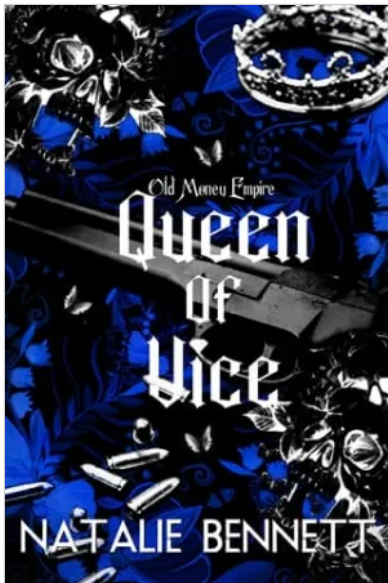




Queen of Vice (Old Money Empire #1)

Author: *Natalie Bennett*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Nothing's what it seems.

Escape is just another broken dream.

In a city where vice and corruption reign, my life has become a nightmare.

With no one to turn to, I'm left with only one option—the man I should avoid at all costs.

Mateo Escuro.

The infamous crime lord who controls this city and everything in it, is now my only hope.

He promises to help me, but his terms aren't negotiable: I must become his wife—in every sense of the word.

He is ruthless, unpredictable, and dangerously possessive.

As our twisted relationship intensifies, secrets from my past start to unravel, and I realize just how deeply Mateo is entangled in my family's history. To survive this, I'll have to surrender to him completely.

But in a world built on lies and deceit, surrendering to him might mean more than losing myself—it could cost me everything.

PLEASE NOTE

Queen of Vice is the first book in a duet, replacing the Old Money Trilogy. This is not a new release, but an updated version of Queen of Diamonds with significant changes and a full rewrite.

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Elena

If you have a gut feeling that something is off about a person or situation, listen to it. Most of the time, your intuition is trying to warn you and paying attention to it can prevent future regrets. Believe me, I wish I had followed my own advice. But even if I had, I'm not sure it would have made any difference.

1 week prior

Despite the oppressive humidity, a chill ran down my spine, alerting me that something was wrong. As I rushed towards the worn bungalow with its shabby shingles and creaky wooden stairs, the feeling only intensified .

It was already past four in the morning, so there shouldn't have been anyone awake. However, every light in the house was on, causing a sense of unease to wash over me. The hairs on my arms stood on end as I became acutely aware of being watched. I stopped and looked around cautiously, but the street was deserted except for a few stray cats seeking shelter on the porch of the abandoned house next door.

With a deep breath, I quickened my pace. Walking home always made me nervous, especially in this sketchy neighborhood. But I had no other choice--my car had a flat tire and without a spare, walking was my only option if I wanted to keep my job. Balancing precariously between getting by and utter poverty, I didn't have the luxury of choice. As I passed through the rusty gate and made my way up the pathway, I scanned for any signs of danger .

Fishing my keys out of my pocket, I inserted the one for the front door into the lock

and to my surprise, it wasn't locked. Alarm bells started ringing in my head--this was not the kind of neighborhood you made the mistake of leaving your door open in. I twisted the handle and pushed hard, but the door wouldn't budge. It was definitely blocked by something. I knocked twice, hoping for a response, but there was nothing. I made my way quickly to the other side of the house, my heart racing as I reached the back. I froze the moment I saw the splintered doorframe.

There was no sound coming from inside, just an eerie silence. With cautious steps, I pulled out my cellphone from my bag and prepared myself for what I might find inside. I knew now that something was definitely wrong. Despite the urge to call the police, I remembered the warnings instilled in me since childhood: never involve the local law enforcement if things go awry .

I stood in the doorway of the kitchen, taking in the chaos. The fridge was pulled out from its usual spot, with its contents scattered across the floor. Dishes were broken and groceries were spilled from the cabinets. Creeping around the disrepair, I headed to the living room. Everything was overturned. Couch cushions were ripped apart and the TV screen was shattered. The loveseat frame had been torn apart, blocking the front door. As I walked towards the hallway, I made sure not to step on any of our tiny goldfish that lay lifeless on the soggy Berber carpet. Their once-golden bellies were now a pale white color.

I passed by our tiny bathroom, and couldn't help but glance inside, half expecting to find someone lurking in the shadows. Like all the other rooms, it had been vandalized - the small mirror was shattered and the curtain rod ripped from its place. I swallowed hard and quickly turned my attention away, knowing that my room had probably suffered a similar fate .

With trembling hands, I pushed my aunt's bedroom door open further, hesitant to see what lay beyond. The scent of tobacco, perspiration, and...something metallic filled my nostrils. My gaze fell upon the figure on the bed, and a guttural cry escaped my

lips as I struggled to process what was before me. Her nightgown was ripped to shreds, barely clinging to her body. Her skin was covered in deep purple bruises, and it seemed as if her entire left side had caved in. I quickly backed away, bumping into the wall behind me in my rush to flee the room. I tripped twice, forcing myself to swallow back the sour taste of bile rising in my throat.

“This can’t be real,” gasped for air. My trembling hands fumbled with my phone's screen as I scrolled through my contacts, struggling to see through the blur of tears. It took me three attempts to locate the name of the one person I had desperately hoped I would never have to reach out to. It was on the second ring a fresh wave of dread washed over me.

I had no idea where my sister was.

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present

Funerals aren't for the dead.

Think about it. Why would the deceased care what color their casket is or how many people showed up to see them off? Funerals were nothing more than social gatherings for those of us left behind after someone passed on. Being here, this whole ordeal was supposed to offer closure, a final goodbye. To me, it felt like a cruel reminder of the void that had been left in my life. The empty chair at the dinner table, the voice that I would no longer hear.

Not a single fucking person present would care as much as I did. I was positive the woman three rows back—who had shown up in a tight red dress—somehow confused the cemetery with a nightclub. Quite a few were whispering amongst themselves as the reverend spoke. Some had begun playing on their phones as if they couldn't be bothered pretending to give a damn .

It took everything in me to keep myself calm and not make a scene. I kept my eyes trained ahead on the two identical cream caskets sitting side by side. One contained someone irreplaceable and dear to my heart. The other was a painful illusion, nothing but an empty box. My estranged family thought this was for the best. Let people grieve an imaginary death versus the never-ending theories and rumors that came when someone went missing.

The problem was that I knew the truth.

It kept me awake at night and burrowed into my chest, creating a consistent pain that

had me physically and mentally worn down. I wanted to be numb, to feel nothing. It was my curse to feel everything. I'd managed to keep it together thus far, but I wasn't sure what the point was. The blatant disrespect I had to endure was a harsh reminder that the Castello family wasn't the powerhouse they'd once been .

There were hardly any of them left. My parents would be sick with rage if they were alive to see what their legacy had become.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for the service to conclude. I'd say it lasted twenty minutes tops, but I couldn't be entirely sure. There were no passionate speeches or last-minute sobs of despair. It was simply over and done with. My aunt would be forgotten before the first mound of dirt hit the top of her casket vault. That was no different than how she'd lived her life, shoved into a decrepit corner far away from Vice City to struggle and rot. She'd never been given a fair chance, but then nothing in life was ever fair, was it?

I stood and smoothed down my black asymmetrical dress. It was so hot outside sweat had begun gathering between my breasts and thighs. My uncle, Luis, stood with me, leaning down to ask, "How are you holding up? "

I hated that question. Were people ever really expected to answer Good? Fine? Doing great?

Giving him a tight smile to appease the nosey masses, I responded quietly. "I'm having the time of my life."

A flash of irritation marred his features, my sarcasm impossible to miss. I didn't care. He hadn't wanted to do things this way. He'd wanted a cremation for my aunt and a burial for the one person that wasn't present. It had been a large source of tension between us. My grandmother had swiftly shut him down before things got violent. It was a wise choice, otherwise, Uncle Luis would've needed an urn for his damn self.

Molly may not have been my aunt by blood, but she was more family than he would ever be. She didn't deserve to die the way she had or to be judged by a man who never knew her .

“Come, my dear, it's almost over.” Grandma Laurel's gentle voice broke me out of my bitter reverie.

She held her arm out and I gently took hold of it, letting her guide me back towards the fleet of waiting luxury vehicles. I tried to avoid looking at anyone too long, but I couldn't do anything about the lingering stares aimed my way. I wished I could make myself invisible, or that all these people would go back to forgetting my existence. It was the fucked-up clandestine world they thrived in that continued to take everyone I loved away from me.

God, I hated this place. My eyes began to burn again, to the point of aching. I bit down on the inside of my lip until I tasted blood. I refused to let any tears fall. I wouldn't cry in front of these soulless, vile assholes. My gaze wandered to where a cadre of men stood observing from afar. An invisible boundary separated them from everyone else in attendance .

They exuded an aura distinctly their own. Even their suits appeared to be cut from a cloth of regality that the others lacked. Among them was one man who solely captured the essence of their difference. I blinked to make sure I wasn't seeing things.

Why the hell was he here?

Our eyes locked in a silent exchange. It was a fleeting connection, but within those few seconds, I became the sole focus of his intense scrutiny. I tore my gaze away and refocused on where I was going. I didn't know what the hell that was about, but I had a bad feeling about it.

I started to think my grandmother was wrong.

This wasn't close to being over.

It hadn't even begun.

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I adjusted the Bulgari sunglasses my grandmother had thoughtfully provided. The lens concealed my true feelings on the hollow sympathies and perfunctory condolences of the attendees. I crafted a veneer of composure, a brittle facade that belied the turmoil that threatened to surface. Standing with the only family I had left, the thread of my thoughts frayed as I grappled with the uncertainty of whether I had taken my medication. It was a precarious moment to be uncertain, not the time nor the place to rectify such an oversight.

"My deepest condolences."

The words were a repetitive chorus from unfamiliar faces, each utterance accompanied by an insincere, forced look of grief. Give me a fucking break. These people had no idea who my aunt was. I wasn't sure if the same could be said about my sister because she lived a life separate from us, but I would bet less than half actually gave a damn about her either .

They were here to be seen and see me like I was some roadside freak show. There was no end to the questions or speculation about my abrupt arrival and sudden reappearance. Those that weren't offering bullshit sympathies were laughing, and conversing as if we were at an annual get-together instead of a wake.

"I'll be right back." I gently touched my grandmother's shoulder and gave her a small smile, excusing myself. I felt eyes all over me as I crossed the room, unable to block out what everyone was saying.

"She looks just like her."

“I thought she was dead too.”

“Where do you think she’s been?”

I let the voices wash over me, unheeded, as I made my way to the ladies' room at the back of the building. The door swung open to reveal a trio huddled over the sink. It took a moment for the scene to sink in. "Seriously? Are you fucking kidding me?" The words bounced off the walls .

I didn't care who heard me. My reservoir of concern for our image was depleted. A curvy blonde was now looking at me like I was the one doing something wrong. I shook my head and promptly exited before I acted on the thought of slamming her face into the goddamn mirror. The audacity to do that here of all places was just the cherry on top of a spectacular day. I couldn't care less that she wanted to get high, that was her own screwed-up prerogative but there was a time and a place, and this was neither. She didn't even try to hide the powder on the rim of her nostril.

Suddenly needing a breath of fresh air, I veered sharply left, escaping the oppressive atmosphere of the venue for the sanctuary of the patio. The imperative to shield my emotions was at a critical juncture, and my defenses were dangerously close to crumbling. The instant I emerged outdoors, the sun greeted me with an unforgiving blaze, though its harshness was tempered by a soothing breeze that whispered promises of comfort.

I found solace at the edge of the patio, resting against the cool stone of the balustrade with a heavy exhale. Weariness seeped through my bones. I wanted to run away and sink into the solace of my bed, yet I dreaded the restless thoughts that awaited me when I got there. It was surreal to think a whole week had slipped by. There were still so many questions yet to be answered, the most crucial being where my sister was and who did this. The coroner told us my aunt was sexually assaulted by at least two men, beaten so badly her brain bled, and then shot in the head twice--postmortem.

It wasn't the bullets that killed her, but the violence of the assault. I kept asking myself what kind of vile human being could do something like this? What had Molly done to deserve it? The answer was rhetorical. No one should ever have to go through what she did, to die in such a slow horrific way. She would've felt every ounce of inflicted pain, knowing no one was coming to save her.

Even worse, I knew she would have begged. My aunt would have pleaded for her life and in the end, was given no amount of mercy. It made me sick to my stomach. She was one of the kindest, most selfless people I'd ever met and would ever know. At my mother's behest, she'd taken me and my sister into her home without a second thought a few months after we'd turned twelve. What was meant to be a temporary situation became permanent after our parents died.

I hated to think the incidents were related. Eleven years was a long time to hold a grudge but nothing else made sense. And I knew better. In the cruel currency of this world, debts were settled in blood. My aunt had paid the ultimate price. So whose debt did she acquire? I had no one to answer that question. I couldn't ask Grandma, who pretended I was as delicate as blown glass. And even if he knew, Uncle Luis wouldn't tell me the truth because he was a misogynistic, sexist asshole.

Gazing down at the koi gliding through their sculpted aquatic haven, I couldn't help but envy the simplicity of their existence. If only my greatest concern was swimming in circles until someone offered me food. It was a sad contrast to the complexity of my own existence, which seemed to have been reduced to a tapestry woven with threads of grief and anger. So immersed in my head, I sensed his approach too late, the silent footsteps behind me barely registering in my distracted mind.

"Some people have a complete disregard for respect, don't they?"

I spun around to face him and instinctively stepped back—a terrible move on my end. Fuck. First at the cemetery and now here? I was the very last person this man

should've been paying attention to. Worse, I couldn't just walk away from him, which left me no choice but to remain where I was. I kept my posture straight, refusing to let his towering frame completely overshadow mine.

I'd seen him maybe once or twice before, years ago when I was just a girl and had my father as a barrier between us. Now that I was seeing him again—older and a little wiser—I had a better understanding of why women were drawn to him. His hair, the color of onyx, fell just right, managing to appear both meticulously arranged and effortlessly elegant. His suit had been tailored to accentuate every line and curve of his form.

My eyes traced the outline of an expensive watch circling a wrist that led to hands of noticeable largeness. A hint of ink trailed from under his cuffs, etched into his deep golden skin. The angular cut of his jaw could have graced any high-end ad, sharp and edged with precision, shadowed by a trim of stubble. Yet, unlike the polished models of glossy commercials, he radiated an unrefined, raw aura of masculinity .

He was undeniably gorgeous, but his beauty was more aligned with that of a predator, something to admire from afar but never approach. Well, unless you were one of the women who naively believed they could be an exception or that a man like him would ever be tamed. He regarded me with a slight smile playing on his full lips, but his light-colored eyes conveyed no specific emotion.

They had a cryptic depth, their hue reminiscent of honey encased within crystalline spheres, giving him an air of being otherworldly. My mute contemplation prompted him to lead the conversation.

“Don't take it personally. Katie's been an embarrassment for far longer than she should've been. I'll handle it.”

So, he saw that. Or more likely, he heard me when I saw little-miss-cokehead getting

her fix in the bathroom. A heavy pause lingered between us. His knowing that girl's name was no surprise. What caught me off guard was him alluding to the fact that he had been watching me and the offer he'd just made.

"By handle it you mean..?"

"I'll take care of her," he reiterated, his tone retaining an unsettling calmness.

I hesitated, unsure of how to flat-out reject his offer. Finally, I managed to say, "No, it'--please don't do that."

He studied me, his expression remaining inscrutable. "Your morality is endearing," he replied cryptically, his undertone of amusement leaving me with a sense of unease.

I really didn't want to talk to him, but more than that I needed to change the subject. "Why are you here?" I asked, my voice tinged with genuine curiosity.

His mouth curled into a faint, enigmatic smile. "I'm actually on my way out. I was making sure you were alright." Each syllable was shaped by a refined accent that danced gracefully around his words .

Checking on me? That made no sense. Given his reputation, genuine concern seemed highly unlikely.

I edged back subtly, my arms folding defensively across my chest. Maintaining my composure was a battle of wills as he continued to scrutinize me with piercing focus. The sunglasses were my only shield and the only thing giving me the courage to meet his gaze squarely. A sidelong glance revealed a figure blocking the patio doors, a clear barrier to any potential interruptions from inside.

That didn't seem coincidental.

With a swallow, I refocused on the man before me, whose allure was matched only by the sense of peril he emanated.

“You have no reason to be afraid. I didn’t go out of my way to hurt you,” he assured me before my brain could start sprouting ideas.

“So, you really came all the way back here to check on me?” I questioned, hedging on the side of caution .

“That, and I wanted to be the first to welcome you back to the city. Has anyone else done so?”

“No...you’re the first.”

“Good. I would be disappointed if someone disregarded my warning.”

“What?” I blinked; certain I’d just misheard him. “What warning?”

He grinned down at me, revealing deep dimples in the center of his cheeks. Without answering, he took hold of my hand and brought it to his sensual lips, pressing a feather-light kiss to the back. Had he been anyone else, the move would have been over the top and a major ick, but the look in his eyes had my entire body flushing despite my reservations.

“We’ll talk soon,” he promised before stepping away. I watched him head towards the side parking lot where a black Benz sat idling with two large SUVs waiting behind it. He gave me one last disarming look as he got in the passenger seat. I caught a glimpse of another man in a suit, his younger brother, before the car disappeared from view, exiting the lot with the other vehicles in tow.

I checked to see if anyone had witnessed us talking together and saw the man who

had been guarding the doors was gone as well. What the hell just happened? I didn't know where to begin trying to figure out why he approached me. His unexpected attention spun my thoughts into chaos. Now that he had departed, a wave of delayed anxiety crashed over me, a visceral reaction to his proximity.

The worst thing about it was that there had to be a reason. Could Evie have been caught in his dangerous orbit? The mere thought twisted my stomach into knots, a bitter taste of fear mixed with loss. I rubbed my brow and sighed. I wasn't sure how long I'd been outside but going back into the venue was out of the question. The fact no one came out to bother me was a silent affirmation that whatever decree he'd given held a disturbing amount of power. A low whistle cut through my thoughts. I looked up, eyes narrowing as a figure approached.

Recognizing her, I abandoned all pretense of decorum. I took off, poise be damned, moving as fast I could in my heels, trying not to fall and bust my ass.

"No one seemed to know where you were," she said as soon as she was close enough to throw her arms around me, pulling me into a bone-crushing embrace. "God, I missed you," she breathed, raw emotion in her voice. I hugged her back just as tightly, catching a whiff of her rose-scented perfume.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make the service. I came here straight from the airport."

"It's fine, Mel." I shoved down a swell of emotion and blinked back tears before pulling away.

"I take it you're out here to get away from everyone in there?" she nodded towards the large brick building .

I nodded. "I couldn't stomach it any longer."

“And no one would dare say shit about it, if they don’t want an eight-inch Louis V shoved up their ass.” She surveyed me from head to toe, her perusal softening into a smile. "You look good, El."

Her infectious grin sparked one of my own, clearing away some of the fog from within. I appreciated her not outright asking the common questions. The grim secret that my sister wasn't in either of the caskets was known only to my family and whoever was responsible for her disappearance. I longed to confide and vent to her, but the danger that could put her in had me biting my tongue.

“You look amazing, too,” I returned her appraising compliment meaning every word. The beautiful woman in front of me was the same Melody Bellucci I’d been best friends with since middle school, but her outward appearance was almost that of a stranger. Her messy, lopsided ponytail had been replaced with silky dark curls piled on her head in an elegant updo. A classy navy dress clung to a beautiful body with generous curves that had once been petite and always covered by oversized hoodies.

“I want to say I’m glad you’re back, but considering the why, I’d feel like a vain bitch.”

“I can’t believe I’m here either. Never thought I would be,” I replied with a wistfulness I couldn’t hide. “But what are you doing here? I told you to finish your trip.”

“Hm, lounge on a beach and drink cocktails, or go home to support my best friend who I haven’t seen in far too long, on what has to be one of the hardest days of her life? God, the decision was such a hard one to come to.”

I ignored her blatant sarcasm. “Did Peyton come with you?”

Just as I finished asking, he came around the corner half jogging to reach us .

He threw his arms around me as Melody had, but where her hug was bone crushing his was debilitating. “I’m so fucking sorry, babe.” He shook me side to side, crushing my face into his solid chest.

“Don’t break her, Peyton,” Melody chided, smacking his muscled arm.

“Oh, please. She can take a lot more than this.” He let go and smiled down at me with a wink, his hazel eyes full of concern. Peyton was one of the only people I would accept it from.

I smirked at his lobster-patterned bowtie and blonde coiffed hair. Unlike Mel, he really hadn’t changed a bit. He fully embraced who he was, and I loved that for him.

“People are starting to leave. Didn’t think you’d wanna be the last one here. Ride with us? I can drop you at home later.”

I could’ve kissed him for that. “I think that sounds like the best idea I’ve heard in a long time. ”

“I do my best.”

I flashed him a grateful smile, allowing him to link our arms together. Part of me considered going to tell my uncle and grandma goodbye, but then I’d have to go back inside. Sending a text would have to suffice. If this had been a true memorial for Aunt Molly, I wouldn’t dare leave like I this, but the cold hard truth couldn’t be ignored.

“Were you two able to come straight back here?” I asked, needing to distract myself and genuinely curious.

Melody slid a glance my way, taking possession of my other arm. “Funny you ask that because I was told where to go by a man known to work for Escuro.”

“Me too. What’s up with that?” Peyton asked.

So, he’d really told people to stay away from me? “I’ll explain in the car,” I muttered, knowing they would want full disclosure and answers as to why he sought me out, answers I didn’t have.

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I closed my eyes, soaking up my last few moments of peace.

“Are you going to be—?”

“Nope, you two aren’t allowed to ask me those questions right now, remember?”

I peeled my eyes open to Melody scowling at me from the front seat. “It was about the house.”

“Ugh, not that either,” I huffed in response, glancing over at the home in question. It looked like something out of Martha Stewart magazine, white stucco with light grey accents and a tiny rose garden in the very front. Nothing like it did when my parents lived there.

Peyton broke the silence in the car. "Just to clarify, you're serious about what we discussed earlier?"

I met his gaze through the rearview mirror and nodded confidently.

"I can't just accept things as they are. I need answers and I want to know why the head of a criminal empire is suddenly taking an interest in me."

Peyton scoffed and Melody's expression turned into a scowl. I raised my hand to stop them from starting another argument. "I'm not saying I'm uninteresting, but there's no logical reason for him to personally greet me upon my return to his city."

"Yeah, I have no idea what that could be about. It's unlikely he has any connection to

what happened," Melody replied.

"Well," Peyton said slowly, considering his words carefully. "You are the long-lost heir of the Castello family, and that would definitely catch his attention."

They both made valid points, even though they were slightly flawed. As we ate earlier, I had already thought about it and knew that he couldn't possibly be involved in what happened with my aunt and missing sister.

He had no reason to care or be concerned with who any of us were. However, there was no doubt in my mind that he knew something. I wasn't desperate enough to ask him yet. I didn't know how to go about even doing so and I hoped for all our sakes I'd never have to figure that out. No one would willingly consort with the devil unless touched by madness. I looked back at the house and spotted my grandmother not so discreetly watching us from the front bay window.

"And what are we going to do about that?" Melody asked. "Your nonna is not going to let you become Nancy Drew. You're all she has left besides Luis, and we all know what a massive cazzo he is."

I laughed. "I can placate her for now. At least until I'm confident enough to lie to her face."

Peyton turned and grinned at me slyly.

"What?"

"Your mama would be proud. "

"Would she? My father wouldn't," I mused, feeling the familiar pang in my heart when I thought of them.

It had been years, and the ache still hadn't dulled. Losing Aunt Molly and not having my sister had brought it all back. Grief was like a relentless storm that I couldn't escape. Some days, it raged with such ferocity that it threatened to engulf me. On others, it became a familiar drizzle, a constant presence that oddly anchored me in its persistence. If there ever came a day that the storm ceased; I'd be dead.

"I think they'd both be proud of you for coming back here when you have every reason to run," Peyton said softly.

I wasn't so sure about that. My parents had known exactly how brutal and unforgiving their world was. I couldn't be sure they'd ever intended on having kids, but nonetheless, here I was. "I want to say one more time, whoever is behind this won't like anyone digging into it. You two don't have to help me. "

"If you're doing anything remotely insane and chaotic, you won't be doing it alone," Melody countered.

Peyton nodded in agreement. "She's right. No matter what happens, we do this together. Besides, you're going to need us."

I relented with a sigh. "As long as it doesn't endanger either of you. I would never be able to live with myself if something happened to you guys because of me."

"It wouldn't be because of you," Mel reasoned.

I looked at them and could practically feel their love for me. Distance—being worlds apart—hadn't severed our bond in the slightest. It felt like we were picking up right where we left off. I was blessed to have them. Which is why I felt terrible about not divulging the truth about Eva. It's not like I didn't want to. I would've loved to bare my soul and confess my sister wasn't in that casket.

But I couldn't .

Not yet.

Revealing that kernel of truth felt so much more dangerous than telling them I wanted to know who was behind what happened to her and Aunt Molly.

“Let me get inside. She’ll stand there all night if I don’t.” I opened the door and was immediately engulfed in heat. “I’ll text you guys.”

I made my way into the house, feeling as if I’d been cast in a horror movie. Any second now, Aunt Molly would appear and point in the direction I came from, warning me to turn back and stay the hell away from here. I smiled to myself, hearing her Southern voice in my head. If only I could do that Molls.

My grandmother and uncle were in the foyer before I was all the way inside, one concerned and the other visibly annoyed. She had to of moved pretty damn fast to get here before I did.

“Are you alright? ”

“You’ve gotta be missing some brain cells, girl. You wanna run off, take someone with you,” my uncle’s raspy voice drowned out her question.

“Like who? You?”

He opened and closed his mouth, no words coming out. He’d clearly forgotten how far our house had fallen, too caught up in his feelings.

“You can’t just go off on your own, Elena,” he practically growled.

“I wasn’t alone, and Grandma was fine with it. Besides, I rode with Peyton and Melody. You remember them, right?”

His mouth opened and closed, the tick in his jaw a tell. There wasn’t anything he could say about that. Both of them came from families of much higher standing than ours these days. Families that probably would’ve destroyed what remained of us Castello’s long ago if not for my friendship with their children. Not only had I lucked out with the greatest of friends, but their families weren’t like the rest of the power-hungry savages around here. They were content with what they had while remaining prominent by their own consistent methods.

Uncle Luis blinked, his round dark eyes blazing into mine before roaming over my body from head to toe. It made me highly uncomfortable. He’d always been an unusual guy, but at least back then he didn’t look at me the way he does now. My father would’ve killed him—brother or not. Doing my best to ignore his sick probing, I diverted my eyes to Grandma.

“I would like to get cleaned up.”

He guffawed, preparing to say something condescending no doubt, but my grandmother spoke before he could. “Of course, diosa. We can talk later.” She gave me a smile that wasn’t entirely genuine.

I gave one back that was just as fake and walked away .

I felt their eyes on me the entire way up the sweeping staircase. Once I was inside my room, I locked the door and began stripping out of my clothes. I headed directly to the adjoining bathroom and stepped into the shower, resolute in my intent to cleanse myself of the day’s filth and gather my thoughts. It was then, amidst the heated cascading water, that the fragile barrier holding everything back finally shattered.

“Goddamnit, Eva,” I cursed my sister’s name, excessively scrubbing my skin with a purple loofah.

The grey and white mosaic tiled wall blurred through a curtain of tears. I’d told her countless times not to come back to this place, but she wouldn’t listen. Glamour and wealth were powerful addictions to girls who felt they had nothing but poverty and squalor. She soaked up this lavish lifestyle and all the attention people gave her like a sponge.

She immersed herself further and further past the point of no return, overly indulging in everything our father had tried to distance us from. Even when he promised our new living arrangements were temporary, it was obvious when he came to get us it wouldn’t be to return here. I never got the chance to ask what led him to that decision. We hadn’t received one phone call, letter, or e-mail since the day we said goodbye to him and our mother.

Eva thought they were happy to shove us out of his life. She swore Dad had a mistress and didn’t want his family anymore. It was a regular argument between us no matter how much I pointed out our mother would sooner castrate him than ever let that slide. A lot of women considered their husbands straying to be something they needed to accept. Many were more than happy for another woman to take up the gauntlet, or when their husbands paid for pleasure because they’d married for power and not love.

Some had no choice at all .

Mom had been one of the brides who barely knew her husband, our father, but they’d fallen head over heels for one another. Dad would’ve leveled the earth for her. It was tragically poetic that they had died together. Yet still, my sister refused to believe the truth. She grew even more irrational after they were killed. Instead of feeling broken and mourning them like I had, she was pissed that our father didn’t leave us any of

his assets.

I assumed our grandmother now controlled what remained of his estate. I saw it as him further ensuring we never returned. My father was seen as cold-hearted and ruthless to almost everyone, but I remembered a man who loved us so much he broke his own heart trying to set us free. Whatever caused him to do the things he did must have been warranted. As soon as she was able, Eva went against his wishes with a dramatic flair. Maybe it was then everything derailed .

The day I lost them I began losing my sister. How many times had I screamed at her for the shitty choices she had started to make again and again? She always screamed back before storming out of the house. I couldn't, wouldn't, go after her. I either had zero desire to do so, or nine times out of ten, had to work. We lived on a strict allowance where every penny had a designation long before it hit my now pitifully overdrawn account.

Aunt Molly was always the poster of guilt when I handed her the money from my paychecks to help keep a roof over our heads and food in our stomachs. That was another source of contention—money. I understood why we weren't given anything to live off. Large deposits to a bank in the ghetto would be a little too obvious if someone were looking for us, something Dad was notorious for being paranoid about.

Arguing was my and Eva's thing, though, and that night was no different .

We did it weekly.

I thought she was a fool for coming here pretending to be someone and something she wasn't. She thought I was pathetic and weak for being complacent. One of us always removed ourselves from the situation and before the night was over, either she or I would text to apologize and say I love you. This last time, she never read the text.

I hadn't seen her or heard from her since she'd left the house. I think I struggled with that the most. I couldn't be without my sister. She was half of my whole. It didn't matter how angry she made me or how badly her words could cut. I loved her more than the rage and hurt. The only reason I'd come back to was for her.

While vengeance for Aunt Molly consumed all the thoughts my sister didn't, the agony of her loss raw, this wasn't a fictional tale of retribution. This was my reality .

To bring down her killer meant unraveling the mastermind behind it all. I wasn't powerful enough to be a threat or make any. My only means of finding my sister and the truth involved immersing myself in a world I abhorred.

Stepping out of the shower, I wrapped a plushy towel around my body and twisted my hair up, locking it in place with a clip. Everything around me was blindingly white with a gray marble accent. This bathroom was the same one that had been attached to my childhood bedroom. They'd redone where I slept, swapping the princess theme with these tones, but nothing else had changed. It brought back a painful nostalgia of a childhood long gone. It was going to be hard to get used to. I'd grown accustomed to living a lower-class lifestyle. Every time I looked around at my surroundings, I felt as if I'd tripped and fallen into an alternate reality .

In a way, I guess I had. I'd trade it all for what I lost in a heartbeat if I could. Poverty was better than this cold, glamorized emptiness. Maybe that wouldn't make sense to a lot of people. In a way, I guess I had. I'd trade it all for what I lost in a heartbeat if I could. Poverty was better than this cold, glamorized emptiness. Maybe that wouldn't make sense to a lot of people. To most, the glittering facade of wealth and privilege was all they ever desired. I knew the truth that lurked beneath the surface, concealed behind designer clothes and lavish parties.

There was a darkness in this world of opulence, a shadow that clung to every corner, whispering secrets of corruption and deceit. Even then, I could feel it creeping closer,

a malevolent presence that hungered for more than just material wealth. It yearned for souls to claim, for hearts to break, for lives to destroy. That's how it dragged me back here .

I let out a deep breath and tried to hold back the wave of tears threatening to spill over, but I couldn't fight them any longer. Crying was a necessary release before I could gather myself and move forward. It was part of our family's ethos: when life knocks you down, you get back up and come back even stronger. As my tears fell silently, I held onto the hope that I would feel it if my sister was truly gone. I repeated to myself that she couldn't be, refusing to accept anything else.

Deep down, I knew I needed to prepare for the worst. Accepting it was an entirely different battle. When the truth came out, I wasn't sure what I would do or how I would cope, but no matter what the case was, I was determined to find my sister and bring her back home.

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MATEO

My mother told me that all a whore really wants is to be loved. My father taught me that no sane man would give a whore what they desired most. Both agreed that after a certain point, the whore was better off dead.

It's like buying a car fresh off the lot. The value plummets the second you take it for yourself, but you're fine with this. You're a level-headed individual who understands there's no point in developing sentimental feelings for a machine. You wisely take full advantage of all it has to offer until it's time to replace it with a new model. Dealing with expendable women was more or less the same.

I scrutinized the two before me, seated with my brother Elias and cousin Sergio at the outdoor table indulging in a light lunch. Both women were stunning, but I never settled for anything less and only the most exquisite made the cut in our line of business .

Some may judge them as too beautiful to surrender their bodies to any man who paid for their services, but that didn't stop them from being used. It was a cycle of life. Each encounter ended in the same way--with gaping orifices filled with cum and a throbbing ache that lingered between their legs or ass.

The clients who paid for the full experience often left behind souvenirs in the form of bruises or welts, while those who sought a more extreme session would sometimes push their bodies to the brink and take their last breath before departing. I didn't care what went on as long as my two rules were followed: discretion was key, and payment was made upfront. There were a select few women off-limits to the sadist,

and another few purchased from a Malignant underground specifically to satisfy that specific market. All the others were interchangeable and if they died, I simply tacked on a disposal fee .

Very few of my girls were granted exceptions to how things got done. The two before me weren't fortunate enough to be amongst those that did. The one on the left had been around for a decent amount of time thanks to my father. Although beautiful, with long honey blonde hair, doe brown eyes, and subtle curves, she was beyond salvaging and my mother no longer tolerated her presence or him fucking her. But that was a small part of a much larger issue.

"Am I to believe neither of you has any idea what this book looks like?" I continued my line of questioning. They shook their heads in unison.

"Use your words."

"N-no, Patr?o , of course not." The one on the right answered.

I'd asked this question three times in three different ways, giving each of them ample opportunity to tell the truth and they continued to do otherwise .

I knew this because the man I had been sending to fuck them off the books was one of my own. He recorded them from the time they sucked his dick as a team to the moment they agreed to be informants if he got them out of the city. They claimed to know the location of a ledger that held invaluable information. I wished I could say their deaths wouldn't be personal, or I wouldn't enjoy it, but both would be a lie. I didn't take kindly to anyone that was a liability to my family.

To threaten that was to fuck with my money, my empire, and those that served me. I didn't give a fuck about being liked or disliked. Loyalty and respect, however? That was paramount. These women had neither. I nodded, pretending I believed them,

flashing the charming smile that always put people at ease. The whore on the left fixed her attention on the file I had sitting on the table. Our eyes met and she quickly diverted her gaze when she realized her error .

“She’s divine, isn’t she?” I picked up the large black and white photograph of Elena Castello that was resting on top of a thick file and a few other photos.

“Yes,” she said softly, refusing to show her true feelings on the matter.

I placed the photo back in the folder and flipped it closed. Peasants should never have the privilege of gazing upon queens. “She’s not like you, is she?”

“No,” she replied, her voice now barely a whisper.

It had been a rhetorical question. Of course, Elena wasn’t like her. She’d proven that by choosing to live a life even a sewer rat wouldn’t envy. She hadn’t resorted to fucking, scheming, and begging for fleeting luxury. She would soon be given all of that because she belonged to me in all the ways they dreamed of. I stood and slowly approached the blonde.

“Get on your knees. ”

Without shame, hesitation, or question, she dropped to the terracotta.

“Do you know what I want you to do next?”

“Yes,” she breathed, feigning enthusiasm.

I would be insulted if this was the pinnacle of her acting skills, but I had no intention of letting her filthy mouth anywhere near me. Not that I was one to slut-shame. I valued these women’s valiant efforts and line of work. I simply wasn’t prone to

sticking my dick somewhere gallons of cum had been emptied. There were some things Listerine and Colgate couldn't erase.

The blonde's sharp mind was an amusing contrast to her friend's naivety. Fear and warning radiated from her eyes, darting between me and her unsuspecting companion. As the brunette reached for me with trembling fingers, I revealed the gun hidden behind my back .

Her mouth opened in a scream, but before she could make a sound, I pressed the cold barrel against her forehead and pulled the trigger without hesitation. The gunshot echoed through the air. My dick twitched as her lifeless body jolted. Like a puppet that had been lifted up just to have its strings cut, she slumped to the ground. Blood began to pool from the small hole in her head, creating a shallow puddle. The blonde was instantly on her feet, scrambling across the patterned concrete, kicking her heels off in the process. They almost landed in my pool. I watched her go, chuckling to myself.

“Why do you always let them run?” Sergio shook his head in amusement.

“I have to give them some kind of false hope, Gio. Why not let them believe they have a chance of survival?” I set my gun on the table and reclaimed my chair, leaving the brunette's body to bask in the sun. My steward, Jason, specialized in this area. He would retrieve and dispose of her before cleaning the mess up .

“So, this woman, she's the right pick?” Sergio gestured to the manila folder, going back to the discussion we'd been having before our temporary guests arrived.

“She's the only pick. There is no one else. It has to be her. It will be her.” I opened the folder again and studied the picture of the woman inside. After being face to face with her, I now knew that I had yet to receive a photograph that did her any justice. She had a classic beauty. What I found most intriguing was her eyes. They were

brown and beautiful, but more than that they radiated a natural innocence and showcased how pure she was.

Those eyes were the gateway to a hidden treasure buried deep within her, one that I intended to take for myself. I envisioned them peering up at me while her pouty lips were wrapped around my dick, my come sliding down her throat.

My mind reeled with anticipation, imagining her eyes widening in shock and pleasure as I forced myself inside her for the first time. Every inch of me yearned to feel her quiver and writhe as she rode my face and ground her pussy onto my tongue. There were endless possibilities and plans for our future together. She was untainted by the harsh realities of my world, and it would be my privilege to corrupt her innocence and have her all to myself.

“What have you got for me, Gio?” I asked, reaching for my drink and making myself focus.

“She’s been here a week and hasn’t gone to a single party or event. When she is seen, it’s never without the Bellucci girl or Ross, and you know that little fucker parties hard. What do you think she’s been doing?”

“Recuperating. A week isn’t that long,” Elias chimed in with a shrug. “You have to remember; that she was never fully inducted into this life. Her father wouldn’t allow it. Her sister forced her way back and Elena chose to stay away.”

“He’s right. She isn’t like anyone from around here, which also means she isn’t close to being what I need her to be. Or who.”

“How can you be sure she ever will be ready, considering...recent events?” Sergio shot a pointed glance at the whore on the ground.

“There’s nothing to worry about, G. She will be everything my brother needs. Both for him and our family,” Elias cut in.

“It’s just, she tried to...” he caught the look on my face and trailed off. "Never mind. I have faith in you completely. I know what you’re capable of. Forgive me, Patr?o , if I’ve offended you.” Sergio bowed his head as a sign of respect.

I waved him off. Had anyone other than him decided to voice that line of thinking to me we'd have a problem .

Gio only had my best interest in my mind. I understood his concerns. Elena had a dark spot in her past that couldn’t be overlooked, but this detail didn't deter me in the least. On the contrary, it piqued my curiosity. Her complexities played right into my hands. Her mind was an intricate enigma, and I had always had a knack for untangling the most confounding of riddles. It would all be worth it in the end. Not only was she my last play, but the one card I needed to solidify something I’d been working towards for years. I’d made a sordid promise to a friend, and I intended to keep it.

“Enough of this. Let’s go see my father.”

As I began to stand, a terrified scream tore through the air followed by a single gunshot. I was almost impressed. The blonde had made it farther than they normally did when I let them run.

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ELENA

The shrill, persistent blaring of my cell phone alarm abruptly yanked me out of my self-pitying thoughts. Groaning, I swiped my finger across the screen to silence it. Reluctantly, I peeled myself out of bed and made my way to the bathroom, heading for the hutch caddy-cornered from the sink.

I reached up and moved the resin lighthouse aside. Resting beneath it was the orange bottle I couldn't bring myself to look at for too long--a symbol of my perceived weakness and dependency. The oblong capsules, a muted shade of green and pale yellow, held the key to balancing my moods and keeping me from spiraling into complete insanity.

Feeling anxious, I counted the remaining pills. Without a doctor here to prescribe me anymore, I had to ration what was left. My usual supplier, who took the risk of losing her license to help me, was now on the other side of the city and I had no means of reaching her. I took the dosage I needed with water from the tap and then placed the lighthouse back in to hide the ugly orange bottle again.

After returning to the bedroom, I discarded the towel that had been wrapped around me for hours and changed into my cozy sweats and an oversized shirt featuring a design from one of Lovecraft's stories. I didn't know what to do next. Despite my determination to push through, I had spent a good portion of the night stifling sobs until I had no energy left and could only hide my ragged breaths. The tears had finally stopped, but the pain still felt as raw as ever, and my swollen face felt like it was filled with helium. I checked the time and saw that it was just past midnight. It would be at least three more hours before I could fall asleep. I had attempted to

distract myself by watching TV, but I couldn't focus on any movies or shows .

The darkness wrapped itself around me like a heavy blanket, suffocating and all-encompassing. It was another one of those nights where I clung to my father's advice, desperate for any shred of comfort to ease the turmoil in my mind.

“Never stop fighting the demons in your head,” his words echoed in my ears, a constant reminder of the struggle that consumed me every day. Sometimes, on these lonely nights, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if I just let those demons take over. Would it bring me peace or push me deeper into this endless cycle?

I sighed and ran my hands through my hair. “Where are you, Eva?” I whispered into the emptiness. I debated whether to call Peyton or Melody, who both understood the moods I could go into. I didn't want to bother them though, especially at this hour. I returned to the bathroom and quickly ran a brush through my hair, trying to smooth out any tangles .

I splashed some water on my face in hopes of reducing the puffiness around my eyes. It wasn't my best look, but it would have to do. Slipping on my flip-flops, I grabbed my cell phone and air-pods off the nightstand before heading towards the door. I remembered to grab my hoodie from the hook before stepping into the eerily silent hallway. It was as if this place was a tomb instead of a home; even the AC unit seemed too quiet.

Once I made it outside without any run-ins, I took a deep breath and let the soothing sound of crickets chirping surround me. Scrolling through my music playlist, I settled on an Aquilo song that seemed fitting for my current mood. I didn't have a destination in mind; I just needed to escape from my room and clear my head. Walking felt like a better alternative than lying in bed and battling with the negative thoughts plaguing me. At such an hour, there was no activity in the neighborhood—I was grateful for that .

Being able to walk like this was the only positive of this place. Most of the homes weren't visible from the road, which added an extra layer of privacy for both me and whoever lived in them. Out of habit, I paused my music and checked my surroundings every few minutes. I still couldn't shake the feeling of being watched, but there was never anyone there. Not for the first time I wondered if I was alive intentionally or by mistake. My gut told me it was the former, but until I knew for sure or the reason why I'd always be looking over my shoulder.

I wasn't sure how long I walked. At least two more songs finished before I decided to cross to the other side of the road. I began to turn, freezing when I realized there was a car slowly creeping around a partially obscured bend. I silently cursed and paused my music, waiting to see if they'd pass, or if I needed to start running .

As the sleek vehicle approached and came to a stop, I admired its impeccable exterior, immediately falling for it--a vintage Monte Carlo in perfect condition. I was curious why it was here amongst all the Rolls Royce and Bentleys. I strained to see the driver through the dark-tinted windows but could not make out their features. Suddenly, the driver's door opened, and my heart skipped a beat. He stepped out and stared at me from across the roof of the car. His lips curved into a smile, but it lacked any warmth or friendliness.

How was it possible that I ran into him again?

"Late night walk?"

"Something like that," I replied, not giving away too much information.

He walked around the front of the car and approached the passenger side door. I watched him with cautious eyes. He was dressed in a white button-down shirt that seemed to have been tailored specifically for his perfectly sculpted body, paired with black slacks that fit just as well. It appeared as though he had just come from a

business meeting or a night out. It wasn't as if he had a legitimate nine-to-five that required overtime. On the other hand, I appeared completely out of place in this neighborhood. He swung open the door and immediately fixed his gaze on me, scanning my entire body. The intrusive evaluation felt like a searing iron pressed against my skin.

We stood still, neither of us moving or saying anything. I wasn't naive; I knew exactly what he wanted me to do. However, I refused to comply just because he expected it. I briefly considered walking away, but for my own safety, I stayed put. He looked amused by my silent defiance and slid his hand into the pocket of his slacks in a nonchalant manner.

"Get in the car, Elena," he ordered calmly, his voice carrying an air of authority that brooked no argument .

"Why would I do that?" I quickly scanned the empty street, noting that he had come alone.

"Because if you don't, anjinho, I'll have you brought to me in a far less courteous manner."

A knot formed in my stomach, and I felt a wave of fear wash over me. My rational side screamed for me to resist and not get into the car with him. But deep down, I knew there was no use in defying him. My mind was filled with countless questions as I removed my headphones and walked towards him. With each step, I felt a sense of dread settle over me. I anxiously watched him as he opened the door for me and guided me inside. As he closed the door and returned to the driver's seat, my mind was racing with a mix of emotions - fear, anger, and a dangerous curiosity.

He returned to the driver's seat and leaned over, causing me to jump. He didn't mention my startled response, but he laughed softly as he pulled the seatbelt across

my lap .

“You need to stop sneaking out late at night. Consider yourself lucky that we're in my city. Anywhere else, and this conversation would be very different.”

His words sparked a mix of anger and surprise within me as he seemed to know about my nightly habits. “Are you having me followed?”

He gave me a look I couldn't decipher. “Of course. I always have someone keeping an eye on you.”

My stomach twisted into knots at his admission, and the ground beneath my feet felt like it was falling away. He said it so casually, and I knew he was telling the truth. All those times last week when I felt like I was being watched, there must have been someone around me because of him. It wasn't just my imagination running wild. Even tonight, when I thought the streets were empty, there must have been someone hiding somewhere .

But why? Why was he watching me? The only reason I could think of was because of my sister.

“Why do you have eyes on me?”

He made a sharp U-turn in the middle of the street, not answering me. As he drove, I settled back. The scent of his cologne wrapped around me, audacious warm cinnamon and blood mandarin. It was the type of fragrance that lingered in your memory. Something about it was loosely familiar, but I wasn't in a position to ask him about it.

“Just relax,” he said in a gentle tone.

Impossible. But I did let go of the door handle, which was practically embedded into

my palm. Attempting to calm myself with a quiet breath, I glanced over at him.
“Where are you taking me?”

“For breakfast. Where else?”

“You...you kidnapped me for breakfast?” I couldn't help but ask, incredulously .

He chuckled lightly. “You got into my car on your own accord. That's hardly kidnapping.”

His amusement only made me more annoyed. “Where are we going?” I repeated.

“I already told you.”

“I'm not really a breakfast person.”

“You should be. It's the most important meal of the day.”

His seriousness almost made me laugh out loud, so I had to bite my cheek to keep from doing so.

“I told you we'd talk soon, yes?”

“Yes,” I replied briskly. He had said that, and I didn't forget. Forgetting him was a feat I wasn't sure I could accomplish. I knew the moment he approached me at the venue there was a reason why. I could only hope to have the answer after this was done.

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MATEO

I didn't ask any questions.

I gave her space for a few minutes, mentally organizing the tasks I had to complete in just a few hours. Deliveries of cocaine were on their way to an unknown destination, cash needed to be laundered and divided evenly, and plans for a new neighborhood development were in progress. These tasks could wait - a benefit of being my own boss, but I preferred to handle everything efficiently and promptly.

If things ever got too tight, Elias would act on my behalf with full authority. He was one of the few men I trusted to make decisions for me, aside from my cousin Angel. However, he was currently out of reach and tended to take drastic measures without hesitation. While this quality served him well on the illegal side of our business, it wasn't ideal for handling legal matters .

Sergio, on the other hand, struggled with interpersonal skills and often didn't work well with others. Collectively, we all kept things running smoothly, just in different areas. At the moment, my main focus was on Elena and getting us to our destination. I didn't like her late-night walks, but tonight they worked in my favor. There was a lingering irritation with her hesitating to get into my car, soothed only by the knowledge the alternative would've been her fighting me. It was too early in our relationship for that.

"What year is this?" Her soft voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I glanced over and saw she was trailing her fingers along the ridges of the white

bucket seat; her nails freshly painted a deep shade of maroon. “Seventy-four. Do you like it?”

“Yeah...”

She didn’t reveal her father had one just like it, but her speaking at all was a step in the right direction .

The route we were taking offered little scenery after leaving our neighborhood, and silence had settled between us. Elena remained alert, fearful but not close to terror. That was good. It would’ve been a problem were she to be lax around me. Eventually, I turned and coasted into a parking lot. Elena leaned forward and peered through the windshield, causing her long hair to curtain the side of her face.

“You were serious about breakfast?”

“If you’d rather I took you to one of my rooms with four stone walls and a concrete floor, I’d be happy to oblige. I wouldn’t mind seeing you bound and gagged.”

She looked over at me, diverting her gaze the second we made eye contact. “I’ll take a raincheck on that.”

I grinned and cut the ignition. “In that case, it’s time you and I had a talk.” Exiting the car, I caught a glimpse of her wary expression as I slammed my door .

She got out and followed me into the diner, sliding into a cherry red booth of my choosing so that we were facing one another. There was only one other person inside, an older man who looked half asleep in a back corner.

“Get whatever you want.” I slid her a menu without needing one for myself.

Paula, the wife of the man I had purchased the place from years ago, shuffled over ready to take our orders. “Hey Hun, didn’t expect to see you today.”

She never expected to see me. She was also the only woman I’d allow to address me like that. Paula had worked for my family for well over a decade, cleaning money and making sure the basement of the diner was always ready for whenever it was needed. She had skin in this game and bigger balls than some of the men I knew. Gerald, her late husband, had gone above and beyond for me and the men I kept close without complaint. It was a selfless act we’d never forgotten .

I bought the diner and made sure they could live comfortably long before an aggressive form of lung cancer took the cutthroat bastard out. Paula still got up every day and came in to run it alongside his brother Franco, who doubled as a chef.

“I want my usual, and she wants...”

“The poached egg.”

“Got it. How do you like your toast? Wheat or white?”

“Wheat is fine.”

“And to drink?” Paula inquired with a gentle smile.

“Orange juice, please.”

“I’ll have that right out.” She collected the menus and shuffled off towards the kitchen.

Elena looked around the diner, taking it all in before she focused her beautiful eyes on me. “You eat here often?”

I'd wondered how long it would take her to pick up on that .

"Often enough. It's one of the rare establishments I place true value on."

She appeared pensive for a moment, thanking Paula when she brought our drinks over—Elena's orange juice and my coffee, black with no sugar. "What is it you wanted to talk about?"

"We can get to that after you've eaten."

She opened her mouth but then decided against whatever she was going to say. We fell into a semi-companionable silence after that, which continued until the food came, up until I had to exercise patience as she stared at her plate but made no effort to eat.

"If you don't start eating, I'll have no choice but to feed you myself. You don't want to offend the cook."

"I'm actually not very hungry."

"Did I ask if you were?"

Reaching across the table, I picked up her fork and added a piece of her poached egg before bringing it to her mouth .

"Eat," I directed, gesturing toward the plate in front of her.

She looked at me with a mixture of shock and resignation, but she didn't put up a fight. She took the bite I offered without any further arguments. Whether or not she was actually hungry was irrelevant to me. It was obvious that she had not been taking care of herself. As much as I hated to admit it, she would be no use to me if she was

sickly. Besides the noticeable weight loss, it was clear that she had been crying. Her face was swollen and puffy, but still undeniably beautiful.

It killed me to know that I wasn't the reason for her tears, that I hadn't been there to taste them as they fell from her eyes. After feeding her another bite, she took the fork from me and started eating on her own. I watched her, noting her every move and facial expression. Elena was alluring in a way I found more desirable than anyone I'd ever encountered .

I was surrounded by beautiful women, the likes of which stayed dolled up even as they slept. Elena would surpass them at her worst. She was an enigma--a blend of fierce beauty and haunting vulnerability. Her long, dark hair framed a face that was both delicate and strong, with eyes that seemed to hold the weight of the world in their depths. They captivated him, those eyes—dark and expressive, often reflecting a storm of emotions she tried so hard to keep in check. Her skin, a warm, sun-kissed tone, hinted at her heritage and added to her allure.

Her lips were full and enticing, often set in a determined line but capable of breaking into a smile that could disarm even the most guarded of men. The way she held herself, with an air of defiance and a touch of grace, spoke of someone who had seen too much but refused to be broken by it. I saw not just the woman she presented to the world but the one she hid from everyone, including herself .

Without a doubt, I knew that Elena was both a prize to be claimed and a challenge to be met. She was the kind of woman who could stand beside me even after I broke her down, and still maintain identity. That, more than anything, was what fascinated me the most.

As we sat there, I made the decision to burn her sweatpants. They were too effective in highlighting the roundness of her ass, and it wasn't fair for her to expect me to always be there to defend her against anyone who took a look. Once she'd eaten a

few more bites, she took a sip of her drink and then sat back in the same way I had, gesturing to my untouched plate. “You haven’t eaten anything.”

“No, but you have and that’s all that matters.”

She reached out and began fiddling with a napkin, a sign she was growing uncomfortable. I debated if I should get right into things or be a considerate gentleman for five minutes. I went with the latter .

For Elena, I would try my hand at being a saint for a day if the situation called for it. “Would you like to get anything off your chest? I’m an excellent listener and can

Her gaze dipped to the table, and I had to refrain from grabbing her face to make her look at me again. “I’d much rather discuss whatever it is that has you suddenly interested in me and why we’re here.”

Thank fuck. In truth, I didn’t give a damn about her losses. How could I when they were my gain? But the last part of her statement didn’t sit well with me. “My interest is anything but sudden, anjinho. And a man taking a woman to breakfast isn’t all that unusual.”

Her brows furrowed. “Right...but you aren’t just any man, and this isn’t just breakfast. You’re very Baron von Rotten-ish.”

I didn’t know who the fuck that was, but they sounded important. The fact she realized who sat across from her had me fighting back a grin .

“And what would that make you, Elena?”

She grew quiet once more. I watched her struggle to find words and as something else slithered into her gaze, poorly veiled curiosity joining an emotion I was well

acquainted with.

Fear.

Perhaps of me or what I could do to her. Maybe both. If only she knew what I inevitably would do to her.

It was all so stimulating.

With a slight clearing of her throat, her mask was back in place. It was amusing that she believed I couldn't see right through it. "How much do you know about me?"

"The better question is what don't I know about you?"

"I imagine there's not much you haven't already figured out."

There was a silent but in there somewhere. I was eager to learn what she thought I didn't know. However, I wouldn't reveal my full hand and ruin the fun .

"You'd be correct in that assumption. But why don't we get to why I really brought you out here?" I began, pleased when her attention didn't waver. "You need me," I stated plainly.

"What?"

"You heard me."

She slowly shook her head. "I don't understand why you'd think that. If anything, what I need is to stay away from you."

"Is that why you got into my car and allowed me to bring you to this rural diner?"

“You make it sound as if I planned this. You didn’t give me much of a choice.” She tucked some of her hair behind one ear and then reached for her orange juice.

“I allowed you to choose. For the record, you choose wisely.”

“I don’t...” she trailed off and took a breath to try and conceal her frustration. “I don’t want to talk in circles.”

“We have that in common. ”

I could feel the anger radiating off her as I continued to toy with her.

"What do you want?" she asked, her grip tightening on her fork. I could tell she wanted nothing more than to stab me with it, and I wouldn't have minded seeing her try.

"Do I really need to spell it out for you?"

"Can't you just tell me?" She dropped the fork, causing me to chuckle at her frustration. We were going to have so much fun together.

"Let's get back on track," I said, trying to focus on the task at hand. My phone had been vibrating nonstop in my pocket since we sat down, so now wasn't the time to push her too far. There would be plenty of opportunities for that later.

"I assume this isn't about what kind of person my sister was," she said quietly.

I kept my expression neutral. Most people knew exactly what kind of person her sister was; it wasn't a secret .

The only one who seemed oblivious was Elena. But that wasn't what I was asking

her, and she knew it. Trying to deflect or redirect wouldn't work with me. If she wanted to play games, she'd quickly learn that I always had the upper hand. I was always steps ahead. And most importantly, I always won.

"I know you're naïve, Elena, but not to the extent that you have no idea what's happening around you or what I could possibly mean."

She scanned the diner, pausing on the elderly gentleman who was now peacefully asleep, thanks to Paula's spiked coffee. We couldn't afford any loose ends. "Do you really want to discuss this here?"

I tilted my head. "I thought you might feel more comfortable here than alone with me at my house. But we could always go to that other room I mentioned." Neither location would necessarily be safe for her, but for now, I needed to create a trap with sweet lies and half-truths. It would be for her own good .

"Right," she sighed. "I assumed this was about Eva, but I wasn't sure what your intentions were."

"There was never anything between your sister and me," I interjected quickly. She sounded resigned, which I didn't like. It wouldn't be far-fetched for her to think I only pursued her because of the disaster that was her twin. That wasn't entirely true. "My interest has always been in you, Elena."

"But why? Where did it come from if not from my sister?"

Ah, I had made a mistake. It didn't happen often, but it happened sometimes. I couldn't fix her self-esteem issues in a small-town diner, so I wasn't going to try. I knew it was something I would have to build back up after breaking it down, but I hadn't considered it during this conversation. "Elena, any man with eyes and half a brain would want you. Unlike me, they wouldn't have the slightest clue how to handle

you once you were in their grasp. "

"That's... quite an assumption," she replied slowly, her cheeks blossoming with a telltale flush. "But not everyone is interested in being possessed or handled. I'm not some prize to be won or a puzzle to be solved."

Her attempt at standing her ground was admirable, yet I could hear the slight tremble in her words, the unspoken emotions that danced just beneath the surface. It was clear my bold declaration had surprised her, stirring a blend of resistance and an undeniable spark of interest. A grin spread across my face as I absorbed her flustered response.

"Well, we don't have to worry about anyone else daring to try any of that, do we? You're going to be mine." Before she could muster a reply, I leaned closer, lowering my voice to ensure she understood the gravity of my next words. "The sooner you come to terms with what I'm telling you, the sooner I point you in the right direction to find your sister. "

I could see the moment my words truly registered, the realization hitting hard. It was unspoken knowledge between very few that her sister wasn't present at her own funeral, but she should've expected me to have it. I knew everything that went on in my city, even the most decrepit corners of it. Her face was a picture of poorly masked shock. There was probably a flurry of questions racing through her pretty little head. It was a calculated revelation on my part, dropping just enough information to keep her tethered to me, to ensure she understood that I held the cards to the mystery she was so desperate to unravel.

Rising from the booth, I casually tossed a wad of cash onto the table. The amount was extravagant, enough to cover every meal on the menu a dozen times over. It was my way of paying for more than the service since Paula adamantly refused my money directly.

“Wait,” Elena demanded as she rushed to follow me .

The moment she stood, I moved, caging her between me and the booth. She tilted her head back and looked up at me, immediately realizing her error. I contemplated turning her around and bending her over the table. Unfortunately, that too would have to wait until another time. Her pouty lips parted, and she began to question me again, but I cut her off before she could finish.

I brought one hand to the back of her head and weaved my fingers into her hair to keep her still. “Don't say anything just yet,” I advised, my tone softening ever so slightly. “Take your time. It's important that you make the right decision because once you do, there's no going back.”

In reality, the choice had already been made. The paths before her, seemingly diverse, all led to the same inevitable destination. A carefully constructed maze with one with a predetermined end. Patience, in this instance, was a virtue I could afford .

It wouldn't hurt me any to wait a little longer, let her grapple with the illusion of choice. The implication I'd made was clear. If she wanted to find her sister, she'd be doing it only after she agreed to be everything that I demanded of her.

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ELENA

Things were worse than I thought.

On top of my father's legacy being beyond repair, Eva was still missing, and I had as many answers about her whereabouts as the day I found our aunt brutally murdered.

None.

I didn't know what to do. With each passing day, I became more frustrated and disheartened. I'd spent the past two weeks enduring the company of my uncle and his lingering, sick fucking stares. When I realized he wasn't going to be forthcoming with any information he may have, I tried to be tolerant of him for my grandmother's sake. His phony display of grief for Eva, and the sudden affection he developed seemingly overnight concerning me, was nauseating. My sister had told me herself, multiple times, that she couldn't stand him on the few occasions they'd crossed paths .

It was clear to me that he was doing close to nothing to find her, despite claiming the opposite. Even if he actually had tried to, I'd long since confirmed what I already suspected when I first arrived here. The Castello family had very little power left. It made me wonder how they managed to hold onto the house considering the messy state of things.

Maintenance and the cost of living in this area were more than what I would've made working at the convenience store for an entire year. They had to be dumping nearly everything they brought in cash-wise into keeping up appearances.

And then there was Mateo.

I hadn't seen or heard from him since he took me out to that diner. I returned home more conflicted than I'd been before speaking with him. I knew I couldn't trust the man, but he knew exactly how to catch my attention and hold it .

He knew I was in dire need of an ally, even if they only lent me an ear and helped point me in the direction. It was for that reason I forced myself to primp and dress for a night out with Melody and Peyton. I hadn't wanted to involve them more than I already had, but I couldn't see any other options right then save for making a deal with the devil.

Speaking here was out of the question. Something about my uncle rubbed me the wrong way and I didn't trust him. I wouldn't risk him overhearing the conversation that needed to be had.

I sat on the edge of my bed and slipped on my heels, making sure I hadn't missed a text from Melody. She and Peyton were picking me up tonight since my car hadn't been prioritized in my move back. Heaven forbid the neighbors get a look at my seasoned sedan parked on their immaculate driveway. Seeing I had some time to kill, I spent a few minutes checking my sister's social media before calling it quits .

I found it strange not a single one of her friends had commented or posted to see where she was before her fade of a funeral was announced. Normally her pages were never short of interactions. There weren't even a dozen condolences and the ones that had bothered weren't names I remembered her ever mentioning.

I leaned back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, placing my phone on my chest. A part of me knew I was in over my head, but I wasn't anywhere near ready to admit that. Somebody knew what happened to Eva and where she'd gone, who hurt Molly too. Someone other than Mateo. Figuring out who was another story. If this was

related to something my family had done, I couldn't go around asking random people questions, especially here. I didn't want to risk pissing off the wrong person.

My phone pinged and I quickly checked the text, sighing as I sat up .

They would arrive in less than ten minutes. That gave me five to come up with a way to tell them everything. I wasn't sure how to approach it. How do you explain that a girl who was supposed to be dead is actually alive? How do you sum up the chaos that had become my life? And on top of it all, how did I admit that I'd been propositioned by a notorious crime lord who everyone fears? Peyton and Melody were more familiar with this world than I was, and they knew firsthand about Mateo's sadistic tendencies. Yet, the same man who terrifies everyone had taken me out for breakfast, albeit against my will, and was offering me a tempting opportunity that was hard not to consider

I'd replayed our one-sided conversation more than a dozen times. I vividly recalled the warmth of his breath against my skin and how my stomach flipped from being so close to him. I couldn't think of a single reason why he'd approached me .

It didn't sound believable even to me, and I was the one there. What did he gain from this? I hoped Melody and Peyton could shine some light on things after I explained everything. That is if they didn't decide to stay away from me after I told them my secrets.

Lore was packed nearly shoulder to shoulder. The music was so loud I had a hard time hearing myself think, but if I was really being watched it was a nice buffer between us and whoever could be nearby. I peered down at the lower level, watching scantily clad women work the room as some people danced and others crowded the bar .

If not for Peyton's foresight to book a private booth with bottle service, we'd be

down there in that sea of chaos.

“You know, I’m not that surprised about any of this,” Melody remarked.

Peyton shook his head. “Me either, but I wish I was.”

I toyed with the thin straw in my glass. I had started with a margarita and was now three drinks too many past my limit. It was never a good idea to mix alcohol with my medication, but I believed this was worthy of an exception. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the day we talked.”

Melody flashed me a sad smile. She looked gorgeous tonight. Her makeup was flawless, and she’d let her dark hair down. “I know you wanted to protect us from this, but if you ever got caught up in something we’d be right there with you, Lena. This is the last thing you need to deal with alone.”

“I can drink to that!” Peyton agreed loudly, clinking his glass against hers .

He took a generous swig and made a face, shaking his head from side to side. I laughed and took a sip from my straw, savoring the taste of Bacardi and Coke. He slammed his glass down and leaned closer, so he didn’t have to speak so loudly to be heard. Melody did the same so she could hear what he was saying.

“Mateo knows Eva isn’t dead, and if by some slim chance, he doesn’t know who put the hit on your aunt and why Eva’s missing, he can easily find out.”

“My money is on him already knowing. I would be shocked if he didn’t have her exact location,” Melody speculated. “I don’t think someone can piss in this city without him knowing.”

I frowned, considering their words. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t already thought of

myself. It was both nice to hear my suspicions confirmed and a little terrifying. “But why help me? ”

Peyton blew out a harsh breath. “That’s the question of the hour, isn’t it? I don’t get his stake in all this. Your family doesn’t have anything that would benefit him, not even a bowl of sugar. No offense.”

“None taken,” I assured him. “It’s not like I haven’t noticed. What can I do, though? Grandma is old. My parents are gone. My uncle Slim and his son are gone. My uncle Luis is here but I’d be better off making nice with a snake than trusting him. The Castello lineage is practically non-existent. I’m beginning to feel like me and my sister are the only two left.”

As I finished speaking, Peyton abruptly sat straighter, his gaze sweeping over our surroundings. “What is it?” I looked around but didn’t spot anything that caused alarm.

“Do you see something?” Melody slid closer, angling her body towards mine as if it could be a shield .

“Oh, shit. No. I was making sure we were good. No one eavesdropping or paying too much attention.”

“Goddamnit, Peyton.” Melody deflated and grabbed her drink.

He waved her off and leaned in again, but this time there was a noticeable change in his demeanor. “I’m an idiot. Your family does have something he’d want.”

“Fuck,” Melody cursed, catching on before I did. “Now I feel dumb.”

“What is it?” I glanced between them. When neither gave an immediate response, I

got the hint. “No. No way.”

“Yes, way,” Melody rebutted. “Your family has one last trump card, Elena. You.”

“No,” I continued to deny. “I’m nothing.”

Peyton jerked his head back as if I'd struck him and scowled. “What the fuck? Never say that again. ”

I sighed, having déjà vu of the conversation we'd had the day of Aunt Molly's funeral.

“I don't mean it like that, but we have to be realistic. I know next to nothing about this world anymore. I have no power, no connections, save for you two. All I've got is my father's name. No matter what you or anyone else says, if he wanted a Castello daughter it should have been—is Eva. This world was better suited for her,” I reasoned, hating that some of my old insecurities crept into my tone.

Peyton's angry scowl morphed into a sympathetic one, which was even worse. “Your sister...” he shook his head.

“Your sister was-- is off the rails,” Melody finished bluntly. “You've always been more like your parents, Lena. I know it may hurt to hear, but like you just said, it's better to tell the truth. ”

I took a breath, and then another, struggling against the urge to cry. I wasn't ready to have this kind of discussion, yet I knew everything they were saying held more than a bit of validity. I stood and began to squeeze out of the circular booth. “I need to use the restroom.”

“I'm coming with you,” Melody declared, leaving no room for argument.

I nodded and headed for the staircase, making sure I didn't lose her in the crowd once we got down to the lower level. It was a major design flaw that restrooms weren't available on the upper floor unless you booked one of the actual VIP rooms versus a booth. You shouldn't have to be drunk and close to pissing yourself while looking for a damn toilet.

"Stay close," I shouted over the music as I grabbed her hand. The bass was so strong it vibrated through my heels .

When we finally reached the lady's room, there was a small line. We stood together, huddled shoulder to shoulder.

Melody leaned in and spoke in my ear, the scent of vodka on her breath. "I'm sorry if I upset you."

I turned my head so that I could respond. "Don't be sorry. I need to hear these things; I just don't want to."

She gave me an affectionate squeeze and we moved up in line. A few guys emerged from the men's room on the opposite end of the hall. My eyes met with a dark pair staring right at me. He looked pissed, and the way he was glaring made it seem as if I was the reason why. He looked familiar, but I couldn't place his name. He stumbled a bit, and I realized he was drunk off his ass. Melody caught sight of him and muttered a curse. I glanced at her surprised.

"Do you know who that is?" Before she could answer the man was suddenly right in front of me .

"Where is Evie?" he slurred, loud enough to attract unwanted attention. I backed away, trying to get out of his personal space. His breath was so foul that it made me want to gag.

"Get away from me," I demanded, bumping into the wall behind me. It suddenly clicked why this stranger looked familiar; he was one of the profiles who had talked to my sister online.

"Eva's dead, you asshole. How thoughtful of you to show up for her funeral," Melody stepped in, playing her role as a supportive friend perfectly.

"Leave her alone, Jay," one of his friends tried to intervene, but he shrugged them off and advanced towards me, trying to trap me against the wall.

Melody tried to block him from reaching me, but I pushed her aside when I saw his hand coming towards me. He grabbed my arm and yanked me closer, ignoring the growing crowd around us who were yelling at him to let go. The pain of his grip made me bite back a whimper as I struggled against him. "Let go," I snapped, feeling a surge of anger and fear rise within me. Without thinking, I punched him in the stomach with all my strength.

He let out a pained gasp and doubled over, glaring up at me with pure hatred in his eyes.

If looks could kill, I would have dropped dead.

"Just tell me where she is!" he snarled as he straightened himself up again.

"Get away from her!" Melody seethed, shoving him from the side. She started shouting something in Italian that I couldn't understand and shoved him again.

He stumbled and fell onto the marble floor before quickly getting back up. For a moment, I was afraid that things were about to get physical, and I might need to take off my heels and defend myself. The last time I had to do that was when three girls at my intermediate school tried jumping me and my sister. I heard a commotion from

behind me, and suddenly two men were charging towards us, pushing anyone who got in their way. Jay's aggressive stance immediately turned submissive as he saw the approaching figures. His friends also tried to make a run for it but were stopped by a third man. Not wanting to stick around and find out what was happening, Melody grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the chaos, nearly colliding with Peyton who had been trying to come to our aid.

“We’re leaving,” he declared.

I had no reason to object. Going home sounded like a great idea for once. He must have had a driver on standby because there was a ride waiting for us outside of the club.

Peyton took the passenger seat, and Melody and I got in back.

“Are you guys, okay?”

“That dickhead didn’t touch me,” Melody answered .

“I’m fine,” I lied, doing my best to shake off what just happened. “What about your car?”

“Fuck that car. I’ll get it tomorrow. And I don’t drink and drive,” Peyton replied.

I slumped back into my seat, replaying what just happened. I’d never met that guy before, yet he recognized me right away. My sister was supposed to be dead. He clearly refused to believe it. I wasn’t sure what to make of that. Had she told someone that she was in trouble? It made sense, but who had she pissed off so badly that they came all the way to our shitty neighborhood to make her disappear?

I had come out to get some guidance and all I got was more questions I couldn’t

answer. There was one person I could turn to that would make all of this so much easier. As loathe as I was to admit, and knowing what it would cost, I think I needed him.

But why did he want me?

MATEO

I set my phone aside and finally gave my attention to the three men across from me. Elias, Sergio, and a seasoned recruit we called Theo were all patiently waiting to see what I wanted them to do.

“We still have eighty-four bundles that need to be evenly distributed. Give them to individuals who consistently put in and take out similar amounts,” I instructed Theo, as he began deciding where the money would go. “Bring two men with you, one to follow and one to ride alongside,” I added before he left the room.

I wasn't worried about him getting robbed; no one was foolish enough to attempt it. However, once in a while, a rival or inexperienced law enforcement officer would test my patience. It never ended well for them. It had been years since I faced a legitimate threat, and I was confident in my ability to cover up any actions necessary to maintain my family's lifestyle. Of course, this success was not solely attributable to me; it was a team effort.

My aunt had people planted in the more legitimate places of power. My parents were still very much involved behind the scenes as well. When someone got the nonsensical notion to be a civil hero or flex their minuscule strength, desperate to take me down, they eventually fucked up and found out why smarter men knew to stay out of my way. If I decided to sit back and do nothing, another family would step in to handle it for me. The resulting bloodbath was always mildly entertaining.

After Theo left, I moved on to the next task at hand. "Could either of you explain why the shipment to Liberty City was two kilos short?"

"It was that new guy's responsibility. Joshua B-something," Sergio quickly responded .

"We're already taking steps to fix it."

Elias shook his head and chuckled. "What kind of idiot steals such a small amount when they'll have to pay so much more?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Angel didn't seem too bothered by it. In fact, he found it amusing."

Sergio scoffed and crossed his bulky arms. "Of course he did. This is the same guy who tortured someone just for fun and then used it as an excuse to wipe out their entire family. What did he call it? A mercy killing? He's a sick fuck. I think he might be worse than both of you combined."

"Well, there's a reason our parents split us up," Elias agreed.

I chuckled, glancing at the time. Dealing with this mistake in the shipment wasn't part of my plans for today, but now that it had been brought to my attention, I knew I couldn't put it off for later. Why did recruiting new members have to be so difficult ?

"Is Diablo ready for us?"

"Yes," they replied in unison.

"Good. Sergio, bring your camera. You're going to need it." Knowing what that meant, his face lit up with excitement.

We left my office and exited through the front door of the house. To the far right, the UTVs solely meant to drive across my property sat parked and waiting. We climbed

into one, me and Elias in the front, Sergio in the back with his black camera bag. We traveled down the long lane that ran between the stables and led to the warehouses. Horses grazed in the paddocks on either side, blissful in their protective bubbles.

The majestic creatures had always brought me an odd sense of peace. When I needed a place to think, I would come and watch them for hours. My mother was an avid rider and thus, made sure we were as well.

Arriving at a large three-tier building that didn't look much different than the ones where the horses were kept, I bypassed the main entrance and then the second, going all the way around to the back where a single door stood. Once inside, we headed straight for the hall where the holding rooms were located.

"Those from the club are on the left, room four. The others are in two," Elias stated.

"Let's start on the right. When we get to the other room, I can consider it delayed gratification."

He snorted in response. I rolled my cuff links back and pushed open the steel door. I was greeted by the sight of two men tied side by side with cloth bags over their heads. Yellow and green puss had accumulated around the gaping hole I'd left in one of their thighs. The maggots I sprinkled over top were sliding right through it. If I listened closely enough, I could hear their tiny bodies moving.

Diablo and his current trainee both stood waiting for my arrival, dressed in the usual plastic gear to protect their clothing from blood. The kid couldn't have been any older than seventeen, but he showed promise, and his father had requested he be placed here.

"They haven't said anything new since you questioned them. I pulled that one's teeth out about a half-hour ago," Diablo explained, pointing to the man on the left.

“Well, that explains why he's got drool all down the front of him.” I turned to my cousin. “I want you to capture every second of this. When it’s done, send a message to anyone you think might have the slightest inkling to do what these two did, or may find incentive to come forward.”

He placed his bag out of the way and began pulling out his gear. I glanced around the room while I waited, my gaze landing on a lime-green chainsaw. “Is that new?”

“Thought I’d switch it up,” Diablo replied with a grin.

“By all means. ”

“You may want to move. This will be messy,” the trainee advised.

I wasn’t sure why he suggested that. Blood didn’t bother me. It was as common as air. Some days I wore it like a second skin. He dipped his head, and I looked down at the same time my brother spoke.

“He’s being considerate of our shoes.”

“These are nice, aren’t they?” I mused, looking at my Mantellassis. “Good eye.” I heeded the trainee’s advice and moved to the far side of the room with Elias and Sergio, who was now poised and ready for the show.

Diablo slid a face cover in place and grabbed the chainsaw from the large hutch that held his tools. He then approached the hooded men. “Good to go?” he asked Sergio.

Diablo gave his companion a thumbs up before pulling the cord on his tool. The room was suddenly filled with a deafening whir as the motor kicked into gear .

Diablo lunged towards the man on the left, wielding the large chainsaw with

effortless skill. The sharp blade tore through flesh and bone, slicing through the man's neck with savage force. Blood sprayed and spurted from the wounds, staining the walls and floor red. Despite his strength, Diablo's arms trembled slightly from the effort of keeping the heavy tool in place. As the blade cut deeper into the man's body, his limbs convulsed and strained against their restraints.

For a moment, it seemed as though he might break free in a burst of desperate adrenaline. But in one swift motion, Diablo finished the job and sent the chair crashing to the ground with its lifeless occupant. The severed head rolled across the concrete floor, leaving a trail of blood in its wake before coming to a stop at my feet. The sudden movement caused Diablo to lose control for a split second .

The chainsaw veered off course and sliced through the next man's arm. The sound of bone being torn apart mingled with agonized screams as he writhed in pain. With a dark grin, I watched as Diablo continued his brutal work, relishing the chaos and carnage that peppered the room like macabre confetti.

He cut the chainsaw off and the kid stepped forward, putting an end to the whole debacle by shooting the man in the side of his head. The bang echoed throughout the room. Once it receded there was no sound but both bodies twitched for a few seconds, making a slapping sound in blood that had congealed around them.

“Well, that was just fucking beautiful.” I clapped slowly. “I suppose we'll have to add that technique to your repertoire,” I said to Diablo.”

"It would be my pleasure," he replied with a possible grin. It was difficult to tell with his mouth covered in blood and a facemask .

As he began to clean up, I noticed Elias was watching the trainee with contemplation. I'd ask him about it later when we were alone. I turned to Sergio. “Did you get it all?”

“From start to finish, a few frames each.”

I gestured to the door, and he and Elias walked with me as I left the room. “How soon can you have everything ready?”

“Within the hour.”

“Alright.” I crossed to room four, my pulse picking up the moment I entered. Four different men were bound by their wrists and ankles, all stripped naked. The chains that restrained them were bolted into the concrete, offering no slack, and constructed in such a way that regardless of how badly the muscles in their legs burned, they had to remain standing.

“Which one of you pissed yourself?” Elias asked jokingly.

I chuckled and rolled my sleeves higher. Only one dared to lift his head and look at us .

The others remained staring at the floor. They reminded me of terrified rodents, trapped and huddled together as much as they could be in some pitiful act of comfort and solidarity.

“Should I capture this too?” Sergio asked.

“Only some of it. I’d like to have a couple mementos.”

“In that case, you’re going to have a collection before you even get the girl,” he joked.

“Get the girl? I already have her. She just hasn’t accepted it yet.” I went to the hutch that was kept in this room. While I surveyed my options Elias reached beneath his

suit jacket and removed his gun. These tools weren't as personable as the ones Diablo did his interrogations with, but they sufficed. I picked up a machete that had a curved blade and tested its weight. It would have to do.

I turned and walked slowly towards the group of men. No, not men. These were boys who had never matured or evolved .

They were young, closer to Elena's age than ours. The youth of today was such a fucking embarrassment. The new money breeds were even worse. They would be lost without their trust funds and parents who offered hush money to solve all their problems. Unfortunately for them, I couldn't be bought.

The actions of one would cost them all. There was no excuse for what happened the night prior. I'd watched the footage from my club back-to-back, making sure I didn't miss a single detail of what transpired. I had to sit in my office for a good hour afterward, convincing myself not to act rashly. Driving to Elena's and snatching her out of her bed to chain in mine would more than likely have caused some friction between us.

I should have done it anyway.

"I'm sure I don't need to explain why you're here, but if you find yourself confused, well, that's too damn bad. "

The redheaded boy on the end took a deep breath and clenched his fist. "Sir, please. I know my friend messed up, but please don't hurt us," his voice cracked on the second plea.

I regarded him for a moment. "Your name is Cooper, isn't it?"

"Yes," he answered after taking another breath.

“Cooper,” I repeated his name as if I knew him personally. “Do you see this knife in my hand? Have you not realized you’re standing in front of me chained up, naked with your tiny dick out? Don’t you think we’re beyond begging?”

"Sir--."

"All the respect in the world won't save you. You can stop embarrassing yourself."

He began to sob and the boy on the other side of him whispered to him to stop. I shared a look with my brother and shrugged. Without needing any further encouragement, he shot Cooper twice .

A small amount of blood landed on the side of his friend’s face. He jolted in response, his eyes wide with fear as Cooper’s muscles went languid. His body remained upright due to the chains.

I gestured to the boy who had been whispering to Cooper. “Him too. He tried to console him and that’s somewhat admirable.”

The gun went off again, this time only once. That left two. One had already pissed himself--again-- and was shaking uncontrollably, the pleas coming from his mouth hard to understand and broken. Not needing any urging, Elias sighed and ended him too.

“And then there was one.” I stepped right in front of Jay and took hold of his sweaty face. He’d perspired so much the edges of his blonde hair had curled and were plastered to his forehead. He attempted to spit on me, making a sound of pain when I applied enough pressure to pop his jaw .

“Even in this situation, you behave with no basic decency.”

“Fuck you,” he managed to hurl at me.

“And now you want to be brave?” I brought the machete up and teased the curved blade against his throat.

“Fuck you, just do it,” he forced through clenched teeth.

“So impatient to die.” I took a small step back. “Killing you outright would be a dishonor to both of us. You put your hands on someone that belongs to me. The only reasonable response is to remove them.”

I grinned as his fear grew right before my eyes.

ELENA

I stared into the backyard from the window above the sink. The sun was shining, but it had rained most of the morning so now everything was wet. I turned around when I heard my grandmother approaching, her heels announcing her arrival seconds before she entered the kitchen carrying a small, pale yellow gift box.

She'd styled her dark hair with barrel curls and put on a modern vintage dress that was nearly the same shade of grey as her eyes, pairing it with silver accessories. If I wasn't imagining things those were my mother's earrings.

"You look nice."

She smiled and smoothed a hand down her side. "Thank you, cariño."

"Are you going somewhere?" I asked, noticing she was carrying her purse.

"Yes. I have a few errands to run and then I'm going to meet your uncle for lunch. You can come if you'd like." She looked at me expectantly, but after last night making nice with Uncle Luis wasn't how I wanted to spend my afternoon.

"Um, that's okay. I'm not hungry. Maybe another time."

"Sí. Another time." She smiled, but as I was beginning to see more frequently, it didn't reach her eyes. "Oh. I came in here to give you this. Your friend left it with me when I was outside." She held the small box out for me to take.

It was lightweight, wrapped in pretty lace trim. "Which friend?"

"The Petrov girl."

I had no idea who that was.

"I don't--."

"I'm so glad you're branching out. I know you're fond of those other two, but it's good to have options. "

My brow pinched. What the hell was talking about? Options? She made it sound as if Melody and Peyton were in some kind of competitive line-up. But really, what did I expect? Most people around here wouldn't know the first thing about genuine friendships. It was all about who could do what for you and had the most to offer. I knew close to nothing about this Petrov family so I couldn't speak on their social standing. The families my actual friends came from? They weren't ones to turn your nose up at. I found it a little suspicious she wasn't pushing for me to keep them close.

"I'll have to thank her for dropping by," I lied with ease, wondering what the deal was with this box. A phone began to ring, interrupting our conversation. She fished it out of her purse and smiled at whoever the display showed was calling.

"I have to get going but send her my regards. "

I forced a smile and replied, "Enjoy your lunch"

As soon as she left, I opened the box. Carefully, I unwrapped the lace and lifted the lid. Inside was a layer of white tissue paper covering something solid and stiff. Tilting my head, I pushed the tissue aside with my fingertips. Instantly, I felt an overwhelming urge to gag when my brain registered what I was staring at. Panicked,

I covered my mouth to suppress a scream.

My body backed away from the kitchen island and collided with the countertop behind me. In that moment of shock, it dawned on me to move away from the nearby window just in case someone was watching this disturbing scene unfold. I stared down at the box, and the severed hand inside of it.

I jogged along the curved tarmac, focusing on my breathing and watching where I was going. I'd only encountered one other jogger, a woman, and her dog, but with the way the path wound all it would take was someone coming around a corner too fast for me to be down on my ass.

The ground was damp from the recent rainfall, leaving the warm air with a wet cedar and moss smell. I found it relaxing. This park didn't exist when I lived here as a kid. I'd done a quick search of the nearest running trails, and it was the first result within walking distance of home .

A perfect place to get some air and attempt to clear my head. An attempt I was greatly failing at. After my initial shock wore off it didn't take much contemplation to connect A-B-C. The problem was, that I didn't know what to do with the connection. If I hadn't been feeling in over my head before, I certainly did now.

I was a regular person.

The biggest conflicts I'd ever had to deal with were irate customers making returns at my old job, and making sure I didn't wake up to the power being off. I wasn't proficient in dealings of body parts. While I'd love to say that If I needed to be an expert in such matters to find Eva, that I would force myself to be scholarly in the subject, I now knew didn't have the stomach for it.

As I approached another bend in the path. A man came from the opposite direction.

The moment I saw his face, recognition was instant. I hadn't seen him since he dropped me off after the bizarre breakfast incident.

He jogged closer and my stomach became inundated with fluttering. I inhaled and exhaled, telling myself to remain calm. After the whirlwind that was the last forty-eight hours, I wasn't surprised he was here. I would be more shocked if he stayed away. I slowed and removed my phone from the rear pocket of my leggings to pause *Purple Rain*.

Mateo came to a stop a few feet in front of me, not at all out of breath or having broken a sweat. He was completely dressed down, in black sweatpants that slightly hung off his hips, tennis shoes, and a simple dark-colored life beater that revealed how toned he was and the shaded tattoo I'd caught a glimpse of. It was larger than I first imagined. A money rose, pocket watch, and three playing cards came together in one sleeve, wrapping around his left bicep and extending the length of his forearm to just above his wrist where his family's emblem was etched.

A few stray locks of his dark hair had fallen across his forehead. I did my best not to ogle his body, but I was only human. I tried to resist the urge to admire his physique, but it was impossible. He was undeniably gorgeous. My eyes wandered down and settled on the noticeable bulge between his legs. My goodness, was that what I thought it was? Soft at that?

"My face is up here, Elena."

The smugness in his tone and the way he practically growled my name had me snapping to attention. He stood with his hands perched on his hips and the hint of an antagonizing smirk on his lips. I scowled at him, ready to inquire about the package he had delivered earlier. Just as I opened my mouth, I heard approaching footsteps and decided to hold my tongue. "Do you usually run this trail? "

“No. I have a private gym. I’m only here for you.”

That wasn’t surprising to hear either. His actual workout regimen would probably break me within the first five minutes. He surveyed my face before breaking the pregnant silence.

“Did you like my gift?”

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

His expression became shrouded. “I would never joke about something like this.”

I stepped closer and lowered my voice. “You sent me a hand.”

“Hm, yes. But did you recognize it? I was hoping you would.”

The approaching footsteps grew closer. I took a step back just as a pretty dark-skinned woman rounded the bend. She gave us a small smile that Mateo returned with a grin, causing a noticeable blush to stain her cheeks as she jogged past.

"What is wrong with you?" I questioned as soon as she was out of hearing range .

He looked down at me clearly amused. "It was just a smile, Elena."

"What?" Did he think I'd just gotten jealous? "I'm talking about that gift you sent."

"Oh. Did you not like it?"

I took a couple more small steps away from him. He remained where he was, watching me closely. “Why? Why would you have it brought to me ?”

“What would you rather have had?”

My brow pinched. "You can't possibly mean I had choices."

"With me, you'll always have choices." He stepped closer. "I also took the smaller parts of him." He grinned and got a look on his face that made me think he was replaying the moment he dismembered the man in question, finding joy in it.

Ugh. I was not broaching that subject. “Again, why did you have someone deliver that to me? ”

“Think of it as a token of my promised devotion.”

“You could’ve sent flowers or a card,” I retorted.

“Flowers wither and actions speak louder than words, but if you want flowers, I’ll build you a greenhouse. If that isn’t good enough, I can give you fields of them.”

The sincerity with which he was speaking baffled me. This entire conversation made me wonder if I had somehow taken a wrong turn and entered the Twilight Zone. “Flowers may die but last I checked severed limbs aren’t everlasting. Did you expect me to store it as a keepsake, put it on a shelf in my bedroom?”

“Of course, not. I would never allow another man in our room.”

“Our room?”

“Where you’ll be sleeping,” he replied without hesitation.

I dropped my eyes to the tarmac and shook my head, repeating more to myself, “What is wrong with you?”

He suddenly stepped forward, bridging the remainder of the gap I'd created. We were practically chest to chest. With a gentle touch, he grasped my chin and forced my eyes back to his. "A man put his hands on you. That's what was wrong with me, Elena. So, I removed his fucking hands. I feel much better now."

I stared up at him at a complete loss for words. Rumors were one thing, reality another. He truly was unhinged in an exceedingly nonchalant way. It terrified me that I didn't one-hundred percent fear that. And now I knew without a doubt that he was, in fact, having me watched. Those men at the club weren't some average employees coming to handle a disturbance.

Melody and Peyton were right. For some reason this man wanted me. He wouldn't have looked at me twice otherwise or given me gift-wrapped body parts. But there had to be more to this than the physical attraction between us.

"Mr. Escuro—."

"Mateo," he swiftly corrected, releasing my chin. "I'm only Mr. Escuro to men under me and even then, it makes me think I'm trying to replace my father, who is alive and well."

"Okay...Mateo," I tested out. "I think I missed something between the last time we spoke and now."

"You haven't. I've decided not to wait and move things along."

"What does that mean?"

"I had a thought that you might try to run away from me, but then I realized you're too smart for that. You wouldn't make such a reckless decision."

“I have no intention of running,” I replied.

“That’s good to hear. Because if you did, I would have to chase after you and trust me, I always catch what I hunt. ”

His smile now held a menacing edge. I tried to brush off the unease creeping into my every pore, but it clung to me like a sinister shadow.

His hand reached out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, a gesture that should have been comforting but instead felt like a warning. I inhaled sharply as his body grazed against mine, causing me to fight against a shiver. I was only wearing my black sports bra and matching shorts, which Mateo seemed to take full notice of. His gaze traveled down my figure, following the path of his hands as they traced over my bare skin. The sensation was like a burning imprint on my body. I had to resist the urge to lean into him, unsure of this intense attraction between us. This feeling was unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

“You’re joining me for dinner tonight," he murmured.

"Why?"

"We have a deal to finalize, don't we? "

"Is it necessary for us to eat together in order to do that?"

"It is," he confirmed, tracing the outline of my lips with his finger. "And afterward, I plan on spending all night making you come."

I blinked, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks as I pulled away from his touch. "I don't recall signing up for any of this," I protested, my voice shaky.

He flashed a sly grin, his eyes dark and smoldering. "Dinner?" he questioned. "Or me fucking you until you can't walk or remember your own name?"

"Both. But mostly the second one." I wasn't naive, but I was still a virgin and couldn't fathom sleeping with this man. Despite how my body reacted to him or how good-looking he was, I wasn't ready for that kind of intimacy. The thought alone was overwhelming and intimidating, considering his vast experience compared to mine .

He laughed, clearly amused that I was growing flustered. "If this is all it takes, anjinho, imagine how you'll feel by the end of the night."

I started to voice my concern but his grip on me tightened, silencing me. "You don't need to say anything else," he said firmly. With one hand still on my waist and the other covering my mouth, he continued, ". "You don't need to say anything else. All you need to do is walk to and from the car. You don't even have to concern yourself with what to wear. Not that you'll be wearing it long."

I glared and he applied more pressure to keep me silent. "A nod that you understand will suffice."

I grudgingly bobbed my head. He removed his hand from my mouth and stepped away. "I'll send a car for you."

With that, he simply turned and resumed his jog. I remained where I was until I could no longer see him, then headed in the opposite direction, my head spinning and worry setting in.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

When I returned from my jog, the house was silent; neither my grandmother nor my uncle had returned yet. I was relieved by their absence. I ascended the stairs thinking about Mateo's declaration, that he'd be having dinner with me tonight—without specifying a time. How was I supposed to explain that to my uncle and grandmother? I didn't care what they thought, but I dreaded their inevitable barrage of questions. I hardly had the answers myself. I had yet to know why this man had taken such a vested interest in me. I could only take his words with a grain of salt.

As I approached my bedroom, a sense of dread gnawed at me. Entering, I silently prayed that the stench of burning flesh had finally dissipated. I had disposed of the severed hand Mateo had sent to me by tossing it into the fireplace, unable to think of any other way to handle it .

Returning it to him was out of the question and touching it any more than necessary was unthinkable. Thankfully, the smell was gone—an experience I never wished to endure again. But now, on my bed, another satin-wrapped gift box awaited me, its presence unmistakably linked to Mateo. A wave of unease washed over me as I stepped further into the room and closed the door. How had his messenger managed to place it here before my return?

Then again, if he was having me watched they could've come right in after I left. With cautious steps, I approached the bed, eyeing the box suspiciously. My heart pounded as I reached out and picked it up, feeling its weight. I gave it a gentle shake, listening intently. There were no unsettling sounds, no telltale signs of another gruesome surprise. Relieved but still wary, I carefully set the box back down on the bed. I hesitated for a moment longer, then began to untie the satin ribbon, my fingers trembling slightly .

Another wave of relief washed over me when no severed parts appeared. Inside was a stunning black dress, elegant and meticulously designed by Alexander McQueen, the tag still attached, indicating its exorbitant price. Alongside it was a pair of heels, their signature red soles gleaming. Nestled beside them was a small note card with a simple but commanding message: " Be waiting outside by 7.

A quick glance at the clock revealed it was already 4:30. Setting the card aside, I carefully lifted the dress from the box, still in disbelief at the unfolding events. I knew that getting entangled with him would irrevocably alter the course of my life yet again, but at this point, the choice felt like it was out of my hands.

I sat my cell phone down on the bed and stared at my reflection in the mirror with a frown. "Aren't you guys supposed to talk me out of this?"

"We're supposed to talk you out of bad decisions, not smart ones," Melody replied.

"Have you not heard anything I've said?" I replied, frustration creeping into my tone.

"Listen, babe, Mateo Escuro doesn't casually tell a woman he's taking her to dinner."

"He doesn't do dinner, period," Melody added .

"Mel's right. He just jackrabbits them into the headboard and then they disappear."

I turned away from the mirror and toward where my phone sat on the bed, my heart skipping a beat. "I'm sorry, what do you mean they disappear?"

"Exactly that. He fucks them once or thrice and then they're gone," Peyton said bluntly.

"What Peyton means," Melody clarified, "is that he doesn't date exclusively. The few

women he's been seen with aren't from here. They're all models or something he collects when gallivanting around the world."

Even though I knew I shouldn't let their words affect me, I couldn't help re-evaluating myself in the mirror. Doubt began to seep in as I compared myself to these other women. I was a far cry from ugly, but I also wasn't on their level and lacked their confidence.

"So, he's never been engaged? That's unbelievable. He's in his mid-30s. "

"None of them have. It's what makes the Escuro men so elusive and desirable. Any woman who captures a ring from one of them will be immediately catapulted into a life of luxury and security," Peyton explained. "And just an FYI, you're just as gorgeous as any of those other women."

"If not more so," Melody added.

I appreciated their attempt to soothe my insecurities, but the doubt lingered. Melody's voice softened as she shifted the subject. "Have you taken your medication today?"

I nodded, then remembered they couldn't see me. "Yeah, I took it," I assured her. Checking the time, I saw it was already 6:20, and my nerves twisted tighter. "I have to go soon."

"Remember to share your location with us," Melody urged. "And don't let him take your phone. "

Right. I wasn't sure how I'd prevent that exactly, but I'd worry about it later if I reached that bridge. "It'll be in my clutch."

"Condoms. Bring them with you and make sure he wears one," Peyton layered in.

"Excuse me? I don't even have those, and that won't be necessary."

"She isn't sleeping with him, Peyton. Jesus," Melody interjected.

"Hey, I know the guy sticks to premium outlets, but still, better to be safe than sorry. You remember what else we said?"

I couldn't forget it. They'd been lecturing and advising me for the past forty minutes.

"I know to be careful. And I know he isn't a nice guy. The last part is a given."

One of them scoffed.

"El, listen, he was brought up by one of the most despicable and revolting men of our time. He's currently in the process of inheriting an empire from this same vile man. He's involved in everything from laundering to kidnapping, trafficking, and drugs. That's just some of the obvious stuff. And the police either work for him too or are too chicken shit to get involved. Saying he's not a nice guy is an understatement," Peyton drawled.

Now probably was not the best time to mention that he had given me a hand as a sign of, how did he word it? Devotion.

"Just to play devil's advocate, most guys around here don't fit the description of 'nice.' They operate by the rules of the underground. My father may not be handing out hands as gifts, but he's a crooked lawyer who for sure has blood on his. He does love my mom and me though," Melody pondered aloud.

"Yeah, Mel's right. Your dad was a ruthless boss. And you know my dad is good at hacking; he's probably gotten a few families killed. So, we're both right."

"I hate we can't creep and watch over you. You've got to be careful, Elena," Melody

pled .

“And whatever you do, don't be swayed by his dreamy eyes, charming dimples, and giant dick,” Peyton warned.

“Seriously?” I huffed exasperated. “I get it. I know to be careful,” I assured them just as I heard voices drifting up from below.

I withheld a sigh, knowing I needed to go down and face the first obstacle of the night—my uncle and grandmother. I ended the call after one last round of assurances. Seeing it was now 6:40, I couldn't delay any longer. I grabbed my clutch and gave myself one last once-over in the mirror before heading toward the door. Bracing myself, I stepped out of my room and began making my way downstairs.

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As soon as my heels touched the first stair, the conversation beneath me ceased, as if I wasn't meant to hear whatever was being discussed. I gripped the railing and continued, wishing I could walk right out the door without a word, but regardless of my opinion of my uncle, it wouldn't be right to do that to my grandmother.

I reached the bottom of the staircase and took a deep breath before making my way into the informal living room. My uncle's stern gaze met mine immediately. He had what could have been his eleventh or twelfth glass of wine gripped in one hand. I'd picked up on his drinking habit very early on.

"You're going out?" His tone was more of an accusation than a question.

"Yes," I replied evenly, trying to ignore the ways his eyes crawled all over me. "I have plans tonight. "

My grandmother turned toward me, a worried crease forming on her forehead. "Elena, dear, are you sure this is a good idea?"

I nodded, forcing a reassuring smile. "I'll be fine, Grandma. It's just dinner."

My uncle's expression hardened. "With whom?"

I paused, knowing their reaction to the truth would not be pleasant. "An old acquaintance."

"An old acquaintance?" His voice held a hint of disbelief. "Since when do you have connections in this part of the city?"

"I have friends here," I responded, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'll return later. Don't wait up."

My uncle gave a smirk, his eyes glazed over and making me suspect he had more than just wine to drink. "If you're not careful, you'll end up like your sister, Elena. Gone and remembered as--."

"That's enough of that," my grandmother interjected.

"And what will you be known for, Uncle?" I gave him a slow once-over. "This?"

His smirk vanished as a shadow of something sinister flashed in his eyes. "Be careful how you speak to me, girl."

"What are you going to do if I don't?" I challenged, frustration coursing through me. This man was a pitiful excuse for a human being. Every time I looked at him, all I saw was my father and it made me sick. I resented the fact that he was living in my parents' house and had done nothing to prevent their reputation from being tarnished. I hated he'd done nothing to find my sister but had the fucking audacity to speak on her name. I could see why she loathed him and made sure she never crossed his path.

When he didn't speak, just stared at me with a slackened face, I turned to leave, my heart pounding in my chest .

As I reached the doorway, my grandmother called out softly, "Just be careful, Elena."

"I will," I promised, glancing back at her with another forced smile, avoiding my uncle's creepy gaze. I needed to get the hell out of this house. Keeping my pace casual, I headed for the front door. The timing couldn't have been better. Just as I pulled it open, a shiny white sedan pulled into the driveway.

It came to a halt as I approached, and a man I didn't recognize stepped out. His hair was neatly tied back in a ponytail, and though he wasn't much taller than me, his muscular build and immaculate suit made an impression. A gun was visible on his hip, and despite the hour, he wore sunglasses.

"Good evening, Miss Castello," he greeted me with an air of respect, his accent thick as he opened the rear passenger door.

"Evening," I replied hesitantly.

"I am here as a humble servant of Mr. Escuro. I will drive you to his location. "

Who spoke like that? Humble servant? How fitting for a man known as the King of Vice. "Okay..." I trailed off, carefully maneuvering into the backseat, taking in the car's luxurious interior.

The leather seats were immaculate and plush, exuding the scent of a new vehicle mixed with a hint of cologne. As the car drove away, I took one final glance at the house. It was no surprise that my grandmother's silhouette could be seen in the window. I hoped she wouldn't fret too much while I was gone. The gravity of the situation I was about to enter into was starting to sink in, and all I could do was hope that Mateo's intentions, whatever they may be, would somehow coincide with my ultimate goal of finding Eva.

"We will be heading away from the estates," my driver announced as he took a left turn out of the driveway.

"Where is he having you bring me? "

"This evening, you will dine at Dior's," he replied smoothly.

"Alright," I said, lacking anything else to add. I had no idea what or where Dior's was, but it sounded expensive. My stomach was a bundle of nerves, making it hard to imagine eating anything.

I gazed out the window, watching the landscape blur as my mind wandered. My thoughts drifted to a few weeks ago when Eva and I had entirely separate lives. She would be getting ready for another night in this city while I prepped for a long night at the convenience store. We would leave our home together, her easily lying to our aunt about where she was headed. Underneath her hoodie and sweatpants, she'd be wearing a revealing outfit.

At the end of our cracked walkway, we would hug and go separate ways, unless we were arguing—which seemed to happen often towards the end. I closed my eyes briefly, taking a small, quiet breath .

When I thought of Eva, I couldn't help but think of my parents and the fact that they were all gone. Over time, I learned that the cruelest part of death was not being able to say goodbye. It's something you never consider until you have no choice but to face it – along with all the things you wish you could take back and everything left unsaid.

A sharp pain throbbed in my chest as if my heart was trying to break free from my ribcage. I clenched my hands together on my lap, willing the burning sensation behind my closed eyes to subside. It always seemed to happen when I least expected it, just when I thought I was getting a handle on things, the overwhelming emotions would come flooding back.

The car continued to glide smoothly along the road, the driver's presence a silent reminder of the evening ahead. I tried to push my grief aside, focusing on my current predicament .

I pulled my phone from my clutch and sent a quick update to Peyton and Melody. Their replies came almost instantly, offering words of encouragement and caution. It didn't take long before the bright lights of the city began to appear on the horizon. I gazed out at the dark ocean that bordered the flashy buildings, its waters so deep and dark it resembled black glass, perfectly reflecting the neon-lit skyline and vibrant nightlife.

I had never seen the city at night. I was sent away to Aunt Molly before I was old enough to even dream of visiting. Now, it seemed something had come full circle. The driver took an exit and seamlessly maneuvered off the highway onto a road that immediately showcased the wealth of its residents and visitors. Luxury cars, each costing more than the average house, glided by, their sleek forms illuminated by the colorful glow of neon signs and streetlights. I couldn't help but marvel at the lively atmosphere .

Palm trees swayed gently against the backdrop of a twilight sky, adding to the surreal beauty of the scene. We continued down the bustling street, the vibrant lights and sounds enveloping us. We approached a more exclusive area, the buildings becoming taller and more sophisticated, slowing near a small line of luxury cars waiting to be dropped off, bypassing them to enter the same grand location.

There were two lanes: one for drop-offs and another for valet. There didn't seem to be an option to park oneself. That would have been the first indication we were at an upscale restaurant, but the building itself was unlike anything I'd ever seen before. Dior's stood tall, at least three stories high, with a connecting hotel rising up behind it, its rooftop vanishing into the night sky. I took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves as I watched impeccably dressed women entering the building with their suited companions. I felt out of place among them, but I had to act like I belonged.

This was for Eva, for Aunt Molly, and for me. Despite feeling like an imposter, I knew I could pull off pretending to fit in. After all, there were probably other women

doing the same thing tonight. My driver opened my door, and I stepped out of the car with one final steadying breath.

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The moment I stepped out of the car, a man built like a brick house approached me. His eyes were also concealed behind a pair of sunglasses. Did Mateo's men have some kind of uniform code to abide by?

"Good evening, Miss Castello," he greeted me respectfully, his accent similar to Mateo's. "Please, follow me."

I nodded, taking a deep breath as I followed him into the restaurant. We bypassed the sign where patrons were checking in, moving effortlessly past people dining, all exuding wealth and sophistication. I didn't allow myself to meet anyone's eye. I was certain there were at least one or two diners that would recognize me. Instead, I focused on the interior of the restaurant. Loathe as I was to admit, the place was stunning.

The ambiance was a perfect blend of elegance and warmth, with wicker pendant lights casting a soft, golden glow .

Each table was adorned with fresh flowers and pristine linens. The soft hum of conversation mixed with the clinking of fine China and crystal glasses. Servers in crisp uniforms moved gracefully between tables, attending to guests with the utmost care.

My guide led me right through all of it. We ascended the stairs and moved through a set of glass doors, emerging onto a breathtaking rooftop bar and dining area. The cityscape glittered below, a sea of lights stretching into the night. Despite the opulence, the rooftop was empty, save for one figure—Mateo.

Even from behind, he exuded an unnerving degree of power, his presence commanding and almost palpable. His broad shoulders and confident stance made it clear he was a man accustomed to control.

I couldn't deny how attractive I found him, a magnetic pull that was both thrilling and terrifying. Peyton's last warning echoed in my head, and I almost laughed. He stood near the edge, looking out over the city, but turned as we approached. The man who had escorted me gave a slight nod and stepped back, leaving me to face Mateo alone. As his eyes roamed over me, I suddenly felt ridiculous, like a child playing dress-up. But his heated gaze told a different story—one where he didn't share my doubts.

Mateo began to approach, his steps measured. "You look beautiful. You are beautiful," he corrected.

I swallowed hard and peeked over his shoulder, catching a glimpse of a bartender that had previously gone unnoticed. So, he wasn't completely alone after all, but there was no guard in sight. My eyes drifted back to Mateo as he reached out and traced a finger from my jawline down to my chin.

"It's not wise to look at anyone else when I'm standing right in front of you. "

I took a deep breath and caught a whiff of his cologne - a captivating blend of spice and warmth. "You do realize that's a woman, right?"

His gaze darkened. "Possession knows no gender, Elena."

Sensing the conversation veering off course already, I decided to change the subject. "This rooftop is beautiful," I commented, gesturing around us.

He placed his hand on the small of my back, sending shivers through me as he led me towards a central table. "It's one of my favorite spots."

Looking up at him, I asked, "Do you own this restaurant?"

"I own this entire city," he replied with a grin, pulling out my chair for me. I couldn't hide my surprise, and he chuckled. "Don't act so shocked. A gentleman should always treat a lady with respect."

"Of course," I replied with a hint of sarcasm lacing my tone .

He rounded the table and sat across from me, sliding his phone away after tapping out a quick text. Without a word, the bartender approached with his drink of choice and a margarita for me, made exactly the way I liked it.

I gave Mateo a questioning look. "How did you know?"

"You ordered this the other night," he said simply.

"The club. That's yours too," I deduced.

"Among other things," he replied, his eyes locking onto mine, making it clear just how extensive his reach was. I reached for my glass and took a sip, the hints of Patrón in the strawberry mix already helping to soothe my nerves. The door I came through opened, and servers appeared carrying an array of dishes, plating them on the table with practiced precision.

"A medium-rare Wagyu steak with truffle butter," one server announced, setting the plate before me.

"An heirloom tomato and burrata salad," another added, placing the vibrant dish to the side.

"And for condiments, we have béarnaise sauce, black garlic aioli, and aged balsamic

reduction," a third server listed, arranging the small, elegant bowls within easy reach.

I glanced at the spread, feeling both overwhelmed and impressed. Mateo watched me with an amused glint in his eye, clearly enjoying my reaction.

"This is... extravagant," I managed to say, trying to keep my composure.

"Consider it a very small taste of what this life has to offer," Mateo replied smoothly.

As the servers finished their meticulous setup and retreated, I looked back at Mateo, my curiosity piqued even further .

There was no denying his power and influence, but the question of his true intentions lingered in my mind. I waited until the servers were gone before speaking. "Are you going to tell me why this was necessary?"

"Do I need to feed you again?" he deflected, his tone teasing yet laced with a hint of command.

I swallowed, remembering the last time he had insisted on feeding me. "No, I can manage."

"Good. Now, eat. We have much to discuss, and I want you to be comfortable."

I nodded and picked up my fork, cutting it into the perfectly cooked steak. The flavors were rich and decadent, each bite reminding me just how far removed this world was from my own. As I ate, Mateo watched me intently, his gaze never wavering. It was as if he was assessing every move I made, every expression that crossed my face .

Even when he ate his own food, his attention remained fixed on me. Unnerving was

an understatement.

"I've noticed something about you, anjinho," he said, breaking the silence.

I swallowed my bite of food and reached for the cloth napkin. "Noticed what about me?" I asked, dabbing at my lips.

"You respond better when told what to do."

"What?" I blurted out, caught off guard.

"You'll see," he replied smoothly, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "I think we should get to why we're really here."

"I agree," I replied, my curiosity and apprehension mingling.

Mateo leaned back, his gaze piercing. "I need a wife, and you want to know where your sister is. You help me, and I will do everything in my power to help you."

I stared at him, the weight of his words slowly sinking in .

The temperature seemed to drop, and the sounds of the rooftop faded into the background as his words sank in. "You need a wife? Surely you don't mean me."

"I do mean you. Forgive me, I misspoke. Elena, you will be my wife," he declared with an air of finality.

My mind raced as I tried to process this unexpected turn of events. This was not what I had imagined would happen. The weight of the situation bore down on me. The only thing keeping me anchored was the promise of finding Eva, but at what cost? Marrying Mateo meant becoming entangled in a world I had always fought against,

one dominated by power and darkness.

Was it truly possible for me to do that? Could I actually marry Mateo in order to find my sister? The decision felt daunting, but as his penetrating gaze locked onto mine, I realized I may not have a choice in the matter .

His level of authority and power made it clear that this was not a mere suggestion, but rather a demand disguised as a proposal.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

The problem with Mateo's proposal was that I had no clue what he wanted from me in return. Although I'd made some questionable choices in the past, I was not blind to manipulation. This wasn't a love story or a passionate affair—we were strangers. Not only that, but this man could have his pick of any woman he desired. There had to be a deeper motive behind his sudden need for a wife, and unfortunately, I was caught in the middle of it all.

"Why me?" I managed to ask calmly, despite the whirlwind of emotions inside me. "What do you gain from marrying me?"

He studied me thoughtfully. "It's partly out of necessity. You possess something that I need."

I furrowed my brow, mixing confusion with unease. "And what is that, exactly?"

"Your background," he responded smoothly .

"Your family name. The connections you may not even realize you have. By marrying you, I solidify alliances and increase my power and influence. And in return, I will help you find Eva. I will utilize every resource available to me to lead you to her."

Two things he said stood out to me, etching themselves into my mind like a sharp blade. First was the way he confidently stated he would lead me to my sister. Melody and Peyton had suggested he already knew her whereabouts; it was clear this information came at a price. Second, his mention of my family connections, nearly made me choke on my sip of water.

"Have you seen the state of my so-called family?" I scoffed, unable to believe that anyone would see value in them, especially Uncle Luis.

Mateo's eyes narrowed slightly, but his smile remained unnervingly calm. "I have," he responded coolly .

"And I know there's more to your family's legacy than meets the eye. Your lineage holds weight, Elena, more than you might understand right now. Aligning with you provides me with leverage in ways that go beyond the obvious."

I shook my head, trying to wrap my mind around his words. The idea of me specifically wielding any sort of power or influence seemed absurd. If that were true, I wouldn't have been on that rooftop with him. "I think you're giving me too much credit," I muttered.

Mateo leaned forward, his piercing gaze locking onto mine with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. "No," he stated firmly. "You have value, Elena, and together, we can leverage that value to achieve our respective goals."

The enormity of the situation crashed down on me like a tidal wave. The promise of finding Eva was the enticing bait, but the price was undeniably high, just as I knew it would be .

"You're asking a lot," I said quietly, feeling overwhelmed by the weight of his proposition.

"And I'm offering a lot in return," he replied smoothly as if sealing the deal with each word spoken between us.

My surprise couldn't be tempered. His words, his geniality, once again threw me into a state of confusion "I don't know what to say... this honestly isn't how I saw this

conversation going.”

“I know.” His voice dripped with dark amusement as he cut into his food with precise, calculated movements. "I could practically see the thoughts swirling in your pretty little head. You thought I would fuck you the moment we were alone, take what's between your legs without mercy." He leaned closer, lips twisting into a cruel smirk. "But let me make one thing clear--I am not some inexperienced teenage boy who can't control himself. ”

I swallowed hard, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks. "And I'm not just any girl you can have," I retorted, my voice steadier than I felt.

"That's an adorable show of strength, but I already have you , anjinho, " he stated coolly. "And tonight, I have every intention of taking my time and savoring every inch of your body before finally breaking you and making you mine . ” His eyes swept over my face noting my reaction. "Although I must admit, sitting you on this table and tasting your pussy right here and now is tempting...but first, you will be properly wine'd and dine'd like the lady you are."

"That's..." I trailed off and took another sip of water, hoping he couldn't tell how flushed my face was. "Like I said, I didn't expect that. I didn't expect anything to happen tonight."

"Then you're all the more naive."

I shook my head. I wasn't going to have that type of discussion with him .

"Do I have to decide now?" I asked, trying to buy some time to process.

He paused, looking up at me with an unsettling calm. "All you need to do is enjoy your meal. The decision has already been made."

"What does that mean?"

"What's the point in pretending you may turn down my offer, or that I'd let you?" he continued, his eyes boring into mine.

"Do you hear yourself right now?" I asked, incredulity coloring my voice.

"I do. And so that there's no surprise later on," his eyes locked onto mine with an unwavering intensity. "You will be completely and utterly mine. I mean that in every barbaric, possessive, and fucked-up way imaginable."

I couldn't come up with a quick response to counter his words, no feminist ideals to argue against his offer. Ultimately, he was right, and I would have to accept it .

I observed him closely, taking in every detail of his appearance: the perfectly styled dark hair, the sharp jawline that looked even more defined in the low light, and his captivating eyes that always seemed to hold power and mystery. He was gorgeous. He was also twisted to the core and unapologetic in his actions.

"So, tell me. What does me being your wife look like?" I asked, trying to maintain a semblance of control.

He reached for his drink with a grin, the glass catching the light as he lifted it. "I could tell you, but I'd rather show you."

"And how would you do that?" I asked, my curiosity piqued despite my apprehension.

"I'd start with us finishing our meal," he replied smoothly. "And you relaxing with a drink."

I wasn't hungry, but I still remembered the last time I'd said that to him. Reluctantly, I picked up my fork and continued eating .

I knew this dinner would be the last meal we shared before everything changed between us.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

One drink had turned into a few too many, and I was pleasantly buzzed. The city lights blurred into streaks of color outside the window, creating a surreal, dreamlike atmosphere. I slouched in Mateo's passenger seat, more comfortable than I should've been as we headed back towards the estates. I glanced over at him, his profile illuminated by the passing streetlights. He looked composed, every bit the powerful man he was, even in this relaxed setting.

My mind swirled with the events of the evening, his words, his promises, and the undeniable pull between us I was trying to ignore. I laughed to myself wondering what the point of that was. If I were to be this man's wife, I would most certainly be in his bed. I didn't entirely hate the idea of being pinned beneath him. If that's what it took to bring my sister back to me, well, I could think of worse fates .

"You seem to be in a good mood," he observed, his tone casual but with an undercurrent of satisfaction.

"I am, I think," I admitted.

He chuckled softly, his fingers tapping rhythmically on the steering wheel. "Good."

I leaned back in the seat, closing my eyes for a moment. The reality of my situation was beginning to sink in, but in this hazy state, it didn't seem quite as daunting. I knew that once the buzz wore off, the weight of it all would return, but for now, I allowed myself a moment of respite. Melody and Peyton would have had a stroke if they had seen me right then.

It wasn't until we passed through the gates that I realized Mateo's destination was his

own home. The mansion loomed ahead, impressive and intimidating despite the darkness. The driveway curved elegantly around a central fountain, its waters shimmering under the soft ambient lighting .

As we approached, I spotted two men patrolling the perimeter, each moving in a different direction. I knew there were probably more unseen guards ensuring the safety of the estate.

My first instinct was to message Peyton and Melody about my whereabouts. I hurriedly pulled out my phone from my clutch and sent them a quick update. Just as I hit send, Mateo drove into a massive garage filled with three other luxury cars that easily cost more than my entire life. He parked and turned off the engine, leaving us in an eerie silence.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked, trying to sound brave.

"To do exactly what I promised," he replied with a smirk as he stepped out of the car and came around to open my door. He offered me his hand, which completely engulfed mine. His grip was strong yet surprisingly gentle. As I followed him out of the car, his presence seemed to fill up the entire space around us .

Mateo's eyes met mine, a flicker of something unreadable in them. "Come," he said softly, his voice a mix of command and invitation.

We walked through the garage, the luxury cars gleaming under the soft overhead lights. I felt a sense of unreality as he led me through a side entrance into the house. The interior was just as opulent as I had imagined, with high ceilings, elegant chandeliers, and an artful blend of classic and modern decor. The air was scented with something subtle and expensive.

The space between us crackled with unspoken tension as he leaned in closer, his

voice low and dangerous. "There are a few things we need to discuss, but first, would you like another drink?"

I felt my heart race at the suggestive tone, but I played it cool. "Trying to get me drunk?"

He chuckled. "I'll cut you off when you've had enough. You'll want to remember everything that happens tonight. "

My mind swirled with desire and confusion as I struggled to keep up with his game.

"Is that a yes?"

I nodded, unable to resist the magnetic pull he had over me. "Yes...please."

He guided me into a luxurious room that took my breath away. The space was a perfect blend of opulence and comfort, designed to impress. The first thing that caught my eye was the stunning pool table at the center, its dark, polished wood gleaming under the ambient lighting. A rich, black carpet lay beneath it.

Above the table, intricate chandeliers hung from the ceiling, their crystals catching the light and casting a warm, inviting glow across the room. The chandeliers themselves were works of art, with branches of gold intertwined and adorned with delicate crystal drops, resembling a cascade of light. To one side of the room was a stocked bar, its shelves lined with an impressive array of spirit s

Behind the bar, a mirrored backdrop reflected the room. Golden accents and artistic designs complemented the overall decor, giving the room a cohesive and sophisticated look. Plush chairs were arranged strategically, offering intimate seating areas for conversation and relaxation. The overall effect was one of refined luxury, a space designed for both entertainment and relaxation.

"Make yourself comfortable," Mateo said, gesturing to the barstools as he moved behind the bar to mix our drinks. He went behind the bar with practiced ease, selecting a few bottles and ingredients. He began to mix a drink, his movements smooth and confident. A moment later, he handed me a beautifully garnished glass filled with a light, pink-hued cocktail.

"This is a French 75," he said, watching my reaction. "It's lighter than what I'm having."

I took a tentative sip, the refreshing citrus flavor mingling with the subtle sweetness of the champagne .

"It's good," I said, genuinely appreciating the choice. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," he replied, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

He came around the bar with his drink and took a stool beside me, his presence as imposing as ever. We sat in a comfortable silence for a moment, the luxurious room providing a backdrop to the weight of our conversation.

"Tell me more about yourself."

I took another sip of my drink, gathering my thoughts. I'd already given the basics at the restaurant. "There's not much more to tell," I started, unsure of how much to reveal. "I've spent most of my life trying to stay out of trouble and looking after my sister."

Mateo nodded, his eyes never leaving mine. "And what about your interests? Your dreams?"

I hesitated, surprised by the genuine curiosity in his voice .

"I used to dream of traveling, seeing the world," I admitted. "But those dreams took a backseat as I got older."

He listened intently; his expression thoughtful. "I understand," he said after a moment. "Things will be different. You're stepping into a new life, with new possibilities. You give me the location and I will make sure we go."

I looked at him, trying to read the intentions behind his words. I couldn't detect an ounce of deceit. It wasn't as if he needed to butter me up with pretty words or empty lies. I could see myself jet-setting with him as easily as I could being his wife--not very clear at all. "What about you, Mateo?"

He leaned back slightly, considering his response. "Power, control, and the need to protect what is mine," he said finally. "Many assume all I have is inherited like I was some fucking trust-fund, spoiled asshole."

"I don't. "

"Because you're sweet," he acknowledged with a dimpled smile. "I admit, I learned much from my father and the other men who raised me, but I've built my side of this empire from the ground up, and I will do whatever it takes to maintain it."

His honesty was both intimidating and oddly reassuring. This was a man who knew exactly what he wanted and how to get it. As I took another sip of my drink, I realized that understanding him was crucial to navigating this new reality. We continued to talk, the conversation flowing more easily as the hour progressed. Despite the circumstances, there was a strange comfort in the way he listened and responded, a connection forming between us that I hadn't anticipated.

Or maybe it was just the alcohol talking.

"Isn't this where you're supposed to be showing me what being your wife is like?" I asked, the alcohol giving my voice a sultry tone .

Mateo's eyes sparkled with amusement. "I haven't forgotten. And I've been thinking about where to begin since I saw you in that stunning dress."

My cheeks flushed at his intense gaze, and my heart raced. "That's not what I meant."

"Regardless, let me make good on my promise," he said with a mischievous grin, finishing his drink. The ice clinked as he set down the glass and moved closer to me. As he closed the distance between us, I could feel the heat of his body against mine. He turned my stool and took hold of my face. His touch was amplified by the alcohol swimming through my veins, electric as he traced a line along my jaw, his eyes never leaving mine.

There was a hunger in his gaze that both thrilled and terrified me. I tried to steady my racing heart as he leaned in, his lips brushing against mine in a tantalizingly soft kiss. Time seemed to stand still as we lingered in that moment .

One hand tangled in my hair, pulling my head back to deepen the kiss. The other slipped under my dress, roaming up my smooth thighs. His movement faltered when he reached the hem of my lacy thong. His grip on my hair tightened and he pulled away from my mouth. "I don't recall sending underwear with this dress."

"I couldn't go without," I replied softly, the warning in my head distracting me.

"Already doing as you please?" He stared down at me. "I need to get you upstairs." He stepped back and pulled me to my feet with a gentle but firm grip, his eyes never leaving mine.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Without another word, he led me through his expansive home. The dim lighting made it difficult to see, but I could sense the sheer size of the space as we walked. We climbed a grand staircase and turned down another hallway, continuing until we reached a pair of double doors. He opened them gracefully and revealed a bedroom far larger than mine, an elegant fusion of luxury and intimacy.

It had a distinct, inviting scent—a blend of rich leather, faint tobacco, and a hint of something spicy, like sandalwood. The chandelier above us was set low, casting a soft intimate glow. Dark walls and plush furnishings exuded sophistication. A massive bed was the focal point of the room, surrounded by equally lavish nightstands and lamps that screamed expensively. I heard the door click shut, and a surge of awareness shot through me like a bolt of lightning, cutting through the haze of alcohol in my system .

I was alone with Mateo Escuro.

I was alone with Mateo Escuro in his bedroom.

It wasn't hard to discern why he would've brought me there after the kiss at his bar, even in my partially inebriated state. He brushed against my side as he moved around me. I remained rooted in place, as he walked over to the nightstand nearest the door, watching him remove his watch with care. There was a glint of metal in his hand next. My heart skipped a beat as I realized it was a gun, one that I had failed to notice before. But of course, he carried. He was essentially a king in this world of organized crime.

He placed it on the nightstand next to his watch with practiced ease before turning to face me. "Is this your bedroom," I blurted out, immediately feeling like a fool for asking the obvious.

Amusement flickered in his eyes; his dark brows raised slightly .

"Yes, it is. You're one of the very few women I've allowed this far into my home."

Right. Because there had obviously been others. Why hadn't he married any of them? His head tilted to the side, a sly grin spreading across his lips as if he could read my every thought. And then it hit me - I had said that last thought out loud.

"There's a difference between the women men like me fuck and the ones we marry."

I felt my heart drop as I stared at him, silently pleading for him to explain. He let out a short laugh and rubbed his chin in amusement. "Some are nothing more than pretty objects for us to flaunt around. They're easy to handle until they become clingy. Others are overly ambitious and crave danger, begging to be used by powerful men like me. They never last long - once our novelty wears off, they go running off into the sunset never to be seen again. "

I swallowed hard, understanding the unspoken implication.

"Then there are the rare women like you, Anjinho, " he continued, his voice dropping to a dangerous tone. "Born into this world and fully aware of its ways, yet so naïve and untouched by its cruelty. Beautiful. Vulnerable." He paused as if considering his next words. "Meant to be possessed, pampered, pinned down and fucked."

My heart raced in my chest as I processed his words. "That's what you think of... me ?"

A sinister smile spread across his face. "Ask me that again after tonight."

I shifted back, bracing myself against the door, a mixture of fear and anticipation building within me. I grasped for the woman from moments ago who eagerly kissed him back and let him put his hand under her dress. One half of my mind assured me I could handle this—it was just sex.

The other was terrified .

Determination alone didn't magically transform me into a bad bitch that could overcome every challenge with ease--and Mateo Escuro was most definitely a challenge.

My bravado shattered into a million pieces as I realized the true danger I was in. The alcohol coursing through my veins offered a temporary escape from reality, but I knew it wouldn't save me from the perilous game I was about to play with this dangerous man. He cocked his head to the side, his eyes piercing into mine as if trying to decipher some hidden meaning. " Você tem medo de mim ." His words were laced with a dark edge.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing bad," he replied with a grin that made my blood run cold. "Come here, Elena."

I heard him clearly, but suddenly I couldn't move. Every instinct in me screamed to stay put. He chuckled, seemingly amused by my trepidation .

"I can come to you," he coaxed, taking a step closer, "but I believe you'd prefer to be fucked in my bed than pressed against the door."

He continued walking toward me; his strides confident. My throat tightened as I tried to swallow the fear that was clawing its way up from my stomach. But even as my palms began to sweat and tremble, I couldn't tear my eyes away from him. His hand reached out, hovering dangerously close to my face before coming to rest against the wall beside my head. The other dropped to my thigh like a heated brand.

A devilish grin spread across his face, revealing deep dimples that only added to his dangerous charm. His light-colored eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that made it hard to breathe. I tried to look away, but he was quick to grip my jaw firmly, keeping me in place. He leaned down without so much as a warning and pressed his lips hungrily against mine.

"Wait," I managed to protest weakly .

He paid no mind to it. His hands roamed over my body like flames. Every nerve ending they touched ignited with a searing hot desire that consumed me from within. It was like a violent tornado ripping through my senses, leaving me powerless and disoriented. My pussy throbbed with need, the wetness spreading between my thighs as I instinctively clenched them together. Desperate for something to hold onto, I grabbed his shirt tightly as if it were the only thing keeping me from being swept away.

Mateo pressed me against the door, his solid body fitting perfectly against mine as he deepened the kiss. I could feel his cock against my lower stomach, the size of it causing my stomach to dip. His hand released my jaw and landed at the base of my throat, exerting a vice-like grip that made it difficult to swallow. His other hand reached beneath my dress, causing me to gasp .

"These are in my way," he growled, tearing my underwear with such force that the slight pain brought tears to my eyes. The discarded fabric fluttered to the ground as he focused on removing my dress. In seconds, I was left standing in nothing but my

heels, completely exposed to his predatory gaze, his eyes roaming over my naked form with a possessive hunger. "You are perfection in its purest form," he declared before claiming my mouth once more in a searing kiss. He forced my legs apart with a roughness that had me sucking in a sharp breath.

He cupped my pussy, causing me to whimper. Slowly, he increased the pressure, watching my every move as he pressed his palm against my clit. His fingers teasing and circling but not fully penetrating. I couldn't help but bite my lip, my arousal building in response to his touch.

"Unbutton my shirt," he commanded his voice level and firm .

"What?" I barely registered his words through the haze of my drunkenness and what he was doing between my legs.

"Unbutton my shirt." He repeated his demand.

I looked at his chest, the subtle rise and fall of his breaths drawing my eyes, then back up to meet his gaze. Slowly, I reached up and began undoing his buttons, willing my hands not to shake, pausing with a soft moan when he eased a finger inside me. "Keep going," he coaxed. I did my best to ignore my body and finished removing his shirt, seeing his full tattoo in all its glory for the first time up close. It was even larger than what I'd seen when on my run.

It wrapped around his left bicep and extended the length of his forearm to just above his wrist. The design featured a money rose, its petals crafted from meticulously detailed dollar bills. Intertwined with the rose was an ornate pocket watch, its face frozen at a specific time, suggesting significance .

Three playing cards, each with a different suit and number, were incorporated seamlessly into the sleeve, their edges sharp and lines precise. Adding to the

complexity of the design, an elegant "E" for his surname was woven into the tattoo, placed prominently near his wrist. The letter was designed with a flourish, combining elements of old-world elegance with modern precision. The entire tattoo was a testament to both artistry and the complex layers of Mateo's persona, blending symbols of wealth, time, risk, and family heritage.

His torso had a few faint scars, each one telling a story of pain and violence. One particularly deep gash ran along his side, a reminder of the constant danger he faced. Aside from the marks, his abs were solid as steel, hardened by years of discipline. With a tight grip on my throat, he violently pulled me away from the door, as if I were nothing but a lifeless marionette under his control .

My body was tossed onto his bed, feeling weightless like a cloud. I lay there, helpless and paralyzed by his intense gaze.

"So, so beautiful," he murmured, his words barely audible. I watched as he lowered his pants and revealed the black briefs underneath. With one fluid motion, he freed his cock. I swallowed and stared. It was long and hard and thick. I couldn't tear my eyes away from him or it.

"Mateo," I began, a flare of panic rising as he advanced on me.

"I'll make it good for you," he promised, his voice low and dangerous as he flipped me onto my hands and knees. My heart raced with anticipation and anxiety. "Good girl," he murmured when I held the position, kneading my ass roughly with both hands. I closed my eyes in surrendering his hard cock pressed against my entrance, teasing me with its size .

Before I could fully comprehend what was happening, he spread my cheeks apart and dove in with his tongue.

The suddenness of it had me gasping for breath and my eyes flying open, my fingers curling into the sheets beneath me. "Oh, my God," I whispered, never having felt anything like that in my life.

The heat of his mouth, the relentlessness of his tongue, exploring every inch of my pussy with a fervor that left me dizzy with pleasure. He lapped at my wetness, swirling his tongue around my clit before diving back in, penetrating me with expert precision.

"Rock back," he commanded, "Fuck my face." I hesitantly did as he instructed, and he responded by sliding two fingers inside me, stretching me in ways I had never imagined. The sensation was intense, bordering on pain, but the pleasure was too great to ignore. I rocked back against him, urging him deeper.

I moaned loudly, my body shaking with each thrust of his tongue and digits. He slurped and sucked, until I clawed at the sheets, my heart pounding. "Oh, God," I cried out, my voice echoing in the room.

He chuckled against me, his fingers never ceasing. "That's it, baby," he murmured, his voice laced with satisfaction. "Let it out." His tongue darted out, sweeping over my clit in a delicate flick.

"Mateo," I gasped, my mind spiraling out of control as the thrilling sensations raced through my body.

"That's it," he repeated, increasing the pressure. He brought me to the edge and then eased off. He repeated this process, each time bringing me closer and closer to the precipice. My breaths grew shallower, my heart pounded in my ears, and my body trembled with anticipation. My moans became louder and more desperate, begging for release .

"Not yet, beautiful," he teased. "We still have a long way to go."

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more, he abruptly stopped, leaving me panting and aching for release. His chest pressed against my back as he whispered into my ear, "When you come, it will be with me inside you." He drew back and wrapped my hair around his fist. I felt his grip on my hip tighten as he positioned himself at my entrance. Without warning, he pushed inside me. I felt a sharp pain that took my breath away. And then he kept going, his cock only halfway in. I bit down on my lip to keep from crying out again, tears gathering in the corners of my eyes. I clutched at the sheets beneath me trying to adjust to the alien sensation. I knew he was well-endowed from the print I'd seen on the jogging path, but now that he was inside me, my initial assessment seemed like an understatement .

"Relax," he commanded in a low, husky voice. "Breathe, anjinho. Trust me, I'll make you feel incredible."

I tried to follow his instructions, but it was difficult as he slowly pulled out and then thrust back into me with even more force, going deeper than I thought possible. A gasp escaped my lips, followed by a cry as he continued to pound into me. I couldn't help but moan as he took control of me completely. He continued to pump, his rhythm building gradually, matching the pace of my gasps and groans.

"Spread wider for me," his deep voice commanded.

With a shaky breath, I shifted my body and arched my back, feeling the softness of the bed beneath me. My legs parted further, inviting him to delve deeper inside me, his cock filling every inch of me. A soft scream escaped from my mouth, echoing through the room in a crescendo of pleasure. My senses were overwhelmed by the intoxicating mix of his scent and the sensations coursing through my body. As he moved in and out of me, each thrust sending fire through my veins, I knew that this moment would be imprinted in my memory forever.

“That’s it, open up for me. Fuck, you’re perfect.” He pulled my head back and claimed my lips in a rough, passionate kiss.

“Mateo,” I gasped.

“You like that?” He punctuated his question by rocking deeper, hitting that spot that made my entire being quiver.

I could barely form words, completely lost in the bliss of our connection. All I could manage was a fervent affirmation. "Yes," I groaned, surrendering to the overwhelming sensations taking control of my body.

His deep laughter filled the air. "Good girl," he said teasingly before resuming his movements. He pulled out almost completely, only to thrust back in with even more force, causing my head to tilt back and my body to arch with pleasure. His strong hand held my jaw and throat firmly, keeping me in place as he gazed down at me with an intense possessiveness. The look in his eyes sent shivers down my spine as he pounded into me relentlessly. "You feel so fucking good," he growled. His grip tightened as he drove deeper. I felt a sharp pain, but it gradually receded as pleasure began to build, starting in my core and radiating outwards until it engulfed every nerve ending.

A surge of heat rushed through my body, making my pussy grow slick and cling to his cock. A curse muttered with a thick Brazilian accent, escaped his lips as he forcefully withdrew and flipped me onto my back. My heart pounded rapidly against my chest at the sudden change in position, sending spikes of desire coursing through me. I could feel every muscle in his body tense as he hovered over me, his beautiful eyes smoldering with primal need. He settled between my legs on his knees and reached down, sliding a finger up and down my slit, coating it with my arousal. "You hear that?" he asked, dipping inside me, "how wet you are?"

I bit my lip, my eyes locked onto him as he pushed inside me. He watched my reactions to his every move in an almost studious manner as if he needed to commit them all to memory. He withdrew and I watched as he pulled his soaked finger to his mouth and sucked it clean, a small smirk playing on his lips. "You're so beautiful like this. You're going to make me come just by looking at you."

I blushed, feeling the heat rise to my cheeks. "You are too," I whispered, my gaze tracing every contour of his muscular chest and abs as he hovered above me. The intricate design of the dark tattoo wrapped around one side of his body added to the raw sensuality emanating from him. His dark hair was tousled in an irresistibly sexy way, a few strands falling onto his forehead .

I could hardly breathe as I took in his every feature. His eyes bore into mine, captivating me the most—pools of deep honey, flecked with hints of gold. I felt like he could see straight into my soul.

"You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this." He leaned closer, his lips brushing against my ear as he whispered, "I will make every second of this count."

The weight of his words hung heavy in the air, their true meaning shrouded in mystery. Before I could even begin to decipher them, he shifted back on his knees, making his way between my legs and reaching for two large, ornate pillows. "Lift up," he commanded. With his help, I moved into position as he slipped the pillows beneath my back, elevating my lower half higher than the top. His hands were strong and sure as they guided me. "There we go," he murmured with satisfaction. He drew closer, still kneeling, and a hand suddenly wrapped around my throat, holding me firmly in place as he lined himself up and slowly pushed back inside me, burying himself to the hilt. I arched my back, moaning softly as his cock hit that sweet spot deep within me.

His other hand reached down, and I felt him slowly finger me, teasing and working

me open. I gasped and trembled beneath him, my body responding to his touch instinctively. He began to move, slowly at first, his hips grinding against me in a delicious rhythm. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him closer, wanting him deeper. His eyes never left mine as he thrust in and out, our breaths ragged and our bodies slick with sweat. "You feel so good," he murmured, his voice low and husky. "So fucking good."

My hands gripped the sheets beneath me, knuckles turning white as I tried to hold on to some semblance of control. But the more he moved, the more my own body betrayed me, arching to meet his every thrust. "Look at you," he said, his voice cool and calculated. "Tell me how you want it," he demanded softly.

"Harder," I gasped, my body begging for more.

"Hmm, I believe you can give me more to give than that," he teased.

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. Speaking in such a way was not a talent I possessed. I bit my lip, trying to find the words to express my desires. "Fuck me harder."

His supple lips curled into a smirk, and he leaned forward, pressing his body against mine. "That's what I like to hear." He began to move faster, harder, slamming into me with a force that left me gasping for breath. His other hand continued to tease me, heightening my pleasure to unbearable levels. I moaned and bucked beneath him, my body screaming for release. The room echoed with the slapping sound of our bodies coming together. His grip around my throat tightened ever so slightly, and our eyes locked in a fierce gaze. The pain mingled with the pleasure, sending shockwaves through me.

"You want it harder, anjinho?" he asked, his voice a seductive purr. "You want me to take you rough? To take what I want from you?"

I moaned, unable to speak, my mind hazy with desire. He leaned down, his lips brushing against my ear, and whispered, "You want me to call you mine."

I whimpered at the thought, my body trembling as he continued his relentless assault. "Yes," I managed to choke out, my voice barely audible.

He grinned wickedly, his eyes glinting with a dangerous hunger. "That's right. You're mine," he growled, his voice low and menacing, his grip tightening to the point it was hard to breath. He pulled out, and then thrust into me again. He was relentless, his need for dominance and my submission clear in the way he held me down, the way he fucked me. I whimpered; my throat raw from the sensation of him choking me.

His low groans of pleasure had me growing wetter around him, causing my walls to contract and tighten in response. "You were made for this," he swore, his words punctuated by harsher thrusts. "To be fucked just like this. To be mine."

"Mateo." My voice escaped in a breathless moan, his name leaving my lips like a breathless plea, a sacred prayer. I grabbed onto his wrist, the one that held me firmly in place, and clawed at the sheets beneath us until they were twisted into a tight knot. Waves of pleasure crashed over me as he drove me closer to the edge.

My cries were no longer coherent words, just raw guttural screams as I reached the peak of ecstasy. His skilled touch pushed me higher and higher, my body spiraling towards a dizzying oblivion of sensations that surpassed anything I had ever felt before. My voice escaped in a frenzy of expletives. "Oh God!" I cried out, my legs shaking.

He suddenly released my throat and leaned down, sealing his mouth onto mine, tangling his fingers roughly in my hair as he kissed me.

His thrusts remained forceful and unrelenting, never fully pulling back, staying deep

inside me. I returned his rough kisses with ferocity, my hands sliding down his back and digging into his waist, silently begging for more. I moaned breathlessly between each kiss, completely lost in this man.

With a moan and low curse, he gave in to his own pleasure and pushed himself even deeper inside me, triggering another explosive release. My fingers dug into his slick skin, my moans and whimpers blending into one harmonious symphony. My pussy tightened around his pulsing cock, eagerly taking in every drop of his release. We continued to kiss, him drawing out every last bit of pleasure by relentlessly rocking in and out of me, his fingers now running through my hair.

He slowly pulled out after he was done, taking his time as he fully withdrew from me. I shuddered at the sensation, both painful and pleasurable. I licked my lips, willing my heart to stop racing as I caught my breath. I glanced down and saw a mixture of blood and come glistening on his cock. My stomach churned at the sight, but I couldn't look away. He wiped some off with his fingers and then offered them to me. I hesitated, but he silently urged me on with a commanding gaze. Slowly, I opened my mouth and let him feed me the mixture of us. The taste was salty and metallic, and the act felt both intimate and degrading. As I obediently cleaned him off with my tongue, I couldn't ignore the conflicting emotions beginning to rage inside me. Confusion, desire, humiliation, and submission.

He replaced his fingers with his mouth, and his hand traveled down my stomach, back to between my legs. His touch was light yet purposeful as he circled my clit, bringing me to another quick but intense orgasm. I clung to him, crying out from the overwhelming pleasure. Through it all, he never stopped kissing me, his mouth devouring my every moan and gasp, my nails digging into his shoulders.

"That was five." He kissed me again before using his tongue to explore the delicate curve of my jaw, trailing down to my neck where he found a spot that made my breath catch in my throat. I could smell his cologne mixed with the sweat from our

bodies, creating a musky and arousing scent. "I'm going for eight," he murmured, spreading my legs wider.

"I can't," I rasped.

"You will," he assured me, determined to push me beyond all limits, beginning to kiss his way down my body. He placed my legs over his shoulders and turned his head. His lips brushed against my inner thighs, causing a shiver to run through me. I gripped the sheets tightly and moaned as he traced the soft skin with his tongue. He slowly moved lower, his breath tickling me as he neared my aching core. His tongue darted out and made contact with my sensitive clit. A bolt of pleasure shot through me, and I cried out his name. He grinned and parted my lips with two fingers. "Look at me, anjinho."

I held his stare, my lips parting as he slowly dipped his tongue inside my pussy, and then licked me from top to bottom, closing his lips around my clit.

"Oh, fuck," I whimpered, fisting the sheets. He shook his head back and forth, motorboating my clit, making my entire body tremble with pure pleasure. He nipped it gently with his teeth before sucking it into his mouth again, and I cried out, my hips bucking involuntarily. "Oh, God, yes!"

He spread my pussy wider and then began to bob his head, fucking me with his tongue. Two fingers slipped in and curled, massaging my G-spot as his tongue worked magic. "Mateo!" I reached down and gripped his hair, throwing my head back into the pillows.

He chuckled softly around my clit, and then drew back to spit on my clit, his saliva running down my slit. His tongue fluttered against the wet skin, savoring the taste and licking it clean. I moaned and squirmed, my body on fire with need and anticipation. My grip on his hair tightened, my fingers digging in as he continued to tease and

arouse me. He licked up and down, back and forth, every touch sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through me. My breath hitched and my heart pounded in my chest. I felt like I was on the edge, teetering between control and the sweet release of orgasm, a barrage of moans pouring from my mouth. The sound filled the room and echoed in my ears, a testament to the pleasure he was causing. He refused to let me go over that edge yet, however. He was toying with me, pushing me to the breaking point, and then pulling me back just as I was about to fall. I was gasping and panting, my body begging for release, as his skilled tongue continued to torment me.

"Mateo... please," I pleaded.

His lips curled into a wicked grin, and he pulled his fingers out of me. "You sound so pretty when you beg." He kissed one thigh and then the other, lowering my legs off his shoulders and bending them back towards my chest. His lips trailed over my navel and across my stomach, his cool breath leaving a trail of goosebumps. He reached my left breast and closed his mouth around it. He suckled and nibbled gently, eliciting a low moan from me. He did the same to the other, widening my legs and bending them back further before kissing the side of my neck.

"Mateo," I moaned softly, my body trembling as his lips and tongue explored every inch of my skin. He was slowly undoing me, and he knew it. When his lips finally met mine, he kissed me in a way that threatened to consume me. Tasting me, possessing me, claiming me as his own. The head of his cock rubbed against my slit, semi-hard already. He eased inside me, and I could feel him growing harder. I gripped his shoulders and moaned into his mouth, my body arching towards him as the pleasure intensified. He held my legs against my chest and kept himself a few inches above me, his strokes deep and slow.

My hands slid down his back, grasping at the muscles there, feeling them contract and relax with every thrust. His lips left mine and traveled down my neck, his bite gentle.

"Mateo," I gasped, my body shaking with anticipation.

He gave me another gentle kiss on the neck before trailing his teeth across my skin, eliciting a shiver from me. His hands gripped my thighs tighter, and he picked up his pace, his thrusts harder and deeper. I could feel my climax building, my breath growing shallower with each passing moment. My moans grew louder, and I locked my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer to me, wanting more.

I'm going to... I'm going to... Oh, God!" I cried out as the orgasm threatened to consume me.

His pace faltered for a moment, his eyes locked on mine, his breath quickening. "Scream my name," he commanded, his voice low and gravelly.

I did as he asked, my voice rising in pitch as he fucked me harder. "Mateo! Yes! Mateo!" My body shook with pleasure as the climax tore through me like a freight train. My moans turned into guttural cries as he thrust faster and harder.

His eyes shone with satisfaction as he watched me, his grip on my thighs tightening. My pussy clenched around him, contracting non-stop as another orgasm hovered. I didn't think I could take anymore, but he showed no signs of stopping. My moans grew louder, my cries more desperate as the pleasure continued to build within me. With another cry of his name, I came again, tears leaking from my eyes as I succumbed to the ecstasy. A dark grin spread across his face as he watched me unravel beneath him.

"Elena," he murmured my name, his voice low and tender. "You are truly exquisite." The intensity of my orgasm seemed to spur him on, his pace unrelenting, his eyes never leaving mine.

As the waves of pleasure ebbed and flowed, I felt his rhythm change once more. He

was close, I could feel it. The tension in his body, the ragged breaths, the way his eyes had darkened to a shade of amber. "Say my name," he demanded.

"Mateo," I moaned, my voice hoarse.

"Don't stop. Keep going."

I did as he asked, continuing to moan his name over and over again, my mind lost in a haze and so far gone from reality. His endurance was astonishing. And the way he seemed to be fully in the moment, yet still the calculating crime lord fully in control as I came apart again and again. Even the way he came was controlled, his body tensing with a quiet intensity. I could feel his cock throbbing, pulsing with a need to release. I was entranced by the sight of him, my own body still trembling from the orgasms that had just rocked me. As he got closer and closer, I could feel the tension in the air, the energy between us reaching a fever pitch. My voice was strained from the cries of his name, but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop.

Finally, he let out a guttural groan, and I could feel his cock twitching inside me as he reached the peak of his pleasure. He released my thighs and kissed me deeply as my legs flopped onto the bed, nipping at my lower lip before pulling away. "I need more of you." He murmured, kneading my breasts roughly. He trailed kisses down my neck, nipping at the sensitive spots while his hands explored my body, caressing my curves as he moved toward my pussy.

"Mateo," I protested weakly. "I can't." There was no way I could keep going.

"You can, and you will." He promised, his voice low and intense. "I'm far from done with you, beautiful." He continued to kiss his way down my stomach, taking his time to explore every inch of my skin. His lips moved lower, and then he was there, spreading me apart and licking from top to bottom. I bit down on my lower lip and whimpered, crying out when he pushed his tongue inside me. Time seemed to lose all

meaning as the cycle started all over again.

MATEO

I glanced at the family, bound and helpless, covered faces pressed to the hard floor.

My brother was a dark silhouette against the wall, his posture relaxed while some of our men prepared oil drums in the middle of the room. The stench of fear and sweat clung to the air, mixed with a hint of blood. It was all background noise to me, an annoyance I could have gone without. I would much rather have been with the beautiful woman who I'd left sleeping in my bed.

The image of her naked body was a masterpiece, with its enticing curves and smooth skin, that consumed my thoughts. Her hair was a wild mess on the pillow, the strands tangled and begging to be pulled and wrapped around my fist. However, this current situation provided a brief respite for both of us. It had been a long day and an even longer night .

I fucked Elena until my balls ached and she was damn near delirious from coming back-to-back on my fingers, tongue, and dick. The taste of her was still on my lips like an addictive drug I wanted to devour all over again. Her juices and blood still decorated my cock like a trophy. My back was a patchwork of angry red scratches--souvenirs from the fiery hellcat I pinned beneath me. When I fucked her again every thrust had been met with sharp claws digging into my flesh, leaving behind marks that would surely scar. I didn't mind. It was poetic in a sense, even as she begged me to stop, she'd claimed me too.

"I'm guessing everything went smoothly with my soon-to-be sister-in-law?" Elias joked, breaking into my thoughts and accurately predicting where they were focused.

“Everything is going according to plan.” I glanced at my watch and waited for the minute hand to complete one full cycle before continuing .

“She’s completely different from Evie,” I confirmed what he really wanted to hear.

“Thank fuck for small miracles.” He pushed himself off the wall and came to stand next to me with a grin on his face. I could hear the relief in his voice. He wanted me to have a partner who would be by my side forever, someone who could strengthen our family ties.

And I wanted the same for him.

Family was everything in our world, and despite the age gap between Elena and myself, and her family being new money while I came from a long line of wealth, the game of roulette was working exactly as it was always intended. I couldn't deny that her parents were skilled players, even if they ultimately lost. Elena had all the potential to be just as ruthless as they'd been. She was a canvas full of potential. The cracks and imperfections only made her more perfect for me, something I could manipulate and corrupt to my heart's content .

Our union would be even stronger because of it. I was fully aware of how people would perceive our relationship when the news broke that she was the only woman in my life. My plan was to let them speculate until I could reveal the whole truth. My family, a select few close friends, and I knew the real story. That's all that mattered to me. She was mine--to pleasure, to mold, to protect, and perhaps even to destroy if necessary. I wasn't that concerned about that last bit.

I trusted my instincts when it came to making decisions, big and small. With an endless wealth of knowledge and memories gained from watching over her for the past five years, I had a clear understanding of what to expect. I couldn't remember the last time I had been this excited about something.

As the clock struck two in the morning, the heavy metal door slid open effortlessly, bringing in a warm breeze that I breathed in .

My mind instantly switched into business mode, shutting out all other thoughts. Alfredo, my doorman, escorted the man of the hour inside and then quickly stepped back out, closing the door behind him. "Joshua, I hope you weren't too busy," I greeted him with a hint of sarcasm as I took in his disheveled hair, bare feet, striped boxers, and wrinkled white shirt. Elias chuckled under his breath and reached for his gun.

Joshua paid no attention to my baby brother or me. His focus was fixed on the hooded figures in front of us.

"I apologize for not introducing you earlier. Josh, this is Ryan, Denise, and their daughter who just turned twenty today. Congratulations are definitely in order." As I pointed to each person, their hoods were each removed by one of my men, but they remained gagged. I wanted Joshua to be aware that I knew he had a daughter around the same age .

Another of my men began opening the drums behind us, causing Joshua's eyes to widen with understanding. My family was known for specific methods of execution, and this was one of them.

"What is going on?" Joshua asked, his voice trembling.

"Why don't you kneel down and I'll explain everything," I replied calmly.

He hesitated, struggling between humiliation and potential physical harm if he refused. Finally, with a subtle nod, he lowered himself to the cold stone floor. Elias positioned himself behind Joshua and pressed the barrel of his gun against the back of his head, making it clear we were the ones in control.

"You were supposed to deliver a shipment two days ago," I stated calmly, beckoning for Diablo to move closer with a flick of my finger. When Joshua caught sight of the ax in his hand, he stiffened. "Mr. Escuro, I-I... "

"Don't bother lying to me," I cut him off before he could make excuses. "I saw the man who was supposed to be watching over you. He claimed to have no knowledge of how ten kilos mysteriously turned into eight. He's been loyal to me for years and is now recovering from a broken nose and shattered hands because of your incompetence."

I gave a subtle nod, signaling to Diablo to take the daughter from the line. The girl's parents tried to scream through their gags, but they were helpless as they watched Diablo pull her away by the hair. He shoved her face-first onto the cold stone floor, causing her to cry out in pain. Her head bounced upon impact and before she could even recover, his ax made a swift whooshing sound as it sliced through the air and pierced her neck. The blade was sharp and precise, severing muscle, bone, and tissue with ease. As he pulled back, leaving a gaping hole in the young girl's neck, Joshua doubled over and vomited at the grotesque sight .

But Diablo wasn't finished yet; with another powerful swing, the girl's head was completely severed from her body, rolling towards her horrified father. Blood pooled around the lifeless body as her parents cried out in anguish, struggling against their restraints.

No one else in the room showed any reaction. The sound of flesh and bones being crushed and ripped apart was all too familiar. We had become desensitized to these kinds of atrocities. Growing up in Vice City, it was a survival tactic. Many of us had personal connections to similar tragedies caused by rivals before my father took full control of the city.

Ryan and his wife watched in horror as Diablo effortlessly dismembered their

daughter's remaining limbs. There was an almost artistic quality to his methodical precision that couldn't be replicated. He wielded his ax with the skill of a master painter, like Picasso with a brush .

He could have chosen any weapon he wanted, a chainsaw, for example, but in times like these, he remained faithful to his ax, and I didn't mind one damn bit. After disposing of over two hundred bodies without fail, I trusted his method of choice completely.

“My policy is straightforward. I give people a chance, followed by another one if they squander it. If they disappoint me again, I have no use for them in my city or my time.”

Joshua trembled from head to toe. He shook his head from side to side and wept uncontrollably, refusing to face the truth. "Mr. Escuro, I swear I didn't touch your product. I know better. My life means everything to me!" His head jerked to the side when my fist connected with his face, leaving a small spot of blood on the floor with a broken tooth.

“Don't. Lie.” I warned, my fingers gripping his messy hair as I turned his head to face me. "You somehow lost two kilos. Now you owe me twenty-five grand for each one and an extra ten for the trouble my cousin had to go through to fix your mistake. Consider yourself lucky that I'm feeling charitable and not making you pay for the profit I lost because of this. And if you can't come up with the money, your family will suffer just like Ryan's is suffering because of his fuck-up."

I pushed him away from me as Diablo began disposing of the severed limbs into one of the three drums, dropping the torso in last. A squelching noise filled the air as it sunk down to the bottom. The couple fought desperately to reach each other, but their attempts were futile as they were forcibly separated. Denise's muffled cries and tears betrayed her fear and anguish as she faced the inevitable demise of both her and her

husband.

They were about to be thrown into 'The Stew—the remaining fifty-five-gallon drums of oil. Joshua dropped to his knees, shutting his eyes tightly in a last moment of desperation before they were lifted up and placed inside .

Diablo produced a long lighter from his pocket and lit the oil on fire, while my men kept a watchful eye to ensure their own safety.

Diablo stood back, admiring his handiwork as the couple struggled against the flames. Their skin began to blister and peel off. The oil bubbled and sizzled around them, splashing up onto and then down to the concrete.

The man's shirt was quickly reduced to ashes, leaving him naked and vulnerable. His muscles tensed as he tried to escape the agonizing pain. Denise' screamed in terror as her hair caught fire, turning it into a torch that flickered wildly. As they were fully submerged, their bodies jerked violently. Bubbles of blood and foam rose to the surface, staining the oil a deep red.

The smell of burning human flesh was overpowering, making it difficult to breathe no matter how accustomed to it you'd become. The lids were placed on top of the drums, sealing the couple away .

The sound of popping and crackling could still be heard from beneath the lids, indicating that the couple was still alive, if only for a few more minutes. The warehouse fell silent once more, broken only by the sound of Joshua vomiting. Diablo turned to me with a satisfied grin on his face. "That," he said, "was truly magnificent.

I laughed and turned my attention back to Joshua, delivering my ultimatum: he had one week to make payment or face consequences. "And clean that up." I nodded at

his pile of vomit that indicated he'd recently eaten spaghetti.

My brother and I left the warehouse together, leaving our men to clean up the mess.

"He's definitely going to make a run for it," Elias remarked as soon as we were outside.

"Yeah." I agreed with a nod. "And that's why his family is about to experience a tragic home invasion within the next fifteen minutes."

"Should've sent Sergio with his camera. "

"Who said I didn't? Angel tagged along too."

My brother's brow furrowed. "We won't have much to look at it if you sent him. You know he only leaves the skin and Sergio can't stomach that."

I laughed, thinking of our cousin losing his shit for precisely that reason. He and Angel were the perfect comedic duo, which was precisely why I was sending them along with the trainee. I had always known Joshua wouldn't be able to come up with the money. His greed consumed him, causing him to use most of the coke for himself and sell off the rest at a much lower price to other addicts.

It didn't take much investigating to figure this all out. It was unfortunate that things had to end this way, but in this line of work, business was business. If I didn't make tough decisions, someone else would step in, undermining me.

I couldn't let one person get away with stealing from me, or it would set a precedent for others to do the same. Rules were rules, and I expected them to be followed. As we walked, my thoughts drifted back to Elena. She was always on my mind, despite my attempts to convince myself otherwise. I could only hope she was able to

withstand the challenges of being my wife.

I was no fucking saint and had no desire to change who I was to appease others. What I would do, was give her a life many would envy, one that others had fought and died for. I wouldn't let her suffer the same fate as her sister, no matter what it took, even if meant making her believe a nightmare was a delightful fantasy.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

ELENA

I woke up feeling disoriented, my entire body aching with the memory of his touch. The blackout curtains had been partially cracked, letting in a small stream of sunlight. He wasn't in the room, and part of me was relieved by his absence.

Last night had been unexpected and I wasn't sure how to face him. It wasn't my intention to sleep with Mateo when we went out, or at all for that matter. But to be fair to myself, I doubted many women resisted him once they were in his bedroom, so I couldn't really be held accountable for my actions.

I sat up and looked around in search of my phone. I didn't see it or the dress he took off me anywhere. What I did see, however, was an outfit folded on top of the ottoman that sat at the foot of the bed. It looked to be another dress—thankfully not as fancy .

The heels were another story. There was a silk ivory robe placed alongside them. Reluctantly kicking the comforter off, I tossed my legs over the side of the bed, my bare feet dangling. I gathered up the dress and heels Mateo had left for me, my heart racing as I hurried toward the bathroom. The door creaked open to reveal a room that matched the opulence of the rest of his home.

It was spacious, with dark marble flooring that shone under the gentle lighting. Deep, rich tones covered the walls, creating an atmosphere that felt both extravagant and intimate. Taking up one side of the room was a large walk-in shower with glass walls and polished gold fixtures. And on the other side was an equally impressive vanity, its long marble countertop adorned with neatly arranged toiletries. Above it hung an ornate mirror, its intricate designs reflecting the soft light from a chandelier

suspended from the ceiling .

I thought my family was wealthy, this house was the next level. I hurriedly undressed and stepped into the shower, reveling in the warm water cascading over my body. The scent of expensive soap and shampoo filled the air, offering some solace in this unfamiliar place. Once I was clean, I wrapped myself in a fluffy towel, its plush fabric gentle against my skin. At the vanity, I noticed that all of the toiletries were clearly meant for me.

There was a new toothbrush, toothpaste, and even a selection of high-end skincare products laid out as if awaiting my arrival. I brushed my teeth, feeling slightly calmer with the minty freshness in my mouth, before getting dressed. Mateo's chosen dress was nice and soft, fitting me perfectly as if it were tailor-made. The floral pattern was vibrant, a stark contrast to the dark, moody ambiance of the bathroom and the rest of his home. I slipped into the black heels, taking a deep breath to steady myself .

I stepped out into the hallway, the soft click of the door closing behind me echoing in the quiet. The quiet elegance of the space was overwhelming, the kind of luxury that made you feel both in awe and slightly out of place. I took a moment trying to get my bearings. The silence was almost palpable, broken only by the distant hum of activity somewhere within the house.

Gathering my composure, I headed toward the grand staircase, my steps measured and cautious. As I descended slowly, my hand glided along the polished mahogany railing, the smooth surface cool beneath my fingertips. Before I reached the bottom, a figure emerged from a side corridor and approached the base of the stairs. It was an older man with dark blonde hair, neatly combed back, and dressed in simple yet impeccable formal wear. His posture was straight and respectful, exuding an air of quiet authority .

"Miss Castello," he greeted politely, his voice smooth and professional.

I paused on the last step, momentarily taken aback by his sudden appearance. My eyes took him in cautiously as I tried to discern his intentions.

"Mr. Escuro is right this way," he continued, extending a hand in the direction of a long hallway.

I hesitated for a fraction of a second before giving a small nod. "Thank you," I replied softly, my voice steady despite the nervous flutter in my chest.

He waited patiently as I descended the final step and then turned to lead the way. Falling into step behind him, I couldn't help but notice the glint of metal peeking out from beneath his jacket. A gun was holstered at the back of his slacks, a stark reminder of the world I had stepped into. The sight made my stomach tighten, but I kept my expression neutral, unwilling to show any sign of unease .

The sound of my heels echoed through the corridor, each click-clack against the shiny floor amplifying the silence around us. The hallway was adorned with exquisite artwork and antique furnishings, each piece likely holding its own story and worth more than I could imagine. As we walked, I glanced around, an unsettling feeling prickling at the back of my neck as if unseen eyes were tracking my every move.

Despite the grandeur and beauty surrounding me, there was an undercurrent of tension in the air, a sense that nothing here was quite as serene as it appeared. Yet, no matter how hard I looked, I saw no one else—only shadows and the distant, muffled sounds that hinted at life beyond these walls. We reached the end of the hallway, stopping in front of a pair of imposing dark oval doors. The man turned to me with a courteous nod, gesturing toward a set of chairs positioned against the wall .

"Please have a seat," he instructed politely.

I obliged, smoothing the fabric of my dress as I settled into one of the chairs. The

cushion was firm yet comfortable, upholstered in rich, dark leather that matched the opulent decor of the house. The man approached the doors and opened one just wide enough to slip through, offering me a brief glimpse into the room beyond. I caught sight of four men dressed in dark suits, their postures rigid and expressions unreadable, before the door closed again with a soft thud.

Left alone in the quiet hallway, I took a deep breath, attempting to steady the nervous energy swirling inside me. My mind raced with questions and uncertainties, but I knew that soon enough, I would have to face whatever awaited me beyond those doors. For now, all I could do was wait and try to maintain the composure that had carried me this far. The silence enveloped me once more, broken only by the distant tick of a grandfather clock .

A man's shrill cry of pain jolted me to my feet, the sound slicing through the heavy silence. My pulse quickened as I took an instinctive step back, every nerve in my body screaming to retreat from whatever was happening in the next room. Before I could take another step, both doors swung open with a force that made the chandelier overhead tremble, and the man in question was unceremoniously shoved into the hall.

He landed on his knees with a sickening thud, his disorientation evident as he wobbled, trying to regain his bearings. His once immaculate suit was now a crumpled mess, one cufflink torn away, dangling uselessly from his sleeve. I couldn't tear my eyes away from his hand, which was desperately cupping a bleeding nose, the bones beneath the skin twisted into an unnatural angle that made my stomach churn.

Mateo emerged from the room like a dark specter .

His expression was infuriatingly calm, almost indifferent, as he looked down at the man.

"Get him out of my house," he commanded, his voice a quiet yet authoritative force

that left no room for argument.

Two of the men I had glimpsed earlier stepped forward without hesitation, each grabbing an arm and beginning to drag the man down the hall. His feet scraped against the polished floor, leaving faint streaks of blood in their wake. The third man, the one who had stayed back, gave Mateo a tight-lipped smile, though the fear in his eyes was palpable. He muttered something unintelligible under his breath before scurrying after the others, his anxiety evident in every hurried step.

I stood frozen, still staring down the empty hall long after they had vanished from sight, the remnants of the scene playing on a loop in my mind.

“Elena.”

My name, spoken softly, snapped me out of my daze. Mateo’s voice was gentle, yet it carried an unspoken command that drew my gaze back to him. He stood there, composed, as if what I had just witnessed was nothing more than an everyday occurrence—a man completely in control, even amid violence. Our eyes locked, and for a brief moment, I was acutely aware of the vast chasm between us.

“I didn’t expect you to be awake so soon. I apologize for the mess.”

The mess. Not the fact that he’d just shattered a man’s hand and nose before discarding him like yesterday’s garbage. Then again, for someone like Mateo, that probably was nothing more than a love-tap. His bright smile, aimed directly at me, did little to diminish the unease twisting in my stomach, but it was disarming enough to make me pause. He wasn’t dressed in the sharp suit I’d grown accustomed to seeing him in .

Instead, he wore a simple black button-down, the sleeves partially rolled back, revealing the edges of that intricate tattoo winding up his forearm. The slacks he

paired with it were tailored to perfection, emphasizing his lean, powerful build. Somehow, he looked even more dangerous—more alluring—than he had the night before.

I bit back the urge to ask what I had just witnessed, knowing better than to let those words slip out. It wasn't my business, and the rules of this world were clear: keep your mouth shut and your eyes averted. Before my sister and I were sent away, we'd been raised around men like Mateo—men who dealt in shadows and made their own rules. My mother and father may have lavished me with love and affection, but they were far from angelic. I remembered a scene like this one unfolding outside my father's office when he thought Eva and I were fast asleep .

It was when he realized we'd seen what happened a lesson was ingrained in me—see nothing, say nothing. Of course, he was also extremely apologetic, unlike Mateo.

His eyes roamed over me from head to toe, taking his time as he absorbed every detail. His gaze was heated, reminiscent of the night before, and it brought everything we had done rushing back into sharp focus. The way his hands had moved over my body, the way his voice had sometimes softened just for me—it all came flooding back in a dizzying rush.

The contrast between the tenderness he'd shown me and the brutality I had just witnessed was impossible to ignore. Mateo was a man of many faces, and I was only beginning to understand the depth of that complexity. I held my ground, meeting his gaze with as much composure as I could muster. His eyes darkened as they continued to roam over me, a small smile curling at the corners of his mouth .

"You're even more beautiful in the morning light," he murmured, stepping forward with a quiet confidence that sent a shiver down my spine. His hands settled on my hips, firm but not forceful, drawing me closer until there was barely any space between us.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, his voice low, almost intimate.

"Fine," I replied, though the word felt inadequate, given the whirlwind of emotions still coursing through me.

Mateo's smile deepened, a flash of something darker flickering in his eyes. "Then I didn't do a good enough job last night," he teased, his tone smooth, but with a sharp edge that made my breath catch.

A flush crept up my neck, heat flooding my cheeks as I tried to stammer out a response. "No, it was... it was good," I managed to say, my voice faltering as I struggled to keep my thoughts in order .

He watched me, clearly amused by my flustered state. "Good?" he echoed, his voice dripping with playful condescension. " Anjinho , I don't settle for good. I demand more—much more. And I'm quite certain you can give it."

The weight of his words, coupled with the intensity of his gaze, was almost too much. I needed to break the tension, to get my bearings before I completely lost myself in whatever this was.

"I... I need to go home," I blurted out, my thoughts snapping back to the reality I had left behind. I could feel my phone buzzing relentlessly in my pocket—texts from Melody and Peyton, missed calls from my grandmother and uncle. I needed to check in with them, to get back to some semblance of normalcy, no matter how fleeting.

The playful light in Mateo's eyes vanished instantly, replaced by something far more dangerous .

His grip on my hips tightened, his fingers digging into my skin just enough to make his displeasure known. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice suddenly void.

"You are home."

I stared up at him, my heart pounding. "Mateo, I can't just stay here. I have a life outside of this...outside of you."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and before I could continue, he hushed me with a gentle finger against my lips. "There's no need to ruin a perfectly good morning with unnecessary arguments. Let's not start the day with tension." His tone was calm, but the underlying firmness made it clear that he wasn't asking for my opinion. He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his eyes, and I knew better than to push the issue.

"At least let's have breakfast first," he suggested, though it was more of a command than a suggestion. His hand remained on my hip as he guided me down the hall, his grip firm yet somehow reassuring .

We walked in silence, the tension from our earlier conversation still hanging in the air, but Mateo's demeanor had shifted back to something more relaxed, almost casual. He led me out a rear door, and we stepped into the fresh morning air.

As we rounded the corner, the backyard came into view. The terracotta stone patio led the way to a sleek glass dining table, already laid out with an impressive spread. The table was set with fresh food—assorted fruits glistening with dew, warm pastries that filled the air with a buttery aroma, and a selection of cheeses and cured meats arranged artfully on a platter. It was the kind of breakfast that could have been pulled straight from the pages of a luxury magazine, every detail meticulously crafted.

Mateo pulled out a chair for me, a small gesture that felt almost out of place given the gravity of our situation, but I accepted it and sat down .

The serene setting was a stark contrast to the underlying tension I still felt, a reminder that despite the beauty surrounding me, I was not in control. He took his seat across

from me, his eyes never leaving mine as if he could sense the turmoil simmering beneath my composed exterior.

“You need to eat, anjinho ,” he said softly, but there was an unmistakable firmness beneath the gentle words. He wasn’t just suggesting; he was telling me.

Not wanting to push any boundaries, I reached for the bowl of fresh fruit, selected a few strawberries, and then moved on to a buttery croissant. The simple act of choosing food felt like a small victory in maintaining some semblance of control. As I took a tentative bite, Mateo reached for a decanter that sat on the table, filled with a rich amber liquid. He poured himself a glass of what I quickly identified as whiskey, the scent of it strong and smoky as he added a few ice cubes .

“Drink?” he offered, his eyes not leaving mine as he raised his glass slightly.

I shook my head, the thought of mixing alcohol with my medication once again, was enough to keep me from accepting. “No, thank you,” I replied, trying to keep my tone neutral.

Mateo nodded, seemingly unbothered by my refusal. He took a slow sip of his drink, savoring the taste before setting the glass down. “Now, why don’t you ask me what you wanted to last night?” he said, his voice low and deliberate. “About our agreement.”

The reminder of our earlier conversation hit me like a wave, and I realized there was no escaping this. I needed answers, and he knew it. I took another bite of my croissant, trying to buy myself a moment to collect my thoughts, but his unwavering gaze told me that time was running out. I swallowed and finally met his eyes. It was time to confront the reality of what I was getting into.

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I hesitated; the words caught in my throat as I considered how to phrase the questions swirling in my mind. Mateo's presence was overwhelming, a constant reminder that the stakes here were high—too high for me to be anything less than direct.

Finally, I took a deep breath and set down the croissant, wiping my hands on the linen napkin. "What exactly do you expect from me?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "What does being your wife really mean? I need to understand what I'm agreeing to, Mateo."

He studied me for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as if weighing how much to reveal. The silence stretched between us, thick with tension, before he finally leaned back in his chair, swirling the whiskey in his glass as he spoke.

"Being my wife means many things," he began, his tone measured .

"It means standing by my side, not just as a partner in name but as someone who understands the power and responsibility that comes with my world. It means loyalty, obedience, and knowing when to speak and when to be silent." He paused, his gaze locking onto mine with an intensity that made my pulse quicken. "It means you belong to me, utterly and completely, in every sense of the word."

There was no sugar-coating, no attempt to make this seem like anything other than what it was—a binding agreement with a man who was accustomed to getting exactly what he wanted.

"And in return," he continued, his voice softening just a fraction, "I will give you what you seek. I will make sure you see your sister again, and I will protect you in

ways you can't even begin to imagine. But make no mistake, Elena—this is not a negotiation. This is your reality now.”

I wet my lips and reached for my water .

The deal was clear: my life, my freedom, in exchange for his protection and the promise of finding Eva. It was a terrifying proposition, but deep down, I knew there was no turning back. I didn't dare ask if he would be loyal to me as well. The thought flickered briefly in my mind, but I quickly pushed it aside. This wasn't a union of love or something born from a genuine relationship. It was an arrangement—a calculated move in a much larger game where emotions held little value.

Mateo's loyalty would only extend as far as it served his interests, and I knew that asking for more would be a mistake. In this world, trust wasn't given freely; it was earned through power, control, and fear. Anything beyond that was a luxury, and luxuries weren't part of this deal. I kept my expression neutral, refusing to let any doubt show on my face. If I was going to survive this, I couldn't afford to reveal all of my weaknesses, especially in front of Mateo .

He leaned back in his chair, his gaze steady on me as I took a few more bites of fruit. “Anything else?” he asked, his voice deceptively casual, though there was an undercurrent of something darker beneath. His eyes tracked every bite of the strawberry I brought to my lips, and I couldn't help but notice that he wasn't eating at all.

I hesitated, feeling his scrutiny like a weight on my shoulders, before deciding to ask about something that had been nagging at me. “What about the living situation?”

He didn't miss a beat, his reply coming swift and sharp. “You have no reason to step foot in your old home again,” he stated. “But because I'm such a kind man, I'll allow you to visit tomorrow. You can announce our engagement then before we hold a

ceremony.”

“Engagement?” The word throwing me off kilter.

“Do I look like a man who would have a shotgun wedding at a courthouse? ”

“You don’t really look like the wedding type at all,” I replied honestly.

“Why not? You think I look good in a suit, wait until you see me in a tux.”

“A tux? Seems a bit too civilized for you.”

He laughed lowly. “I know you’re not a morning person--.”

“You couldn’t possibly--.”

“I know more than you can imagine,” he cut me off. “And civilized isn’t the word I’d use, but I assure you, you’ll be wearing white, I’ll be in a tux, and at the end of the night, your dress will be stained red.”

I stared at him, turning those words over in my head. He wasn’t talking about sex.

“Anyways,” he reached for his drink. “I know you aren’t a morning person, but if last night didn’t put you in a good mood, I shouldn’t have gone so easy on you.”

That was easy? I ached every time I moved, and there was a faint bruise around my throat from how hard he’d gripped it .

“So, we’re going to do the whole engaged thing?” I changed the subject.

He grinned at my obvious deflection, deepening his dimples. “We’ll be engaged, and

then you'll have a wedding fitting of your new name and of my bride."

I was quiet for a moment, trying to process the implications of what he was saying. This was spiraling into something far more serious than I had imagined. "This is for show, right?" I asked cautiously. "You don't expect us to behave like an actual married couple?"

"Do you have a problem with hearing or is it comprehension you're struggling with?" he asked, his voice laced with mockery. "You will be my wife in the truest sense of the word," he explained, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that left no room for doubt. "And in my bed every night."

"But what happens after you find my sister?" My voice trembling slightly despite my best efforts to remain composed .

"You have my children," he replied, his tone matter of fact as if discussing the most mundane of topics.

The simplicity of his words hit me like a punch in the gut. There was no affection or romanticism in his declaration. The reality of it all settled over me like a cold, heavy weight. This wasn't just about finding Eva. This was about securing a future—his future—through me. I was a means to an end, a vessel for his ambitions. Any remaining illusion I might have had about being anything other than a piece in his game was shattered.

"We need to work on your poker face, anjinho ," he said softly. "This isn't a bad thing. I'm not the worst you could do. In fact, I'm quite the sought-after bachelor."

I frowned, the urge to push back gnawing at me. "Yes, Pey—" I cut myself off abruptly, realizing I was about to mention Peyton. I wasn't going to drag my friends any deeper into this .

Mateo's grin widened, his expression all too knowing. "Nice catch," he murmured, clearly pleased with my slip.

I ignored his comment, trying to steer the conversation back on track. "So, we can never divorce?" I asked, hoping there was some room for negotiation in this arrangement, some semblance of an escape plan.

He tilted his head, studying me with that same unsettling intensity. "How about I have your grave dug as an early wedding present?" he suggested, his voice calm, almost gentle. "Whenever you decide to leave me, you can go there."

I knew that wasn't a bluff or empty words. He truly meant that.

"I'll join you soon after," he added before I could muster a response, his tone still deceptively soft. "I'll make sure that when my time comes, you're exhumed, and I'm added to your casket. Then we'll be together again. "

My mouth went dry as I tried to find the right words. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, each beat a reminder of the gravity of the situation. "I... I guess that's one way to ensure we stay together," I finally managed to say, forcing the words out despite the tightness in my throat.

Mateo's gaze remained steady, a small, satisfied smile playing on his lips as he watched me grapple with the reality, he'd laid out so clearly. There was nothing I could say to change his mind, nothing I could do to alter the course he'd set for us. All I could do was accept it—or at least pretend to.

How did I end up in this position, tangled in a world so far removed from the life I once knew?

Maybe, in some screwed-up, tragic way, this was meant to happen. If it brought my

sister back to me, then I could—and would—endure it. For her, I would withstand anything .

I took another sip of ice water, the coolness soothing the turmoil swirling inside me. “So... what now?” I asked, my voice calm despite the chaos in my mind.

He leaned back in his chair. “I have some business to handle in the city tonight. You’ll be joining me,” he replied. “Your wardrobe isn’t here yet, so I’ve arranged for a driver to take you to La Galerie Noir so you can get something for you to wear. But first...” He trailed off, sliding his chair back with a smooth motion. “Come here.”

I hesitated for a moment, then slowly pushed my seat back and stood, walking around to his side of the table. My heart raced as his eyes followed my every move, a predatory gleam lurking just beneath the surface. When I reached him, he placed his hands gently on my thighs, guiding me to sit on his lap. The closeness of him was overwhelming, his warmth seeping into my skin as I settled into place, gripping the arms of the chair to steady myself.

He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small velvet box, its rich fabric a stark contrast to the sharp edge of his demeanor. He opened it slowly, revealing an engagement ring that took my breath away. The blue diamond at its center was encased by a delicate halo of pink diamonds, the colors striking against the platinum band. I didn’t know its value, but I could tell it was worth more than anything I’d ever owned—or ever would. It was a piece that screamed wealth, power, and exclusivity—everything Mateo represented.

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered as I looked down at the ring, unable to meet his gaze.

He gently gathered my hair, pulling it to one side. The warmth of his breath brushed against my exposed skin, sending a shiver down my spine. Then, with a tenderness that seemed almost out of place, he pressed a soft kiss to my neck. I closed my eyes

for a moment, trying to process the rush of emotions flooding through me.

He took hold of my hair again, gathering it in one hand while the other slid beneath my dress. I gasped, my eyes flying open when he tugged on my hair. As his hand roamed higher up my thigh, a surge of panic gripped me. I pushed against his chest, trying to create some distance between us.

"Mateo, stop," I pleaded.

“Already testing me again, anjinho .”

Despite my fear, a stubborn fire ignited within me, urging me to stand my ground. I pushed against him with more force, determination lending me strength. "I said stop," I repeated, my voice firm and unwavering this time. Mateo's grip tightened, sending tiny sparks of pain through my scalp.

His breath ghosted over my ear as he chuckled darkly, the sound sending a chill down my spine. "You think you can tell me when to stop?" His words were a taunt, a challenge laced with arrogance.

With a quick movement, he pulled my underwear to the side and slid two fingers inside me. I whimpered against the discomfort, biting my lip to stifle it. He worked his fingers in and out, his thumb circling my clit. “Spread your legs.”

The fear in my heart threatened to consume me, but the defiance still burned. Despite the overwhelming force Mateo wielded, I refused to let him dominate me completely. Taking a deep breath, I forced my legs apart, even as my body screamed in protest. I tasted blood from how hard I was biting my lip, the soreness from the night before lingering. In an instant, his grip on my hair was gone and his hand tightened around my throat.

My body was lifted off his lap as I struggled to swallow against the suffocating pressure on my windpipe. He swept aside the neatly arranged dishes on the table, causing them to clatter and shatter against the unforgiving concrete floor.

He roughly maneuvered me so that I was bent over the table's edge, now fully facing the crystal-clear pool just beyond. My heart pounded with a steady, painful rhythm against my chest as I steeled myself for what was to come next. The fear and anticipation coiled in the pit of my stomach, threatening to overwhelm me. But I refused to give in, refused to beg or plead for mercy he wouldn't give. My pride had already been shattered into a million pieces and now it was being further torn apart.

Every moment felt like an eternity as I waited for the inevitable.

I heard his belt buckle and closed my eyes.

At the sound of his zipper going down, I froze. He edged closer behind me. "Your defiance is amusing, but I promise you, it will only cause you more harm than good. "

I didn't respond, my mind and body trying to conjure some form of strength to endure.

The sensation of his fingers teasing me again caused my body to tense, anticipating the pain to come. "You're mine now. You're going to take all of me, and you're going to enjoy it. I can feel your body betraying you, wanting me."

I tried to deny it, but the truth was there, undeniable . He lifted my dress up and over my hips, then entered me forcefully. Without the numbing effects of alcohol, his cock felt even larger and more painful.

"It hurts," I managed to gasp out.

"I think it feels fucking amazing," he replied, pulling out and thrusting back in. "You'll get used to it."

He grabbed a fistful of my hair, yanking my head back so forcefully I feared he might rip it out. With each hard, punishing thrust, he showed no mercy as he fucked me. I hated I could feel myself growing slick around him, his cock sliding in and out faster as my juices lubricated his every movement.

It was a vile and violent dance, my body betraying me with its involuntary responses, while my mind screamed for this end. Each time he pushed deeper, I felt like he was tearing me apart, both physically and emotionally.

"Don't you like this, Anjinho?" his voice a mocking taunt.

I hated him for this. Hated myself even more as a low moan escaped my lips. I clenched my fists as the pain gradually gave way to pleasure. I shook my head, but the lie tasted bitter in my mouth. I could feel his muscles flexing and tension as he thrust deeper and deeper. The pain continued to mix with pleasure, creating a confusing, intense mix of sensations. I was losing control, being consumed by these overwhelming feelings, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

His grip on my throat tightened, and I could barely breathe. My vision began to blur, and I felt like I was slipping away, spiraling into a darkness that would swallow me whole.

In the haze of conflicting emotions, I could feel tears streaming down my cheeks. I closed my eyes, trying to escape the intensity of the situation, but it was no use. I could feel the waves building, an unstoppable force sweeping over me.

I struggled and lost to suppress whimpered moans. "That's it," he rasped, his lips brushing against my ear. "Let it all go. Don't fight it." His grip on my throat

tightened, the other going to my hip so that he could fuck me harder, sending the table scraping against the concrete.

I desperately clawed at the glass surface of the tabletop. My vision swam with a cacophony of colors and sounds so overwhelming I could barely make sense of anything. The rough scraping of the table against the floor echoed my own ragged gasps, amplifying the scene and leaving me soaking wet and shamefully exposed .

"You're almost there." His voice was tinged with a husky edge.

As the words left his lips, his fingers loosened their tight grip on my throat and I gasped for air, the cool rush of oxygen a welcome relief. But just as quickly, his hand closed around my neck again, cutting off my supply and causing me to whimper in desperation. I could feel my heart racing in fear and exhilaration at the same time.

I desperately tried to gather my wits about me, but my mind was a whirlwind of emotion and sensations. With each thrust, he was taking something from me and giving something else in return – pain, pleasure, control, surrender. A voice was screaming to resist, but my head was spinning, and my body wasn't getting the message. As he continued to dominate me, I felt the familiar signs of release.

In one swift motion, he pulled out of me completely .

His grip on my throat was still firm as he forced one of my legs up onto the table, my knee digging into the hard surface.

With a foreign curse, he thrust back into me with an unrelenting force. The new angle had his cock hitting a spot deep inside me that sent unending pleasure coursing through my entire body. I started coming, soaking his cock with my come and something gushing out of my pussy, drenching him, the table, and the floor beneath us. My legs trembled and an endless moan escaped me as I surrendered to the

intensity of the orgasm.

“You feel so goddamn good,” he ground out, his hips pounding into me harder than before, relenting only occasionally to let my oxygen-starved lungs gasp for breath before cutting it off abruptly, only to have me whimper in desperation once more. My body was on fire, each and every nerve ending alight. I could feel another climax building, a crescendo of sensations that threatened to consume me whole. I wanted to resist, to cling to the last shreds of sanity, but it was futile.

I was lost to him, my body responding to his every command. Before I could even realize it, I was coming again, a tidal wave of ecstasy crashing over me as he continued to fuck me mercilessly. My body convulsed, gasping for air as he held me down, never missing a beat as he took me to the edge of madness and back again. He felt it too the shuddering of my body beneath him, the tightening of my muscles around his cock. He released my hip and slid his hand around to my clit his fingers expertly working it in sync with his thrusts.

“Please come,” I pleaded, needing him to finish.

“You want me to come inside you?”

I nodded, unable to speak through my haze of pleasure and desire. "Yes," I managed to gasp out.

“Beg for it. ”

The demand was delivered with a detachment that was at odds with what he was doing to me, laced with a twisted kind of pleasure.

Fresh tears filled my eyes as I began to beg, stammering over moans and trying to breathe.

"P-please," I breathed, my voice breaking as I felt the edge of another impending orgasm building within me. "Please, please."

"That's it," he praised, his voice a deep rumble that reverberated through me. "Say it again."

"Please, Mateo," I rasped, "Please come inside me." My words were punctuated by gasps and moans as he continued to thrust. He slapped my clit hard, sending a jolt of electric pleasure coursing through me. "Fuck!" I cried out, the pain and pleasure melding into a single agonizingly beautiful sensation.

"Come for me again." He slapped my clit a second time and bottomed out inside me. My body trembled uncontrollably, his words, his touch, his dominance overwhelming my senses.

I cried out, a long, drawn-out moan that seemed to last forever.

"Yes, yes," I panted, clinging to him as I rode out the orgasm, crying out his name.

"That's it, good girl." He continued stroking my clit, sending aftershocks of pleasure coursing through me. I was still coming when he buried himself as deep inside me as he could and with a curse, I felt him throbbing inside me. My walls tightened around his cock, drawing him deeper.

The world around me seemed to shift. The sounds of our bodies colliding and the scraping of the table against the floor faded into the background, replaced by an eerie silence. I struggled to focus, to find my bearings, but it was as if the air itself had thickened, making it difficult to breathe.

As suddenly as it had begun, it was over .

Mateo slowly withdrew from me, leaving me gasping for air and shaking, my mind a mess of confusion. At the sound of his belt buckle, I began to lower my leg.

“Not yet.” He reached between my legs and used his fingers to push back the come that had started to leak out. “Better.” He took hold of my thigh and lowered my leg back down before turning me around, keeping me pressed between him and the table. “Now clean these off,” he ordered.

I hesitated for a moment, but I knew that I had to do this. As I sucked, he slid his other hand to my pussy, slipping two fingers inside. I sucked in a breath, but I didn't protest. I knew what he wanted--me obedient, and submissive. He turned his hand palm up, and curled his fingers, slowly fucking me with his hand. My whimper was cut off by his lips crushing mine, his tongue probing my mouth.

A sloshing sound filled the air as he pushed deeper, roughly finger-fucking me. My thighs were wet with my own come and juices. “Oh,” I moaned, my breath hitching. “Mateo.”

I dug my nails into his shoulders, moaning wildly as I squirted all over him, my pussy spasming around his fingers.

“That’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever seen,” he stated, watching my body convulse with pleasure. “You’re beautiful, Elena.” He took hold of my jaw with his other hand and kissed me, rolling my clit with the pad of his thumb. He laughed against my lips as I came again with a low, pitiful moan, squeezing his hand between my legs. He remained like that for a moment, kissing me gently before finally pulling his hand away.

I swallowed, my eyes darting around as I tried to catch my breath. We’d moved quite a distance from where we started, and my mind was still processing what had just happened.

He gripped the back of my neck, and my eyes flew to his. "Today, as you feel me every time you so much as breathe, and see that ring on your finger, I want you to remember the man you belong to."

I nodded, unable to speak through the emotions welling up inside me.

"Good girl," he said, his hand gently caressing my cheek. "If you begin to forget, I'm always willing to remind you again." He leaned in and brushed his lips over mine one last time. "Now you will go inside and make sure not a single drop of my come leaves my pussy unless you want me to put it back the hard way. Understand?"

I nodded again, my heart still racing.

"When you're done, your driver will be waiting for you out front." He released me and stepped back. "I'll see you tonight." He turned as if to walk away but then suddenly stopped. "What do you think of this view?"

Confused, I glanced in the direction he'd motioned. The pool sparkled in the fading sunlight, the water shimmering like a trophy in the stillness of the evening. Was this a metaphor for something?

"I think it's beautiful," I said hesitantly, uncertain if I was answering correctly.

"I think so too." He left then, leaving me alone with my confusion and my raging emotions.

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I shut the bathroom door behind me, my fingers trembling as I twisted the lock for some illusion of safety. The soft click seemed louder than it should have been, echoing in the silence like a final nail being driven into a coffin. My breath was ragged and shallow. For a moment, I just stood there, staring at nothing, my heart thudding painfully in my chest and my bare feet on the cold floor. My heels were cradled in one arm, I'd taken them off to move in silence, away from my shame.

Slowly, I turned to face the mirror, and what I saw magnified every ugly, nasty emotion rooted in my chest. My hair was a tangled mess, wild from his hands pulling at it. My lips were swollen and bruised from kisses that felt more like a punishment than anything resembling affection. And there, on my neck, faint marks still remained where his fingers had gripped me, reminding me of the control he had, and I let him take .

What really gutted me was the large engagement ring now on my finger—shining like a mocking beacon, a symbol of everything I'd lost. My future, my freedom, and worst of all, my dignity. I stared at it, the weight of the diamond-like it was made of iron.

I bit down hard on my lip, fighting the sob that was crawling up my throat, but it was no use. A ragged breath escaped, and I slapped a hand over my mouth to stifle the sound. I couldn't stop the tears, though. They blurred my vision, turning my reflection into something unrecognizable.

What the hell am I doing?

The question tore through me, sharper than any pain Mateo could inflict. I pressed my

hand tighter against my lips, trying to hold it all in—the grief, the fear, the anger. I thought of Molly, how I hadn't even had time to grieve her properly. The woman who raised me, gone in an instant. And Eva...my sister, my other half.

Still missing .

I had no idea if she was even alive, but I was gambling everything to find her.

And that's why I had to marry this man.

To get what I wanted I had to marry him, live with him, and play this sick game. And we hadn't even made it to the engagement ceremony. I wasn't sure if I could do this.

But I had to.

I had to swallow the pain, bury it deep, and carry on. For Eva, for Molly... for myself. Even though it felt like it was going to tear me apart.

Less than thirty minutes after my breakdown, I found myself in the backseat of a luxury sedan. My thoughts were still a tangled mess, but my mask was at least secure again .

The driver, a tall man with a military bearing, was meticulously dressed in a sharp black suit. His hair was cropped short, and he wore dark sunglasses like the last driver had, which obscured his eyes, adding to his professional and stoic demeanor. He had only spoken three words to me, all of them curt and formal, leaving no room for conversation.

As the car glided smoothly down the road, I noticed a bottle of water and a small bag resting on the seat beside me. Curiosity gnawed at me, and I picked it up, finding two pills inside that looked identical to the ones I took daily. It was ironic, considering the

line of work Mateo was involved in, that he would ensure I had my medication. But it wasn't surprising that he would find out such personal information. Nothing seemed out of reach for him.

The realization threw me into a deeper state of turmoil .

If these were truly my pills, it meant Mateo had access to my most intimate details, and there was no telling what else he knew about me. But if they weren't... I couldn't risk it. I wasn't going to take that chance, no matter how much they looked like mine. I stared at the pills for a moment longer, then set them aside and reached for the water instead. The cool liquid slid down my throat, offering some small comfort.

My body felt like a battleground, each inch of skin a reminder of his violation. The shame burned hot in my cheeks. I kept replaying him roughly bending me over that table, treating me like nothing more than a worthless whore. He didn't care who saw or heard us, whether it be his own men or even his family members passing by. The memory made me want to shrink into myself. At the same time, my body betrayed me with its craving for his touch. It was a never-ending battle within myself, one that left me feeling broken and helpless .

The previous night, I had given in to his every desire without hesitation. Now, I couldn't deny the shock and confusion overwhelming me. Was something wrong with me? I'd gone as far as following his absurd command to keep his semen inside me. I couldn't help but hate myself for giving in to him so easily, for allowing him to treat me so ruthlessly.

And yet, this was just the beginning - a mere hint of what our marriage would inevitably become. Worse, I could sense his restraint. From the way he moved within me to how he reacted to my naivety and futile objections. I knew that there was a deeper reason behind it all, one that only he held the answers to. This dance of pleasure and pain would continue, and I was powerless to do anything about it.

My phone rang again, the persistent buzzing cutting through the silence in the car. I glanced at the screen and saw my uncle's name flashing for the fourth time .

With a sigh, I silenced it, unwilling to deal with him right now. I'd texted earlier that I would speak to them soon, but the thought of actually doing it gave me a headache. How was I supposed to explain all of this to my grandmother? I couldn't care less about my uncle's opinion—he was the last person I wanted to talk to.

But my grandmother...

She had gone out of her way to give Aunt Molly a proper funeral, and for appearance's sake, she'd done the same for Eva, despite everything. The thought of facing her, of trying to explain what had happened and what I was entangled in, made my stomach churn. I glanced down at my phone again, hoping for a distraction, but Peyton and Melody still hadn't replied to my texts. The silence from them only added to the unease building inside me. With a resigned sigh, I closed my eyes and leaned my head back against the seat .

I heard a voice calling my name, soft but insistent. It was Mateo's. Wait—Mateo? My eyes fluttered open, and for a moment, I was disoriented, unsure of where I was. It took a second to register that the driver was holding a phone out toward me, and Mateo was on the other end of the line.

I took the phone, blinking away the confusion. "Hello?"

"If you were tired, you could have gone back to sleep, anjinho ." His voice was smooth, almost amused.

"I didn't know that was an option," I muttered, still trying to shake off the grogginess.

The line went silent for a moment, and then he responded, his tone more serious. "I'll

see you soon.” Before I could say anything else, there was a beep to signal the call had ended .

I handed the phone back to the driver, giving him a questioning look. “Why didn’t you just wake me up?”

His expression remained stoic as he responded, “Mr. Escuro made it very clear you aren’t to speak to other men without his consent. As far as touching, that would cause me to lose my hands.”

I stared at him. The image of the severed limb flashed through my mind. A brutal warning, wrapped in flesh and bone, delivered in an elegant box.

“We have arrived,” the driver added, his voice breaking through the haze of my thoughts. I looked up just in time to see him stepping out of the car.

I turned to look out the window, taking in the sight of the boutique Mateo had mentioned earlier. The name was etched in elegant script above the entrance, and the store itself was a study in opulence .

The intricate gold latticework on the windows and the polished marble exterior made it clear that this was no ordinary boutique. This was a place where only the wealthiest of the wealthy shopped, a shrine to excess and luxury. It clicked then, as I stared up at it.

My sister had shopped here before, flaunting the latest designer pieces as if they were as casual as jeans and a t-shirt in our rundown neighborhood. I remembered the countless times she’d returned home with bags from this place, her eyes sparkling with the thrill of having something no one else did. Eva had loved this world, thrived in it even. She’d been born for luxury, whereas I’d always felt like I was playing dress-up, an imposter in a world that wasn’t mine when she begged me to try the

clothes on. Now, standing outside, I wondered what my sister would think of me being here now, under such circumstances .

Would she be proud? Horrified? I wasn't sure, but the thought of her brought a fresh wave of sadness and determination. As I stepped out of the car, the driver, who had barely spoken three words to me since our journey began, said in a measured tone, "I will be on standby, Miss. Take your time."

I nodded, appreciating his professionalism, knowing he had to have an opinion on this whole situation. I turned and approached the grand entrance to the boutique. The streets around me were eerily quiet, devoid of the usual hustle and bustle as if the entire area had been cleared out just for my arrival. Mateo's doing, no doubt. As I pushed open the door, I paused, taking in the interior.

The boutique was a vision of refined luxury, from the sleek modern fixtures to the soft lighting that bathed everything in a warm, inviting glow. One wall displayed the words " You Are Beautiful" in elegant script, while the other featured a series of mirrors .

It wasn't the luxurious decor that made me stop in my tracks—it was the sight of Peyton and Melody waiting for me, their expressions a mix of relief and something else I couldn't quite place. Beside them stood three fresh-faced staff members, each smiling politely, ready to cater to my every whim.

Peyton was the first to break the silence, stepping forward with a smirk. "We were wondering when you'd show up."

I froze, momentarily at a loss for words. "What are you two doing here?" I managed to ask, my voice betraying the surprise and confusion I felt.

Melody stepped forward, a wry smile playing on her lips. "We were summoned by

your fiancé ," she replied, drawing out the word with deliberate emphasis. Her eyes roamed over me and her smile tightened.

Peyton clapped his hands together loudly. "Alright, folks—let's get to work! "

His voice was upbeat, almost as if this were any other day spent shopping, but I knew him well enough to see it was an act.

The staff, who had been waiting attentively, immediately sprang into action. One of them, a young woman with a sleek bob and impeccable style, approached me with a warm, professional smile. "Miss Castello, it's a pleasure to assist you today. We've already taken the liberty of preparing a selection based on your measurements and Mr. Escuros' preferences."

"You... already have my measurements?" I asked though I shouldn't have been surprised. Of course, Mateo would have thought of everything.

"Yes, Miss," she replied smoothly. "We've curated a collection that we believe will meet your needs and exceed your expectations. If you'd like to follow me, we can get started right away. "

The staff member led me into a beautifully appointed room lined with full-length mirrors on three sides, the fourth wall dedicated entirely to an array of luxurious clothing. Each piece was more stunning than the last, a dizzying array of fabrics and colors that nearly made me forget why I was there. The lighting was soft and flattering, designed to make every angle perfect, and I couldn't help but feel a little overwhelmed.

Peyton and Melody followed close behind, their eyes scanning the room with a mix of curiosity and wariness. The staff member—her name tag read Isabella—turned to me with a polite smile. "Would you care for some refreshments while you browse,

Miss Castello?"

Before I could answer, Melody chimed in, her voice breezy but firm. "Yes, that would be lovely. We'll have sparkling water, please, and perhaps a fruit platter if you have one. "

Isabella nodded and gestured to another attendant standing by the door. The young woman hurried off, returning moments later with a tray carrying glasses of sparkling water and an assortment of fresh fruit, arranged artfully on a silver platter.

Isabella then began explaining the different options laid out before me, speaking of the designers, the fabrics, and how each outfit could be tailored to fit my exact specifications. It was clear this wasn't just about finding something to wear; it was about projecting a specific image—a role I was meant to step into.

As she spoke, I reached for a glass, feeling the bubbles tingle against my palm as I wrapped my fingers around the stem. Peyton suddenly turned to the staff; his smile was polite but his tone left no room for negotiation. "We appreciate all your help, but we need a bit of privacy now. "

The room fell silent, the staff exchanging brief glances before bowing their heads slightly in acknowledgment.

One by one, they filed out of the room, leaving the three of us alone. The quiet that followed was almost suffocating, filled with all the things we weren't saying. As the doors clicked shut behind the last of them, I turned toward my friends just as Melody surged forward.

She wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. "Jesus Christ, El. I was so worried about you after that last text."

“I’m okay,” I lied.

She let me go and then looked down. Her eyes widened as she took in the sight of the ring Mateo had placed on my finger. “Do you realize how much that ring is worth?” she asked, her voice a mix of awe and disbelief.

I shook my head, feeling a bit out of my depth. “No,” I replied honestly .

“Is that really what’s important right now, Mel?” Peyton questioned,

“Our best friend is engaged to the man we were just warning her about less than twenty-four hours ago? I would fucking say so, Peyton.”

“That goes without saying,” he countered, then turned his sights to me. “How exactly did this happen?”

“Yeah, what happened last night?” she asked, her voice tinged with both concern and curiosity.

I took a seat on the egg-shaped sofa, needing a moment to gather my thoughts. The memory of the night before was still fresh, but it felt like something out of a dream—or a nightmare. “We had dinner, and then he took me to his home,” I began, trying to keep my voice steady as I relayed the events.

Peyton raised an eyebrow. “So, he jack-rabbited you?” he remarked offhandedly .

I shot him an incredulous look. “Seriously?”

He simply shrugged, a sly grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I can see his handprint around your neck, babe.”

My hand instinctively went to my neck, where I could still feel the faint remnants of Mateo's touch. I had tried to make it fade, but I hadn't had much luck.

Melody frowned, stepping closer to get a better look. "He wasn't too rough with you, was he?"

I didn't want to lie to them, but I couldn't bring myself to admit what had truly transpired just a few hours ago, either. It was too raw, too confusing to even put into words. So, I compromised. "Last night was intense, but I was... accepting of it." I lifted my hand to show them the ring that now adorned my finger. "I got this today."

"He really proposed to you?" Peyton asked, his tone laced with disbelief .

"Not that there's anything wrong with you. You're one of the most gorgeous women I've ever met, but babe, the man has been with plenty of women. What the hell did you put on that man for him to wake up and wife you?"

I couldn't help but laugh, the sound hollow in my throat. Peyton had gotten it all wrong, and we both knew it. He was trying to lighten the mood, to pull me back to the surface because he sensed I was sinking too deep. He'd always been good at reading me.

"It wasn't my sex-kitten moves," I quipped dryly, managing a small smirk. "This is part of our deal, Peyton. He'll bring Eva to me, or me to her, but it's contingent on us having a whole engagement ceremony. It's all... transactional."

Melody sighed, running a hand through her long hair. "A deal... Of course, it is. That makes more sense."

"That still doesn't sit right, El. You deserve better than being part of some arrangement," Peyton argued .

“Better?” I scoffed, shaking my head. “This is what I’ve got, Pey. If it means getting Eva back, I’ll do it. We knew he wouldn’t be doing this out of pure kindness from the start.”

Melody sat down beside me; her eyes filled with concern. “El, if it’s too much... if you want out...”

I shook my head, more resolute than I actually felt. “No,” I said quietly but firmly. “We agreed he was my best shot at finding Eva, and he’s promised to bring us back together. Even if I wanted to run, where would I go that he wouldn’t follow? And what would he do to the people who helped me try to leave?”

The weight of my own words pressed on my chest. Mateo wasn’t a man you escaped from; he was a man you survived. “I have to see this through. I don’t have another choice.”

Peyton, who had started pacing, finally stopped, a mix of frustration and understanding in his expression .

“Ya know, that twisted bastard may be a lot of things, but he does keep his word. Some underground honor code or whatever. Which, honestly, I can’t believe is a thing considering what these people get up to.”

Melody shook her head. “Yeah, but that ‘honor code’ is soaked in blood, El. You’re in so deep already.”

“I know,” I whispered, the enormity of the situation sinking in. “But like I said, I don’t have a choice.”

Melody softened, resting her hand on my arm. “Then we’ll be with you the whole way, no matter how dangerous this gets. But you have to promise us you won’t shut

us out.”

I blinked back a surge of emotion, swallowing hard as I looked between the two people who had stood by me through everything, even miles apart. “I won’t,” I managed to say, my voice hoarse, knowing it was another lie. There was something less dangerous I could offer up, though .

“We need to figure out why he’s helping me. I get the whole value thing, but there has to be more to it than that.”

Peyton gave me a lopsided smile, trying to lighten the mood. “Okay. We can add that to figuring out how to navigate this ‘engaged to a crime boss’ thing without getting ourselves killed.”

Melody let out a short, humorless laugh. “It’s going to take more than navigating. We’re going to need a damn survival guide.”

I gave a weak chuckle. “How did you two get brought here, anyway?”

“Oh, I was walking through my living room adjusting some morning wood and nearly had a heart attack because he sent people to my doorstep like I owed him a debt, but then he mentioned it was to celebrate your engagement and my ass damn near levitated to get here.”

“I just got a text from a random number and then shortly after a car arrived,” Melody added, giving Peyton a bemused look .

I shook my head, trying to make sense of Mateo’s angle, rubbing the back of my neck. “I haven’t spoken to my uncle or grandmother since last night. They aren’t aware of this yet.”

Peyton crossed his arms and looked thoughtful for a moment. "Honestly, it's better to wait before telling your uncle. You know how he is. He'll probably have a meltdown," he said bluntly. "He's a controlling scumbag. If you tell him now, he'll try to get in the middle of this—and that won't end well for anyone."

I frowned, nodding slightly. "Yeah, I'm not exactly eager to tell him anything. But what about my grandmother?"

"Your grandmother's been through hell, Elena. Maybe it's better to wait until things are more settled before telling her too."

"It's one and the same, really," Peyton pointed out. "Once you tell her, she'll spill to your uncle."

"Yeah, that tracks." I sighed, glancing around the boutique .

"Eva used to shop here," I murmured, a wave of bittersweet nostalgia washing over me.

"I never saw much of her," Melody admitted. "She ran in different circles and knew I was your best friend—same with Peyton."

Peyton nodded, his expression darkening. "She avoided us. And let's be real, I wasn't exactly nice to her. I told her she had no idea what the fuck she was doing and that she'd end up getting involved with the wrong people."

"Well, that's exactly what happened." The reminder of how everything had spiraled out of control hit me hard. I looked around, taking in the racks of expensive clothing surrounding us. "I suppose it's time to find something to wear."

Melody gave me a brighter smile. "We'll be right there with you. Let's get you into

something that makes you feel like you can handle tonight, whatever it brings,” she said, her tone reassuring but tinged with the seriousness of the situation .

Peyton agreed. “Might as well make sure you look good while we all try not to piss off the king of the underground.”

I managed a weak laugh, appreciating their support more than I could express. I needed to get through tonight, one step at a time.

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The sun was setting when we departed. We'd spent the day at the boutique, leaving only for a light brunch that Mateo had arranged for us. The car glided smoothly down the street, the same luxury sedan that had dropped me off earlier. Now, it was taking us to the next step in this whirlwind of events.

I sat in the backseat, dressed to perfection, every inch of me groomed and polished to a level I had never experienced before. My hair felt like silk, straightened and styled to perfection. My nails were a neutral shade, perfectly manicured, and my makeup was flawless—smoky eyes that made my gaze look sultry, with just the right amount of contouring to accentuate my cheekbones. My lips were painted in a soft, natural pink that added a hint of color without being too bold. I barely recognized myself.

Thank God for Isabella hiding the marks on my body without uttering a word. The boutique had doubled as an all-in-one beauty treatment center, and I had undergone a transformation I hadn't expected. Peyton and Melody had received the same, though theirs was less extensive—they were used to this level of care, while for me, it was all new. I couldn't help but feel like a factory doll, perfectly prepped and ready to be carted off to her new owner.

As the car continued its journey, I glanced at the driver, his face impassive, his attention solely on the road. I knew without a doubt that he would be relaying everything back to Mateo. I pulled out my phone from the clutch I had been carrying since the night before, pretending to text as I deliberated on my next move. With careful movements, I typed out a message and discreetly showed it to Melody, asking for her help with birth control and a morning-after pill. Mateo hadn't used a condom the night before or this morning and I had lost track of how many times he came in me. I wasn't remotely ready to be a mother—now or ever.

Melody glanced at the phone, her expression unchanging, and then smoothly commented. “That sounds good, just remember to pace yourself tonight. You don’t want to get too caught wasted. And stick with us—we’ll keep an eye on you.”

Peyton nodded in agreement. “And don’t let anyone corner you alone. If you need to step away, take one of us with you. We’ll be your buffer. Not that your new fiancé would allow anyone within breathing distance.”

That wasn’t even a legitimate concern of mine, but I hadn’t told them about the gift Mateo had sent me. I was still trying to process that on my own and how I’d discarded it. Mateo hadn’t asked where it was either. Thinking about it, that was odd. I smoothed my hands over the fabric of my dress, trying to keep my nerves at bay .

Peyton reached over and took one of my hands in his, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “You’ll be okay, El. Remember we’re here too.”

“And you look divine ,” Mel added in an upbeat tone.

“So do you,” I shot back.

She looked like an absolute bombshell. Her dress was a deep, rich burgundy that clung to her curves in all the right places, an off-the-shoulder number that accentuated her neckline and flawless shoulders. Her dark hair was styled in loose waves that cascaded down her back, and her makeup was perfection—bold red lips, dramatic eyeliner, and just the right amount of highlighter to give her a glow that seemed almost ethereal. She looked like she had just stepped out of a high-fashion magazine. Then again, Melody was the kind of woman who could turn heads the moment she walked into a room--regardless of what she had on .

Peyton was dressed in a tailored suit that fit him like a glove, his shirt open at the collar just enough to give off a relaxed yet polished vibe.

“So, what do you guys know about where we’re going?”

“We’ve never been. To get in requires a decent amount of cash and a ticket of some kind that doubles as a reservation, and even that doesn’t get you in the door. But I have heard about it, of course.” He leaned back slightly. “Encore is one of those places where the elite go to forget their problems and flaunt their wealth. It’s flashy, exclusive, and expensive as hell.”

“I was told the whole place feels like something out of a dream.” Melody chimed in; her expression thoughtful.

Peyton laughed. “Or a nightmare, depending on how you look at it. ”

"Thanks for that," I joked, trying to keep the mood light despite the nerves twisting in my stomach.

His comment about nightmares felt a little too close to the truth. When we arrived at Encore, however, it was nothing like what I had started imagining. The building was sleek and modern, bathed in a red glow that made it look almost ominous against the darkening sky. Behind it, a high rise with the name Encore Suites. Both sat atop a large hill, isolated from the rest of the city. Men were stationed at the entrance, taking what looked like tickets, just as Peyton had mentioned. Their guns were visible on their hips.

Luxury cars were split into two lines, each waiting to be admitted. Our car passed without being stopped, the men waving us through and signaling for others to move aside. As we approached the entrance, Peyton’s eyes widened. "Holy shit," he murmured .

For him to say that meant it was truly impressive. I swallowed, taking in the sight of the men and women entering the club. They were all dressed impeccably—suits,

button-downs, and dresses that looked like they cost more than most people made in a year. The women were stunning, each one seeming to belong to this world in a way I couldn't imagine ever feeling.

The grandeur of the place, the armed men, the sea of impeccably dressed people—it was all overwhelming. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, my breath catching as I tried to keep my nerves in check. We bypassed the main entrance, the driver taking a turn that led us through a set of iron gates that slid open without a sound. As we circled around the building, I could feel the tension in the car rising. Melody and Peyton were both sitting a little straighter, their eyes darting around as they took in the surroundings .

The driver guided the car down a small ramp, leading us under the building. The change in lighting was immediate, a cooler, more subdued glow replacing the evening sunlight. We entered what was clearly a private parking garage, the polished floors gleaming under the soft lights embedded in the ceiling. A few luxury cars were already parked, each one as pristine and expensive as the last.

My anxiety flared up again, my fingers tightening around the clutch in my lap. The sight of those cars, each one probably costing more than I could ever dream of affording, only added to the overwhelming sense of being out of place. Melody noticed and shot me a reassuring look, but I could see the concern in her eyes.

Our ride came to a stop, and the driver turned off the engine. He didn't say anything, just waited for the signal to let us out. Two men in dark suits approached us and one opened the door closest to Melody .

“This way, please,” the other said, his voice smooth and professional as he gestured for us to enter the lift. As the doors slid shut behind us, the lift began to ascend, and the solid wall in front of us suddenly transformed into tempered glass.

The club's interior was nothing short of breathtaking. It was a world unto itself, where luxury met decadence in a perfect storm. The main area was bathed in moody, atmospheric lighting that highlighted the rich tones of deep purples, golds, and blacks that dominated the space. The floors were sleek and polished, reflecting the ambient lights that danced across them, giving the illusion of movement beneath your feet.

The seating arrangements were equally impressive, with plush velvet forming intimate alcoves for the elite clientele. Each area was surrounded by low tables with glass tops, lit softly from within .

Above the main floor, towering columns reached up to a high ceiling, where chandeliers hung like modern art installations. The abstract designs mimicked the sparkle of stars, casting a warm, inviting glow over the entire space.

One of the most striking features was the DJ booth, set within a large circular structure that resembled a portal to another world. The backdrop was an enormous, vivid screen displaying shifting images—clouds of red and black, a stormy sky that seemed to pulse with the beat of the music. Two sleek black panther statues flanked the booth, adding an almost primal edge to the sophisticated surroundings.

In another part of the club, there were private stages, each with a singular pole, where performers—draped in shimmering fabrics—moved with ethereal grace. The lights there were more intense, spotlighting the performers in an array of colors, making their movements even more mesmerizing .

We stepped out of the lift once the doors slid open to reveal a dimly lit hallway. The polished marble flooring reflected the soft glow from the potted trees wrapped in diamond lighting. It was quiet—too quiet—and the atmosphere held a weight that made my pulse quicken. At the end of the hall, a grand marble staircase spiraled upward, leading to two large, tinted glass doors. Without a word, the man in front of us stepped out, and we followed, our footsteps echoing softly against the marble.

“Look,” Melody whispered, nodding toward a darkened corner by the double doors. I blinked and focused, finally noticing the man I’d completely missed, blending seamlessly into the shadows. He was dressed in simple suit pants and a plain button-down, but there was nothing plain about the intensity in his stance.

My eyes drifted to the other corner, and, sure enough, another man was standing there, looking both bored and at full attention simultaneously .

As we approached, they turned their heads in unison, stepping forward in perfect sync to open the doors. The moment we stepped through, I realized how deliberately every part of this place was designed to impress, intimidate, or both. The room we entered was expansive and luxurious, with plush seating, elegant lighting, and an unmistakable air of exclusivity. It wasn’t just the opulence that struck me—it was the realization that this wasn’t just a nightclub. This was Mateo’s domain, a place where deals were made, and people were either valued or dismissed by a single word from him.

The walls were adorned with dark, textured wallpaper, and the dim lighting cast long shadows that accentuated the opulence of the space. Plush, oversized sofas in a deep, luxurious shade of black velvet were arranged around a sleek, low-slung coffee table made of polished onyx .

The air was thick with the scent of expensive cologne and the faint but unmistakable aroma of smoke, mingling together in a heady concoction that felt almost intoxicating. The ceiling was adorned with an abstract light fixture that looked like shattered glass caught mid-explosion, casting fractured beams of light across the room.

Shelves lined the walls, displaying an array of crystal decanters, each filled with rich, amber liquids that gleamed under the soft glow of the lights. In the center of the room, two women, topless and wearing only bunny-tailed thongs, moved in tandem

around a polished chrome pole, their movements synchronized and almost hypnotic. Another two women, fully clothed but just as striking, lounged on one of the sofas, their eyes occasionally drifting to the men surrounding them.

On the coffee table sat two diamond-encrusted platters of cocaine .

Some had clearly been indulged, as evidenced by the smudged remnants of a few piles. The scene was one of excess wealth, a clear indication that nothing was off-limits here. Despite the distractions, my eyes were drawn to a familiar pair that stood out—Mateo's. His gaze was locked onto mine, unwavering and intense, as if daring me to look away first. The corner of his mouth quirked up into a half-smile, a gesture that felt both reassuring and ominous at the same time.

He stood up and approached us, his presence commanding the room. He was dressed differently than earlier, looking like a GQ image come to life. His tailored suit was impeccable, every detail perfectly in place, and his hair was slicked back with precision. As he reached us, everything he had done to me earlier came flooding back.

"You look absolutely stunning," he murmured, taking my hand in his while leaning down to place a kiss on my cheek .

His hand felt like a brand, marking me as his in front of everyone. He then turned to greet Peyton and Melody; his tone was friendly but with an underlying authority that made it clear who was in charge. After exchanging pleasantries, he introduced us to the others in the room.

"This is my brother Elias and our cousin Sergio," Mateo said as I settled into the luxurious space. Elias grinned at us, the resemblance to Mateo uncanny. He had the same dark, brooding features, only with a slightly boyish charm. His clean-shaven face and lighter eyes gave him a softer look, but there was no mistaking the family

resemblance.

Sergio, on the other hand, was bulkier, with striking green eyes and a more rugged appearance. A lithe blonde was seated beside him, engaged in a game of bones with Elias.

“Ah, Elena, the beautiful new woman in my brother’s life,” Elias remarked, his grin widening. “I’ve been waiting to meet you. ”

I couldn’t bring myself to lie that I felt the same, and I could tell that was exactly the right response with him--none at all. There was a mischievous glint in his eyes, one that matched Mateo’s in a way that was both endearing and unsettling.

“Next, we have Teddy and Diablo,” Mateo continued.

Diablo looked like he could bench press tanks for fun, his muscles straining against his suit, while Teddy’s appearance lived up to his nickname—a bear of a man with long hair tied back, a soft yet dangerous air about him. Mateo’s final introduction was for a man who had been watching us with keen interest the second we stepped in. “And last but not least, my cousin, Angel.”

This man’s gaze was sharp, assessing, and I could immediately sense that he was just as dangerous as Mateo, if not more so. The name rang a bell—Angel Escuro .

He was the one who controlled Liberty City, another significant territory in the Escuro empire. His reputation preceded him, and the power he held was almost palpable. As Mateo continued speaking, introducing me to the people who seemed to orbit around him, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being introduced to something far more sinister than just a new circle of acquaintances.

Once he finished the introductions, he guided us further into the room, his hand still

firmly on the small of my back, a gesture that was both possessive and reassuring. The others returned to their conversations, but I could feel their eyes flicking toward us intermittently, assessing us— me —with the same intensity they seemed to apply to everything else in this world. I was seated on a plush sofa, Mateo settling in beside me with a casual confidence that only heightened my awareness of him .

My friends took seats nearby, and Peyton's eyes darted around the room, taking in the opulent surroundings.

Melody appeared more composed, though I could tell she was on high alert. Elias, with his boyish charm, leaned forward, an easy smile playing on his lips. "So, Elena," he began, his tone light but with an underlying sharpness, "what did you think of Mateo when you first met him? He's not exactly the warm and fuzzy type."

I hesitated, unsure how much to reveal in front of these strangers, who were clearly anything but harmless. My eyes flicked to Mateo, who was watching me closely, his expression unreadable.

"Well," I started carefully, "I didn't exactly know what to think at first. He's...intense." That was putting it mildly.

Elias chuckled, the sound rich and warm. "That's one way to put it. Don't worry, you get used to it. "

His words were light, but they were much too close to what Mateo had told me as I was bent over his table. It took everything in me not to react visibly.

Sergio, who had been quietly observing, joined in. "Intense is just the surface. There's a lot more to Mateo than meets the eye." His voice carried a deep timbre, the kind that demanded attention.

Peyton, sitting across from me, leaned back, his casual demeanor contrasting with the sharp glint in his eyes. “That sounds like a warning,” he commented, a hint of protectiveness in his tone that made my heart tighten. Leave it to him to go up against a room full of crime lords and their underman on my behalf.

Mateo’s hand squeezed mine gently, pulling my attention back to him. “Let’s not overwhelm her with too much all at once,” he said smoothly, his gaze holding mine .

“Tonight isn’t meant for an interrogation. Or to worry her friends.”

The subtle shift in his tone left no room for argument, and the others took the cue, turning the conversation toward lighter topics. As they spoke, I couldn’t help but feel like I was on display, a new piece in a game I barely understood. Every word and every glance seemed to carry layers of meaning, and I was painfully aware that this was only the beginning of my immersion into Mateo’s world. How the hell was I going to manage a large crowd of these people?

Drinks were served, and I found myself holding a glass of something onyx-colored that I didn’t recognize. I hesitated, glancing at Peyton and Melody, who were each holding similar glasses. Peyton caught my eye, giving me a small, reassuring nod as he sipped from his. Melody, ever composed, took a delicate sip before returning her attention to the room .

Seeing their confidence—or at least their outward show of it—I took a cautious sip. The liquid burned slightly as it went down, its warmth spreading through me and easing some of the tension coiled in my chest. Mateo leaned in close, his voice a low murmur meant only for me. “Relax, anjinho. You’re doing just fine.”

His words were meant to reassure me, but they only heightened my awareness of how precarious my situation was and that even here, he was watching me closely. I was surrounded by people who were dangerous in ways I couldn’t fully comprehend, all

of them bound by ties of blood and loyalty that I was now a part of, whether I wanted to be or not.

I offered a weak smile in response, not trusting myself to speak. The earlier events of the day—the proposal, the table incident, and how I’d come all over him—still weighed heavily on my mind .

Everything had happened so quickly, and now I was here, in the midst of his world, already playing a role I wasn’t ready for. Peyton, on the other hand, was still observing the room, his gaze occasionally returning to me with a protective edge that hadn’t been there before. As the night wore on, the conversations grew more animated, the atmosphere charged with a mix of companionship and something darker.

The two women at the pole continued their performance, their movements fluid and practiced, but to me, the scene felt more like a display of power than anything else. The others seemed relaxed, indulging in the party favors laid out before them, but there was always a sense of alertness, a readiness to shift from leisure to business at a moment’s notice.

Elias turned to Mateo with a grin, breaking the casual chatter. “So, what’s the plan for the evening, brother? ”

Mateo’s expression darkened slightly, though a smile still played on his lips. “Let’s just say tonight is about sealing the deal.” His gaze slid over to me, making it clear that the deal in question was far more than just a business arrangement.

I could feel Peyton and Melody’s eyes on me, both of them silently questioning what Mateo meant by that, but I wasn’t sure either. As more men in suits arrived, I was introduced to each one with a quick exchange of pleasantries. Their names blurred together in my mind, only a few standing out because I could sense they were

important--DeRosa, Barron, Caruso, and Thanatos.

The women on the pole were now completely nude, their movements a hypnotic blend of sensuality and detachment as they danced to the music thumping through overhead speakers. Another woman was draped across Angel's lap as he joined the other men--including Peyton--for a card game .

He wasn't paying her any attention. His gaze kept coming back to Melody, who sat beside me with a composed expression, speaking naturally, though I could see the tension in her eyes. It felt like we were there to be nothing more than beautiful trophies, left on display while the others' focus divided between the cards in their hands and the display of flesh across the room.

Feeling the buzz from the alcohol and the nagging worry at the back of my mind about missing my medicine, I told Melody I needed to move. She wordlessly followed my lead, and we wandered to the glass window that overlooked the club below, a world away from the opulence and danger that surrounded me.

"This isn't what I thought it would be," she said quietly.

"Me either, but I think that's a good thing."

"Oh, it is. "

I looked down at the club, still full of people dancing, drinking, and losing themselves in the night.

Many of them were aware of the empire their money was fueling. Mateo's brilliant laundering front was in full swing, every dollar spent on drinks and entertainment feeding into the dark machine that kept this world turning.

And then my thoughts turned to Eva.

My beautiful, reckless sister. She would have fit right in down there, laughing, drinking, helping to deplete the powder supply, and deciding which beautiful man she would take to bed that night. I missed her more than I thought I ever could. She'd only been gone for a moment, but it felt like a lifetime.

I found myself wishing for the oblivion that the people below were chasing. Anything to numb the pain of losing her, of being here, of the life I was now a part of. I took a deep breath, trying to steady the whirlwind of emotions swirling inside me .

"I'm right here with you, El," Melody said softly, as if sensing the direction of my thoughts.

"And I can't thank you enough." I turned back to face the room. The men were still engrossed in their game, the women still dancing, and Mateo... Mateo was watching me from across the room.

I faced the other way again and nudged Melody with my arm. "You know you have eyes on you?"

She scoffed loud enough that it carried over the music. "Yeah. That's a long story that requires at least four more glasses of liquor."

"Then it's a good thing we've got plenty," Mateo's voice came from behind us. His large hands landed on my waist, grounding me in the here and now. "Come with me," he murmured in my ear.

I glanced over my shoulder, meeting his gaze. "But what about Melody and Peyton?"

"They will be fine. Come. "

He released my waist, taking my hand instead, his thumb brushing over the ring he'd placed there not long ago. Without another word, he led me from the room, leaving the intoxicating mix of opulence and debauchery behind. We didn't take the lift. Instead, he turned a corner, approaching a solid, glossy door guarded by a man who quickly stepped aside to grant us access. We entered a private hallway, the noise of the club fading into the background, replaced by the soft hum of luxury.

Mateo guided me through a set of double doors, and I found myself in a room unlike anything I'd ever seen. Gold gleamed from every surface, from the countertops to the ceiling, the richness of the décor overwhelmed my senses. The space was a testament to extravagance, yet it was the view that truly captivated me—Vice City laid out in all its nighttime glory, framed by the massive windows .

“Sit,” Mateo instructed, his hand gesturing towards a plush couch that curved around a sleek black table. I hesitated, still absorbing my surroundings, before finally taking a seat. The couch was as soft as it looked, enveloping me in its luxurious embrace.

Mateo remained standing, his eyes locked on mine, a hint of something unreadable in his gaze. I waited, heart pounding, uncertain of what was to come next.

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Mateo remained standing, his eyes locked on mine, a hint of something unreadable in his gaze. I waited, heart pounding, uncertain of what was to come next. He moved away from me; his footsteps silent on the glossy floor as he headed toward a gold-trimmed bar. The sound of glass clinking softly against glass filled the space as he poured himself another drink, the amber liquid catching the light.

As he took a sip, he turned slightly, his gaze sharp and probing. “What did you show Melody on your phone earlier?”

His question caught me off guard. How did he know about that?

“Cameras in the car,” he answered my unspoken question, his tone as casual as if we were discussing the weather.

I swallowed, feeling a lump form in my throat. The truth wasn't going to do me any favors, but a lie would be worse. I knew that much .

“I... I asked her about getting some medication,” I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

Mateo's eyes darkened slightly, though his expression remained composed. He set his glass down with deliberate care, the soft clink echoing in the silence between us. He took a slow breath, his features betraying a hint of displeasure that sent a chill down my spine.

“Medication,” he repeated, his voice low and controlled. “May I ask why you felt the need to discuss such matters with someone other than the one responsible for your

wellbeing?"

I felt a flicker of anger. "She isn't someone, she's my best friend."

"Is she?" He swirled the ice in his glass. "What if she wasn't?"

"What?"

"Her and that boy. I'm beginning to wonder if I made the right decision by allowing them to stay close to you. "

His words hung in the air like a heavy fog, suffocating me as I struggled to comprehend their implications.

"You have no right to dictate every aspect of my life."

"Your life belongs to me now. I can do whatever I want with it."

I steadied myself, my hands trembling with a mix of fear and defiance. Mateo's gaze bore into me, unwavering and intense, as if assessing my every move. A flicker of something unreadable passed through his eyes before being replaced by a cold calculation.

"You seem to have forgotten our talk from this morning," Mateo said softly, his words laced with a dangerous edge. "I can make everything you hold dear disappear without uttering a word." His expression remained stoic, giving nothing away as he watched me closely. "You will have privilege beyond anything you can fathom," Mateo began slowly, his tone measured and deliberate. "But do not mistake it for freedom. Your choices are not yours alone to make anymore."

"I never asked for any of this," I retorted, my voice stronger now despite the

trembling in my hands. "I never wanted to be a part of your world."

Mateo's features remained impassive, but a glint of something unreadable flashed in his eyes before he masked it once more behind a veil of indifference. "Yet here you are," he remarked, his tone neutral. "Wearing the ring I slid on your finger. Wearing the marks I left on your skin like a pretty collar. Sitting in my suite with the view of the city you'll be staring at as I fuck you tonight."

I wanted to lash out, to resist, but what choices did I have? None that mattered, it seemed.

He took another sip of his drink. "Now why don't you tell me what you really asked her about? If you're feeling shy, I can get the answer out of her myself. Actually," he pretended to consider something. "Angel would love a go at your friend. I'm the only thing that's stopping him from making a whore of her."

I swallowed hard, my throat dry and my mind racing. That was a threat wrapped in a promise. The Bellucci's were a powerful family but against his? They would be wiped out entirely. "I..." I glanced away, then met his penetrating gaze. "I asked her about birth control."

His lips curved into a smile, revealing a hint of satisfaction at my admission. I realized then; that he'd somehow already known. "Ah, so you were hoping to outsmart me, were you?" he mused. "So our little chat this morning has already been forgotten."

"No—it hasn't."

He leaned back against the bar, the hint of a smile still playing on his lips. "Fortunately, I'm always one step ahead." He finished off his drink and then began to roll back his sleeves. "Stand up, anjinho."

Slowly, I pushed myself up from the plush couch, my body moving almost mechanically as I complied with Mateo's demand. He approached me with measured steps, his eyes moving over me from head to toe. "I really like you in this dress," he remarked, his voice laced with approval. "You're trembling," he observed, his voice low and smooth like velvet against my harsh nerves. "You try so hard to be brave, to keep your fears hidden, but they're betraying you." His fingers gripped my jaw and tilted my head back. "Your eyes tell me all I need to know, and fear has never looked more fucking beautiful." He captured my lips with a searing kiss, his mouth firm and insistent. I could taste the remnants of the drink he had been sipping.

When he finally released me, he trailed his fingers down my cheek, wiping away a tear that had escaped without my realization. "I'm going to enjoy tonight." He said softly, his voice a seductive rumble. "I'm going to enjoy every second of it." His thumb traced over my lower lip before he dropped his hand to my neck, using it to anchor me while he removed my dress. Not in a gentle way—he tore the lace apart.

"Mateo." I gasped at the unexpected roughness of his actions. "Wait."

"I've wanted to take this off you since you walked through the door." He let the torn dress slip to the floor, leaving me standing before him in nothing but a bra and G-string. His gaze traveled over my naked skin, taking in every curve and contour. I shivered under his scrutiny, my heart pounding wildly in my chest. "You're truly exquisite," he murmured, tracing the band of my strapless bra. He bit his lip, considering the garment for a moment. "I want to see all of you."

I swallowed, knowing where this was leading to—again. Judging by the look in his eyes, it was going to be rough. With a deep sense of trepidation, I reached behind my back and unhooked my bra, letting it fall to the floor alongside the dress. Now in nothing but my underwear and heels, I suppressed a shiver from the cool air.

"This too." He released my throat and pulled the side of my G-string, letting it snap

back against my skin. I whimpered at the sting, and eased it down my legs, kicking it away with a heel. He hummed in approval, cupping my breasts in his hands, and massaging them roughly. I winced at the sharp pain as his lips went to my neck. His teeth gently nipped at my skin, leaving another mark that would surely be visible in the morning. His breath was hot against my flesh, making the goosebumps rise on my exposed skin. His hands continued to work their magic on my breasts, his fingertips causing a shockwave of sensation that I couldn't control.

Without warning, he pushed me down onto the sofa, the sudden force catching me off guard. My breath hitched as I landed on the plush cushions. "Stay," he commanded softly. I remained where I was, my body tense and alert, my eyes locked onto his. He stepped away from me, his movements deliberate and measured, but his gaze never wavered from mine. It was as if he was testing me, waiting to see if I would dare to move, to challenge his control. He returned to the kitchen area and poured himself another drink, the sound sharp in the otherwise quiet room. He took a sip, his eyes still fixed on me, as if he was savoring both the taste of the liquor and the sight of me obediently waiting. "Spread your legs."

I hesitated for a moment, swallowing hard. I slowly did as he instructed. The cool air brushed against my bare skin, but his gaze kept me anchored to my place on the couch. "Good girl." He stared at my pussy, his expression unreadable. "Touch yourself."

I reached down, acutely aware of his scrutiny, feeling as though his gaze could pierce through me. With uncertainty, I began to rub gentle circles around clit, far beyond my comfort zone. He watched me intently, his eyes never leaving my hands.

"More," he commanded, his voice deep and authoritative. "Fuck your fingers, anjinho."

My heart pounding in my chest, I obeyed his command, thrusting my fingers deeper

into my wetness. I couldn't help but whimper softly as my fingers brushed against my sensitive spot, pleasure and fear mixing in a potent cocktail.

"Faster," he said, his voice low and commanding.

I increased the pace of my movements, my breath ragged as I struggled to maintain control. My eyes never left his, watching as he sipped his drink, his expression unreadable. It was as if he was watching a chess game, and I was just one of his pawns .

"So you do listen," he mused with a taunting smile. "Add another finger, I can see how wet you are."

I hesitated again, but I knew what I had to do. Gathering all my remaining strength, I slid another finger into my silky folds. A moan escaped my lips involuntarily, but I didn't want to lose control. I pushed my fingers deeper, feeling the wetness around them. My heart raced, my nipples hardened, and my breath grew shorter.

"There's a good girl," he said, his voice low and sultry. "Now, make yourself come."

At his command, I focused all my attention on my pleasure. I moved my fingers faster and more firmly, the sensation of them inside me driving me to the edge. The fear, the danger, and the power he held over me all added to the intensity of my arousal.

"Say my name," he commanded, his eyes locked onto mine .

I gasped in surprise at his demand, but I knew what he wanted. I clenched my eyes shut and whispered his name. "Mateo."

"Again," he ordered his voice like velvet.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to open my eyes and meet his gaze. I whispered his name once more, feeling a strange mix of pleasure and shame.

He leaned back slightly, his smirk growing wider. "Louder, anjinho," he commanded. "Scream it for me."

I couldn't believe I was doing this, but I knew he would make me do it. Inhaling sharply, I screamed his name at the top of my lungs, feeling the words vibrate in my chest. His eyes seemed to glow as he watched me. "Yes, that's it," he murmured, his voice filled with satisfaction. "Now, let go, anjinho."

I took a deep, shaking breath, feeling the familiar rush of pleasure and release building within me. As I focused on the sensation, I couldn't help but feel his eyes on me, watching my every move with a predatory hunger. But at the same time, there was something else there – something I couldn't quite put my finger on. Abruptly, I felt my body convulse as an intense orgasm washed over me. I let out a breathy cry, my head thrown back as the pleasure consumed me, my pussy gushing onto the sofa beneath me.

He was in front of me, moving without a sound. My eyes flew open as he pulled my hand from my pussy and grabbed hold of me by the throat, partially lifting me up to kiss me roughly. His lips were rough and possessed, consuming me in a way that left no room for air or thought. His other hand dropped to his slacks, making quick work of his belt. He lifted me further and turned me around, positioning me on the edge of the couch, using a knee to spread my legs wide apart. His palm forced my shoulders down. My chest felt compressed, and my heart pounded against my ribs. His hands gripped my hips as I tried to catch my breath, staring at the wall of glass that overlooked the city in the distance. I tried to gather my wits and focus on the rapidly approaching reality. I could see our reflection in the glass, the two of us staring back. He had a predatory look in his eyes, and I felt like prey. My heart was pounding in my chest, and my breathing was short and sharp.

He positioned himself behind me, his body hovering above mine. I could feel the heat radiating off of him, and the anticipation was almost unbearable. There were no sweet words or gentle caresses. He entered me with one thrust, burying himself as deep as he could go. I cried out from the roughness and the sheer size of him filling me completely. My hands clawed at the sofa cushions, grasping for purchase as he began to move within me.

He was brutal.

He fucked me with no holds barred.

The glass wall seemed to blur as our reflections danced wildly, each movement amplifying our animalistic desires. My head fell back, my mind hazy with the intensity of our encounter. I felt his hand wrap around my throat once more, a reminder of his dominance and the control he held over me. I moaned, unable to resist him even if I wanted to. My body shuddered with each thrust, my pussy clenching around him, begging for more. Suddenly, he pulled out, leaving me empty. In one fluid motion, he thrust into me again.

"So goddamn perfect." He slapped my ass, fucking me harder and without any mercy. His thrusts became more aggressive, more possessive.

"Too much," I gasped, my body aching under his relentless assault. I gripped the sofa cushions harder, my nails digging in, leaving marks.

"Too much?" He sneered, his voice low and dangerous. "You think this is too much? We're just getting started." He withdrew and grabbed me off the sofa by my throat, collaring me with his hand and walking me to the window. I was shoved against the glass, my breasts flattening against the cool surface. He leaned in close to my ear, his breath fanning against my skin. "You think you can resist me? You think you can deny me this?"

He hooked one of my legs over his forearm and then thrust back inside me, the height difference forcing me onto my tiptoes. I cried out in a mixture of pain and pleasure, my body struggling to adjust to the intensity of his invasion. He held me against the window and forced me to take every thick inch of him. It was rough, relentless, and completely unforgiving. My cries echoed through the room, a perfect soundtrack to the symphony of flesh slapping against flesh and the groans of lust that filled the air. I could feel my pussy dripping down my legs.

“Fuck. I need to be deeper.” He released my throat and turned me around, kissing me again. His tongue invaded my mouth with the same aggression and dominance as his thrusts. He lifted me up and carried me to the suite’s bedroom. He placed me on the bed and stepped back to remove his shirt, and then his slacks.

My eyes followed his every move, devouring the sight of his perfect, sculpted body. The way his muscles flexed and relaxed as he undressed himself was a sight to behold. It was a spectacle of raw masculinity. As soon as he was unclothed, he was reaching for me, dragging me to the very edge of the bed. He forced my hips to lift as he placed my legs on his shoulders. He was back inside me on my next breath, fucking me so hard I thought I was going to break apart. There was no relief from the pressure or how full I felt, he held me firmly in place. My hands clutched the sheets, my knuckles turning white with the force of my grip. I cried out his name and pleaded for him to stop, but he ignored my protests. It was as if he thrived on my pain, my resistance only fueling his desire to conquer me .

His rhythm became more unrelenting, his thrusts more brutal, as if he was trying to break me, to claim me completely. The room was filled with the sounds of our passion, and I found myself caught in a whirlwind of emotions. Part of me hated him for this, for the way he was taking me without care for my feelings. Another part had my pussy growing slick around him because of the way he was using me. There was nothing sentimental between us—just him wielding his power over me, and me being forced to take everything he gave.

His eyes locked onto mine, a mixture of lust and dominance in them. I felt powerless beneath him, my body responding to the brutal pounding he was giving me. My cries of pain and pleasure were muffled by my own moans as my body shook uncontrollably. I was going to come. I couldn't believe the intensity of the emotions coursing through me. I felt like I was on the edge of a precipice, about to tumble into an abyss of pure ecstasy. The man above me, with his rough, dominating demeanor, was driving me to the brink of insanity. I wasn't sure if I wanted to scream or beg him to stop.

“Look at us,” he demanded.

I glanced down at the sight of our bodies entwined, his cock thrusting deep within me, covered in juices and tinges of blood. There was no denying the intense pleasure I was feeling, despite the pain that accompanied it. There was something almost primal about the way we were connecting. He slipped my legs from his shoulders and hooked them over his forearms, allowing him to come closer and drive even deeper. I let out a gasp, feeling his dick hit a spot inside me that had my toes curling. I dug my nails into his shoulders, desperate to keep myself grounded, even as my body was careening toward a pleasure so intense it bordered on agony. His eyes never left mine, gauging my reactions, feeding off my desperation, and he moved his hips in time with my quickened breaths. The air around us crackled with electricity as the night grew darker outside. It briefly filtered through my mind this wasn't solely about pleasure for him. He was diligently studying me, observing every twitch, every flush, every gasp, to gain more control over me. It made the situation even more suffocating, knowing that even in the throes of passion, he maintained his dominance. I struggled to stifle my cries of pleasure-turned-pain, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing how thoroughly his assault was affecting me.

I could feel my body tightening, the sensation building, a world away from the pain I had been experiencing just moments ago. I could see the victory in his eyes, his triumph in this game of control. A small part of me wanted to reach out to him, to beg

him to stop, to make it easier, but another part of me wanted to keep playing this dangerous game. I wanted to see just how far he would push me, how far I could let him take me. My hands clawed at his back and shoulders, leaving deep marks that I knew would bruise in the morning. I squeezed my eyes shut, biting my lip to keep from crying out, but it was no use. A loud wail tore from my throat as I climaxed, my body shaking beneath him. He groaned; his own release imminent. He thrust once, twice, three times, each time hitting that spot deep within me that sent waves of pleasure cascading through me like a tidal wave.

He didn't waste any time pulling out of me. His lips crushed against mine and he maneuvered my body so that my head was where my pussy had been, the comforter beneath me drenched. "Suck," he commanded, his voice low and rough. I hesitated for a moment, my mind still reeling and my chest still heaving. I finally relented and opened my mouth to take him in. His length slid between my lips, and I could taste us mingled together – a salty, sweet concoction that made my stomach churn with a mixture of disgust and arousal. He wasn't hard anymore, but he was still long and thick. I had never done this before, never let anyone come in my mouth, but something about the power dynamic at play made me feel daring and defiant. I worked my lips over him, sucking and stroking, running my tongue over the veins and ridges while he moaned above me.

"Faster," he ordered calmly, his hands threading through my hair, guiding my movements. I obeyed, picking up speed, my jaw tightening as I struggled to keep up with the intensity of his reactions. His cock began hardening again, growing bigger than it already was. I coughed around him. He laughed and thrust deeper, groaning when I choked. "That's it, baby," he groaned, his voice laced with both satisfaction and harshness. My eyes were watering, turning him into a blur. He grew harder and abruptly pulled out of my mouth; the tip still wet from my efforts .

He looked down at me and cupped my face. "You're going to turn around now. I want your legs spread and your ass up."

My eyes widened. He wanted to keep going? "No, Mateo—."

"It wasn't a question." He flipped me onto my stomach and lifted my hips. I bit back a whimper as he spread my legs wider and positioned himself at my entrance. I felt the familiar pressure as he pushed inside me. I fisted the sheets and breathed through it, my pussy clenching around his cock. "You're so tight," he muttered, pulling my hips back and then forward again. His movements were slow and deliberate, the feeling of being filled with him overwhelming. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to process what was happening, but the sensations were too intense. He continued forcing me to meet his thrusts until I was doing it myself.

"That's it," he hissed, as his hands left my hips to grip my thighs, pulling me back against him. "You're taking it so good, anjinho." Each slap of his hips against my ass echoed through the room, a cacophony of flesh on flesh punctuating the air. My breaths were coming in ragged, moaned gasps.

His hands suddenly left my thighs, only to return to my hair and throat, grabbing and pulling me back against him until he was so deep in my pussy that I felt like I could feel him in my stomach. I cried out, a mix of pain and pleasure, my voice echoing through the room. "Harder," I begged, surprising myself. Mateo chuckled darkly at my plea. With a sudden, crushing force, he slammed into me, taking me to the very edge of my limits. My entire body shuddered, and I screamed into the sheets, reaching blindly for purchase. He was relentless, his every thrust punctuated by the sounds of our bodies colliding, a primal, carnal symphony. "Oh, God." I gasped and moaned, each movement sending shockwaves of pleasure and pain through my entire being .

My clit throbbed, desperate for attention, but Mateo's relentless pace seemed to be more focused on my discomfort than my arousal.

"Gods not here, baby," he rasped, his cock driving deep into me with each definitive

sweep. "It's just me and you, you and me, forever. And the only worshipping you'll be doing is for me."

His declaration sent shivers down my spine, and I suddenly felt a new kind of heat between my legs. My wetness grew, and I realized that I was close. So close. He pulled my hair tighter, making me wince in pain, but it only fueled my arousal further. He whispered dirty, forbidden things into my ear, savoring the way my body responded to his every command. He reached around and began caressing my clit with his slick fingers. At first, my body tensed at the unexpected touch, but then a shockwave of pleasure burst through me. Mateo's fingers moved in rhythm with his thrusts, hitting all the right spots, and sending my arousal into overdrive.

I couldn't help but moan, the sound reverberating through the room. My hips bucked against him, desperate for more. I came hard. "Oh, God," I cried out, my voice hoarse from the intensity of the experience. "Yes, please, yes."

Mateo's satisfied laugh echoed through the room as he continued his relentless rhythm. My body was on fire, trembling uncontrollably as I felt another orgasm building. This time, I didn't want it to stop, I wanted it to consume me, to take me to new heights. As he moved faster, I begged for more, each plea more desperate than the last.

"Please, harder, Mateo." My voice was hoarse, an echo of my desperate need. His response was to thrust even harder, each movement driving me closer and closer to the edge. The pleasure-pain mix was overwhelming, and I couldn't tell where one began and the other ended. He chuckled again, and without pulling out, flipped me so that I was on my back. "You want it harder, anjinho?"

"Yes, harder," I moaned, my voice filled with need.

He took advantage of my vulnerability and seized the opportunity to claim me fully.

Each thrust was harder, rougher than before, as he took what he wanted from me. The pain and pleasure coalesced into one all-consuming sensation, and I found myself lost in it. I clawed at his back, leaving red marks on his skin, but he didn't seem to mind. He was too caught up in our shared ecstasy to care. The room filled with the sounds of our bodies colliding and our ragged breaths, punctuated by the occasional slap of skin on skin. I didn't care who might hear us; I was lost in the moment. My eyes rolled back in my head as the intensity increased.

As Mateo continued to thrust, his eyes locked onto mine with a feral intensity that made my pussy clench even tighter. "That's it, anjinho," he growled, his accent thick and sexy. "Take it, let me feel you shatter around me."

I cried out, my body heating up with waves of pleasure. I felt the orgasm building deep inside me, threatening to consume me whole. I clawed at his slick back, needing to feel his skin against mine, to be closer to him.

Mateo's eyes never left mine, his gaze intense and filled with desire. He thrust harder, deeper, his movements rough and possessive. I felt myself slipping further and further into the abyss, each thrust drawing me closer to the edge. My moans became louder, and my body arched, begging for more.

"I'm going to come, Mateo," I gasped, my voice barely a whisper. "Please, don't stop, don't stop."

Mateo's smile grew wider, his eyes flashing with triumph. "let me hear you scream my name. "

I couldn't hold back any longer. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him closer, wanting him deeper. "Mateo!" I moaned his name, my voice echoing in the room as my orgasm finally hit me. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over me, and I clawed at his back, feeling him shudder as he thrust into me. Mateo's breath hitched,

his movements stuttering for just a moment before he regained control. His dark hair was disheveled, a light sweat trickling down his neck. His muscles tensed and flexed with each powerful thrust, his gaze piercing and intense. The scent of sex filled the air, mingling with the musky aroma of Mateo's cologne. He still had this air of calculated control as he moved inside me.

“Fuck,” he growled, “you feel so fucking good.”

I reached up to touch his face, to feel the heat of his skin beneath my fingers. “Mateo,” I whispered, my voice barely audible above the sound of our heavy breathing .

He growled, his eyes darkening as he thrust into me, his hips driving us both closer to the edge. “Say my name again,” he demanded, his voice rough and deep.

I did, and the sound of my voice seemed to push him closer. He leaned down, his mouth capturing mine in a searing kiss. He thrust into me with newfound urgency, his movements forceful as if he was trying to break something, to leave his mark on me. I thought he’d finish soon, but he kept going, fucking me until I felt boneless and could no longer string together a sentence or feel my legs. I asked him to stop, the word a weak plea as he continued making me come—the pleasure almost painful now. I surpassed being able to handle more but had no choice but to endure. I wanted to make him come, my body was screaming for a break. I let out a pained cry, my hands clutching tightly onto his shoulders in a desperate attempt to hold onto something, anything. My body was a mass of sensations—overwhelming and all-encompassing. It was like he was rewiring me, remapping my entire body and mind.

He braced himself with one hand beside my head and hooked my leg over his arm, fucking me at a new angle. “Touch yourself.”

“I-I can’t,” I rasped, the thought of coming again too much to bear.

“You will.”

I hesitated, but the intensity in his eyes urged me on. Gingerly, I brought my hand down between us, expelling a shaky breath when my fingertips skimmed over my clit.

My touch became more confident, my fingers moving in small, firm circles. I could feel the tightness in my core building, a heat spreading from my center outwards. I moaned softly, my eyes fluttering closed for a moment as the pleasure intensified.

"You're so fucking beautiful," he intoned. "Fuck, yes," he murmured, his grip on my thigh tightening. "I want to feel that pussy squeezing me. "

I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze again. My breath hitched, and I knew I was close. I quickened my pace, pleasure and need coursing through my veins. He matched my movements with a fierce intensity. "That's it," he praised.

"Oh God," I gasped, my mind hazy with pleasure. I could feel his eyes on me, the intensity of his gaze intensifying the sensations coursing through me. I pressed harder against myself, my breaths shallow and ragged. A shudder ran through me, and I squeezed my eyes shut, unable to take it anymore. He thrust harder, and I could feel him hitting that spot inside me, the one that sent me spiraling over the edge. A cry escaped my lips, my body trembling uncontrollably as another wave of pleasure washed over me.

“Goddamn, I’m going to come.” He thrust once, twice, his breath hitched and his eyes locked onto mine. A fierce intensity consumed his gaze, and I could feel him tensing. I whimpered, clutching the sheets as his movements became erratic, his hips pounding into me. He groaned, his body stiffened, and then he was coming. I felt it, a warm surge within me, and I let out a soft cry. I watched him, his mask slipping enough to reveal a look of bliss. Without a word, he lowered my leg and pulled out of

me. I exhaled slowly, my body still trembling. He looked down at me, still not speaking, his expression inscrutable once again. His hand softly caressed my cheek, brushing a lock of hair away from my face. It was a rare show of tenderness from him.

He withdrew and stood up, reaching down to pick me up as if I weighed nothing. I didn't have the energy to protest. I rested my head on his shoulder as he carried me to the bathroom. He set me down gently on the cold tile floor, and I shuffled over to the toilet, feeling weak and spent. I was grateful it was behind its own door. I doubted he would've given me the privacy to pee. As I relieved myself, I winced at how sore I was and looked between my legs. I saw a mixture of blood and fluids, and my labia felt raw and swollen. I wiped myself gingerly, trying to be as gentle as possible.

I heard the sound of the shower running and was suddenly desperate for the warm water, despite how exhausted I felt. I sat on the toilet for a moment, catching my breath, before I stood up and left the tiny room of peace. Mateo was waiting for me, the steamy air offering a welcome contrast to the chilly bathroom. He reached for my hand and led me into the large space. A sigh left my lips the second the multiple shower heads rained heated water down on me. I closed my eyes and savored the moment, the warm water massaging my sore muscles and the pulsing shower heads enveloping me in a cocoon of comfort. Mateo's strong arms wrap around me from behind, his hands gently caressing my hips. His breath was warm against my neck, and I could feel his heartbeat against my back .

"Are you alright?" he asked in a soft voice I didn't trust.

I wasn't remotely alright, but I was learning to compartmentalize. I nodded, trying to get lost in the sensations of the shower. "Yes, I'm fine. Just sore."

"You'll get used to it." He continued to hold me close, his grip comforting but also a silent reminder of his control. As the warm water continued to cascade down on us, I

felt a blend of pain and revulsion. I swallowed hard and closed my eyes again, leaning against him not for comfort, but because I was so fucking exhausted.

Mateo's hands slowly moved down towards my lower abdomen, tracing the delicate curve of my hips, and then dipping lower still. I tensed, unsure of what his next move would be, silently pleading for him to stop there. His fingers ghosted over my swollen labia, tracing the folds gently. A shiver ran through me, a mix of dread and submission. When he didn't take it any further, I had to suppress a sigh of relief.

I slowly began to relax, the warm water still showering down on us. I could feel his breath on the back of my neck, his strong hands still holding me close. The moment stretched on, suspended in time like a delicate bubble on the verge of bursting.

Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 6:25 am

The insistent buzzing of my phone pulled me from a deep, dreamless sleep. My hand fumbled over the sheets until I wrapped my fingers around the device. Groggily, I lifted my head, squinting at the screen. The floor-to-ceiling drapes were partially drawn, but not enough to block out the unexpected morning sun.

"Peyton," I murmured, my voice hoarse from sleep. My body ached in a way that reminded me of the intense night before, and I winced as I tried to clear my throat. "Hello?" I croaked out, the sound grating even to my own ears.

"Are you still in the suite?" His voice was sharp, tinged with an urgency that jolted me further awake.

"Yes," I managed, my heart beginning to race at the worry evident in his tone. "What's wrong?" I asked, my eyes darting over the multiple text messages and missed calls cluttering my notification screen.

"Meet me in the lobby, pronto," he said quickly, his words clipped and full of tension.

Before I could respond, the line went dead. I stared at the phone for a moment, the silence of the room settling around me like a heavy blanket. The events of the previous night were a blur, and I realized with a sinking feeling that I didn't remember falling asleep. The exhaustion had claimed me completely, leaving me vulnerable and exposed. With a deep breath, I shoved the blanket off my naked body, feeling the cool air of the luxury suite against my skin.

Mateo was gone, leaving no trace of his presence, as if the night before had been a vivid, erotic dream rather than reality. The extreme soreness in my muscles told me

otherwise. Pushing aside the lingering fog of sleep, I forced myself to focus. I had no idea what Peyton was so anxious about, but I knew better than to ignore it .

I searched the room, hoping to find some clothes, my mind racing with questions. The dress I'd worn last night was nowhere in sight, and I had a sinking feeling it had been ruined beyond repair.

With a frustrated sigh, I moved toward a large wardrobe on the far side of the suite. I hesitated for a moment before pulling open the doors, not sure what to expect. To my surprise, inside hung a single dress, emerald green with a tag still attached.

It was simple yet elegant, the kind of dress that seemed perfectly picked out for the day ahead. It was as if someone had known I'd need it—likely Mateo. I brushed my fingers over the soft fabric, feeling a wave of emotions I couldn't quite name.

With no other option, I slipped into the dress, grateful for its perfect fit. The fabric fell softly around me, the deep green complimenting my skin .

As I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, I hardly recognized the woman staring back. I rushed into the bathroom, my mind still spinning. Grabbing a brush, I quickly ran it through my hair before twisting it into a low bun at the nape of my neck. I didn't have time to do more, so I swished some mouthwash, feeling the cool burn as I tried to clear the lingering taste of sleep from my mouth.

Satisfied that I looked somewhat presentable, I hurried back into the main room, snatching my phone off the nightstand as I headed for the door. It was only as I stepped into the hallway that I realized I had no idea where the lobby was in this enormous building.

Panic flared up in my chest as I stood there, momentarily paralyzed. The suite had felt like a labyrinth last night, and in the light of day, it was no less confusing. I didn't have time to get lost—Peyton had sounded urgent, and I needed to find him .

I took a deep breath, trying to calm the frantic beating of my heart. "Think," I whispered to myself, scanning the hallway for any signs or clues. There had to be someone I could ask for directions, but the corridor was eerily silent, not a soul in sight.

Gritting my teeth, I decided to trust my instincts and headed in the direction I vaguely remembered coming from last night, hoping I wouldn't end up more lost than I already felt. I paused mid-step, suddenly realizing the direction I was heading would take me back to the nightclub, not the hotel lobby where Peyton would be waiting. I cursed under my breath, frustration and anxiety bubbling up as I turned on my heel, heading back down the empty hallway.

The silence of the corridor was unnerving, each of my footsteps echoing off the walls. As I rounded a corner, I faltered, surprised to see a man standing in front of three elevators. His posture was rigid, and the golden lapel on his uniform indicated he was staff.

Before I could open my mouth to ask for directions, he spoke. "This lift will take you down to the lobby," he said, his voice smooth and professional. With a small nod, he pressed a button, and the elevator doors slid open with a quiet chime.

"Thank you," I mumbled, ducking inside quickly. I glanced back at him as the doors began to close, but he remained still, his expression unreadable.

I knew this had something to do with Mateo—there was no other explanation for why I'd woken up alone or why I was being allowed to leave his suite so freely. My mind buzzed with a thousand thoughts as the elevator doors slid open, revealing a lavish lobby bathed in warm light.

Before I could fully step out, I was snagged by Melody and Peyton, their grips tight and their expressions strained. "What's going on?" I asked, trying to ignore the curious stares we were attracting from the hotel staff and guests.

“That’s a loaded question,” Melody replied, her voice low but firm, as she kept a hold on my hand.

Without any more explanation, they hurried me through the lobby and out of the hotel, emerging to the backside of the hill where both buildings sat. The parking lot was full, the luxury cars gleaming under the morning sun.

“We’re in spot 8,” Peyton announced, pulling out a key fob.

“Spot 8?” I echoed, confusion settling in as we approached the parking spot.

A sleek white luxury car sat waiting for us. It was pristine, the kind of car that screamed money and power.

“Whose car is this?” I asked, the unease in my voice growing .

“Your fiancé’s,” Peyton enunciated the word with a pointed look. “Hop in.”

At Melody’s urging, I slid into the front passenger seat, the cool leather beneath me doing little to calm my nerves. “Okay, now can someone please tell me what’s going on?”

Melody exchanged a glance with Peyton before asking, “Did something happen last night between you two?”

“Besides the obvious,” Peyton added, his tone dry but concerned.

I took a shaky breath, trying to find the right words. “He...was upset about me wanting birth control,” I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. As I said it aloud, the realization hit me like a freight train. I still hadn’t gotten any kind of morning-after contraception, and he had come inside me again, repeatedly, the night before.

“What the actual fuck?” Melody’s voice cut through my thoughts, sharp and filled with outrage. “That isn’t his decision. ”

“It’s screwed up, but for men like Mateo, yes it is,” Peyton interjected, running a hand through his hair, his frustration evident.

I noticed then that both of them were dressed in new clothes as well, but instead of the full glam I had seen them in last night, they were in refined, comfortable outfits—casual, but still expensive-looking.

“We were woken up by someone pounding on our room door,” Peyton continued, his voice strained. “They handed me this fob and instructed me to have you at Mr. Escuro's by eleven. I was told if I didn’t, he would have you brought to him by his own methods.”

He paused, then reached across the console and grabbed a manila folder off the dash. “Look at this.” He handed it to me.

With trembling hands, I flipped it open. My brow furrowed and my neck stiffened as I registered what I was looking at. It was a deed to my parents’ estate—with Mateo’s name on it .

Before I could even process that, another document joined it—a promissory note with a sum that made my head spin. My uncle's name was scrawled beneath it, clear as day.

“I don’t...what the fuck is going on?” My voice cracked as I flipped the folder shut, feeling the world tilting off its axis.

“This isn’t just about you,” Peyton said quietly. “It’s about everything—your family, your past, and whatever else Mateo’s planning. We’re in way deeper than we thought.”

I knew he would have an ulterior motive. There was no way Mateo would help me out of kindness, and there was even less reason for him to make me his wife. I voiced as much to Peyton and Melody as Peyton pulled out of the parking spot, the luxury car gliding effortlessly onto the road.

“But why didn’t he just take me with him on his own? Why involve you two?” I asked, my frustration bubbling to the surface. The more I thought about it, the less sense it made—unless there was something even more twisted going on.

Peyton glanced at me in the rearview mirror, his expression somber. “We’re already involved because we’re close to you. Yeah, he could’ve taken you with him whenever he left, but that isn’t how the Escuros work.”

Melody nodded, her gaze fixed out the window as if trying to process everything herself. “They don’t just control the person they’re targeting—they control everyone around them. It’s a power play, showing you that no matter what, he’s in charge. By involving us, he’s making sure you know how deep his influence goes.”

I slumped back in my seat, my mind racing. Peyton was right; Mateo could’ve just taken me, but he didn’t. He wanted to show me that I wasn’t just dealing with him—I was dealing with a family, a network, a world of power that extended far beyond anything I’d ever known .

And now, because of me, Peyton and Melody were caught in the middle of it too. The weight of the situation pressed down on me, the reality of what I’d gotten myself—and them—into sinking in deeper with every passing second.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out, the guilt twisting in my gut. The weight of everything that had happened, and everything that was to come, felt like it was pressing down on my chest. I knew I had dragged Peyton and Melody into something dangerous, and the thought of them getting hurt because of me was unbearable.

Peyton didn't miss a beat. He slammed his hand against the steering wheel, cursing under his breath. "Don't you dare apologize, El. Not again. You think I didn't know what I was signing up for when I agreed to help you? I'm not some naive kid. I knew the risks."

His tone was sharp, but there was something else there too—a fierce protectiveness that made my heart ache .

He glanced at me in the rearview mirror, his gaze softening just a fraction. "You're my friend. That means something to me. So cut the crap and stop apologizing."

Melody, sitting beside me, reached over and grabbed my hand, her touch a grounding force amidst the chaos swirling in my mind. "Peyton's right," she said, her voice steady but laced with concern. "We're in this together. We chose to be here with you, and we're not going anywhere. So don't even think about trying to shoulder all of this alone."

Peyton grunted in agreement, his focus back on the road, but his knuckles were still white against the steering wheel. "We've got your back, El. Just don't shut us out, okay?"

I nodded, swallowing the lump in my throat. The words I wanted to say—how much their support meant to me—got stuck somewhere between my heart and my mouth.

I flipped the folder open again and stared at the promissory note, the words blurring slightly as I tried to make sense of it all. My uncle's name was right there, bold and undeniable, alongside a sum of money that made my head spin. And then there was the date—two months before my aunt was killed and Eva went missing.

My stomach twisted into knots. "Why would Mateo have this? And what does it mean for the house? My parents' estate?" I asked, my voice laced with confusion and rising anxiety.

Peyton's grip on the steering wheel tightened, his knuckles whitening. "El, this note means your uncle owes Mateo a lot of money. And if the deed to the estate is in Mateo's name now, it means your uncle used it as collateral. Mateo owns your family home."

I blinked, trying to process the information. "But...why? Why would he do that? And why was this all set into motion two months before Aunt Molly was killed? Before Eva disappeared? "

Melody's eyes widened as she caught on to what I was implying. "Wait...you don't think..."

"Had I been looking at this all wrong?" I interrupted her, the pieces slowly starting to come together in a way I didn't want them to. "Did my uncle have something to do with Eva's disappearance?"

Peyton shook his head, but the uncertainty was clear in his eyes. "I don't know, El. But it's looking more and more like this isn't just about money. If your uncle was desperate enough to involve Mateo and gamble away the estate, who knows what else he might have done—or who he might have involved."

A cold dread settled over me as I considered the possibility. My uncle had always been controlling, but was it possible he was desperate enough to betray his own family to cover his tracks? To save his own skin?

"I need to find out what he knows," I murmured, my mind racing. "If he had anything to do with Eva's disappearance, I have to know. I can't just let this go."

Peyton glanced at me in the rearview mirror, his expression somber. "El, whatever you decide to do, we're with you. But you need to be careful. Mateo's not the only dangerous one in this mess."

I ran a hand over my face, trying to clear my mind. "I can't jump to conclusions. None of this explains Mateo's vested interest in me, especially if he already has the only thing of value my parents left behind."

Melody exchanged a glance with Peyton before speaking, her voice gentle but firm. "I agree to a fault, El. There are too many moving pieces right now, and we still don't know where your sister fits into all of this. But the house? That's not the most valuable thing your parents left behind."

I frowned, confusion knitting my brows together. "What do you mean? "

Melody leaned forward, her gaze locking with mine. "You and Eva. You two are the most valuable things your parents left behind."

The weight of her words hung in the air, pressing down on me. It was a truth I hadn't fully considered, but it made sense. If Mateo wanted something more than just the house, something that would tie me to him indefinitely, what better way than to involve me—and by extension, my sister—directly in his life?

Peyton nodded, his voice carrying the same gravity. "You're not just a pawn in this, El. You're a key player, whether you want to be or not. Mateo's interest in you isn't just about the estate. It's about control, influence, and maybe even more. He's not someone who does anything without a reason."

I swallowed hard, the implications of what they were saying settling in. Mateo wasn't just after material possessions—he was after control, and somehow, I had become central to his plans.

"But why?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "Why me? And why now?"

Melody shook her head. "That's what we need to figure out. But whatever the reason, it's clear that you and Eva are crucial to whatever game Mateo's playing. And that

means we need to tread carefully, especially if your uncle's involved in this too."

I leaned my head against the cool leather of the car seat, staring out the window as we drove through the heart of the city. The cityscape outside blurred, a neon jungle that never seemed to sleep. It was a place that thrived on excess, a playground for the rich and powerful. Towering skyscrapers, their facades glittering like gemstones, rose against the darkening sky. Below, the streets were alive with a sea of people and cars, a constant pulse of movement .

Bright neon signs flickered on every corner, offering everything from designer drugs to underground fights, as if the city itself was a living entity, breathing sin and temptation. It was a place where the lines between right and wrong blurred, where power was the ultimate currency, and where people like Mateo thrived. A place where my sister had been swallowed whole.

I sighed, the weight of it all pressing down on me as we moved deeper into the city. The vibrant colors, the relentless energy—it was all just a fa?ade, hiding the rot underneath. A place where people like Eva could disappear without a trace, where secrets were buried beneath layers of glitter and grime.

And ever present, like a shadow that clung to me, was the lingering feeling of Mateo—his hands rough on my body, the way he took complete dominion over it, claiming every inch of me as his own .

The memory of his touch sent shivers down my spine, a mix of fear and something else I didn't want to name.

His presence was inescapable, even now. It was as if he had left an indelible mark on me, something I couldn't scrub away no matter how hard I tried. His control extended far beyond the physical—it was mental, and emotional, a hold that gripped me tightly and refused to let go. The city outside might have been a vibrant, chaotic mess, but inside, my thoughts were consumed by him—the dangerous stranger who now knew

my body inside and out.

We reached Mateo's home all too soon .

The gates to his estate were already wide open when we arrived as if expecting us. As soon as Peyton's car made it through, the gates closed behind us with a large SUV that had been following us for some time pulling in right after.

“What the hell is that?” Melody leaned forward from the backseat, her voice tense with curiosity.

I hesitated before answering, “It's my... it's my car—or pieces of it.”

“Your car?!” Peyton exclaimed, his eyebrows shooting up. “Wow, babe, it was really rough over there.”

“Peyton,” Melody scolded, though there was a hint of amusement in her voice.

I managed a weak laugh, appreciating his attempt at levity, but it didn't last long. The sight before me was too surreal. My old PT Cruiser, or what was left of it, was stripped barren—door panels, seats, and even the steering console were gone .

It was the skeleton of a car, and I had no idea why or when Mateo had retrieved it. I had never thought I'd see it again.

To do this here, in plain view, was a statement. Men were still working on it, their expressions impassive as they went about their task.

Before Peyton could bring the car to a full stop, I had the door open. “Elena—” he started, but I cut him off.

“Stay in the car,” I demanded, grabbing the folder and stepping out, my heels clicking

against the pavement as I marched straight to the front door. Without knocking, I pushed it open and didn't bother to shut it behind me.

I headed straight toward Mateo's study, where I could hear voices. They all fell silent as the sound of my heels echoed down the hallway.

"Give me a moment," I heard Mateo say just as I reached the threshold .

Two younger men in suits exited the room as I entered, both giving me cursory once-overs before they disappeared down the hall.

"What the hell is going on?" I demanded, skipping all pleasantries.

Mateo's eyes roamed over me, a slow, deliberate appraisal that made my skin prickle with awareness. "Good morning to you, too," he replied, a hint of amusement in his tone. He leaned back slightly, his gaze never leaving mine. "You were supposed to sleep in. And you walked a little too fast for my liking. Clearly, I went too easy on you last night."

I shot him a glare, trying to ignore the heat creeping up my neck. "Why did you steal my car?" I demanded, my frustration bubbling to the surface.

Mateo laughed, a real, genuine laugh that caught me off guard. "Stole? More like recycled. I did something good for the environment. "

I snapped, "That wasn't your decision to make."

He grinned, completely unfazed by my anger. "Don't tell me you were attached to it. Elena, you will be my wife. I would sooner cut off your legs so driving wasn't an option than allow you to drive that disappointment to engineers."

"Do you hear yourself talk?" I snapped, disbelief and anger warring within me.

Mateo's grin widened, unfazed. "No, but I've been told I have a lovely voice."

Mateo's grin faded slightly, though the amusement in his eyes remained. "Shut the door so we can talk properly," he instructed.

Without hesitation, I turned and kicked it shut with the heel of the wedges he'd left for me. The sound echoed in the room as I faced him again.

He laughed lowly, his gaze lingering on me. "I like this side of you, very cute. "

He circled behind his desk, opening a drawer with deliberate ease. From it, he removed a woman's bag that made my breath catch. It was black and crocheted, adorned with various pins. Eva's bag. I hadn't realized she still had it.

Mateo dumped the contents onto the desk without a second thought. Condoms, lipstick, lotion, feminine wipes, blood-tinged cash, and a small black book spilled out in a chaotic mess.

"Where—where did you get that?" My voice was shaky, my mind reeling.

"So you recognize it?" His tone was casual as if we were discussing something trivial.

I stared at the bag, my heart pounding. "That's Eva's... But where did you find it?"

Mateo picked up the small black book, turning it over in his hands before circling back around the desk. He leaned against the front of it, his gaze fixed on me. "Do you know how many people died because of this? My men have been searching for it for months."

"I don't even know what that is. What the hell does that have to do with your name on my father's estate and my car being torn apart?" My voice was louder now, panic

creeping in.

“Well, it was found in your car. Under the passenger seat,” he said smoothly, watching my reaction closely.

I froze. She hadn’t put that there. “I’ve never seen that before. Just the bag.”

“Don’t you think I already know that? Give me some credit,” Mateo's voice was calm, yet edged with a certain gravity. He held up the small black book, his gaze piercing. "The issue is this little book? It’s caused more problems than you could ever imagine."

“I don’t understand,” I replied, confusion tightening in my chest.

“The book was in your sister's bag, in your car. Why would she frame you?” he asked, his tone probing as if trying to dig deeper into a truth I couldn’t see.

Anger flared up inside me, sudden and hot. Eva may have been many things, but she would never use me as a scapegoat. I refused to even entertain the thought. “Eva would never do that to me,” I snapped, my voice firm. “I don’t know what’s going on or what the fuck you’re playing at, but I want nothing to do with it. Or this.” I tossed the folder toward him. It fluttered open as it fell to the floor, the papers scattering across the polished surface.

Mateo clicked his teeth at me, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Your father would be so very disappointed to hear that," he remarked, the words cutting deeper than I expected. And he knew it.

I swallowed hard; my throat suddenly dry. That comment had more of an effect on me than it should have, and he could see it in the way my resolve faltered for a moment .

"Does that bother you, Elena?" he asked, his voice almost a purr. "Letting your pai down?" The way he said the word in Portuguese made it feel more intimate and more personal. He sighed, glancing down at the scattered papers. "I'll help you with those daddy issues. Along with finding your sister."

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to hold his gaze. "I don't have daddy issues," I said firmly, the words tasting bitter on my tongue. It was a lie, and we both knew it, but I wasn't about to hand him that power over me. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing just how deep that wound ran.

I had been a daddy's girl through and through—he was my hero, the one person I thought would always be there for us. When he sent us away with a promise of coming for us soon, I believed him. Then came the radio silence and eventually, the night Aunt Molly broke down in the kitchen with me when I learned he and my mother were dead .

Now that I was older, I understood that fear had driven him. Our father never would've ripped our family apart unless he was trying to protect us from something far bigger than we could have understood. The why still haunted me—what had he been so scared of that he felt he couldn't protect his own daughters? What could make him sever our bond so completely?

That unanswered question gnawed at me, resurfacing in moments like this when Mateo's words cut through my defenses. He didn't know the half of it, didn't know the pain of losing a father without ever really losing him. But it didn't matter now. My father was gone, and whatever he had been afraid of, Mateo was now part of that shadow.

His eyes gleamed with amusement like he could see straight through me, peeling away every layer I tried to protect. A small smile was on his lips, but he didn't push the issue. He didn't need to. He had already made his point .

The fact that I had denied it only confirmed what he already suspected. I regretted charging in the way I did, letting my emotions take control when I needed to be logical. Mateo's words undoubtedly held a hint of truth, but now I was left with more questions than answers.

"All I want is to find my sister," I said, my voice betraying the exhaustion and desperation I felt.

Mateo circled back around his desk with calm, deliberate movements. He dropped the small black book back into the drawer and retrieved a small velvet box. After locking the book away, he approached me, holding the box as if it were something precious.

"She's in the city," Mateo said, his voice smooth and almost comforting. "In fact, she's much closer than you can imagine."

My heart skipped a beat at his words, my breath catching in my throat. A mix of hope and fear surged within me .

I wanted to believe him, to hold onto the idea that Eva was within reach, but the fear of being manipulated, of this all being part of Mateo's game, kept me from fully embracing it.

My eyes flicked from the velvet box in his hand to his face, searching for any sign of deception, but his expression was unreadable. The possibility that Eva was so close, after all this time, was almost too much to process. It felt like the ground beneath me had shifted, leaving me unsteady and unsure of what to do next.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice trembling slightly. "Where is she?"

"Now, that's not how this works. I promised to help you find your sister in return for you being my wife in every way possible. And now, we've got a few more kinks to work out."

"You can't just change our agreement!" I snapped, my voice trembling with anger .

"Oh, my beautiful girl," Mateo said softly, a dangerous edge to his voice as he stepped closer, "I can do whatever the fuck I want so long as I keep my word."

"But you know where she is," I protested, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. "You aren't helping me find her."

"Of course, I am." He loomed over me, forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. His hand reached out, brushing against my cheek with a possessive tenderness that sent a shiver down my spine. "I'll be the only one telling you how to find her." His fingers trailed down, sending an electric current through my skin. "I've known where Eva was long before your uncle approached and asked me to fund her charade of a funeral."

That hit me like a punch to the gut. It explained why he had been there, why he seemed to know so much. He'd funded the entire thing. Why hadn't I considered that before ?

My family was living off hail-marys, or so I thought. They were only sustained because of Mateo's money. But why? Why had he offered? It was all too much to process at the moment.

Mateo circled around me, his presence suffocating. He gently draped my hair over one shoulder, his touch sending another involuntary shiver down my spine. I heard the lid of the box snap open behind me, and a moment later, I felt something cool and delicate against my neck.

He clasped the necklace in place, the chain settling on my skin. I glanced down, catching sight of the pendant—a small, intricately designed card, the Queen of Diamonds, encrusted with tiny diamonds that caught the light and matched the engagement ring weighing heavily on my finger, creating a set that felt as much like a

shackle as it did jewelry.

“What is this?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper as I stared down at the pendant resting against my collarbone .

“Tradition,” Mateo replied, his lips brushing the back of my neck in a lingering kiss that sent a wave of heat through my body. Before I could react, he turned me around to face him, his eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that made it hard to breathe. He placed one hand on the small of my back, pulling me just close enough to feel his warmth but not close enough to touch.

“Tradition?” I echoed, trying to steady my racing heart.

“Yes, tradition,” he said softly, his thumb tracing small circles against my spine. “In my family, we give this to the woman who is to be our queen, our partner. The Queen of Diamonds is a symbol—a promise if you will.”

“A promise of what?” I asked, struggling to maintain some semblance of control under the weight of his gaze.

He smiled, but there was something almost sinister behind it. "That's for you to find out," he murmured, his voice low and intimate as he cupped my jaw and brought his lips to mine. The kiss was possessive, a reminder of the control he held over me, and for a moment, I couldn't think of anything else but the feel of his mouth against mine.

When he finally pulled away, leaving me breathless and disoriented, he spoke again. "I've left something for you on my desk. I'm sure it will help you feel closer to your sister," he said, his tone casual as if he were mentioning something as mundane as a grocery list. Then, dropping his hand from my face, he took a step back, letting me go.

"I have to go now," he continued, his eyes never leaving mine. "When you're done,

have your friends come in and join you for breakfast. I'll be back by lunch."

And with that, he turned and walked out of the room, leaving me standing there, reeling from the whirlwind of emotions and the weight of the necklace now hanging around my neck .

My gaze drifted to his desk, curiosity, and dread battling for dominance as I wondered what he could have possibly left for me that would bring me closer to my sister.

Whatever it was, I knew it wasn't going to bring any comfort. I fingered the necklace Mateo had just placed around my neck, the weight of it heavy, both physically and emotionally. The cold metal pressed against my skin, a constant reminder of the chains that were tightening around me. His control, his presence—it was all-consuming, and I could feel it with every step I took toward the desk.

I tried to block out the scattered remnants of Eva's life that lay strewn across the polished wood. Lipstick, lotion, blood-stained cash—each item was a piece of her that I had lost long before she went missing. My focus was on the bag itself, the last tangible connection to my sister, not on the grim evidence of what she had been involved in .

As I lifted the bag, a wave of her favorite perfume enveloped me. It was so strong, so achingly familiar, that for a moment, I could almost pretend she was there with me. I could hear her voice, her laughter—see her eyes sparkling with mischief as she shared some secret. The scent was like a cruel reminder of what I had lost, of the sister I once knew, now reduced to this—an empty bag and a thousand unanswered questions.

I clenched my eyes shut, willing myself not to break down, not to give in to the overwhelming grief and anger that threatened to consume me. But when I opened them again, reality slammed into me with a force that took my breath away.

That's when I noticed it—a thin tablet lying face down on the desk, partially hidden beneath the other items.

It hadn't been visible before, or maybe I just hadn't seen it in my haste to reclaim some piece of Eva. But now, there it was, impossible to ignore, stark against the wood.

My hand trembled as I reached for it, my mind racing with possibilities, each one more terrifying than the last. What was on it? What had Mateo left for me? My heart pounded in my chest, the uncertainty gnawing at my resolve.

I didn't want to look. I didn't want to know. But I had no choice. Whatever was on that tablet, it was part of this twisted game Mateo was playing. And I was the unwilling participant, trapped in a web of secrets and lies.

With a deep breath, I picked it up, my fingers brushing over the smooth surface, dreading what I might find, but knowing I had to see. I had to know. Because even if it shattered me, even if it tore apart the last threads of hope I was clinging to, it was better than being left in the dark.

There was a passcode on the tablet, a small barrier between me and whatever truth Mateo wanted to reveal. My mind raced as I considered the possibilities. Since he had left it for me about Eva, I decided to try something personal, something that might link us together even in this twisted game—our birth year. I typed it in with trembling fingers, half-expecting it to be wrong, but the screen unlocked with a soft click.

The background was nothing special, just a basic preinstalled image that told me nothing. There were no apps visible, no clues as to what this tablet was hiding. Confused, I tapped on the browser, hoping it might offer some answers, but it wasn't connected to Wi-Fi. Another dead end.

That left one last place to check—images. My heart pounded as I opened the gallery,

a feeling of dread pooling in the pit of my stomach.

I took a deep breath, bracing myself for whatever I was about to see, and then I tapped the icon .

The first image filled the screen, and I felt the air leave my lungs in a rush. There she was—Eva, vibrant and alive, staring back at me through the screen. She looked just as I remembered, her smile wide and carefree, her eyes sparkling with the thrill of the city she had loved so much. My heart twisted painfully in my chest. For a moment, it was as if she was still here, still the sister I had lost long before she disappeared.

The next few images were more of the same—Eva with some girlfriends, laughing and posing for the camera. They were snapshots of her life; of the world she had chosen over the one we had shared. It was a world I had never fully understood, one that had ultimately taken her away from me.

Then I swiped to the next image, and my breath caught in my throat.

There, with his arm draped casually around Eva, was the man whose severed hand Mateo had sent me. His face was unmistakable, his eyes dark and unreadable as he stared into the camera, oblivious to the fate that awaited him. My sister stood beside him, her smile just as bright, completely unaware of the darkness that loomed around her.

I hesitated before swiping again, a cold dread settling over me. The images so far had been painful, but nothing I couldn't handle. But I knew Mateo—he wouldn't have left this tablet for me just to show me happy memories. There was something else, something I wasn't going to be ready for.

I closed my eyes for a moment, gathering the strength I needed to face whatever came next. When I opened them again, I swiped to the next image, steeling myself for the worst.

And then I saw it.

He looked like Mateo.

The resemblance was so striking that, for a split second, I thought it was him. My heart stuttered the idea that my sister had been with the same man who now claimed me as his own too much to comprehend.

But then, as I studied the image more closely, I noticed the subtle differences—the few silver hairs threading through the man's dark locks, the lines etched into his skin that spoke of years Mateo hadn't yet lived. And then there was the thick wedding band glinting on his finger, a stark contrast to the way those same fingers gripped Eva's naked hips with possessive intimacy.

I felt bile rise in my throat as I realized what I was looking at. Eva had taken this photo herself, capturing their reflection in a mirror on the ceiling of whatever fancy hotel room they were in. The entire scene was grotesque in its casualness, the way it turned something deeply private into something flaunted, something to be captured and kept. The reflection was almost artful, but it was nothing more than a twisted trophy of the life my sister had been living, a life I never truly knew .

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the image. It was disturbing in ways I didn't have the words to express, a sickening violation of everything I thought I understood about my sister. I had known she was wild, that she had embraced the chaos of the city in ways I never could, but this? This was different. This was dark and dangerous, a world far removed from the one we had grown up in.

The man in the picture, so eerily similar to Mateo, felt like a warning—a sign that my sister had been caught up in something far more sinister than I had ever imagined. And the fact that she had taken this photo herself, that she had been a willing participant in whatever was happening, made it all the more horrifying.

I hesitated, my finger hovering over the screen. Part of me wanted to stop, to throw the tablet away and pretend I had never seen any of this. But I knew I couldn't.

The next image was worse .

Eva was still there, but this time, her face was different—flushed and vulnerable, eyes half-closed in what looked like a mix of pleasure and pain. This man—whoever he was—had her pinned on a bed, his hand wrapped tightly around her throat, the other tangled in her hair. But that wasn't the bad part. I had been in a similar position just hours ago. No—the worst part was the reflection in a glass window that showed men watching.

I kept swiping, unable to stop myself even as the images became more vulgar and more explicit. Each photo painted a clearer picture of the life Eva had been living—one of dangerous liaisons and indulgence in the darkest corners of the city. Some of the men in the photos were faceless, their identities hidden by the angles of the shots or perhaps deliberately cropped out. But there were others—most of them—whose wedding rings gleamed in the low light, a silent testament to their infidelity .

It wasn't just one man; there were many. Mateo's father was in several of the images, his hands on Eva, his presence undeniable. But he wasn't the only one. There were other men, some of them two at once, their bodies intertwining with hers in ways that made my stomach turn. The gold bands on their fingers told me everything I needed to know about how Eva had financed her lifestyle—the expensive clothes, the luxury apartments, the nights spent in the city's most exclusive spots. She had found her way to thrive in this corrupt city, but at what cost?

I felt a strange mix of emotions—rage, sadness, disgust—but most of all, a deep, aching sorrow. This was the life my sister had chosen, or maybe it was the life she had been forced into. Either way, it had consumed her, swallowed her whole, leaving behind the girl I once knew in its wake.

Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, the images changed to videos. I hesitated, my finger hovering over the screen. The thumbnail showed Eva, her face partially obscured, her lips slightly parted as she stared into the camera. It was a look I didn't recognize, a combination of defiance and despair that twisted something deep inside me.

I knew I shouldn't, that whatever lay on the other side of that play button would only make things worse. But I couldn't stop myself. I had to see, had to understand what my sister had been through, even if it shattered the last illusions I held about her.

I tapped the screen, and the video began to play. For a moment, the screen was filled with nothing but darkness. Then the scene began to take shape—a dimly lit room, opulent and suffocating in its decadence. My sister, Eva, came into view, dressed in nothing but lingerie that left little to the imagination. She was perched on the edge of a bed, the camera angled in such a way that I could see the mirrored ceiling above her .

The reflection showed more than just her—it captured a man's silhouette moving towards her, the same man from the previous images, Mateo's father.

He reached out, his fingers brushing along her bare skin, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. The way he touched her, the way she leaned into him—it was like watching a predator close in on its prey. But the most disturbing part was the look on Eva's face. It wasn't fear, nor was it pleasure. It was resignation, a deadened acceptance of whatever was about to happen. As if she knew she was trapped in a life she could never escape, and this was just another moment in her endless cycle.

The video continued, the man's voice barely audible as he murmured something into her ear. Eva nodded, her expression changing to one of forced delight. My hands shook as I watched, and I had to fight the urge to throw the tablet across the room .

How could she have ended up like this? What had driven her to this point? Anger

surged through me, mingling with a deep, crushing guilt. I should have been there for her. I should have done something, anything, to stop this. Her moans poured from the tablet as she submitted to his every desire, riding him slowly. As the video progressed, it was evident that the man was growing increasingly rougher, his voice louder. Eva's cries grew less and less like pleasure and more like pain. The video ended abruptly. The screen went black, leaving me staring at my own reflection in the glass, pale and horrified with tears streaming down my face.

I didn't want to see it anymore.

My hands were trembling as I tried to exit the gallery, desperate to escape the horrors flashing on the screen. But in my clumsiness, I swiped to the next video, and it began to play automatically. I froze, a chill sweeping over me when I recognized the voice .

"No," I whispered, the word barely escaping my lips as dread clawed at my chest. "No, no, no..."

I didn't want to look, didn't want to see what was coming next. But I couldn't stop myself. My gaze was drawn to the screen as if it had a will of its own. And then I saw her—Eva's face turned towards the camera, her eyes wide with fear and pain. For the first time, she met my gaze through the lens, and the sheer desperation in her expression broke something inside me.

The man behind her—thrusting like an animal—our Uncle Luis.

Eva's cries grew louder, and I felt my heart shatter into a million pieces. I could hardly breathe, the air felt thick in my lungs.

How could he?

My world tilted. A wave of nausea crashed over me, so intense I thought I might actually throw up. My stomach churned violently, and the bile that had been rising in

my throat now threatened to spill over.

My entire body felt cold, my hands clammy as they gripped the tablet. I fumbled with the controls, struggling to find the right button to end this horror. Finally, I managed to pause the video, but it was too late. The damage was done. I sank into Mateo's office chair, the plush leather offering no comfort as I tried to steady myself. My mind raced, trying to make sense of the images I had just seen, of the horror that had unfolded before my eyes.

There was one man who controlled the sex trade in Vice City. The same man who had seen all of this and said nothing. One man who knew exactly where my sister was right now. The man who held all the power and had all the answers.

Mateo Escuro—my future husband.