gave that intel to the police, not Jasper directly, then the pendulum sways the opposite way. My heart sinks again.

"You're right," I tell him, but I'm realizing that taking my husband down to rescue my father from this stupid mess he's in—part of it my fault now—is going to be harder than I thought.

"I'm not worried." Dad pats my shoulder again. "You'll produce my heir, and by the time I'm too old to do this any longer, he will be a man old enough to lead well, with a brilliant mother to support him."

I force myself to sit straighter as Melody walks in, Mom trailing behind her. "Look who feels up for company," Mel says, trying to act cheerful, but her eyes are just as puffy and red as everyone else's.

Mom hurries to Dad's side, climbing onto his lap and letting him hold her. She is taking this harder than us all, and my deep shame causes a chasm of separation between us. I'm sure she doesn't feel it. She would wrap me in her arms and hold me

like I'm her baby girl all day if I ask. It's me. I'm the problem. I can't bring myself to meet her gaze right now. I am the reason her baby boy is dead this time, and nothing will undo that.

The most I can hope for is vengeance in the end. So, I curl up and rest my head on her knee as she sits on Dad's lap. Melody sits on the other side of them, leaning her head on Dad's shoulder.

I have to fight harder now than ever before because Tito needs to get his hands out of the pie and away from my father's businesses. It doesn't even matter that the sex is incredible, and after that comment about us leading together, my heart is starting to fall for him. I didn't do this to find a partner. I did this to save my father's organization, and my heart will be collateral damage, but by God, I will bring him down and his money will stay ours forever.

16

TITO

It's been two weeks now since the funeral. Aria isn't herself anymore. She's angry and reserved all the time, but not in the feisty way that shows her will to fight for her family and punish herself to make sure they're taken care of. This is a new expression of hers, something more sinister. I see the anger flash in her eyes at all times, even when she acts caring toward me. I think she blames herself for her brother's death and as a result, she's punishing herself, not allowing herself to find any sense of relief.

Which is the reason for today's dinner.

We're dining at 71Above, a restaurant seventy-one stories in the air with a breathtaking view of western LA. The gold and cream colors don't seem to fit Aria's mood, though she dressed appropriately for the venue. She looks stunning with her

hair swept up into a braid, loose tendrils kissing her cheeks. But the hollow stare, like I'm looking into a void instead of her soul, is chilling.

"Try the sushi," I tell her, pointing at it with my knife. She does as I say, but she's quiet. She doesn't say a word, so I fill up the space with conversation, hoping it will draw her out of her grief for a while. "You look absolutely stunning tonight, Aria. I really mean that."

Her eyes flick up at me over the rim of her glass of wine, and she blinks as she sips. The ring on her finger sparkles in the light from the golden chandeliers overhead, reminding me that she's mine. I take care of my things. I always have.

"And I spoke with your father earlier. He's so proud of you." I take a small bite of my steak and chew carefully, contemplating what else I can say to cheer her up. "Things are really looking up for Carlos, too. That advice you gave him was a game changer. His businesses are booming now."

Aria sets her wine glass down and uses her napkin to wipe her lips. "That's good," she says, the first thing she's said all night other than what food she wanted to eat when the waiter took our order. Her eyes scan the window, taking in the city lights. "It's beautiful from this far up."

I set my knife and fork down, suddenly no longer hungry anymore. She is what I'm interested in. "Not as beautiful as you are, mia cara." I feel myself drawn to her. I want to hold her against my body and make the weight of what she's going through go away. Watching her grieve feels like it's changing me, like I've been seeing life through such a narrow, unfocused lens for so long that I forgot there was more.

"My father calls me that." She turns away from the window, and I see the moisture in her eyes.

"Is it alright that I call you that?" Something is developing in me, the tiniest ember of affection growing and being fanned to a flame.

"I guess." She lifts one shoulder and lets it drop, and I reach over to take her hand.

"If it's not okay..." I dip my head, looking up at her through my lashes, and she blinks slowly.

"It's fine." Her lips press into a line and she sucks in a deep breath. "I want to go. I feel so out of place here. Everyone is so happy and I'm just not." Her eyes plead with me to heed her request. "Thank you for spoiling me, for wanting to do anything you can to get my mind off things, but I'm more comfortable at home."

The guilt is crushing as she explains what she's feeling. I'm not pampering her out of guilt. A man like me doesn't feel guilt, shame, or fear. So why the fuck do I feel so goddamn guilty that she is hurting? And why do I even fucking care at all? This was an arrangement, a means to an end. I'm not supposed to care. I'm supposed to make a baby with her and nothing more, but as her fingers turn in my grasp, wanting their freedom, I find myself caring way too much.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

My lips part, almost letting my secret escape, but I hold it in. I didn't know the person responsible for that drug bust was her brother until after it was done. Tony followed my orders. If I had known, I'd have handled this differently. The Peralta organization would be all mine. But now I'm feeling something I've never felt in my entire fucking life—regret.

"Let's go, then," I tell her, standing up. I offer my hand to her, and she drops her napkin on her plate and stands, taking my hand.

I don't even bother with paying. These people know how to contact me. I escort Aria across the dining room, dropping a fifty in the waiter's pocket as we pass him. With my hand in the small of her back, I guide her to the elevator. If home is where she feels more comfortable, then home is where I want to be with her. Dad would say she's softening me, and perhaps she is. I'm a little rough around the edges, but it's not going to change my ruthless business tactics. She may just find a man she can love, and I know I need a woman who loves me.

"Maybe you could make me feel something again..." Aria says meekly, her voice so timid I don't believe I hear her right. She's asking for sex, but I hear the plea inside those words. It's a request for intimacy too, something connecting her to this world that's not grief or pain.

The elevator doors open, and I walk through with her, pressing the ground floor button as I turn to her and say, "I would love nothing more than to take my beautiful wife home and make her feel anything her heart desires." Both of my hands rest on her hips, and she curls into me, laying her head on my chest.

There is a storm in her eyes. She's conflicted now. This entire thing is a delicate dance. I'm falling for her, but I'm poised to ruin her father. I'm conflicted too. How do I gain the things I want in my professional endeavors while pursuing something so pure with her? And will she ever forgive me if she discovers that I'm the one who had her brother killed? What about when I destroy Hector Peralta and everything he's built for six decades? Will she still want me when he's out and I'm in charge?

"What are you thinking?" she asks, breathing into my chest.

"I'm thinking that something is happening between us and I like it." I pull her closer. It's not the slight erection I have from her being pressed against me. It's so much deeper. "I want to find out where it will lead because I like it."

I slide my hand over the curve of her ass and pull her in. It's a distraction, forcing her to feel my dick press into her thigh. I'm an idiot for telling a woman I'm catching feelings. Especially a woman like Aria. She's vocal and she's loud, and people listen to her. She's also the daughter of the man whose empire I'm strangling. There's no telling how nuclear this will be when it explodes.

Her hands rise, smoothing across my chest and neck, locking behind my head as they tangle in my hair. "I like this too," she murmurs, lifting a leg to wrap around mine. "And I need you to make me feel something so strongly I forget myself for a while."

She's desperate to not hurt anymore, and I'm happy enough to help her. She has asked me at least four times a week for this same thing. She's using sex as a means to numb her pain.

My hands on her ass inch the fabric of her flimsy dress upward until it's wadded in my hands and my palms are cupping her cheeks. Her lips brush mine, and I kiss her and bite her tongue. Her pelvis grinds on my thigh and she pulls my hair. I'm instantly hard and ready for her, even in this elevator.



"My God, you are intoxicating, Mrs. Ramiro," I growl into her mouth as she deepens the kiss. I knead her ass as I rock my hips against her body.

"I need you to take me to the brink," she whimpers and she grabs one of my hands and places it on her throat. "Please do it."

But the look in her eye isn't desperation for an orgasm. It's just desperation. She wants escape, but I can't give it to her this way.

I whip her around, pinning her against the wall, and let go of her neck. My hand gruffly pushes between her thighs and finds her panties moist. I slide them to the side and pinch her clit between my thumb and forefinger.

"You're a bad little vixen today, aren't you?" My fingers twist and roll the swelling nub, and she hisses and jolts.

"Fuck, Tito." Aria's hands are on my shoulders, pushing me like she wants me to drop to my knees and finish her right here, but the elevator slows and stops and I let her dress drop to cover her panties.

Aria shimmies it into place and loops an arm around my bicep as we waltz out of the elevator. "You're so getting it as soon as we get in the car," I grumble under my breath, and I don't even bother hiding the large, hard bulge in my pants.

"You're so giving it to me," she says, and I reach into my pocket and shoot the driver a text. He meets us at the door and rushes to open for us.

"Sir," he says.

"Privacy, and drive," I growl, following Aria into the back seat. My coat is off before the door is even shut, and Aria is hiking her skirt back up around her hips.

I'm on my knees spreading her wide when the car starts to roll but immediately stops, sending me toppling backward into the divider behind me.

"What the hell!" I snap as my head slams into the window dividing the passenger compartment from the driver.

"What's going on?" Aria asks. She sits up and looks out the window just as the door is yanked open.

"The fuck..." I grunt as I right myself and see Carlos lean into the door.

"We got problems," he blurts out, and nothing could make me more furious.

"I was in the middle of something." I notice Aria fixing her skirt, covering that delicious moist spot on her panties I was about to drink up.

"Now, Tito. We have huge problems." Carlos looks impatient, and I see cars driving past behind him through the open doorway.

"What the fuck could be so important that you are interrupting sex with my wife?" I crawl onto the seat next to her, and she scoots over to give me space. Her cheeks are red. She's flustered.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"The FBI. They're serving a search warrant on the laundromat. Someone finked on us again, said we're laundering money." Carlos steps back, and I know he's right. I have no choice.

I lean over and kiss Aria, stealing her breath. "I have to go. You be awake when I get home, and stuff your panties in your pussy like a good girl."

Her whimper is enough to let me know I'm needed, and I leap out of the car with one thing in mind. I will find out who did this and I will kill them. Even if it's Hector Peralta himself. Even if Aria finds out.

17

### ARIA

At home, I shower and dress for bed. The look on Tito's face when Carlos interrupted our sex was physically painful to me. Not only did I really want to have sex with him, but the anger in his eyes cut me to the quick. I was the one who betrayed him. I was the one who guided Carlos to leak the information to Tito's enemies who inevitably leaked it to the police. I had no idea it would rise to the heights of the FBI.

I curl up in bed and set my phone on the nightstand. Tito hasn't checked in, and I'm not sure if I want him to. I don't know if I can keep lying to him—or myself. I should hate him for his sneaky, traitorous actions. I should want to murder him in his sleep for trying to own my father's business, to prey up on his vulnerability after losing my brother. I should loathe him from somewhere deep in my soul.

But I don't.

For some ridiculous reason which I can't begin to comprehend, I actually felt guilty and ashamed of myself when Tito lunged out of that car, desperate to go clear his name. I come from a very long line of liars, scoundrels, and thieves, but I am not one of them. At the heart of who I am, my being can only anchor itself in compassion and concern for others. I thought I could do this, and maybe if I didn't have this strange dynamic of being married to him, I could.

But I can't. I have to tell Carlos it's off now. I have to. Hurting Tito even in his business isn't who I am as a person. And now there is this strange bond.

Tonight at dinner, I expected him to scold me for sulking or order me to smile more. But something was different about him. He was kind and patient with me. The compliments he poured over my soul felt like droplets of water to a thirsty plant. He surrounded me, and yet he gave me space, and now I'm confused and conflicted. I may be developing feelings for him, but I can't. It would mean Jasper's killer goes free.

The phone rings, startling me, and I jolt and tense before taking a deep breath. It's just a phone call. The screen on my phone is lit up, but it's not the ringtone I saved for Tito. I push my naked form upward to prop myself on one elbow and see the caller ID displayed. It's Carlos. My shoulders tense. I don't want to talk to him. I should never have commissioned his help.

The phone stops ringing and the screen displays a notification that I have one missed call. Behind it is the picture of Jasper and me on the day of my wedding. He looks cross with me, and I know he was. He hated my marriage to Tito.

He tried to warn me.

I should have listened.

Now Jasper is dead and I'm in a mess of trouble. I should be with my family, mourning, but they're not my family anymore. Tito is my family now, and while he'd allow me to go, I'm afraid the only thing that will happen is his talons will tighten on my father's organization until there isn't anything left for Dad to grab on to.

I stare at Jasper's face on my phone screen with an aching heart until it goes black and I remind myself why I'm here. I'm not here to fall in love and live happily ever after. Tito is fucking with my mind, that's all. He knows the game and he's playing it well, and I would be wise to follow his lead. I have to continue my plan with Carlos, making him look better in every way than Tito so their father will make Carlos the leader and not Tito.

When that happens, Carlos will see to it that Dad's businesses are separated back to him, and I will get out of this ridiculous marriage contract by proving Tito broke the statutes in the agreement. Even if I have to bruise myself to do it.

The phone rings again, and again it's Carlos, but this time, I don't hesitate to answer. I lift the phone to my ear after swiping.

"Yes?" I say and hear a very breathless man on the other end of the line. If I'm not mistaken, it sounds like he's scared.

"He's gonna find out. He's on a fucking rampage. What the fuck did you get me wrapped up in?" Carlos is furious and scared, a dangerous combination.

"Nothing you didn't already want. Now calm the fuck down or he will figure it out, moron." I swing my legs over the side of the bed and sit there with a palm pressed to my forehead. I feel tired and nauseous, and my heart is screaming at me to stop and back out of this whole thing, every part of it.

"You stupid bitch. You are going to get me killed."

His insults don't affect me. I grew up with a brother who was being trained to murder without remorse. That's a pet name to me.

"You could step off the curb and be hit by a bus tomorrow, Carlos. Life is a risk. Just live it. Now just follow the plan. Stay calm, and let the information work for you. If you don't stop freaking out, you're the one who's going to get us busted." I sigh and continue. "Give it time. The FBI knows everything now, and your father will bail Tito out. He'll pry around, but it will look like the Russians. They have nothing on us."

My heart hammers but I'm confident I'm right. Even if they did trace it back to us, Carlos can get me proof that Tito ordered the hit on Jasper. I know it was my fault. I'm the one who got him killed, but my parents don't know that. They'll only think that Tito crossed lines and the agreement will officially be terminated. I can't get that proof on my own, or else I'd expose him now and be free.

"You'd better be right," Carlos hisses before he hangs up, and I exhale in relief.

Maybe I have it all figured out, or maybe I am subconsciously self-sabotaging. Tito isn't that bad as a husband, and the sex is incredible. But none of that is worth the cost my family will pay in the end.

"There you are," I hear, and I look up to see Tito walk into the bedroom. His eyes are wide and bloodshot. The stench of whiskey wafts in my direction, wrapping around my throat like his hands when he fucks me. "Who was that?" he asks and looks down at the phone in my hand.

"Oh, it was Carlos. He called me to tell me you were pretty upset. He suggested I help calm you down." I toss the phone onto the nightstand and feel my heartstrings being tugged by the lie. I'm feeling guilty over lying to him now? Oh, fuck, I have it

bad.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Yeah, he kept trying to tell me to calm down." Tito yanks off his tie and throws it, then proceeds to tear his clothing off in a very angry fashion as he relays how the FBI has torn apart several of his businesses' office spaces looking for evidence. I can't look him in the eye or he'll see my stained conscience.

When he climbs into bed and crawls over to me, I know my guilt is only going to get worse. He started something in that car that he wants to finish, but now that I've seen how angry he is, how hurt he feels, I don't think I can bring myself to fuck him. It would be like I'm pouring salt into his wound but he won't feel it until later, and when he does, he'll be so angry, he really will kill me.

"That sounds like a very difficult position to be in..." I'm not sure what to say to comfort him because I know it's all my doing. And in this moment, my stupid fucked-up heart wants to take it back, to make it like it never happened and Tito walks scot-free.

"I have an even more difficult position to be in, and I want you in it... now." His fingers coil around my neck and press into the throbbing vein next to my esophagus. "If you still want me to make you feel something."

I can't say no to him, because I feel so ashamed for hurting him and because I actually do want him. I wanted him in that limo, and I want him to finish what we started earlier.

I nod and let him have his way with me. His firm grip on my neck strengthens as he pulls me backward. I whimper when he forcefully drags me across the bed until my head is on his pillow and my legs are stretched out.



"Do you like it rough?" Tito asks, and I nod even though that's not entirely what I want right now. "Good," he growls, and before I can react, his dick is in my mouth, semi-hard and salty. His hips start thrusting, and I try not to cut him open with my teeth, but he straddles my head and thrusts so hard and so deep I am gagging.

I claw at his ass when his cock pushes into my throat, and I feel my body jerking as my gag reflex pinches his head. My eyes water. My legs protest, pushing me across the silky sheets until my head hits the headboard.

"Oh, fuck, baby, that's incredible. Gag for me again," he grunts, pushing into my throat again, and I find his begging strangely erotic. He continues to fuck my throat so hard I'm drawing blood with my fingernails on his ass. He grabs my hair and yanks it back, exposing my neck. I gasp before he grinds his cock past my tonsils again, his balls slapping against my chin. I can't breathe and my vision is going out of focus, but I don't want him to stop. Somehow, this feels a fitting punishment for my betrayal. I deserve this.

"Shit... I gotta stop..." Tito slowly pulls his cock from my mouth with a wet pop and it springs up, my spit dripping to my cheek. He's rock hard now, precum beading on his head, and I'm panting for breath. I'm also so fucking hot for him that my pussy aches and throbs.

I moan when he climbs off me and grips my ankles, pulling me to the side of the bed. Tito spreads my legs wide, his muscled thighs inserting themselves between mine. He smirks down at me before pushing himself home, effortlessly stretching me. Holy fuck, does it feel good. He grabs my hips and picks me up so only my shoulders are on the mattress and starts pounding into me. The headboard keeps rhythm with his hips, beating against the wall. He goes deep, ensuring he hits my back wall with every thrust, and I am a whimpering ball of need, now scratching his hands.

"Shit, oh, shit," I moan, unable to pry his hard grasp off my hip bones. He's an

animal, not letting up for a second, and I'm helpless as he pounds me. I might start bleeding. It actually hurts for a moment, but I distract myself by touching my clit, and in seconds, I'm on the edge, ready to snap.

"Ah, not so fast." Tito stops short, denying my moans for more, and lowers my hips back to the mattress. "I want you to beg me, Aria."

"Please, Tito, please!" I beg. I've never felt this desperate for anything in my life. Not even air. "I need it!" I whine.

He grins, wiping the sweat from his brow and sliding his hands up over my body. "Louder." One hand grips my tit, while the other curls around my throat. The sweet pressure of his thumb pushing against my jugular makes it impossible for me to say it louder, but I try.

"Please... fuck... me..." My eyes are locked on his as his hips begin slowly thrusting, his cock making glorious friction against my pussy walls.

"Beg," he orders again, and now his grip on my neck is so tight I can't breathe at all. My lips move, but no sound comes out as I mouth "fuck me" over and over again. I thrash against his muscular body, my nails leaving crescent moons in his wrist, but he doesn't budge. "Beg me, Aria!" he growls, and I'm at my breaking point.

"Fuck me... fuck me... fuck me!" I mouth, and Tito's lips crash against mine, biting my bottom lip until I taste blood. He picks up speed, slamming into me so hard I swear the bed moves. I can't think straight anymore. Everything is just a haze of white and red and pleasure as he pounds into me.

When his thumb presses on my clit, it's consuming. Every muscle in my body tenses. My pussy locks down on his dick, and I feel my consciousness slipping. The jolts and spasms of pleasure roll across me in waves that only intensify the second he takes his

hand from my neck, and I don't even feel his release this time. The pleasure is so overwhelming, all I feel are the surging hormones and endorphins that make me body convulse and my heart connect, and without thinking, I'm muttering, "Fuck, I love you..."

Tito thrusts until my body is only spasming lightly, then pulls out and flips me over. I crawl back to my side of the bed and collapse a quivering mess, and the bed shakes as he climbs in and pulls me against his sweaty body. My stomach rolls again, and I don't know whether it's because I just confessed to loving the man who has the power to destroy my father or if his plan of impregnating me has been successful. Probably the former. I can't believe I told him I love him. How can I betray my brother like this?

Tears well up, but I hold them back until I hear Tito snoring. Then I slip out of his arms and head to the bathroom. I glance in the mirror and see the marks around my neck, probably enough to prove he "hurts" me. But even the thought of hurting him more makes my body react. I'm kneeling on the floor by the toilet, emptying my dinner into the bowl and praying Tito doesn't hear me.

What am I doing?

18

TITO

The lawyer sits across the coffee table from me at my father's house, giving me a look that tells me he doesn't believe what I'm saying. I don't give two fucks what he thinks. I'm not signing a plea deal for any of this bullshit. I know I'm as guilty as the court says I am, but I'm not going down as the only Ramiro in history who got caught. How those Russian bastards got this information is beyond me. They have to have someone on the inside helping them.

"Look, it's five years in minimum security, Tito. You'll basically be living at a fucking country club and?—"

"And I'm not a fucking fool, Aaron." He hates how I cut him off, but he works for me, not the other way around. I stand and loosen my tie, pacing the Persian rug Dad insists on keeping. Never in my life have I been so insulted. I'll hire a new lawyer, find one who will do what I say when I say it. This man isn't the bulldog I need. He's a puppy on a leash. "I'm not going to prison."

I hear Dad's hard sigh, a wheezing sound of displeasure with the situation. He shouldn't even be thinking about this. He's so sick he can't even get up for more than a few minutes without being winded and lying back down. This is my mess, but he's here prying into it for some reason, and I know that reason is Carlos. I definitely smell a rat.

"Tito, sit down," Dad rasps, and I look down at him. I don't want to sit down. I want to punch this shitty lawyer in his big, crooked nose and show him just how seriously I'm taking this thing of not pleading out. But I comply with a dying man's request, sitting in the hard armchair I just vacated in rage. Dad turns to Aaron and says, "He's not taking a deal..."

The tone of Dad's voice is resolute. He, like me, understands the leader of an organization the size of ours can't go to prison. With Dad's health declining, he won't make it another five months, let alone five years. Our family can't handle a change of regime under these circumstances.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Then what?" Aaron asks, and Dad gives him a side-eye. The man has been with us for long enough to know Dad doesn't do things by the books. He's not the sort of man to mess with either, even in his weakened state. Those who are loyal to him will destroy any trace of disloyalty everywhere they go.

"I'll handle it," Dad tells the lawyer, and with a flick of the wrist, dismisses him. Aaron scowls and shakes his head, then gets up and carries his briefcase out the door. There is so much to Dad's statement, I don't know where to unpack it, but I know he won't want me to have anything to do with any of it. The goal will be clearing my name and keeping me from prison, and anything I learn about his plan to do that will make me as guilty as him.

With Aaron gone, it's just the two of us and Dad isn't afraid to tell me what he thinks. I don't even get to take a breath before he starts in.

"You know Carlos would never have allowed this to happen. You're careless. You need redundancies. You put yourself too close to the action, and when that happens, you put yourself at risk of being connected to it. You need more layers of security between yourself and the sins you're committing. Never break the fucking law when you're breaking the law, Tito!" His gravelly voice paired with his rasping is enough to make a coughing fit start. He coughs so hard he has to sit up, and I am there to help him.

I take his hand and hoist him to an upright position on the old, tired sofa that matches his appearance. His disheveled hair sticks up at odd angles. The faded black and red bathrobe he wears over his pajamas is a bit tattered. Mom got it for him, and he can't seem to part with it. It's funny how even the hardest of men have a sentimental side to

them. I'm going to miss these little things when he's gone and I'm the patriarch of the family.

Offering him his handkerchief from the table, I help to steady him so he doesn't fall when the coughing gets so severe he's gasping for air. He'll still smoke a cigar as soon as he's done with this fit. I never could believe that.

After he calms, I help him lie down on his pillow and put his blankets back over him. He is worn out, exhausted after expending most of his energy to clear his lungs of the fluid that collects in them. I don't know what's more painful—thinking I'll go to prison for the next five years and not be able to say goodbye to my father properly or staying here and watching him fade slowly in suffering.

"You should just rest, Dad. Let Carlos see to it." I resume my spot in the armchair, and he reaches for his water, carefully sipping from the glass before putting it back on the table.

"I'll handle it...." He's still angry, and I won't change that. My only failure was trusting my men to do things in a clean way, and how my enemies learned which of my thirty-plus businesses were actively involved in money laundering, I'll never know. I still think the prosecution's case is weak, but if Dad wants to handle it, I'll let him.

"Alright," I concede, and I feel a vibration in my pocket. I pull my phone out to see Sal's number on my screen. It seems when it rains, it pours. My men know I'm meeting with my father. They know better than to interrupt me, but if they are, then it can't be good. "Yeah," I say when I swipe right to answer.

"Tito, it's not good, buddy." Sal's tone is dry, and he sounds angry or frustrated.

"What is it?" I ask, not even wanting to know. Sometimes, I think the Peralta

organization is cursed, that they've put a hex over my life and my businesses. Since getting involved with Don Hector, nothing but challenges have come my way, except for Aria. She's the one good thing to come from all of this.

"The Russians are causing shit. I guess there was a brawl on the corner in front of the deli. They're claiming we're on their territory. We know we aren't. Blah, blah..." Sal rattles off a few more infractions, and while none of them seem outrageous, they are a clear attack on our territory, reputation, and authority and a very weak power grab by the Bratva.

For a moment, I sit and think about the things that have happened. My drug deal was busted up. Jasper Peralta paid for that one. My businesses are coming under scrutiny by the FED and now the Russians are moving in? There is no way in hell this is all coincidental. They are connected, and I just can't see the thread yet, but something tells me I'm not going to like where it leads when I find it and follow it.

"Alright, let's start keeping track of everything, double duty." I glance at Dad and remember his words of criticism which I decide are actually wisdom. "At least five layers deep, Sal. This doesn't blow back on me or you. Let's build that in so if shit hits the fan, we are upwind."

"Yeah, no problem, Boss." Sal hangs up, and I know I'll have to deal with this later on. If the Russians are stirring the pot now, someone put them up to it. There's a chance that they see our alliance with the Peraltas as a threat, but it's just as likely that I have a rat within my own family who wants to take me out before the throne is fully mine.

"What is it?" Dad asks, but I won't tell him.

"I think we have a rat and I'm going to find out who it is." I stand and button my coat. "Rest now, because you're going to need your energy when I return. You have more

contracts to sign." I start for the door, but Dad clears his throat.

"If you see Carlos, send him to me. We need to talk."

My pace slows and I look over my shoulder. Dad can't really think Carlos would have done things better than me, can he? He won't just sign things over to my brother instead. That's not what we've discussed.

"Of course," I tell him, and as I open the door and step into the hallway, I begin to see how Carlos could be behind all of this. If his goal is to make me look foolish or get me out of the way, it's working. All he needs to do is convince Dad that I'm unfit, then he gets what he wants. It's what he's always wanted—the throne.

I march up the hallway and out the front door into the night, only to run into Carlos who is just arriving. He has a scowl on his face, forehead furrowed so deep his eyes almost look like coal. He's guilty. I can see it scribbled on every inch of his frame. I stand in his way and don't even ask a single question. My fists talk for me.

I rear back with my right hand and swing forward with a solid blow, striking him right in the face. Carlos stumbles backward and falls into a tree behind him, then slides until he's on his ass on the pavement holding his chin. "What the fuck was that for?" he grunts, and I have to stop myself from putting a foot in his gut.

"I know you're up to something, you sick fuck, and when I find out what it is, I'll kill you. Anyone who is involved with you will die too." My hand throbs, but I don't let him have the satisfaction of knowing I've injured myself while punching him.

"Fuck you," he snaps, and he spits out a glob of blood at my feet. "Go get fucked."

"Dad wants to see you," I tell him, but only out of respect for my father. His little game won't work. I'll see to it. And then I'll make sure he is held accountable for



everything he's doing. I walk off into the night with the intention to clear my head before I go home. My wife is still mourning. She needs me to be level-headed and comforting, not this angry, raging monster. Things may be out of control, but the monster in me is good at fixing things like this.

I just need time.

19

ARIA

Melody's arm hooks around mine as we navigate the aisles of the pharmacy. I've never been to this one. I planned it this way on purpose. I don't want anyone who could possibly know me to see me buying this test. Having Melody along is mostly a comfort thing. I also don't want to be alone here.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Oh, I really hope you are. Imagine having a new little baby around the house. It'll make it seem less lonely." Her heart is still aching in the wake of Jasper's death a few weeks ago. All of our hearts are. A baby won't fix that, at least not for me. For me, things will grow even more complicated. I'm not sure I even want to know if I'm pregnant, but after weeks of feeling overly emotional and slightly nauseous, it's the only thing that makes sense.

"Well, it won't be quiet, that's for sure." I don't smile as I speak, but I am trying to keep the mood light. Melody doesn't need to know my reservations about this potential baby.

Yes, if I have a son, he will be the heir to my father's throne and for that reason, I feel a nervous anticipation of his arrival. But he will technically be the heir to Tito's throne as well. It's something I can't change, even though the contract states that he will lead the Peralta organization. In fact, his surname will be Peralta from the time he's born.

"Mom will be so in love. You know she loves babies. It would bring her so much joy again." She points up a row, and I look at the overhead sign. It indicates feminine health and care products are in this aisle, so we veer left.

"Yeah," I sigh, understanding my sister's joy over it all. "But she'll just say it's Jasper's spirit or something weird." I stop in front of the shelves that hold condoms, spermicides, a variety of lubes, and a few types of pregnancy tests.

It's sad to me that like my life, dictated for me before I had a chance to even make a choice, my son or daughter will be born into a world with no actual choices of their own. Like cattle born to be slaughtered for meat, my baby will come into this world

and know only one thing—a life destined to be controlled by the traditions of his or her family lineage. A daughter will be married off for convenience and alliances. A son will lead even if he doesn't want to.

It doesn't matter that I don't even know whether I'm pregnant yet. It's inevitable, and when it happens, whether now or later, I will be bringing a child into this world to be a slave. Somehow, it doesn't feel right to me. But I have no choice, as my mother before me and her mother before her.

"There is no heir right now, Aria." Melody lays her head on my shoulder as I reach for one of the tests, and I hear the ache in her voice. Dad will never let her lead the family. This business is too dangerous for that, and Melody isn't the sort to be in charge. Even if she was, no one will respect her. She's a woman and this is a man's world, and besides, she doesn't have the personality for it. I believe I do, but being married to Tito means only one thing—dissolving the Peralta name for him to take over. I won't allow that.

"What do you think of this one?" I ask her, changing the subject. The topic makes me uneasy, but my sister doesn't seem to notice even though she knows me better than anyone else in this God-forsaken world.

"He will be the heir to both thrones, Aria. How will Papa's businesses survive without a firm leader? Will Tito take them?" Her question angers me, but not because I'm upset with her curiosity. I'm stuck in a horrible situation I don't want to be in because I wanted to save my family.

If I'd never said a word, I wouldn't be married right now. But we would have lost our home and Dad would be hopeless. Of course, Jasper would still be alive too, which only makes me regret my decision more.

"My son will never run the Ramiro organization." I look her dead in the eyes as I pick

up another test and hold it in my hands. "I've read the contract. If I am pregnant, which I don't know if I am, but if I am, he will be the new heir to my father's throne. If it's a boy. There are so many ifs right now. I just don't want to think about it."

I grab her hand and start walking toward the front of the store with the test in hand. She knows better than to question me when I'm in a mood, and she keeps quiet as I pay for the test and we head out to my mother's car. I don't even want Tito's drivers to know I stopped at a pharmacy, so Melody had Mom's driver escort us.

I climb into the back seat, and she sits next to me as I crunch the white paper bag down around the test. It won't fit in my pocket, but I can make it as inconspicuous as possible. I didn't bring a purse with me or a jacket, but we're heading to my parents' house, not home to Tito's. Dad will be in his office fussing over work, while Mom lies in bed still in heavy grief. I won't have anyone to truly hide it from.

"What do you think Mom and Dad will say?" Melody asks, resting her head on my shoulder as the car pulls into traffic.

"I'm not planning to tell anyone right away if I am pregnant. You know how many women miscarry in the first trimester. I couldn't handle it emotionally if that happened." It's a fair excuse for why I'm keeping things a secret, and Melody sighs her agreement.

"Yeah, it would destroy Mom. She would be devastated all over again. She doesn't need that."

I pat Melody's arm and agree with her. "Yes, which is why I'm asking you not to tell a soul I even have this test. It's possible I'm not even pregnant yet, but if I am, it's our secret until I'm certain things are going well."

Melody hooks her pinky around mine and squeezes. "Pinky promise," she says with a

smile.

I'm so thankful that my sister and I share this close bond. My family is everything to me. It always has been. Ever since our younger brother died, the only thing that has mattered to us kids is each other.

"You get one set of siblings," Mom used to say. I'm sure she'd be saying it now if Jasper's death wouldn't have hit us so hard.

Well, my set of siblings are closer to me than any friend group I'll ever have. And now that it's just me and Melody, we are clinging to each other for dear life.

At my parents' house, Melody goes with me upstairs to our formerly shared bathroom. The Jack and Jill style bedrooms were pointless. Most nights, I camped out in her room on her floor or even slept in bed next to her. Even well into adulthood. Now my room sits empty but untouched. It is as I left it. The bed is even still made. I slip into the bathroom and lock the door on Melody's side but stare into the darkened room I used to occupy.

When Jasper moved out and got his own place, they immediately emptied it and repurposed it into a sewing room for Mom. Of course, he took his furniture with him, leaving the room mostly empty, anyway. But my things weren't needed at Tito's. They wouldn't fit in with his modern design, anyway. And now that I'm looking at my things beginning to collect dust after the few months I've been gone, I wonder if they will ever remodel it. Will Dad claim it as a man cave? Will Melody own it and turn it into her personal walk-in closet?

Or will grief claim it, sealing it up as a tomb where happy memories lived but now only pain exists? Will it sit there untouched for as long as they live in this house because my leaving was followed by Jasper's murder and the two are forever connected?

I shut the door to my past in more ways than one when I close the door to that bedroom. My life in this home will never be the same, even if my plan to break away from Tito but keep his money goes how I want it to. I don't even know if I can sleep in that room. The last memory I have in there is with Jasper, and I feel too guilty to go in that room and sit and remember it.

My hands shake as I do the test. It makes a mess I have to clean up, and I wash my hands while it processes. I stare at my own reflection wondering what sort of mother I'll be. I make choices that affect people in negative ways because I can't know what will happen in the future. I suppose it's that way with any person, but somehow, I feel like my choices carry a heavier weight.

I'm not even surprised when I look at the white plastic wand I just pissed on and see the two pink lines. I've had sex with Tito so many times, and not once has he even tried to use protection. I'm going to have his baby—my baby. Hopefully, the heir for my father's throne. According to the contract, my firstborn son will carry the Peralta name into the future.

But Tito will fight me. In fact, I know he'll probably begin controlling everything I do and where I go. He'll force me to eat foods he thinks are healthy, and he'll limit how much time I can spend with my family. He'll box me in, make me dependent on him, brainwash me into believing ridiculous things like how we can lead together. All in an attempt to have the power and control. He's already made it clear that he wants an heir. But he's read the contract too—which only leads me to believe he has no intention of upholding it.

"Are you done?" Melody asks, tapping on the door.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"One second!" I call out, feeling stuck. She's my sister, my best friend. I tell her everything, and we don't keep secrets from each other. But this secret has to stay a secret a while longer until I figure out what the hell I'm even going to do.

The plan to make Carlos seem like the true leader is working, but too slowly. I know Donatello is having doubts about Tito now. Carlos has told me as much. I'm overwhelmed. I can't tell anyone that Tito hurt me, because he hasn't, but that's my only way out of this agreement. That or turning on him and telling my father that Tito had Jasper killed, but I'd have to confess as to how I know that and it would lead to their finding out it was me. I can't live with myself if my parents learn I'm the reason my brother is dead.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Mel asks again, and I scoop up the test, shove it back into the foil wrapper, run water over it so it looks like it's been peed on, and crumple it into the trash with the box and bag. Hopefully, she doesn't mess with it.

"I'm fine..." I reach for a towel and dry my hands as I step out of the bathroom into her bedroom. I let my natural emotions out, pouting a little. She doesn't know I'm pouting because of all the pressure I'm under, but the expression is the same, anyway.

"So?" she asks, eyebrows raised.

"So, it's negative," I sigh and flop onto her bed. Inside, I'm thrilled my father will have an heir... hopefully. It could be a girl. But I'm also lost as to how I can make sure Tito doesn't take what rightfully belongs to my father—his businesses and his grandchild.

"Bummer. I want a little baby to cheer me up." Melody flops onto the bed next to me and grabs my hand. "Mom would have loved that."

"Yeah..." I squeeze her fingers and draw strength from them that she doesn't even know she's providing for me. "Too bad..."

Now, I just have to decide what to do next.

20

TITO

The little street cafe is packed, not an empty chair in the open-air dining area. The scaffolding overhead shades this little meeting from the late-evening sun. I tap my finger on the wrought-iron mesh of the table and listen to Vic and Sal going on about my choices. I'm in too foul of a mood to listen to this bullshit, but I'm not going to blow my lid like a maniac so that everyone around me knows my business.

"I'm just saying if you spread yourself too thin, your enemy is going to slaughter you." Sal, older than me and probably wiser, tries to chide me as if he is my father and has authority over me. Of course, his wisdom is correct, but he underestimates the strength of my army of men.

"The Ukhovs are moving in every day now, Boss." Vic crumples the wrapper from his burger and tosses it on the table. "We are having skirmishes every day on street corners. They're stirring up unrest with our ladies. The entire row of businesses on Fifth are squeamish now, wanting to pull out."

"I trust you've put an end to that." My glare is directed at Vic, who is supposed to be in complete control of all of our movement in Central LA. This nonsense about the Russians moving in on my territory has gone on long enough. I've sent enough men



down there to push them back and enforce our territorial lines, so I don't understand why we're still having this issue.

"They know you don't have the manpower to push them back the way you want to." Vic's head bobs like a fucking bobble head, and his heavy eyelids betray his haphazard approach to strong-arming my enemies. "They're going to keep coming until we send a clear message, but right now, you're all tangled up in the Peralta bullshit, focusing your time on that."

"My dealings with Hector Peralta are none of your fucking business. I'm making moves you don't know about or understand." Though my volume is low, there is so much poison in my tone that Vic gets the point and shuts up. I glare at him with nostrils flared as Sal steps in to calm me down.

"Hey, Tito, he's just tryin' to help. Listen, we get it. You want that organization, but if your enemies come up the backside while you're pushing down the front lines, you're going to be caught with your pants down." Sal presses his palm into the table, and I turn to look at him.

"Do we or do we not have enough manpower to push the Russians back and send a signal that will make it clear to them that we aren't fucking around?" My shoulders hurt. My head is pounding. I want to go home and blow off some steam, get drunk and fuck my wife to relieve this tension, but I have idiots I need to deal with.

Sal narrows his eyes at me and tilts his head. A shadow of a bird overhead passes across his face, and he purses his lips. "In this organization under normal conditions? Yes. We can defeat the Russians with no issue. But when you've sent more than half of them to work their way into the Peralta businesses, expanding our territory that direction on the streets and in their clubs, no. We can't hold both fronts, Tito."

I'm not pulling out of Peralta territory to fight the Russians. They've been on our back

doorstep for years, and that's where they will stay. Maybe it's time to test this alliance with Hector and see if he will lend his men to me. That may fix both issues at once. The fewer of his nosy soldiers that are in my way, the more easily I can take what I want, change things to my way and reinforce to those remaining that I'm leading things now.

Then Hector's men will be fighting on my side against my enemy, showing the Ukhovs that we are a force to be reckoned with. It seems like a win-win to me, but I won't even bring it up with Sal and Vic. They'll question the loyalty of men who are being forced to fight in a war that's not their own.

"We'll have to finish this discussion later. I am going home now. Just pour what we have into the worst areas. I'll have more support in a few days." I stand and pull out my wallet, dropping a few crisp bills onto the table.

The guys say nothing as I slide my wallet back into my pants, but they stand to join me. We begin walking, heading to the parking garage around the corner where my car is safely stowed for our meeting, and I hear the squeal of tires on the pavement in the distance.

"Watch out!" I hear someone shout, and before I even know what's happening, Sal is on top of me, throwing me to the ground.

Seconds later, gunfire erupts. Something fully automatic lets off more rounds in a second that I can count, and my hand goes to my lower back where my Glock is tucked into my belt.

"Stay down," Sal orders as he pushes off me, but I won't lie here like a coward. He races into the fray with his gun pointed at the car from where the ambush has originated.

I raise my gun and fire too, peppering the side of the black sedan with bullet holes. Vic is down, sprawled on the pavement with blood oozing from a hole in his head. His eyes are wide open and his mouth is agape. He was dead before he hit the ground, and I'm surprised it isn't me. Sal saved my life.

"I said stay down," he screams at me, and I crouch lower, but I keep shooting. These bastards could have just driven past and shot the place up, but they stopped. They're not here to send a message. This is an assassination attempt. And I recognize that license plate. It's the Utkovs' errand boy.

"Get to the car, Sal!" I order, and as he lays cover fire, I stand and run to the street corner. Then I turn and reach around the corner of the brick building to lay cover fire for him as he charges toward me.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

The car doesn't follow instantly, and I see why. They open the driver's side door and push someone out, someone who took a round to the chest, compliments of me or Sal. We can't stand here and wait for them to get their shit together, though, so Sal and I run the half-block to the garage entrance and dart inside.

My car is on level one, left here by Vic who drove us across town. Sal and I can't even unlock the damn thing. The keys are in Vic's pocket. So, Sal gives the driver's window a roundhouse kick and the glass cracks into spiderwebs. His second kick causes the window to shatter and glass to rain down on the ground and into the seat. He reaches in and unlocks the car, and we climb in.

He uses his pocket knife to break open the ignition, but it's pointless. These newer vehicles have an immobilizer built into them. There's no way he will get the thing started. It only shows his old-school techniques are because of his age. While he's dicking around trying an impossible task, I open the glove box where I keep two extra guns and a few clips fully loaded, then I reach into the center console where even more ammunition is stored.

"We have to get a different car," I tell him, already climbing out of mine. "That one... over there. The old Camry." There is a nineties model Toyota with rust trying to claim its rear bumper, and that's the only car I see in this damn garage he could hotwire. I just pray it starts. Those Russians aren't going to just run away. They'll be coming for me.

Sal jumps out of my car, and we hurry to the older model car. He has it started in under ninety seconds, and we're pulling out of the garage as the Russian vehicle rolls past. We turn the opposite direction, and Sal steps on the gas. I know these streets

better than he does, so I give him directions to take us through alleyways and side streets, anywhere to lose our Russian tail as they pull a U-turn and gain on us.

I watch the rearview mirror like a hawk, expecting the Russians to open fire at any minute. Their boldness to target me in broad daylight on a busy street is startling. They don't give up once they have their target in their sights. And I'm their damn target. They want me dead, but that's just not going to happen.

Bullets whiz past the side of my newly acquired ride, shattering the back window. Sal curses, ducking down as I reach for the old window crank in the passenger door. I roll down my window and start to fire. One, two, three... the radiator on their car blows out. Steam pours from their grill, and I know before long, they'll overheat and lose power. But for now, we're still in a fight for our lives.

"Nice driving," I tell Sal. "Now get us the fuck out of here."

He obeys without argument, turning down another side street and weaving through a maze of alleyways until we find ourselves in Russian territory with the potential to encounter more men who want me dead. I duck down as we pass by a group of men leaning against a brick wall.

"Shit, Sal! You just brought us to their fucking doorstep!" I yell, my heart pounding in my chest as I fumble for extra ammunition.

"I know, but this is the fastest route to safety." His definition of safety and mine are polar opposites.

I bite my tongue as we speed past the group of men, all of them staring at us like we're their next meal.

"Just keep driving," I growl, my gun drawn and ready to fire at an instant's notice.

One wrong move from any of them and they'll have a lot more than holes in their car to worry about.

The car screeches to a halt in front of my house twenty minutes later with one fewer person inside than when we left. Someone will have to explain to Vic's woman why he's not coming home tonight, but when Sal tries to stick around and talk it out, I snap at him and order him to get out.

Someone made an attempt on my life tonight, and I don't take that lightly at all. The Russians think they can move into my territory and threaten me, and after what's been going on with the Feds and Dad having to deal with the money laundering threat, this just adds another complex layer to an already challenging problem. I need to relax.

I make my way upstairs to the bedroom where I know Aria will be this time of night. She's probably curled up with a book. She'll be curling her toes in a few minutes. I'm already peeling my tie off when I walk into the room, and she doesn't even look up at me. She's got her eyes closed, blankets pulled up over her chest.

"Take your clothes off. You're going to make my body explode so I can just fucking relax already." I've not been this demanding about sex since the first night she slept here, but I'm in no mood to coddle her emotions tonight.

"What?" she mumbles, yawning.

"I need to fuck, so take your clothes off." I undo my belt and begin to slide it out as she sits up and scowls at me.

"I was sleeping. I don't feel well." Her eyes blink slowly as she tries to focus on me.

"Alright, well we can skip the part that makes you feel good and you can just suck me off." I free my dick from my slacks and start to stroke a little, but she scoffs and turns

over, lying back down.

"Fuck you. I'm not sucking you off. I'm not feeling well. Go find a whore." There is anger in her tone, and I have a mind to beat it out of her.

"Should I remind you that if you don't do what I say, I own your father's organization?" I ask. Yes, it's a threat. I don't give a fuck that I'm supposed to be her husband. She'll get the point. I'm in charge.

"Why don't I just resist you so you'll leave bruises on me and I can go home and keep all your money and manpower too?" Aria looks at me over her shoulder, and I'm so angry now, there's no way I'll ever get hard. So she's read the contract completely now and she thinks she knows the loopholes.

We'll see about that.

"Fine, I'm going to the club. Don't wait up." If I can't fuck my wife, I'll go get wasted and make Tony drive. Something's got to give. I'm losing ground on every side now, even in the bedroom.

21

ARIA

Carlos drives me to my parents' house, though Tito's driver was supposed to. I sit in the back seat like normal, which has obviously angered Carlos. He's not my driver and he's not Tito's personal errand boy, but he's the one who volunteered. I've been avoiding him, having second thoughts about our little arrangement. I don't know what I want anymore. Grief over Jasper has blinded me, and Tito's been so comforting. Seeing my husband hurt because of my choices and actions hasn't been easy.

"We need to talk," Carlos says halfway to my parents' house. He's edgy. He hasn't stopped moving since he climbed in the car. He shakes his head and taps his fingers. I'm fairly certain he's either on something or going crazy because of anxiety.



*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

We all know Donatello is on his last legs. He's bedridden now, or he remains in bed as a statement to show his men that one of his sons is taking over soon. I'm not sure which. I don't know the man well enough to know if he's putting on an act to make sure his men follow his orders after death or if he's really that sick. Tito comes home dragging, shoulders heavy with the weight of the world, and though he wants comfort through sex, at times, I can't give that to him.

"What?" I grumble, not even wanting to be in the same car with him. My morning sickness has gotten so bad, the bumping of the car on the road is stirring it. I've managed to hide it from everyone for the most part, except Tito's cook. I've asked her to keep it a secret—told her that due to Tito's stress with his father dying and the criminal charges still lingering in his purview, I was keeping the pregnancy a secret in case I miscarry. It isn't a total lie.

Melody has a point that Mom will be devastated if I tell her she's going to have a grandchild and then I lose the baby. It's the only rationalization I can come up with to ease the guilt I'm feeling for keeping this from my parents. Now when I lie in bed grieving my brother, I'm grieving so many other things.

I'm a monster and a liar. I don't deserve this baby or this life. My father deserves better than me, and I need a place to hide from the hell I've created with my own stupidity.

"It's not working... this little plan of yours. Dad isn't seeing me as the true leader. I need to do more and I need to do it now." Carlos's knuckles are turning white. He's gripping the wheel so hard it makes me want to climb out the next time he stops at a red light. He's scary and huge, but I know if he lays a finger on me, both Donatello

and Tito will rain fire on him. Not to mention my father's wrath.

"You need to be patient, Carlos." I don't even know what he should be patient for anymore. He's right. The plan isn't working, but mostly because I've become so torn over what to do now that I haven't done anything.

The contract is binding. Tito has to let my son lead my father's family. I've read it over and over again. This baby growing in my womb is a Peralta, whether male or female. And if I have a girl now and a boy later, it will be the same. Besides, I've seen a new side of this strange and scary man I'm married to. He's not as bad as I thought he was. He does have a heart buried in that barrel chest of his, and it's a good one.

I hate to say it, but the silver lining of my brother's murder is that I'm seeing things through a new lens. Jasper should never have died, don't get me wrong. I hate that. My heart is a black hole without him here. But Tito only did what men in his position, with his authority, do. He retaliated for a business transaction that was interrupted by an enemy. And I failed to see the entire time that the minute he knew it was anyone in my father's organization, he could have owned it all and me too.

"You don't seem to be getting the point, Aria. I will be the next leader of this family even if something drastic has to happen."

I get cold chills as my eyes meet Carlos's gaze in the rearview mirror. I can tell he's the sort of guy who thinks he gets what he wants, and I wonder what sort of war I've started between the brothers as he pulls to a stop outside my destination. I reach for the handle, but he locks the door. I can easily unlock it and open it, but I wait for him to say what he feels he needs to say.

"I'm not waiting. With or without your help, I'm taking Tito down. Now is the perfect time, with the Russians moving in and him spread so thin in your family business. I have to move, and if you rat me out, I'll kill you in your sleep. Make no

mistake about it."

I shudder, thinking about how easily that could happen, and wonder if I should tell Tito anyway. It would open Pandora's box, but at least Tito would have a chance to protect himself and me. This entire situation has gotten out of hand now, and I want to go back and do it differently, to trust my mother and believe that Tito's not a bad person.

"I'm sorry you feel that way. Now, may I go visit my mother? She's expecting me. She's still grieving my late brother, you know?" I won't let him know he's intimidating me. The way my hand shakes is hidden by the angle he views me from, so the only indicator of fear would be my tone of voice. But I make sure I sound harsh and upset, not fearful.

The door unlocks and I climb out. On wobbly legs, I walk away from him, and he speeds off before I even get to the door of the house. It opens before I ring the bell, and Mom pulls me into her arms.

"You look like you've seen a ghost, Aria. Come in. Are you okay?" She ushers me inside and into the great room, where I collapse on the sofa, finally allowed to tremble. Carlos is terrifying, and I know I've made a huge mistake. "Henry... water, please!" Mom shouts, and I know the old butler is running to get it for her.

I feel like I may pass out, and I don't know if it's from the pregnancy, the nerves, or the mourning. I also have barely eaten in days. I feel like Midas, except everything I've put my hands to hasn't turned to gold. It's turned to shit. Why did I ever think I could take down the leader of a criminal organization and walk away from it? I don't even know the men I'm involved with, Tito or Carlos.

"Baby, talk to me..." Mom sits next to me, cradling my hand while I blink my eyes, trying to get them to focus. I'm dizzy, and my vision is blurry due to the anxiety.

"It's uh..." I don't have a way to tell her. It's too messed up, too overwhelming. My plot to overtake Tito, my brother's death, my guilt in it all, and worst of all, a baby I'm not even caring for well because I can't keep my health a priority while I'm so stressed and afraid.

"Did something happen? Did someone hurt you? It wasn't your husband, was it?"

I look into Mom's eyes and see the fear and concern and shake my head. "No, nothing like that, Mom. Tito has been wonderful, so good to me." And I mean it. He has been so very wonderful. Things started out rough with him ordering me around like a piece of meat, but I see now that it was just his way of initiating me into his realm, of letting me know who's in charge. I'm very okay with his being in charge now, because he may be the only one who can fix this issue with Carlos.

"Then tell me... Is it the Utkovs? Have they gotten to you too?" Mom's grip on my hands tightens, and now I feel like she's growing pale.

"The Russians?" I'm confused. "Have they done something?" I know Carlos said they were pressuring Tito, but are they pressuring my father? Has my choice to marry Tito for his money, to save my family, actually put my father at a greater risk from worse enemies than the Ramiros?

"Oh, baby, I don't want you to worry..."

Henry rushes into the room with a pitcher of water and a glass with ice in it and his eyebrows rise. "Miss Aria, I didn't know you were here."

"Quickly, Henry. The water," Mom says, flapping her hand at him. He pours some water into the glass and hands it to her, and seconds later, Dad rushes in the door too.

"I heard there was a problem," he breathes out hastily and then rushes to my side.

"Are you okay?"

I wave him off as I sip the water, and the cool liquid coats my throat, helping me relax. "I'm fine, Papa. I just felt faint."

Dad presses a hand to my forehead and then puts his arm around me. "Are you sure?" He looks to Mom, who still looks concerned, but now I'm more worried than I am scared.

"Mom said the Russians are pressuring you?" I have to know. If my decisions have brought my family under more scrutiny and made them a target, I'll never forgive myself. This wasn't supposed to happen.

"The enemy of my enemies is supposed to be my friend, but I've become friends with my enemy and now we are a target, I'm afraid." Dad's face falls. He is thinking now of the trouble he's in because of me and not whatever else I may have brought in with me.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

My heart clenches, and I want to scream and smash things. This can't be happening. There's no way we can defend against a Russian attack. Not alone, anyway.

"What have they done?" I ask timidly, my bottom lip quivering. I bite it to stymie the shaking, but my hands tremble instead.

Dad shakes his head and pulls his arm away. His hands clasp together in his lap, and Mom whimpers almost imperceptibly.

"There was an incident..." Dad's tongue flicks over his bottom lip, and he looks up at me. "Aria, Melody had a very close call on the street. Nothing happened, but she's shaken. She's gone to stay with family in Boston for a few weeks."

Dad doesn't have to say any more at all. Those sick bastards came after my sister and threatened her. Likely, they would have succeeded if Dad's men hadn't been there. She always has security wherever she goes, even now at my cousins' house where she is.

"Can I speak with her?" I ask, but Dad grimly shakes his head.

"She's distraught, Aria. After what's happened in the past few months, she needs some time alone." His hand pats my knee. "And I need to know you're safe, so I'm going to meet with your husband to align our families to fight against this foe we face." He stands and moves away, and I scowl in fear. What is he talking about?

"Papa, you can't fight the Russians." I stand, but he turns and holds up a hand. "I can't fight on my own, and my family cannot fight alone, but with the Ramiro alliance, we

are stronger than any enemy in this city." He cups both of my cheeks. "Now promise me you will do as your husband says and be safe."

I can't answer him. My enemies come from within my family, not from outside. My enemy is one who may be playing both sides, and I'm the only one who even knows it.

"Promise me," he says sternly, jerking his head slightly.

"I promise," I tell him, but my mind is already at work thinking up a new plan. I have one last connection I can leverage to try to stop this. A friend by the name of Yuri Ukhov. And he may just be the one to save my life, because if Carlos Ramiro gets his way, I no longer trust that my family is safe under his leadership and I don't believe he will stop at humiliating Tito. I fear he wants my husband dead.

22

TITO

The car bumps over some rough pavement with Tony at the helm. It's late. There are at least a dozen cars in the caravan behind us looking like a march to war. We're headed to the front lines of this war, the edge of my territory where it butts up to the Ukhovs' drug houses.

I'm taking Sal's advice for the most part, though I've sent a few cars into Peralta territory too. I hear my enemies aren't being kind to my allies now on account of the way I've married the Peralta princess. I'm just protecting my investments there. Sal thinks that's a mistake, but if I do anything less than this, Hector Peralta will take on more than he can handle, and I can't handle being married to a sinking ship. It's going to be mine. That's just a matter of time. I don't want it damaged.

"So, you heard from the DA today?" Vinny, seated next to me in the back with his gun in his lap, chews a big wad of chewing tobacco, pushing it into his lip firmly with his tongue.

"Aaron did, yes. The DA is willing to cut a deal, no jail time, but that's not enough. I'm under a fucking microscope, and here we are, marching off to push men off what is rightfully mine. This isn't going to end well."

My dad knows what he's doing. He's been doing this for long enough that I should trust him, but his health is going quickly and my life is on the line. I can't help but feel like he may make a mistake in the way he does things, and it makes me want to take control. But with Carlos reaching for power, putting a bug in my father's ear to sour him against me, I can't do anything to upset him.

I love my brother, and I see how he will be a good asset in the future if he can be rehabilitated. It's natural for brothers to fight over the inheritance. Carlos will get his fair share—the money, the businesses, the realty. But I've always known that what he really wants are the authority and power. Something is going on with him and I can't figure out what. At first, I thought it was something to do with Aria, but now I'm not sure. She seems to want to be as far away from him as possible.

"No jail, that's good," Tony chimes in, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. His eyes are full of mirth, though at a time like this, they should be full of anger. Our men have been slaughtered by our enemy several times, and we're on the hunt tonight. But Tony is as loyal as they come, and as far as supporters within this family, he's got my back one hundred percent.

"Yes it is, but it's not enough. Dad will continue to work with Aaron to get me cleared of all wrongdoing, even if he has to slip some of my inheritance to them. And when it's all over, he'll share his secrets with me so that one day, I can do the same for myself and others."



The lights outside the car blur past as I delve into deep thought. It feels hollow to talk about my father like that, to tell my loyal men that one day, he will be just a memory. It brings up rage at life itself and the cruelty of death, the finality of it all. I tap into that anger as Tony turns the car down the street toward our destination. It's that rage coupled with the anger over why I'm in this situation to begin with that will fuel this night.

I've not figured out yet who tipped off the police about the money laundering, but I'm glad it's turning into mostly an embarrassment and not anything full-blown. Even then, Dad would have found a way to get me out of it. It would just have cost more. And it probably would have been the throne I paid with. I'll find out, though, and when I do, the person who gave up info on me will pay dearly.

"There," Vinny says, pointing. "That's where the last of them were found. They shot three of our guys in cold blood, shoved two women into their van, and later, we found the women beaten but alive." Vinny runs this neighborhood for me, and he shepherds his flock here. The men who were killed were very close to him, ones he personally trained. And the women were like sisters, bonded in blood.

"Then we go here. I've always told Carlos that the Russians having their front line directly across from ours would be a problem. They're scared now, of us joining with the Peraltas. It makes us almost invincible." I pull out my gun as the car rolls to a stop, but Tony's phone rings.

He pulls it from his pocket and answers it, and I listen to his side of the conversation.

"Hey... Yeah, why? Of course.... They are? How many? No, stay... We've got this." A dozen pairs of headlights join us, filling the street outside the old theater whose dilapidated marquee flashes with several bulbs broken or missing.

"Who was it?" I ask when he hangs up.

"It's Sal. He said Hector's men are fighting with us... At least forty of them." Tony's eyebrows rise, and he shrugs. No one expects the Peralta family to be very strong with the shit they've been through lately, but I am impressed. They won't be taken easily.

"Let's go" I bark, and I open the door and step out.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I read once that kings allow their troops to go into battle and lead from behind. In doing so, they protect the monarchy and ensure their people have a leader if the battle fails. I'm not that king. I march with determination into the front of the theater followed by my nearly fifty men who are armed and ready to defend me and themselves.

We barely get past the ticket counter when I hear shouting and doors slamming. I'm not sure what sort of an operation they have going in here, but it reeks of chemicals. It's dark too, like they purposefully keep the lights off so people will think the building is empty or abandoned. So with guns drawn, we move toward the shouting. If Aleksander Utkov wants a war, I'll bring one to him.

"There." I point with the tip of my gun down a side hallway leading who knows where, and a few men head that direction. A few of my guys move to the right toward a closed door, while others clear the bathrooms. I continue to move to the main theater doors, and Tony opens one to me.

We take them by surprise. They scramble when the doors are thrown open. I have my gun out ready to fire, but I take in what I'm looking at first. A grow room full of varying forms of plants. Hydroponics have been constructed, large solar lamps—the Russians have craftily discovered a way around my roadblocks for their drug rings, which means the stench in the lobby is downdraft from their cooking room, probably upstairs.

"Show's over!" I shout, and the first rounds ring out. My men rush in, flanking me on the right and left. We stoop behind old metal theater seating that hasn't been removed and aim toward the large area down front where the chairs were torn up and

Alexsander's men built their grow room.

The sound is deafening, at least forty guns discharging rapidly. It's adrenaline-inducing. My pulse races as I creep forward row by row, pushing closer to their plants where I can see more clearly what I'm dealing with. I watch men fall to the left and right. One of mine goes down, and there's little I can do to save him. I rise and fire, then duck and wait. It draws the ire of the enemy my way, allowing my men to advance.

Our mission is simple—to destroy as many Russians as we can without losing any of our men. So we're already partially failing, but I can't just kill them. I have to hurt their organization too. They took out three of our women, which means a decrease in cash flow from their hooking. It's only fair that they limp if we're limping.

"The plants!" I order, and my men know what I mean. Three of them charge forward and begin destroying the grow operation. I lay cover fire for them, buying them enough time to destroy over half the plants, until one of them gets hit in the hip. He goes down, and the others drop with him, hiding behind one of the tables.

"You're going down, Ramiro," I hear from somewhere, and then I smell smoke.

The gunshots don't let up, either. More bullets hail from everywhere. It's so loud I can't tell where until something strikes my arm and I scream in pain. I'm shot, from someone behind me. I cower between the rows of seats to assess how bad it is, but I can still move my arm for now, so it's not too bad.

"Fuck!" Tony shouts and lets off a blast of rounds. "Got him, Boss." It's time. We'll all be slaughtered here in their home if we don't go soon.

I survey the damage done. At least twenty Russians on the ground, three of our own. While I was assessing my injury, the guys managed to decimate another twenty

plants, leaving the Russians with only one fourth of their original operation. It will take them months to recover and grow those plants to size again. I'd say that's a win.

"Move out now!" I order, and I don't have to say it twice.

I'm not sure how many of my men who moved off down that hallway have been hurt, but I'm hoping it's none. We fall back quickly now that our message is sent, and as we do, I know they'll give chase. In fact, I'm aware that they will probably increase their pressure on us now, but I'll be ready.

At the car, I climb in, feeling a bit lightheaded. I'm bleeding harder than I thought I was. I won't die, but I'm gonna need a few days. "Take me home..." I tell Tony, and I let my eyes shut as I hear four car doors slam. Message sent. Now we wait.

23

ARIA

Tito's been gone a while, off to "take control", as he put it before he left. He needs to—take control, that is. His involvement with my family has gotten out of control, and I'm worried about what will happen to my parents. What has happened with Melody is terrifying to me. She's off with family now, where she's safe, but I'm sickened that simply by reason of association with the Ramiro family, she was put at risk. I hate that for her, and I hate that for Tito because it renews my desire to destroy him.

I pace the living room while I wait. My heart is ripping apart with every pass across the white marble floors. One second, I'm certain I will murder the man in his sleep and the next, I'm desperate to feel his arms around me, comforting me in my fear and sadness. First Jasper, now Melody... Tito has to see how this marriage has only brought harm to the Peraltas. He has to see how it's affecting me. If he cared at all,

he'd stop, but he either doesn't see, doesn't care, or he is doing it on purpose.

The door clicks open, and I'm there, rushing to tug it wide as the guys squeeze in. Tony and the man they call Vinny are here, Sal following behind. They carry him in with an arm draped over each of their broad shoulders.

"What's wrong?" I ask, breathless. I follow them back into the living room where Sal drapes a thick jacket over Tito's white couch before they drop him there.

Tony tears open the chest of Tito's jacket and shirt, and I see blood. The man continues to tear at the fabric revealing Tito's corded muscles and tattoos until the shirt is in shreds and a painful-looking wound is exposed.

"Fuck... It's just a scrape, man..." Tony shakes his head and examines the injury as I rush to Tito's side.

"What happened! My God," I gasp, crawling onto the couch next to him. I use a scrap of the torn shirt to wipe away the blood that oozes out. He's lost quite a bit by the looks of it, and these assholes are doing nothing.

"What the fuck is it to you, lady?" Tony nods at Tito's liquor cabinet... "The hundred proof," he snaps at Sal, who scurries to get the bottle.

"He's been shot? He needs a hospital." I press the bloody strip of material to the wound to stop the bleeding, but Tony has other ideas.

"Move it, Aria. You're in the way."

He doesn't own me, and for some stupid fucking reason, I actually care what happens here. Maybe it's because Tito needs to run this family and save mine, or maybe it's because I'm falling in fucking love with this bastard in spite of myself.

"He needs an ambulance," I growl, but Tito groans, and I turn to focus on him.

Tony pushes me out of the way and uncorks the bottle, pouring the powerful alcohol across Tito's arm. Tito screams and opens his eyes, instantly angry until he sees Tony and the vodka that streams down his bicep and drips from his elbow into my lap.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Shit," he hisses, and Tony chuckles.

"Got ya good, didn't they?" he asks and stops pouring. "Need a drink?" Tony offers the bottle to Tito, who swipes it out of his hand and takes a long drink. As the bottle rights itself, he looks to me but says nothing.

"We got five more men injured, guys. Boss is fine. His lady can patch him up. We gotta go." Sal hovers by the door in what I think is a heartless response to a bad injury.

Tony looks at me and Tito, and my husband nods at him. "Go on... Make sure they're okay. Make sure we have plenty of arms ready for the retaliation. It's sure to happen quickly."

I can't even believe what I'm hearing. Retaliation? They've obviously started something with their enemies, probably the Russians, and they're expecting it to continue now.

"What the fuck?" I ask, standing up quickly. "Get back here! He needs help!" I'm livid, wanting to chase the men down as they make a swift exit, but Tito grabs my arm and squeezes my wrist.

"Let them go..." he growls, and I wrestle away from him. He moves and fights me, causing the bleeding to get worse, but he doesn't seem to care. The men are gone, and I don't know how to take care of a gunshot wound.

"You started something, didn't you? With the Russians?" I glare at him, all my anger



suddenly turned in his direction. His men were catalyzing a conflict that needed to be deescalated.

"Aria, sit down and listen to me," Tito shouts, but the booming voice only rattles my chest. I was already afraid all day. I don't even respond to that right now. My fear for my family overrides my fear of him.

"No, I won't. Your enemies are pushing my father around and it needs to stop. You're out there inciting them to violence, and my family is who will pay." I'm crying now, hot, angry tears that burn streaks down my cheeks.

"I said, sit the fuck down and listen to me." Tito is angry now, pushing his bleeding body off the now-stained sofa to tower over me. I've never seen him actually angry with me, only the type of feigned anger that allows him to push my buttons. I cower instantly, sinking to the bloody surface as he twists my arm. "Do not test me tonight."

A few drops of blood dribble down his bare bicep toward my hand, and I nod at him, biting my lip. I'm scared, but not of him. Even now, even when he's glaring at me and his eyebrows touch in the center with rage. He won't hurt me. He knows he will lose everything if he does, but that's not why I'm not afraid.

I trust him. I actually fucking trust him for some God-awful reason, and I don't know why. And seeing the blood he is shedding makes me fearful that my father will shed blood too, that Tito won't be able to uphold his end of the bargain and protect the people I love. I need to feel comfort now, and short of driving all the way across the city to see my father in person and know he's okay, the only thing I have is this beast of a man who is intimidating me right now.

"Tito..." I whimper, and his grip on my wrist loosens.

"I'm taking care of it." He lets go of me, and I stand again, this time clinging to his

chest. I don't care about the blood or the sweat, or even the sticky alcohol that reeks. This has gotten out of control. Carlos did something I can't undo, and I'm afraid of what it means.

"Please..." I whimper again, and his arms come around me tightly. When I look up at him, he kisses me hard, teeth scraping against my lip. The warmth of his arms around me is the comfort I need, but I see the angry beast within him needs comfort too. And for some strange reason, I want to give it to him.

"I've got it..." he says again, calmly. Then his eyes dip to my lips and back to my gaze. "I'm going to fuck you now because I need to dump this stress or I'm going to kill someone."

I don't even get a chance to resist, but why would I? Instead, I nod my head and willingly let him push me against the wall. His hand comes between my thighs and he growls in approval.

"Never been so wet for a man's pain, huh?" he grunts, and I blush.

"No," I admit, because it's not the pain he's in. It's the need I see in his eyes. He needs me the way I need him, but differently. I need his strength. He needs my surrender, to dominate me, to feel powerful again. Symbiotes tangled up in one another, sick and twisted but functional.

I don't fight as his pants hit the floor, revealing his erection, as his hands tear at my blouse and slacks. I offer only mild protest as he drops to his knees and rips my panties apart, exposing my core. His teeth pinch my tender parts, not wet yet, but already pulsing with want. The pain mixes with pleasure, and I moan, biting my bottom lip to keep quiet.

"Louder," he growls. "I want everyone to know you're mine."

I try to be quiet, but it's hard when he's fingering me with one hand and sucking on my clit. I'm so wet now, so ready for him I could die. The volume of my pleasure sounds increases naturally, which seems to encourage him. He fucks me harder with his two fingers while he sucks me off, and his thumb rubs over my ass too, stimulating me there. I'm trembling, knees going weak, pussy aching for his cock.

I'm a bloody mess, literally, my hands coated in the red life force still seeping out of his arm. It's on the wall, on his hair, between my fingers, against my tits. It's everywhere and it's erotic. I think of his fingers around my throat and come undone, pressing my eyes shut as orgasm shakes my core. I'm screaming, clawing at his head, picturing the blood behind my eyelids and his hand on my throat. It's powerful enough that I have to lean on him, and he holds me up as he fucks me until the convulsions slow and his sucking stops.

Long, slow laps at my pussy tease me and make me jolt. I open my eyes again and see more blood spilled, running down my thigh. When he stands again, I don't even have a chance to breathe before he's kneading my tits, spreading my thighs with his knee. His hand covers my mouth as he thrusts into me harshly against the wall, our bodies pressing together in a dance of lust and desire, violence and pain. I wrap my legs around him, pulling him closer, harder, deeper as his hips begin to thrust.

His hand on my mouth muffles my moans, but I don't care anymore. I bite into his hand, drawing more blood as he slams inside me, eyes wild with lust and need. He's close too, I can tell by the way his cock twitches inside me and the way he grunts. His hips jerk and pull, giving me everything he has left to fill me up. And I'm whimpering, needing something to make me go again.

I take his wrists and guide his hands, both of them this time, to my neck. I want him—no, I need him—to take me to the brink, push me to the edge of consciousness, and hold me there while my body shakes with pleasure. “Please,” I mouth to him, and his hands begin to tighten.

Tito's grip is firm, his motions hard, and his thrusts even harder as he plows into me against the wall. I'm gasping now, eyes tearing with pain but filled with pleasure. It all mixes together in a kaleidoscope of sensations that leave me begging for more and pleading for it to stop. I'm so close, so close to orgasm again as the blood rushes to my head.

The room around us begins to spin, and I can't breathe. My hands fly up, nails raking his back as he continues to fuck me, hips ramming into mine with a force that would have normally made me cry out in pain but instead has me moaning his name like a prayer. "Tito," I mouth, clawing at his back and squeezing my pussy tightly around him. His cock pulses inside me, hot and thick, and I'm about to pass out as he clamps down harder on my neck.

Then it hits me like a ton of bricks. Orgasm after orgasm slams through my body as Tito roars his desire. His hips spasm, and I'm along for the ride, clinging to him as we ride out my high together. My body shakes and trembles, holding onto his wrists as he holds me up. My breath is gone, but it doesn't matter because he's got me pinned against the wall. His thrusts slow, and I can breathe again when his hand moves.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I gasp for air, panting hard as he pulls out of me. Blood coats my thighs, but Tito doesn't care as he turns me around and bends me over the couch. He spreads my cheeks wide, exposing my ass to him, and what little shame I had left seems to melt away. It hurts when he forces his thick girth into me, but my moisture slicks his dive into my ass.

I moan in pleasure as he fucks me here too, his fingers rubbing at my clit while he plunges deep inside me. He talks dirty in my ear now, telling me how much he loves it, how tight I am, how no one else will ever have me again or else they'll suffer. I believe him. After tonight, I don't think I will ever want normal again. I know he's the only one who will ever make me feel this way.

I come again, screaming his name into the cushion as he pounds into me from behind and my ass clenches around his cock. Tito growls and roars out his release, fingers digging into my hips as he collapses against me. The heat of his explosion warms me from the inside, but the sweat of his chest against my back is just as hot, comforting me. His hands wrap around my body, cupping my tits as he kisses the back of my shoulder.

"Do you trust me?" he asks in a soft, gravelly voice, and I nod. He pulls out, leaving me draped over the couch, and smacks my ass lightly. "Let's shower. I have to be ready."

With the vodka still strong in the air, I follow him upstairs, walking naked and coated in sex and blood. I do trust him, but I need to make some decisions for myself now. Carlos has to be stopped, and there's only one way to do that. I just don't know how Tito will feel about it.

## TITO

More than a week after our encounter with the Russians, I am healing and we are holding our ground. The situation with the Feds and their money laundering charges is at a stalemate. Dad's lawyers are doing what they can, but Aaron seems to think it's looking more and more questionable. Someone is fucking with the system, planting more evidence, gathering more dirt, and I know it's someone inside my own fucking organization.

The car bumps along the road, headed to Dad's house. Aria and I were enjoying dinner when I got the call. Not to be rushed, I told him I'd come when dinner was over, but it means she's along for the ride with me this time. Either I scared her enough to be obedient with that stunt last week or she's coming around on her own. She's been nothing but quiet and submissive to me since, except for in the bed. She still fights me like a little vixen in a trap, but it's all put on. She knows I love that shit.

"What does he want, though?" she asks, and her large eyes peer up at me through her thick lashes. A meeting with my father isn't an intimidating thing, normally, but Aria seems to be frightened. She knows nothing of the struggle I'm having to hold my father's faith and keep my brother under control, but she isn't meant to carry that, anyway.

"I'm not sure tonight." I pat her hand which is wrapped around my arm and try to calm her. I'm finding myself so drawn to this woman even in her difficult moments. Partnership has taken on an entirely new perspective for me. I'm hesitant to call it love because it makes me seem weak, but maybe love is what I need to be strong, to be the man I'm supposed to be. That idea rolls around inside my brain for a moment until she speaks again.

"Is he angry with you?" Her grip tightens, and she lays her head on my shoulder. I look up at the rearview mirror where Tony's eyes catch mine. He knows the struggle, how Carlos is trying to defame me on my father's deathbed so the inheritance will be his. I don't even know how he came up with the idea. Carlos is an idiot. He'd never do this on his own, though he's capable of some very dark things if pushed that direction.

"He's not angry, Aria. He wants the best for his family, like any father does. That's all." I pat her hand again and kiss the top of her head.

The car pulls up outside and I say, "Stay here," but she whimpers.

"Please, let me come in. Don't make me wait in the car like a punished child." She clings to me as I open the door, and I sigh. She has me wrapped around her pinky. I'd probably do anything she asked so long as it was good for my business.

"Alright, but you have to wait in the living room. I don't think Dad will appreciate a woman during a meeting like this." Sliding out of the car, I take her hand and pull her along with me.

The dark dress she wears dangles around her shapely legs, hugging her hips. I can't wait to get her home and remove it from her body, but first to deal with the wrath of my father. I lead her up to the front door and into the living room. I already hear the harsh rasp of his voice as he complains about something Carlos has done.

I cup Aria's cheek, drawing a kiss from her lips as moral support. "Stay here, mia cara. I'll be back."

She nods at me as I walk away and watches me as I vanish into my father's study. He lies prone on the couch, covered in a blanket so thick it hides his scrawny body, wasting away from barely eating.

"Get in here," he grumbles, and I shut the door behind me.

Carlos stands in the corner with a glass of whiskey in hand. Beads of sweat cling to his forehead, but his dark smirk chases me, haunting me as I perch on the edge of the coffee table next to my dying father. Dad sucks in a few heavy breaths and closes his eyes, opening them slowly.

"What is it, Papa?" I ask, resting a hand on his hand.

"Tito," he scratches out, barely making a tone. It's mostly breath. "Carlos has shared some awful things. You've been fighting the Russians, and they're moving in?" I hear the disappointment in his voice. I hoped to have kept this from him, to ease his transition into the next life without so much anxiety over this one.

"I've got it, Papa. It's under control. Our enemies have struck us. I'm only pushing back." What I'm doing is the right move. It will only turn in our favor, and soon. With the Peraltas fighting alongside us, soon, Uhkov will see how formidable we are and how he won't ever be able to overpower us. My plan will work. I'll just have to be patient when it comes to owning the Peralta family. If it even comes to that anymore. Hector is eating out of my hand as it is. Without an heir, they will all fall in line soon.

"It's a disgrace, Tito. Years—" He rasps, then begins to cough. The coughing continues for several minutes. Blood and sputum soak his handkerchief, and I glare at Carlos when Father's eyes are shut. My brother is evil and sadistic. Who would put an elderly man on his deathbed in such a state of emotional chaos?

"Papa, I'm in complete control. We did not strike our enemies. They saw that we were forming such a strong alliance with the Peraltas and moved in to wreak havoc. They want to weaken us while we are not yet fully aligned." I put his glass of water in his hand, and he sips from it.



There is no way Carlos isn't behind this somehow. And now at the very end, too. How can he be this heartless to his own father? I've seen the evil of which he's capable, but I never imagined he'd use it against our father. And only because he wants my power. Will I have to take him out too? Is he the one putting the Russians up to this, or is my mind hazed over with the threat of intimidation too?

"Your brother is concerned, Tito, and so am I. We've had years of peace with Utkov and his family. This is unheard of. You must stop this warring. Things are so volatile right now. You can't risk it." Dad sips the water again and hands the glass back to me. He's so weak, the water in the glass sloshes as his hand shakes.

"I'm taking care of it. Okay?" I have a mind to slash Carlos's throat, but unlike him, I remain loyal to my family even when they are disloyal to me. If I find he's doing something to hurt my family, however, God help him.

"I believe you," Dad rasps and then sighs. Another few coughs puff out of his chest, but these ones are weak. I notice there is no ashtray, no pack of cigarettes or a pipe. Not even a cigar lying around. He's not even strong enough to feed his addiction, which is probably killing him. The withdrawal is horrible. I don't know how he can stand it.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Fix it now, Tito. Before it's too late." Dad's stern warning comes just as his eyes flutter shut. He's tired, and I'm furious. I need to leave before I hurt my brother and start something I can't undo.

Without saying a word to my brother, I slip out of the room. Aria is here, at the door listening, and the instant the door is shut with Carlos and my father inside, she throws her arms around me. I am taken by surprise at the show of affection and pull away from her.

"Shh," she whispers, taking my hand. Her furtive glances and the way she pulls me toward the door intrigue me, so I follow without protest.

Safely inside the car and headed toward my home, she turns to me. "I can help you." Those full red lips speak words a man like me never hears. My wife helping me with what? My issue with my brother? Does she know something I don't? Is that why Carlos was speaking to her privately so many times?

"With what?" I ask, feigning ignorance. I don't know how much she heard, and I'm not giving anything away.

"I heard that, Tito. Don't play dumb." Aria's expression darkens. "It seems to me your brother is trying to instigate trouble. He's telling your father things that make you look bad. Maybe he's hoping your father gives him the reins, not you."

Her accusation against Carlos is spot on, and now I'm really curious. "And exactly how can you help me with this?" I angle my shoulders to face her as the car rumbles onto the highway, and she lays out her plan for me as our fingers lace together.

"Petrovich Ukhov... I call him Peter. We went to high school together. We were close. He was my first—" Aria cuts herself off as her cheeks flush, and she looks down at our fingers locked together. "We have to stop the war, Tito. My father is weak." She looks into my eyes. "They took my brother from him. They've threatened my sister, and she's away now, where it's safe." This is news to me, but Aria doesn't explain. She continues, "Peter can help. If you let me, I will do what needs done. You just can't ask me what I'm doing, and you have to trust that it's the only way."

I think for a moment as I notice the serious look in her eye, and for the first time, I wonder how dangerous my own wife is. I see a fire there I've not seen since the day we met. She'd have gutted me if she could have. Now I wonder about whom she is thinking, about whose throat she's dreaming of slitting while they sleep.

"And Carlos? You know he's involved?"

Aria nods but doesn't explain, and I wonder how she will take care of this.

"You won't harm him?" My question makes her bristle.

"I will only do what is necessary to save your life, your reputation, your family, and your father the shame of having a traitorous son. Now, no more questions. Do you want me to do what I need to do?" Aria's hand pulls away from mine and she reaches for her hair, collecting it and drawing it over her right shoulder.

The less I know about it the better, and I do trust that she has my back for a very strange reason. I'm not looking at her as a weak and powerless woman anymore. When she gave Carlos that business advice, I knew how smart she was. When she stood up to me, I knew how strong she was. And now, I know how deadly she is, and if it means saving everything, I can turn a blind eye.

"Most men who make a deal with the devil have to share fluids... Spit on their hand,

mingle some blood...." My dick is already throbbing as I suck in the breath for the next sentence, but she beats me to it.

"Then get your dick out and let me suck you off... My spit and yours..." Her eyes haze with lust as she slides to the floor, and my fly is open before her mouth descends.

The way her lips wrap around my cock is glorious, sucking and sliding up and down my shaft. This isn't forced. It's not coercion. Aria and I have something no one will ever take from us now, and I'm beginning to see how wrong I was about this entire family. I don't have to take them by force. They're willingly giving themselves to me because they see my leadership and know it's good.

I wiggle the silk of her dress up over her hips and bare her ass, shoving my hand into her panties to finger her backside as she continues to suck. Yes, I think this partnership will work out just fine. Better than I hoped. And fuck, is she good at sucking me.

25

ARIA

I have to do this under the cloak of darkness. It's nearing midnight, but if I were to be seen with Peter, it would cost him his life. We go way back, but I know his ruthlessness. When he's ensnared, his temper goes supernova, and I don't want to be anywhere close to him if that happens. We have an understanding, but it'll never supersede the connection with his family.

Tito agreed to let me work my magic without asking any questions. It's a matter of trust, which I now have for him and he for me. When he said he wanted to be my partner in life and in business, he wasn't kidding. For all he knows, I could be

working as a double agent for the Russians, hell-bent on destroying him, and though the double-agent part wasn't accurate, for a while, I was. I wanted him to weep at my feet and grovel for my forgiveness because of the things he threatened to put my father through.

Now I just want the fighting to end and my father to be of sound mind and safe in body for the rest of his life. Losing Jasper changed the game. It didn't necessarily change my outlook for this arrangement. That came later. What it did was show me how short life is and how fragile we all are. If Tito can order a hit to take my brother out without even being suspected, then he could do far worse to my father, and it seems Dad is handing him everything he wants on a silver platter.

I drive a borrowed car, untraceable and donated to my cause by Tito who did not ask where I would go this late at night. Though he did kiss my forehead and ask me to be safe. My stomach rolled with nausea when he said, "You may be carrying my heir." He can only suspect things right now. There is no way he knows anything. I've hidden it very well, behind fatigue and grieving. But he's right. I need to be safe for the baby's sake.

The car—a small, early model Pontiac sports car with no registered plates—hugs the curves. I have such little experience driving, though Dad insisted both of us girls learn to drive. He cautioned us that we may need the skill in an emergency, and while I don't consider this an emergency, I do think it's a necessity.

The night swallows the road, sucking in the light from the headlamps into its void. It makes navigating the turns a little anxiety inducing. As if I don't have enough anxiety as it is. There is danger on all sides. If my father discovers I'm speaking to Peter, he'll be heartbroken. He told me a long time ago that the man—then just a boy—was off limits. An enemy is not a friend. But now that I'm grown and know better, it would tear his heart out. Two children dead, one gone off to safety, and the final one a traitor? No, I can't do that to him.

If Tito's men see me speaking with Peter, they'll kill me on the spot. It's their training. They'd do it to Carlos or any of the others. I'm just a tool to bind the Ramiros to the Peraltas, and in meeting with Tito's foes, I'm breaking the agreement. I have to place my trust in Tito that he understands this is for his protection and my father's. He'll see what I'm doing and he won't see it as my breaking the agreement.

But if Peter's family catches wind that I'm with him, not only Peter will suffer. They'll make an example of me in front of both my husband and my father. They'd both be crushed. I can see it in their eyes when I look at them.

I park a few blocks away, armed with my pepper spray, a switch blade I taught myself to use with Jasper's help, and a Ruger .22 handgun. It won't kill much unless the shot is perfect, but it'll buy me time to escape in a pinch. I'm not here to destroy, just to maim, and my plan is simple. I have to make sure Carlos's plot is exposed to everyone, not to harm him, but to disarm him. His father must know how he's working with the enemy to overthrow Tito now, before the elder Ramiro dies and gives his life to the wrong son. Tito is the rightful leader, and I was mistaken when I thought Carlos could do it.

If Carlos takes the helm, there will be no respect for my family at all. He'll pick them off one by one, destroy the business, and bury the Peralta name so deeply no one will remember it ten years from now. Tito and I have an arrangement that we can at least push for ten years, longer if I'm carrying a son. I might be willing to make concessions to ensure things go smoothly for my family, at least until my father and mother pass.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I move through the night along the side of the buildings with my knife in one hand and my pepper spray in the other. It's been a long time since I've been in this part of LA after dark. A decade at least. We used to sneak out, Melody and I, and meet with Peter and his cousin. We'd kiss and do other things unruly teens do, and at one point, I thought I was in love with him. Until my father taught me the dangers of the Russian Family.

I feared Peter then, but I never needed to. Not then, at least. Now, it's a different story. I sent him our message, a code word that only the two of us know. I asked him to meet me here. His returned message stated simply, Petrovich is dead. I don't know what that means, but I gave him instructions for this time and place—our place. A place we would meet almost nightly for a long time.

Not looking to rekindle the romance, I dressed very modestly—a black top that buttons to the collarbone and loose-fitting jeans. My heels and long black trench coat complete the incognito attire, but he'll recognize the hat, one similar to my favorite hat back in the day, a felt fedora with a very wide brim, black, of course, to help me blend in with the shadows.

I stand by the dumpster just out of the light of the street lamp overhead and wait. The time on my phone tells me he's late, at least ten minutes, but then he did tell me he was dead. I can only imagine that was his way of warning me off, trying to keep me from coming, but I have to do this. I'm still not sure whether Tito deserves my help. I instigated the trouble with Carlos for a reason, after all, but my father needs saving, and this is my only shot. If I don't reach Peter and beg him to stop this, his family may destroy everything.

"You came," a male voice says from the shadows behind me, and I reel around to see a broad set of shoulders moving toward me.

"You said you were dead..." My heart flutters nervously. I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be doing this. It's so dangerous. Peter is an Utkov. He's not loyal to my father or Tito. He could slit my throat in one swipe, but I have to believe the affection we once had for one another will keep him from laying a hand on me.

"The Petrovich you knew is dead, kotenok."

Kitten. The pet name he had for me so long ago. The instant I hear it, I'm put at ease. He remembers and he wants me to know he remembers. It wasn't my fault I never came back. My father's insistence and my fear drove me to stay away. I think he knew that.

"Peter..." I whisper, a sudden rush of all that lost emotion overwhelming me. He moves toward me swiftly, cupping both cheeks. I can feel the heat of his breath on my lips as he leans in. He smells like whiskey and musk, the thick, heady scent almost enough for me to forget who I am and why I'm here, but my breath catches in my throat.

Before his lips can press against mine, I touch my finger to them, holding him back in a move that silences his affection and his advance in one fell swoop. He lingers there, eyes searching mine in light so dim I can barely make out the faint outline of a scar across his right eye.

"I'm married now, Peter." My confession doesn't shock him. His eyes never leave mine.

"Forbidden fruit is sweeter and juicier, isn't it?" he asks, and he leans in again, only to meet my resistance again. I turn my cheek, and he kisses me softly there before



pulling away. "Why is it that you've come to me?" His thick Russian accent has never faded, not one bit. He slips into a few slurs that I can't understand and then releases me. "Do you know how I suffered? How my heart ached for you and you ignored me?"

There is anger in his tone, but he won't harm me. I can tell he still loves me. I put the knife and pepper spray into my pockets and sigh. "Peter, I was only a tool in my father's tool belt. I had no choice. You have to know that." I reach for his hand and take it, and he lets me pry the fist open until his palm is exposed. I trace his lines as I continue. "I need your help."

"My family is at war with both of your families and you come to tempt me like a seductress? Did your father put you up to this or your husband? Who should I kill first?" His hand slides from my grasp and my heart clenches. This isn't the man I used to love. Life has hardened him. Pain has hardened him. Rejection... turned his heart to stone.

"You won't do either, tesoro..." My murmur pulls his strings and he loosens his shoulders. "You love me, and I can see it on your face. I need your help, please. You must help me."

He keeps his distance now, a man wise enough to know he's beat. "What is it, then?" he asks, and I know I have him right where I want him. Tito turns a blind eye on my plans for good reason. He cannot be found with red on his hands when his father sees what's been done. I have no problem with the guilty stains. I'm going to have to come clean, anyway. Tito will find out how I plotted, but he'll have no recourse. He plotted too. And I'm carrying the heir both to the Peralta throne and his own. How will he harm me? Anger, yes, but he will not lay a hand on me.

"What can I do?" Peter asks, and his tone is softer yet. If I were less of a woman, I'd give myself to him now out of sheer relief, but I will not disobey my father, not even

now. And for some reason, I care enough to never cross that line with Tito.

"This is what I need..." I say, and my plan unravels before him like a map rolled out, showing the way to all who see it.

Now if Peter stays on board and Tito can manage to follow my lead, everything will work out fine. But that's a big "if". I can't even fathom the alternative. I won't even think it. Peter and I will fix this if it's the last thing we do.

26

TITO

I've spent the past hour speaking with Carlos and Sal about my father's concerns over what's happening with the Russians. When someone tries to move in and take territory, we have an obligation to push back, and maybe in his sickness, he's failed to see the threat Uhkov and his family present to us now. He lived in a time of peace, but I'm living with anything but.

"It's not like we can sit back and do nothing, Tito." Sal uses an open-handed gesture to accent his disagreement with my father's notion that peace should be reigning. "They moved on us first, and we all know it's because they're trying to dismantle our alliance. They want Hector Peralta to get scared and run. They don't want us to be strong."

"I disagree, and so does Father." Carlos angrily sucks on a glass of whiskey, eyes hazed and glassed over from drink already. "You could have stopped all of this."

I don't even want to speak with him right now. Aria never told me openly what is going on, but she insinuated that it has something to do with Carlos's hunger for my authority and position. I'm reluctant to believe, even still, that my brother would form

a plot against me with my enemies, but I don't put it past him to humiliate me in front of our father. It's anyone's game, apparently, though I believed myself to be the rightful heir.

"I've had enough for tonight." I stand, moving away from my brother before my temper gets the best of me. Six months ago, he would never have questioned my decisions or authority. What snake has come into my garden and tainted my tender vines? I rub a hand over my face and sigh as I hear the front door click shut.

"This can't wait, Tito. You know?—"

"Enough," I bark, cutting Carlos off. I turn my glare on him, and he scowls at me, defiant even though he understands what that will mean for him when I am the leader. And I will be the leader because I have no intention of letting go of my position. My men respect me, and the loyalty runs deep. Our family would sooner be split in two than follow Carlos. Everyone knows that.

"Let's go," Sal encourages, nudging Carlos with his elbow.

A hostile glare passes between me and my brother, and Aria steps into the living room, drawing all the attention. The wide, dark hat over her head speaks to everyone, and I get a sideways glance from Sal. Carlos's hands turn to fists, but he doesn't say a word to her. My men leave, and I am left with my wife who approaches me, removing her hat.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"It's done," she says softly, out of earshot from the still-retreating men who just sat in my living room.

I don't know what she's done, but I know why. Her loyalty to her father is unrivaled, though I sense a growing loyalty to me too. There is an unspoken agreement between us now, one I haven't made good on. In her eyes, I see fierce determination to do what's right for her family, and I want to believe that includes me.

"Your father traded you to me in exchange for help..." I begin to circle her, feeling a swirl of questions rise up. Her sneaking around, speaking to my brother behind my back, the feistiness she had when she first got here that has now relaxed.

"He did nothing of the sort." Aria's words are firm and calculated. I'm not speaking to a helpless waif. She is a powerhouse that no one suspects, strong and resilient. "I made this choice myself, though he did mention it was a possibility."

And there is her confession. All along, I thought she was forced into this, which was the reason for her fight and rebellion in the beginning. The cold expression on her face, however, shows me she's being truthful.

"You offered yourself to me? To save your father, I assume..." I move toward my liquor cabinet to pour myself a drink. "A glass?" I ask, but she shakes her head to refuse.

"I pledged to do what was needed for my family, and I am here to do just that." Aria sets her hat on the back of the new couch, replaced since my bleeding incident last week. Then she sheds her black coat, revealing the dark clothing beneath. Anyone

would understand why she's dressed this way, but I know all too well it's been for some nefarious purpose.

"So why help me?" The amber-colored liquid fills the tumbler, and I wonder why my wife isn't drinking. Could it be that she's already pregnant and she's been hiding it? Or is it that she wants to keep a level head—clear, sober thoughts? I turn to face her with my glass of whiskey in hand. "Why are you offering to use favors you have stored up to help me, Aria? Why not just help your family?"

The question mars her expression. Her forehead wrinkles. Her lips purse. She averts her eyes and licks her lips softly, lips that have touched mine in ways only lovers understand.

"We have an agreement," she says tightly, but there's more to it. I know there is. I can see it in her eyes. It's not just an agreement, and it's not just for her father.

I move toward her, stalking her like prey. She remains standing behind the sofa with one hand resting on the trench coat now draped over its cushion. She doesn't flinch when I touch her cheek with my pinky, drawing a few stray hairs off her creamy skin.

"Do you love me?" I ask her bluntly, because I've been wondering just this. I feel the swell of affection now and then. It's hard to differentiate between that and the power I feel when I'm around her, dominating her. But it's there, permeating my being.

Her lips are sealed, refusing to answer my question, but when she looks in my eyes, I know she wants to. I see the war raging inside her thoughts even though I can't read them. Aria Peralta is caught in a storm inside her mind.

"Let's ask an easier question. Are you sleeping with my brother?" My words hit their mark, a target in her chest designed to inflame that delicious anger she has.

Her shoulders stiffen, and she glares at me with nostrils flared. "I will tell you exactly what to do to make sure your father does not make Carlos his heir. And no, I have not, nor will I ever, sleep with your brother." The pain in her eyes as she defends herself convinces me she is in love with me, even if she's not ready to admit it out loud.

My hand lingers on her face, cupping her cheek. It's a tender moment between us, the kind men like me don't often have. Watching my father grieve for my mother, I'd have thought there was no affection in their relationship, but I know better now how much he loved her. And I feel it for Aria. The perfection of who she is as a woman and as a partner doesn't go over my head.

"Mia cara, tell me what you've done." My thumb brushes over her cheekbone.

"I know of your plot to infiltrate my father's organization, to merge your finances with his then bankrupt him." Her lips are alluring even as she speaks my sins to me as accusations. The fiery darts don't pierce me, though. It's as if she is the leader and I'm being scolded by her for my misdeeds, only it's softer and gentler than my father's rebukes. "You'll stop that immediately. Our Families aren't now, nor will they ever be, truly one. United in this marriage, but separate. Am I clear?"

Aria's hand shakes as she lifts it to my wrist and presses my hand into her skin. The way she looks into my eyes, igniting hunger for her inside my body, I can't look away. This woman is worth more than the entire Peralta fortune, their territory, suppliers, customers, and the lot. I could live a peaceful life as a happy man with only her, and yet I've been greedily pushing for more.

"And what if I don't?"

Her tongue draws out over her lips, moistening them, and she presses my hand more firmly against her cheek. "Then bad things will come of it, a war unlike the ones

you've seen before. Your father will roll over in his grave, and the last thing you'll see will be my face over you as you breathe your final breath."

This is not a threat. It's a promise. There are no threats between us because there is a bond here. She's not telling me she will harm me. She is only predicting the inevitable end for our relationship should I continue on the path I'm traveling. Which means she's known about this path, the plot to forcibly take over her father's businesses, for a while. That night when I told Carlos what I would do, she was there, and she was listening.

"And my brother?" The idea that he could convince my father to change his will so close to his deathbed doesn't sit well with me. Carlos isn't ready to lead. Father has to know that.

"I told you not to question me and to trust me, and now I need to know that I can trust you." Her bottom lip shakes as she speaks. She's given power to someone other than herself to finish the task that must be done. It's written in her eyes, on her forehead, the way her hand shakes against my skin.

"My trust is yours, Aria." I reach into my pocket and pull out my gun, pressing it into her palm. "If you do not believe me, then kill me now, and all of this is yours." Spreading my arms wide, I back away a few steps. The ultimate test between enemies turned lovers is submission and vulnerability. I want her to see that in order to survive this war with Utkov and his men, we must be united as one. Perhaps not our families—she doesn't trust my leadership in that aspect yet—but at least as partners.

"What good is lead to me?" She tosses the gun aside. "When I need assurance? I have that now." She clings to my chest and breathes me in. "And I need to get justice for my brother. His killer must pay."

The words sting like a slap to the face, even as her arms wrap around my body and

embrace me. I am her brother's killer, and there is no way I can tell her that. Not now, not when trust has been developed between us like this. I slowly close her into the circle of my arms and kiss the top of her head. Her tone is sad, too, not angry. It's not like she is demanding revenge, but more as if she's mournfully accepting that nothing will be the same.

"I love you, Aria..." I whisper next to her ear. It's a foreign word on my tongue—love—but there's no other fitting word for me.

"I love you, Tito..." The words spill from her lips in a painful sob as tears begin to flow. The game I'm playing is wicked and dangerous, and I'm seeing the rippling effects flow outward from my choices now, effects I hate and wish were gone. That turns to rage inside me and a determination to make things as they should be, in every way.

If she says she is handling this, then I must trust her. It's the least I can do after taking her brother from her.



27

ARIA

Tito's sweat-slicked body rolls off mine onto the bare mattress, the sheets tangled at the foot of the bed from the wild romp we just had. His sex drains from me, soiling the bed beneath me and reminding me that I'm his—the child inside me, too. He's panting for air like me, and neither of us speaks. I lie there staring at the ceiling thinking of the mess I've made and how things are going behind the scenes where I cannot look.

I haven't heard from Peter, but I cling to hope that he will keep his word. I don't even know how much pull he has in his family right now, but if he can give me what I asked for, it'll be enough to set things right. Though, it may never make things between Tito and me the way they should be in a trusting partnership or marriage.

"I'm going to shower," Tito says, pushing off the bed. It jostles as he stands and heads toward the bathroom, turning over his shoulder to say, "You want to join me?"

"Not tonight..." I turn my back to him as the thoughts continue to pummel me. I've spent the past month trying to make Tito seem inadequate to his father along with Carlos's help. I don't know if Carlos's attitude and temperament turned on me because I withdrew and had second thoughts or if it's because he's a monster in disguise.

Our plan was to discredit Tito, but I'm afraid Carlos has done something darker and more sinister than I ever had in mind. Peter will confirm this for me, but my suspicion is that he's employed the help of someone inside the Utkov family, someone who

knows exactly what to do to make Tito a non-threat to Carlos's plot to become the new leader. The thought makes me shudder with fear.

The Russians may be regrouping right now, but their next strike could come at any time, in any place. I hardly think they will attack Tito's residence, but anything is possible. I fear that in encouraging Carlos to resist Tito's leadership and undermine him, I've created a monster who won't be satisfied with just the authority and title of Don of the Ramiro Family. The insatiable hunger for power and money sinks its teeth into victims, and Carlos may have already succumbed to it. An alliance with the Ukhovs would be devastating, sucking my family into a web of deceit and treachery.

I hear the water turn on and Tito humming to himself. I'm tempted to join him if for no other reason than to feel the physical comfort of his hands washing my body clean, but I have no energy to move. I'm hiding so many secrets, I don't know which one is the heaviest. I'm weighed down, paralyzed by the circumstance and the grief. I still miss Jasper, but I haven't even had time to grieve him properly yet. Not with everything falling apart around me.

When my phone rings, it startles me. It's late, too late to have a phone call. Anyone who calls this time of day has something important to say. I push myself up and look at the screen—a blocked caller. It means only one thing. Peter has news for me.

I steal a glance at the bathroom door, still ajar with steam rolling out. Tito is still happily humming, occupied for the moment, so I take the call. My thumb slides across the screen to answer, and I hold it to my ear.

"Yes..." My simple greeting is both for my protection and his. If anyone is listening to either end of this call, they can't ever hear any personally identifying words. I wait with bated breath as the line crackles in the silence for a moment.

"Kitten... I have news." Peter's voice is thick with emotion. He never stopped loving

me, though I have clearly moved on.

"Go on," I tell him, not willing to even risk the impression that I'm moved by that. If Tito heard that, he'd be furious. I don't know how he'd react.

"Jasper was murdered by someone very close to your husband, Kitten. The man himself probably gave the order." The first thing I wanted to know, which I feared I already knew, is confirmed. I don't know why rage wells up inside me.

I knew this, right? That Tito probably ordered the hit that killed Jasper... I knew it and I blamed myself—blame myself. It never would have happened if I hadn't messed with things, but Jasper is dead and now it's confirmed my husband is guilty, caught red-handed.

"Thank you."

"There's more." Peter has several tasks from me. One of them is to make sure his people stay away from my family. The Peraltas are not responsible for this feud, and I don't want them involved. The next thing Peter has to do is get proof of Carlos's anarchy and deliver it to me or Tito, maybe even in front of his father.

"Go on," I repeat, glancing at the door. The shower water is off now, door still ajar. Tito isn't humming, but he isn't out here yet. I sit up, legs dangling over the bed. I'm so angry I am shaking, but I have to know what else.

"Your family... I can't do much. They willingly entered this fight, and my brother will do what's needed to maintain integrity. I'm sorry. It's out of my hands." Peter clears his throat. "But I have what you asked for and I will send it to you soon. Ramiro's brother has been working with mine. I don't know all the details, but I'll get them."

"Thank you so much." I want to speak his name, a gratitude from me to him, but to do so would be to put us both at risk.

"Speak nothing of it. And if you find yourself alone, Kitten, then come to me." His invitation is comforting, but it doesn't move my heart. I am in love with the man I forced myself to marry now, for good or for bad, in peace or at war.

"I will." My promise comes just as Tito rejoins me in the bedroom.

"Who was that?" he asks, using a towel to dry his hair. His naked body has droplets of water across it, scars and tattoos bared for my eyes. He's a work of art, but I'm so hurt I don't know where to begin. I need a buffer, some time to put this rage back inside the box Peter just opened and lock it away.

I know Tito had my brother killed and I know it was my fault, but my anger isn't directed at myself anymore. That's how I swallowed it before. That's how I was able to push it away and not feel it. But now, I can't help but feel it. The wound is reopened and fresh, and he's standing right in front of me.

"My source..." I'm not lying, though I won't tell him who, or that we were once lovers.

"And?" he asks, walking toward me.

"And he told me you ordered the hit that killed my brother." I can't look at him. Tears burn my eyes as I set the phone on the nightstand and rise. I want to run out of this house and find peace and solace somewhere else, with my family, maybe, but Tito is my family now.

"Aria..." he starts, but I am livid.

"No!" I shout, an eruption so fast and so loud he jumps. Then his eyes darken as he opens his mouth to speak, but I rush at him with fists ready. I pummel his chest hard, screaming, "I hate you! I hate your family! I hate your business! I hate this marriage! I hate you!"

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

All the grief of the past several months is too much for me to control. My hands hammer against his firm body until he grabs my wrists and pins them against my chest.

"Stop it!" he shouts, but I'm relentless.

"You are a monster!" The accusation wells up, and I spit it at him, but I know it's meant for me. I am the monster. I am the one to blame, but I don't know how to express that.

"Aria, knock it off," he booms, and I try to wrestle away from him, but he shoves me hard and I land on the bed. "This is business and I had no clue who snitched on us until the hit was done. I sent my men to take care of a problem and they did as they were told, and?—"

"And you stole my brother from me," I sob.

The bed shakes again as he sits down and lays a hand on my hip. "I didn't know, Aria. I only found out when it was done. I had no way of knowing it was Jasper."

"Don't say his name!" I scream as I curl into a ball. "Don't you ever fucking say his name again." The pain I'm feeling is too deep, pushed so far into my gut I hoped I'd never feel it again. I know now what my mother has been feeling, my father too. I've compartmentalized it away so I could function, and it's all rising to the surface, threatening to drive me mad with anger.

For once Tito is silent, hand still resting on my hip. I know it wasn't personal, that he

didn't love me back then the way he does now. And I believe him when he says he didn't know who it was until it was too late. Things like this aren't supposed to happen, though. The agreement was meant to protect us both, but I breached it first. I leaked the information that got Jasper killed, and I can't blame my husband for his reaction. I knew what sort of game I was playing.

My phone rings, but I ignore it. I'm in no shape to speak to anyone right now. And if it's Peter, he will get the point and not call back again tonight. But Tito doesn't think like me. He reaches for my phone and answers.

"Hello... Yes.... Oh, hello... Is everything okay?" My heart claws at my rib cage, a wounded animal seeking refuge from the pain. "I understand. Yes, I agree. That's not good. We'll be there in twenty minutes."

"What?" I ask, sitting up. My naked body feels very exposed to him now, the vulnerability of our sex juxtaposed next to my rage for the man seated in front of me. "Who was it?" I ask, now trembling.

"It was your parents' security team. There's been an attack." He doesn't explain much as he stands and walks to his dresser with determination.

"Attack? What attack?" I ask, the fear now overwhelming my anger. "What happened? Are they okay?" More tears come now, but not from rage. I rush to the dresser and pull out clean clothes, dressing in tandem next to the man I simultaneously loathe and love.

"I don't know," he growls as he steps into his boxers. "A bomb. We have to go there. I need time to get my men ready." And then Tito is gone, taking my phone with him. He carries his clothes as I scurry to dress. My mind is racing with terrifying images flashing through it.

My God, what have I started? Dear God... Protect my parents.

28

TITO

Tony drives us to Don Hector's house, but we can't even get onto the block. Smoke rises from the back of the house and the street is lined with firetrucks and first responder vehicles. Aria is frantic, trying to jump from the moving car, but I hold her down, pinning her against my side as she cries and pleads audibly with God to protect her family. She didn't even react like this when Jasper died. That was more of a silent, inward mourning that she couldn't even speak of. This is loud and painful to watch.

"Hey, look, the security team would have told us if it was really bad. This is just a home and it can be repaired." I try to encourage her with the full knowledge that she's still angry with me and probably will be for a long time. She has reason to terminate our agreement now, proof that I harmed her family and in doing so broke one of the clauses that would permit her to leave me.

But she won't.

With the way the Russians have moved in, she needs me. She needs to stay with me to continue to tap into the strength I can provide, and tonight, I'm thankful for that. Just holding her as she cries and panics makes me want to erase suffering from the face of the planet just to help her feel better.

"What if they're dead? My God, Tito! How will I live?" Aria's words are barely intelligible. Her face is covered in tear streaks and snot. I offer her my handkerchief, and she mops up the mess, but it will return, as it has so many times. She emptied the glovebox of the restaurant napkins stored there for emergencies.



"I don't think they are, baby, but if they are, I won't rest until they are avenged." I pull her head into my chest, and she buries her face there, as if none of the previous argument had even happened. She clings to me, a shuddering leaf in a violent tornado, and I am her refuge.

I mean it, too. No one who harms the woman I love this much emotionally will live to tell about it. The crushing guilt of my part in this night's emotion tempers my anger toward her for lashing out. How can I blame her? We both understand this business and how things work. Jasper did something that crossed a line and my men dispatched him without a care in the world. All at my order.

"My God..." She sobs, and her hands claw my shirt into tight fists that don't let go until the car stops.

"We're as close as I can get." Tony's eyes look at me through the reflection in the rearview mirror, and I nod.

"Come on, baby..." I don't have to tell her twice. She slides out the door with me, and still trembling, clings to my side as we walk around the police barricades. My men have been on this house for more than a month now for various purposes, but in the wake of the skirmishes with the Russians, I've had to decrease security here to avoid wearing them out. It was a foolish move. I know that later on, Aria will learn of it and be even angrier.

"Sir, you can't go back there!" I hear, but I ignore it. My wife needs to get to her parents as quickly as possible. "Sir!" the officer shouts again.

"It's my wife's parents' home. She has to get to them, please." I continue walking even when I see him reaching for his radio to call for backup. I'll knock him out if I have to, but luckily, he only radios in that we're breaching the line. He doesn't attempt to stop us, likely because he has to stay by the barricades to stop others.

The neighbors are out in droves, staring at the flames shooting out the rear of the house. First responders bustle about in full fire gear. A few EMTs sit in the back of an ambulance treating someone, I can't see who, and one firefighter mans a long hose that snakes between houses toward the fire in back.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

The entire block is lit up with flashing lights and spotlights from the tops of cars and trucks. In the chaos, it's easy for us to slip through unnoticed, and when we get to the front of the house across the street, I see Hector standing next to an EMT with an oxygen mask on his face. Aria notices him at the same time, and I can't even restrain her. She's a wild animal, tearing past the crowd to crash into him.

"Papa," she sobs, clinging to the older man's chest. She nearly knocks him over with the force of her hug, and he lowers the mask to wrap his arms around her.

"Aria..." Hector coughs, and Aria pulls away when the EMT puts the mask back on his face.

"Papa, where's Mamma?" She stands back as the EMT straps the plastic tubing down around Hector's jawline and neck, securing the mask with elastic straps around his ears. As he speaks, the mask fogs.

"She's going to the hospital. She has a few burns and cuts. I have to stay here, find my men." His coughing rivals my father's. He doubles over, and the EMT forces him to back up and sit on the wide bumper of the ambulance. Aria stumbles along with him, trying to cling to him and fawn over him.

"Aria, you should go." I look up at the ambulance with the EMTs working on someone and know it has to be her mother. "Go to the hospital with your mother."

Her eyes are full of fire as she stares up at me. The same anger that heated her gaze at home is there, defiant and burning through my soul. "I'm staying here with my father. They won't let me ride with her anyway, and she'll be getting treatment for a while. I

can go in a little bit." Her harsh tone warns me that I'm going to get nowhere, but I have to try. This place isn't safe. If the Ukhovs are anywhere close, there could be a shootout, and I need her to be away from here.

"Tony will drive you."

"No," she says sternly and glares at me. "I'm staying here. We will find who did this and we will take them down together, and don't cross me, Mr. Ramiro. If you do, you won't live to regret it."

Even Hector is surprised by his daughter's outburst. His eyebrows rise and I see him struggling to breathe. He takes her hand and gently pats it.

"Aria, please listen to your husband. He's only trying to keep you safe." The words are muffled through the mask, but I know she hears them. Her shoulders droop a little then stiffen again as she stands.

"I will do whatever he says, but here, not at the hospital. I have to know how this happened and why. It was Ukhov, wasn't it?" She keeps hold of his hand, and he nods.

"Find Nigel and he will help you. My men, they're at your disposal, Tito. Perhaps I'll let them take me to the hospital. With you in charge, I trust things will be handled."

Aria looks hesitant at her father's words, the same hesitation I noticed in Jasper's expression before his death when he protested our financial merger. She fears my leadership of her father's family, and for good reason. She still believes I'll take over, and she has no clue I've had a change of heart, how good this will be to truly merge our families and eventually become one by blood, not by force.

"You have my word, as a man of my honor, Father." When I call him that, Aria looks

up at me with pain and confusion in her eyes. "I will protect your daughter, my wife, and I will find who did this. They will pay." Only this woman could do to me what is happening, my heart changing, my loyalty shifting. Seeing how she loves her family makes me love her family as much as I love her.

"Sir, let's get you into the ambulance. You're going to need more rest..." The EMT takes over, pulling Hector away from us, and I walk away, heading out to look for Nigel, one of Hector's top men. Aria stomps along beside me, her feet slapping the pavement.

"Why did you say that? Who are you trying to fool?" She's hurt and angry. She still thinks I'm manipulating him. I will only prove my altruism by action, not by words.

"Why do you question everything I do? When will you trust me?" I continue moving with purpose, seeing Nigel's face in the distance among a cluster of Peralta family members just on the other side of the police barriers.

"When do you trust a snake?" she hisses, and I stop short and turn around so fast that she runs into my chest. I grab her by the biceps and shake her hard.

"This is my territory, Aria. If you can't trust me, at least have the decency to respect me and your father. He trusts me, and for good reason." I'm angry, but I know she's going through things. "I fucking love you, alright?" My voice is low, a gravelly anger seeping through my tone. "I never intended to kill Jasper. If I wanted him dead, I'd have taken full credit immediately and owned your family and you by force. But I haven't done that. And I won't."

She trembles, then her lip quivers. Then she turns away from me and dry heaves, bending toward the pavement and coughing as nothing comes up, but her body doesn't stop. The emotion overwhelms her so much, her body has symptoms, and I hate this but I can't stop it. I stand next to her with my hand on her back until she

rights herself and nods at me.

"Are you okay?" I ask sternly, as if she were one of my men, not my wife. Because right now, in this situation, she's one of the guys and she has to be treated as such.

"I'm fine," she growls. "Let's find and kill those bastards."

When we start moving again, I know it's as a unit. The two of us have one purpose, to recompense the evil perpetrated on our family. And we won't go home without vengeance on our plate.

We approach her family who all look to me with expectation. They've seen me around enough to know who I am and that Don Hector trusts me. For now, they've lost their leader, and they have to collect themselves to move forward. But what I don't expect is the warm welcome I receive.

They all shake my hand and ask me for direction, and I have no trouble issuing it. "Tonight, we're going hunting. The men who are responsible will pay, and we will avenge our trusted leader and friend, Don Hector Peralta."

A cheer goes up and draws a little attention from the police, but we're not backing down. With Aria by my side, I'll lead them into battle and come out victorious. And if not, I'll die trying.

29

ARIA

For a moment, I thought Tito was going to impose his will on me, make me go with my parents to the hospital. But here I am, seated next to him in the back of his car while his men drive us into battle. If I hadn't known about Peter's family, we'd be

going nowhere, so Tito really had no choice but to bring me along. I'm the one with inside information—me and Carlos, apparently. I don't know how Tito will react when he learns that. I don't even have the details, but something tells me tonight, we'll uncover the truth ourselves.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Are you sure this is the right place? Seems sort of exposed to me..." Tony doubts me, not because I'm new to this game but because I'm a woman. Men don't like when women play their games, but while I may not be the cold-blooded killer they think I am, I know how to play.

"It's the right place," I say firmly, remembering many nights where Peter and I spirited away to this exact location. "Hidden in plain sight... I guess you've never heard the term."

Tito has a weapon, polishing it, making sure the rounds are loaded correctly. He hasn't given me a weapon yet, and I rushed out of his home in a panic, frantic to see my parents and find out whether they're okay. I never thought to grab mine. He can't expect me to go into this situation without protection.

"How do you know it's the right place?" Tony's questioning is annoying, and I don't have to tolerate it.

"Look, Tony, just drive. That's what you're supposed to do, not question my knowledge or orders." My hard glare isn't missed. His eyes shift from meeting my gaze to the road, then back to the mirror where I'm certain he's looking at Tito. But my husband is preoccupied, probably going through each step in his head of how to appropriately respond to our enemy. He says nothing about my comments to Tony.

"Where is my weapon?" I ask Tito, and he pauses for a second to look up at me.

"You don't need one. You're waiting in the car." He's serious. He thinks he's keeping me locked up like a little puppy in a cage while he goes to take care of business.



"The hell I am. I'm going to be right beside you. If I can't avenge my own brother's death by taking out the man who murdered him, then I deserve the right to avenge this attack on my family." The words are a slap in the face, and I mean them to be. He knows the pain I'm in, and while I still blame myself for Jasper's death, the reaction I had at home before learning about the attack on my parents' home spoke volumes.

"Boss, a woman in a gunfight?" Tony chuckles. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"I told you to mind your fucking business." Glaring at the driver, I try to calm myself before turning again to Tito. "You said you want me to be your partner, so give me a fucking gun and let me be your partner."

Tito's eyes flash with anger and stubbornness, but his scowl softens into a resolved defeat. He moves swiftly, leaning over the seats in front of us and reaching for the glovebox. When he returns to his seated position, he's holding a large handgun, my guess is a nine mil or a three-eighty, but I'm not well-versed in weaponry.

"You've handled a weapon before, I assume?" he asks, and I nod.

The guns I've worked with were limited, mostly twenty-two pistols, and once, I fired a forty-five, but it knocked me on my ass. I release the clip and it drops into my hand. It's full. I count fourteen rounds, which I slide back into the gun and clip in place. I feel sort of badass as I pull the slide back and chamber a round, then drop the clip again.

"One more..." I tell him, holding an open palm up so he can give me one more round to fill the clip again.

His eyebrows rise, as if he is surprised that I actually know what I'm doing. If I'm going into a war zone, I need as many rounds as possible. There's no sense in taking

only fourteen when the gun will hold fifteen. His lips purse and he reaches into the box of ammunition on the seat beside him.

"Aria, I don't think this is a good idea. Your father would?—"

"My father isn't here, and he taught me to use a weapon for a reason. If I were Jasper, joining you on a hunt to avenge the family, you wouldn't doubt me for a second, but you take one look at my tits and believe I'm incapable." I slam the clip back in place with the final round loaded and glare at him. "Stay out of my line of fire. I don't take to people who doubt me."

The car rolls to a stop in the middle of my rant, so when I'm finished I climb out and round the front of the vehicle without waiting for him to respond. Several more cars fall in line behind ours and men begin exiting them. The looming furniture store and adjoining warehouse is only a block away. If any of Utkov's men see us approaching, we're sitting ducks, but the amount of adrenaline coursing through my veins keeps me focused on my task.

Peter won't stop the attacks on my family because they got involved, and while he is a good friend and likely would be a good husband if things had been different between us, he is still an enemy. Even more so now that his family has openly pitted themselves against mine. I will never kill him myself, nor will I ever order it to be done indirectly, but I won't sit back and take this shit. We have to defend the Peralta-Ramiro alliance.

"I know how to get in. There's a door in back and the key is always inside the drainpipe."

Tito, who's just joined me at the front of the car, nods at my instruction. I'm not the leader here. I'm along for the ride, and I won't be told to sit like a good dog. So, I offer my respect to him when he moves out first, taking the lead.

We slip under cover of darkness along the storefronts next to the warehouse and then into the black alley where we almost vanish. If I weren't so close to Tito, I'd lose him. My gun hand shakes as he stands by the door and reaches for the key in the drainpipe. The light over the back door has been busted out for as long as I can remember, evidence of the childish things we did when we were younger. I can't believe they've never fixed it, but then there is a new generation of Uhkov teenagers who probably do the same thing.

Tito slides the key into the lock and turns it, and the door clicks. He whispers a few harsh words as the men collect behind us. I can't see how many there are, but the small herd is noisy. He hushes them and quietly pulls the door open.

"Stay behind us," he growls at me, and suddenly, I'm wishing I'd have stayed in the car. What the hell was I thinking believing I could come in here and do this like I am a grown man? My stomach rolls, nausea reminding me that it isn't just my safety I'm in charge of. My little one has to be protected now too, and my anger over everything pushed me to be the hero.

The men file into the building, Tito holding the door for them, and before thirty seconds pass, gunfire erupts. My pulse is hammering, my hands sweaty, but I lurch through the door behind Tito and step into his world.

It's surreal, the explosive sounds around me, the eerie, dim lighting. I feel like I'm in a bad dream, hoping I'll wake up before things get scary or I die. At least I can see now. I creep forward behind the men, now having lost track of Tito for the moment. My gun is raised, my breathing rapid and thready. I can't hear anything. The gunshots have deafened me. I wince every time they go off. I don't belong here.

"You're gonna die, Ramiro, you and the whole Peralta family." A sinister laugh is cut short by another blast, and I faintly hear gurgling and coughing.

Tears well up, and I don't try to blink them away. I back myself into a corner near a stairwell and slide down the wall with my gun on aim. The men are gone now up the steps, down the corridor, into various rooms, and I sit cowering like a fucking fool, shaking so badly I almost piss myself. I'm hyperventilating. I pull my shirt up over my face and breathe in the stale, recycled oxygen, and it helps.

I don't even see most of what's happening, but I don't miss a single one of the gunshots. Each one makes me jolt with fear. Each one feels like a nail in my coffin being hammered in place. And when I see a shadow at the top of the stairs, I turn my gun in that direction. It isn't one of my father's men or Tito's, and the paralyzing shot of adrenaline to my heart stabs me into action.

I squeeze the trigger once, twice, three times, missing a few and striking him in the shoulder with one. The body falls down the stairs at me, tumbling and rolling. His gun bounces on the steps and hits the wall, and he slumps into a pile, groaning.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

I'm trembling, still aiming my gun at him even as he reaches for his own, but he doesn't get it in time. I fire off a few more rounds, not even counting how many I have left. The blood splatters everywhere, so much of it. It stains my conscience and my clothing. I can't look away from him, can't peel my eyes off his dying form. I did that. I murdered him, and I'm going to throw up now.

"Hey, it's okay," I hear, and then I feel hands on me. Startled, I jerk and inadvertently fire off another round when Tito's hand slides down my arm to lower the weapon. "It's over, baby."

I turn and curl into him. He was right. I don't belong out here with guns and bloodshed. I'm strong, and I can do a lot of things, but killing apparently isn't one of them. Tito holds me tightly against his chest, and I sniffle a few more times, listening to the patter of feet on the steps and down the hall.

"We got it locked up, Boss. Should we head out?" An unfamiliar voice says the words, and I stay hidden in my husband's chest.

"Go on... Tony and I will clear everything and make sure the cleaners get here." Tito's warm baritone rumbles my chest, and I hear the door opening and shutting. "I need to do one more sweep, okay? You go wait in the car. I'll be right out."

For a second, I think of handing him the gun, but even in the car there is danger. If someone approaches the building or the car, I need to defend myself. I loathe the idea of killing another person, but I take it with me, nodding.

I slip back into the cover of night alone. The others have already dispersed, leaving

the alley empty. I hear voices and move that direction, seeing the light on the street a hundred yards away, but one of those voices sounds familiar, too familiar. It's Carlos, and he wasn't part of our raid party coming in. What the hell is he doing here? It makes the hairs on my arm stand on end.

Ducking behind a dumpster, I crouch down in the darkness trying to make myself invisible. My mind has played a trick on me, making me think Carlos was coming from the direction I need to go, and in reality, he comes from the opposite way, which is why he never saw our men moving that way. He's with three other men. I can only see their silhouettes, but I hear their voices distinctly... Russians.

Anger is ignited in my chest as they move toward the door and open it. One of them comments about how it's unlocked, and all four of them pull their weapons. Tito is in there with Tony, outnumbered two-to-one, and the gun in my trembling hand could even the score. But I sit paralyzed, seeing the blood of the man I killed splattered all over the wall, the steps, his body.

I can't bring myself to move and go in there. I know if I do, I have to kill more, and I don't know if I can do that. So I stay planted where I am, even when guns start going off again. I hear muffled shouting, men's angry voices, more gunshots, and my fear rises. Finally, I am thawed, able to jog to the door where I can hear more closely what's being said. I stand to the side and press my body against the brick exterior.

"You know she's turning on you. She's the one who set you up, Tito. Look around you. Don't you get it? You think she hired a fixer to take the Russians down, and sure, you killed a few of them tonight, but look where you are." Carlos's voice sounds victorious, boastful, as if he's gloating over a dying man, not toe-to-toe with an enemy. Because he is definitely Tito's enemy.

"You... You're going to pay." Tito's voice is hoarse, gasping for air. It makes me sick in the stomach again, but thankfully, I'm used to that feeling. I can't stand here and

listen to him gasping for breath not knowing what's going on. I don't care if there are more shots fired or if I die. My husband needs me.

I whip around and yank the door open, marching into the tight hallway with my gun raised. Tito lies on the floor with a knife in his belly, high near his liver, and Carlos stands over him with a boot on his neck. Tony is on the ground writhing in his own blood. One of the Russians is lying face down, lifeless, and two others stand near Carlos. I take it all in in a split second before pointing my gun at Carlos and shooting, one, two, three shots, and he falls.

The others open fire, but my gun is faster, meeting one in the shoulder and another in the gut. The two men drop their weapons and fall to the ground, and I stand over Carlos who is grasping his knee, rolling back and forth. His weapon is still on his hip, and I disarm him, throwing it to the corner near the dead man I killed earlier.

"You sick fuck!" I scream, kicking him hard in the wounded knee. I missed with all shots but one, and it hit his leg, but it's enough to injure him. He can't do much anymore except scream.

"Tell him, Aria... Tell him you're the one who made this all happen. Tell him you were supporting me," Carlos taunts while his men lie on the ground out cold.

"Shut up!" I shout, kicking his knee again to draw another scream. I run to Tito, whose body now is soaked in sweat. He's shaking from shock and bleeding so heavily he will die without help.

"Oh, God. No. Tito..." Laying my gun down, I wrap my arms around him and pull his head onto my lap. I need an ambulance or at least someone to come help me get him out of here before one of Carlos's men comes to or Carlos gets to his gun. "Fuck... I'm so sorry." I weep, curling over him.

Then the door opens, and Nigel struts in with two more of my father's men. We're saved, for now... But now, Tito knows I'm the one who made this happen, and I don't know how he will react.

If he even lives to have a reaction...

30

TITO

I blink my eyes into focus. The lights are bright overhead, and I hear sirens roaring. I'm moving, being jostled by a force greater than myself. Two people, a man and a woman in what appears to be scrubs, sit on either side of me. I'm in pain, excruciating pain. There's something strapped to my face, a breathing mask, possibly? Am I in an ambulance?

"Mr. Ramiro, you have been stabbed. We're taking you to Our Lady of Mercy Hospital." One of the EMTs is speaking to me, but I'm barely able to understand what they're saying. I feel lightheaded and dizzy, probably an effect from losing blood.

"Two CC's of epi now," the other one says.

I try to look around, try to locate whether Aria is in the ambulance with us, but I don't see her. And that little bit of activity makes me feel so exhausted, I have to shut my eyes. It's hard to breathe. It's hard to move. I remember marching into that furniture store and warehouse to take back the dignity that was stolen from me when my enemies attacked Aria's father's home. I don't, however, remember how I ended up in this ambulance on my way to the hospital.

"My wife," I croak out, but before I'm able to hear a response, I lose consciousness again, sucked into the void of blackness where I stay for I don't even know how long.



The rhythmic whirring and beeping of machines lulls me to a state of consciousness. There's a pressure on my chest, as if someone or something is lying there. I'm groggy. I don't remember where I'm at or how I got here. I smell the faint hint of lavender shampoo, and I think of Aria, her smile warming my heart without even having seen her.

I try to open my eyes but I feel like I've been drugged. And that's not all I feel. I'm in pain, a pain unlike anything I've ever experienced before. It starts beneath my rib cage and spreads across my whole torso. I try to breathe in a deep breath, but the pain is so intense I wince. Like fire and ice being poured into my veins at the same time, a volcano meeting an avalanche and suffocating me in its world of heat and pressure.

I am not a weak man. I have stood upon the precipice of death many times, looked into the void of eternity and questioned my existence, what comes after this life. But this—this is excruciating. And then it all comes back to me—the look in my brother's eye as he pushed the knife into my gut is all I can think about. The anger in those eyes, the jealousy. And the words he said to me as he did it were even more painful.

"You will never be my leader."

Those words reverberate inside my mind until my eyes force themselves open to avoid seeing that hatred that bore down upon me. My throat is dry or I would speak. Instead, I lift my hand and rest it upon the back of Aria's head. She lies draped over my chest, arms extended to wrap around my torso as much as possible. I can see that she has tried to avoid the spot in my stomach that's so painful, but just the light pressure of her draped across me makes me grimace.

"Mia cara," I whisper.

Aria sits upright with her eyes wide and a hand covering her mouth. "You're awake? Oh, my God, I thought you were dead. There was so much blood, Tito."

"Shh, I'm here now." I try to reach for her, but the small strain to my stomach muscles as I lift my arm up and extend it in her direction is enough to make me wish I had never woken up. She captures my hand and brings it to her lips, kissing it, and then lays it gently at my side where it relaxes and the pain lessens.

"Tito, I'm so sorry." There's apprehension in her gaze, like she has some reason to feel guilty or apologize to me. But I know I am the one who's guilty. I'm the one who should be apologizing. Her brother is dead because of me. Her father and mother are in the hospital. Their home is destroyed, and it will take years to rebuild.

My enemies have become her enemies—have become her parents' enemies. None of them deserve this. It was my selfish plot to try to assume control of something that did not belong to me. I brought this upon them all, even upon myself.

"Shh, hey, this isn't your fault. You don't need to apologize to me." I wiggle my fingers, indicating that I would like to hold her hand, and she notices. She laces her fingers through mine and squeezes gently.

I'm beginning to remember more now. I remember her hovering over me with a gun in her hand aimed at my brother. I remember her firing several shots into that narrow hallway. I remember the look of rage in her eyes, the kind of rage that I have felt before when seeking vengeance for someone or something that had been wronged. I remember the way she fell at my side and held me, pleading over me, weeping onto my face.

"You don't understand, Tito." Aria is sorrowful. Her head droops but she doesn't stop holding my hand. "This is all my fault."

The silence of the room is only broken by the rhythmic beeping of the machine above my head. My heart is steady and strong, though my mind is confused. When I look into her eyes, I want to erase her pain. I want her to forget anything and everything that might be causing her discomfort. But I am beginning to remember even more now.

"Carlos... Did you...? What happened?" I study her with an intensity, hoping to draw answers from her expression, but she says nothing, and in that silence, I remember everything.

My brother flung harsh accusations against my wife. He told me that Aria is the one who set me up, that she is the one who partnered together with him to take me down. His maniacal laugh as he stood over me after having stabbed me with his gun pointed at my chest, it's something I'll never forget.

"It's true, Tito. I did everything he said." There's a sadness to Aria's tone as she confesses to me what she believes to be her gravest sin. I can see it in her eyes. She

feels guilty. "I was so angry with you. I heard you in that meeting telling Carlos and your cousins that you were going to take over my father's businesses and how you were going to do it. Our agreement was supposed to be so that you would save my family, not so that you could take over my family."

I listen to her carefully as she spells out every detail of her betrayal to me. In any other circumstance, the person sitting before me admitting this level of disloyalty and disrespect would earn death. But these words are coming from the lips that I've kissed so passionately, the woman I have loved so fiercely, and the heart that beats so boldly in my favor, so I can do nothing but listen. And I wonder how she can be confessing this to me after knowing that I am the one who killed her brother, by whose command her heart was destroyed. And I realize that all along, she had the power to break our agreement, keep my money, and set herself free while saving her family.

"Mia cara," I hum, reaching for her. I find just enough strength to reach up and cup her cheek. "You were angry. I did plot against your family. I did intend to take over. But I give you my word, I did not purposefully kill your brother."

"I killed my brother." Tears well up in her eyes, and when she blinks, they creep down her cheeks.

"What do you mean, you killed your brother? That order came directly from my lips. Aria, this isn't your fault." I brush her cheek with my thumb and wipe away a few more tears that escape.

"But I'm the one who leaked the information about that drug bust, Tito. Jasper knew nothing about it, not until it was done. Not until the drug bust was spoiled and you were angry. I called him in celebration that my plan was working. I wanted to celebrate with him because I was going to take you down from the inside, make you hurt and then break our agreement and go home to my family."

Aria's sincerity tells me that she's telling the truth. Even after watching the pain she went through upon learning that her brother had been murdered, the grieving that she did that she still does, I can't find it in my heart to be angry with her.

“Then we're even. I've wronged your family, and you've wronged me. Either one of us could break the agreement. Either one of us could back out right now, and it would take a court of law to negotiate who got what portion of the settlement.” I brush her cheek again, and her eyes open and she looks into mine.

“What, then? Are you going to kill me the way you killed Jasper?”

“And kill the best partner I've ever had?” I don't know how to articulate what I'm feeling without sounding weak, without showing my hand, my vulnerability. “I am your husband, Aria. I love you. Can we put this all behind us now and simply love one another?”

She bursts into tears once again, draping herself over my chest, and I feel a crushing weight that makes me grunt in pain. I use every last ounce of my strength to wrap my arms around her and hold her while she cries. I'm never giving her up, not after everything we've been through.

I hear the swish of a door opening and I look up to see Sal pushing a wheelchair. My father sits propped by pillows with an oxygen mask strapped to his face. His eyes are more sunken than normal, and it appears he hasn't eaten in several days. He looks like he's lost even more weight.

“Well, you've done it this time, haven't you?” His tone of disapproval does not surprise me at all, but now that I know the truth, that Carlos has been working against me this entire timewith or without my wife, I'm now ready to stand against my father if it comes to that.

Aria sits up quickly and then stands, turning to face the imposing figure who has entered my room. I couldn't sit up if I tried, but she comes to my defense quickly, and I find myself nudged out of a conversation I'd rather not have, anyway.

"Mr. Ramiro, sir, Tito almost died. It was Carlos. I saw him myself. Things aren't what you think." She's flustered, and rightly so. My father would cut her down at the knees if he had the strength. She spoke when she wasn't addressed, and he hates that.

"Ms. Peralta, I?—"

"You mean Mrs. Ramiro. Or more rightly, Aria." Her determination knows no end. I can see the look on my father's face, and instead of being angry as I expect him to, he's amused, perhaps impressed.

*Source Creation Date: June 24, 2025, 8:01 am*

"Aria, sit," he says calmly. Though his voice is muffled by the mask and his hot breath steams the clear plastic, I understand him. "I've come to visit my son who nearly died. And I understand all the facts of what happened. Nigel and Hector have been to see me. I know everything." Dad coughs and takes the mask off to cover his mouth with a handkerchief. Sal hovers behind him like a nursemaid. We all know it won't be long now. Days, maybe.

"Are you okay?" Aria asks, and I wonder that myself, if today will be the last breath, or tomorrow.

"I'm fine," Dad grunts as his coughing fit passes, and he covers his mouth again. His breathing is raspy and choked by mucus in his airway. "I came to tell you I will handle what must be done with Carlos. I've had a visit from a certain young man whose name I will not mention, but he said to tell Aria that he is fond of his kitten and to thank her yet again."

Aria's cheeks flush and she looks away nervously. I make a mental note to ask her what that means later and then turn to my father. "So, what will be done with him?" I don't want my brother to die, but the suffering he's caused is too great to look past.

"I'll handle it, Tito. You will lead this family, and that's my final word. Now, do exactly as the doctors say because we need you at home. There's too much to do, and I won't be around much longer." Hearing my father speak of his own imminent death is disheartening, but it's a truth we can't turn away from.

"I'll make sure he listens," Aria says with a smile, and Dad nods.

Together, these two are going to make my life hell for a few days. I just wish I knew what Dad intended for Carlos. He won't kill his own son unless Carlos refuses to repent. Even still, it will be a cold day in hell before Carlos is trusted again.

Dad moves closer and sets the brake for his wheelchair, and I listen as he begins to unravel his plans for our family, the Peraltas, and dealing with the Russians. The fact that he doesn't ask Aria to leave is encouraging. Even he sees her as my partner now, and that's all a man could hope for from his father in these, his last days. I think everything is going to work out fine now. As long as Carlos is handled, I will recover and lead, with my wife by my side.

31

## ARIA

The tables on the patio are set, decorations and place settings all laid out and ready for our guests who are beginning to arrive. Today is a celebration both of life and of victory, and almost everyone will be here... except Jasper. It's bittersweet for me, knowing I will never see my brother again, but knowing my family is safe now and that the war, for now, is over, is a huge relief.

Tito stands next to me, surveying the spread. I've had everything decorated perfectly, floral arrangements, catering, even soft music playing through speakers set up for this intimate garden party. His hand in the small of my back is reassuring but not demeaning. It's been three weeks since the night of the attack and subsequent retaliation, and things are finally calm.

Tito's father was able to get all the money-laundering charges against him dropped and his name cleared. And as it turns out, Peter's father has made peace with my father and Donatello, though I'm not sure whether I've had any influence in that matter. Exposing Carlos's ill intent was a strategic move that helped peel back some



of those layers, but I know the threemen met a few times and worked things out, and today, we can breathe a little easier. Albeit without Carlos around.

"It's a sad day, and yet still happy." Tito sighs, and I feel the weight of that emotion too.

"Yes, it is. I wish our whole family could be here." My sentiment finds agreement in his nod and the way his expression calms as he presses his lips to my temple.

"Jasper is with us in spirit, and maybe one day, Carlos will be able to find his way back to us." He carries weight he shouldn't have to.

We've had a few really long talks about the entire thing, and I've come to realize, with Tito's help, that Carlos was always going to do what he did. He had a gentle nudge in that direction from me, but whether it happened before or after their father's death, he was going to try to take over. It was inevitable. Tito had seen it coming for years. It breaks my heart because I wish for Tito's sake that he'd have grown up in a family more like mine, where honoring our father was the only thing that mattered.

"He will," I say, turning to face him. He faces me, and I splay my hands on his chest and tilt my chin upward to accept a kiss. Things haven't been the same since Tito learned how close he came to losing everything—the family, the power, the money, even me. He's different, softer.

"I have what I need most right here," he says, holding me against himself. His lips are tender on mine and his stubble scratches my chin.

"Get a room!" Melody calls out, chuckling at our display of affection as she leads Mom and Dad onto the patio. Tony nods at us from the door, having escorted them through the home. It's the first time I've seen Mel in weeks. I pull away from Tito to hug her and breathe her in.

"I'm so glad you could make it," I whisper, knowing how challenging it must be to return to LA after she was attacked.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." Melody hugs me back as Tito shakes hands with my father who has fully recovered from his smoke inhalation. Mom has bandages on her arms and likely on her chest beneath the blue blouse she wears, but she looks happy. I pull away from Melody to embrace Mom.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, knowing she's well on the way to being recovered. I've spent hours every day at their house caring for her and even learning to change her bandages. Now that Melody is home, she'll take that over, but I'll still visit often.

"I'm feeling as good as can be expected. I just wish Jasper were here." Mom's eyes always sparkle with emotion. She probably wishes both of her late sons could be here. I know I do.

"He's here in spirit." I press my hand to my stomach knowing today is the day I will tell everyone the secret I've been hiding. They deserve to know, and I want to tell them now. I know that the little one growing in my womb will lead our family forward, the entire Peralta-Ramiro clan, not just my father's legacy. And it will be this way whether I have a boy or a girl. I'll see to that.

"You're right," Mom says, squeezing my arm, and we're distracted by some boisterous laughter near the door as Donatello is pushed through the doorway in his wheelchair. With Tony and Sal at the helm bickering and laughing playfully, I feel like things are more than back to normal.

"Bumbling idiots," Tito mumbles, but he laughs too. I can still see the pain in his eyes. He wishes Carlos were here, but that won't happen for a while. He's off on his own, trying to right the wrongs he started. He's in debt to the Russians, and he'll have to find a way to make that right or he'll continue to suffer. I know Tito will help him

out in a split second if he asks, but for now, Carlos is too prideful, his ego too wounded.

"Be nice," I chide him and swat his backside. I peck Dad on the cheek as I walk past, maneuvering myself so I can nudge the men out of the way and push my father-in-law's wheelchair into the shade near a table. We'll have a few more guests—cousins on both sides—but the people who matter most are here, and I am too excited to wait any longer.

I push Donatello up to the table and he smiles at me. He's almost nonverbal at this point and probably should be in bed, but he insisted on coming today, one final hurrah before death comes calling. I lock the wheelchair in place and reach down and take his hand and pat it.

"This is for you," I tell him, knowing a dying man's wish is only for his family to be whole. One day, I will have to face this goodbye with my father, and I can only guess how it will affect Tito, but I want Donatello to know joy before he goes to his grave. His eyebrows rise in curiosity as I say, "Can everyone listen for a second?"

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Slowly, the chatter and greetings quiet. Tony stands once again in the doorway while Sal and the rest of the family quiet down. Mom and Dad sit at the table with Tito's father, and I clear my throat. No one, not even Melody, knows what I'm about to say, but they all look at me with expectation.

I'm nervous to make this announcement because I don't know how it will be taken by everyone. I expect my father to be thrilled and Donatello to be proud. Tito, I'm not sure. But I know it's inevitable, and I want everyone to learn at the same time, get all those reactions out of the way at once.

"I, uh... I have something to tell you all and I'm excited about it." I bite my lower lip and watch as Melody's lips curve upward into a grin. She's reading my mind. Mom folds her hands in her lap, and Dad rests his hand on the table. Tito joins me and places his hand in the small of my back again, and I'm instantly given more courage. "The past few months have been sort of chaotic. Some good things have happened, some not so good things." My sentence is punctuated by the silent weight of that statement, but I continue.

"And the best is yet to come..." I look up at Tito, whose face is serious and stern as always. He's not expecting this, and I hope his reaction is good. "The best for the Peraltas and the best for the Ramiros. I'm going to have the heir."

I let the words sink in, hovering in the air as they all understand what I'm trying to say. I don't even look at the family. My biggest concern is what Tito thinks. His expression darkens, eyes hazing over with confusion then concern and then upset.

"You went into that warehouse into a shootout and you knew you were pregnant?" he

asks, and I smile at his anger and protectiveness. It's how I know he loves me even when he's sometimes so angry or withdrawn that he can't show affection.

"Yes, of course." Wrapping my arms around his torso, I say, "Am I your partner or your wife?" And then I hear my father chuckle.

Dad laughs louder, causing Mom to laugh, then Melody. Tony and Sal join them in the fit, and if Donatello wasn't so sick, I am certain he would laugh too. It makes Tito seem angrier at first, and then he cracks, a smile forming on his lips as he hugs me hard and sways back and forth.

"Mrs. Ramiro, what will I ever do with you?" The moment is priceless, the two of us surrounded by our family in celebrating the newest Peralta-Ramiro to join the ranks.

"Love me?" I say playfully before he pecks me on the lips.

Everyone claps as I rest my head on his chest, finally settled in the idea that it doesn't matter whose heir my son or daughter is. We will love them the same. They will have both families to love and be loved by, and in the end, he or she will lead us all into the future, one where both families are one and strengthened in number and influence.

"Congratulations," my father cheers, and everyone here offers their congratulations too. It's a happier moment than I imagined as I lean on Tito and accept the celebratory cheers.

"You know this means diaper duty, right?" I say to him quietly, and he speaks to me out of the corner of his mouth.

"You know there will be no more shootouts until this child is at least five, right?" He tickles my side, and I snicker and squirm.

"Deal." After the last one, I have no intention of doing that again. I will help lead with my wisdom and let someone else be the muscle. As the Donna of the family, I'm all for letting others do my dirty work, including pooppy diapers. But I'll love every second of motherhood, even if it means cleaning up vomit.

"I love you, Mr. Ramiro." I hug him a little tighter as he shakes his father's hand and the elderly Ramiro nods his praise.

"I love you too, Mrs. Ramiro," he growls as he leans down to kiss my cheek and nip at my ear. "Let's eat something. You're eating for two now. You've got to take that job seriously."

I couldn't be happier now, which I never saw coming. Mom was right. Over time, respect turned to affection, and that affection and fondness have formed an unshakeable bond. I'm better off because of where I am today, and I wouldn't change it for the world.