

AALIYAH ROSE

A Dark Mafia Strong Woman Romance

Incognizant

DESIRES



Incognizant Desires

**Legitimate Reign Series Book 1 (A Dark Mafia
Strong Woman Romance)**

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Aaliyah Rose

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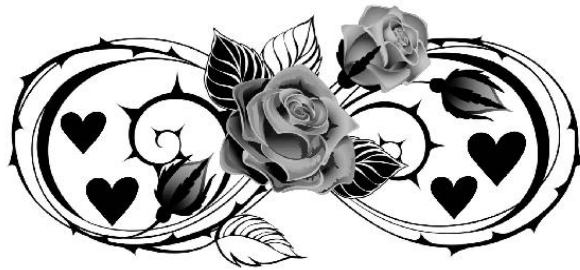
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Dedication



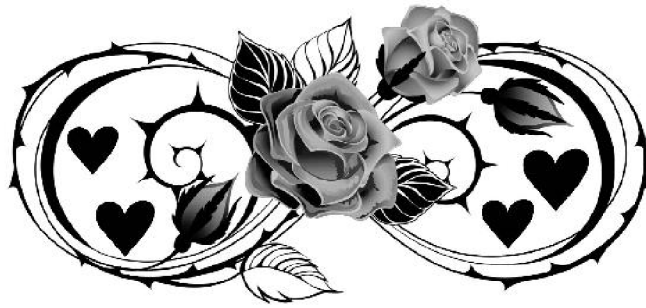
*I dedicate this book to my Illicit Reign fans who encouraged me to write
this series.*

Much love, and I hope you enjoy it.

xo

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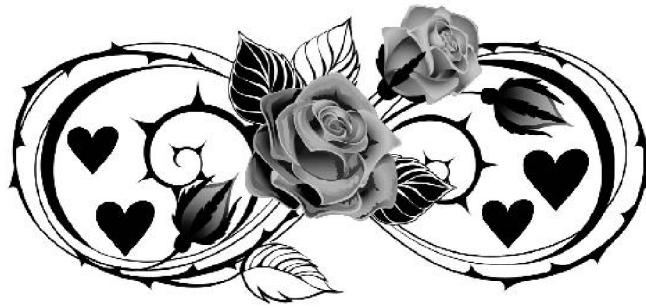
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Chapter One

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Catalina



The coffin was expensive. A deep red hardwood, polished, buffed and shined to perfection. So shiny, I could see myself reflected in the earthen wood. Ironic how something so new and refined housed something so dead, old, gone.

Today the coffin was closed, and for good reason. Apparently when they found his body, it was beyond recognizable. My uncle Darius had to identify him by his attire alone, and even then he didn't want to believe it. Fingerprinting later confirmed it was him, but even now I was still in denial. It couldn't be him.... My father.

I dabbed at my eyes, smirking at my so-called smudge proof mascara that was covering my linen handkerchief, as tears flowed anew. I idly wondered where on earth so many tears came from. Surely there would come a point where they would just dry up. No more tears. No more heartache. No more pain. Pain... I remembered when it all started.

It had been one of the sunniest, most beautifully radiant of days when I had received the news. I had been savoring my newest wine blend as I looked over the grapevines lining the hills before me. They looked fantastic, and the new crop would surely bring the enhanced taste our wine was looking for.

“Catalina Rivera-Flores, you’ve done it again! Perfecto!” I swirled the wine in my glass taking a final sip of the liquid that would be the next high-end wine, and admired the beautiful purple bottle I had designed. It would do excellently, and I couldn’t wait to see what the public thought. Although it was early, people were already starting to filter in, ready to partake in one of our many wine tasting tours and to dine at our famous countryside restaurant. It wouldn’t take long to find out the verdict.

My thoughts of an award-winning wine were interrupted when an envelope was handed to me. Taking it absent mindedly, I thanked the deliverer with a quick smile and tore open the envelope. It wasn't until I felt the smooth card and wax beneath my fingertips that I knew it was from my father. His expensive taste in stationary and penchant for the old ways of sealing his message with the family crest of a knight and shield, brought a smile to my lips. It was something we had done since my childhood, and I indulged his messages with sending wax-sealed ones of my own.

I placed my wine down on the banister and gently broke the wax seal, unfolding the letter. At first glance it was way longer than his usual quick snippets of what he was doing or asking what I was up to, but I giggled at his opening endearment of *mi changuito*, or *my little monkey*, a nickname he’d called me since I was a child. A deserved nickname, as I was always hanging onto him, especially after my mother’s death.

I frowned as I looked at the date in his perfect calligraphed writing. It was over a year ago, and if it was one thing he's not, it's disorganized. With his high-profile political career and many businesses, he managed to run it all like a well-oiled machine.

Very strange indeed.

* * * * *

To my precious Catalina, mi changuito,

I dread the day you must read this letter. You are my most treasured daughter and the only person I can trust. I hope that I don't lose it now once I confide in you what I really do. Please don't think poorly of me when you find out the truth and know that what I have done is out of love for you. To secure a future for you.

To that end, it has always been my wish for you to take on my empire. Keep our empire within the family and carry on our name for many generations to come. I know you are not one for politics and I would not wish for you to follow a path that is not true to your heart, but the other businesses I run are now yours to carry on. Already you have proven yourself an adept businesswoman, running several of our winery estates and leading our restaurant chains. I know you can handle the rest as well, especially with the team I have in place. They are loyal to the family.

I have all their details and my personal information, all my business records, dealings, partnerships, and associations hidden in our special spot. Only you will know where to find it.

For now, know that I love you with all my heart, and I sincerely hope that you find that special someone and live out the rest of your days in blissful

happiness. I wish I could be there to share it with you, but know I will be watching over you.

I will love you always.

Your loving father,

Mateo Rivera

xoxo

P.S. Where do ghosts go on vacation? The Boo-hamas.

P.P.S. I bet you thought I forgot the bad dad joke. I hope I always make you smile, even beyond the grave.

* * * * *

I chuckled, shaking my head. One thing was for sure, his jokes, as lame as they were, were actually getting funnier. I reached into the back pocket of my jeans and hit my father's number to call him.

What on earth was with the outdated letter? It sounded like he was going somewhere and getting sentimental about it. I waited patiently, taking a deep breath. As usual, it went straight through to voicemail. I waited for the beep.

"Papa, it's me, Cat. Can you please call me back when you get this. I just received a very strange letter from you. Okay, I love you. Bye."

I didn't know then that that voicemail recording would be the last time I would hear my father's voice. An hour later, I got the call from Uncle Darius that he was dead. And we didn't even know why.

I was dumbfounded. Numb. Random thoughts tumbling through my head.

This could not be happening. How could it have happened? It couldn't be real. Could it? No. No. It was all a mistake. A really big, huge mistake. And what did this mean? Murdered? How? Who? And why would anyone want to hurt my father?

My mind was running a million miles per hour as I stood in front of the coffin, clenching my hands into fists. My grief giving way to anger at the injustice of it all.

How could life be so unfair? My father didn't deserve this.

I stood in resolute silence, staring unseeing at the flowers adorning the lid as the throng of people filed passed me on their way out. Their small gestures of comfort and whispered condolences going unheard to my ears.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, but when I finally broke through the haze, I bent and kissed the cross upon the lid, placing my hand one last time longingly on my father's final resting place, and turned to leave.

"We'll find out who did this Catalina. If it's the last thing I do, it will be to bring the people responsible to justice."

I just nodded in silence at Uncle Darius, who looked just as mad as I felt. There was a look in his eye that I'd never seen before, and I knew he meant business.

"If there is anything I can do for you Catalina. Let me know." He held out his hands and I threw my arms around his waist, hugging him close. Throughout my whole life, Uncle Darius had always been there for me. I grew up with him always by my father's side and he was always gifting me with surprises as a young girl. I was glad for his support now and knowing he was still by my side, the only remaining immediate family member left.

"If you need some time, I can run your father's businesses if you like. I know them well, and it's of no bother. No one will think anything of it."

I released myself from his grasp, dabbing at my eyes again. Luckily my makeup had not left any smudges on my uncle's designer suit. Not that he would have cared.

I shook my head. "No. It's okay. Papá wanted me to take over. I want to do that. Make him proud."

He nodded, "Did he leave you any instructions? Tell you anything in particular?"

"Not really. He left me a strange letter, but it didn't say much. I'll figure things out."

"I'm sure you will. Have it your way." He smiled, "When did you stop being my playful *Kitty Cat*, and turn into a grown up?"

I smiled wanly, "Cat or not, I'll always need your help, Tío. You'll be there right? To help me run things? You're the only one I can trust. The family, what's left of us, needs to stick together."

"You don't even have to ask. I'm here for you always." He nodded up the aisle at the group of men patiently waiting, "I think that's our cue to leave. Ready?"

"I just need a moment."

"Okay, I'll see you at the burial." He gave my shoulder a final squeeze and walked up the aisle to join the others who were patiently waiting to carry what was left of my father through the cemetery to his final resting place. I turned back to the sleek coffin, placing a hand on it one more time.

"I love you papa. I'll see you in heaven. I'm going to make you proud."

With that, I picked up my black handbag from the seat beside me and slowly made my way up the aisle. I nodded at the group of men who were my father's closest friends.

"Thank you for waiting."

They nodded, murmuring their condolences as I stepped out into the adjoining vestibule to wait and follow the procession outside. From here I could see the external yard was already packed with throngs of people. My father's death had sent a shock wave through the city. He was a beloved politician and multi-millionaire who the people appreciated. He was a man of his word, and truly helped where he could, even if it meant dipping into his own pocket.

So why would anyone want to kill him?

Through the glass window I could see it was getting late, the setting sun casting long shadows through the swaying trees. The throng of people outside had begun to light their candles and the glow of their light danced across the thousands of brightly colored flowers they held aloft. In true Spanish tradition, it was time to celebrate his life as he was buried.

Taking a deep breath to steal myself before I joined the crowd, I turned, jumping slightly as I caught sight of a man in the shadows behind me. His face was half obscured by the dark, and the large hood he wore.

"H-hello. I'm sorry. I didn't see you there."

The man just stood there. Not saying a word. Watching me.

"I'm Catalina. Wh-Who are you?"

No response. My eyes darted around the room. I was acutely aware that we were alone.

"Are you a friend of my father's?"

He remained silent, unmoving. I started to feel my skin cover in goose bumps and my heart start to race. Something wasn't quite right here. I swallowed the rising lump in my throat, as he slowly shook his head in answer to my question.

I took an involuntary step back towards the doorway, my heart now racing as he moved towards me. I screamed, turning just in time to see the funeral home doors open and the coffin bearers emerge.

"Are you alright, Catalina?" Hugo, one of my father's men looked at me with concern.

Relief flowed through me at the sight of familiar faces, and I quickly looked over my shoulder in search of the stranger, but could see no one there.

"Y-yes, I'm fine. Thank you, Hugo. Shall we?" I indicated to the front door and the men proceeded to exit. I took one quick look behind me, frowning.

Where did he go?

Not wanting to find out, I quickly followed the others and lost myself in the crowd of people as they proceeded after the coffin, singing and swaying. As I moved through the throng of people, joining in the singing, I smiled at the adults and children who had come to celebrate my father. He was truly loved by many, and it warmed my heart to see it. It wasn't until we were nearly at the Rivera mausoleum that I caught sight of the hooded man off to one side. Standing still. Watching me as the crowd moved around him.

What a creep!

"It's okay, Catalina. It's okay." I whispered to myself. Feeling relatively safe amongst the other people, I stopped to get a better look. This time I could partially see his facial features in the flickering candlelight. His tanned skin, square jawline and piercing bright eyes seemed to see right through me. If I wasn't so spooked by him, I would have thought him an extremely attractive man.

I took a steadying breath, "Just keep walking, Catalina."

Slowly, I continued to walk amongst the people, watching him out of the corner of my eye. He followed at a distance, never once taking his eyes off me, until without warning he started striding in my direction, pushing his way through the many celebrating people between us.

The involuntary gasp that left my throat was swallowed up in the noise of the crowd, and my feet finally jumped into action, stumbling backwards. I looked in horror at the hooded man that was now only a few yards away and reaching out his arm to me. Screaming, I turned to get away, breaking through the people and staggering down a path between two rows of headstones. The cold granite loomed up around me on both sides, blocking out what little light the half-moon shed, making it hard to see. As I ran, I tried to look over my shoulder but could see only shadows.

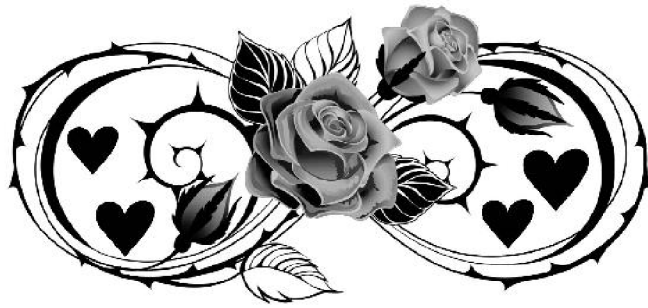
I screamed again as arms came out of nowhere and encircled my body. Hands stifling the screams from my mouth.

The last thing I remember was falling, pain shooting through my head, and seeing bright stars shoot across my eyes, before everything went black....

Chapter Two

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Luca



***J**ust when you thought this city couldn't get any worse, things get fucken worse.*

I looked out over the city of Los Angeles, drumming my fingers against the leather armchair, my other hand slowly swirling a glass of cognac. Thoughts of the current attacks on our real estate were making me more on edge than I'd like to admit, and it was the last thing I needed right now. The destruction of our properties, the raids on our warehouses, the missing stock and money, and the constant disappearances of our members were all problems that needed to be extinguished like a flaming bag of shit to be stomped out on a front doorstep.

We had started that stomping tonight, but as I watched the small plume of smoke in the distance rise into the morning air, I felt no sense of satisfaction. I rubbed the side of my temple with my fingertips, willing away the tension in my head as I felt the first vestiges of a migraine start to

throb. As if I wasn't dealing with enough already, another problem lay right beside me.

I looked down at the sleeping woman who had been in a coma for over two months. At first, I had thought she was a burden, taking up our valuable time, but the more time I spent with her, the more I realized she was just the respite I needed. She seemed so peaceful, so serene in her slumber, and I had come to find her silent breathing calming in a world that had so much chaos. Here was the only place I had time to think in complete silence, although sometimes I found myself distracted by her beauty. The more I looked upon her face, the more beautiful she had become.

I reached out a hand and ran it through the long black curly hair that framed her face. A face that had pale flawless skin and pink full lips that seemed to always have a hint of a smile. I brushed my thumb over them softly wondering if they would ever speak again, and what it would be like to kiss them.

Letting out a deep breath, I leaned back in my chair and admired her. How I wished that those long dark lashes of hers would flutter open. I wanted to see the color of her eyes, but I almost dreaded the day I would see them. No woman had ever captivated me so and I feared just one look from her, and I'd be in trouble.

"So does the doc say she'll wake up?"

I looked up, startled from my thoughts as Nico walked into the room and took a seat on the opposite side of the bed.

"Who knows. The doc says it could be anytime, or maybe never. His stance hasn't changed on that today I'm afraid." I frowned as I studied him, "You have a bit of something on your shoulder."

Nico looked down, disgust crossing his face. "Aww man, this is my favorite jacket. I told Atlas not to shoot the guy near me. Now I have *brains* on me."

I couldn't help chuckling, "Nico, for a man in your line of work, I would have thought blood would be second nature."

"It is," he grunted, "but I don't have to like it *on* me."

Laughing, I watched as Nico crossed the room to the ensuite and started dabbing at his jacket with a towel. He was like family. I'd known him most of my life and although not related, he was like a brother. Atlas too. I could trust them a hundred percent and we had no secrets from each other. We *usually* were on the same page, so leading our organization was easy. Between us, we handled all aspects of the business. Nico was our friendly hitman. I say friendly, as he always had that charm to talk people into anything, giving them a false sense of security... right before he blows their head off. Of course, despite if you cooperated or not, he'd still blow your head off. If he was sent for you, your fate was already sealed. You couldn't tell by looking at him, but he was as deadly as they came and he liked things taken care of quickly and *cleanly*.

He glared at me in the mirror as my chuckles subsided.

"Calm down, Nico. I take it all went well last night?" The destruction of one of our warehouses was near disastrous. Luckily we had found out it was no accident, and instead a bold attack by our rivals. A mafia that was led by someone called "The Phoenix". No one knew who this person was, but one thing was for sure, they were not on our side.

Nico, satisfied that his jacket wasn't ruined, returned to his seat.

"Of course. All went according to plan. Their drugs and money have been *redistributed*, their *accountant* is no longer, and as you can see," he waved

towards the window, "Their warehouse is now also destroyed."

"Good. Good." I idly wondered what retaliation we would endure next, even though we were only responding in kind. It was inevitable however, as the rivalry between the three mafias was fueled by years of grudges and betrayals, and it seemed that there would be no end in sight. Now with Mateo Rivera dead, the future was even more uncertain.

Nico sighed, staring at the unconscious woman. "Why are we even doing this?"

I rolled my eyes. We'd had this conversation many times already, and I was getting tired of repeating myself. For all our sakes I hoped she would wake up soon.

"Just follow orders, Nico." I stood up, stretching my tired limbs.

"Are you sure we can't hire someone for this. It feels so.... below my pay grade."

I raised a brow at him, scoffing. "Your pay grade? Last I checked you don't get paid. You've already got more money than you could ever want. No. This isn't about money. And no, only the three of us can watch her. We are the only ones who can be trusted until we know what happened."

"Okay, fine." He shrugged. "I just want to understand what we're doing here. I mean, what are we going to do when she wakes up?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we have to. For now, let's concentrate on the other issues at hand."

"What issues? I'll deal with 'em". Atlas strode into the room, covered in blood. In his current state he looked like the devil himself. He was a huge guy, and just as well since he was the family *muscle*, so to speak. He was as brutal as they come. He may seem a bit unhinged, a little bit psycho, but deep down he was a sensitive soul. What people didn't know was that his

traumatized childhood made him the way he was. Torturing or killing our enemies, *bad* people, was just his outlet as our enforcer. Unlike Nico who liked things taken care of quickly, efficiently, and as cleanly as possible, Atlas wasn't afraid to get up close and personal, and get his already bloodied hands even dirtier.

"Let's find out *who* we're dealing with first. Tell me you brought someone worthwhile who can shed light on this, *Phoenix*."

"Of course we did!" Atlas grinned. "Don't we always deliver?" He was right about that. Once Atlas had his sights on someone, he was as good as caught, no matter how fast or clever they seemed. He was like a hound with a bone. He nodded at Catalina. "How's our gal today?"

"Same as every other day. No change."

He frowned, "Are you sure, bro? I swear she just moved." Atlas pointed at Catalina and our eyes all followed his finger to the bed. At first I thought he had imagined it, for she seemed as unmoving as sleeping beauty.

Nico clapped Atlas on the shoulder. "You're seeing things, and I don't blame you. It's been a long night, bro. Go get some sleep... and a shower."

Atlas grunted, "I swear she moved."

We waited a while longer, and just as we were about to give up, a small moan escaped her lips.

We froze, looking at one another, and tentatively stepped towards the bed. I could feel my heart starting to thump in anticipation.

Her delicate hand slowly raised off the bed and we all watched with bated breath as she rubbed a hand over her eyes, groaning softly.

Crowding around the bed, still shocked to see her conscious, we waited for her next move. As she slowly removed her hand, her eyes blinked open.

It took several attempts, and they seemed a bit unfocused for a few moments, but then she stared straight at me.

My breathing hitched as I got lost in her amazing dark blue eyes, and my heart began to race....

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Chapter Three

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Catalina



It was just a brush. A soft stroke across my lips that woke me from my slumber.

I tried to open my eyes, but they felt heavy. I tried to move my arms, *anything*, but they wouldn't obey. Muffled sounds came to my ears. I could hear voices in the room, but try as I might, I couldn't make out the words, or pinpoint who the voices belonged to. They did not sound familiar.

Confused, I lay there, eyes closed while my body caught up to my consciousness. Slowly, I became aware of the aches and pains of my stiff body, and I hurt. *Everywhere*. At first, I could only move a finger, and I began to fear I was paralyzed. But when I was finally able to move my arm, I raised my hand immediately to my eyes that still refused to open, and rubbed them.

What was going on? Why am I so stiff?

Willing my eyes to obey, I slowly blinked them open. My vision was blurry at first but when they slowly came into focus, there were three men

standing over me, none of whom I recognized. I was immediately drawn to the man with dark features, his bright amber eyes stared back into mine. He murmured something, but I couldn't make it out.

"...atalina. Catalina, can you hear me?" His eyes were concerned when I didn't respond, and he pulled out his phone and retreated from my side.

I looked at the other two men standing over me. One of them was dressed neatly, with his styled blonde hair, green eyes and slim build, he could be mistaken for a male model. The other one was huge, tall with wide shoulders, and made of muscle. My eyes opened wider in alarm at all the blood over his clothing.

Was I in some kind of accident?

I turned my sore neck to look about me. I was in bed, monitors and screens on one side, with a drip line on the other that was connected to my arm. It was evident something had happened to me, but what, I couldn't remember.

"Catalina. How are you feeling?" The male model was holding my hand and gave it a slight squeeze of which I barely felt. My heart fluttered at his relaxed smile, a smile I'm sure would have charmed a lot of women.

I opened my mouth to speak, but my throat was dry and I covered my mouth with my hand as I coughed uncontrollably.

"Water. I got you girl." The big one said gruffly snapping his fingers. He left and came back with a glass of water, and Mr. model slipped an arm behind my back and gently helped me to sit up. He took the glass of water and held it to my lips as I took a few tentative sips. The water tasted sweet as it washed through my sandpaper mouth, and I gave a small moan of relief as my throat opened up.

As the other man returned, I scrutinized him from head to toe. He was tall and dressed immaculately in an expensive suit with a Rolex. He had dark features, black short cut styled hair and had those amber eyes that seemed to glow. I could tell by his demeanor that he was the one in charge here.

"The doctor is on his way. He'll be here shortly. Nico, stay by her side, and Atlas," he looked the huge man up and down, "for Christ's sake, go take a shower and get changed."

The man, Atlas, just grinned. "I'm on it. Until next time baby girl." He gave me a curt nod and then left the room.

The one in charge stood a moment, staring me over before turning his attention to the guy beside me. "You good here?"

"All under control, bro."

Bro? They looked nothing alike.

"Good. You know where to find me if things get... complicated." He gave me one more quick glance before he strode from the room.

"More water?"

"Huh?" I looked at male model who was holding the glass aloft. I nodded, taking some larger sips this time, relishing the taste. I was crazy thirsty. After I'd finished most of the glass, he plumped my pillows and laid me back to rest. "It's Nico, right?" I managed to say.

He smiled, a brilliant, perfect pearly white smile that I'm sure would have made girls fall over in a swoon.

Thank god I'm lying in bed and can't fall any further.

"She speaks! Yes. I'm Nico. At your service." He lifted my hand and kissed the back of my knuckles.

I couldn't help but smile girlishly. "Do I know you?"

"No." He grinned, "But you will."

I nodded, even more confused. *Why on earth would I be cared for by strangers?*

"Where am I?" The place did not look familiar in the slightest.

"At our humble abode. You are safe here."

I frowned as I looked out the window. I could see the city of Los Angeles beyond and the sun starting to rise, highlighting the changing colors of the trees.

It was autumn already?

"What day is it?"

"October 5th. You've been asleep for quite some time. Here." He got off the bed and retrieved a remote, pointing it at the huge television that adorned the wall in front of me. He turned on the TV and snuggled in beside me on the bed. "Don't worry, I won't bite... much." He grinned.

He flicked the channel to the morning news where reporters were showing a large building fire with smoke billowing out of its windows. The writing at the bottom said, 'Five confirmed dead. Feared more inside yet to be found.' The corner of the screen had the date and time displaying.

I shook my head. "I don't understand. What happened? What am I doing here?"

"All will be explained in good time, Catalina."

"C-Catalina?" I rubbed my forehead where a headache had started and was getting worse by the second. "I-, I... that name does not sound familiar."

Nico, who had been avidly watching the news report with a smile, muted the TV and turned his attention my way with a look of worry on his face.

"You can't remember your own name? What *can* you remember?"

"I remember... I remember.... I-, I don't know. I can't remember anything. I..."

Why can't I remember anything? What is going on? Who am I?

Just then, a knock on the door interrupted my thoughts and Nico jumped off the bed to answer it.

"Doc. You're just in time. Meet Catalina. She's having some difficulty remembering."

The doctor was an older man, grey haired and with a friendly smile. Approaching the bed, he held out his hand.

"I'm doctor Thomas Lawrence, but you can call me Tom." He had a heavy southern accent as he spoke. I shook his hand. "How are you feeling, Catalina?"

"Like my head is going to explode."

"Hmm, not good for us. Messy business. Lots to clean up." He grinned as he placed his case on the bedside table and pulled out some aspirin. "Take these."

I smiled at his joke and immediately decided I liked him.

"May I do a few checks, Catalina?"

I nodded, and followed his instructions as he checked my heartbeat, blood pressure, checked my eyes and ears and in my mouth. Finally, he nodded to Nico, who put his arm around me and helped me to sit up off the pillows again. Tom then proceeded to touch the back of my head.

"What are you checking fo-. *Ouch!*" I flinched as he poked a tender spot on my head.

"My apologies, Catalina." He nodded at Nico, who gently laid me against the pillows again. I reached up to feel the back of my head. There was a

patch of hair missing, and from what I could feel, a bumpy wound that had stitches in it.

What the hell happened to me?

"Your stitches have come out, but it will still be tender for some time. You are healing nicely though and you'll be perfect again in no time." He smiled as he packed away his various implements before turning back to me. "Now, Nico says you are having difficulty remembering?"

I nodded.

"Can you remember anything at all? Who you are? Where you live?"

I tried to think, but the pain in my head was getting too much. I shook my head.

"Never you mind about it, Catalina. You just need some rest. It's normal not to remember anything when you first wake up. It will come back to you. For now, get some rest. I'll come back to check on you tomorrow."

I nodded and closed my eyes, the pain getting unbearable. I felt disoriented and the urge to sleep was slowly overwhelming me. I could hear Tom as he packed the rest of his things and exchanged indiscernible whispers with Nico in low tones by the door.

After the doc left, the last thing I remember before sleep consumed me, was Nico stroking my hair.

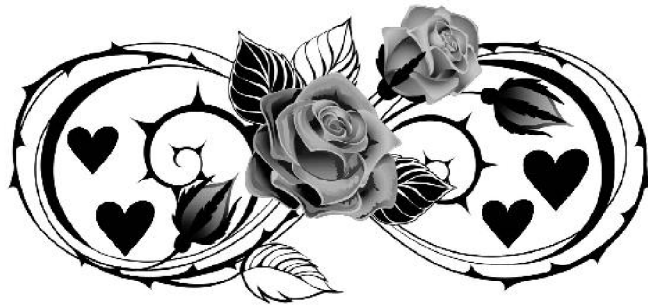
"Rest now Angel. You're safe with us."

For some reason, something deep inside me sensed that couldn't be further from the truth...

Chapter Four

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Nico



"Ugh. Seriously Atlas?"

"What? You said, '*Let's finish this*', so I did." Atlas shrugged, putting his gun back in his holster. "What? Afraid you got a little somethin' in that manicured hair of yours?"

I grunted with disgust as I dropped the body in my arms and wiped my cheek with a handkerchief.

"Well, you could have waited until I was clear. That's three times you've done that already."

Atlas howled with laughter. "And the expression on your face, bro, is priceless. Every. Single. Time."

I scowled at him. "Next time, you're staying at home. I can deal with this myself."

"Perhaps. But I'd rather be here, taking revenge. If I stay home, I'll get stuck watching sleeping beauty. Can't exactly say that's riveting since it seems she can't even remember her own name."

I shook my head, remembering the first time I had laid eyes on her. She was even more beautiful than the rumors had said. When she was delivered to the manor, all of us were in shock. Why Catalina Rivera-Flores was on our doorstep still wasn't clear, but one thing was. We were to protect her ourselves, and to trust no one, not even people we trusted within our own organization. Why we would be protecting the late Mateo Rivera's daughter was beyond me, but if our brother said it had to be done, then there was a bloody good reason.

"Come on. Let's get this gear back to the warehouse." I nodded towards the crates piled high to the ceiling, and Atlas proceeded to yell orders to our crew.

I watched the trucks back in, deep in thought about why the Phoenix would be targeting us. Their raids on our property were getting more frequent lately. They seemed to be targeting anything we owned, taking anything they could get their hands on. Money. Weapons. Drugs. It was strange. While we were all aware of each other and tolerated the other mafia's, we usually stayed out of each other's way and got on with our own business. It was only the occasional clash that caused issues. But that had not been the case lately and there was one question that kept niggling in the back of my mind.

Why now?

By the time the cargo was loaded and removed five trucks later, I was spent. I waited as Atlas delighted in his pyromaniac urges, and watched the blaze in the rearview mirror as we sped away, wondering how I was going to stay awake to watch over Catalina again.

Oh, Catalina...

I didn't know what to think. On the one hand I was annoyed. I didn't have time to babysit. Yet, here I was, two months later, still watching her angel face as she slept. Now that she was no longer in a coma and she could converse, admittedly, I found the task quite exciting. Having watched her sleep for so long, I was keen to know the type of woman she was under that pretty façade. The fact she couldn't remember anything though was a bit concerning.

Or was it? Maybe that is for the best and works in our favor.

When we arrived back at our heavily guarded hilltop manor, I took the grand staircase two steps at a time, unbuttoning my jacket and running a hand through my messy hair. I paused at the hallway mirror, checking to make sure there were no obvious signs of blood or brains that would surprise me later, or Catalina for that matter. Satisfied, I stepped through her bedroom door to find Luca standing in the middle of the room, a look of annoyance on his face, as he faced an angry Catalina.

I raised an eyebrow in question at Luca, but he only turned dark eyes towards Catalina, who returned his gaze with a baleful glare.

This I got to see!

"So that's a no then?" Catalina demanded, hands on hips.

"No. I mean, yes." Luca shook his head in frustration. "You are to remain here. End of discussion."

I stifled a grin with my hand. I'd never seen Luca so exasperated. He was usually so calm, collected and in control. It was good to see that he actually *was* human, and something could get under his skin. Evidently, that *something* was Catalina. Maybe it was their shared Spanish blood that got the fire going. Either way, I was breaking out the proverbial popcorn and crossing my legs on the couch as I took in the scene before me. I was

fascinated by her spirit. Most people would not dare stand up to Luca, but I guess she didn't know him well, so ignorance really *was* bliss.

Catalina started pacing the room, spraying a string of what I can only assume were profanities or insults, or both, in Spanish. Luca's face only seemed to get darker as he patiently waited for her tirade to stop. When she did, she looked straight at me, glowering. I immediately wiped the smile off my face.

"I want to leave. If I'm not your prisoner, then why do you keep me here? I demand to go, now!"

"No!" Luca and I said in unison.

Luca straightened his suit jacket before leaning forward and speaking into Catalina's ear. Whatever he said seemed to make her angrier, and she glowered after him as he came towards me.

"I have a meeting downstairs. She's all yours, Nico. Have fun with that." He brushed past me with a flicker of amusement on his face.

I sighed, looking back at a now seemingly fully functional woman. I half wished she was still asleep so I could lock the door and get some shut eye myself. But by the looks of the thundercloud within the room, that was never going to happen.

"Nico. Care to explain to me why I can't leave here?"

Not wanting to get off on the wrong foot, I decided a bit of tact was in order.

"And where would you go, Catalina? You don't know who you are, where you are, or where you should be. Are you even certain that Catalina is your real name? Where do you live? Do you have someone you can call to pick you up?"

Her heated gaze faltered, and she looked at the floor for some time, thinking hard. Finally, she groaned in frustration, her hands squeezing the sides of her head as she sat on the bed.

"Why can't I remember anything?" Tears sprung to her eyes as she looked at me. "If you're protecting me, you must know me. Can you help me?"

"Of course I can. Look. I can see you're overwhelmed. Why don't we take a moment. Let's just calm down first, yeah?"

She looked at me coldly. "That's the same vague bullshit I keep hearing. You're not going to help me, are you? You're as manipulative as him!" She pointed defiantly at the door through which Luca had just left. "You just want to keep me prisoner here!"

"No. Catalina. Calm down." She was breathing heavily, shaking her head, and she jumped off the bed and started pacing the room, shouting what I assume were more expletives that I couldn't understand in Spanish.

I took a deep breath, not at all deterred by her wrath. When she was mad she looked even sexier. Like a sexy little hurricane whipping about the room. But it wasn't her looks that appealed to me, it was her personality that was slowly appearing. Her determination, her resilience, her fire.

"Catalina. Catalina. Stop." When she continued to ignore me, I strode across the room and grasped her wrists. "Please. Stop." I looked down into her seething blue eyes, holding them. "Listen to me when I say, we are here to help you."

She struggled against my grasp. "Let go of me. You're hurting me," she hissed. Letting go, I took a step back as she stormed past me and slammed the ensuite door behind her.

I groaned. *I'm too tired for this shit.* It had been a long night already and the last thing I needed was to put up with her drama, sexy or not. Slumping

down in the chair, I stared at the ensuite door. If she wasn't so damn feisty it would be easier for me to just shout and threaten her into submission. But for some reason, I couldn't.

I waited patiently, looking at my watch. It had been fifteen minutes already. *How long was she gonna be in there?*

I waited five more minutes then hesitantly climbed to my feet and rapped on the door.

"Catalina? Catalina, can you come out please?"

No response

"Don't make me break down this door, because I will."

Still no response. I pressed my ear to the door, the dead silence within making me immediately nervous. I stood back, and kicked the door in, watching as it flew open to reveal an empty room. Running to the open window, I looked down at the ground below, fearing the worst.

What the fuck was she thinking? We're three floors up!

I didn't know what was worse. The fact that there was no body messed up and sprawled on the ground below, or the fact that she was gone, nowhere to be seen.

Fuck! Luca was gonna be so pissed off.

I ran downstairs and burst out of the back doors and into the garden. She couldn't have gotten far. It wasn't long before I heard shouting at the east gate and I bolted as fast as I could, praying I would get there in time. As I burst into the clearing, I was horrified to find Catalina on her knees, with three guards holding guns to her head, and shouting irately into their radio.

"Sir, we have an intruder."

I ran closer, shouting, "Stop! Put your guns down!"

"Confirmed. We'll take care of it."

I watched in slow motion, horrified as Boris dropped his radio and retook aim. Catalina looked down the barrel defiantly, not a shred of fear in them. I was still hurtling towards them, closing the distance, aware that Boris was oblivious to my presence as I came at him from the side, diving in front of his gun just before it went off.

I felt the bullet pierce my chest as I dropped to the ground, and I could hear Catalina scream.

"Shit. You shot the boss."

"Fuck. Stop the bleeding you dim wit and call for help."

I tried to issue the command to stand down, but I couldn't breathe. I looked down at my chest. Bright red blood gushed forth between my fingertips. Even though I knew I was dying, I was still aware of Catalina behind me and the third guard still holding his gun at her head.

Catalina's eyes were wide as she leaned over me. My blood splattered across her beautiful face.

"Nico, why?" She looked confused, but all I could do was think of her safety.

"R- run." I spluttered. "Run!"

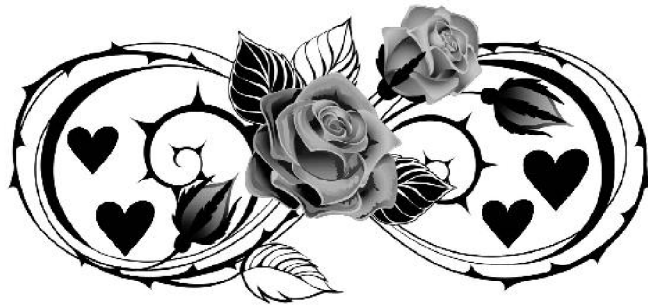
Her eyes went wider and without hesitation, she turned, swiftly kicked the third guard in the balls, and ran through the gate and out of the manor grounds.

The last I saw before my head dropped to the ground, was her raven black hair flying out behind her as she disappeared into the night...

Chapter Five

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Catalina



The man was simply infuriating!

"So, you're saying I'm not a prisoner?"

"No."

"But I can't leave this manor?"

"No."

"And you say that because I'm safe here?"

"Yes, of course you are."

"So why can't I leave with a bodyguard?"

"For your continued safety."

"And who exactly am I *safe* from?"

"The people who want to hurt you."

"And *who* are they?"

"We don't know."

I threw my hands in the air in exasperation. I felt like I was getting nowhere. Clearly he knew something that he didn't want me to know. Well,

unfortunately for him, I could play mind games too.

Let's see who's more manipulative.

"So, what? Am I supposed to stay here indefinitely?"

"Yes."

"And who decides when I can leave?"

"I do."

"So, what does a girl have to do to get out of here?"

He cocked his head slightly at the change in tone of my voice, eyeing me warily. I closed the distance between us and placed both hands on his chest, running my hands over his designer suit. I had to give it to him, the man kept in great shape. Beneath the expensive fabric, all I could feel was hard muscle. Running my hands down his front I could tell his abs were just as good. My brows raised involuntarily.

Impressive.

"Are you playing with me, Catalina?" he said in a low voice.

I smirked. "I'd love nothing more than to play with you, Luca." I looked at him with playful eyes, sliding my fingers under his belt and pulling him closer so he was mere inches from my face. "But right now, I want to leave this house."

His eyes darkened, the conflicted emotions evident on his face. Although I knew he wanted me, I could tell he was trying to restrain himself. Whether it was lust or anger he struggled to control, I couldn't tell.

He placed two hands on my shoulders, pulling my ear to his lips and speaking in a low tone. "You will remain here, Catalina, until I say you can leave." His tone sent shivers running down my spine, and his warm fingers gave me goosebumps as he slid them slowly down my arms and over my hands that were still hanging onto his belt. "But perhaps you don't really

want to leave after all. You're playing a very dangerous game. If you're not careful, I may just play along."

My breathing hitched, and I could feel my heartbeat quickening in my chest as he leaned back to look me in the eyes.

Damn him and his sexy brooding eyes.

If he wasn't so good looking, I could have hated him easily. He was so rigid, so arrogant... *but oh so sexy.*

Stop it, Catalina. Don't let him beat you at your own game.

I brushed my lips against his ever so slightly. "Is that a promise, Luca?"

"Don't play games with me, Catalina." He growled, and before I knew what was happening, he grabbed a fistful of my hair and crushed his lips down on mine. His tongue invaded my mouth, swirling relentlessly, and before I could even begin to respond, the kiss ended as abruptly as it started. He released his hold on me, disengaging my hands from his body and stepped back, swearing under his breath.

I was still swooning as my anger returned. *How could I let his touch affect me so much?* I was angry at myself for getting so carried away, and that he had successfully used my ploy against me.

Now we stood glaring at each other not saying a word. His usually bright amber eyes now so dark they were almost black. I placed my hands on my hips, meeting his gaze, determined not to show that he had any effect on me. No. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. *I had to defy him.*

"So that's a no then?" I demanded.

"No. I mean, yes." Luca shook his head in frustration. "You are to remain here. End of discussion."

I ground my teeth as I started to pace, lapsing into spanish as I usually did when I was angry. "You are an arrogant bastard. You know that? And how

dare you force me to kiss you? If I have to do what you say, does that mean I have to let you have my body as well? Do I have to submit to you too? I'd rather die than have your sleazy hands on my body again, you disgusting piece of shit. Make no mistake, you will let me go as I please, and you will never touch me again."

Breathing heavily, I halted my rant as a movement by the door caught my eye. I'd been so caught up in my anger I hadn't even noticed that Nico had entered the room and was stifling a laugh. I eyed him angrily.

"I want to leave. If I'm not your prisoner, then why do you keep me here? I demand to go, now!"

"No!" Both Luca and Nico answered in unison.

My eyes narrowed. *So they are both hiding something.*

Luca straightened his expensive suit jacket before leaning towards me and whispering in my ear.

"You'd do best not to defy me, Catalina. I look forward to our next.... *game.*"

I glowered after him as he exited the room, and I was left with the man called Nico. I looked him up and down. He was always immaculately dressed, hair styled, leather jacket, charming smile. And even though his demeanor was a lot less rigid than Luca's, something about him told me he was also a person you would never cross.

Well, defy them both I will.

After getting the same lame responses from him, I decided it was time to take action. Something wasn't right here and I needed to figure it out.

Once in the bathroom, I calmed myself as I stared in the mirror. I could still feel the pain at the back of my head where Luca's grasp had come into contact with my wound. I scowled. Admittedly, I enjoyed our little tryst, but

not enough to make me stay. Silently, I opened the window. I had spent days scoping out an escape, and even three floors up, I knew I'd have no issues scaling down the external pipes along the building. It was another reason my father called me *changuito*. I was an excellent climber. They may as well have put a ladder against the wall.

Climbing down, I stood amongst the bushes for a few moments, deciding which way to go. I knew there was a main gate nearby and I decided to waste no time and ran up the garden pathway and away from the house as silently as I could. I wasn't sure how I was going to get past the guards, but I knew if I played the confidence card, I had a pretty good chance.

As I stepped out onto the road and approached the gate, I was surprised at the number of cars that were gathered there. Usually, it was just one or two guards, but tonight, there seemed to be quite a number of them, many of whom glanced my way when they saw me.

Second guessing myself but too late to change my mind, I strolled up to the gate, chin held high, willing every muscle in my body to co-operate and not flee at the slightest sign of trouble. I cleared my throat, hoping that my voice didn't croak from the nervousness I felt stealing up my throat.

"Open the gate. I wish to leave."

The man on duty eyed me suspiciously. "Who said you could leave?"

"Luca."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "He never mentioned anything to me. You'll have to wait until I verify. He's in an important meeting right now. Best you go back to the house and wait there."

I frowned. Not because of his dismissal, which was expected, but because he seemed to be nervous. His eyes were darting about at the other men, who were watching curiously from the side of the road. Clearly, they were not

the usual men on guard, and I could only assume they were here with the other important people for this so called *important meeting*. They seemed to be relaxed and taking the chance to catchup and have a smoke while they waited.

"Hey, you look familiar." One of them, a gruff looking guy, pointed his cigarette at me. "Do I know you, sweetheart?"

I studied his face carefully before shaking my head. Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't, but either way I couldn't remember.

"No. I don't think so."

Another man, younger and brutish looking with a shaved head, came and stood beside him. "Yeah, I haven't seen you around here before, but where do I know you from?"

Both men were now squinting at me, and the younger one's eyes started to widen in recognition, his cigarette falling from his hands as he reached for his gun.

"You're, you're Catalina!"

The older man's eyes widened and he also pulled his gun.

"Get on your knees little girl."

Suddenly, I found myself staring down the barrel of a gun. I gulped, scared shitless, and did what I was told.

What was going on?

I watched as another stepped up behind me and pointed his gun at my head. The older man, ignoring the protests of the man on guard at the gate, spoke into his phone.

"Sir, we have an intruder. Confirmed. We'll take care of it."

Intruder? Me? I thought I was protected here.

Shocked at what was happening, I watched as the man slowly took aim, and I knew at that moment I was going to die. I squeezed my eyes shut for what seemed like an eternity as I prayed for my life. When I opened them again, I was angry. Angry at the unfairness of it all. I was going to die, and I didn't even know why. I didn't do anything wrong. I glared at him, willing him to pull the trigger. The next second, hot liquid was spraying across my face, the sound of a gunshot ringing in my ears.

I tentatively opened my eyes. There were voices shouting, men running. I didn't pay attention to the chaos around me as I stared down at Nico's ashen face.

"Nico? Why?" I was confused.

Why were these men shooting at me? And why would he risk his life to save mine?

He barely knew me. I didn't even think he cared if I lived or died. Yet, here he was, lying before me, blood coming out of his mouth and chest. He was trying to say something and I leant closer, grasping his face in my hands.

"R-Run..."

Huh? Did I hear right? I thought I was safe here!

"Run!" he said urgently.

Evidently not.

I didn't wait to find out. I jumped to my feet, taking the man behind me by surprise and kicked him as hard as I could in the balls. I'd always wanted to do that, but no one had pissed me off enough to warrant it. I wasn't even sure if I *could* do it.

The man dropped to the ground howling, and I darted towards the gate, giving Nico one last look as I ran out of the grounds and into the darkness.

One thing was for certain. I had to get off this road. It looked private and I knew no one using it could be trusted to help me. I climbed down the embankment to one side, and slid down on the loose gravel, my arms flailing to grasp onto the trees for support. I began to slide faster and faster, out of control, the shrubbery scratching and digging into my skin as I lost my footing and began tumbling down the hillside.

Shit!

As I came to the bottom, I landed with a thump amongst some bushes, the air whooshing out of my lungs, making it difficult to breathe. I lay there for some time, gasping for breath on my back, hidden in the shrubbery, as I heard an ambulance and then cars and motorbikes racing out. I waited for the commotion to die down before rolling on my side and attempting to stand. Groaning, I lifted a hand to my head that was throbbing with pain, to find warm blood running down my forehead.

I have to keep going!

Climbing to my feet, I staggered along the roadside, taking note to stay close to the shrubbery should I need to conceal myself. I had no idea where I was heading but I knew I had to keep going. To get away.

Forcing one foot in front of the other, time seemed to disappear as I staggered along the open road that seemed to go on forever. I wasn't even sure how far I had gone when I finally came to some buildings. On closer inspection they appeared to be warehouses. They looked dark, possibly abandoned, and not the welcoming refuge I had been hoping for, but I desperately needed to stop. My head was pounding, my eyes weren't focusing, and I could feel pain all over my body from the numerous cuts and bruises from the fall.

Making my way between two buildings, I took a seat on an upturned crate and leaned my head against the metal wall. The coolness of the metal eased my head somewhat and I closed my eyes as I thought out a plan of what to do next.

Who do I contact? Where can I go? Who am I?

Frustrated that I only had more questions than answers, I leaned forward and held my head in my hands. I took a deep breath, exhaling slowly as I searched for a solution.

"I guess, first thing's first." I muttered to myself. "I have to find out who I am. I have to find someone to help me." I thought for a moment. "The cops. I need to find a police station."

"Well, well, well! What do we have here?"

I froze.

"Looky here boys. We have ourselves some entertainment." Sneers and laughter followed as I slowly raised my head. Three men were closing in on me, their faces lit with glee, and for the second time tonight, a wave of fear sliced through me like a cold knife.

I scrambled to my feet, realizing I had nowhere to go as my back pressed up against the warehouse wall. My eyes darted around looking for anything I could use as a weapon, but there was nothing.

"What's wrong sweetheart? Surely this is why you're out here on your lonesome. Surely this is what you want?" He grabbed his crotch suggestively and began to unbuckle his belt. I gulped, the terror rising in me as I realized what their version of fun meant. As they closed in, I could feel the panic rising in my throat and I knew I couldn't give in.

If they wanted a piece of me, they're gonna have to fight me!

I leapt forward, jabbing the hairy guy in front of me in the throat, satisfied at the choking sounds he made as I darted past him.

I screamed as I felt a yank on my arm. One of the men grabbed me, hauling me back against the wall, and knocking the wind out of me. My other arm was quickly pinned, and I struggled to free myself, looking either side at the two men holding me captive. The hairy guy who I'd jabbed straightened, still coughing, and rubbed his throat. He took a step forward, raising his hand with a menacing look on his face, and slapped me hard.

Pain exploded through my head as his hand made contact with my cheek and my head bounced off the wall behind me, making me see stars.

"You little bitch. You're gonna pay for that. And here I was thinking I'd be gentle with you."

The men on either side of me snickered. "Hope you like it rough, little lady." One of them sneered.

I was barely conscious as one of them tore my blouse open. I struggled, blinking my eyes, forcing them to focus, as I felt hands squeeze my breasts painfully. I screamed, kicking instinctively, and heard the hairy one grunt as I made contact with his stomach.

"Hold her down," he grunted. "Time to teach this bitch a lesson."

Another blow landed on my head, and I saw black.

Must stay conscious. Must... Fight... Back...

I could feel my body being hauled to the ground and felt weight applied on both sides. When my eyes stopped rolling in the back of my head, I was alarmed to find one of the men jerking off above me, his dick only inches from my face. Although I was disgusted by what was happening above me, my attention quickly left him as I felt hands running up my thighs, lifting my skirt and tearing away my panties. But no matter how hard I struggled, I

couldn't move an inch. I was pinned hard to the ground by the three men and the panic and overwhelming fear I felt, slowly turned to hopelessness as I realized my worst fears were about to happen.

I squeezed my eyes shut as the men above me began to breathe heavily and the sound of the hairy one unbuckling his pants, jingled like impending doom in my ears.

"I'm gonna make you scream little girl."

Don't scream. Don't scream. Don't give them the satisfaction.

The tears I had been holding back slowly began to run down my cheeks as I heard the man spit a few times into his hand, and I felt him lean over me, his thighs spreading my legs wide. My whole body tensed as I dreaded the moment I'd feel him enter me.

Suddenly, the weight off one side of me lifted and I heard a grunt as a body dropped to the ground.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." The voice was low, calm, controlled.

I opened my eyes to see the hairy one being lifted off me in surprise, and watched as he flew backwards, tripping on his pants around his ankles, and landing hard on the concrete.

The third guy hesitantly rose, backing away slowly, pulling up his pants.

"Hey man. She's all yours. We were just having a bit of-." His words were abruptly cut off as a tall man stepped from the shadows and punched him in the face. My assailant dropped without another sound.

Now unrestrained, I pressed my legs together, pulled my skirt down, and held my torn blouse together as best I could. I looked up at the hooded figure standing over me. I couldn't see his face in the dim lighting, and my fear slowly turned to discomfort when he didn't say anything.

What did he want? Did he want to rape me too?

As if he knew my thoughts, he spoke. His deep voice as even as before.

"Are you okay?"

I nodded warily.

"You shouldn't be here. It's not safe." I flinched away from him as he knelt and offered me his hand. "You need not be afraid of me."

I hesitantly took his hand, noticing the large scars running up his forearm as he pulled me to my feet. I shivered as he slowly withdrew into the shadows. I couldn't make out what he was doing, but when he returned, he was bare chested but with his jacket and hood still on.

He held out a hand. "Here. Put this on."

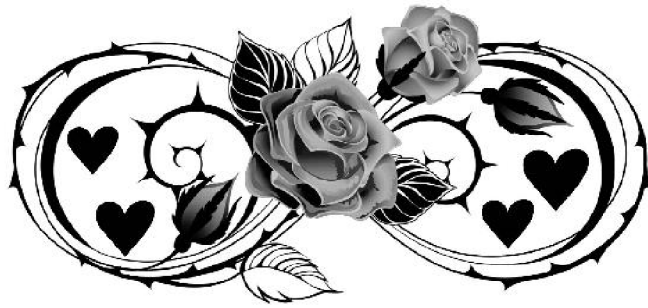
Taking the cloth in his hands I realized it was his shirt. I turned around and pulled it over my head.

"Thank you..." my voice trailed off as I turned back to emptiness, and I found myself shielding my eyes from the bright lights and the sound of screeching car tires....

Chapter Six

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Luca



She is the most frustrating woman. She's ignorant and demanding. Annoying, is what she is....

I drummed my fingers on the table.

Why can't I stop thinking about her?

I closed my eyes momentarily, inhaling slightly as I remembered the smell of her hair as I held her close. The feel of her fingers enticing me, as she slid them under my belt. I felt my cock begin to come alive at the thought of our earlier encounter. I had not been turned on by a woman in a very long time, and the fact that she made me feel things again, concerned me. But if I had to admit it, a small part of me liked it.

A small kick under the table jolted me from my thoughts, and I looked up at Atlas across the table, who nudged his eyes towards Marco. His message was clear.

Concentrate.

He narrowed his eyes at me with a raised eyebrow, a look I knew all too well having grown up with him since we were kids. *What's up with you?*

I ignored him and turned my attention to the matter at hand as Marco elaborated on his idea.

"And that's how we'll quadruple the deal. Why make three million dollars when you can make twelve?"

I considered the proposal. Weapons trade wasn't something we were new to, but upscaling to this magnitude took on a lot more risk. The logistics became trickier. Larger shipments were harder to hide, and a lot more manpower was needed. Still, no risk, no reward.

"Not a bad idea. I'll think about it. With the right partnership in place, I believe we can make it work. Come back to me when you have some solid prospects."

Marco, a short stubby man, beamed as he sat back in his seat. "Leave it with me boss."

"Any other matters we need to discuss?" I looked around the table at the group of men who were our board representatives. Each brought a strength to the table. Besides Marco García who was somewhat of a greedy man, but had an excellent eye for finding and brokering deals, there was Frederick Tremblay, of French decent who was a serious character and managed every deal with an iron fist. We could always leave it to him to see our plans were followed through as expected. Stefan Nikovic took care of the muscle. If we needed the men for a particular job or for general security, our Balkan boys were the fiercest. Then there was Brad Anderson, our expert money washer and accountant, and finally, there was Edward Taylor who ran those *legitimate* businesses and ensured all ran smoothly.

Together we made a tight knit team. It helped that we'd all known each other since we were boys and built this conglomerate up into what it was today from scratch.

"Let's call it a night. We have lots to prepare over the coming weeks and -". I looked up abruptly as Nico came bounding down the stairs and rushed out of the back doors.

What the hell? Shouldn't he be watching Catalina?

I scowled. He knows better than to make a scene when the board members were here.

"Is Nico alright? I'm surprised he didn't join us tonight if he was here?" Stefan commented.

I ground my teeth, suppressing my anger, "Yes, like I said, they've had a busy night already, handling the warehouse situations, as you may have heard on the news. I'm sure that whatever has got his attention is under control."

They nodded in agreement.

"We are in good hands." Frederick murmured.

A buzz sounded on the table, and Stefan picked up his phone. We knew it would be serious if someone dared call him during a meeting.

"Yes. Intruder? Well, you know what to do." He hung up the phone and looked at me. "I didn't realize you had a security issue up here? Do you need more men?"

I raised at brow at him. "What security issue? Was that intruder here?"

Stefan shrugged his broad shoulders. "Yeah. A woman at the east gate of the estate. But don't worry, I told him to take care of it."

A woman?

It took a moment for the penny to drop. *Nico!*

"Cancel the order. Now!"

Stefan dialed his phone immediately but was interrupted by the sound of a gunshot.

Shit!

"This meeting is over. Excuse me." I dashed out of the meeting room and out the alfresco doors. I could hear a calamity down the pathway towards the eastern gate and hurried towards it. As I cleared the gardens and came onto the road, I froze. Nico was on the ground, blood spurting from his chest.

Shit, Nico!

My blood ran cold as I ran over to him and shoved my hands onto his chest.

"I'm so sorry boss. He jumped out of nowhere. I've called for an ambulance."

Nico grasped my hands, his eyes wide as he gasped for breath and tried to form words, blood gushing from his mouth.

"Shh, it'll be okay man. Just a flesh wound. Relax." The blood had stopped to a trickle from the pressure I had on his chest, but I knew his lungs were now filling with blood. I silently willed the ambulance to come faster and was relieved when the sirens blared up the driveway.

As the energy slowly faded from Nico's eyes, he let his hand drop and his head fell to one side. I followed his gaze as he pointed down the driveway.

"C- Cat..." he spluttered before his eyes closed.

"Move aside sir!"

I was abruptly pushed to the side as paramedics squatted around Nico and started working to resuscitate him. Dumbfounded, I watched as if in a haze.

This couldn't be happening. No one would dare touch a hair on any of the triad.

Eyes blazing, I rounded on the guardsmen who were watching from a distance. They shrank away as I approached them.

As they fucken should!

Atlas came running down from the manor. His face turning ashen as he saw Nico being bundled into the ambulance. They slammed the doors, not waiting for anyone, and sped off down the driveway.

"What the fuck happened here?" He demanded.

"I'm about to find out." I growled, turning back to the men. "Explain! Now!"

Boris spoke, his voice wavering. "There was an intruder boss. A woman. We were told to take care of it. Nico. He just jumped right in front of her. We didn't see him coming. He just dove. It was an accident. I would never hurt the family. Nev -".

A shot blasted through the air and Boris fell to the ground, the bullet hole still smoking in his forehead. Atlas re-holstered his gun with a growl of disgust.

"You!" I pointed to the man that had been beside him. "The woman. What happened to her?" The man paled and pointed down the road with a shaky finger. "Did you try and stop her?"

He nodded, "We all did. It was Catalina Rivera-Flores," he stammered.

I looked at Atlas who promptly dropped the two guards with a grunt of satisfaction.

"What has transpired here?" I turned to Marco and the other board members who had exited the house and followed the commotion.

"Nico has been shot trying to stop an intruder," I informed. "We will deal with this personally. Please, head home. We'll let you know if there are any further developments."

"May we be of any assistance?" Stefan offered. "Has the intruder been dealt with?"

"No. Myself and Atlas will handle it." I pointed to the dead guards, "I'm sorry about your men. I know Boris was one of your best, but mistakes cannot be tolerated."

Stefan nodded in understanding. "He was, but they signed their own death warrants by the sounds of it." He sighed, "For the love of Christ, I hope Nico is alright." He squeezed my shoulder then ordered his men to get in the car.

Frederick clapped me on both shoulders. "No matter what happens, the family will still be strong. We will pray for Nico."

Marco, Brad, and Edward each whispered their words of encouragement before they got in their cars and sped into the night. I nodded silently, not wanting my fear of losing Nico to show on my face. I was an emotional wreck, but I knew breaking down in front of our men was not an option.

"We should have told them about Catalina." Atlas growled.

"Not yet. They don't need to know about her. She's our responsibility."

"What if one of the other guards recognized her?"

"No one said anything if they did. Let's hope it stays that way." I turned to Ivar who had been standing a ways off, silently waiting for our orders.

"What do you think?"

He shook his head. "I don't think the others knew who she was."

"How did this situation get out of hand, Ivar?"

"I tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen, not once he recognized her."

I nodded, deep in thought. "Assemble the men. Let's go find her. She can't have gone far."

We coordinated a search area, then split up. Some of us jumping into cars, others on bikes. As I drove out with only Atlas beside me, I couldn't help but lose my shit.

"How the fuck did she get away from Nico in the first place? It's not like him to make mistakes!"

Atlas, always one to see the silver lining in a bad situation, chuckled softly. "Maybe it has something to do with his infatuation with her."

My eyebrows furrowed.

Nico and Catalina? No way. There was nothing there. I would have noticed... wouldn't I?

"What makes you say that?"

"Oh, come on, you haven't noticed? He's always pawing her every chance he gets and calls her Angel. And call me crazy, but I swear every time he complains about having to watch her, his eyes light up."

"Hmmm." I didn't know what to say. For some reason the idea just pissed me off further.

He raised a brow at me, "Hmmm? That's all you have to say?" When I didn't respond he narrowed his eyes at me. "No! Don't tell me. You too?"

"Don't be absurd Atlas. We have to guard her, that's it."

"Uh, huh." He grinned.

"Watch yourself. I'd be careful about starting any... *rumors*."

Atlas rubbed his chin, his eyes alight, but he sat back in his seat, probably because he knew me too well not to push me. No one but my brothers could push my buttons and get away with it.

Nico and Catalina. Could there be something there?

"You know, it has been five years Luca, and I say this, jokes aside. You deserve to be happy again. I really mean it, brother."

I clenched my fists, hating that tears still sprung to my eyes even after all this time. I turned away, looking at the city lights in the distance whiz past. I didn't want to get into this discussion right now, not with all the bullshit going on and more important things to think about like Nico's life being on the line.

The sound of heavy metal broke my thoughts and Atlas pulled out his phone and answered. His face turned serious, "Got it. On our way."

He hung up and pointed ahead to a block of abandoned warehouses in the distance. "She's up ahead."

I let out a sigh of relief, and anger suddenly filled me at the shit she had caused tonight. There were going to be consequences... for *everyone*.

I pulled the car to a screeching halt, and Atlas and I made our way between the buildings. Some of our men were already there and trying to persuade a shouting Catalina to come with them.

"Enough, Catalina!" I bellowed. The shouting died down and our men stood back to let us pass. "We'll take it from here. Send the word out that we have her, and head back to the manor."

The men nodded and promptly disappeared. It was only once we were alone and I got a good look at her, that I noticed all the scratch marks and bruises on her legs and arms. I frowned at the oversized shirt she had on, but thought nothing more of it. Instead, I was distracted more by the blood that was running down her forehead, and the fact that half her face was swollen to the point that one of her eyes was nearly closed.

What the fuck happened to her?

I tried to calm my nerves. I didn't know if I was angry at her, or if I was angry at the person who did this to her.

"Catalina. Get in the car and we'll take you back home." I said as evenly as I could.

"That's not my home. It's your home.... And I'm your prisoner there." She spat.

"No, you're our guest Catalina. Until you can figure out who you are, and where you want to go." I held my hand out to her, wanting to pull her into my arms and assure her she was safe with us.... with *me*.

"If I'm your guest, then why did your people attack me?"

I sighed, deciding to tell her the truth. "They were also visitors and didn't know you were there. It was a misunderstanding. You just took them by surprise. Very few would dare to enter our grounds, and even fewer would actually make it in. They thought you were an intruder."

"So what? You shoot first then ask questions later?" She accused.

Fair call. We didn't care much for interrogations. There was only one reason for someone to try and penetrate our defenses and it was usually to kill us. It was easy to identify afterwards which group they were affiliated with.

I shrugged. "Something like that." She looked at me in shock. "Look, it's the reason I didn't want you leaving your room tonight. Not many people know you are with us, and that's for your own safety."

I reached out my hand again, beckoning her to come. She didn't look convinced, but at least she had calmed down from her seething cat stance.

Atlas stepped forward, "Come now baby girl. Let us take you home and get you patched up." He put a comforting arm around her shoulders, "I bet a

nice hot soak in a bath would feel amazing right about now, and I have just the oil remedy to sooth you."

I rolled my eyes but watched as Catalina nodded timidly and leaned into him, giving me the stink eye as she walked past me. I clenched my hands into fists yet again.

She'd prefer to go with Atlas over me?

I didn't know how to react.

It's way too late and I'm too tired to be putting up with this shit.

I stalked after them, and once Catalina was safely tucked into the backseat of the BMW, I pulled Atlas aside.

"You drive. Drop me off at the hospital first then get Catalina home."

He nodded and we drove in silence to the hospital. My thoughts running rampant with worry for Nico, and anger at Catalina for being so foolish and the mess she'd caused.

"I thought we were heading back to the manor?" Catalina asked as we pulled up in front.

"Well if someone hadn't caused such a scene tonight and gotten Nico shot, we wouldn't be here!" I turned in my seat and glowered at her.

Her eyes widened and her lips trembled as she shrank back into her seat. "I, I'm sorry. I forgot about Nico. Is he okay?"

I ignored her and opened the car door. "Atty, I'll keep you posted."

"Alright, bro," he said solemnly.

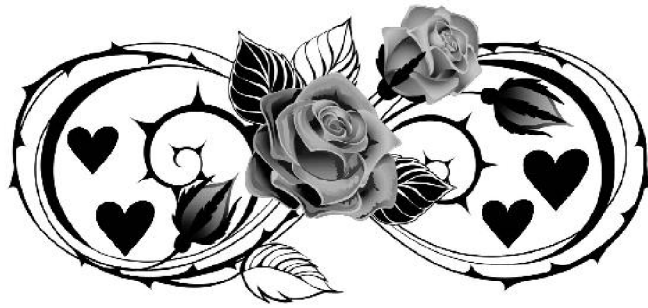
I slammed the door shut and headed into the hospital, frustration boiling through my veins. At this point, I didn't know whether to love or hate the damn woman. I guess only time would tell, but for now, Nico needed me, and I prayed to God he would be alright...

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Chapter Seven

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Catalina



***E** l Diablo!*

That's what he looked like. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and although his hands and forearms had been wiped clean, he was covered in blood, his shirt more maroon than white and he had splatter all over his neck. With his dark hair slicked back and his glowering amber eyes, he truly looked scary.

How do I trust the devil?

Luckily, Atlas came to my rescue and led me away. Although I wasn't convinced they had my best interests at heart, they had never harmed me. That and the thought of a hot bath seemed like heaven to my bruised and battered body.

As they bundled me into the back of a car, I sat in a daze, trying not to think about how close I came to being raped tonight. I clenched my legs together, as if trying to defy the thoughts that kept invading my mind.

What if that hooded man hadn't been there to save me in time?

I shuddered at the thought, trying not to think about it and wiped away silent tears as I sat in the darkness of the backseat. I wasn't sure how much time had passed but when we pulled to a stop, I was surprised to see we were at the hospital.

"I thought we were heading back to the manor?"

Luca turned and glowered at me, his simmering look making me shrink back in my chair. "Well if someone hadn't caused such a scene tonight and gotten Nico shot, we wouldn't be here!"

My eyes widened. *Oh no! Nico!*

Through all that had happened tonight and being attacked, I had completely forgotten about him.

"I, I'm sorry. I forgot about Nico. Is he okay?"

He ignored me, spoke briefly with Atlas, and then slammed the door so hard, that I jolted in my seat. As Atlas drove home, neither of us said a word. I could see even from my position in the back seat that the usually smiley-faced Atlas, had his mind on other things. The worry lines on his forehead deepening as we drove further from the hospital.

When we eventually pulled into the underground garage back at the manor, he let out a worrisome sigh and smiled into the rearview mirror.

"Come on baby girl. Let's get you cleaned up." He jumped out of the car and opened my door for me. The first thing I noticed were the rows of cars lining the expansive underground area. Clearly someone was a collector.

"These are all yours?"

"Not just mine. My brothers' too."

"Let me guess." I pointed around the garage, "The R8 is Luca's, and yours is the hummer."

He chuckled. "Are we that obvious?"

I shrugged matter-of-factly. "Who rides the bikes?" I nodded to a row of six motorcycles. They looked expensive. I didn't really know much about bikes, but a distant memory sparked in the back of my mind. Going on rides with an older man. A father perhaps. I shook my head trying to remember, but the fleeting memory abandoned me as swiftly as it came.

Atlas smiled wanly. "Nico. He is our resident bad boy biker."

We fell into silence, looking over the shiny motorcycles neatly aligned to one side. He obviously took great care of them, and I wondered if he would ever ride them again. I'm sure Atlas was thinking the same thing.

"I'm sorry." My voice was barely a whisper. "I know it's all my fault."

"No. It isn't."

I turned in his direction. "I know you are only saying that to be nice, but if I hadn't tried to escape..."

"No!" He held up his hand, shaking his head. "He made that decision on his own. He could have easily let you die."

"How do you mean? Why would Nico risk his life for me?"

"You are more important than you realize." He smiled tiredly. "C'mon. Let's get you cleaned up."

I followed silently, deep in thought about what Atlas meant. We ascended some stairs from the garage, and Atlas led me through the lavish house, starting with a mirrored hallway showcasing various artworks, that appeared to be from different regions of the world. From there we walked through the house that was simply beautiful and immaculately styled, with floor to ceiling windows everywhere that seemed to bring the outdoors in. Stained glass skylights in the voids where the ceiling soared to the fourth level, shimmered from the light of modern chandeliers that fell the length of several floors. The place was clean and welcoming, and although the spaces

we walked through were quite large, they all seemed to exude a level of comfort.

"Who exactly lives here?"

Atlas shrugged. "Just me and my brothers and a few employees."

I stared at him incredulously.

"What? Did you think we were a bunch of Neanderthals?"

I laughed. "No. I just imagined a male pad to be more.... "

"Beer fridges and pool tables? Televisions and posters of women?"

I stifled a giggle, "Not quite that bad, but definitely not as... sophisticated."

He raised an eyebrow at me. "I will take that as a compliment." We ascended the spiral staircase before entering a door on the third floor. "Here we are. Welcome to our spa room."

"Whoa," I breathed. Not only was it the largest bathroom I had ever been in, but it was also the most luxurious. In the center were marble steps surrounding a square spa bath, large enough to fit eight people stretched out comfortably. Off to one side was a glass enclosure with crystal blue tiles that I guessed was a steam room, while on the other side was a large sauna with wooden seating. An area on the rear wall had multiple shower heads, and everywhere you looked, marble tiles with gold inlay clad the walls. Some small palms and hanging plants finished off the man-made oasis.

"Towels and robes are right there," he pointed beside the door we just entered. "The toilet is just behind those palms, and *that* is for you." He nodded to the spa that was bubbling quietly with steam rising from the heavenly smelling waters.

"It smells amazing."

"Thank you. It's my special blend. Perfect for soothing injuries. Scratches, bruises, muscle damage, broken bones, you name it, and of course, the nerves."

I raised a brow at him. "That's oddly specific."

He just grinned sheepishly. "Yeah. We get hurt a lot. A story for another time perhaps." Heavy metal music filled the room and he reached into his pocket. "I'll leave you to it. Take as long as you need, but I recommend at *least* two hours." He winked at me before answering the phone and leaving, pulling the door closed behind him.

Well you don't have to tell me twice!

I quickly took off the torn, dirty clothes I had on and tossed them to the floor. As I stepped into the steaming hot water and slowly eased under the surface, shivers of pleasure ran up my spine. I sat there, eyes closed, spellbound by the sensations, completely zoning out for god knows how long, before I came to my senses. As my eyes fluttered open, I started to examine my arms and legs. My legs were all cut up but nothing serious, and I had bruises everywhere. I looked over at a mirrored wall and gasped at the sight of my face. It wasn't that I was filthy as hell, or that my hair was so wild it made me look like a crazy person. It was that half my face was so badly swollen and dark purple that I looked like an alien.

I gently touched my face, wincing at the pain that shot through my head, and slowly started to scoop some water over my face. The tears I had been holding in finally started to fall as I leaned back to soak my hair.

The more I reflected on all that had happened, the more I knew I deserved what had happened to me tonight. First Nico, who had been nothing but a gentleman since I'd met him, gets shot. Secondly, falling through scrub

down the mountainside and getting injured. And finally, my encounter with the filthy men at the warehouse, getting beaten and sexually assaulted.

I shuddered. This was not how I anticipated my escape would go. And to top it all off, instead of punishing me for running and getting their brother shot, they found me and treat me like a princess.

What on earth is going on? I don't deserve this.

I blocked my ears and dunked my head below the water, trying to drown my guilt and sorrows. When I came up for air, I screamed, covering myself instinctively, even though you couldn't see a thing below the water's surface.

Atlas just chuckled as he watched me.

"Sorry. I was just checking up on you. How do you feel?"

"I- I feel much better. Thank you." My arms tightened around my chest.

He chuckled, "Oh, don't worry about me. Although you are a very, *very*, *stunningly*, beautiful woman, my preferences are elsewhere."

"Huh?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm gay, but don't go telling everyone. People know, or *think* that they know, but I like to keep them on their toes. You know, keep 'em guessing. It's fun this way."

I was speechless. He seemed so macho, but maybe I had been fooled by his huge size and manly attitude. The more I thought about it though, he had only expressed a kind, sensitive side to me. It made sense.

"But I can't say the same for my other two brothers. They definitely have a thing for you."

"Huh?"

"You must have a concussion." He came closer and sat on the edge of the spa. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

I frowned at his index finger waving in front of my face, and slowly raised my middle finger out of the water at him.

"One," I said.

Laughter fell from his throat. "I knew I liked you."

"What do you mean, they have a *thing* for me?"

He shrugged, "Just lately I've noticed they have been acting differently, in a good way, and I'm pretty sure it has something to do with you."

What!?

I furrowed my brow at him. "Look. I don't know what you're talking about. I barely know either of them. They barely know *me*. You must be mistaken. Something else must be going on and it has nothing to do with me."

Atlas just shrugged again with a smug grin on his face.

"Tell me. You call each other brothers, but you are nothing alike. Are you all related in some way?"

Atlas let out a long breath. "Ooh, long story."

"Well apparently I have a good hour and a half left in here, so I've got time." I leaned back against the tub making a show of getting comfy.

He smirked good humoredly. "You have me there. Well, your suspicions are right. We are different and not related by blood in any way. Our brotherhood bond comes from a time when we were all young boys. You could say we grew up together."

"You were orphans?"

He thought for a moment, "You could say that, yes."

I frowned at his obtuse response but listened as he continued.

"We all come from different cultural backgrounds. Luca is Spanish, as you know. Nico has an Italian background, and me, Greek, obviously." He

flexed his bicep muscles, "Built like the gods."

I rolled my eyes but giggled at his playfulness.

"We all tried to get back to our roots, but it's hard when you're young and so far from your own country. That's why we stuck together, built a life here. Besides, we all have a lot in common, and you could say we have the same goals in life. All we had growing up, was each other."

"And look what you've all accomplished." I gestured to our surroundings.

He smiled his sad smile, "Well, we were highly motivated." He looked at his Rolex, "But *that* is definitely a story for another time. I have to go. If you need anything, there is help just outside the door."

He leaned over, kissed me on the forehead and left.

I leaned back in the tub, thinking of everything he had said. *Growing up with no family*. I could only imagine what that must have felt like. I decided I'd had enough sad feelings for one night and turned my attention instead to other things. My thoughts immediately went to the hooded man in the alley.

Who was the guy that saved me?

At first I had been scared and intimidated by him. He was tall, and clearly strong by the way he handled those dirtbags in the alley. I thought back to when he had taken off his shirt, revealing his toned physique underneath. I was too traumatized at the time to appreciate it, but now, thinking back, his body was quite impressive, despite the numerous scars on his forearm.

Strangely, although I had not seen his face at all, he *did* seem familiar. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I swear I'd seen him before. I frowned. Maybe I was just imagining. I shook my head of the thought. The more important question was, what was he doing in an alleyway in the middle of the night? Was he a homeless man, or a low-life scum feeder like the rest of them, just drifting through dark corners of the city?

I reached out of the spa and picked up his shirt that I'd worn and examined it. I gave it a quick smell. *No, he was neither.* The shirt was clean, fresh even, and smelt amazing like Patchouli and sandalwood. What was more interesting, was that it appeared to be a quality shirt. More expensive than what you'd find on someone on the streets. I leaned back in the tub, closing my eyes and taking another whiff of the shirt, my heart fluttering at the thought of him. My mind then drifted to Luca and Nico and what Atlas had insinuated earlier.

Could it be true? Are they both interested in me?

It was then a disturbing revelation came to me.

If I was completely honest with myself, I was attracted to them both as well.

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Chapter Eight

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Luca



I watched as she walked through the garden, admiring the flowers and laughing with the guardsmen.

"She's settled in nicely, hasn't she?" Atlas entered my office and came to stand beside me at the large window. "She's made friends with nearly everyone these past few weeks, and they seem to like her back. I'd be careful if I were you?"

I raised an eyebrow at him, "How so?"

"Well, if I was straight, I'd take orders from her any day." He grinned. "I see how they look at her."

I smirked. "Yeah well, you're not straight, and as long as all they do is look, then we won't have a problem." Ignoring the shit-eating grin he was casting my way, I poured two glasses of tequila and sat at my desk, sliding one over to the other side. "I didn't ask you here to talk about women."

"I figured." Atlas sat down in the chair opposite me and reached for his glass, taking a long sip.

"The situation out there is getting out of control. This rivalry between the mafia groups needs to stop, but there's no end in sight. We need to figure out a way to put a stop to it before more of our assets go up in flames."

Atlas turned the glass back and forth between his fingers. "What do you propose?"

The thought of what to do had kept me preoccupied for months. Now with the recent escalation in attacks costing us millions, it was time to take action.

"How do I propose to stop a war that has been fueled by years of grudges and betrayals?"

Atlas chuckled.

"We need to make a gesture."

"A gesture?"

"Yes. A gesture of trust. Give them some faith that a truce is possible between us."

Atlas narrowed his eyes. "How?"

"We need to find some common ground, and although I hate to say it, I think we should start with the Rivera's."

"Why them?"

"Because I think it was the Phoenix who tried to kill Catalina. Wipe out the Rivera's in one swoop. I think if we deliver Catalina to her uncle, we can form a bond."

"I still don't understand why she was brought here. Why was she not taken back to her uncle in the first place?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe the plan all along was to use her as a bargaining chip."

"So, I take it you haven't discussed this plan with our brother then?"

"No. Not yet. We'll wait until we get the chance and hopefully we all agree."

Atlas just nodded silently, deep in thought.

"She's a liability, Atlas. We still don't know who attacked her at her father's funeral or what they wanted with her, but it makes sense that it was the Phoenix." Rubbing a hand over my eyes, I closed them briefly as a wave of exhaustion hit me. "Just her being here poses too many risks to our operations. The last thing we need are rumors getting out that will affect our business deals. It's better she returns to where she belongs. Until that time, and until we all agree on how the exchange occurs, we need to keep her close."

"Yeah but you can't keep her locked up here forever. You know that. She's not a timid woman who is going to do as we say indefinitely."

If she were more timid, I could bend her to my will instead of being so frustrated all the time.

"I'll figure something out."

Atlas grinned, "Are you sure you want to send her back?"

I scowled at him. I knew he was trying to bait me so I ignored him. "Any word on Nico?"

I'd lain awake most nights, unable to sleep as I thought of Nico. Luckily the doctors had stopped the bleeding, but he still hadn't woken as expected. He'd been in the intensive care unit since the incident, and the more he remained outside the manor grounds, the more chances our enemies had to take advantage of us while we were most vulnerable.

"Nothing. Vitals remain the same, but I'm heading that way now to check in with our guards and station some more."

I nodded. "Good thinking. Keep me posted. The hospital security is not enough to keep our enemies at bay. I think we can both agree that we need to bring Nico home as soon as possible."

"Agreed." Atlas rose, adjusting his sports coat. "Hey, it'll be alright. He'll pull through."

"I hope you're right." I stood, smiling wanly. "Let me know how your date with Logan goes too. Hopefully he's compliant."

"Ha! Logan? Compliant? That I'd like to see."

"He will be... after you break his leg."

Atlas howled with laughter, "It *is* more fun when they don't comply. Don't worry, he'll come clean about his money skimming, and by the time I'm done with him, he'll tell me where he's been stashing it. Leave it to me."

"Oh, I definitely will." While I didn't mind getting my hands dirty now and then, I didn't mind leaving the physical side to Atlas, who didn't seem to mind the blood and gore. I walked to the window, looking back outside at Catalina. "On second thought, maybe we should trade places."

He chuckled, turning to leave but paused at the door.

"Hey, go easy on her." He nodded his head towards the window. "You don't always need to be domineering. Just talk to her. You'll be surprised how agreeable she can be." He disappeared and I turned towards the window once more.

Agreeable? She's anything but agreeable! Downright defiant is what she is.

Yet, as I heard her laughter lilt through the garden as Ivar spoke with animated zeal, I knew that Atlas was most probably right. I hated to admit it, but there was something there that I didn't want. A small spark that ignited every time I looked at her.

As if she knew I was thinking of her, Catalina lifted her head, our eyes meeting, her gaze lingering for just a moment before the smile fell from her face and she glared at me for just an instant. She turned back to Ivar smiling, taking his arm, and guiding him away from the fountain they had been sitting on.

Taking a deep breath, I calmed the anger that was already brewing inside me and made my way outside. As Ivar caught sight of me, he immediately came over, and I smiled inwardly as Catalina's face soured.

"What do you need Boss?"

"I just wanted to speak with Catalina a moment."

"Of course. She's all yours." He turned to Catalina, kissing the back of her hand. "Until next time, Catalina."

She smiled brilliantly at him. "It's been a pleasure Ivar." She waved him goodbye then turned back to me with an icy stare.

"How are you today, Catalina?"

She placed her hands on her hips adamantly. "I am going out," she stated, her eyes challenging mine.

"Good morning to you too."

"Are you going to let me go out or not?" She glared at me.

I remained silent, considering her request as her steely gaze got more heated with her impatience. My mouth twitched with a hint of a smile. I was starting to enjoy pushing her buttons.

"Maybe you misunderstood." She stepped towards me, pointing a finger in my face, "I am going out, whether you like it or not!"

She turned and started to walk away before I grabbed her wrist and tugged her back, pressing her to me and holding her tightly about the waist.

Does she think that just because she looks so damn beautiful that she can just get what she wants? Stubborn woman, I should... Whoa Luca. Remember what Atlas said. Take it easy on her. Take it easy... She will be... agreeable. Oh how I'd like to teach her to be agreeable!

I realized my jaw was tense, and as I looked down into her eyes, I saw a flicker of pain. I immediately loosened my grasp but held her firm.

"You can go out." I managed to say stiffly.

She looked surprised, "When?"

"Tonight. You will be accompanied of course."

She threw back her head and laughed sarcastically. "Send as many bodyguards as you want. At least I'll be away from here... and from you."

"Now I think it's you who misunderstands. *I* will be going with you. Tonight, dinner, 7 o'clock."

The stunned look on her face told me I had caught her off guard.

Good!

"Why you?"

"Because I don't trust anyone else."

"Not even Atlas?"

I hesitated, thinking about Atlas's whereabouts tonight and Logan's debt. He was a hard ass, and I should have told Atlas to break *both* his legs.

"He's otherwise... engaged elsewhere."

She nodded hesitantly, "Maybe I'll go another night. I don't have anything to wear anyway?"

"Who said you had to wear anything?" I whispered into her ear. "7 o'clock. Be ready."

I grinned at her shocked expression before I let her go and strode back inside without another word, leaving her to stare after me. I was aware my

cock was half erect and I hoped she hadn't noticed. Once inside I took a deep breath, trying to control the blood coursing through me. Somehow, she had this control over me, and I couldn't control how my body was reacting. It was all I could do to not throw her against the wall and have my way with her.

Maybe tonight was not such a good idea....



My breath hitched in my throat as she walked down the stairs and stood before me. The golden lace dress fitted her body perfectly and her hair had been styled beautifully, cascading down one shoulder. I was lost for words as I drank in the sight of her, and it was in that moment, that I finally admitted to myself that there was more to my feelings than just a physical attraction. I wanted to be near her, protect her. *I wanted her to be mine.*

I smiled as I caught her examining me from head to toe with a hint of a smile on her face.

I cocked my head at her. "Like what you see?"

She shrugged, trying to look disinterested. "You'll do."

Is she flirting with me?

"Thank you for the dress, and the hair and makeup stylists, but we're a bit overdressed for dinner, aren't we?"

"Not at all, but if you're worried about that, we can always take something off." My mouth twitched as I tried to suppress a grin at her sarcastic, *You wish*, glare she threw my way.

"Here, this is for you." I stepped forward and carefully slid the hair pin into her hair with the red carnation arrangement.

She glanced in the entryway mirror, smiling brilliantly.

My god she looked beautiful.

"Thank you, Luca." She began to walk towards the front door, revealing her bare back and curvy ass that swayed with every step, just begging to be touched. She looked back over her shoulder, "You coming?"

I grinned, shaking my head.

Easy tiger. The night has only just begun. Control yourself.

As I stepped out into the cool night air, I signaled to the guards to follow before sliding behind the wheel of my black Maserati.

Although I tried not to look at her for most of the trip, the small glimpses I did get, had my heart swelling and my dick kicking in my pants. No one had warned me that Mateo Rivera's daughter was a rare beauty. Probably no one actually *knew* as she kept entirely out of her father's limelight as much as possible. In fact, I was hoping that no one would recognize her tonight either. I was glad the stylist had done as requested, and put on lots of dark eyeshadow to help hide her appearance.

When we arrived, I tossed my keys to the valet and opened her door, extending my hand to her, hoping she wouldn't scratch me like a cat. Surprisingly she took my hand, and I gently lifted her from the car.

"Nice ride, boss."

I smirked, "I'm not your boss."

But I could be if you wanted me too.

"I take it that's your favorite car in the garage?"

"For now. I have just ordered a new Mercedes though, so we shall see."

She rolled her eyes, but as we entered the venue, Catalina surprisingly held tightly to my arm. I liked the feel of it. I felt comfortable. It had been a while since I'd not felt.... Alone.

Upon stepping through the grand doors, Catalina gasped. "You said we were going to dinner. Where are we?"

I watched as her eyes lit up as she took in the grand ballroom that had large crystal chandeliers and walls that had been opulently decorated with flowers and hanging lace.

"We are at an annual fundraiser ball for the Dela Cruz foundation. We will be having dinner here. The food is always excellent, I assure you."

"And what does this Dela Cruz foundation support?"

"Research into infant and child mortality due to undiagnosed diseases. All funds go to the Undiagnosed Diseases Network."

She nodded but didn't say anything more as she continued to soak in the room and the throng of richly dressed people mingling and dancing.

"Here he is. The man of the hour, Mr. Dela Cruz. I'd like you to meet Richard Stavros. He has moved here to Los Angeles and is a property developer and shipping magnate. He's eyeing off some of your port real estate."

I smiled at Howard, our loyal real estate agent as I shook his hand, then Richard's. Over the years Howard had made us a lot of money in property deals.

"Howard, good to see you. Richard. You have a good eye."

"Any possibility you'd be looking to sell?"

I smiled, "Let's not talk business tonight."

"Maybe you have to be very generous with your donations tonight." Howard chimed.

"Of course. Wouldn't have it any other way." Richard beamed, raising his glass in agreement. Even as he drank, his eyes wandered to Catalina and stared, a bit too long for my liking. I was about to excuse ourselves when Jenny pushed through the crowd.

"You're here. It's time for your opening speech, Mr. Dela Cruz."

I nodded curtly to Howard and Richard, happy for the interruption and led Catalina to a table at the front and center of the room.

"I won't be long. Don't go anywhere."

She rolled her eyes.

"I mean it Catalina." I whispered. "Never leave my sight. Do you understand?"

She gave me a dirty look but leaned back in her chair. "Fine."

As I headed up to the stage, I checked that our bodyguards were in the room. They were. Stationed at every exit and some lingering around the room. They all had strict orders to watch Catalina carefully, lest she do another runner.

As the room quietened down, I began my usual welcome speech. Everything was going smoothly. It was ten minutes in when Catalina stood and walked from the table.

Where did she think she was going?

I was infuriated, struggling to contain my anger as my words faltered. One of the bodyguards followed as she disappeared from sight, and I hastily continued my speech to its natural conclusion, raising my glass and telling the crowd to drink up and spend a lot of money. As I left the stage to their laughter and applause, the music started up again and the room continued to move and dance. Searching around the room, I saw the bodyguard wave me

over and I quickly greeted people and shook their hands as they pushed in front of me with their hellos.

When I finally reached the bodyguard, he nodded up the hallway behind him.

"*Nobody* comes in."

The bodyguard nodded curtly.

By this time I was livid, and I stormed up the hallway just as she reappeared.

She looked up in surprise as I grabbed her around the waist and pushed her up against the wall.

"What did I say about leaving my sight?"

At first she was shocked, but anger quickly flooded her features.

"Really? I can't even leave your sight to go the lady's restroom?"

"Huh?"

She pointed a finger behind me, and I turned to see the female sign on the door.

"You could have waited. I would have escorted you."

She rolled her eyes. "What's this need to control me really about, Luca?"

I scowled. "It's not about control. I told you, it's for your own safety."

"Are you sure, because right now you're hurting me, and it seems the only person I need saving from, is you!"

Her words bit deep, and I clenched my jaw as I decided what my next move was. I reluctantly removed my hands from her body and took a step back, deciding it was best to keep calm given our current surroundings.

Oh, but how I wanted to punish her.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you. It wasn't intentional. Please, just come back and have dinner with me."

She looked at me briefly, and for a second I thought I saw tears in her eyes, but she stormed past me and out into the crowd.

Sighing heavily, I followed from a distance, making sure she made it back to our table. I slowly made my way over, stopping for the occasional conversation and banter, but never taking my eyes off her. As I neared the table, I realized that I was not the only one watching her. Several men were eying her off with lustful eyes. I didn't blame them and it made me want to get back to her even faster.

When I finally sat down beside her, I breathed a sigh of relief. Catalina had a strange expression on her face as I leaned back in my chair and appraised her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

She shrugged, "I was just thinking I don't know much about you."

"Ahh, but you do know something then. That is more than most people can say".

Leaning forward she whispered, almost conspiratorially, "Yes. I know you're arrogant, stubborn, domineering, have a need for control, and have quite the temper."

I chuckled, nodding my head in agreement. "I am all those things. But there is a lot more to me than that." In the background the fundraiser announcement was made. I stood, raising my glass of champagne, "Let the bidding begin!" Applause and laughter filled the room as I retook my seat.

"So I can see." She took a sip of her champagne, eying me over the rim.

"Ask me whatever you like."

"Let's see. Where to start? You didn't tell me you headed a charity. How did you come by this cause."

I hesitated only a moment before responding, "Someone I knew died from it. This is my way of keeping their memory alive. You'd know that if you'd have stayed through my speech."

It's also a great way to launder money.

She nodded and looked down at her glass. "You seem to know a lot of people here."

"I know most through business partnerships. Others are word of mouth to their other rich acquaintances. This charity event has become an annual occasion that people look forward to now. The rich and famous never miss it, and I meet more and more influential people every year."

Which comes in handy to have more connections to bribe when we need deals to go through.

"So, you're an important person I take it?"

"To some."

"That's a very mysterious response."

"I'm a very mysterious person."

She smiled shyly, the act making her look vulnerable and even more beautiful.

"What is it you do, exactly?"

"I run... several businesses."

"With your brothers?"

"Yes."

"What *are* your business's?"

I laughed. *Dios mios she is inquisitive.*

"A subject for another time. Look. Here comes the first course."

"Ahh the best food in town that you promised. Maybe you had something to do with it?" She raised an eyebrow at me.

I rubbed a hand across my jaw before holding up two slightly separated fingers. "Just a little bit." If she knew I had chosen, taste tested, and scrutinized every piece of the menu tonight several times over, she'd definitely think I was a control freak.

Although she's not wrong in that regard.

As she took the first bite of her entrée, the moan that escaped her lips and the look of pleasure that crossed her face, gave me a semi hard on.

"This," she pointed down at her salmon ceviche with her fork, "Is divine!" I grinned, "I'm glad."

As we ate through the five-course dinner, I was pleased to see the sensations running across her face. It had been so long since I had spent so much time with a woman, and she was civil the whole time. Eating and conversing with her made my other worries drop away as if they didn't exist.

"Shall we?" I stood and held my hand out to her.

"Shall we what?" She looked confused.

I nodded in the direction of the dance floor. "Dance of course."

She laughed but took my hand. As I led her to the dance floor, I was again acutely aware of the whispers and lustful glances of the other men.

Holding her close, I twirled her under my arm as we hit the floor, making her giggle. A sound that she made more frequently these days, and that I took as a good sign she was hating me less. Pulling her back in close and placing my hand on her bare lower back, I guided her about the floor. Looking down at her as we danced, I realized I hadn't had this much fun at my own event in five years. I also hadn't been attracted to someone in that time.

Luca. What are you doing?

I berated myself instantly at the thought, and the feeling of guilt that swept over me was like a tidal wave.

My duty is to protect her. Keep her close. That is all.

"Is something wrong?" Catalina looked at me in alarm and placed a soft hand upon my cheek. An action that jolted me to my core. While I hadn't realized how much I had missed the tender touch of a woman, the guilt of liking it just made me feel worse and angry with myself.

My hands dropped from her body. "No. I think it's time that we leave."

Catalina frowned, grabbing my arm to look at my watch.

"But it's only 10:30pm? Why so early?"

Before I could respond, an elderly couple I didn't recognize, stopped in front of us. All beaming smiles. "We have been watching you two, and we think you both make the most perfect couple. So handsome, so beautiful. Such an exotic looking pair."

I nearly choked, "No, we're not..."

"Why thank you. You're too kind." Catalina beamed. "My beau here was just telling me how he didn't want the night to end." She looked my way challengingly.

Two can play at this game. I plastered a fake smile on my face.

"And it won't. We were just leaving as I have a surprise for her."

The old woman looked at her husband knowingly. "Oh Henry, I remember what it was like to be young and getting surprised by you."

"Only for you Sarah. Come. Let's leave these two love birds to enjoy the rest of their night."

I took Catalina's hand and started to pull her towards the exit, smiling at the elderly couple. "Enjoy the rest of the night."

As we left, I waved, said some good nights, and accepted praises on yet another delicious dinner and successful fundraising night. I gave a sigh of relief when we finally exited the building and I was able to bundle Catalina back into the car and jump behind the wheel, thankful to be alone.

Now that I was in the privacy of my own car, my false bravado dissipated.

Catalina placed a hand over mine. "What happened in there? Why the sudden change in mood? Was it something I did?"

"No." I wasn't in the mood for her questions.

"Are you going to tell me what is going on?"

"No."

She sighed, "Have it your way. Are we going home?"

"No."

She hmped and sat back in her chair muttering, "No, no, no. Back to Mr. Arrogant Asshole."

I ignored her, driving the short distance in silence and found Raena waiting on the sidewalk.

Catalina raised an eyebrow at me, "Are we picking up women off the sidewalk now?"

I smirked, turned off the engine and climbed out. Opening her door, I patiently waited for her to step out.

"Raena, this is Catalina. Catalina, Raena. She will personally look after you."

"Mr. Dela Cruz, I will make sure she has everything she needs and more." She batted her lashes at me, smiling seductively. Yet her advances had no effect on me.

"What's going on here? Where are we?" Catalina demanded.

"You said you didn't have anything to wear. I thought you could pick out your own wardrobe."

"Huh? Isn't everything closed?"

I waved an arm at the row of shops that were brightly lit and waiting.

"As you can see, the attendants are ready and waiting. Pick whatever you want. It's all been paid for."

She looked at me dubiously, "Why?"

"Consider it a peace offering from Mr. Arrogant Asshole."

She smirked, "Does this mean you'll be accompanying me in the dressing room?"

I raised my eyebrows at her in surprise.

"You know, since I can't leave your sight."

I straightened a wisp of hair behind her ear. "Oh, don't tempt me, Catalina," I warned.

She smirked again, "I would never." With a flourish, she twirled and walked inside the store, stopping at the door to look over her shoulder.

"You coming?"

I sighed, bracing myself for the tedious part of the evening. I couldn't say I overly enjoyed shopping, which is why I paid people to do it for me. But duty called and I could trust no one else to protect her.

Three hours later, and only two stores down, my phone rang. It was Atlas.

"Luca, you need to get home now." The urgency in his voice distracted me from Catalina's alluring gaze as she showed off a hot little number.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Nico."

Chapter Nine

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Catalina



It was the first time I'd actually seen another emotion on his face other than the ruthless demeanor he usually carried. I wasn't sure what it was, but I knew I had triggered something in him. The change in him just grew my curiosity further, and I decided that there was a lot more than met the eye when it came to Luca, and I was determined to understand this enigmatic 'boss'.

As I raised another fork with a slice of the Kobe beef to my lips, I thought I'd die and go to heaven. *The. Food. Was. Divine!* He had definitely come true to his word. He must have an excellent event manager to pick all this out.

Even as we hit the dance floor, I was loving his mood. He was smiling for once, and if I'm honest, *owned* the dance floor. Boy, could he move as he waltzed around the room. He could probably make any woman with two left feet look good. Secretly I was glad of his excellent control, as I was *not*

a great dancer. As I hung onto his strong shoulders, I felt secure in his arms, like I would never fall.

And even though I tried to dislike this rude, and domineering man who sometimes brought me to the verge of tears, in this moment, I couldn't. He was like a completely different person. And I liked him. I *really* liked him.

When his demeanor changed at the drop of a hat, I was astounded. All I could think about in the car was what I had done wrong to trigger such a reaction. Even looking at him as he drove, he was angry, his jaw clenched.

It was only when we arrived at a shopping strip that he spoke again, and I was determined to bring carefree Luca back.

"So, what do you think?" I stood before him in red 6-inch stilettos and a red dress so short, that my butt cheeks were almost showing.

He glanced up from his phone, "Yes, it looks fi..." he looked me up and down and swallowed before composing himself.

Just the reaction I was looking for. At least I could get his attention.

"So, what do you think?"

Although he still looked serious, I could tell he was suppressing a smile.

"I think it is a very nice dress, but not appropriate to go out in."

"No?"

"No. Especially if you're with me."

"And why do you say that?"

"If tonight has been any indication of how men are around you in a bare back dress, then I can only imagine the trouble you'd cause in that one. I think I'd need to hire more bodyguards to protect you."

I was surprised. "More? I *have* bodyguards?"

He nodded.

"How many?"

He held up three fingers.

"Three? Really? How come I've never seen them?"

"Because they're not to be seen. They are to watch and protect only when needed."

"Well where are they? I'd like to meet them."

He shook his head. "No."

"No?"

"No."

I rolled my eyes, "Fine. How long have they been watching me?"

"A few weeks."

"A few *weeks*?!" My voice rose an octave, "You've secretly had me watched for *weeks*?"

He sighed, "What is the problem, Catalina?"

I looked directly at him, and we stared at each other in silence for a few moments.

"They can't be watching me that closely. What if I were to get into trouble, like right now? Surely they are too far away to help me in time. Would they not have to be right here, beside me?"

He shook his head, "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm here."

"You?"

"Yes." He stared at me, his face devoid of humor.

"You're saying you can protect me? Aren't you just the fancy, good looking, rich boss?"

He smirked, "You think I'm good looking?"

There was no point in hiding it. The man was sex on legs. I was not oblivious to the magnetism he had over women, especially after tonight. They seemed to hang breathlessly on his every word, pawing him at every opportunity, despite some having their husbands on their arm. People just seemed to flock to him. Women wanted to be *with* him, and men wanted to *be* him.

I shrugged, "Very. You're even sexier when you smile."

He stood, staring down at me. "Well, this fancy, good looking, rich boss, can protect you better than you know. I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty."

I wasn't sure if he was being serious or flirting with me. I swallowed hard. Either way he was turning me on with his intensity.

"Why do you still want to protect me after everything I've done?"

He gently lifted my chin, his fingertips sending a tingling sensation down my body. "Because I don't want to see anything bad happen to you."

I was about to ask why on earth he thought anything would, when his phone rang. He didn't take his eyes off me as he answered.

"Yes?" He quipped. I could tell by the concern that flitted across his face that it was serious.

"Okay, we're on our way." He ended the call, grabbing the mountain of bags beside him, and pushed me towards the door.

"What's going on?"

"We need to go home. Now!"

I was confused, "Why?"

"Nico's there."

I gasped, "What? Nico's awake?"

"I don't know."

I thanked Raena and the other girls who had helped me, as I was ushered out the door and into the Maserati.

Shivering against the cold night air and the coolness of the leather on my practically bare ass, I noticed Luca, despite his prior seriousness, had a hint of a smile on his face.

"Cold?"

"No." I crossed my legs and pulled the dress down as far as it would go to no avail.

Luca smirked, and as we sped away from the curb he reached over and turned on the heating.

"Thank you." I muttered. He seemed to ignore me, and as we arrived at the manor, he ushered me out of the car and through the front door, where he immediately took the stairs two at a time and left me watching after him from the foyer.

Not knowing what else to do and wanting to see Nico, I followed. I saw Luca disappear through a door and I approached tentatively.

Was he still alive? Was he awake? What had happened?

I poked my head around the door. I immediately saw Nico, lying on the bed, asleep. Atlas was there by his side, Luca standing on the other. They were talking in low whispers.

"What happened?" Luca enquired.

"There was a security breach at the hospital. It was lucky we had Stefan post our men discreetly inside. There were two of them."

"Are they alive?"

What on earth kind of question is that?

Atlas nodded, "Still breathing. I had them brought to the guard house basement and brought Nico home immediately. We have the doc and a

nurse on standby."

"Good work. Let's go interrogate those bastards."

Atlas grinned, "Finally. Let's go fuck 'em up."

Luca gave Nico's hand a squeeze. "Hang in there bro." As they both turned to leave, they halted at the sight of me. They both looked at each other.

It was Atlas who spoke first.

"How much did you hear?"

I shrugged, confused. None of it made sense. "I-, I'm not sure."

Luca loosened his bow tie. "It doesn't matter. Catalina, you stay here with Nico. We have some *business* to attend to." They brushed past me and down the hall, their expressions angry.

I turned my attention back to Nico. He was pale, but otherwise looked like himself. He still had that tousled, sandy blonde hair that I found so charming, and his jaw line, which was usually clean shaven, now had a layer of stubble over it, making him look even more manly.

I sat in the chair by his bed and held his hand, a wave of exhaustion coming over me. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. His heartbeat was even and smooth, his body warm. I must have nodded off, because the next thing I felt was a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to find Luca glaring down at me, madder than I'd ever seen him before.

"Cozy?" He hissed.

I sat up, confused, blinking the sleep from my eyes.

What have I done now?

"Don't pretend. That's all you people do. Scheme. Steal. Hurt."

You people? What does that even mean?

"Luca, wh- what are you talking about?" I stood up to face him, the grogginess of sleep slowly fading.

"Do you all think you can get away with whatever you want?" He came closer, stepping into the soft glow of the lamp beside the bed.

I took an involuntary step back, nearly falling over the chair behind me. He was glowering at me, and there was blood splattered across his face and tuxedo shirt that had been rolled up at the sleeves. His hands were clenched at his side, and the muscle in his jaw was twitching. A sign I'd learnt, that meant he was in no mood for games.

I put my hands up to ward him off. "Luca. I'm not sure what has happened, but it has nothing to do with me."

With lightning speed, he grabbed my hands and pulled me to him.

"Oh, it has everything to do with you Catalina." He growled. He spun me round and bent me over the bed, taking hold of my hair and yanking it back. He leant down and whispered in my ear. "You Rivera's deserve everything that's coming to you, and now it's time to deal some punishment of my own."

I could feel his free hand sliding up my thigh, his fingers hooking beneath my lace underwear and roughly tearing them off.

What is happening?

Although I was scared of what was occurring, I found myself madly turned on. I wasn't sure if it was his anger or his forcefulness, but deep down I knew I wanted this, and I didn't know if I wanted him to stop. As I heard the sound of him unbuckling his belt, I tried to stand up.

"Don't move. You're a fucking tease Catalina. You wear something like this and expect to be in control? No fucking chance!"

He placed a hand on my back pushing me down across the bed and Nico's legs, and slapped my bare ass hard.

I yelped, the sting of pain still fresh when another blow hit. I let out a scream as yet another blow landed, and another.

"Yes, scream Catalina," he hissed. Then without warning he grabbed both my ass cheeks roughly and rammed his cock into me. The motion making me scream again at the sudden intrusion. He groaned loudly, hesitating only a second to relish the feeling, before leaning back and slamming into me again. I whimpered. He felt huge and he gave me no time to adjust as he rammed into me again and again. I could feel the pain deep inside as his thrusts increased in tempo. I could do nothing but hold onto Nico's legs and bite my lip from crying out. He smacked my other ass cheek hard, and I whimpered again.

I could hear him smirk as he relentlessly thrust into me as deep as he could. I was still in two minds at how I felt about the situation, it was painful, yes, but gradually I could feel my body responding to his advances, and I found myself biting my lip, not out of pain but to stop from crying out in pleasure. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

Or would that piss him off more?

It was in that moment that we heard a weak voice.

"I don't know if I should be pissed that you're rocking my bed so much, or turned on?"

My heart skipped a beat, and I turned my head in Nico's direction to find him grinning sleepily at us. I was horrified! I tried to wriggle out from under Luca's grasp, but he pushed me back down to the bed, pinning me down tight, his cock pushed deep inside me. With my head half buried in the blankets I could see that Nico's cock was pitching a tent.

How long had he been watching?

"Bro, you're awake! You're just in time to join in the fun."

Nico chuckled weakly. "I'm not sure you got the memo, but I'm kind of out of commission right now."

"Well, it doesn't seem like it to me." He lifted me up by the hair making me wince, and pulled the blanket from the bed. "Besides, Catalina here has been making cozy with you while you slept, and I'm sure she has a welcome wakeup gift for you."

Huh? What is he talking about?

I didn't have to wonder long as he repositioned so my head was above Nico's groin.

He wanted me to suck Nico's dick?

"Lift his robe."

I was still in shock at what he wanted me to do. I'd never had a threesome before, that I could remember, and the thought both scared and excited me.

"Do it Catalina, or I'll make you scream like you never have before."

I was confused by what he meant, then gasped as I felt a slight sting of discomfort as his thumb slid into my butt hole.

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Really? You doubt me? By the feel of it, you have never done it before. Am I right?"

I thought hard, but I honestly didn't know. Either way, there was no way I wanted Luca's large cock up my ass, especially given how rough he was being.

I could almost feel his triumphant grin at the back of my head as I lifted Nico's robe and released his penis from his pants.

"Catalina, you don't have to do this." Nico lifted his good arm that wasn't in a sling and tried to stop me.

"No, it's okay. I want to. It's the least I can do, for you saving my life."

I lifted my head and caught a glimpse of Luca's angry face.

Ha! I knew he'd be pissed if I played along.

The more I made him angry to beat him at his own game, the more I wanted to do it.

I pushed aside Nico's hand and took the tip of his penis in my mouth. Nico's head dropped back on the pillow, and he let out a moan as I gently slid down his shaft taking as much of him in as I could. I did a few strokes up and down his shaft, twirling my tongue around his salty tip and sucking as tightly as I could, as Luca once again grabbed both ass cheeks and continued his relentless thrusts. I could hear his breathing getting louder and more ragged, and I moaned around Nico's cock, sucking harder as I felt the pleasure pooling between my legs. I felt Luca jerk and groan as he came, his erratic last thrusts sending me over the edge as I came too. Suddenly a hand on the back of my head cut off my moans as Nico's cock was forced deep into my throat, making me gag. As I gagged around his pulsing cock, my body convulsing with pleasure, I heard Nico swear as he came deep in my throat.

"Fuck. Oh my god." Followed shortly by, "Geez, let her breathe man."

Luca let go of my head, and Nico's semi hard dick slid from my mouth. I coughed as Luca lifted me from the bed and gently slid out of me. He turned me around to face him. His breathing was heavy as he looked at me with dark eyes. They were unreadable and I wondered what he was thinking.

At least he doesn't look like a rabid dog anymore.

He opened his mouth to say something, and I put a finger to his lips. Then claspng his face in both hands, I forced my tongue into his mouth and kissed him roughly. Something I had wanted to do since I had woken from my coma.

When I eventually pulled away from his mouth, the cute, bewildered look on his face almost made me laugh.

"Thanks for the fun boys. I had a really good time." I lifted Luca's hands from my waist and dropped them to his side, then turned and kissed Nico gently on the lips.

I picked up my clutch that I'd left on the chair and made towards the door. As I did, I lifted my hand and ran it across Luca's still heaving chest. The fabric of his tuxedo was damp with blood and sweat.

"I'll leave you two boys to catch up." I strode towards the door in my red dress and 6-inch heels, aware of their bewildered gazes following me as I walked from the room. I turned at the doorway and winked at them both, "Until next time...."

I smiled to myself as I headed down the hallway and heard a '*What the fuck?*', from Luca.

And although I was sore all over, I had to agree it was some of the best sex I'd ever had...

I think...

Chapter Ten

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Nico



"What. The. Fuck?" Luca stared at the empty doorway in shock.

I didn't know what the hell was going on, but there were no complaints from me. "You can say that again. That was some awakening. Do I even want to know what's been going on between you two?"

Luca just shook his head. "I wish I knew the answer to that, brother."

By the confused look on his face, I knew he was struggling with his feelings. It was an emotion I'd seen many times in recent years, and I knew he didn't want to talk about it.

"How long have I been out? I feel like I slept for ages." I stretched my legs and arms as best I could, and only noticed then that one was in a sling. "Shit. What happened?"

Luca finally tore his eyes from the doorway and sat down.

"You don't remember?"

I frowned, trying to think of the last thing I could remember. As the memories came flooding back, I cringed.

"That's right. That asshole shot me in the chest."

Luca nodded, "Dead asshole, now. You had us worried. It was touch and go there for a second."

I tried to move my arm and pain shot through my shoulder.

"How long?"

"Five weeks."

"Five weeks! Shit! What did I miss?"

"Nothing you need to worry about, man." Luca patted me on the shoulder, "Just get some rest. We'll talk in the morning."

I laughed. "You don't have to tell me twice. I'm completely sated right now. Not sure what I did to deserve the royal treatment, but I'll take it."

Luca finally cracked a smile, "Do you need the nurse or anything?"

I shook my head, "Like I said, I've been taken care of plenty already."

He grinned, "I'm really glad you're awake bro. You have no idea what it's been like."

"I'm sure you'll tell me everything."

He nodded, rose from the chair, and grabbed my head with both hands and kissed my forehead. "I love you bro. Now get some sleep, we have a lot to talk about."

With that he left my room, closing the door behind him.

I looked at the clock. 4:30am.

What the fuck was he doing in my room at 4:30am in the morning, covered in blood and fucking Catalina on top of me?

We had a lot to talk about all right...



Three days later and I was finally out of bed. Catalina came every day to see how I was doing, and Atlas almost lived by my bedside, catching me up on the current status quo with the attacks. It appeared he'd been enjoying himself, and letting out his inner psycho more since I hadn't been there to keep him in check.

Ironically, from what I could make out, Catalina thought he was some sort of sweetheart. *Boy did she have another thing coming.*

I still hadn't had a chance to catch up with Luca. He'd been called away the next morning for a business trip and he'd been gone ever since. Now here I was, finally up and about and having breakfast with Catalina and Atlas.

"How are you feeling today?" Catalina asked.

"Better." I rotated my now free arm, feeling the slight pull of pain in my chest. "Remind me to never take a bullet point blank in the chest again."

Catalina leant over and grasped my hand. "I'm so sorry Nico. Truly I am. I shouldn't have run away that night. I just... I just felt trapped."

"It's okay. I'm alive. That's all that matters." I lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, and was rewarded with a smile.

"Am I missing something?" I looked over to see Atlas with a mouthful of scrambled eggs and waving his fork between the two of us.

"Let's just say I've said sorry, as best I can." Catalina said sheepishly.

Atlas narrowed his eyes, then shrugged his shoulders, turning his attention back to his breakfast.

A knock at the door had us all turning to see the housemaid holding a long golden dress.

"Miss Catalina. This just came for you. Shall I put it in your room?"

Catalina nodded. "Oh yes, thank you Eva. How is your son, Goran? Any better?"

She nodded with a bright smile. "Yes. His fever broke yesterday and he's much better now. Thank you for asking, Cat. And thank you for the book too. He just loves stories with dragons."

"Well I'm glad he likes it, and he's feeling better."

Eva smiled, "I'll leave you to your breakfast. Have a nice day, Cat."

"You too Eva." Catalina waved after her.

I raised my brow at Catalina. "You know her?"

She nodded as she took a bite of her fig. "Of course. Eva is lovely."

"And where is the dress from?"

"Oh, I left it in the store by accident. They must have laundered it and sent it over. Your brother gave it to me."

"Atlas always did have good taste."

Atlas shook his head, "Don't look at me, bro. I didn't get her that dress."

Now I was confused. Atlas was our usual fashionista in the house. I looked at Catalina who just shrugged.

"Luca, gave it to me."

"Luca?" I was astounded.

Atlas leant back in his chair. "Now I'm definitely missing something. What is going on with the world?"

"Why do you say that?" Catalina asked innocently over her coffee.

I thought about my words carefully. "It's just, he hasn't bought any female any gift in a long time."

"No, it wasn't a gift. He got that for me for the fundraiser event."

I looked at Atlas, who looked just as stunned as I did. "He took you to the fundraiser?"

She nodded.

"That's even more meaningful, given the reason for the fundraiser." I said.

Catalina looked confused, "Because of his close friend who died?"

"Close friends?" Atlas frowned. "You mean his wife and kid?"

"What?!" Catalina spluttered on her coffee, coughing for a few seconds before she looked between the both of us.

"You didn't know?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"His wife died during childbirth. His daughter was born but she died a few days later from an unknown disease."

"When?" Catalina asked softly.

"Both of them died five years ago." Atlas replied. "He created the foundation in honor of their memory."

I nodded, "So the fact that he bought you a dress to his wife's fundraiser... it means something."

We sat in silence, finishing off our breakfast until Atlas got to his feet.

"Okay, I'm outta here. Got some errands to run." He clapped me on my shoulder, making me wince. "Take it easy bro. Catalina, a pleasure as always." He gave her a wink before leaving the table.

I rubbed my shoulder, "Ow."

"I'm sure he didn't do it on purpose."

"Oh, I'm sure he does just that. The sadist." I chuckled.

Catalina giggled, "Come on, let's get you some fresh air. Let's go for a walk in the garden."

As we walked out, Catalina greeted Hugo our gardener and waved to Ivar, our head guardsman, who blew her a kiss back.

My brow furrowed, "How do you know everyone?"

She laughed, taking me by my good arm, "Let's just say I had a lot of time to explore the compound and meet everyone while you were out."

"It seems you fit in well here." I was impressed. The more I learnt about Catalina, the more my interest was piqued.

"I guess so. It's starting to feel like one big family here. I get this sense of real camaraderie and loyalty among everyone. It's how a home *should* be. How are you all so close?"

I crinkled my brow at her. The truth would be too much for her to comprehend.

"Let's just say we've known each other a very, *very* long time."

"Well, you and your brother's have done well here. You're all really sweet... well mostly."

If only she knew how ruthless we could be.

She looked at me with questioning eyes. "Why did you take that bullet for me?"

"To keep you safe. Protect you. Call it a protective instinct."

That and I didn't think the bastard would actually shoot me. He must have had slow reflexes.

"But I still don't understand why?"

"Because you're important."

"Why? How? Help me to understand."

"Look all in good time. The docs advice was not to overwhelm you." She rolled her eyes.

I ignored her and continued walking. It was good to get out of bed and stretch my legs for a change, get some fresh air, new perspective. I usually got that feeling when riding my bikes, and I couldn't wait to get back on

them again. I was lost in the reverie of imagining the open road and the wind on my face when I felt a tug on my arm and looked down at her again.

"So, what about you?" She asked.

"What about me?"

"Any past wives or girlfriends I should know about?" She looked up at me through her lashes. I know she was being playful, but if only she knew how dark and depraved my past really was, then she wouldn't be asking me this question.

"No. There's no one."

"None? Noone at all?"

I shook my head. "I don't do relationships. I mean I tried a few times, but it turns out it's not for me."

She looked at me, waiting for me to continue. I knew I had piqued her interest and I scowled at my lack of tactful wording.

"Care to elaborate?"

I just shook my head, turning away from her. My past was my own personal demon that I wrestled with almost every day. It haunted me still and I tried to push the memories back as if they never happened. I wasn't ready to open up about it. Only my brothers knew and right now, I preferred it stayed that way.

She must have taken the hint because she backed off and instead rested her head on my shoulder as we walked in silence. Although I didn't want to keep her at arm's length, I didn't want to hurt her either. I decided to turn the conversation around.

"So, what is going on with you and Luca? How did you two end up being in my room the other night."

She shrugged, "I honestly don't know. I was asleep, he came in, he was angry...." Her voice trailed off as if she was trying to remember something. "I think he was accusing me of something. Wait. He called me a Riv..." she shook her head as she tried to recall what had happened. "Sorry, I was a bit distracted at the time." She smiled sheepishly. "It was Riv- something."

"Rivera?"

"Yes! That's it! What does that mean?"

I was shocked. I didn't know what to say. All I could think of was that Luca must have been stinking mad to let that slip. Telling her her full name was way too risky.

Play it cool Nico, and hopefully she won't suspect anything.

I shrugged, "I'm not sure. I mean I have heard Luca mention it but I'm not sure what it means." She looked at me dubiously. "I can ask him if you like?" I added hopefully.

"Yes. I need to find out what he knows. I know he knows more than he's letting on."

Shit!

"Do you know when he'll be back?"

"Um, tonight I think."

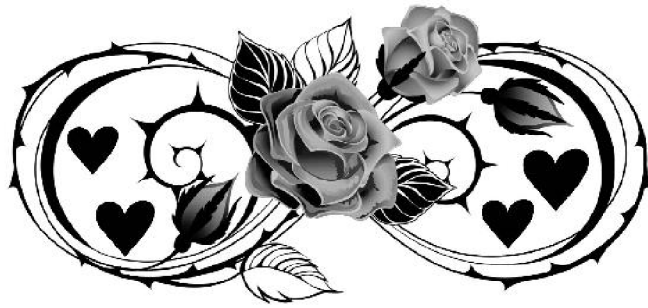
"Good. Tonight then." I avoided her stare, aware that she was looking at me with narrowed eyes.

Double shit!

Chapter Eleven

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Catalina



*N*ow it made sense.

The event was for his late wife *and child*. No wonder he was so unpredictable.

Poor tortured Luca.

And what was with Nico? He seemed just as damaged by something. Something he still couldn't face. It made me want to know more about them both.

How could a man who seemed to be so charming, so good looking, never have had a real relationship? I'm sure I wasn't the first to be attracted to this man. I wanted to help him, but until he let me in, I couldn't. I was determined to figure out the truth.

And I was determined to figure out why and how I was here. I knew they knew more than what they were letting on and I was going to get to the bottom of it. *Tonight.*

Ever since Nico mentioned the name Rivera, I couldn't stop repeating it over and over in my head.

You Rivera's deserve everything that's coming to you... That's what Luca had said.

In the back of my mind, something was nagging. I felt close to a breakthrough, and I was frustrated that even after being here for nearly two months, nothing had come to me. I refused to believe that whoever I was, was gone forever. Tonight, I was confident I'd find out.

Now, as I sat on the lounge after dinner, sitting across the room from them, I looked from one to the other. Luca as dark as night, Nico as light as day. And Atlas, well he was sweet Atlas. They couldn't have been more different, and I'd come to like all three of them. With Luca and Nico in particular, I struggled with how I felt. The more I learnt about them, the more I started to understand their complicated nature, and although I didn't know the full truth of what was happening here, I couldn't help the growing attraction I felt towards them both.

"How was your business trip?" I asked.

Luca smiled, "Why did you miss me?"

I smiled back but I wasn't going to give him the pleasure of a response. I hadn't seen him since that night three days ago and I wasn't sure if he was being genuine, or his mind was in the gutter. Instead, I turned my attention to Nico and gave him the, *'anytime'* look.

He got the message, sat straighter in his chair, and looked at Luca hesitantly.

"Uh, Catalina was wondering what you meant by saying *'you Rivera's'* last time we saw you."

Luca looked surprised. "I said that?"

I nodded, watching him carefully to see his reaction.

He simply shrugged, "I'm not sure. Don't listen to what I say in the heat of the moment." He rose from the lounge and poured wine from a beautiful looking bottle and handed us each a glass. His curt look at Nico did not go unnoticed. "Drink. I discovered this while I was away, it's the smoothest, most flavorsome wine I've ever come across. I thought you might like it, Catalina." He held my eyes for a moment before turning and sitting back down. My brows furrowed as I saw the gun tucked into his waistband at his back.

Why on earth would he be carrying a gun?

"Not bad for a wine." Atlas commented. I looked over to see Atlas already placing an empty glass on the coffee table and brandishing another glass in his hand. "But I still prefer my bourbon."

Nico just shook his head at him with a grin, swirling his glass and smelling its contents before taking a sip and nodding his approval.

I, however, made no move. They were trying to distract me. Change the topic, and they all looked at me, waiting to see what I thought,

I cleared my throat, "I find that what people say in the heat of the moment, are usually their most truthful thoughts."

"Oh boy." Atlas mumbled under his breath.

Luca just stared at me with a seemingly impassive expression, but I could tell by the way he was clenching his jaw that he was *not* happy.

Eventually he sighed, "It's just a name I call people who vex me, okay. I came in, I saw you sleeping on Nico's shoulder, I got... I got..."

"Jealous?" Atlas supplied with a grin. He was enjoying this.

Luca scowled, "Let's just say I didn't like it."

Nico looked momentarily confused before snapping his fingers, "Oh I get it now. The '*making cozy*' comment. I'd forgotten about that."

"Uh huh. And why would you use that name exactly?"

"It was someone I knew as a kid. I hated him. Really hated him. It all started then."

Nico and Atlas both gave grim nods in agreement.

I looked from one man to the next, half considering what Luca had said. I doubt it was the truth, but it seemed I would get nothing from the boys. I'd have to do my own research.

How could I find out who I was? And why were they keeping the truth from me?

I absently took a sip from my glass, pondering my next move. *Mmm, way better than my last batch.*

"Well, I'm going to call it a day." Atlas gave an exaggerated stretch. "See you tomorrow bros, baby girl."

"Yeah, me too. I think I've been up much longer than what the doc prescribed." Nico stood and briefly kissed my forehead. "Night Angel."

Luca watched them leave, an expression on his face that read, *cowards.*

"What? Afraid to be alone with me?" I jested.

The corner of his lips twitched into a smile. "Not at all."

I took another sip. *Catalina Rivera-Flores. You've done it again.*

"Perfecto." I whispered. I looked down, confused at the glass in my hand.

Why would I think that?

I took yet another sip. A vision of a vineyard popped into my head. A beautiful purple wine bottle in my hands. My favorite color.

"Everything okay Catalina?"

"Fine." I stood and collected the bottle from the table between us. "You're right. This wine is amazing."

As I studied the bottle, my eyes widened.

Rivera-Flores vineyards.

I looked at Luca who moments ago had seemed so convincing.

He was lying to me, and I'd had enough. Time to cut the crap.

I put the bottle down and walked around the table to stand before him. I could tell he was intrigued.

"Do you care for me, Luca? Or am I just a plaything to you?"

He cocked his head to one side, studying me a moment before answering.

"Both."

I took the half empty wine glass from his hand and placed it on the table before climbing on his lap and straddling him on the lounge. He made no move to stop me and the hint of a smile on his face told me he was enjoying where this was going.

Well, the joke's on you sweetheart.

I smiled at him as I ran my hand through his hair and grabbed a fistful, yanking his head back.

"Tell me who I really am, and don't bullshit me."

Luca smiled, "I'm not sure if I should be turned on or intimidated."

"Both." I reached around with my free hand and pulled out his revolver and held it beneath his chin.

"You know how to use that sweetheart?"

I cocked the revolver, "What do *you* think? Take your time... *sweetheart.*"

He fixed me with a steely gaze. "Your name is Catalina Rivera-Flores. The daughter of the late Mateo Rivera."

"*Late Mateo Rivera?*"

"Yes. He's dead."

I didn't know how I felt about this news.

"How?"

"No one knows."

I yanked on his hair again and forced the gun deeper into his jawline.

"Did you have anything to do with it?"

He turned his head downwards ignoring the gun at his throat so he could stare me squarely in the eyes.

"We had nothing to do with it Catalina. That is the truth."

Something in his eyes told me he wasn't lying, but I knew he was guilty of something.

"Have you killed any of my family?"

He hesitated before responding, but never took his eyes off me. "Yes."

I was infuriated, and as tempted as I was to pull the trigger, I couldn't. I was no killer.

"When?"

"The night we fucked."

I swallowed. It had been Rivera blood on him that night. My *relations* blood on him.

"Why?"

"Because they tried to kill Nico. In the hospital. We were just defending ourselves."

"Why would they do that?"

"They have always tried to get rid of us Catalina. It's nothing new."

"I don't understand. Why? Business? Money?"

"If only it were that simple. Money can be negotiated. You can work it out, bribe someone even. Easy solutions. But no, our rivalry goes much

deeper than that."

"Rivalry?"

"Yes, Catalina." He grasped my wrist with the gun tightly and pulled it away from his head. "I'm surprised you haven't figured it out yet." He twisted my arm behind my back, pinning it there, while my other hand still grasped his hair tightly. He then ran his free hand up my thigh and grabbed my behind, pressing me to his erection, his eyes never leaving mine.

I swallowed hard, "Figured out what?"

He leaned forward and whispered, "That we are *enemies*."

My brow furrowed as I looked into his dark amber eyes, and he smirked as he lowered his head and kissed the nape of my neck.

Was he playing with me? Why would we be enemies?

The questions came thick and fast to my mind, and I tried to make sense of them, order them and demand responses, but Luca's relentless assault of kisses were driving me to distraction. I was loving the feel of his lips on my neck as he kissed behind my ears. I moaned as he sucked on my ear lobe, then eventually silenced me with his mouth. His tongue invading me, seducing me.

I was truly sleeping with the enemy. But in that moment I didn't care.

How could something so wrong feel so right?

Deep down I knew he was telling me the truth. His answers were direct this time. No nonsense, no obscurity, and I knew that their intentions with me were most likely only for their personal gain. I was a bargaining chip. Nothing more. The thought left me both saddened and angry, and as I kissed Luca's mouth for the last time, I pulled away, biting his lower lip, and drawing blood.

Luca winced, lifting a tentative finger to his lips. "Vicious."

"Sweetheart, you have no idea." I reached down between us and rubbed my hand over his cock that was straining against the material, squeezing it hard.

He sucked in a quick breath, tensing slightly. "Play nice kitty cat."

Kitty cat. I had heard that before, I was sure of it.

I smiled at him, leaning forward and briefly sucking his bottom lip into my mouth before leaning back and licking my lips.

"My first taste of Dela Cruz blood."

Luca looked at me with a puzzled expression mixed with something else.

Was that admiration in his eyes?

"Stay right here. I have something for you." I whispered. I slowly slid off his lap, "Don't move."

He narrowed his eyes at me but didn't move as I left the room still holding his revolver in my hand.

Taking a deep steadying breath, I quickly ran down the long hallway and into the garage. I looked at the row of cars and my eyes immediately fell on Luca's new red Mercedes. He wouldn't mind if I borrowed it. It's more my style anyway.

Grabbing the keys by the door and jabbing at the garage door remote, I smirked at how easy it was to get out of here. I tossed the gun in the passenger seat and was halfway in the car when I noticed the Jerry cans beside the motorcycles. An idea hit me and I grinned.

That'll do.

They were lucky I could only grab two, and I threw them in the car beside me before starting the engine. The car roared to life, and I sped out of the garage, halting at the front door. I jumped out, spreading the gasoline across the front steps and along the front of the house. I punched the cigarette

lighter in the car, waiting for it to heat up. As it popped up, Luca opened the front door and rushed out, no doubt disturbed by the sound of his precious new car driving away.

He made his way toward me, his eyes alight with anger as I flicked the lighter through the air and it dropped to the ground bursting into flames. I laughed as he jumped back from the fire and started yelling as the flames started to lick up the walls, climbing higher and higher.

I got back in the car, revving it loudly to get his attention. He reached behind him, no doubt looking for his gun, before he scowled in my direction.

Laughing, I blew him a kiss through the flames and put the pedal to the metal, speeding out of the driveway.

Although a part of me was saddened to be leaving the guys I had grown feelings for, I knew I would never find out who I was there. And they clearly couldn't be trusted.

As I watched the flames rise higher in the rearview mirror, I knew I had made the right decision. And as I sped into the night, I knew I would find my true self and find out the truth about what was going on with my family, *and* its enemies.

It appeared we had a darker side than what my father was letting on, and I was determined to figure out what that was, and the connection to my boys.

I am Catalina Rivera-Flores, and it was time that I enter the shadows...

To be Continued...

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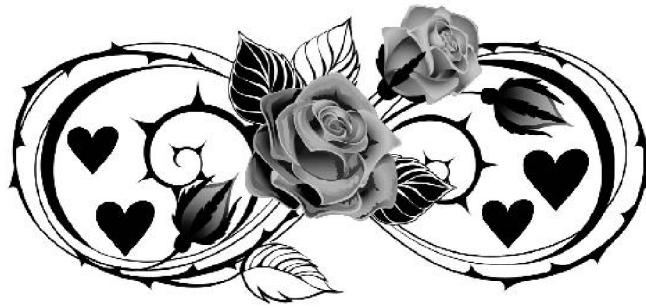
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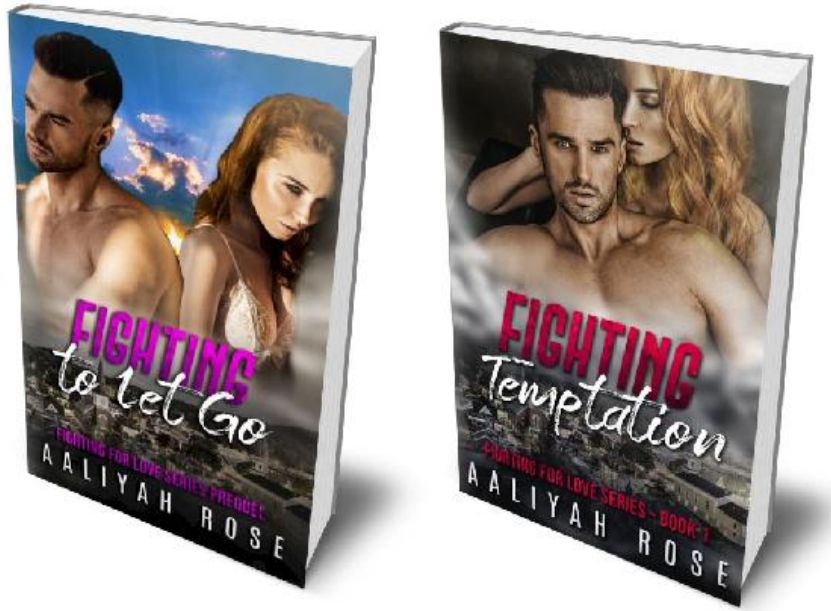
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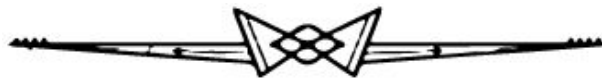
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About The Author



Book lover and daydreamer Aaliyah Rose found her love of writing at a young age but didn't start publishing until recently. She writes passionate, suspenseful romances that pull the heart strings and always ends with a happily ever after.

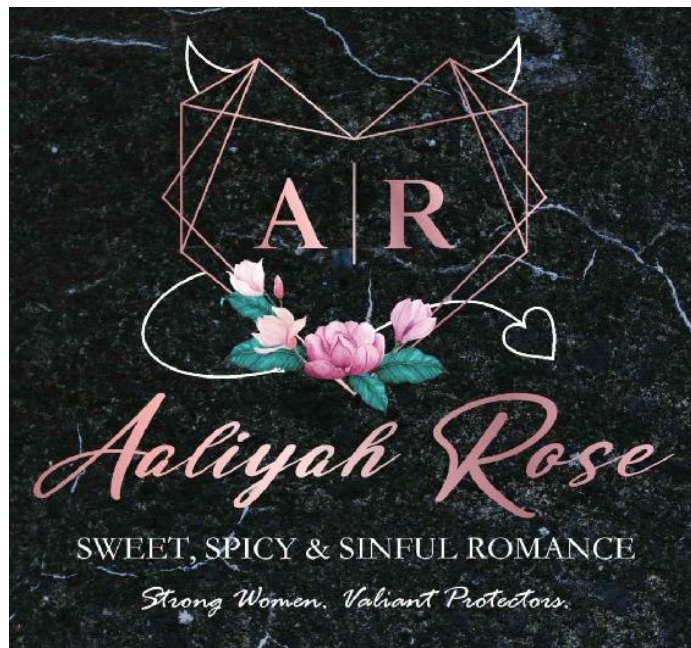
As a newer author to the scene, your support is her inspiration. Aaliyah is excited to have you read her books, with her aim to provide heart-warming romances that will make you smile and of course, create those sexy and charismatic book boyfriends to satisfy her fans.

Aaliyah Rose currently lives in sunny Australia and when she isn't dreaming of romance, she enjoys getting out and about in nature with family and friends. If she's lucky and her two toddlers are not jumping all over her, she enjoys staying in and watching movies over a steaming mug

of coffee and some sweet and salty popcorn (although Nutella on bananas and strawberries is fast becoming a new favourite).

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