

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and tattoos, wearing a pearl necklace, kissing a woman on the cheek. The woman's face is partially visible, and she is wearing a ring. The background is a soft, out-of-focus pink and purple gradient.

A
DARK MAFIA CAPTIVE
ROMANCE

KEEPING *My Captive*

NYT & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ANGELA SNYDER

KEEPING MY CAPTIVE



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BLURB

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KEEPING MY CAPTIVE

When I first saw Aria at the auction, it was like some twist of cruel fate
bringing us together. There's just something about her that I could not
resist. I had to make her mine.

But now that she's under my power, I quickly realize I've gotten more than
I bargained for.

Aria isn't just a pretty doll to play with. No, she's so much more than that.
And no matter how many times I try to bend her, she just won't fully break.
When I find out the truth about Aria's family and where she came from, I
know my feelings for her will bring an all-out war against me and my
empire.

But I'll do anything to protect and keep my little captive. She's mine now,
and I'm never giving her up.

*Keeping My Captive is Aria Vitale's story; and although it is a standalone,
it would be better enjoyed after reading Keeping My Bride and Keeping
My Girl.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Due to the sensitive subject matters contained in this book, it may cause triggers to some readers.

Please use caution. Your mental health matters.

Please check my website for all CWs before reading.

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**If you're still here, then sit the fuck down, buckle up and enjoy the ride
like a good girl. <3**

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the readers out there who always find themselves falling for the villains and the anti-heroes.

This book is for you.

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PLAYLIST

Echos – *Saints*
Halsey – *Bells in Sante Fe*
Austin Giorgio – *You Put a Spell on Me*
EZI – *Take My Breath Away*
Isabel LaRosa – *I'm Yours (sped up)*
The Weeknd – *Take My Breath*
Bad Omens – *The Death of Peace of Mind*
RÜFÜS DU SOL – *On My Knees*
Excision & Illenium – *Gold (Stupid Love) ft. Shallows*
Mr. Kitty & The Neighbourhood – *After Dark X Sweater Weather*

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PROLOGUE



Aria Vitale

BLOOD RUSHES IN my ears as I huddle in the corner of the concrete cell. My teeth begin to chatter uncontrollably, and my jaw clenches painfully as another violent tremor takes over my body.

I'm cold. *So cold.*

The past several hours feel like a living, breathing nightmare. One that I cannot escape from. I keep willing myself to wake up, but to no avail. This is real. This is really happening to me.

I hear a woman whimpering loudly from the corner of the room, and my eyes snap up to meet hers. The last girl who made a commotion, who called out for help, was pulled from our little group and brutally assaulted. She was made to be a message to the rest of us — do what you're told, and you won't get hurt.

Slowly, I raise my tied wrists and hold a trembling finger to my lips, silently shushing the woman. She gives me a shaky nod in understanding before huddling into a ball on the concrete floor, self-soothing herself by softly humming an unfamiliar tune.

My eyes bounce from girl to girl in the room, taking in their faces and unique features. We couldn't be more different, varying widely in age and race with a kaleidoscope of hair and eye colors. But we all have one thing in common — we're all about to suffer the same terrible fate.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to block everything out, but instantly memories of *him* flood my mind. And, suddenly, it feels like all of the air in the room has been sucked out. Gasping for breath, I open my eyes and search the room for any sign of him.

Constantine Carbone.

Satan himself in an expensive Brioni suit.

He's the reason I'm here right now. He stole me like a thief in the night, willingly handing me over to these criminals to sell my virginity to the highest bidder. Traveling by boat, then plane and then by vehicle, we finally ended up on what is simply known as The Island. I've only ever heard rumors about this place, but now I'm about to experience firsthand everything that happens here.

As I look around the room at the group of women, I can't help but wonder where we'll all end up after tonight. Who will ultimately *own* each one of us.

Bile rises in the back of my throat, but I quickly swallow it down. God, I can't even *think* about it, let alone believe I can actually survive all of this.

Suddenly, the heavy, metal door flies open, causing my muscles to lock up in anticipation. One of the guards steps inside the room, holding an assault rifle in plain view with his finger resting precariously on the trigger. He's tall and muscular and looks menacing in his military-style clothing with a black mask covering most of his face. "It's time for the auction," he announces, motioning with his gun for us to get up and walk out. "Stay quiet or die. Those are your only two options," he says, pointedly looking at me.

I stand slowly, my entire body bruised and aching. All of us fall in line, our footsteps forced and slow, like animals being led to slaughter. It certainly feels that way at this point; because after we're paraded around, we're going to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

As we're led down a dark hallway, I hear one of the other guards say, "Smile and look pretty, girls. It's almost showtime."

And, ever so slowly, my mouth stretches into a roguish grin. They want us to put on an act for those sick perverts? Well, then I'm going to give them one hell of a show.

CHAPTER 1



Aria

Two days earlier...

MY FEET POUND against the wooden floor of the hallway as I run as fast as I can. I abruptly turn a corner, pressing my back against the wall and holding a hand over my heart, which is currently threatening to beat out of my chest. Butterflies take flight inside my stomach as anxious anticipation takes over my entire body.

I can hear his heavy footsteps getting louder, closer. And then, suddenly, they stop. I hold my breath, desperately trying to anticipate his next move.

“You can’t hide from me, princess,” Renato says right before he lunges around the corner and grabs me.

I yelp in surprise, and then a giggle escapes me as he plants kisses all over my face and down my neck.

When he finally pulls away, I’m completely breathless. Reaching up, I touch a light brown lock of hair that’s currently swaying in front of his mischievous, green eyes. His eyes remind me of the forest behind the compound where I used to play as a kid. They remind me of home.

“I’ll always find you,” Renato promises, a smile gracing his full lips before they seek mine in the near darkness.

Moaning, I finally concede to him as he pulls me closer, his hands roaming all over my body and kissing me until I'm lightheaded. I know his lips better than my own. I have kissed him more times than I can count. *The first and only boy I've ever kissed.*

A walkie-talkie goes off nearby, making us both freeze. I can feel Renato's ragged breath on my lips as he blocks me from the hallway with his body, his muscles tensing around me on high alert. When we hear the guard finally walk away, both of us instantly relax.

God, we're always playing this dangerous game. Seeing how far we can test our limits before we end up getting caught or in trouble. It's been this way with Renato and I for years. Every chance we get, we sneak off somewhere in my parents' compound, tuck ourselves away from prying eyes and make out like our plane is going down.

Renato and I are risking a lot by fooling around, especially in public. Mostly because I'm the daughter of a very powerful mafia boss — Lucas Vitale. And because of the little fact that my father pays him to be my bodyguard, not my make-out partner. If my dad ever found out what actual duties Renato is doing to me almost every night, let's just say he wouldn't exactly be pleased.

And so, when Renato's hands begin to wander, squeezing my breast through my shirt and then venturing lower, I stop him right as his fingertips graze the waistband of my shorts. "We can't," I gasp.

There's something else holding me back from going past second base with Renato, and it has nothing to do with my father and everything to do with our friendship. I've seen too many couples break up and never speak again. And just the thought of not having Renato in my life, the one and only true friend I have, guts me. I definitely don't want to lose him over a stupid fight or breakup. I simply couldn't bear the thought of never talking or seeing him again. Most of the time Renato is the only person I have to talk to or to vent to. He's my rock. My person. Honestly, I just don't know what I'd do without him. And I never want to find out.

So, for that reason, even if it is selfish, I slowly withdraw from him. Renato looks hurt by my rejection, so I lean in and give him a sensuous kiss that has him groaning in the back of his throat.

"One of these days, Aria..." His voice trails off before he stares off into the distance.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” I tell him with an eyeroll. He always threatens to stop our little game, but I’m sure it’s just the blue balls talking; because he is always seeking me out, wanting more even after I *wound him*, as he often calls it.

“Are you going to bed?” he asks with a frustrated sigh before stepping back and running his hands down the front of his white dress shirt, attempting to get the newly formed wrinkles out.

“Yes,” I lie. I feel bad about lying right to his face, but I can’t tell him what I’m actually planning on doing tonight or he would try to stop me.

“Alright. Well, goodnight,” he says, his lips finding mine once more in a chaste kiss.

“Goodnight,” I call after him as he disappears down the hall to go finish out his shift.

Renato is my bodyguard during the day. And when I go to bed, he’s on patrol duty. He’s been working for my father for a long time, and he’s also my brother’s best friend. My brother has caught Renato and I a time or two making out, but Nico doesn’t seem to care I’m messing around with his bestie. I’m sure he would support both of us no matter what we decided to do, because Nico’s just a good brother like that.

But the fear of losing Renato will always hold me back, and I truly don’t know if I’ll ever get over it. Maybe someday when the cards are right, and the stars align...or some crap like that. But not tonight. Tonight, I have plans that don’t involve Renato nor our future together.

I head to my room and immediately go to my huge walk-in closet, looking for something to wear. One of my friends, whom I haven’t seen for months, is DJing at a club tonight. I promised her I would be there, and nothing is going to stop me. I’m tired of being couped up in this place and under constant supervision. I’ve snuck out before, so it’s not that big of a deal. Well, as long as I don’t get caught, that is. This time might be a little harder; however, because of recent circumstances, but I’m up for the challenge.

Sorting through my wide range of designer dresses, I let my fingers slip over the expensive materials. Many of the items in here still have tags. My mother and I have a shopping obsession, much to the dismay of my father and his wallet. My father once told me that she never worried about labels much before I was born. But as soon as I became a teenager, it kind of became our special thing. My mother and I bond over the latest designer

dressess and shoes, and I've become what some would consider a socialite around New York. My Instagram has been blowing up lately with over two million followers. Everyone wants to know what I'll be wearing next, and it's kind of addicting to have all the attention.

But social media is often a total lie, and I'm just one of the many imposters out there, faking how wonderful my life is. If they only knew the truth about my real day-to-day, how I'm kept under lock and key most days, and how I spend a lot of time doing online shopping instead of going to the actual stores or visiting designers like I let on in my posts. I can pretend I'm something I'm not to the world, showing off my perfect life, when, in reality, I don't think I've ever been more miserable.

I'm tired of being a mafia princess, never knowing what my future holds and only knowing that I can't leave the house without at least five bodyguards and a chauffeur. I mean, I don't even have my driver's license, because really, what's the point?

Sighing heavily, I pull a dress off a hanger and study it. It's short with gold sequins, and I know just what shoes I could wear with it — a pair of metallic gold Louboutin red sole heels that my mom gave me as a gift. I dig the box out of the bottom of my closet and open it. They look brand new, and I can only ever remember wearing them maybe once or twice.

Holding everything in my arms, I go into the bathroom, freshen up and then change into my outfit for the night. After fixing my hair and makeup, I'm almost ready to go. While I'm applying the finishing touch — a nude lip gloss — in the mirror, I realize how sad I look. I try to smile, but it doesn't reach my eyes.

I know what most people think about me. Poor little princess. She has everything, and somehow, she still wants more.

And it's true in a way. Sure, I have everything I could ever want. But when you don't have freedom, what do you really have? Material things don't matter much when you're miserable and lonely. I've been locked up in a proverbial ivory tower most of my life, not even able to so much as go to a gym or a grocery store by myself. Every time I leave the house, I'm surrounded by an entourage of guards, who make their presence blatantly known to me as well as everyone around me. It just screams *don't go near her; don't talk to her*.

I don't mind when Renato tags along since he's my friend...and sometimes more. And, as of late, I've found solace in his arms. Sometimes

the only thing that makes me feel alive is when we sneak around the house into dark corners, running from guards and trying not to be seen. I know my father would kill us both if we ever got caught, and the thrill of that makes my heartbeat race — the only true evidence that I'm not totally dead inside.

When I'm not sneaking around with Renato, my daily routine is pretty boring. And now that Selina, my brother's girlfriend, is back, the house is on a tight lockdown, and I have even less to do than I did before. Just getting permission to leave with a carload of guards is like pulling teeth. And unless it's absolutely necessary, my father usually forbids it. He says it's too dangerous.

And I get it. I do. A decade ago, Selina was taken from right under my parents' roof by her own mother and sold to the most notorious kingpin of human trafficking in the city, perhaps even the world. Selina was only thirteen when she came under the control of Constantine Carbone. She was only able to escape after ten years of captivity because my brother killed Constantine's son to rescue her.

Selina came back a different person, so unlike the happy, shy girl I once knew her to be. And my brother changed a lot too since he had to take a life to save hers. I was hoping my brother would never take after our dad, who has a lot of blood on his hands from his line of work, but it looks like that's exactly what is happening.

I haven't experienced my father's dark side personally, but I've heard stories, and I know how feared and revered he is. Our last name brings panic into people's eyes whenever it's uttered. Having a lot of power and influence is nice, but it also brings around a lot of enemies and people constantly trying to take them away from you.

Selina has only been staying with us for the past few months, and it feels like all of our lives have been turned upside down in that short amount of time. I don't blame her, though. None of this is her fault. It's just that any tiny sliver of independence I had before her arrival was quickly squashed. And if I thought things were bad before, they're much worse now.

Giving up on trying to make my smile reach my eyes, I walk out of my room and stop in the hallway. I can see Selina's bedroom door from here. We haven't had much time to bond since she's been back, and a fun girls' night out would be just the thing to bring us closer. Although I highly doubt if she'll say yes, I still feel an intense need to invite her. Maybe she's suffering from cabin fever as much as I am.

Before I can doubt my choice, I go to her door and knock. When Selina answers a few seconds later, she looks stunned to see me; no doubt expecting to see my brother.

“Bored?” I say with a big smile.

“Very,” she confesses.

“Want to go out?” I offer. “My friend is DJing at a club tonight, and I’m dying to see her do her thing.”

A nervous smile forms on her lips. “Okay, sure,” she tells me with a nod, surprising the hell out of me.

I realize she’s in her PJs, so I ask, “Got anything to wear?”

She looks down at her outfit and blushes. “No?” she says, but it sounds more like a question than an answer.

“Don’t worry. I have plenty in my closet,” I explain. Then, with a wink, I tell her, “Come with me.”

CHAPTER 2



Aria

ONCE WE FIND something for Selina to wear, we sneak outside to a car waiting for us. I had texted the driver, Marco, an hour ago and told him to be ready. He's constantly grumbling about my late-night escapades, but he never tells me no. And, more importantly, he never tells my father about where I'm going or what I do outside of the house. Maybe it's because nothing has ever happened on my little outings...or maybe it's because I always slip him a few hundred dollars to keep his mouth shut and his wallet happy.

When we climb into the back of the sedan, Selina glances around nervously. "We don't need more guards?" she asks.

I smile and wave nonchalantly. "We'll be fine," I assure her. "There are going to be tons of people there. Nothing is going to happen." I understand her apprehension, but it's not like we're going totally alone. We'll have Marco nearby in case anything happens, and the club has plenty of security and bouncers.

Selina flashes me a hesitant grin and fixes the hem of her skirt before nervously crossing and uncrossing her legs. The dress I let her borrow fits her figure perfectly. Selina is tall, blonde and insanely pretty. She was a knockout when she was barely a teenager, so no wonder my brother fell madly in love with her all those years ago. She's twenty-three now, two

years older than me, and it's hard to believe the kind of life she recently escaped from. I personally don't know if I could have survived. But she's strong. She's always been so damn strong.

Marco drives us into the city, the lights and atmosphere filling me with an overwhelming sense of happiness and peace that I couldn't ever describe with words. I love the city. I love how it never sleeps and how there is always something happening. So many people live and thrive here in NYC, and I wish I could be one of them even for just a day.

When Marco pulls up to a large industrial-looking building, he turns around in the seat and tells us, "I'll be parked a few blocks away. Just text me when you're ready to leave."

This isn't his first rodeo. I've done this numerous times before unbeknownst to my parents, who would probably have my head and his if they knew I was sneaking out to clubs at night.

"Thank you, Marco," I tell him. Then, I climb out of the back of the car, turning and waiting for Selina. She looks anxious and almost like she wants to turn around and go back home, but then she seems to steel her nerves and eventually gets out. Mind made up, I take her hand and pull her past the line of people and right to the front door.

The huge, burly bouncer at the door tips his bald head at me and narrows his eyes. "Name?" he asks, looking bored and unconvinced that it will actually be on the list. I'm sure he's had numerous people attempt to get in tonight, but I know for a fact that I'm not going to be wasting his time.

"Aria Vitale," I say with a smile.

I can see the change in his demeanor almost instantly. My family name sends fear into a lot of people when they hear it. My father is very well known throughout the city for his line of work and ties to the mafia. Even though my family helps innocent people who get caught up in human trafficking rings, my dad still delves in the dark underbelly of the city to make his money. He controls most of New York and New Jersey and owns a lot of territories.

The bouncer checks his list, gives me a nod and then steps aside for us to go through the front door.

Inside, it's loud and bright with numerous neon-colored lights moving in various patterns across the huge dance floor. The club is packed with people drinking, laughing, dancing and talking loudly.

I lead Selina straight to the bar, ordering us a couple of shots and drinks to loosen her up. God, the girl looks like she's at a funeral and not at a club right now. I really want us to have a good time tonight, and I'm going to make it my mission to make sure that happens. Selina deserves this, a night out, a fun evening to relax and forget about all the bad things.

I end up snagging us two seats at the bar while we wait for our mixed drinks to be made, and we take turns downing a few shots of tequila. After the third shot, I can start to tell Selina is beginning to relax, and that makes me so happy.

A few guys come and go, trying to hit on us, but I shut them down quick. If they want to live to see tomorrow, they're better off just running the other way and not pushing their luck.

The bartender sets down our drinks a few minutes later just as one of my favorite songs begins to play over the speakers. I jump up, grab Selina's hand and shout over the music, "Let's dance!"

She follows me onto the dance floor. The crowd parts as I barrel my way through it. Even though I'm only five-two, I like to think my confidence makes up for the fact that I'm vertically challenged.

I text my friend, who is DJing, and let her know we'll be up to the booth soon after we get a few drinks and dances in. And then, I tuck my phone away and start to dance, one of my favorite things to do.

Selina is awkward at first, barely swaying to the music. "Come on. You can do better than that!" I tease her.

She downs half of her drink, needing the liquid courage before she begins keeping up with me, putting her arm up in the air and looking like a superstar on the dance floor.

"Hell yeah!" I call out to her with a big grin.

She moves so freely, without a care in the world, and it's a wonderful thing to see. She's finally letting her guard down and enjoying herself, something she probably hasn't done in years. It makes me so happy that I asked her to come out with me tonight. She needed this. We both did.

I finish off most of my drink, dancing and laughing when suddenly I realize Selina dropped her drink. "Whoa!" I call out, bumping into her. "Okay, you're cut off!" I joke. But when I look up and see the worry and fear in her eyes, I sober up quickly. "What? Selina, what's wrong?" I ask urgently.

Her eyes cut away from me and focus in on a specific area on the second floor. I try to look to see what she's staring at, but all I see are people drinking and having fun.

"Constantine is here!" she says in a panic, her eyes darting around.

And with those words spoken, what was supposed to be a fun girls' night out turns into a freaking nightmare within the matter of a few seconds.

"Are you sure it was him?" I ask Selina, grabbing her arm and shaking her hard. I need her to focus.

"Yes! No!" she sputters out. "I'm not a hundred-percent sure, but I think it was him."

I look around the club, torn between wanting and not wanting to see him. Constantine Carbone has been a thorn in my family's side for years. I remember overhearing stories about him when I was a child, thinking he was the real-life boogeyman. And the thought of actually facing him tonight has me shuddering. He's responsible for destroying a lot of lives. Poor Selina was in his clutches for an entire decade while he did all sort of sick and depraved things to her. And if he's here tonight, that means he's looking for her and wants her back.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath before I pull my cell phone from the small clutch in my trembling hand. "I'm going to call Renato just in case. He'll know what to do."

When I hear his familiar voice answer the phone, my heart clenches inside my chest. "Renato, it's me." And then I take a deep breath before telling him, "Listen, don't freak out, but we're at the club."

Renato has been dealing with my shenanigans for years. This isn't the first time I've snuck out of the house without an entourage of bodyguards against my parents' best wishes and without him knowing until the next day.

"Damn it, Aria!" He curses under his breath before he asks in a demanding tone, "Which club?"

"Liquid Lounge."

He berates me for a full minute, telling me how dangerous it is to leave the house without his knowledge, especially now, as if I don't already know all of that. Rolling my eyes, I cut him off and say, "I don't need your shit right now, Renato. I need your help." I glance at Selina, who looks ghastly pale with dread in her eyes. "Selina thinks she just saw Constantine Carbone here."

Renato pauses a beat before he tells me, “You need to get out of there, Aria. Right now. Do you hear me?” His tone is severe. “Don’t even pay the tab. I’ll take care of it later. Just get the fuck out of the building.” I don’t think he’s ever been this brusque with me before, and it’s scaring me.

I nod in understanding even though he can’t see me. I look at Selina and tell her, “He said we need to get out of here. I’ll text the driver to come pick us up. He’s only a few blocks away. Then we can —.”

I don’t get to finish my sentence. A loud, deafening boom sounds, and the music suddenly cuts off.

Pop, pop, pop, pop!

Selina pulls me down to the floor, sheltering me as the gunfire goes off. The crowd of people surrounding us erupts into panic, screaming as they start running for the nearest exits. Acting quickly, Selina pulls me under a table so that we don’t get trampled to death in the ensuing chaos as the shooting continues to explode through the entire building.

Dead bodies begin to fall around us until the place looks like something out of a war movie.

“Aria! Aria!” I can hear Renato’s frantic screams from the speaker in my phone, which is now lying on the floor next to our feet.

People are crying, screaming and trying frantically to escape, and anyone that moves is just being mowed down by the gunmen. I begin to hyperventilate; my senses on overload; my flight or fight kicking into high gear. “We need to get out of here!”

Selina nods in agreement. “Stay low,” she instructs.

We scramble out from under the table, and I barely remember to grab my phone at the last second, holding it in my hand like a lifeline. Perhaps because it is.

My legs threaten to buckle, but Selina drags me alongside her towards what I hope is an exit.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you!” someone calls out.

Selina suddenly stops dead in her tracks as if the voice has an unforeseen power over her. Her eyes are full of pain and regret as she yells at me, “Go! Get out of here!”

Tears fill my eyes as I realize she’s sacrificing herself for my safety. Frantically, I pull on her arm, hoping that she’ll change her mind. “I’m not leaving you!” I cry, my vision blurring.

“Get out before it’s too late!” she hisses at me, pushing me towards the exit and away from her. I can see the hidden communication in her eyes. She wants me to go get help; because if we’re both taken, there’s no hope for us.

Sobbing, I give her a small nod before I turn and run out the door at the end of the hallway. I shove my phone down the front of my gold, sequin mini dress, hoping that Renato is still on the line and is coming to rescue us. There are several people gathered outside, all of them turning to look at me, fearing that I’m one of the gunmen coming out to finish the job.

I move towards the crowd, hoping to blend in and hide until someone comes for us, but I only get two steps in before I’m suddenly hauled up in the air. I’m crushed in a gripping hold against a big, burly man who smells like sweat and grease. I scream at the top of my lungs, begging for someone to help me, but the people who looked like they were willing to help before are suddenly scattering in the wind, afraid for their own safety and self-preservation.

I fight and kick and scream, but the man manages to get me back inside the club. He forces me to stand beside Selina, who is facing the devil himself — Constantine Carbone. I’ve never seen him in person before, only in pictures, but I would recognize his evil face anywhere. He’s responsible for all of this. But how the hell did he find us?

“I’ll go with you,” Selina pleads with him. “Just let her go.”

I stare at Selina in awe. She’s so damn brave, so tough. And she’s willing to do anything for my safety. If we make it out of this alive, I have no idea how I’ll even repay her for her selflessness.

Constantine lets out a deep, hearty laugh. “Oh, you think you make the rules now, my little pet?”

Selina visibly flinches from the nickname, and I wonder how many times he called her that during their ten years together. I shudder at the thought.

Constantine walks over to us. Up close, he’s handsome with salt and pepper hair and dark eyes. I would never peg him for a monster but looks can clearly be deceiving.

He reaches out to touch Selina’s face, but she grimaces and takes a step back. He tsks at her, and a cruel smirk forms on his lips as he says, “It seems my little pet has lost her manners. Don’t worry, I’ll teach you your manners again. I’ll beat the fucking defiance out of you until you can no

longer walk.” And then he draws his hand back and slams his fist into the side of her head.

My first reaction to his brutality is total and utter shock. I’ve never seen a man hit a woman before. And then, all too soon, anger begins to well up and seep through every pore in my body, and I scream at him, “Leave her alone!”

The moment his black eyes rest upon me, I realize my mistake. Constantine slowly walks over to me, like a mountain lion stalking its prey. Gently, so gently, his fingertips graze along my cheek and jaw before he wraps his hand around my neck and forces me to lift my chin. He stares at me, taking in every detail of my face. “And you must be Aria Vitale. My god, you look just like your mother,” he says in awe, and I can practically see the fucked-up thoughts swirling inside of his evil eyes. If eyes are the gateway to the soul, this man has none. They look void of emotion, void of any kind of light, void of everything. Just endless shadowy pits of pure darkness. “Oh, I’m going to have fun with you,” Constantine tells me. “All the fun I was denied with her thanks to your no-good father.”

I open my mouth to tell him off, but suddenly Selina lets out a primal scream beside me. In the blink of an eye, she’s pouncing on Constantine, her nails scoring his cheek before one of his guards suddenly hauls her backwards, away from him.

She fights the man holding her like a wild animal, and I can’t help but silently cheer her on. I step forward to help her, but I’m immediately pulled back. I struggle against my own captor, kicking him in the shin and making him yelp in pain.

We’re both putting up the fight of our lives right now. We’re not backing down. We’re not making it easy on them.

Eventually, Selina goes limp in the man’s arms, having worn herself out. Her breathing is ragged and raw as she stares daggers into Constantine. I’ve never seen this side of her before. But considering what she went through as a teen and into her adulthood, I’m sure she’s had to adapt and become someone else, something fierce and unbreakable.

Constantine casually pulls a white handkerchief out of his suit pocket and wipes at his face, staring down at the blood when he pulls it away. A hearty chuckle escapes his chest before his dark eyes lock onto Selina. “Save your strength, little pet. You’re going to need it for what I have

planned for you,” he threatens. Then, he looks to his men. “Hurry up and frisk them, and then let’s get the hell out of here.”

A shiver runs up and down my spine. *My cell phone*. It’s hidden in the front of my dress. I need Constantine to give us more information, something, and I can only hope and pray that Renato is still on the line and listening to all of this.

“Where are you taking us?” I yell at him to make sure it’s picked up on the microphone.

“We’re going on a little boat ride,” he says cryptically before turning to leave, stepping over the dead bodies as he goes.

Police sirens can be heard in the distance while four men roughly search Selina and me, tearing at our clothes and putting their fingers and hands in places they shouldn’t be. I fight them off as hard as I can. “Don’t you dare touch me!” I screech. “Don’t! Stop!” Despite my best efforts, they manage to manhandle their way inside my dress before pulling out my lifeline to Renato.

“Cell phone,” one of the men calls out before he drops it to the floor and smashes it against the concrete with the heel of his heavy boot.

A sob escapes me then as I look up at Selina. We know exactly what the other is thinking — they’ll never be able to find us now. We’ll be taken, and there’s not a damn thing anyone can do to change that.

CHAPTER 3



Aria

I GROAN MISERABLY as I slowly come to. My entire body hurts. The last thing I remember was being shoved into the back of a black windowless van. I screamed and kicked at the guards, fighting as hard as I possibly could...until one of them hauled off and hit me in the head.

Everything went black after that.

My head throbs with a painful migraine blooming behind my eyes. “Wh-what...where are we?” I ask as I force myself to wake up fully and face reality. I try to move, but I realize my arms are trapped above me and I’m literally hanging in the air. My eyes snap open and dart around the poorly lit warehouse. Rope painfully tugs against my skin as I kick out at empty air, my feet dangling a few inches from the dirty concrete floor.

“Aria, it’s okay,” Selina says from beside me.

I glance over at her and realize she’s strung up and helpless just like me. Selina looks deceptively calm, and it makes me panic even more to the point where I feel like I’m going to hyperventilate. Is she mentally preparing for what’s about to happen? I know she survived hell and back many times in her past. She was with our very kidnapper for an entire decade from the ages of thirteen to twenty-three. I can’t even imagine what she went through, and I hate to think that I might be about to suffer that same fate.

“It’s not okay,” I whine, tears streaming down my cheeks. “We have to get out of here, Selina!” I hiss, pointing out the obvious. I stare at her, hoping that she had time to think of a plan or something while I was unconscious, but I see the despondent look on her face when she turns her head towards me.

Her somber expression tells me everything I need to know. *We’re both totally and completely screwed.*

A whimper escapes me as heavy footsteps echo in the warehouse, growing closer, and Selina hushes me to be quiet. My entire body trembles when I see Constantine emerge from the shadows. His attention is exclusively on Selina, however, when he walks over to her and says, “Hello, my little pet.”

Selina slowly raises her head and faces her former captor. “How did you find me?” she asks, her voice steady and firm. And once again I’m in awe of how brave she is.

Her question seems to irritate him. “I told you I would always find you, my sweet Selina.” He moves closer, walks behind her. Slowly, seemingly tenderly, he lifts the shoulder-length hair from her neck and brushes it aside. Feeling along her scalp, he explains, “A tracker.”

I mutter a curse under my breath. All this time we had no idea Selina wasn’t completely safe with us. That explains how he found us at the club so easily. He was waiting. Waiting for one of us to do something stupid and for Selina to let her guard down.

I hang my head in misery. I led him right to her by pulling my stunt tonight. I shouldn’t have snuck out of the house and definitely not without my usual group of guards. This is all my fault.

He releases her hair and then walks around until he’s standing before her once again. “I never lose what’s mine,” he tells her, his voice deceptively calm. “It just took a little while longer to get to you, but I knew I would have a chance eventually. You know how patient I can be.”

I can see Selina’s hard exterior suddenly begin to crack. Perhaps she’s reliving their years together in her mind, torturing herself with the horrific memories.

Constantine moves closer until they’re only an inch apart, and I clench my jaw so tightly I swear I can hear a tooth crack. “I want vengeance on the man who killed my son,” he starts, and I swallow hard.

My brother killed Constantine's son to save Selina; but clearly, he doesn't know who pulled the trigger. This is all about revenge? Well, he's not going to get it. I will protect Nico and my family with my life, if that's what it takes. And I know Selina would never give my brother up. It's just not in her DNA to be a traitor to the only boy she's ever loved and who equally loves her as much in return.

Constantine continues with, "You were there long enough to know the schedules of the guards, the layout of the Vitale compound. I want to know the access points. I want to know when they're at their most vulnerable. You're going to give me every single thing I want."

Suddenly, his hand snatches out and grabs a fistful of Selina's hair, bending her neck at an awkward angle and causing her to cry out in pain.

"Don't touch her, you bastard!" I shriek at him.

Constantine releases her with a dark chuckle, and then he turns his attention to me. I try to keep the same bravado and stare him down but fail miserably. He is the devil incarnate. I can see it in his eyes. "And what should I do with my *new* little pet?" he asks.

Over my dead body, I think to myself. "I'll never be your pet, you fucking psychopath!" I yell.

His tongue darts out of his mouth, and he licks his bottom lip, as he stares at me with a look that can only be described as depraved. *Oh god, is he getting turned on by this?* I instantly want to take my words back, but it's too late.

Constantine walks over and reaches out to touch me, and I swiftly kick out at him, narrowly missing his balls and, unfortunately, catching his thigh instead. "Don't you dare touch me!" I cry out.

"Oh, I'm going to do so much more than touch you, my little *principessa*," he says through gritted teeth. "I'm going to hurt you. I'm going to bend you until you fucking break," he threatens, turning the blood in my veins to pure ice. With a snap of his fingers, two guards come forward. "Let's show my new little pet some manners. Cut her down."

A tall, skinny guard with bad acne brandishes a knife and reaches above me, sawing through the rope. I fall to the hard, unforgiving floor in a crumpled heap, every single bone in my body hurting from the impact. I cry out from the horrific pain jarring my body.

"No! Please!" Selina cries. "I'll do anything you want, Constantine! Kill me for your son. Take my life. Just let her go!"

Constantine doesn't even seem affected by her pleas. His attention is solely on me now, and he simply instructs his guards, "Hold her down. I'm going to take what I want from the little bitch before you two get your turn."

One of the guards throws me down to the concrete floor and pins my arms down above my head. I struggle as hard as I can until the guard, who had cut me loose, holds the same knife to my face. I can feel the edge of the blade nicking my skin, and I suddenly still as an anguished sob escapes my lips.

"Don't make him carve into that perfection," Constantine warns. Then, he gets on his knees and pries my legs apart. Inwardly, I curse myself for wearing a damn dress tonight and giving him unfettered access.

Selina again contends for me. "No, Constantine! Please don't do this!" she cries. "I'll do anything you want. Anything!" she screams out, begging, pleading.

I watch in horror as Constantine unbuckles his belt. And then the zipper of his pants is going down, and I can see his semi-hard cock. He inches towards me, and I begin to panic, my lungs seizing. *My first time can't be like this!* I scream inside my head.

"No, no, no! Please! Please!" I beg. And then I make a gamble with the last and only chip I have. "I'm a virgin!" I shout, my throat raw.

And as if I just said the magic word, Constantine miraculously stops. I watch as he slowly stands up, zips up his pants and looks down at me with mixed emotions written all over his face; the biggest of which can only be described as disappointment.

A sense of relief floods through me when I realize he's not going to rape me. But when I turn and see Selina's grim and severe expression, the relief I was feeling seeps out of every pore of my body in a rush, and I know that somehow I've just made a very grave mistake.

I see her mouth form the word *no* just as Constantine says, "Take her to the doctor and get him to examine her. If what she said is true, put her on the next boat to The Island."

The Island? I shake my head, refusing to believe it's the same place my father and brother have been discussing for the past few weeks. I overheard them talking about horrific things that take place there. Girls and women are auctioned off like prized cattle to the highest bidder, and most of them are never seen or heard from again.

Two of Constantine's men wrestle me into a standing position. "Where are you taking me?" I call out, needing to be sure it's the same place.

"Why, you're going to auction, my dear," Constantine explains with a sneer. "Your virginity is about to make me a lot of money. Some retribution for my son's death, if you will."

I fight, kick and scream as the men lead me away from Selina. I hear her crying out my name, and I can't help but wonder what's going to happen to her and if I'll ever see her again.

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CHAPTER 4



Aria

BLOOD IS DRUMMING inside my ears as I try to calm my breathing under the black hood covering my head. It's strange what your mind begins to do when one of your senses is taken away for an extended period of time. I can almost see objects and colors that aren't there even though I'm in total darkness, blind to the outside world or really anything within an inch of my face. I can smell metal, rain, desperation...and blood.

Is that even possible?

Also, I can hear everything, even the raindrops pelting off the roof and the little rocks pinging off the undercarriage of the van we're riding in as we fly down a gravel road.

And then a thought occurs to me. Maybe I'm just going crazy at this point. Would I even realize I've gone mentally insane?

How long have I been in this van?

My head aches when I think of the events that transpired earlier tonight that led me here. Led me to this horrific point. It all started with what was supposed to be a fun night out...

The van abruptly hits a pothole, rocking everything violently from side to side and sending me crashing into a woman near me. There are several of us crammed in the back of the vehicle. I quickly try to right myself; the struggle being real since my hands are tied together. At least they tied them

in the front and not in the back — one small benediction in this dreadful situation.

I don't know exactly at what moment I became a silver lining kind of gal, but here we are.

Breathe, Aria. Just breathe, I keep telling myself in my head.

I was violated earlier by a so-called doctor, who physically examined me at the dock. I swear I can still feel his fingers inside of me poking and prodding, and a violent tremor runs through me when I think about it. He was absolutely ecstatic when he realized my hymen was still intact. And after that confirmation, I was immediately put on a boat and then an airplane and finally in this cramped van. All modes of transportation have been exhausting, especially without any knowledge of where we're going or how far it will be until we reach our final destination. And each stop that we made included picking up more innocent, terrified women. I think I counted ten of us before the hood was placed over my head as we boarded the plane, but there could be more by now.

My lower lip trembles, but I refuse to break down. It's too dangerous. I can't appear weak. I know what happens to the weak girls here. To the girl who was crying and screaming and begging for her life in the back of the van an hour ago. I listened in horror as they dragged her out of the vehicle. I could hear the assault even though I couldn't see it. I knew they were beating her into silence. After that, she was quiet. So very quiet.

I don't even know if she got back in the van. But the truth of the matter is I almost hope she didn't. I think most of us would prefer death than have to face our horrible inescapable fates. Auctioned off like pieces of meat to the higher bidder to do whatever they please with us. Whatever they desire.

Shaking my head, I clear those awful thoughts from my mind. I can't think about her. I can't think about *them*. I can't think about anything in this moment except for myself and my own survival. My entire life depends on it.

The van comes to an abrupt stop, pitching us all forward. I don't even have time to try to sit up before I hear the back doors opening and someone instructing us to climb out.

Not wanting to fall and needing to see what's going on, I carefully reach up and remove my hood. I allow my dark hair to fall around my face, hoping they won't notice that I took it off.

The smell of the ocean assaults my senses, and I know we're on The Island. My eyes scan my surroundings, frantically looking for a way out. There are numerous armed guards in dark, tactical-style clothing and black masks leading us towards a huge building. Even if I ran, I wouldn't get far. I'd either get shot or probably drown while trying to swim with my hands tied.

Distracted, I stumble and almost fall. My ankles bend awkwardly, and I curse my heels. *Why couldn't I have worn some comfy sneakers to the club?*

"Walk," a rough, deep voice says from behind me before the barrel of his gun is digging into my back, shoving me forward.

I whirl around, staring at the man in the mask. "You try walking in heels, asshole!" I snap before I can contain myself.

I hear a few of the women gasp, and I feel my heart stutter inside my chest. *Oh god, what have I done?*

Immediately, my mind goes to the girl in the van. How they forced her into silence. And now I'm about to suffer the same outcome.

The guard raises his gun, intending to hit me with the butt of it, and I tense, waiting for the blow. But it never comes.

"Easy. She's the premier choice tonight," one of the other men warns him.

I slowly open my eyes and see the two guards in a tussle. The one really wants to hurt me, but the other knows the consequences for those actions.

"Fine!" the first guard sneers, pushing the other off of him. "Then *you* make the bitch walk. And put her hood back on," he demands.

"No, please," I beg the nicer guard, but he doesn't listen to me, and soon I'm consumed in darkness once more. I try to breathe, but it feels like I'm not getting enough air as I panic under the hood.

"Go. Now!" he yells, pushing me roughly. *Okay, so this guy is definitely not nicer.*

I hold my tied hands out in front of me as best I can so that I don't accidentally bump into anything along the way. My fingers become tangled in the long, matted hair of a girl in front of me, and she whimpers when I pull them free. "Sorry," I whisper quickly. I don't want her to get in trouble because of me.

We walk for a while before I hear metal scraping. A door opening maybe. And then suddenly, the dark hood is pulled from my head, bright fluorescent lights above instantly blinding me. I slam my eyes shut,

desperately seeking another way to ground me to my surroundings. I reach out in front of me but instantly regret my decision when I feel the muscular arm of one of the guards. He immediately shrugs me off, almost sending me toppling to the ground. Stumbling around, I manage to grab onto a wall and get my footing in these godforsaken heels I decided to wear earlier tonight. Was it earlier tonight? No. No, I've been gone for far longer than that. It must have been at least two days ago now that I was taken. Stolen away from my friends and family by Constantine Carbone. The bastard. I hope he rots —.

"Keep moving," the guard from earlier says, breaking me out of my bitter thoughts as he shoves me in the back. I fall to my knees, whipping around, ready to snap at him again. But the challenge in his blue eyes daring me to say one word to him has me biting the inside of my cheek to keep from telling him what I really want to say. I have a feeling the other guard won't save me this time, and I don't feel like pressing my luck.

Let's just say my mouth and choice of words have gotten me in trouble in the past, and right now is not the time to be audacious. Right now, I have to play it smart, bide my time, and hope that someone rescues me from this place before things get worse. And I have a feeling they're about to get so much worse.

With a lot of effort, I manage to pick myself up off the dirty floor and huddle into a corner with the rest of the women, who range in ages from very young teens to middle age. The look on all their faces is the same — we are screwed. Totally and completely. I tear my eyes away from their despondent expressions and focus on my surroundings.

We're in some kind of concrete jail cell. Possibly in a basement, because there are no windows, which ultimately means no way out.

My designer dress is dirty, mangled and torn, barely providing me any sense of warmth or cover, and my metallic gold Louboutin red sole pumps are scuffed beyond repair. If I wasn't in such a dire situation, I would be pissed about the shoes. They were in perfect condition when I put them on to go to the club. A present from my mother. *Maybe the last gift I'll ever get from her.*

And when I think about my parents and the rest of my family and friends, my chest aches with a pain I've never felt before. I press my tied hands against me, desperately trying to rub out the hurt when the first of what will probably be many tears finally cascades down my cheek. A sob

threatens to break free from my throat, but I don't allow it. I quickly swallow it down and straighten my back. I was raised tougher than this. My dad and brother did their best to prepare me in case I found myself in any similar circumstances. Although, I don't think anything or anyone could have prepared me for this exact situation. I know how many bad men there are in the world, and I know how many bad things can happen to people. I've seen it firsthand.

My father has been taking down places like this for years; even before I was born. He's a bad man himself, but he does good things, like saving numerous women and children from human trafficking rings. He's made it his mission in life to save people from being bartered and sold like animals. And I can only hope that he's on his way right now with his team to save me.

The door opens suddenly, and one of the masked guards steps inside, holding an assault rifle. I recognize him from earlier; the same one who almost hit me after I smarted off to him.

"It's time for the auction," he announces, motioning with his gun for us to get up and walk out. "Stay quiet or die. Those are your only two options," he says, purposely looking at me.

I stand up slowly, my entire body bruised and aching. All of us fall in line, our footsteps forced and slow, like we're being led to slaughter. It certainly feels that way at this point. I don't know exactly what will happen after we leave this room, but I know one thing for certain — all of our lives are going to change forever.

As the group of us are led down a dark hallway, I hear one of the other guards say, "Smile and look pretty, girls. It's almost showtime."

Slowly, a wicked grin forms on my face. They want us to pretend to be polite, pretty, little dolls for those sick, rich perverts? Well, they've got another thing coming.

CHAPTER 5



Mateo Navarro

WHEN ONE OF my business associates suggested we take a little trip, I didn't think it would involve traveling in a private jet for hours to some remote island in the middle of the fucking ocean. Thiago was very secretive about this whole thing, claiming it would all be worth it in the end, but he did tell me that one of the rules of where we were going was no weapons.

The moment we land and exit the plane, there is a team of security that runs metal detector wands up and down our bodies to make sure we're not carrying. Little do they know that my suit has a special lining that fools archaic methods such as this, and I'm happy that my Glock is secretly resting near my heart inside my jacket where it belongs.

"Getting felt up by these men is your idea of a good time, Thiago?" I quip, irritated by the fact that they're attempting to pat me down, clearly not trusting their previous search. "Touch me again and I'll break your goddamn fingers," I tell one of the men. I don't fully relax until he puts his hands up and slowly steps back, knowing that I've had enough of this bullshit.

Thiago chuckles. "Calm down, Mateo. It's just protocol."

I glower at him, contemplating all the ways I could kill him right now. I know numerous ways that would be particularly painful, and I wouldn't

even have to make it look like an accident.

After the security guards have deemed us safe and acceptable, we're put into a car and driven for a while to a large, nondescript building in the middle of the island. From there, we're led down a long hallway and into a small ten-by-ten room where we're told to wait.

Fed up with the theatrics already, I turn to Thiago and ask, "What the fuck are we doing here?"

He tells me cryptically, "You'll see."

I tower over him, wanting so badly to put my fist through his puffy, red face. He's short, much shorter than my height of six-foot five, and about as wide as he is tall. He glances up at me and flashes a mouth full of yellow teeth as he runs his fat fingers through his dark slicked-back hair. The dated hairstyle makes him look older than he actually is when, in fact, we're the same age of thirty-five.

Sighing in barely confined frustration, I stare out the wide viewing window before us, stepping closer to examine it. I can see myself in the reflection since the outside of this room is completely darkened. I tap on the glass, curious.

"It's one-way. We can see out, but no one can see in," Thiago informs me. "It keeps everything private," he says, stressing the last word.

"So, you've been here before," I presume.

"Oh yes, many times," he confesses.

He's never told me about this place, or perhaps I never remember him telling me. Thiago has a tendency to run his mouth a lot, and most of the shit I just block out for my own sanity. I've known him for years. He's one of my closest associates and biggest dealers, distributing the rainbow-colored fentanyl that my people produce in the numerous warehouses in Mexico that I own and run. So, I let a lot of his shenanigans slide, for the sake of business alone and for the amount of money he makes me.

But our partnership goes both ways. Thiago wouldn't have the drugs to sell without me; and thus, wouldn't have the extremely lucrative income that he does. So, for those reasons, I trust him...to an extent. I know he wouldn't double cross me, because he knows he would be a dead man before my corpse even got cold.

"Have a seat," Thiago suggests. "The show is about to begin."

Grumbling, I go to a chair situated in the corner of the small room as he takes a seat in front of a computer with a keyboard. The monitor flickers on,

and a bunch of information runs across the screen. Warnings and disclaimers, I think. He signs in, and then all the fine print blinks away to a black screen with a countdown of five minutes in big, red numbers.

I want to ask him what happens in five minutes, but I know the bastard won't tell me. He's being ambiguous, for some reason, and it's driving me insane. I'm already thinking about who will replace him after I put a bullet in his head. It wouldn't be difficult. Everyone is replaceable, to an extent. Even me.

Pulling my lucky coin out of an inside jacket pocket, I begin to roll it over the knuckles of my right hand. I do the maneuver repeatedly, and it begins to calm my nerves, like usual. Call it a nervous tik or whatever you want, but it helps me to think, helps me to concentrate.

I stare through the dark glass, assuming I'm going to see something soon since the counter is down to three and a half minutes now. Sure enough, bright fluorescent lights begin to flicker on, illuminating a circular room and what appears to be a round stage with a runway leading up to it in the middle. The room is huge, and I can see numerous large, square windows facing the stage. I'm assuming beyond the windows are other rooms, just like the one I'm currently sitting in. But Thiago was right about the one-way glass since I can't see into any of them to confirm.

Glaring at the runway in the distance, I scoff, "You brought me all the way here for a fucking fashion show?"

"Oh, it's not a fashion show, although you will see many beautiful girls here tonight. I can promise you that," he mutters under his breath.

I'm just about to demand he tells me what's going on when a robotic-sounding female voice comes over the intercom speaker above us, interrupting me.

"The first auction will begin in three minutes," the voice announces.

"Auction?" I question. "What are you bidding on?"

"I'm not going to spoil it. You'll just have to wait. The first time is always the most exciting," he states, smiling cruelly.

I steel my features. This is a new side of Thiago that I haven't witnessed before. Hell, we're all seedy motherfuckers in the cartel, but he's bringing on a whole other level of sordidness. After tonight, I'll decide if I want to keep doing business with him...or kill him. The more time that goes on in this room with the two of us, I'm beginning to lean more towards the latter option.

He's quiet for a while, his knee jumping and anxiousness marring his features. He's excited for this, like a gambler before a big horse race.

I watch the countdown on the screen, and when it gets to zero, I can't help but hold my breath for what is about to happen. The stage lights blink a few times, and then a blonde woman is walking down the runway with what looks like an armed guard behind her. He's wearing tactical gear and a black mask. I narrow my eyes as I turn my attention to the woman.

She looks young, late teens, early twenties maybe, with short, blonde hair and long legs under a white dress that is so sheer I can see the color of her nipples. She glances around the room when she reaches the end of the stage, looking lost and confused.

"*Dios mío*, she's pretty," Thiago remarks, and I look on the computer monitor, realizing there is a camera pointed at her face and broadcasting it on the screen. Zoomed in, I can see the fear in her deep blue eyes. She looks absolutely terrified.

The robotic voice announces over a speaker in the ceiling, "*Age nineteen. Place of origin, Russia. We'll start the bidding at fifty thousand dollars.*"

Almost instantaneously, several red lights above the darkened windows around the stage begin to flash, lighting up the numbers. The windows are all numbered, and the highest one I see is twelve. There are twelve rooms. Twelve men bidding on women.

"*Three hundred thousand dollars*," the robot says after filing through multiple bids. "*Three hundred thousand going once...going twice...sold to number eleven.*"

The girl is forced off the stage by gunpoint, and I turn to Thiago, who is grinning ear to ear, enjoying his time here like we're at a normal sporting event and not at an auction for human beings. "What the fuck are we doing here?" I demand. I'm tired of him pussyfooting around.

"When you told me you've never been to an auction before, I knew I had to invite you." He pauses. "I haven't bid on any girls yet, but it is quite entertaining." He shifts in his seat then and not so subtly adjusts himself through his pants. *Fuck, is he getting aroused by this?*

I vaguely remember him discussing his sick fascination with paying for whores, but I had no idea he thought I would ever remotely be into this. The very thought of it makes me feel sick and *stabby*, and I'd love to stick the

blade of a knife right through his carotid right now. Even though we've been cohorts for years, he went too fucking far this time.

I may live in a sick, fucked-up world where there are no rules except kill or be killed, but I draw the line at hurting innocent women. Thiago doesn't know about my past or what I went through as a young boy. Hell, only one other person knows, and that's my uncle. Thiago couldn't have possibly known that this would trigger me, but that doesn't make any of this better or okay.

Several more women are presented on stage, and the bids go higher and higher each time. I pace the floor of the small room, two seconds away from losing my shit. My eyes squeeze shut as a barrage of memories assault my mind. I swear I can still hear them screaming...

"The premier female is being presented now," the robot voice says, thankfully interrupting my thoughts, but not fully pulling me out of them.

My breathing is labored as I watch the next woman forced on stage. Her long, brunette hair has my hands clenching into fists on top of my knees. She struggles with the guard and is rewarded with a hard slap to the cheek. She crumbles in her high heels, falling to the stage, her dark hair hiding her face.

And, suddenly, it feels like my head is under water. I'm drowning between the past and the present, and then I'm right back where I was all those years ago when I was just a little boy...

Her dark hair covering her face as the men force themselves upon her. Her screams fill my ears until that's the only sound I can hear. Her begging for them to stop, but they don't stop. They don't stop until she's quiet and not moving. Why is she so quiet?

"She's a lively one," Thiago comments with a dark chuckle. "Whoever takes her home is gonna have fun with her."

He's finding all of this oddly amusing while I'm over here trying not to lose my shit, thinking there is a ghost out there haunting me. I stand up abruptly, knocking over the chair I was sitting in. Moving towards the glass, I point with a trembling finger at the ghost on the stage. "Her face," I whisper.

Thiago's eyes widen as he watches me intently. He's probably never seen me this on edge before, about to lose my shit. I try to always remain calm, regularly masking my inner thoughts, like I'm constantly in a game of

poker in this fucked-up world we live in where one wrong move can get you killed.

“Her face. I need to see her goddamn face!” I demand almost in a panic. What I don’t add is that I need to make sure it’s not the face of my dead mother or sisters.

Thiago stares up at me, confused. “Okay, okay,” he concedes before he quickly types something onto the keyboard.

I watch through the window anxiously as the guard checks his radio before grabbing the woman’s arm in a bruising grip. She’s still on the floor, and I can see his lips moving as he instructs her on what to do. She just lays there, not moving, not listening. Finally, the guard forces her into a standing position, swinging her around to our viewing window. Then, he roughly brushes her long, dark hair away, revealing her face.

As if sensing me staring at her, the young woman looks directly at me even though it’s impossible for her to see into the room. A lump lodges itself in my throat, and I’m finding it hard to swallow or even breathe at this point. Those piercing amber eyes of hers seem to somehow focus on me, and I can’t seem to tear my gaze away.

“*Hermosa*,” Thiago comments.

Beautiful. No. Beautiful isn’t even enough to describe someone like her. She looks like a broken angel, fallen to the earth, displaced from her otherworldly home. Almost too perfect to be real.

The guard releases her, and the woman stares through the window before elegantly raising her middle finger and flipping me the bird. I can’t help the smile that stretches across my mouth as Thiago roars in laughter behind me.

The gesture earns her a verbal reprimand from the guard, and then the connection we shared is severed as he forces her to stand facing in another direction.

“*United States origin. Twenty-one. Certified virgin*,” the robotic voice says over the speakers in the wall. “*We’ll start the bidding at...one-hundred thousand dollars.*”

The bidding takes off quickly; and before I can even blink, it’s over a million.

Thiago points to his screen. “That bastard,” he says with a chuckle.

“What?” I ask, reluctantly tearing my eyes away from the girl to go take a glance at the computer monitor. I realize it shows the number of bidders

and how much each one has bid on a particular woman. Number ten is lit up with the current max bid.

“This is the fourth virgin he’s bid on in the past few months.”

“Who?”

“I dunno. Damion something.”

So much for anonymity at The Island, I think to myself.

“I actually feel sorry for the girl,” Thiago continues. “I heard that he tortures and kills them after he brutally rapes them. He brags about it all the time to the others.” He shakes his head solemnly. “I’ve even seen some pictures of the aftermath. Fucking gruesome. He’s one sick son of a bitch.”

My blood boils at his words, and the nagging memory of that fateful night hits me with full force once again. Enraged, I grab Thiago by the collar of his shirt and force his beady eyes to look at me. “Why did you bring me here?” I hiss at him. Does he somehow know about my fucked-up past? Is he doing this to hurt me, to fucking destroy me?

“I-I-I thought you would enjoy it!” he stammers with fear in his eyes.

“Enjoy it?” I say through clenched teeth. I’m two seconds away from ripping out his fucking throat and leaving him to bleed out on the dirty floor.

“Si! The girls here are exceptional. You can simply look...or buy. You could buy yourself a sex slave!”

“You think I need to pay for pussy?” I ask with a glare, barely containing myself from strangling him to death.

“No, no, of course not!” His hands cover mine when I grip his throat. “*Por favor*, Mateo!” he cries out. “It was my mistake!”

“*The current bid is at two million dollars for the premier choice*,” the robotic voice announces.

Suddenly, I release him and take a step back. My eyes go to the girl on the center stage. Even though she can’t see anyone through the mirrored glass, she flips everyone the bird. She’s screaming something, but I can’t hear her words.

The guard comes back and thrusts a long cattle prod in between her ribs. Her entire body shudders from the electric shock, and she collapses to her knees.

None of the other women even came close to defying their captors. They probably knew what would come as a result of their misbehavior. This

woman doesn't seem to be scared of anything even though her fate lies in the balance of everyone in this building.

"This doesn't bode well for her. Damion likes when they fight," Thiago says in barely a whisper.

I growl at his words. She's fighting for her freedom, for her life out there. And if these men can't recognize the courage it's taking her to defy it all, then they're just idiots.

"Three-point-five million dollars going once...going twice..."

Before I even know what I'm doing, I yell to Thiago, "Bid!"

Thiago presses a button on the keyboard before I can even second-guess my decision.

"The current bid is now four million dollars."

"F-f-four million dollars for a sex slave?" he asks, stuttering in disbelief.

"Counter bid is four-point-five million dollars."

I can see number ten lit up on the monitor. Damion is bidding against me, determined to win her. Determined to rape and maim this poor, young woman and have her become another one of his lifeless, mutilated trophies that he brags about to his friends. And in that moment, I decide that I'll die before I let that happen to her.

"Bid again," I tell Thiago, my jaw set in determination.

"Four-point-five million dollars is the current top bid."

"Again," I instruct Thiago, but he hesitates.

The robot begins saying, *"Four-point-five million going once...going twice..."*

I pull the Glock out of my jacket and press it against Thiago's temple. "Bid. Now!" I roar.

With a trembling finger, he presses the button on the keyboard, securing my bid. "How the fuck did you get a gun in here?" he asks, his voice shaking.

"Don't worry about it. Just keep bidding," I instruct him through gritted teeth while the robot announces the counterbid from number ten.

We play this game of bidding and counterbidding until it goes up to seven million dollars. That's when Thiago informs me, "There's no way he'll counter that, Mateo. He's never gone over seven mil for a virgin before."

*“Seven million dollars going once...going twice...going three times.
Sold to buyer number two for seven million dollars.”*

A sense of relief hits me at first, but then I’m consumed by confusion and then disbelief. I just spent seven million dollars on a virgin.

What the fuck have I done?

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CHAPTER 6



Aria

S EVEN MILLION DOLLARS. I mean, I guess I should feel flattered in a way. None of the other girls went for much over a million. Although I'm sure my virginity played a role in my exuberant price tag, because my little act of defiance on stage certainly didn't help the way I thought it would.

I'm being led down a shadowy hallway with the other women. I have no idea what will happen next, and not knowing is perhaps the worst part of all. My hands are tied behind me this time, like all the rest. And since I'm at the front of the line, I don't even have time to react or study my surroundings when they open the main doors and then a black hood is thrown over my head. Darkness consumes me, and I struggle to breathe through the heavy material.

I hear cars running in the distance, and we're being led towards them. I stop walking, and I quickly regret that decision. A boot is planted against my backside, kicking me. I stumble forward but manage not to fall flat on my face.

"Keep moving!" someone demands from behind me.

I can hear one of the women cry out, and I turn my head towards that direction, but I can't see a damn thing and I'm definitely not in any position to help her.

Suddenly, I feel the presence of someone next to me. I feel a soft caress on my bare arm before a voice whispers into my ear, “You should’ve been mine, little lamb.”

“Who are you?” I ask, trembling in fear.

“I’ll see you soon,” the mysterious man says calmly, but it sounds like a warning...or a threat. Then, I hear his footsteps retreat, his presence no longer casting a dark shadow across my hood.

Before I can even contemplate what the man meant or who he might be, I’m being pulled into another direction by someone else. I’m pressed up against the exterior of a vehicle before I hear a door opening, and then I’m violently shoved inside. I fall face first onto a soft leather seat, and then I hear the door close behind me.

I lay there, still and quiet, my ragged breaths the only sound around me. I can’t hear him, but I can sense someone in the car with me. His scent envelops me — earthy, woodsy with a hint of cinnamon and tobacco — and I don’t know why, but it calms me for just a moment.

“Please,” I beg. I have no idea who is here, but I need them to help me out of this situation. “Please help me.”

A metallic click has my senses going wild. Is that a...switchblade?

Fingers wrap around one of my bound wrists, and I jump. “Stay still if you don’t want to get cut,” a deep voice demands before I hear him slicing through the rope.

As soon as I’m free, I pull away from him and yank the hood from my head. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust, but then his face slowly comes into focus.

I don’t know what I was expecting, considering this is a person who kidnaps and buys women, but it definitely wasn’t this. The man sitting across from me is devastatingly handsome, beautiful even, with bow-shaped lips, bronze skin, black hair, and dark chocolate eyes that are narrowed in on me. His strong jaw is clenched as he watches me intently, and I have a feeling his attractiveness is probably the same type that serial killers use to lure in their unsuspecting victims.

Even though he’s currently seated, I can tell that he’s tall. Very tall, in fact. He’s dressed in an expensive, black tailored suit, and I can see numerous tattoos peeking out from under his sleeves and collar. My eyes are drawn to the tats on his neck, and I can’t seem to look away. Everything about him screams *danger*.

“What’s your name?” he asks, drawing my gaze back to his.

Should I tell him? I’ve watched a lot of true crime documentaries. I know that telling him my name might help. He won’t just see me as an empty shell. He might see me as actually human, and maybe he won’t hurt me.

Yeah, right, I internally scoff. I grew up around made men, and I can spot one from a mile away. And the man sitting across from me is definitely dangerous and probably kills for fun.

“Aria,” I whisper.

“Aria,” he says, his tongue rolling on the *R* and sending a shiver through me. “You are twenty-one years old?” he questions.

I nod slowly.

“Where did they take you from? Where did you live?” he presses.

I think back to the words my father told me once. *If anyone ever kidnaps you, don’t give them any information that could lead you back to us. We will never stop looking for you, and we will find you. But don’t give them an advantage. Don’t ever give up the information that could lead them to us first.*

I stare out the window, refusing to answer him. The car begins to move, slowly driving down a gravel road. “What are you going to do with me?” I ask. I want to ask if he’s going to kill me and make a skin suit out of my flesh, but I keep my mouth shut. He doesn’t seem to be the type, but you never know. Look at Ted Bundy. He looked normal, handsome, charming even, and he was a certified freak.

“I don’t know yet,” is his vague response.

“Are you going to rape me?” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

This gets me a reaction. A dangerous one. His dark eyes narrow and a sneer appears on his face as he vehemently states, “I don’t rape women.”

While that should make me feel better, it doesn’t. He could just be saying that and go against his word later on. I mean, he did just pay seven million dollars for a virgin. He also might be trying to gain my trust and get me to put my guard down. *Never gonna happen.* Frowning, I lean my head against the window as I try to hold myself together. It’s hard, but I manage to do it. I don’t want to break down in front of this guy.

The car stops a few minutes later. I stare out the window, trying to gauge my surroundings, but it’s nighttime, and I can’t see much.

“I have to put this back on your head,” he says, indicating to the black hood.

Panic instantly runs through me. I don’t want to be back in that thing. It’s hard to breathe, and I can already feel my lungs seizing up on just the memory of wearing it.

Perhaps sensing my thoughts, he sighs heavily. “I can keep your wrists unbound if you behave, but the hood is a must,” he demands.

I glance around the car. I mean, what choice do I have? This man bought me. *He owns me*. Just the thought of that sends a shudder through me.

If I’m going to do this, any of this, I’m doing it on my own terms. Angrily, I rip the hood from his hands and place it over my head. Instantly, I’m greeted with my panicked, warm breaths, but I will myself to calm down. Eventually, breathing becomes easier, and I force myself to focus on the fact that my wrists won’t be bound. At least I’ll stand a fighting chance if anything goes down, and I can rip the hood off at any given moment. At least I hold that power.

“*Buena niña*,” he whispers gruffly in what I’m assuming is his native tongue.

I recognize it as Spanish, which is not one of the three languages I speak. I know English, Italian and some French. Never had the use to study Spanish, but I know some of the basic words. I think he said *good girl*, but I’m not totally sure. God, I wish I would have spent some time learning it, though. Not that I could have known that I would have been kidnapped and sold to a man that speaks that specific language, however. Nope, never would have guessed that fate for myself.

Sighing, I rest my head against the seat. My entire body is wired with adrenaline, but my brain is exhausted. I feel like I could fall asleep at any given moment, but there is no way I can let myself relax, let alone sleep. Even though this man hasn’t touched me yet, I have no doubt in my mind that he will. Eventually, he will want what he’s clearly paid a lot of money for. Seven million dollars, in fact.

My hands clench into fists on my lap. I will never give myself over to him willingly. If he thought he bought a docile doll, he’s got another thing coming. I will never stop fighting until one of us is dead.

The car door opens, and my breathing picks up. I listen as the man steps out, and then I feel his large hand on my arm, gripping tightly and pulling

me out.

“Be good,” he warns before leading me away from the car.

Listening intently, I hear what sounds like multiple plane engines. My heels suddenly dig into the ground. If I get on a plane, this man could take me anywhere in the world.

“No, no, no,” I chant, shaking my head in protest.

I can almost feel the anger coming off of him in waves as he grips my arm tighter. “Don’t make a scene,” he hisses.

He wanted me to be good. But I can’t let him take me anywhere he pleases. I need to give my family a chance to find this place first. To rescue me. Maybe they’re here already. Panic overtakes me, and I begin to hyperventilate inside the hood. “P-please,” I beg.

The man doesn’t sound amused before he simply lifts me up and puts me in a fireman’s hold over his shoulder. I kick and scream, my fists beating on his back as he continues to carry me up a flight of steps, not even grunting from the exertion, as if he does this type of thing all day long.

Maybe he does.

Maybe buying and kidnapping helpless women is his *thing*. His hobby.

My world turns upside down as he pulls me off his shoulder and throws me into a seat. Not being able to take another damn minute under that hood, I rip it off my face. The man is crouched before me, and he frowns as he stares at me while I struggle to get enough air into my lungs. I push the hair from my eyes and glare at him, daring him to ask me to put it on again. But instead, he simply shakes his head, smirks and goes to the seat across the aisle from me to sit down.

We sit in uncomfortable silence as the pilot does several engine checks over the radio. When the older man in uniform emerges from the cockpit, he tells my captor, “We’ll be departing in a few minutes, sir.”

The man across from me gives the pilot a nod before standing. He towers over me as I stare up at him. And when he reaches for me, I flinch, almost jumping out of my seat. “I’m just going to buckle you in,” he explains calmly, making a show of his hands with the belt, exaggerating his movements, so that I know exactly what he’s doing and where his hands are at all times.

Confused, I stare at him and watch him closely as he buckles me in, his fingertips briefly grazing against my bare thigh. A shudder runs through me from his touch. He pauses, his face merely inches from mine as I take in

every detail — his strong features, the stubble lining his perfect jaw, his dark eyes that look like molten chocolate below his thick, dark brows. In any other circumstance or universe, I would be attracted to him. But not now. Not like this. He's clearly a monster in disguise, hiding under a painstakingly crafted and handsome façade.

Turning my head, I dismiss his intense gaze. After a beat, he clears his throat before returning to his seat directly across from me and buckling himself in.

I stare out one of the small oval windows. The runway is lit up with hundreds of lights, but I can't see much beyond it. Several planes are boarding and taking off, and I think about those poor women who were auctioned off alongside me and where they might end up. I wonder how many will survive the night and how many will be dead by morning. Tears fill my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. I can't allow myself to appear weak to this man. I need him to know that whatever he wants from me, he's not getting it without a fight.

Several minutes later, another man boards the plane. He's short and overweight, his large gut peeking out from under his button-up shirt. His eyes lock onto mine and never waver as his gross tongue darts out of his mouth to lick his thin lips. He stares at me like I'm a juicy steak and he hasn't eaten in more than a year. My breath hitches in my throat, but I put on a brave face and glare at him. I swear if he tries to touch me, I will bite his finger off.

He tells my captor something in Spanish and then laughs. My eyes shift to the tattooed man, but he doesn't seem amused by his friend's choice of words. His eyes darken as he watches the other man approach me.

"Hello, my name is Thiago," the short man says to me in introduction. He reaches out towards me, and I lean forward, my teeth snapping just an inch from his finger. "Oh, shit, she's so feisty!" he throws over his shoulder to my captor. And then his hooded eyes focus on me once again. "*Las cosas que te haria,*" he mutters before his hand suddenly wraps around my neck. I struggle to breathe as his hand roughly grabs my breasts through my dress. "The two of us could have a lot of fun with you on the way back to Mexico."

I open my mouth to scream, to yell, or do anything, but nothing comes out. I struggle to try to unbuckle myself, but my fingers can't find the release button. I'm at his mercy, strapped to this seat. Maybe that was my

captor's plan all along. Maybe he wanted his friend to have fun with me first while I was helpless.

Black dots swirl into my vision as the man cuts off my oxygen, and my mouth slowly opens and closes like I'm a fish out of water.

I'm on the verge of passing out when suddenly the vice grip on my neck is gone, and I can breathe freely again. I gasp and cough violently, sucking in lungfuls of precious oxygen, as I watch the man who bought me grab Thiago and haul him off of me. In a split second, my captor reaches into his jacket and pulls out a Glock, pointing it at my attacker's head. It's a gun I'm familiar with since I've seen my father and brother carry theirs around a lot over the years.

My captor yells something in Spanish, and the man, who was literally trying to strangle me to death moments before, puts his hands up in defeat, apologizing profusely.

"Por favor, Mateo," he snivels like the little worm that he is.

Mateo. His name is Mateo.

"I overstepped, my friend. Won't happen again," Thiago says before straightening his suit and slowly walking back a few rows to sit behind us.

My captor stares at me, his strong jaw clenching and unclenching before he puts his gun away and calmly returns to his seat as if nothing just happened.

My breathing is shallow, panicked. And when I swallow, my neck throbs in pain. Mateo stares at me, silently assessing me, but doesn't ask if I'm okay. I close my eyes, effectively blocking him and everything around me out. And I don't open them again until the plane is taking off. I gaze out the window as I watch the world go by as we fly to...God only knows where.

CHAPTER 7



Aria

I WAKE UP as the plane touches down on the runway. Startled, I inhale a sharp gasp as I look out the small window. It's early morning, and everything outside looks bright and sunny. *At least my prison will have nice weather*, I think sarcastically to myself.

I glance across the aisle to the man who bought me. His dark eyes are locked onto me, and the way he's watching so intensely sends a shiver running up my spine. He's looking at me like he can't figure out what he wants to do — fuck me or kill me. *Maybe a little bit of both.*

Tearing my gaze away from his, I stare out the window as the plane slowly comes to a stop. I didn't even know I had fallen asleep. I mean, it's no surprise given how exhausted I was, but I can't believe I left myself so unguarded and vulnerable. I guess it says something about my captor, who didn't assault me or try anything while I was asleep, but I'm still not letting my guard down around him. One little act of kindness can't make up for the fact that he is kidnapping me.

"Where are we?" I ask him, not expecting an answer.

I'm surprised when he says, "Mexico."

Mexico. God, I'm not even in the United States anymore. And that's a long way from New York...

Thiago makes his way down the aisle, winking at me when he walks past. "It's good to be home," he announces before exiting the plane.

Mateo stares after him, his eyes narrowed. The tension is almost palpable. Then, his eyes land on me before he stands and says, "Let's go."

My hand trembles as I fumble with my seatbelt, and it takes me three times to get the damn release button clicked. Finally free, I stand up and follow my captor down the steps to get off the plane.

I've barely put my feet on the ground when I hear Mateo utter something in his native tongue. I turn to see who he's talking to, and I barely have time to register the fact that there's a gun in his hand before it goes off.

I watch in horror as Thiago falls to the ground in a lifeless heap. There's a bullet wound between his dead eyes, which are staring up at me. My gaze slowly moves to my captor, who nonchalantly pulls out a black handkerchief from his front suit pocket and wipes away the spray of blood from his cheek.

I can't help but wonder if that's why he wears black, because otherwise the dry-cleaning bill would be astronomical if he just goes around killing everyone, even his so-called friends.

I slowly back away from him, my eyes darting around to the small airport in the distance. It's not deserted. I can see people milling about inside the building through the windows. If I can just get to it, I can...

"Don't even think about running," Mateo says, his voice dark and dangerous.

I don't even heed his warning. My feet begin moving before my brain can even catch up. I slowly slip out of my high heels and take off running like my life depends on it...because it does. Little bits of gravel dig into my bare feet as I run down the tarmac towards the building, towards someone, anyone, who I hope will be my savior.

"Help me! Someone please help me!" I scream, waving my hands in desperation. Maybe someone will call the authorities or do something. But I don't make it very far before I'm tackled into a patch of grass beside the tarmac.

The air is knocked out of my lungs as we tumble to the ground. Somehow Mateo keeps most of his weight off of me, taking the brunt of the fall with his shoulder. He grunts in pain, but quickly recovers, straddling me as I reach up, intending to scratch his eyeballs out.

I manage to score his cheek before he grabs my wrists, securing them both with just one of his large hands. He pins them above my head and glowers down at me.

“What did I tell you?” he snaps.

I stare up at him, my mind blank. All I can think about is how I can get out of this situation.

“I told you to not even *think* about running. And what did you do?” he hisses angrily. He’s scolding me like a child, and I hate it.

I open my mouth to scream, but then I hear the cock of a gun before he’s pressing the end of the barrel to my temple.

“I haven’t decided whether I’m going to keep you or kill you...but you’re making my decision a lot easier by pulling stunts like this,” he murmurs, scowling.

My entire body shivers uncontrollably beneath him. I just watched my captor kill a man, who appeared to be a friend of his. I know he won’t hesitate to kill me.

“This is your one and only free pass,” Mateo warns before standing and hauling me up with him. He jams the barrel of his gun into my back and growls, “Walk.”

Tears fill my eyes, but I don’t dare let them fall. Now is not the time to appear weak. Weakness will only get me killed. So, I simply obey him, doing a walk of shame back towards the plane, slipping back into my high heels on the way and hating the feeling of little pebbles digging into my soles with every step. There’s a car waiting for us, and he guides me to it. The back door is open, but I hesitate to get in. My hesitation earns me a huff of displeasure before he locks one of his hands around my arm and forces me inside.

It takes a few moments for my eyes to adjust to the dark interior of the car, but I see immediately that I’m not alone. There is a man sitting in the corner of the bench seat opposite of mine. He’s big, bald, tattooed, with a scar running through his eyebrow and left eye, which is completely white in color. The man stares at me intently, merely acknowledging my existence but not speaking a word.

A moment later, Mateo climbs into the car and sits next to him and directly across from me.

“How was your trip?” the man asks with a heavy accent.

“Eventful,” Mateo quips.

“I can see that,” the man says with a smirk.

They begin to speak back and forth in Spanish, and I’m instantly lost in their conversation. Every once in a while, they glance in my direction, so I know that they’re discussing me. I just hope it’s not over where to hide my body after they kill me.

A violent shudder runs through me, and I wrap my arms around my stomach, trying to hold myself together, because I feel like I could suddenly fall apart at any given moment. I turn my attention to the window as the car begins to drive away from the airport. Focusing, I try to take in every detail, memorize any landmarks or anything that might prove useful if I manage to escape my captor. If I can make it back to the airport at any time, maybe I can find someone to help me.

The car ride is long, and I almost give up hope of remembering everything in the small chance I do make it back to the airport. But then I steel my spine and force myself to concentrate. I can’t give up already. If I do, I’m as good as dead.

I can hear my father’s voice in my head right now. *Never lose hope. We’ll find you no matter where you are or who has you.* He ingrained those words into my head when I was just a little girl. It had frightened me at the time, but I never imagined it would actually ever happen to me; that I would be kidnapped or sold.

I stare across the aisle at Mateo, who is staring at me. And I know in that moment that I’ll do whatever it takes to escape. I will never stop fighting.

Maybe he can sense the change in my demeanor...or maybe he can read minds, but he quirks a brow at me in challenge. Narrowing my eyes at him in defiance, I turn my head and stare out the tinted window.

Eventually, the car slows and comes to a stop in front of a large security gate that seems to stretch up into the heavens. The fence surrounding the property must be at least twenty feet tall with barbed wire at the top, and my plan of escaping quickly begins to deflate.

We drive through the gate after a thorough check, and then I see the place that will be my prison for I don’t know how long. Maybe even eventually my tomb.

The compound is huge, spanning over a few acres of land, darkly utilitarian, and nondescript with gray concrete walls and very few windows in the front. Obviously, they are not trying to flaunt their wealth or power.

They are trying to maintain a low profile here. It almost looks like a warehouse, not a dwelling, but I have a feeling the inside will be quite the opposite. I haven't known my captor for very long, but I can't see him living in squalor since his suit probably costs more than most people's rent.

Armed guards with dogs roam the property as the car coasts up the long, gravel driveway. A nearby dog snaps and barks at the car, and I jump. I hear Mateo chuckle, and it has my blood turning to ice. If he finds pleasure in my fear, it doesn't bode well for me.

The car rolls to a stop in front of the large building, and someone opens the door. Mateo studies me intently, motioning for me to exit on my own. I wish so hard to be invisible in that moment, to just disappear inside the backseat. Once I get out of this car, my fate is sealed. I know now that I'll never be able to escape. This place is twice as big as my family's compound and at least ten times more secure.

"Why do you keep defying me every step of the way?" Mateo asks, disapproval marking his tone.

He reaches for me, but I quickly pull away and get out of the car on my own. Several guards surround us, and a few of them stare at me creepily, their eyes raking up and down my body. Suddenly feeling vulnerable, I wrap my arms around myself, trying to cover as much as I can since my torn dress is leaving little to the imagination at the moment.

Mateo steps out of the car behind me, his tall frame unfolding and towering over me. I glance up at him, but he doesn't even acknowledge me.

"Ella está fuera de los límites," he announces in a deep, booming voice.

I have no idea what that means, but it has an effect on his men, who suddenly forget all about me and go about their business. I'm just thankful that they're no longer leering at me.

Mateo looks to the bald dude and says, "Take her to my room."

My eyes widen, and I quickly look around for a way out of this situation.

Mateo clicks his tongue, bringing my attention back to him. "Did we not learn our lesson earlier about trying to run?" he reminds me.

I think about his gun pressed against my temple, and I quickly shake my head. No, I won't run. At least not right now. But the first chance I get, I'm getting away from this man and this godforsaken place.

"Take her, Ignacio," Mateo instructs him.

Ignacio grabs my arm in a tight grip and hauls me towards the entrance of the massive building. I want to protest, but I know my pleas will fall on deaf ears.

“I’ll be back later,” Mateo calls over his shoulder.

Why does that sound like a threat?

Ignacio leads me through the nondescript front door. But when we walk through the open foyer, I have to stop myself from gasping. The inside of the house looks nothing like the outside. The inside is opulent, immaculately decorated with antique furniture and colorful artwork on the walls. I only get the chance to glance around before I’m forced up the grand staircase.

There are several doors upstairs, and Ignacio leads me to the last one in the hallway. This door is different than the others. It almost looks like the wood was hand carved with intricate patterns and flowers.

Ignacio turns the knob, pushes through the door and roughly tosses me onto the large bed in the center of the room. I collapse against the soft sheets and glare at him.

Then, he points a thick, tattooed finger at me. “Stay,” he says, speaking to me like I’m a dog.

When he’s satisfied I’m not going to try to run out of the room, he leaves, closing the door behind him. I wait to hear a lock of some kind, but I don’t hear anything else but the sound of his retreating footsteps. I think about leaving, about running, but then I remember the numerous guards outside with dogs and the huge, gated fence lining the property. I wouldn’t make it more than a few feet out the front door without being caught...or gunned down.

No, I have to bide my time; wait for the perfect opportunity to escape.

Climbing off the bed, I look around the room. It’s extremely masculine with dark wood furniture, stone wall panels, a black shag rug under the huge bed, and a leather and metal armchair in the corner of the room.

There are no windows in this room, but there are two doors, and I open both of them. One leads to a large walk-in closet full of black suits, shirts, ties and dress shoes, and the other leads to a large, modern en-suite with a glass-encased shower and a copper clawfoot tub.

I slowly walk over to the sink and stare at my reflection. What I see there scares me. I don’t even look like myself. My hair is a ratty mess; my eyes are bloodshot; streaks of mascara are stuck to my cheeks; and my skin

is covered in blood and dirt. My dress is completely ruined, and I'm quick to strip out of it. Then, I step out of my heels, take off my bra and panties and walk into the shower. Turning the water on, I make it as hot as I can stand it and then proceed to begin to scrub the grime and dirt from my body with a bar of soap I find on a shelf.

The water feels so good, so soothing that I begin to cry. And once I start, I can't stop. My mind is assaulted by everything that's occurred over the past few days. Selina and I getting kidnapped and strung up like animals. Constantine almost raping me but then letting me go. Me being taken to The Island and then sold to my captor. All the people who died at the club. The girl who was taken from the van and beaten into submission, possibly even to death. The man from the plane who was murdered in front of me.

So many lives taken and irrevocably changed in such a short span of time. So much tragedy. And I'm simply at the epicenter of it all, watching everything happen and having to survive somehow. But how? How can I possibly survive this?

My legs threaten to give out on me, and I slowly slide down to the tiled floor. I rest my head against my knees and sob under the spray of water. Now that I'm alone at last, I finally allow myself to grasp the gravity of my situation and breakdown.

I just hope that Selina was rescued somehow and that she's not suffering a similar fate. That's the only thing that keeps me sane. The only thing that gives me any sense of peace in this terrible situation.

CHAPTER 8



Mateo

AFTER I FINISH explaining everything that happened at The Island to Ignacio, my number one and my enforcer, he sighs deeply and then asks, “So, what are you going to do with her?”

“The seven-million-dollar question,” I say with a smirk. “I have no idea. I really don’t know what to do. I didn’t plan this far ahead.” And maybe that’s what pisses me off more than anything. I never make a decision without first mulling over about a billion different scenarios that could happen. But when I saw this young woman standing there, I made a rash, split-second decision that ultimately could change my life. If I let it, I suppose. And therein lies the dilemma.

I take my lucky coin out of my pocket and roll it across my knuckles; a nervous habit I’ve had since I was a boy. The coin is an old aluminum-bronze peso that my father gave to me shortly before he was murdered. I never sold it, never got rid of it. It’s the only thing I have left of him, so the sentimental value alone makes it priceless in my eyes. The coin has been with me through the years, all the ups and downs; never changing, the only constant thing in my life.

“I can make it quick,” Ignacio suggests, getting my attention. He’s giving me an easy out on this whole situation. “She won’t even feel a thing.”

But the thought of him dragging Aria out back and putting her down like an animal doesn't sit well with me.

I dismiss his idea with a wave of my hand. "I just need some time to think," I explain. The girl hasn't made it easy on herself so far. She's making me lean more towards a swift death every time she runs or opens her smart mouth. But I should have known she would be a challenge based on how she acted when she was facing the most terrible point of her life on that stage. She knew she was being auctioned off to the highest bidder, and there she was, putting her middle fingers up and screaming, facing her fears and not giving a single fuck.

A smile forms on my lips when I think about the first moment I saw her. And then I notice Ignacio staring at me like I've grown two fucking heads. Quickly, I school my features and get back to the matter at hand. "I'll handle her when the time comes. Until then, I'm just going to enjoy her."

That causes my number one to grin this time. He likes the idea of me using my newest acquisition like a common whore. Little does he know that I have no plans to do such a thing. I'm going to keep my distance from the girl as much as I can until I can figure out what to do with her.

"What are we going to do about Thiago's men?" Ignacio questions.

Sighing, with a shake of my head, I say, "Call his number two to take his place. Tell him Thiago had an unfortunate accident this morning and won't be returning to the job."

Ignacio cracks his knuckles. "Consider it handled."

My cell phone rings, and I glance at the caller ID before grumbling under my breath. "I have to take this," I tell Ignacio, who simply nods and leaves my office without another word.

"Uncle," I answer.

"Nephew," Domingo says from the other end of the call. "How are you this fine day?"

I rub my chin with my hand, hating the small talk. My uncle only calls when something bad or important occurs, so I decide to cut him off before he continues on with his charades. "Don't blow smoke up my ass. What happened?" I demand.

He chuckles, and it irritates me. To say I have a tumultuous relationship with my uncle, the only surviving family member I have left, would be an understatement of the fucking century. After all these years, I still don't trust him. How could I trust the only man who made it out of the massacre

of my family alive? I still question in my mind his whereabouts that day, and I've been trying to prove his involvement for years, but to no avail. Until I have solid, concrete proof that he was involved with the murder of my family, I have to pretend as if blood is thicker than water between us and that I would do anything for him. Some days are harder than most, considering he can be a real thorn in my side when he wants to be.

"I heard through the grapevine that you shot someone on the tarmac of the airport this morning just before chasing a woman and holding a gun to her head."

My hand stills, the coin resting over my middle knuckle as I grit my teeth. Even though my uncle is currently living and running his side of the family business in California, he still has connections here. And my reputation around this city isn't exactly stellar. I can't even take a shit without someone running their goddamn mouth about it.

"Word travels fast," I tell him, trying to keep myself calm and my voice steady.

"It does," he agrees. "Did the man you shot do something to offend you?" he asks.

"Yeah. He couldn't keep his fucking mouth shut. I got tired of hearing it." At least that isn't too much of a stretch from the truth.

"I see," he says with a sigh. "And what about the girl? Who is she?"

The fact that my uncle wants to know about Aria sets my nerves on edge. I don't want anyone to know about her, least of all him. The longer I keep her a secret, the better.

"We met on a dating app," I joke, lying through my fucking teeth.

That earns me a loud chuckle from the other end of the line. "I don't believe that for a second, nephew, but I'm not going to push you for information." And then he adds, "Yet."

The most important thing I've learned in my lifetime is that you can't appear weak, and caring for someone is the biggest vulnerability of them all. At any given moment, someone is willing to take what's yours and use it against you. I've gone through life like a lone wolf, not letting anyone in or getting too close. It's done well for me so far, and I intend to keep it that way.

"She's just some whore I picked up during a trip," I tell him nonchalantly, hoping that he'll buy it.

“I see. Must have been some party on the plane for her to run away from you like that.”

“She likes it when I chase her,” I say, keeping my tone light.

He laughs. “Well, maybe I’ll fly down there and have a turn with her myself. I could use the exercise,” he offers.

I flip the coin into my palm and squeeze so hard I swear blood is going to start dripping from it. “She’ll be gone soon,” I tell him, not knowing if it’s a lie or not. I haven’t decided what I’m going to do with the girl yet.

“That’s a shame.”

“Did you want anything else, Uncle?” I ask, barely holding myself together. I don’t know why my newest acquisition brings me so many emotions — emotions I can’t remember ever feeling before. Just the thought of someone violating her makes my stomach churn with acid. That’s what caused me to shoot Thiago, even though the bastard deserved it for assaulting a woman in front of me.

In some fucked-up way, saving Aria from that island and her horrible fate with the man bidding against me felt almost cathartic for me. If only I had been able to save my own family...

“We’re having a problem with one of our suppliers down your way,” my uncle says, interrupting my terrible thoughts.

Now we’re at the real reason why he called. He just wanted to gossip and waste my time before, like usual. Being head of the *familia*, I could easily put my uncle in his place. But out of respect for my father, I never do, even when he deserves it.

“I need you to remind him who he works for,” he tells me. “Can you handle that, or have you gone soft over your new whore?”

“Give me the name,” I grit out, completely over his bullshit.

“Harold Cortez.”

I end the call without another word. Harold will be dealt with, most likely beginning with my fists and ending with my knife or gun. Unfortunately, for him, he’s going to take the brunt of all my pent-up frustration and anger that has built up over the past twenty-four hours.

“I’m afraid you caught me on a bad day, Harold,” I say out loud before grabbing my special black bag from the bottom drawer of my desk and heading out the door.

CHAPTER 9



Aria

I STEP OUT of the shower and instantly notice a small pile of clothing on the countertop that wasn't there when I first came in. That means someone was in here while I was showering.

Was it him?

Was he leering at me, staring at my naked body, planning all the sick fucked-up things he wants to do to me tonight?

Even though the heat from the shower had warmed me, a cold shudder suddenly runs through me straight to my very bone marrow.

I take my time towel-drying my hair and body. Then, I sift through the clothes. They seem simple enough — a plain black t-shirt and black leggings. They don't appear to be new, though. I can see some signs of pilling and wear on them even though they smell and feel freshly laundered.

My heart skips a beat when my imagination begins running wild with ideas as to who these clothes could have belonged to. How many women has he bought? How many women have been here before me? And where are they now? Did he rape and murder them all?

Shaking from head to toe from that last thought, I snatch the clothes and quickly put them on, not wanting to be naked and vulnerable a second longer. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. My long, dark, wet hair hangs

down my back, soaking into the cotton of the shirt. My eyes are wide, and I can see the fear swimming around in my irises.

“What am I going to do?” I whisper out loud.

This man just paid seven million dollars for me. There is no way he’s going to just let me *sleep* in his bed. No, he’s going to demand that I screw him, offer him up my virginity willingly. And if I don’t go along with his plans...I have no doubt in my mind that he’ll take whatever I won’t give him.

I need some kind of weapon, I think to myself.

Focusing on that mindset, I go to work, checking every drawer for something that can be used against my captor. Panicking when I come up empty, I rummage through the cabinet below the sink. I sift through body washes, soaps, bath towels, hand towels, some extra unopened toothbrushes, and toothpastes.

Nothing. There’s nothing here I can use.

“Shit!” I hiss before standing up.

I stare into the mirror once more, hoping that it will open up into a portal from another world and swallow me whole, taking me away from this place once and for all.

Dropping my head into my hands, I realize I’m out of options. The mirror obviously isn’t going to save me...

Or is it?

My head snaps up, and I stare at the glass, seeking answers. The mirror itself isn’t a weapon...but it can become one.

Before I can internally entertain any doubts about my decision, I reach into the cabinet below and grab a towel. Placing the soft cotton over the bottom corner of the mirror, I grab a heavy-looking soap dish from beside the sink. I breathe deeply, in and out, in and out, gathering up the courage to do what comes next. I hope he isn’t in the next room, and I pray that he doesn’t hear what I’m about to do, giving away the element of surprise.

As hard as I can, I drive the square edge of the soap dish into the corner of the mirror. The impact is muffled by the towel, but I can hear the glass cracking underneath the pressure.

Removing the towel, I look at my handywork. A large circle is punched into the mirror with shards of glass splintering out from around it. I take the dish and use it to knock out some pieces, which subsequently fall onto the counter.

Grabbing a washcloth from under the sink, I wrap it over my hand before I pick up the biggest shard of glass that is on the counter. I feel like a crazed woman as I swing my makeshift weapon forward, slashing through the air, practicing for what's going to come.

It feels like do or die at this point. Fight or flight; that's what they always say.

Well, I choose to fight.

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CHAPTER 10



Mateo

IT'S BEEN A long day, and I can think of nothing better to do than curling up in my warm bed and getting a good night's rest. My hands are aching after the brutal beating I put on our wayward dealer, but I can rest easy knowing Harold will never fuck up again. If he wants to live anyway, that is.

As I'm ascending the stairs, it dawns on me that I won't be sleeping alone tonight. I can't even remember the last time I had anyone in my bed, and then I realize that's because the answer is never. It will be a first for me. And it's not because I haven't had my fair share of women. It's because none of them have had the honor of stepping foot inside my bedroom or even sleeping in the same bed as me. Nightmares often plague me, and they can sometimes cause me to wake up volatile. But more than that, I just haven't trusted a woman enough to let her see me in such a vulnerable state. And we are the most susceptible when we're sleeping or unconscious.

Earlier in the day, Sofia, one of my housekeepers, had informed me that Aria was taking a shower, and I'd instructed her to give Aria some of her clothes to wear since I had nothing readily available for my new guest.

A grin graces my lips as I reach the landing of the top floor. I wonder if Aria will be sleeping after her shower or if she will be pacing the floor, waiting for whatever depraved things she thinks in her pretty, little head that

I'm going to do to her. Even though I have no intentions of touching her, the sick bastard in me can't help but hope for the latter.

Walking down the hallway, I pause at my door, my hand on the knob, patiently waiting, listening. I hear nothing on the other side, and so I enter, expecting to see Aria fast asleep.

When I walk into the room; however, I see quite the opposite. Aria is standing on the other side of the room by one of the dressers, wide awake. Her eyes widen when she sees me, and I can practically smell her fear as I close the door behind me and remove my suit jacket. Tugging at my tie, I turn towards her and check out her current state.

She's dressed in a black t-shirt and matching leggings; and her hair is still damp from her shower, the long strands hanging over her right shoulder. My eyes scour her petite form, and I'm pleased by Sofia's choice of clothing and the fact she kept it easy and comfortable for our new guest.

"I'll order you more clothes soon," I inform her.

"Whose clothes are these?" Aria asks, and I can hear the tremble in her voice. I don't know why, but it fucking turns me on that she fears me so much.

"Sofia's," I explain.

"Was she one of your whores? Did you buy her too? Is she dead?" She spits out the questions in rapid succession.

A deep chuckle escapes me. "She's one of my housekeepers, and I assure you she's very much alive. I figured you two were around the same size, so I asked her if she would lend you some of her clothes."

Silence fills the room as I continue to undress. Her honey-colored eyes are narrowed as she watches my every movement like a little bunny would watch a big, scary wolf. I walk over towards the walk-in closet, undressing completely inside of it before slipping on a pair of dark gray sweatpants, forgoing a shirt. Usually I sleep naked, but I figured Aria would rather I didn't tonight. When I emerge from the closet, I'm surprised to see that Aria has moved closer to the bed.

I stare at my little prisoner. Aria's hands are tucked demurely behind her back with one leg crossed in front of the other as she bites her lip nervously. She looks so damn young and innocent in that moment, and it takes everything I have in me to tear my gaze away from her.

"I'm sorry I'm not going to be much up for conversation tonight," I tell her bluntly. I'm beyond tired. The past thirty-six hours haven't been the

easiest, and I haven't even had time to dwell on the outcome of having Aria here with me. I don't have a room prepared for her, which is why she is staying here with me. Although the thought of her being somewhere else in the compound makes me nervous. It's not that I don't trust my men. I trust most of them with my life. But when it comes to pussy, they all have a one-tracked mind. And considering I haven't put a claim to her yet, they might see her as fair game.

Aria swallows hard at my words and gives me an imperceptible nod, and once again the smell of her fear has my cock twitching in my sweatpants. Why do I like the fact that she's afraid of me? I suppose I'm just twisted like that.

Without waiting for a response from her, I walk over to the bed, pull back the comforter and lay down. "Are you coming?" I ask her. I don't want to play games. I just want to go to sleep.

She gives me a nod, and I can see her hand trembling as she peels back the blankets on her side of the bed. Slowly, she climbs in, staying on her knees.

My brows furrow as I stare up at her. What the fuck is she doing? Before I can form another thought, she crawls over to me, getting closer and closer. My cock throbs in my sweatpants. I never thought she would be a willing participant in bed. Well, really, I haven't thought much about it or what I'm even going to do with her. I bought her, but I'm still trying to wrap my head around the reasons behind it. I'll deal with the consequences tomorrow when I'm more rested and clearheaded.

"Aria," I whisper as she plants her thighs on either side of mine and straddles my lap. "Fuck," I growl, as she rests her covered pussy against my hardening cock. Just the thought of sinking inside of her and taking her virginity has my dick roaring to life. I was dead tired before, but now the adrenaline pumping through my veins has me wide awake.

Ever so slowly, she leans forward. I stare at her sexy mouth, her bee-stung lips begging to be bitten and sucked on. Even though I know the kiss is coming, I'm not ready for the jolt I feel between us when our lips finally touch. It's barely a kiss, leaving me wanting more. So much more.

Suddenly, an explosion of pain hits me right in the abdomen, and I quickly push her away from me as I try to find a source for the pain. Looking down, I see a shard of glass that's currently lodged into my side.

“*Que mierda?*” I shout, scrambling out of bed to stand and assess the damage. “You fucking stabbed me?” It comes out sounding like a question rather than an accusation. I just didn’t think she had it in her to do something like this. She looks so sweet and innocent. And now I know I gravely underestimated her. She’s not a docile, little doll like I first thought. She’s a goddamn tigress.

Gritting my teeth, I angrily grab the large shard and slowly pull it out of my side. Aria watches in horror as I do this. But I don’t know if she’s more horrified by the blood or the fact that I’m not dead. She clearly wanted to do me bodily harm, and she definitely achieved that goal tonight. I just hope it’s not deep enough to have stabbed any of my vital organs.

I watch as blood begins to gush out of my wound. Quickly, I cover it with my hand, putting pressure on it. “Fuck. Look what you’ve done,” I tell her, shaking my head as a red river cascades down to my gray sweatpants, soaking the fabric. Stalking over to her, I close the distance between us in three long strides.

“You should’ve gone for the throat,” I tell her before wrapping my bloody hand around the column of her neck. She stares up at me with a frightened gaze. My thumb brushes across her full lips, painting them in crimson. And there’s just something about seeing her covered in my blood that drives me wild. But when I begin to sway on my feet, I know that I’m losing too much blood too damn fast. Taking a step back, I grimace not from the pain but for the pity I feel for Aria. She has no idea what is to come next, the consequences of her actions here tonight. Calmly, I step away from her and push a special panic button on my watch, which never leaves my wrist for this very reason.

Within seconds, I can hear my men’s footfalls running up the stairs and towards my room. Aria panics and starts looking around for what I’m assuming is a quick and easy exit. But there’s nowhere for her to go. I don’t even have windows in my room for this very reason — someone attempting to hurt or kill me.

Ignacio enters the room first. He takes one look at my wound, and then he announces in Spanish for the men filing in behind him to capture the girl.

Aria screams and struggles as they surround her and take her from the room. I hear her crying out my name, begging for my help. But she just sealed her fate. Even I can’t save her from what is about to happen.

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CHAPTER 11



Aria

MY SITUATION JUST went from bad to worse. So much worse. I've been locked in some kind of medieval-looking cell in the basement for days. I've only been able to keep track of the time because they feed me twice daily. A small breakfast in the morning consisting of toast and fruit, and then a dinner in the evening that is basically the same as the first meal but with an extra piece of bread. They're barely feeding me. Only sustaining me enough to keep me alive. And that makes the fear creep even further into my bones.

It's on the third night of my captivity that Mateo finally comes to visit me. I watch him with rapt attention as he calmly takes a seat on a stool outside of my cell.

"So, you *are* alive," I say sarcastically.

He glares at me with a pissed off look on his face, and I snap my mouth shut, instantly regretting my words. God, I can't control my mouth even in a situation like this where the only possible outcome is probably death at this point. But I've been waiting for him for days. He's my only lifeline here, whether I like it or not, and he couldn't even be bothered to come see me.

Mateo's dark eyes take in my appearance, and his lip curls in disgust. I'm sure I look like hell, considering I'm still covered in his blood, and stink like I haven't showered in almost a week because, well, I haven't.

He's wearing a three-piece suit, so I can't tell how his wound is. Not that I care. I stabbed him for a reason. I wanted to kill him in that moment but only because I wanted to save myself and my innocence. I've never hurt anyone before, and I'm very conflicted about it. I almost feel bad for what I did. But right now isn't time to get into my head. I need to get the hell out of here, and he's the only one who holds the key to my freedom.

"I have a question for you, Aria," he starts, and I hate the way my name sounds coming from his mouth. I would find it sexy in any other circumstance. But it's distracting, unnerving in a place like this. "What exactly were you going to do after you killed me?" he muses with a smirk on his face that irritates me.

"I hadn't thought that far ahead," I confess in a whisper.

He chuckles darkly. "You hadn't thought that far ahead," he repeats with a shake of his head in disbelief.

"I'm sorry!" I blurt out. Am I truly sorry for stabbing him? No, of course not. I would do it again if I had the chance, except I would go for the throat next time, just like he taught me. What I am sorry for is getting myself in this impossible situation because I tried to kill him, but he doesn't need to know that.

"You're sorry?" he scoffs, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"I was scared. I thought you were going to rape me," I confess.

He flinches at my accusation. "I told you before that I don't rape women. You should have listened to me the first time."

"You could just be a rapist *and* a liar!" I exclaim, exasperated.

He's up and out of his seat before I can even blink. He wraps his large hands around the bars, his knuckles turning white under the strain. His eyes look evil as he threatens, "Put me and the word rapist in the same sentence again and see what happens to you."

"I don't know you at all. I'm just trying to get you to see it from my perspective," I explain, my voice just above a whisper. "You bought me at an auction where women were sold to the highest bidder like prized cattle! What am I supposed to think?"

His expression falters, but then he quickly builds up all of those armored walls once more and shuts me out of his thoughts in an instant. "If I needed pussy, I could have it at any second, any minute, any hour of any day. I can get sucked, fucked or anything I want anytime I want. Do you understand?" he asks through clenched teeth.

I nod emphatically.

He releases the bars and returns to his seat. After a few seconds, I watch as he pulls a coin out of his pocket and begins methodically gliding it across his large knuckles. The motion is almost mesmerizing, but the silence starts to drive me insane. It's almost deafening as neither one of us speaks for several long minutes and he just keeps flipping around that stupid coin of his. And when I can't take the tension or quiet anymore, I tell him, "I've apologized. There's nothing else I can do. I think my punishment should end."

"Your punishment? You think *this* is your punishment?" he sneers. "Oh no, *cariño*. This," he says, motioning towards my cell, "is just where you're being kept until your true punishment begins."

Dread and panic threaten to overwhelm me. "Please. Please just let me go," I beg him.

"If I were a better man, Aria, I would let you go. But, unfortunately for you, I'm not." He pauses for a moment. "You see, my men need some kind of retribution for what happened. If I set you free, they would see me as weak. And I simply can't have that," he explains with a tight expression before glancing around, lost in thought.

Tears cloud my vision, but I refuse to let them fall. "Please, Mateo," I beg. The mention of his name has his eyes snapping to mine. "I'll do anything you want. *Anything*," I stress. I know he paid for my virginity. Surely, he still wants it.

"I'm afraid it's too late for bargaining, *cariño*."

I watch the coin flip over his knuckles, annoyed that he's still playing with it. It obviously has some importance to him, because I can see how worn and scratched it is even from here. Maybe he's a gambling man. Well, if he wants to gamble, maybe I can convince him to bet on this. "Why don't you flip that coin and decide my fate then?" I question.

"What?" he asks as if he might have misheard me.

"You know, heads I get to leave this cell. Tails, I stay."

He flips the coin to his pinky and then snatches it in his hand. "You want to determine your destiny like this?" he asks with a dark quirked brow.

"I have a better chance with the coin, don't I? You already told me I'm not getting out of here. At least, this way, my odds are fifty-fifty." Maybe I'm just stalling for time or for a miracle, I don't know, but I just hope something, *anything* works in my favor at this point.

Mateo's dark eyes pierce mine as he considers my proposition. Then, with a nod of satisfaction, he stands and flips the coin in the air. It lands on the back of his other hand, and he covers it quickly, neither of us knowing the outcome. "Heads, you leave. Tails, you stay right where you are," he suggests, repeating back what I said earlier.

I give him a slow nod. *Oh god, I hope it's heads.*

He removes his hand from the coin and stares at it for a long time before finally revealing to me the outcome.

I see the eagle devouring a rattlesnake and realize...it's tails. My heart sinks into my stomach, and I bite my lower lip so hard I can taste blood.

Mateo almost looks disappointed for a split second before he puts his usual, stoic mask back into place, not giving anything away about his inner thoughts. "It appears Lady Luck won't be intervening today," he tells me with finality. And with that said, he leaves.

I wait until I can no longer hear his footsteps before I let the first of what will no doubt be many tears fall. I lie down on the hard, unforgiving floor and curl into a fetal position as all the horrible thoughts of what my true punishment might actually be threaten to consume me from the inside out.

CHAPTER 12



Mateo

I FEEL AS restless as a caged animal while I pace in my office. Back and forth. Back and forth. I swear I'm going to wear a path into the hardwood flooring soon. I light my fifth cigarette of the morning, puffing away on it like it's going to somehow solve all of my problems.

Today is Aria's punishment. It will be harsh; there's no doubt about that. Does she deserve it? Of course. She tried to kill me. And when you hurt or attempt to kill the head of a cartel, well, let's just say you earn everything that's coming to you.

But for some reason, I'm feeling conflicted for maybe the first time ever. I know deep down Aria deserves this, but the thought of her being disciplined for it has me torn in two. On one hand, I want to let her go unscathed. But on the other hand, I know I can't. If I let her get away with this, my men will see me as cowardly. She will ultimately become my weakness, and I can't let that happen.

My phone rings just then, and I'm quick to answer it. There's a problem at one of our warehouses, and it takes me a good thirty minutes to fix it. It requires every ounce of my attention, making me temporarily forget all about what's going to happen today with Aria, and I don't mind the distraction. In fact, I welcome it.

But when Ignacio barges into my office a short time later without knocking, I know something's wrong. His eyes are shifting from side to side, as if he's afraid to look at me. I've seen him act this way many times before. I know he needs to tell me something, but he doesn't necessarily want to because of what my reaction might be.

"I'll call you back," I tell the warehouse manager on the phone before ending the call. "What the fuck happened?" I ask, knowing before he even speaks that it's probably going to piss me off.

"They started without you."

It takes a few moments for his words to register. "What the fuck do you mean they started without me?" I hiss in anger.

"The men. They got restless. Demanded justice."

I stub out my cigarette in the ashtray and say, "Let's go."

I follow him to the basement. My feet can't seem to move fast enough, and I can hear the commotion before we even arrive. Fifty or so of my men are chanting and cheering; the noise almost deafening. And I know they don't just want justice. They want fucking *blood*.

Ignacio goes downstairs, but I stay on the second floor where there's a viewing area surrounded by a metal railing. When I step closer to the edge, I can see that Aria is already chained to a giant pole in the middle of the open room below. I watch her intently as she clings to whipping post for dear life, trembling violently. Her pretty face is pressed against the wood as tears stream down her flushed cheeks.

The back of her shirt has been cut open, exposing her perfect, beautiful, naturally tan skin. I can see three whip marks already on her flesh. They don't look very deep, but I know how Alvaro is. He's just warming up. He always goes easy at first, making the person on the post think he's not going to hurt them too badly. And then that's when the real torture begins.

The rule is five lashes for anyone who steps out of line and ten for minor infractions within my organization. But for stabbing me? Fuck, Alvaro will probably want to give her fifteen...or maybe twenty. She is the enemy in their eyes, and they won't rest until justice is served against her.

I take another step forward and notice that the sides of Aria's breasts are visible. Glancing around the room, I see that several of my men are salivating over the sight. My hands clench into fists at my sides, and I almost stop the whole thing right then and there. But I can't stop it. Even if

I wanted to. My men want retribution for what was done to me. I should want that too; but for some reason, I don't.

When I first saw Aria in that dirty cell with desperation dripping from her, I wanted to somehow turn back the hands of time and change everything. I shouldn't have even called my men into my room that night after she stabbed me. I should have tied her to the bed and left her there while I tended to my wounds on my own.

But then there would have been too many questions. Rumors. Gossip. My men would have wanted answers; and eventually, they would have found out the truth. Either way, no matter what I did, we would have found our way back here. She can't escape this punishment, because she can't become my weakness, and I also don't want a fucking mutiny on my hands.

I watch breathlessly as Alvaro looms behind Aria. He's a huge guy, tall and wide, and Aria's petite form dwarfs in his presence. There's a roguish smile on his face as he circles around her. He loves being in charge of the whippings. I swear the bastard gets off on it.

He rears back and the whip flicks out, hitting hard, the force splitting her flesh wide open. The sound of Aria's terrified screams echoes in the room, and the sick fuck in me savors every sound. I just wish she was screaming for me and not because of the terrible pain she's in.

Alvaro whips her in succession, a few of the strikes fileting her skin with precision. I flinch during one particularly hard hit, and my side begins to ache against the pull of my stitches. Aria cut me deep, deeper than the whip is cutting through her now. The painful throbbing keeps me grounded and reminds me of why she's here, and the clearly irrational part of me wanting to put a stop to all of this is temporarily restrained, for the moment at least.

Aria's screams turn into cries of anguish as the punishment goes on, and I close my eyes against them as my hands grasp the railing in front of me in a white-knuckle grip. I try to assure myself that she'll be okay. I survived this once when I was a young boy, but I didn't have the luxury of it ever ending. I was whipped until they thought I was dead, my body lying amongst the rest of my massacred family members. I was left there in a pool of my own blood with only my internal screams to keep me company.

Forcing my eyes open, I watch as Aria's frantic gaze searches the room, looking for something or someone. My breath hitches in my throat when our gazes lock. We share an indescribable connection in that moment. Her

honey-colored orbs are full of emotion and of pure, undiluted fear. I've seen that same look before. And it instantly reminds me of *them*.

Suddenly, it feels like all the air in the room has been sucked out by a giant vacuum, and I'm having trouble catching my breath. My lungs burn as painful memories bombard me. I'm taken back to that time when I was younger, and I was forced to watch the most vile and horrific crimes against my family take place.

Staggering, I sway and fall against the wall behind me. It takes all of my strength to suck fresh oxygen into my lungs and regain my wits.

When I manage to get back to the railing, I look down just as Aria's eyes flutter closed. Her body slumps against the post and her extremities go limp because she's fallen unconscious.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath.

I watch in horror as Alvaro rears back, ready to continue to whip her lifeless body and continue out the punishment. My anger suddenly rises to the surface, my blood boiling inside of my veins until I see nothing but *red*.

"That's enough!" I roar. My deep voice bounces off the walls, drawing the attention of every single person in the room.

I jog down the steps, telling a few of the men to let her loose. They heed my instructions, having the ropes untied by the time I reach the bottom. I scoop Aria into my arms, her blood soaking through my shirt as I carry her up the stairs and through the compound.

My hurried footfalls echo through the halls as I carry her to a room that we use for all of our medical care. This morning, I had called a local surgeon, the best one I know. I wanted him here, prepared to care for Aria in case he was needed. No one before her has ever gotten this type of treatment. If you make it onto the whipping post in the first place, it's because you earned the punishment you'll receive. And if you deserve the punishment, then you deserve to wear the scars for life.

I thought I could remain indifferent to Aria and the process, but I was wrong. I was so fucking wrong. As I glance down at her pale face covered in a sheen of sweat, the way my heart beats erratically in my chest scares the hell out of me. I've never given a shit about anyone but myself for the past fifteen years. So why now? Why her?

Because she's innocent. Just like your mother and your sisters.

I let out a growl of frustration as I push through the door to the room. The surgeon is waiting, dressed in scrubs and putting on a pair of latex

gloves as I lay her unconscious body facedown onto the sterilized metal table.

The doctor stares at the open wounds on her back, but he doesn't say a word. He simply turns and begins grabbing what he needs. He squirts some kind of saline solution to clear away the blood and dirt, and the sight of the whip marks turns my stomach. It takes everything in me to not lose my fucking breakfast. I'm used to seeing blood and gore. Hell, I think my hands are permanently stained in the blood of my foes. But this. This is different. This makes me *feel*. And I haven't felt much of anything for most of my life.

My hands begin to shake, but I quickly curl them into fists. "She deserved this," I say out loud, trying to convince myself more than the doctor, but he simply stares at me before giving me a small, reassuring nod. But what I said feels like a blatant lie. The worst goddamn lie I've ever told.

You did this to her. It's your fault. You could have stopped it, but you didn't.

I haven't heard from my conscience in such a long time, and it shocks me to my very bone marrow that I actually feel an overwhelming sense of guilt over all of this. This girl has my head going in several different directions at once. I can barely keep up. One minute I want to kill her, and the next I want to keep her and never let her go.

I run my hands through my hair, pulling at the ends in utter frustration. This is exactly the reason why I need to keep my distance. She's already worming her way under my skin, and I can't let that happen. Not now. Not ever.

"She will be all right. Not too much blood loss," the doctor assures me. "Will have lots of scars, though."

And his words suddenly send me tipping over the edge. "No scars," I demand, my tone low and deep like an angry growl. My own voice sounds foreign, like some kind of feral animal.

"*Qué?*" he asks with a confused look on his face.

"I don't want a single scar on her. Do what you can to make the incisions as small and neat as possible. Take care of her wounds so that they don't turn into scars."

"Some of these are so deep. I don't know if that's possible, Mr. Navarro," he says, and I can hear the unease in his voice.

“Steady hands, Doc. Not. A. Single. Scar,” I say, enunciating every word. “If you fuck up, you won’t have your hands much longer,” I warn him. “*Lo entiendes?*”

He nods in agreement.

I watch every movement, every incision he makes, and I’m glad that Aria is unconscious for all of this. But when she wakes up, what will happen? Will she hate me for what was done to her?

Yes, I suppose she will hate me. She may never stop hating me for the rest of her life.

Shaking my head, I decide that I don’t care. I’ll take her hatred and any other emotion she wants to feel towards me. I’ll take all of them and absorb them, shaping and molding myself into a new creature like I’ve done for almost my whole life. I’ve been a chameleon for as long as I can remember, always adapting, always changing. In this world, you can never sit still for too long. Someone is always looking to take off the head of the snake. Someone always wants what you have, what you treasure the most.

Sighing deeply, I take one last long look at Aria before I force myself out of the room. I can’t become attached to her. It’s too dangerous. For the both of us.

CHAPTER 13



Aria

THE NEXT SEVERAL days pass by in a blur. I'm barely coherent or awake for more than a few minutes every few hours. The pain when I wake up is excruciating; and every time I open my eyes, the man responsible for that pain is there. Always waiting. Always watching. Never leaving my side.

As soon as I wake up, groaning in pain, he's there to shove a pill into my mouth and force me to swallow some kind of broth. The pill is nasty, but the broth tastes good; just like the chicken soup my mom used to give me when I was a little girl whenever I was sick. It gives me some semblance of peace when I slurp up the broth just before I pass out again.

I try to talk to Mateo, to ask him why he's doing this, why he's helping me, but my words come out in gibberish and slurred beyond recognition. I don't know what he's giving me, but I welcome the peace and the escape from the pain.

The next time I wake up and I'm semi-coherent, the pain feels just like a dull, throbbing ache. And so, I refuse the pill he tries putting in my mouth. "No," I grumble, pushing away his hand.

"How is your pain?" he asks.

My eyes open and narrow into slits as I stare up at him. He's sitting on the edge of the bed in his black designer suit, acting like he gives a crap

about me when, in reality, he's responsible for all of this. All of the pain I've been experiencing is because of him.

"How is your pain, Aria?" he asks, more forcefully this time.

"Not that bad," I confess.

"Good, good," he says with a nod before standing. "If you need anything for pain," he starts, but I don't let him finish.

"I hate you," I whisper. Once the words are out of my mouth, I almost wish I could take them back. A fissure of terror courses through my veins, and my eyes dart up to his, fearful of his reaction.

"I know," he simply says with a nod.

He knows? I guess I haven't been exactly hiding my contempt for him. I'm sure it's been written all over my face. I've always been told my poker face is less than stellar. Well, since I'm already pressing my luck, I decide to push even further. "I...I want to call my family," I demand. It's the least he can do considering what I just went through. When I see him hesitate, I quickly think up a lie and tell him, "My mom...she's sick. I need to make sure she's all right."

Mateo's gaze sears into mine, searching for the deception. I keep my face lax and neutral, hoping that he won't see right through me. "Okay," he says after an excruciatingly long time.

"Okay?" I say in disbelief. A huge sense of relief and hope blooms inside of my chest. I know my brother has technology on his phone that can track the call and find my whereabouts. If I make that call, maybe they can get me out of here. "Thank you," I tell him, laying it on thick.

He gets up and walks out of the room, only to return a few minutes later with a phone that looks like an old walkie-talkie.

"It's a satellite phone," he explains.

I bite my lower lip as I wonder internally if that means it can't be traced. Well, I guess I have no other choice but to try and find out. It's not like he's going to offer me his personal cell phone, which I'm sure is locked with a code that would take me a million tries to figure out anyway.

He pushes a few buttons on the device and then hands it to me. "Just punch in the phone number," he says.

I stare at him, wondering if he'll give me some privacy. But when he just stands there with no indication of moving anytime soon, I let out a resigned sigh. His eyes are narrowed, watching me carefully as I dial my brother's cell phone digits. When I hear the call connect and begin to ring,

tears fill my eyes. "It's ringing," I whisper in relief. *Please, Nico. Please answer*, I beg inwardly.

"Hello?" my brother answers on the fourth ring.

"Nico. It's me," I say, keeping my voice as calm as I can even though I'm screaming on the inside for help. With Mateo staring me down, I need to keep the phone call as normal as I can so that he doesn't get wind of my deceit.

"Aria?" Nico says in disbelief. "Where are you?" he demands. I can hear him shuffling his phone around, and I know that he's trying to help me by tracing this call. I just need to stay on the line and not break down.

"I'm safe," I lie, my eyes drifting to Mateo. He's still watching me, scrutinizing every word, every movement I make. I wonder if he can see the sweat building up on my forehead or the way my lips are trembling. Maybe he'll just chalk it up to excitement and not the fact that I'm trying so hard right now to not yell out to my brother to help me.

"What happened? How can I find you?" Nico presses.

"I'm okay," I say vaguely. "How are mom and dad doing?" I ask him.

I normally don't believe in miracles; but in that moment, I do, when Mateo's cell phone begins to vibrate. Grumbling, he pulls the phone from his pocket and stares at the screen. His eyes flash in warning before he slowly walks out of the room, leaving me alone.

"No one is going to be okay until you're home," Nico tells me, and I can hear the anguish in his tone. "Please, give me any information you can, but only do it if you're going to be safe," he carefully instructs me.

"Remember how I always wanted to go to Mexico?" I ask him, my eyes searching the doorway that Mateo just walked out of, fearing he'll come back any second. "It's really beautiful here."

Nico hesitates, but I know he's picking up on the clues I'm giving him. I just nonchalantly gave him my location, but I know it's not enough. I don't know how much more I can give him; however, without getting caught, but I know I need to do my best. My brother is my only hope at this point.

"Are you okay?" he finally asks.

My body begins to tremble with anxiety when I think about everything that has transpired between the night at the club until now. Memories of Constantine, the kidnapping, the assaults, the auction, the whipping, everything hits me at all once like a freight train. "No," I say, my voice breaking on a sob. I can't hold it together anymore. I was being so strong,

but I'm tired of being strong. It feels so good to hear a familiar voice, and I just want to be home so badly. I want that more than anything. I want to wake up in my own bed and realize this whole thing was just a terrible, cruel nightmare.

He hushes me on the other end, and I try to quiet myself down. "Describe where you are. Are you in a house or an apartment?" he asks.

"It's big, secluded. Lots of men with weapons," I whisper.

"What else can you tell me, Aria?" he demands, needing more.

"I..." Mateo appears in the doorway, his eyes automatically glued to me. I'm sure he can see the change in my demeanor and the expression on my face.

He walks towards me, a frown marring his features. "Time's up. Give me the phone, Aria," Mateo commands, holding out his hand.

He's going to take away my only lifeline, my only chance to get out of here. And so I shout out quickly, "I was sold to a man!" If I wasn't panicking before, I'm truly panicking now. "Please, help me, Nico!" I cry into the phone to my brother. "His name is Mateo, and he's —."

My captor finally wrestles the phone out of my vice grip, cutting my words off abruptly. I try to grab for the phone, but my efforts prove futile. He's so much bigger and stronger than I am.

"We're going to find you, Aria. We're not going to stop looking for you! Do you understand me?" I hear Nico screaming into the phone right before Mateo ends the call.

I sit there, my panicked breaths the only sound in the quiet room for a long time before Mateo finally asks, "Is your mother actually sick, or was that just a lie?"

His eyes are boring holes into me as I confess in a whisper, "A lie."

Mateo slowly nods his head. After a while, he finally says, "You better hope they never find you, Aria. Because the moment they step foot onto my compound, they will be killed." For the final blow, he adds, "And I'll make sure you watch them die from the consequences of your actions."

And then he walks out of the room, leaving me a quivering, sobbing mess.

CHAPTER 14



Aria

AFTER THE PHONE call to my brother, I wait in anticipation for my rescue. Every day that passes, I think maybe today is the day I'll be saved. But at least a week goes by without any sign of that happening anytime soon, and my sense of hope begins to slowly deflate. I know my family will do whatever they can to get me back, but I just wish I could speed up the hands of time. The more time I stay here, the more confusing it gets. The lines between captor and captive are beginning to blur, and I don't like it.

"These are healing nicely," Mateo says as he rubs a soothing balm over my back.

Even though I should hate his touch, I'll admit it does feel good. "What does my back look like?" I question, wondering if I look like a scarred freak because of him.

"The doctor did an excellent job. You can barely even tell that you were whipped," he says. "I guess he'll be keeping his hands after all," he murmurs.

His statement has my head whipping to the side. "You threatened to take his hands if I scarred?" I ask in disbelief.

"Yes," he states matter-of-factly as if it's not a big deal at all.

I turn away from him once more, overanalyzing everything in my head. Why would he want me to be whipped for stabbing him and then want me to not be scarred? Unless... Fear grips me tightly by the throat, refusing to let go. And suddenly I need to know the truth about my future here. "Are you...are you going to sell me?" I ask, my voice just above a whisper. The thought has crossed my mind a time or two, but now I feel even more certain that it's a possibility. It could be the reason why he hasn't taken my virginity. He's just biding his time until he sells me off and recoups some of his money he wasted on me.

Mateo doesn't even hesitate before saying, "No."

"Then what are you going to do with me?" I don't know which is worse...knowing or not knowing at this point.

His hands hesitate before continuing to rub the balm over my back. "I don't know yet," he eventually answers.

"Oh, well, that's *really* reassuring," I say sarcastically before slapping a hand over my lips. Damn my smart mouth. Always getting me in trouble.

I expect Mateo to get mad, but instead he chuckles softly. "You don't have to worry about anything right now."

Yeah, right now. But what about a few days or a few weeks from now when he gets bored of me or when I slip and say something to piss him off? Will he whip me again? Or even kill me?

"You're lucky," he says quietly, interrupting my thoughts.

"Lucky?" I question in disbelief.

"Your back. No scars," he explains. "You're lucky."

I scoff at his words. "I wouldn't consider myself very lucky."

"You didn't have to endure the pain either. You're extremely fortunate, Aria."

His words upset me, and I pull away from him. I stand up on shaky legs, grabbing the edge of the bed to steady myself as I keep a vice grip on the sheet wrapped around my front. "What would you know about the pain I've endured? Has anyone ever whipped you?" I ask crossly.

"Yes," he says, giving me a searing look. "I was only eleven years old, but I still remember every strike of that whip, every time my flesh was ripped open."

I stare at him, searching for any signs of deceit but finding none. He endured this when he was a little boy? How did he ever survive it? I barely survived. I can't even imagine being whipped when I was a child.

“Who hurt you?” I ask him, my voice soft.

“The same people who murdered my parents and sisters,” he answers quietly before standing and glancing at his expensive watch. Clearing his throat, he tells me, “I think dinner is almost ready. I’ll have one of the maids bring you up a tray.”

And then he just walks out of the room after dropping a bombshell and ultimately leaving me speechless. God, he has a knack for doing that lately.

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CHAPTER 15



Aria

I STEP OUT of the shower and look over my shoulder into the mirror. The whip marks on my back have healed, leaving only ghost trails behind of what really happened to me. Even though I won't bear the scars physically, I'll never be able to forget everything I endured. I'm scarred emotionally and mentally, probably for life.

Over the past few days, Mateo has slowly weaned me off the drugs he was supplying to me. And although I miss the high and escaping reality and the gravity of the situation I'm in, I'm glad to be coherent and clearheaded for once.

It's also been nice to be able to shower on my own and not have to rely on one of the housekeepers for help. I'm sure that poor woman has enough to do around this place without having to worry about me. She cooks for an entire army of men but claims to love it. Her passion is cooking, and I've promised to help her in the kitchen as soon as I'm better.

Even though I shouldn't be making false promises that I probably won't be able to keep, it felt good to see her smile. I'm still not giving up on hope that my family is on their way to rescue me. It could be any day now, and I have to stay vigilant. I must stay prepared.

I'm brushing my teeth when a cramp in my lower back has me almost doubling over in pain. I drop my toothbrush and clutch the edge of the sink

to keep from falling over. I've been off my feet for a while, so I chalk it up to my body protesting all the moving I did today and decide to just get ready for bed. I'm suddenly feeling exhausted, and sleep sounds like just what I need. I rinse my mouth out quickly and dry my face with a towel.

When I emerge from the bathroom, the lamp by the bed is on and Mateo is coming out of the walk-in closet wearing only a pair of boxer briefs. His muscles and numerous tattoos covering almost every inch of his bronze skin are on full display, and I can clearly see the outline of his dick through the thin cotton material. I have to tear my eyes away. He looks...*huge*. And I can't help but wonder if he's hard or if that's just him soft. Oh god, what if he's a shower *and* a grower?

He flashes me a knowing smirk before disappearing into the bathroom. Internally, I facepalm myself and force myself into bed, rolling over onto my side facing the wall and closing my eyes. I'm so tired, but the pain in my back doesn't subside, and I end up tossing and turning well into the night.

Sweat beads on my forehead as I begin to have the most lucid dreams. I'm back home. With my family. My brother is the first one to hug me, telling me how much he missed me. And then I hug my father and mother. I'm so happy to be home.

Something or someone is telling me to wake up, but I don't want to leave the dream. I just want to stay here. Forever.



Mateo

IN THE MIDDLE of the night, I feel Aria stirring beside me. She's been restless for a while, and it's been driving me crazy. I'm a light sleeper; my body and mind always on constant alert. And every time she moves, I'm wide awake.

It's almost morning I realize when I glance at my watch. Aria snuggles close to me, muttering about being cold. And when she presses her backside against my cock, I have to stifle a groan. Fuck, her body is so damn sexy.

What I would give to take her right now. And therein lies the problem. I would probably give everything to be inside of her. My entire empire. All my riches. Maybe even my own life. Because I know I would die a happy man having been inside of her virgin pussy and hearing her chanting my name like a prayer as she comes all over my fucking cock.

I try to shake away the thoughts, but her ass keeps grinding on my dick. “Aria,” I warn, gripping her hip and forcing her to stop.

“Please,” she begs. “Please, Mateo,” she whimpers like she’s in pain.

“Christ,” I hiss. I feel like a wound-up rubber band, threatening to snap at any given moment. And when she presses her luscious backside against me once again, my constraint finally shatters. “What do you want?” I growl into her ear. I need to hear her speak the words.

“You,” she whispers. “Please...touch me.”

My hand gripping her hip slowly eases its way down. She’s wearing tiny shorts and panties, and I find my way under them in the darkness. And the moment I touch her bare pussy, I curse under my breath. Fuck, she’s so soft and smooth. *Perfecta*.

My fingers gently part her lips, and I find her clit, rubbing slow circles as she grinds against my hand.

“Yes, please. Oh god,” she pants. Her hand grips my wrist, her fingernails like little claws digging into my skin.

My lips find her neck. Fuck, she’s so hot for me. She certainly lied about being cold. But as my mouth creeps up to her cheek, I realize she’s not just hot. She’s burning up.

I snatch my hand out of her panties and quickly reach around to turn on the light by the bed. “Aria?” I question, pulling back the blankets and looking down at her.

A sheen of sweat is present on her beautiful face, which looks ghastly pale in the dim light, and she stares up at me with an unfocused gaze. I put the back of my hand to her forehead, and it feels like a wildfire is raging inside of her.

Her teeth chatter as she reaches for the blankets and protests, “I-I-I’m c-cold.”

“The fuck you are,” I snarl. “You’re burning up with a fever.” I scramble out of bed and grab my cell phone. It takes me two tries to unlock it before I’m speed dialing the doctor in town. When he answers, I tell him, “I need you here. Now.”

He doesn't say a word or even goodbye. He simply ends the call, knowing what is expected of him. He should be here in several minutes. Until then, I don't know what to do with her. I scoop her up in my arms and take her into the bathroom. Placing her down on the counter, I grab a nearby washcloth and wet it under the faucet before running it over her face and then down her arms.

Her skin is so damn pale it scares the hell out of me. Her eyes flutter shut as I gently run the cloth over her pretty face. "Stay awake, Aria," I demand. "Do you hear me?" I say, raising my voice.

Her honey-colored eyes blink open, and a grin appears on her face. "I love it when you're bossy," she says, her words slurred. She inches forward, wrapping her legs around my waist and drawing me closer. "I want you, Mateo," she moans.

"You're delirious," I tell her with a shake of my head. Of course she would only want me when she's out of her mind. I should have known something was wrong the moment she begged for me to touch her.

I continue to wet the washcloth and gently run it over her fevered skin until one of my guards alerts me that the doctor is downstairs waiting. "Time to go," I tell Aria before lifting her off the counter and cradling her in my arms.

About halfway down the stairs, I realize she's gone limp in my arms. "Shit," I bite out before I haul ass to the room that we use for medical procedures and exams.

"Put her down," the doctor tells me in Spanish. He's an older gentleman, short in stature with salt and pepper hair. He's the only doctor in a forty-mile radius, and I pay him well to always be on call for emergencies.

I gently lay Aria on the table. "Is she...is she breathing?" I ask him, and even I can hear the worry...and fear in my voice. Fuck, I haven't been this scared of anything in a long damn time.

The doctor checks her breathing and then presses two fingers to her wrist as he watches a clock on the wall. With a grim look on his face, he tells me, "This isn't good." He reaches into his medical bag and produces a digital thermometer. He scans her forehead. "One-oh-four," he reads.

I mutter a curse under my breath. "Do something!" I demand as my heart drums in an irregular rhythm. "Save her. Please. I...I can't lose her too." My words don't even make sense at this point, but I can't dwell on them right now. All I know is that I want her to be okay.

When I look up, the doctor is readying a needle. He swipes an alcohol pad across her arm and then injects her with something. I trust this doctor, so I don't question him. He knows that if he double-crosses me, a painful, agonizing death is the only suitable punishment he will endure.

"I'm going to run some tests," he informs me. After a few seconds, he looks up, realizing I haven't left the room. And when I cross my arms in front of my chest and stare him down, he says, "Just try to stay out of my way."

I nod in agreement. I'm not going anywhere.

Reaching out, I hold Aria's hand. It feels cold to the touch, and I swallow hard, studying her pretty face and the way her long, dark lashes fan out over her pale cheeks. "I'm here, Aria. You're going to be okay," I try to assure her even though she probably can't hear me.

Just the thought of not hearing her sassy words coming out of her beautiful mouth or seeing those honey-colored eyes locked onto me as they narrow and throw invisible daggers into my skull absolutely crushes me.

I realize in that instant that I would miss her. Terribly so. And that scares the fuck out of me.

CHAPTER 16



Mateo

ARIA REMAINS UNCONSCIOUS for two days. The doctor eventually figured out she was suffering from a kidney infection. Most likely occurred when she was laid up in bed while healing from the whipping. Aria's been on an antibiotics treatment for the past forty-eight hours, and the doctor is sure that she'll be just fine.

After a quick shower, I get dressed for the day and go to the room that Aria has been staying in. It felt weird not having her in my bed at night. And I hate to say it, but I've fucking missed her. More than I thought I would. More than I would ever admit out loud.

Aria somehow wormed her way into my dark heart, and I didn't even realize it. It happened so quickly, like some kind of cruel magic trick.

When I enter the room, Aria is sitting up in a cot in the corner of the room, wide awake and alert as she tries to communicate with the doctor as best she can with the language barrier. The man knows some English, so that should make it a little easier at least.

As Aria turns to me, all the air in my lungs leaves in a rush. I have a strong urge to run to her side, to plant kisses along her beautiful face and tell her that I'm glad she's okay. But I abruptly suppress that urge and slow my walk. I can practically feel the mask slipping down over my face as I

school my features. I can't let this obsession, and that's exactly what it is and nothing more, take hold of me.

"Nice to see you awake, Aria," I tell her coolly.

"Nice to be awake," she counters.

I force my attention to the doctor. I ask him in Spanish about her condition and what needs to be done from this point forward.

"Lots of rest and liquids. Need to keep her hydrated," he informs me.

"*Considérello hecho.*" Consider it done.

"The doctor told me you barely left my side the last couple of days," Aria says, a slow, mischievous grin spreading across her face.

My lips thin, and I glare at the man beside me. *That bastard ratted me out.*

I can see the amused sparkle in Aria's eyes as she continues. "I didn't take you as the Florence Nightingale type, Mateo."

She's testing my limits. "I think I liked you better when you were unconscious," I snap.

That earns me a smile, and fuck, it causes my mask to slip a little. A couple of days ago, I would have done anything to see that smile. And to see her awake and happy now...it makes me feel things. Things I have absolutely no business feeling.

"I have some matters I need to take care of," I inform her before turning to leave. When I learned that Aria was going to be okay, I purposely scheduled meetings outside of the compound today so that I could get some fresh air and have time to think about all these new *emotions* I've been trying to deal with. I need to get away from Aria and see if the real world wakes me the fuck up without her in my constant presence.

That's what I'm chalking this all up to. Taking care of her, having her by my side almost twenty-four-fucking-seven for the past week or so. Anyone would think they're developing some sort of attachment towards another person in that case. That's all this is. Pure and simple.

"Thank you!" Aria calls after me before I make it out the door.

When I turn to face her, I cock a brow in question. *She's thanking me?*

"For staying with me, making sure I was safe, and for calling the doctor," she says in a rush. Then, she stops, takes a breath and says, "For... everything."

I nod and walk out of the room before my mouth gets me in trouble once again. Fuck, I need to get away from her before I do something stupid,

like tell her that I've missed her...or, God forbid, try to kiss her.

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CHAPTER 17



Mateo

THE STRIPPER GYRATES her hips in front of me, trying desperately to entice me. Gritting my teeth, I snag my drink from the table and take a long swig of the dark liquid, doing my best to completely ignore the woman.

“Maybe blondes aren’t your thing?” Vidal, my business associate, surmises. “I can bring in some brunettes or maybe a redhead,” he offers.

“Not in the mood for any variety today,” I tell him, barely able to contain my irritation. We’re at Vidal’s strip joint, just one of the many businesses he owns that we launder our money through. He insists on conducting meetings here; and any other time, I wouldn’t really mind. But today, I’m not in the mood.

Vidal nods in understanding and waves his hand, dismissing the girl. The blonde walks away with a backwards glance at me, pouting. Any other day, I would have taken her to one of the back rooms and fucked that pout right off of her face. But now that Aria is in my life, it would feel wrong somehow.

When did I suddenly get so fucking righteous?

Groaning, I rub a hand down my face while I desperately try to block Aria from my thoughts. The whole reason for me getting out today was to forget about her; and so far, it’s not working. In fact, her not being with me

is making my thoughts drift to her even more often. “Fuck,” I grit out before finishing off my drink.

“Another?” Vidal suggests.

When I nod, he gestures for one of his men to bring forward the bottle of expensive liquor, and I watch as he carefully refills my glass. Vidal is dressed casually today with a Hawaiian-looking shirt and khaki shorts. He’s short and skinny with a pencil thin mustache and warm, brown eyes. He doesn’t seem like much to look at him, but I’ve seen him take down three men much bigger than him in a fight before. He’s scrappy and gets shit done when it matters the most. Maybe that’s why I chose to work with him several years ago. There’s something profound that can be said about a man, who is an underdog, with the odds stacked against him and the weight of the world on his shoulders, and he still ends up coming out on top when it counts.

“Something wrong, Mateo? I’ve never known you to drink so much or turn down pussy,” he says, leaning back and stroking his mustache.

My eyes flash towards him, narrowing as a warning.

Vidal puts his hands up in a placating gesture. “Alright, alright, no need to talk about it,” he says with a smirk.

“I just want to talk about business,” I inform him. *And forget about a certain pretty brunette with a smart mouth*, I add internally.

“Good enough.”

“Why is my shipment not here yet?” I inquire. The materials I need from California never arrived, and it’s been a thorn in my side. Production has halted at several of my warehouses. And if they’re not making the product to sell, then that means I’m not making any money.

“Our usual dockworker wound up dead last week,” Vidal explains. “We’re still working on trying to bribe another man to take his place.”

“Any progress?”

“I found a man with a family — a wife and kids. I have no doubt he’d be willing to do it if I paid them a visit, gave them a little scare. Hell, he might even do it for free if I take his family for a few days and rough them up to help convince him.”

I hold up my hand to silence him. “Your words should suffice. We don’t need to go to extremes unless it becomes absolutely necessary.” Children are innocent. They don’t choose what their fathers end up becoming. “Pay

him the same rate,” I add on. It’s worth the money if I can get my shipments docked safely.

“If everything goes well with our new rat, the rest of our deliveries should be a breeze.”

I nod. “Good. Make sure there are no further problems,” I tell him sternly before standing and buttoning my suit jacket. “I need to head home.”

“So early? It’s not even five o’clock,” Vidal says incredulously.

I move my head from side to side, cracking my neck. The tension I feel there is almost excruciating. I’ve been trying to handle business as usual just to get away from *her*. But even my associates are noticing a deviation in my behavior. Maybe I just need to fuck Aria to get her out of my system. *If only she would give in to me*. I’m sure one good romp in the sack would make everything better. I could quickly get over her and move on with my life.

“I have a woman tied up in my bed waiting for me,” I lie through my teeth.

He smiles wickedly. “Nice.” He stands and shakes my hand. “Well, I won’t keep you from your little captive.”

My little captive.

Yes, that’s exactly what she is. And tied up in my bed is exactly where she should be right now. Just the idea of seeing Aria’s big doe eyes wide and helpless as she struggles against her bonds has my cock hardening in my slacks.

“I’ll be in touch,” I tell Vidal before departing.

Once I’m in the back of the car, I pull out my cell phone. I read over my texts, hoping for an update on Aria, but there is nothing. Frowning, I tell the driver, “Hurry home.” I have an almost overwhelming need to see her. And an even stronger need to touch her and make her mine.

CHAPTER 18



Aria

AFTER DINNER, I return to the room I've been staying in for the past few days while I've been recuperating from my kidney infection. But when I see the cot rolled up in the corner of the room and all of my things missing, I stand there, confused.

"What's wrong?" Mateo asks, startling me.

I turn to see him leaning against the doorjamb, looking devilishly handsome in his black three-piece suit, like usual. "I just...I thought..."

"What? You thought this was your new room?" he questions with narrowed eyes.

"Yes."

"This is a medical room. We need it for emergencies."

"Oh. So, where will I be sleeping now that I'm better?"

"With me," he says with conviction.

I just assumed since he was done taking care of my lash marks and my infection is over that he would put me in another room in the house. The fact that he wants me to stay with him, to sleep in his bed every night makes me feel uneasy. We've already been walking a very fine line between hostage and kidnapper, and I need to put an end to all of this. "No," I tell him with a shake of my head.

“No?” He cocks a brow as a smirk forms on his lips. “You don’t have a choice in this matter, Aria,” he says with finality.

Damn it, I hate when he says my name. It sounds so sexy coming from his mouth, especially when he rolls the R with his tongue. “Fine,” I say, storming out of the room and upstairs with Mateo hot on my heels. “It’s not like I’ve had any choices since I arrived here anyway,” I call out when we make our way into his bedroom.

“You always have a choice, Aria,” he says.

Even though I’m sure he’s meaning when it comes to my virginity, I decide to plead with him anyway. I turn around and face him. “Then let me leave,” I implore.

“Well, not a choice when it comes to leaving,” he corrects, and I just want to smack that grin right off of his face.

Rolling my eyes, I go to the bathroom and slam the door shut. I swear I hear his dark chuckle behind the wood. Fuming, I get in the shower. The hot water does little to calm my nerves. And after I’m done and get out, I realize my mistake. I didn’t grab any clothes first. And now I have to do a walk of shame to the closet with nothing but a towel.

Feeling even angrier now than I was before, I open the door and stalk out of the room with dripping wet hair and a towel precariously cinched between my breasts. I can almost feel Mateo’s gaze on my exposed skin as I move to the closet and pull out a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. They’re worn with lint balls covering them, but I have nothing else to wear.

Taking the clothes back to the bathroom, I slam the door again. It feels good to slam that door and show a little act of defiance. I dress quickly and comb through my wet hair with my fingers. There are some tangles I can’t get through thanks to not having any conditioner, and it frustrates the hell out of me.

I’m practically steaming by the time I emerge from the bathroom. Mateo is sitting on the edge of the bed, his attention on the cell phone in his hands as he types something quickly with his thumbs. He glances up at me and quirks a thick, dark brow, looking bored.

And that’s when I snap. Holding an accusatory finger at him, I raise my voice and say, “If you’re planning on keeping me here, then I’m going to need things. Like...like conditioner and a hairbrush!”

I expect him to be pissed off by my demeanor and demands, but instead he breaks out into laughter. “You know, you’re really cute when you’re

mad.”

Wait. Did he just say I was cute? I’m so taken aback by what he said that I can’t even remember what I was angry about in the first place.

His face goes back to serious in two-point-five-seconds. “Make a list, and I’ll get someone to fetch what you need tomorrow,” he instructs me. And then he stands and walks into the bathroom, slamming the door in *my* face this time.

With a huff, I climb into bed, staying as far over on my side as I can. Turning over onto my back, I ball my hands into fists and repeatedly strike the mattress under me. Mateo is so infuriating! One minute he’s angry, and the next he’s smiling and...calling me cute.

And then I realize that I have a big, stupid grin on my face. Oh my god, why am I even smiling right now? Because he called me cute? Because he’s going to let me make a list of things that I need? Because he looks so damn handsome when he smiles, which is so rare it’s like catching a glimpse of a falling star in the sky?

Quickly, I grab one of the pillows from the bed and shove it over my face before screaming my frustrations into it. Oh my god, I think I’m losing my mind.

CHAPTER 19



Mateo

I GNACIO LOOKS AT the list incredulously. “*All* of this?” he questions for what seems like the tenth time.

Aria made the list late last night, using an entire sheet of paper. Front and back. I wanted to tell her no, but I couldn’t go back on my word that I would get her what she wanted. I just didn’t realize she’d want everything but the goddamn kitchen sink.

“Yes, all of it,” I stress. “Make sure you get every single thing even if you have to order it online.”

He shakes his bald, tattooed head in disbelief. “Tampons? Mateo, I can’t go into a store and buy fucking tampons!” he hisses angrily.

Just the thought of my number one walking into a store and carrying out a dainty box of feminine products has me biting back a laugh. “Then take one of the women from the compound with you. Send her in the store with the list and money.”

This seems to calm him down in record time. “Alright, alright. I’ll take Flora,” he says with a renewed attitude and a grin on his face before walking away.

He’s been fucking Flora, one of our housekeepers, for years. Hell, I’ve caught them together in compromising positions more times than I can count. He has a thing for older women, especially maids. Mommy issues

perhaps. Hell, I think we all have mommy and daddy issues here. We're all from fucked-up families with fucked-up pasts. Mine might be the worst of all, however.

On the way to my office, I spot Sofia in the hallway. She's the one I've been borrowing clothes from for Aria. "Sofia, a word?"

"Yes, of course, Mr. Navarro."

She follows me into my office and closes the door behind her. I sit at my desk and light a cigar. I puff on the end, loving the taste of a real Cuban. These cigars are expensive but worth every penny.

Sofia stands on the other side of my desk, patiently waiting with eager eyes. She's petite, like Aria, with short, black hair and brown eyes. She's had an obvious crush on me for years. I don't doubt that she would bend over on command or suck my dick if I asked her to.

But when I started my empire, I put a provision in place — never fuck an employee. Also, the whole one and done rule that I stick by wouldn't go so well if I had pussy available to me twenty-four-seven. And lord knows I've been in a dry spell since Aria arrived. Hell, I feel like my dick is going to spontaneously combust soon if I don't get some sort of relief.

"Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Navarro?" Sofia asks, batting her eyelashes.

I've been spending more time with her as of late, constantly asking her to borrow clothes for Aria and giving her money to buy new ones for herself. She probably thinks I'm showing her attention for another reason. But she would be wrong. While Sofia is attractive, she couldn't hold a candle to my little captive. Aria is one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. She's probably ruined me for life, because I doubt if I will ever find the likes of her beauty ever again.

I puff on the cigar, cursing under my breath. This girl is ruining my life slowly but surely, but I can't even dwell on that right now. "I need to borrow a dress for Aria," I tell Sofia.

Her face falls. She really thought I was going to request something else. "Oh. Of course, Mr. Navarro. I might have a few in my closet."

"Bring them to me," I instruct her.

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir." She leaves the room in a hurry, and I can faintly hear her saying *perdóneme* in the hallway.

A few seconds later, Aria enters my office. She looks mad, but I mean, what else is new?

“Did you take my list?” she questions, but it sounds more like an accusation.

I give her a nod. I found the piece of paper by the bed this morning. She must have spent most of the night writing it before finally crashing early this morning. “Ignacio is on his way to buy the things you requested,” I explain.

When Aria steps closer and wrinkles her nose from the smoke in the room, I quickly stub out my cigar in the ashtray. Normally, I wouldn’t give a fuck who was bothered by my cigarettes or cigars; but it was an almost knee-jerk reaction when I realized she didn’t like it. For some reason, she makes me care. *Damn it.*

Turning my attention away from my five-hundred-dollar discarded cigar to Aria, I notice that she’s nervously wringing her hands and fidgeting like she has something on her mind but doesn’t want to say it out loud. “What is it, Aria?” I ask, doing my best to sound bored and unaffected.

“Who was that girl that just came out of your office?”

“One of the housekeepers,” I answer nonchalantly. I can practically hear the wheels turning in her pretty, little head. “What’s your other question?”

“Is she...is she your girlfriend?”

Her question has me barely constraining a laugh. “Girlfriend? No,” I tell her with a shake of my head. Fuck, I don’t think I’ve ever had a girlfriend. I’ve had lots of women under me, but no one has ever stuck around long enough to be considered more than a casual fuck. And I’ve never been interested in commitment before. *Women make you weak.* I can practically hear my uncle’s words echoing inside my brain.

“So you two just...” Her voice trails off as she fidgets some more.

“We just what, Aria?” I know what she’s too afraid to ask, but I want to hear the naughty words coming out of her mouth.

“You two...fuck?”

Dios mío. I close my eyes, savoring the sound of that word in her sweet voice and tone. When I open my eyes again, I can see that she’s desperately wanting an answer. “Are you jealous?” I question out loud.

Her eyes narrow. “No, I’m not jealous. I just want to know how many diseases you have. You know, we sleep in the same bed!”

“Yes, we *sleep*.” I stress the last word.

She opens her mouth to say something, but then closes it. I’ve rendered my little captive speechless. *That’s a first.*

“I’m clean, by the way,” I tell her. I always wear condoms, and I get tested regularly. With my proclivities, I can never be too careful.

Before either of us can say another word on that particular subject, there is a knock at the door, and I yell for the person to come in. It’s Sofia again, with a few dresses. She gives Aria the side eye before coming straight for me. She holds the dresses up, and I study them. There’s a black one that looks like something a grandmother would wear, a white one that’s delicate and lacey, but reminds me of a doily, and a red one that appears to be more like a scrap of fabric than an actual dress. I motion for Sofia to turn, and then I ask Aria, “Which one do you like the best?”

Aria locks her honey-colored eyes on me for a moment before she thoughtfully considers the dresses. “Red.”

“Red it is then.” I turn my attention to Sofia. “You can leave it there on the chair. Thank you,” I say, dismissing her.

Aria watches the other woman walk out before staring at the dress. “Who is that for?”

“You. We’re going out tonight.”

“What?” she whispers in what I can only assume is disbelief.

“Ignacio should be back soon with everything on your list. I expect you to get ready and wear that dress,” I explain.

She slowly picks up the red dress and holds it tightly in her hands. It looks like she might refuse at first; but when her eyes meet mine, I can see the hopefulness swirling in her honey-colored orbs.

Aria hasn’t set foot outside of the compound since she’s been here, so I’m sure she’s already planning every kind of little escape plan that she can inside of her head. She probably thinks I’ll let my guard down so she might have a chance to run away while we’re out in public. Little does she know that I own this entire city and everyone in it. And soon enough, I’ll own her too.

CHAPTER 20



Aria

“WHERE ARE WE going?” I ask for what feels like the millionth time during the car ride.

“You’ll see,” Mateo answers for the exact number of times that I have asked.

Scowling, I stare out the dark tinted window, trying to take in every detail in case I need to remember anything. Wherever we’re going, I’m prepared to scream and fight and call out for help. I want to go home... before I forget what home felt like. My life prior to being kidnapped is starting to feel like some sort of surreal dream that I was suddenly woken up from. It’s scaring me how I’m growing accustomed to my life here, to Mateo, to everything. I don’t want to get used to things. I want to go back to my old life.

I can hear the music before we even pull up to the club. It makes me think of that awful night when I was taken and my entire world changed and crashed around me. My heart starts beating faster, and I begin knotting my fingers nervously in my lap.

“What’s wrong?” Mateo asks, his dark eyes assessing me.

I shake my head, dismissing my inner thoughts. “Nothing.”

He stares at me for a beat before he reaches for the door handle. He opens the door and impatiently waits for me to emerge from the car.

I'm wearing the red dress that Sofia let me borrow and my scuffed-up Louboutins. I step out of the car and almost fall thanks to one of the heels being cracked. Mateo catches me in his arms at the last second and hauls me against his chest. He's so tall that I feel like a child in his arms.

"Those shoes have seen better days," he remarks gruffly. "Sofia should've let you borrow a pair of her heels."

"They were a gift from my mother," I respond. I couldn't bear the thought of throwing them away. And when I wear them, I feel like a part of her is with me, giving me the strength I need to carry on.

Mateo nods slowly in understanding. With me still in his arms, he gazes down at me, studying my face with rapt interest. Since all the things on my list were brought to me, I decided to get all dolled up with a full face of makeup. I did a smokey eye and a nude glossy lip. I can't even count how many times Mateo has looked at me tonight. I look hot. I know I do. I was always used to the attention back home, but I'm not so sure if I want his attention. What if he decides he's done being patient with me? What if he just takes what he wants?

Mateo releases me then, taking a step back. He clears his throat and then motions towards the club. "Let's go," he says, his voice deep and gravelly.

With his hand on my lower back, he guides me towards the front door. Several times I almost stop, wanting to turn and run the other way, but his hand is persistent, moving me forward.

One of the bouncers gives him a subtle nod as he opens the door and motions for us to enter. The moment we walk inside the dark club, the volume of the music almost knocks me over. It's so loud...and bright. It reminds me of the club I was in when I was taken. When Constantine had a bunch of people gunned down in front of my eyes. Memories of that night assault my mind as I glance around, making sure everyone here is alive and well, and not lying dead on the floor with vacant stares. My breathing becomes erratic as I try to calm my nerves but desperately fail.

Mateo stops and turns to me. He studies me for a moment, his dark brows furrowing. "I have some business I need to take care of. You'll wait for me upstairs with Pablo and Javier in the VIP lounge. Alright?"

I nod several times, unable to speak. He probably thinks I'm looking around for a way out of here. I mean, technically I am, but not just for the reason he thinks.

Grabbing my arm roughly, he leans in closer to tell me, “Behave yourself while I’m gone, *cariño*.” And then he vows, “I will punish you if I have to.”

He pulls back and stares at me for several seconds until I finally break eye contact and stare around the club, keeping my face stoic and feigning interest. And then he eventually walks away.

I search the area around me, wondering if anyone speaks English. But when I feel a firm hand at my elbow, I know my time is already up. Mateo’s goons are going to take me upstairs whether I want to or not.

“Let’s go,” Pablo says sternly. He’s the bigger of the two. While Javier is tall and skinny, Pablo is stout and muscular. I’ve seen them around the compound often, but I don’t know much about them other than their names and that they work for Mateo.

I’m led upstairs, and my entire body is trembling by the time we get to the top. Javier opens the door, and I slowly enter. Several men are in the room, playing Poker at a large, oval table, and they all turn at once to look at me with hungry eyes. But as soon as Javier says, “This is Mateo’s girl,” every single one of them turns their attention back to the card game.

Sighing, I realize tonight is not the night to plan an escape. Mateo has all of these men in his back pocket, and I’ll never be allowed to leave this room on my own. Sitting down on the couch, I try to calm myself down. “May I have some water?” I ask Pablo.

He mumbles something in Spanish under his breath, but then begrudgingly turns and grabs a bottle of water from a nearby mini fridge.

I take the water with a small note of appreciation. My hands are shaking, and it takes me several attempts to open the cap. The water feels cool and soothing on my throat, but it does nothing to take away from the loud music thumping downstairs and making my stomach turn with every drop of the bass.

I can feel a cold sweat breaking out on my forehead, and I fan myself to try to get rid of the nausea. Goosebumps form on my arms as I think about that fateful night. *The club. The music. The gunshots.*

I squeeze my eyes shut and press the cold bottle of water against my neck, trying to bring myself back to reality.

My eyes open, and suddenly the room I’m in feels too small and suffocating. I feel like I can’t get enough air into my lungs. I’ve never had a panic attack before, but I think that might be exactly what’s going on.

I stand quickly, teetering in my heels, and all the blood rushes to my head to the point where I'm lightheaded. Just the thought of passing out in a room full of these criminals makes my anxiety even worse.

"What the fuck is your problem?" someone asks.

And that's when I hear it.

Pop, pop, pop, pop!

It's loud and distinctive over the music. At first, I think I'm hearing things, stuck in a memory of that night, but then I see the men in the room all going on high alert all at once; all of them reaching for their own weapons.

The men who were all previously in the room before our arrival go storming out the door. Pablo looks to his partner and says, "Stay with her. I'm going to go check things out."

Javier stands by the door with his gun in his hand, ready to shoot anyone who dares to cross the threshold.

"He's coming for me," I whisper, ice crystallizing in my veins as I shiver with fear. Even though it doesn't make any sense, I truly believe that somehow Constantine found me. He's shooting up the club just like he did the night he kidnapped me. He's going to take me again. And even though I wanted to be rescued from Mateo, I now realize that there are crueler fates out there and more dangerous men than my own captor.

"He's coming!" I yell in a panic, my voice tremulous and sounding high-pitched and strange even to my own ears.

Javier turns to look at me with an inquisitive look on his face. "Who? Who's coming for you?" he demands.

My mouth opens, but the only sound that comes out is a horrified scream.

CHAPTER 21



Mateo

I STARE DOWN at the dead man with a bullet between his eyes. His lifeless body is lying on the floor in the back room of the club, along with two of his men, who tried playing hero in protecting their boss.

What was supposed to be a peaceful meeting between the two heads of the largest Mexican cartel families turned into what almost became an all-out war and a fucking bloodbath. But I solved the problem quickly by taking the head off the snake before things could escalate any further.

Hernando Cruz is no more, suffering the same fate as every other man I've killed before him. His empire is now mine. With him gone, I will liquidize his entire cartel, taking all his drugs, money, weapons and men. Everything will become part of my kingdom, only strengthening it and ultimately giving me more power.

Cruz thought he could cheat me out of a deal, cheat me out of millions. Well, I showed him what happened to people who double-cross me.

He took the first shot. My ear is still ringing from the bullet that passed by my ear, narrowly missing my head. Maybe it was supposed to have only been a warning, but I didn't take too kindly to his methods of persuasion. And so, when I pulled my Glock from my jacket, I didn't just aim to wound or maim. I aimed to kill.

“Anyone who wants to work for me, talk to Ignacio,” I tell Cruz’s men. “Anyone who doesn’t, get the fuck out of my club.”

A few leave, which is understandable. They just witnessed their boss and possibly friend get murdered. But the rest stay, which only means more manpower for me at my discretion. At this rate, I’ll own half of Mexico by the time I’m done.

The door to the backroom swings open, and I watch as my group of men from the VIP lounge come barreling in. They’re on high alert with guns drawn, but I tell them to stand down. The show is over. And I can tell a lot of them are mad they missed all the action.

When Pablo steps forward, he surveys the scene quickly and then asks, “What the hell happened?”

I announce to the room, “Cruz wanted to have a dick measuring contest.” With a smirk, I tell them, “And I obviously won.”

My little joke seems to take away some of the tension in the room, but there’s still the little matter of the dead bodies. “Take care of this,” I tell Ignacio, pointing to the floor.

He nods in response before spouting off instructions to the men. They immediately begin wrapping the bodies in rugs and tarps, getting ready to transport them out of the club. I’m sure they’ll end up in the middle of the desert in shallow graves or at the bottom of a lake somewhere. It doesn’t really matter much to me just so long as they aren’t continuing to bleed all over my club floor.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I take it out. A frown tugs at my lips as I read the text from Javier.

Something happened to the girl.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath. My stomach drops with the feeling that it’s been filled with a thousand rocks. “I’ll be back,” I tell Ignacio.

I button my suit jacket and make my way out of the room and up the stairs, taking them two at a time towards the VIP lounge. On the way, I think about the worst-case scenarios in my head as to what could have happened to Aria. Did one of my men betray me and touch her? I let them know from day one if any of them lay a single finger on Aria, they will lose their entire fucking arm and most likely their life.

I burst through the door and look directly at Javier, who is standing with his hands on his hips, looking beyond frustrated. I open my mouth to ask what is going on, but then I hear Aria whimpering from the bathroom.

Rushing to the door, I reach for the knob and turn; but it's locked. "Aria, open the door!" I yell, banging against the wood, shaking the entire frame. My threat only makes her crying worse, and I can hear her begging like her life is in danger.

"Who is in there with her?" I question Javier.

"N-No one," he stammers with wide eyes.

I study him for a few seconds to see if he's lying. I don't find any deception in his eyes, but I'm not completely satisfied. Would Javier lie to me to protect one of his cohorts? I would hope he wouldn't be so stupid, because he knows the consequences for defying me.

"Fuck this," I say before I take a few steps back. I swear to all that is holy that, if someone is in there with her, I will be adding them to the pile of bodies I left downstairs. Putting my shoulder into it, I ram up against the door. My shoulder screams in protest at the impact, but I step back and do it again and again. Once the wood has softened up and is starting to splinter, I kick at the doorknob until it breaks, sending the door flying open.

I expect to see someone in the small room with Aria, but she's alone, huddled in the corner by the sink. Her head is pressed against her knees, her entire body trembling.

"Aria," I say as gently as I can. Her trembling intensifies. "Tell me what's wrong," I demand. "Tell me what happened."

When she doesn't answer me, I grow infinitely frustrated. Grabbing her, I roughly haul her to her feet and force her to meet my gaze. The tears make her eyes look like two endless pools of honey, like I could fall into them for miles.

"Tell me. Now!" I growl at her, shaking her. I'm barely able to keep myself together. Someone obviously hurt her, and I need to know who it was, so that I can hurt them a thousand times worse.

"He...he took me," she whispers so softly I barely catch her words.

"Who?" I demand. If any of my men touched her, so help me God, it will be their last night on this earth.

"He was at the club. The music was so loud. He shot up the place. There were bodies everywhere. Selina and I hid under the table. We tried to get out, but he...he caught us." She closes her eyes, squeezing them shut, and it takes me a few moments to realize she's recalling a memory and not talking about anything that happened tonight. "They took Selina and I from the club. He tried to...he was going to rape me," she whispers, her words

making my blood boil inside of my veins. “I told him I was a virgin, and he stopped. But then he told me he was going to sell me, and they took me to The Island. I was on The Island, and I...I...” Her beautiful face crumbles as fresh tears form in her eyes.

She’s barely making sense, but I understand the gist of it. She was taken from a club just like this before she was brought to the auction where I bought her. Obviously, being here reminds her of that time, and she’s been traumatized by it. The gunshots earlier must have triggered some sort of PTSD episode.

“Look at me,” I demand. And when her amber eyes finally meet mine, I tell her, “No one is going to hurt you. I would kill them first. Do you understand?” I give her a small shake when she doesn’t answer, but her eyes look lost, unfocused, like she’s not even here in the moment, like she’s looking right through me.

I know all about traumatic experiences. They still haunt me at night in my dreams. But I don’t want that for her. I don’t want her to be afraid for the rest of her life because of what happened to her.

“Come with me,” I tell her, taking her hand and dragging her towards the broken door.

“No!” she cries. “He’s out there!” she pleads, and it sounds so genuine that I almost fucking believe it.

She pulls away from me, but I catch her before she can run back to her corner to hide. “I’m going to show you, Aria.” I put my hand around her waist, dragging her out of the room. “I’m going to show you how to replace your pain with pleasure.”

CHAPTER 22



Aria

I CAN BARELY breathe. Sucking a full breath into my lungs is too daunting of a task at the moment while my senses and my mind play tricks on me. I'm barely aware that Mateo is leading me somewhere. My feet are moving of their own accord. I'm too caught up in my own head to even focus on my surroundings. The thunderous music is doing a number on me, taking me back to that fateful night when Constantine Carbone and his men took me, changing my life forever.

I'm numb as to what's going on around me until I hear Mateo's deep voice tell me, "Look down."

My breath catches in my throat as I glance down through the glass floor, a sea of people twenty feet below us, dancing and moving with the music. My head snaps up, and I realize the entire room we're in is made of glass, a three-hundred-sixty view of the club with floor-to-ceiling concave glass windows.

I go to step back, but Mateo pins my front against the railing. His large hands envelop mine and place them on the cold, metal bars on either side of me. "Don't let go," he tells me. "There will be consequences if you let go, Aria," he warns. "Do you understand?"

I give him a shaky nod, my grip tightening on the railing.

He disappears behind me, and I struggle to pull air into my lungs. My panic attack had come on so quickly that I barely had time to register what was happening until I was already locked in the bathroom and huddled in the corner. Mateo's henchman banging on the door didn't help matters, only making my anxiety-riddled mind think that Constantine really was coming for me.

My breathing begins to pick up again when I think about it, but then I hear Mateo *tsking* behind me.

"No thinking, *cariño*. Just allow yourself to feel. Focus only on that," he commands as his hands possessively grasp my hips.

I slowly nod and lick my lips, forcing myself to do what he told me. *Focus on feeling.*

"Close your eyes," he says, and I do.

His hands slowly move from my hips down to my knees. And then I feel him wrap his hands around my trembling thighs. His calloused fingers trail up under the hem of my dress, lifting it ever so slowly until I'm completely exposed to him.

I gasp when Mateo grips my thong in between his fingers. He pulls the material taut, and my hands squeeze the metal bars as the rough fabric grazes against my clit. I shudder at the feeling, my legs trembling in nervous anticipation. I know I should tell him to stop; but for some reason, I can't. My mouth opens, but no words come out.

Mateo maneuvers the cloth, allowing it to gently saw between my lips, teasing my aching little nub until it's driving me insane with want and need. My hands ache as I grip the railing harder, desperately trying not to cry out.

"I can smell your arousal, Aria," Mateo rasps.

A surge of heat rushes to my core, and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning. Oh god, this is wrong. So wrong. And I feel like I'm being torn in two. The rational part of my brain is telling me that I shouldn't be doing this. But then there's another part of me that wants him to keep going, to drive me over the edge and never look back.

"Do you want more, my little captive?" he asks, his voice deep and raw.

I want to scream out yes, but I resist the urge and stay quiet. If I don't answer him, I can pretend that I'm not a willing participant; that I don't actually want this...even if my body is silently begging for it.

Mateo releases my thong, and I almost cry out in frustration. But then I feel him grip the strings and pull the thong down my legs until they fall to

the floor around my ankles, a rush of cold air running over my now bare skin.

He lifts my feet, one at a time, until I step out of my panties. And then I hear a deep hum of approval. "Fuck, you're so wet for me. Such a good girl," he praises me.

And, oh god, why do those words coming from his filthy mouth turn me on so much?

He runs his fingertip from my clit up to my ass, and it takes everything in me to stay quiet. I don't want him to know how much I want this. *I don't even want to know.* I shake my head, trying to convince myself to tell him to stop, to not let this happen. But for some reason, I want it to happen. I want him to touch me. I want him to make me come.

Mateo takes a step back, and I think for a moment that he's done with me. Maybe this was his plan all along — to tease me just enough to distract me from my panic attack. But when I open my eyes and glance over my shoulder, I see Mateo dropping to his knees behind me. And I realize he's not done with me. *He's just getting started.*

Seeing him on his knees does something to me. I'm sure Mateo has brought many men to their knees in war, but I'm sure no one has ever brought him to his own.

But I just did.

And the very thought makes me feel powerful.

His fingers gently part my lips before his tongue touches my clit. The very first lick has my knees threatening to buckle. Oh god, it feels good. *Why does it feel so good?*

I don't even get to think about that before Mateo presses his face against my center and begins feasting on me, his tongue lashing my clit with ravenous strokes, causing me to cry out. My clit throbs against his tongue while I desperately cling to the metal bars in front of me.

"Does this feel good, Aria?" he asks me, his voice a guttural whisper.

Again, I refuse to answer. Instead, I moan loudly, my eyes rolling back in my head as his tongue swirls around my throbbing clit.

A sudden slap on my pussy has me coming back to reality. "I need your words, Aria," he demands. "Tell me to stop, and I will. You hold all the power here."

I hold all the power? I've never felt more powerless in my entire life. But then I realize I can tell him to stop, and all of this would end. I open my

mouth to say it, but the words won't come out. A frustrated sob escapes my lips instead. I don't want this to feel good. I don't want him to make me feel good. And yet I don't tell him to stop. I can't.

There's a fine line between wanting to keep my dignity and wanting to continue taking all the pleasure he's giving me. Slowly, I feel myself falling over the edge of the line until I'm begging him for more. "Don't...don't stop," I plead shamelessly.

He hums in approval, and I can feel the vibration against my flesh. And then his tongue assaults my clit as his thick finger teases my entrance, causing every nerve in my body to awaken at his adept ministrations.

"If anyone would look up right now, they would see your dripping, wet cunt," he breathes against my thigh.

My head falls forward, and my lungs suddenly seize as I stare down at the crowd below us. Anyone could glance up here at any moment and see us; see what Mateo is doing to me. That should be enough to turn me off and tell him to stop all of this. But why does it seem to have the opposite effect? Why is it turning me on?

Before I can even question that...or my sanity, Mateo groans, "Fuck, I'm addicted to your sweet nectar, *cariño*." He dips his finger into my entrance, testing me, teasing me. "Tell me, Aria. Have you ever done this? Has anyone ever tasted you before?" he asks.

I know I should lie. I know I should tell him that it's happened at least once or multiple times. But for some reason, I end up telling him the truth. "No," I admit.

His tongue slides against my clit, a low, possessive growl slipping past his lips and vibrating against my center as he licks me, making me groan loudly. I no longer care about hiding my pleasure from him. I'm too far gone.

"I'm going to be tasting you on my tongue for weeks," he confesses.

I shudder at his dirty words and moan in desperation. I can feel my pending orgasm curling low in my stomach, but I'm scared to go over the edge. I'm scared for what it means for me, for him, for us.

My legs begin trembling uncontrollably as I reach the precipice. A hazy wave of lust courses through my veins as his tongue flicks back and forth over my clit.

"Please!" I beg, not even knowing what I'm truly asking for.

“Come for me, Aria,” Mateo demands before he presses his mouth on my exposed sex and tortures my clit with rhythmic circles.

I cry out my captor’s name as the orgasm is ripped from my body, shattering me and leaving me completely and utterly destroyed. Mateo’s strong hands hold me up when my knees give out, and he continues to lick me until I’m a quivering mess in his arms.

I feel like I’ve just gone to space and touched the surface of the sun. I’m burning up and struggling to find enough oxygen to fill my lungs. I cling to the railing, trying to catch my breath. Mateo’s tongue gives my clit a few lazy licks, causing me to shudder, before he finally stands. Then, he surprises me by carefully fixing my thong and the back of my dress. I wouldn’t think he’d care about that considering he just made me flash my vagina to a few hundred people below us.

I can hear his cell phone buzzing, and then he informs me, “We need to go, *corazón*.”

I take an unsteady step and clutch the rail. My legs feel like jelly. “I don’t know if I can walk,” I confess as a blush creeps up my neck.

“I could always carry you,” he offers with a smirk.

Shaking my head, I straighten my back and glare at him.

“Ah, so you’re back to hating me,” Mateo says with a glint of amusement in his eyes. “I’ll be waiting downstairs for you then,” he tells me before turning and walking away.

Reluctantly, I follow him down the stairs, the music growing louder with every step I take. Only, this time, I don’t feel the panic trying to snake its way inside of my chest with every drop of the bass. I guess Mateo’s little stunt upstairs did work even though I hate him a little more because of it.

My first orgasm was given to me by my captor, a man who bought me at an auction. And it was in a public place. But even more than that, what if this completely changes the dynamic of our relationship?

No, I won’t let it, I decide right then and there.

If Mateo thinks I’ll give in to him so easily again, he’s got another thing coming. I won’t let my body override my brain next time. I need to keep a safe distance from him and not let his talented fingers...or tongue near me again.

When we reach the bottom of the stairs, I glance back up to the VIP room where we just were. I see the glass encased room we were in, but then I realize the glass is reflective and not see-through. There was never a threat

of anyone looking up and seeing me even though Mateo led me to believe there was.

He protected me. Once again.

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CHAPTER 23



Mateo

VIRGIN. INNOCENT. *MINE*.

The last word roars inside of my mind, but I don't let it stay. I immediately push that thought aside. Because if she becomes mine, it will change everything. And I can't afford to have her as a liability. I've built my empire from the ground up, like a phoenix rising from the ashes of my desecrated family and eventually securing my own place in the world. I will not have it crumble for a woman. Especially not one that I paid for.

I can't get the image of her at the club out of my mind. At first, my intention was to simply scare her out of her panicked state. But the moment the sweet smell of her arousal assaulted my senses, I was a fucking goner. It sparked a dark, primal urge from deep inside of me. I had to taste her. *I had to give her pleasure.*

My body was shaking like an addict with the need for her. She's like a drug tailored for my specific tastes. And if I don't quench my thirst and feed my addiction again soon, I feel as if I might go mad.

If she had told me no at the club, I would have stopped. It would have taken every ounce of strength in me to do it, but I will never force a woman. I may have done a lot of fucked-up things in my life, but that's where I draw the line.

But when all I heard were her staggered breaths and panicked whimpers, I continued. And when she finally begged me not to stop, I think she needed me just as much as I needed her in that moment.

As I stand under the hot spray of water, I tug on my hard cock, closing my eyes and remembering the taste of her. Fuck, I never want to wash away her essence. My dick is hard steel in my hand as I work my fist up and down my length. My balls tighten to the point that they're almost painful, and then I groan out low and deep as my release shoots against the tiled wall.

My entire body shudders with that release. It feels like years of pent-up frustration even though she's been here for a much shorter period of time. Fuck, that woman is going to be the death of me.

Rinsing off, I step out of the shower and dry off. I slip on a pair of boxers and walk into the dark bedroom. Aria is already in bed with her back turned towards me. Sighing, I slide under the blankets and bring my arms up, resting my head on my hands and staring up at the ceiling.

The orgasm satiated me to an extent, but I'm wide awake. I realize we haven't even talked about what happened earlier tonight. Not about the panic attack over someone who kidnapped her, hurt her; nor me tasting her sweet cunt and making her come on my tongue. In fact, she refused to talk to me at all after we left the club.

The entire night replays over and over again in my mind as we lie in bed together. Aria is huddled on the other side, pretending to be asleep, but I know she is as alert as I am. I've grown accustomed to knowing the sound of her slipping peacefully into slumber and also to knowing when she's awake, like right now.

I turn on the lamp by the bed, dowsing the room with a soft amber glow. "The man who took you and tried to rape you. Tell me his name, Aria," I command.

I'm assuming she's going to flat-out refuse, just like she does with everything else, but then she turns on her side to face me. "There's nothing you can do," she tells me, surprising me. "He's untouchable, like he's been for years. He might even be in prison again by now. Or at least I hope so anyway," she says. And then she adds, with sadness dripping from her tone, "No one can get to him. Not even my father could."

I listen to her words and pick them apart carefully. Her father must be a powerful man, but so is the man who assaulted her. I stare into her amber

eyes in the soft lamp light. I can still see the panic and the fear inside them, and it makes my muscles tremble in anger. "His name," I demand through clenched teeth.

Aria sighs dramatically, and I can hear her resigned tone when she finally says, "Constantine Carbone." Rolling back on her side to face the wall, she tells me, "No one has ever been able to bring him down. Like my brother always said, he has more money and power than God," she resolves.

I turn off the lamp and lie awake for a while after she's done speaking. I listen to her breathing even out as she eventually falls asleep. And then I listen to her whimpers as she fights through a nightmare. I can only assume she's dreaming about the bastard that kidnapped and sold her. The man who attempted to rape her.

Possessiveness that really has no business being there in the first place suddenly wells up inside of me. My blood is boiling by the time I throw back the sheets and climb out of bed.

Whoever this man is, he will be dead soon. I don't give a fuck who he is or where he is hiding or how powerful he pretends to be. He is not untouchable in my eyes. The moment he laid his hands on Aria, his fate was sealed. He's a dead man walking.

CHAPTER 24



Aria

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up in bed alone. I reach over to feel the sheets beside me, and they are ice cold. Mateo hasn't been here for a while. I vaguely remember our conversation before I fell asleep. He wanted a name, and I gave it to him willingly. And, hell, if he can do something about Constantine, then so be it. Lord knows that monster certainly deserves everything coming his way.

Giving Mateo any kind of information felt wrong, though. But I was so exhausted, mentally and physically, after what had happened, that I gave it up willingly. Also, I knew he would just keep pressing until he got what he wanted. If Mateo is anything, he's definitely relentless.

My thoughts turn to what else happened last night. I swear I can still feel Mateo's tongue between my thighs. The orgasm he gave me was so powerful, it felt like my soul was leaving my body. I've never felt like that before; and while it thrilled me beyond belief, it also scared the hell out of me. I can't afford to fall under whatever spell he's trying to put me under when the crystal-clear, blaring fact remains — he's my captor.

Clenching my thighs together, I groan out in frustration before tossing the sheets aside and climbing out of bed. I take a shower to clear my mind and get ready for the day, dressing quickly in worn yoga pants and a plain, black t-shirt. I frown at my reflection while I brush through my hair, but it's

not like I can do anything about my wardrobe choices. If I were home, I would have a closet full of dresses, outfits, and shoes that would make even the biggest socialite green with envy.

After my hair is dry, I venture out of the room and down to the kitchen. There are several guards on the way, but they don't even so much as make eye contact with me. I can't help but wonder if they were instructed to ignore me by Mateo. I wonder if they would pay attention to me if I ran, though. The thought crosses my mind, but only for a split second before the phantom scars on my back remind me why I will never run or misbehave again.

When I enter the kitchen, one of the cooks is busy making breakfast, and there's a smorgasbord of food on the center island. When the older woman sees me approaching, a big smile graces her pretty, wrinkled face. "*Por favor,*" she says, motioning towards the food.

I smile at her and take one of the pink and brown seashell-looking breads from the counter. I tear off a fluffy corner and pop it into my mouth. The flaky, buttery crust hits my tastebuds first and then a sweetness that's divine, and I hum in approval.

The woman seems pleased by my reaction. "Concha," she says while pointing to what's in my hand. "Good?" she asks.

I emphatically nod as I put another piece in my mouth.

"*Bueno,*" she tells me, motioning for me to say the word.

"*Bueno,*" I repeat.

She smiles appreciatively. "*Muy bueno.* Very good," she says with a thick accent.

"*Muy bueno,*" I agree.

She points to herself and tells me, "Esmeralda."

"Aria," I respond.

She says something in Spanish, but I don't understand a word of it. "I'm sorry, I don't —."

"She said 'beautiful name for a beautiful girl,'" a deep voice says behind me.

I turn to see Mateo sitting in the corner of the room. I'm not sure how long he's been here. He looks immaculate in a black-on-black suit, shirt, and tie. His eyes look tired, however, like he didn't sleep much last night.

I glance back at Esmeralda, but she's back to busying herself with making breakfast. Nervousness gnaws at my belly as I sit down on a nearby

stool and pick at my concha. Just seeing Mateo makes my thoughts turn to last night. I stare at his mouth, the same mouth that gave me so much pleasure. And then I quickly tear my gaze away when he smirks, because I'm convinced he can read my mind and hear all the dirty thoughts I'm thinking right now. I stare down at my breakfast, completely focusing on it while I eat.

"I have a few people coming to see you today," Mateo explains, surprising me. I'm about to ask him who, but he cuts me off by saying, "They're going to get your measurements and fit you for a new wardrobe."

My eyebrows crease in confusion, and I stare down at the clothes I'm wearing. Why would Mateo suddenly care what I wear?

"I'm sure the slim pickings you have right now aren't up to your standards."

What would he know about my standards? I think to myself, but I keep quiet. Instead, I simply say, "Thank you."

He gives me a nod before he stands, his form towering over me. "They should be here within the hour." And with that, he walks out of the room, leaving me alone with Esmeralda.

The delicious smell of eggs frying in a pan wafts over to me, but I'm suddenly not feeling very hungry. Mateo's unexpected knowledge of my supposed standards has me on edge and wary. Did he figure out who I am? Did I accidentally let something slip that could have led him to my last name?

Constantine.

I told him about Constantine last night, but how would he link him to my family? Gnawing on my lower lip, I suddenly wish I had a cell phone. Some way to Google his name to see if it leads to anything about me or the Vitale name.

Turning to Esmeralda, I ask her, "Do you have a phone?"

She cocks a brow at me and shakes her head.

Damn. Even if she does understand me and has a phone, I doubt if she would let me use it. And I can't even think about her punishment if she did help me out. I don't want anyone else to ever go through what I went through down in that basement. Just the memory of it has my hands shaking. I almost drop the rest of my bread, but I hold on tightly and finish it quickly, not wanting to waste it in front of Esmeralda.

I feel numb, like I messed up. Did I unknowingly put my family in danger by giving Mateo the name of the man who kidnapped and sold me? If that's the case, then I'll never be able to forgive myself.

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CHAPTER 25



Mateo

THE INFORMATION I found in connection with the name Aria gave me last night proved quite fascinating, to say the least. Constantine Carbone is currently in jail for the kidnapping and false imprisonment of Selina McCall. Also included in that article was the fact that police are searching for another woman he kidnapped that very same night — Aria Vitale.

I now know her full name. And I must admit it suits her.

With a few strokes of the keyboard, I found out some interesting information about her parents. The Vitales are a powerful mob family in New York; but, to my surprise, they work together with law enforcement and the government to bring down human trafficking rings. How ironic it is that their own daughter was ultimately sold into the flesh trade.

I'm sure Aria's father has some sort of deal with important higher-ups in the government. The Vitales probably clean up the trash no one else is willing to touch; and in return, the police look the other way on their extracurricular activities that earn them the money and power attached to their family name.

In my obsession to find everything about her, I ended up not even sleeping a wink last night or this morning. Curiosity literally had a stranglehold on me as I Googled everything I could think of, not being able to stop myself. Knowing her full name led to a whole new door opening of

endless possibilities, and I willingly fell down the rabbit hole to gather as much information about my little captive as I could.

Aria is on the National Missing and Unidentified Persons System, and there are numerous news articles about her kidnapping and disappearance. None of that bodes well for me considering I'm currently holding her captive in another country. I'm very careful about covering my tracks and keeping my identity and compound private and secure, but the U.S. government is a force to be reckoned with. They could invade my entire empire and shut it down in minutes, taking everything I've worked so hard for and killing me in the process without even a second thought.

But I can't dwell on something that might or might not come to fruition.

The fact of the matter is that I could easily return her to the U.S., to her family and wipe my hands of this entire situation altogether. I can't say the idea hasn't crossed my mind a time or two. But the thought of letting my little captive go does not sit well with me. I like to think that it's because Aria could rat me out and I could lose everything, but I don't truly believe that's the only reason. And I simply won't allow myself to dwell on what else could be keeping me from letting her go.

Even more interesting than her family connections was the fact that I found all of Aria's old social media accounts. I shamelessly spent hours combing through her Instagram. Aria was quite a popular socialite in the States. She never wore the same thing twice; always appearing in designer clothes and dresses with expensive high heels.

One thing I noticed in all of the pictures, however, was that she was never alone. There are bodyguards in every single picture. Even the one of her by the pool in a bikini. That picture affected me the most. The fact that so many people have seen her half naked pisses me off.

She's not yours, I have to remind myself. *Not yet*, a voice in the back of my mind says.

I sit back in my chair, bringing myself back to the present while I watch the seamstresses work with Aria, measuring her and speaking in Spanish. Aria can't understand them, but I can. One of the women comments on how she wishes she had Aria's figure, and the other one emphatically agrees.

Aria is petite, perfect in every way, like a real-life doll. But she's definitely not docile like a little doll. No, she's a hellcat when she wants to be, and I have the scar on my stomach to prove it. A smile tugs at my lips

when I think about her attempt to kill me. That's definitely a first for me. And for some fucked-up reason...it still turns me on.

I adjust my hardening dick in my slacks before finding a more comfortable position in the chair. I listen to the women chatter about which designers they think Aria would look best in, and I nod in agreement when they glance in my direction.

After seeing Aria's Instagram photos, I want her to look more like her former self. I want her to feel comfortable here. I could dwell on the motives behind that all day, but I refuse to even acknowledge them. I'll chalk it up to my selfish desire in seeing her tan legs in high heels and walking around in skirts, giving me easy access to her pussy.

Fuck, my cock painfully presses against my zipper at just the thought of tasting her again.

She's still a virgin, but I would love to remedy that. And soon. I don't know how much longer I can restrain myself and stay away from her. But I'll never ever force her or take what I want. I need her to come to me willingly. And that in and of itself would be a heightened sense of pleasure. Just the thought of hearing Aria beg for my cock has me biting back a groan.

Perhaps with enough pressure, I could finally break her. Give her enough pleasure that she would finally give in to me. And, fuck, it would be fun trying.

But I need to face facts. The moment I take her is the moment she will become mine. And no matter how much I would love to give in to the temptation, I'm not ready to commit to that yet. It would change everything. Aria would become not only a danger to me but to my entire empire; something that I can't afford right now when I have people constantly trying to overrule and undermine me. I would never be able to set her free, and that type of commitment is not something that either of us are even remotely ready for.

No, I have to maintain my distance even if it's killing me inside. I have to remain in complete control of my emotions...and my cock. I can't let pussy get in the way of what I want the most — power.

Standing, I reluctantly walk out of the room with my cock pressing painfully against my zipper, begging to be released, and a deep scowl on my face.

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CHAPTER 26



Aria

IT'S AT LUNCH one sunny, hot afternoon when Mateo announces at the table, "Constantine Carbone is dead."

I choke on the bite of sandwich that's in my mouth and quickly take a swig of water to wash it down past the lump forming in my throat. "What?" I ask him incredulously.

"I took care of your problem. No more nightmares. No more panic attacks," he says with a nod, like everything is finalized.

The past several nights I have been waking up in a cold sweat, the memories of the club and being taken to The Island fresh on my mind. I stare at him in disbelief. He has to be lying right now. My father and the government couldn't get to Constantine, and they spent years trying everything. "How do I know you're not just telling me this?" I question with a quirked brow.

Mateo pulls out his cell phone, taps a few keys and says, "See for yourself."

I slowly stand up and round the table. I stand next to Mateo and stare down at the screen, at the Google search he's pulled up. I instantly see Constantine's name plastered all over the top pinned news stories. My eyes skim over the headlines and snippets of each article as Mateo scrolls through them.

Constantine was murdered in jail. Shanked by a fellow inmate. Pronounced dead a few hours after the attack.

I take a step back in shock. Then, my eyes search his dark orbs. “You had him killed. Why?” I ask in a whisper.

“Because he hurt you,” is his response.

Those four words speak volumes about Mateo’s feelings for me. He cares for me in some way. Even though I doubt he would ever admit it, I know it to be true.

Staring down at his phone, a thought occurs to me. “Did you happen to see any articles about Selina McCall?” I ask, desperately needing to know.

“She was rescued that night. She’s safe at home,” he tells me.

My heart skips a beat inside my chest. *Selina is safe*. And suddenly, I feel like a thousand-pound weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I had been so worried that she was back in Constantine’s clutches. Just knowing that she’s home with my brother and my family makes me feel a million times better. I exhale an uneven breath and tell him, “Thank you.”

Mateo nods as if it’s nothing, as if he didn’t change my life or, hell, the entire world. Constantine was a menace, buying and selling women and children, raping and pilfering his way through this earth, and now his reign is over. Just because Mateo willed it so. He did what always proved impossible before.

I return to my chair on autopilot. Mateo has no idea how much good he has done for so many people. My immediate thought goes to Selina. I wonder if she knows her tormentor of an entire decade is finally dead? I close my eyes, imagining her face when she hears the news. She would be so happy and relieved. No longer having to live in fear of her real-life boogeyman.

Tears spill down over my cheeks, and I don’t even bother to sweep them away. I’m crying for the joy that Selina must be feeling or will be feeling. She can go on and live a normal life now, not constantly looking over her shoulder. And so many women and children won’t have to deal with Constantine’s wrath in the future. So many lives saved. So many virtues that will remain unbroken.

I startle when I feel Mateo’s touch. He hooks a finger under my chin and brings my gaze up to meet his. “Are those sad or happy tears?” he asks, his dark eyes assessing me.

“Happy. Very happy,” I confess.

He growls lowly in his throat before his thumb sweeps over a rivulet of tears running down my cheeks. And then I watch in awe as he brings his thumb to his mouth to taste them. “You’re so pretty when you cry,” he says, his voice deep and guttural.

We stare at each other, both of us barely breathing as this strange magnetic connection keeps us tethered to one another. I can’t explain it, but if Mateo kissed me right now, I wouldn’t pull away.

However, he doesn’t kiss me. Instead, he walks out of the room, leaving me confused and desperate for his affection.

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CHAPTER 27



Mateo

WHEN I WAKE up in the morning, Aria is in my arms. This has been happening every day this week. Our nights always start out the same way. Aria climbs into bed and situates herself as far away from me as physically possible on the opposite side of the mattress before closing her eyes. But at some point, while she's sleeping, she gravitates towards me like a magnet and ends up curled in my arms, cuddling with the monster she was desperately trying to avoid.

Even though all of this feels foreign to me, I truly don't mind it. I could easily push her away or demand she sleep in another bed or another room, for that matter; but for some fucked-up reason, I want her close to me. I could do without the puddle of drool she always leaves behind, though.

I stare down at her as she snores softly against my chest, drool leaking out of her beautiful mouth and onto my skin, and I have to bite back a chuckle. Even the drooling is kind of...cute.

Fuck, I must be losing my goddamn mind.

I know deep down we shouldn't be doing any of this domestic shit for a million different reasons — not a single one of which comes to mind at this moment.

Aria stirs, her pretty amber eyes blinking open and focusing on me. Our mornings continuously begin this way. At first, she's surprised and

confused to see that she wound up in my arms again. And then, she quickly withdraws from me, like she can't stand touching me for another single second.

"Sorry," she whispers as she sits up, moving away from me.

I grind my jaw at her response. I would think she would stop apologizing after doing it for so many mornings, but she's still trying to hold back from me, still trying to act like she's not affected by any of this. And it's driving me insane.

"What are you sorry for? For falling asleep on me or for trying to drown me with all this drool?" I snap.

She turns to me, appalled, clearly offended and embarrassed by the very notion that she could possibly have a flaw. "I do not drool," she says indignantly.

"I have a lake on my chest that proves it," I tell her, pointing to the evidence.

Huffing in frustration, she climbs out of bed and goes to the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. I can't hold back the chuckle. Fuck, I love it when she gets mad at me.

I lay in bed, listening to the sound of the shower turning on in the other room. She hogs all the hot water too, but I won't bring that up. I love when she emerges from a fresh shower or bath, smelling like flowers and honey. Her soft, unique scent drives me crazy, though. It makes me want to taste her, lick her, bite her and fuck her. I don't even care in what order. I just want to feel her writhing under me as I take what I want.

Biting back a groan, I sit on the edge of the bed, scooping up my cell phone from the nightstand and unlocking it to check my messages since I have time to kill.

I'm halfway through typing out an email when my phone rings. A Bolivian by the name of Cristóbal Espinoza is calling. He's an older gentleman who throws some of the most lavish parties in the country. He's been out of the game for a long time; now dedicating his life to more philanthropic adventures.

I answer it on the fourth ring. "*Hola?*"

"*Buenos días, Mateo.*" His voice is deep and gruff from fifty plus years of smoking.

"*Buenos días,*" I respond. Cristóbal only calls when he's hosting parties or events and needs my presence and money to make a difference. I donate

a lot of money to charity. Hell, there's even a school named after me in the south. But my benevolent side does not make my enemies fear me, so I rarely discuss it with anyone who's not in my inner circle. Only those closest to me the most know about my humanitarian efforts.

"I'm hosting an event at my house on Friday. I'm only inviting my biggest donors to join me for a special dinner. It's to benefit the influx of families and orphans that have been recently deported back into our country. Can I expect to see you there?"

"Of course, *mi amigo*," I tell him. "I'll be there with a hefty checkbook."

That earns me a chuckle. "*Bien, bien*," he says. "Now, for the dinner, will you be bringing a plus one?"

He always asks me this question even though he already knows the answer. "No," I say.

"Ah, just checking," he admits.

The thought of having Aria there does appeal to me. By then she'll have received her new wardrobe. And having an excuse for her to dress up and take her out of this place for some much-needed time away is what has me speaking without second-guessing the consequences. "Wait. Yes, I will be bringing a plus one."

I can sense the smile on his face as he tells me, "That's wonderful news. I'll be delighted to meet her. *Adiós*, Mateo."

"*Adiós*," I say before ending the call. The old man holds a soft spot in my black heart, and it's hard for me to tell him no. When I was first building my empire, I had the help of my uncle, yes, but Cristóbal is the one who funded most of it. He had lots of money, and he did the one thing that nobody back then did — he believed in me. He could see my potential, what I would ultimately become.

Now I am head of the *familia* with more money than I would ever need in ten lifetimes and more power than one man should ever have. And so, if the old man needs money for his charities, I'll gladly fill his pockets. It's the least I can do.

The bathroom door opens, and Aria's familiar scent wafts in the room. My cock stirs in my boxers as I slowly stand and stalk towards her. Fuck, if she were mine, I would ravage her right now. She wouldn't stand a chance against me. I would bring her mind-blowing pleasure until she begged me to fuck her.

Aria's eyes widen when I come towards her. Perhaps she can sense my predatory thoughts. She stifles a gasp when I walk past her, closing the door and pressing my back to it. Releasing a sigh, I know that neither one of us is ready to cross the line between prisoner and lover. But perhaps taking her to this party will be the start of something. If she sees my *other side*, then maybe, just maybe she'll start to see me as more than her captor.

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CHAPTER 28



Aria

IT TAKES A few days for the shipment of clothing to arrive at the compound. Several of the housekeepers take my clothes to the walk-in closet, moving Mateo's suits and ties to one side as they fill most of the space with my things.

After they leave the room, I stare in awe at my new wardrobe. The clothes are even better than I imagined. Fine silks and designer brands. I have several new pairs of heels, but I end up cradling the beaten up Louboutins that my mom gave to me against my chest. These damn heels went through hell and back, and they remind me of her and her strength. They remind me of *home*.

"What's wrong?" Mateo asks, startling me.

I turn to look at him, and he has a stern look on his face when he notices the unshed tears in my eyes. "Nothing is wrong. I just..."

"You just what?" he prompts, his frustration seeping into his tone.

"I just miss home," I say in a whisper.

He's quiet for a beat. "Are you going to throw those out?" he asks, eyeing the heels in my hands.

"No," I say vehemently. "I'll keep them. I just won't wear them," I explain before tucking them carefully in the back of the closet.

Mateo nods in understanding but doesn't broach the subject. "The new clothes are what you wanted?" he asks instead.

"Oh, yes. Everything is so beautiful." I know he must have spent a fortune on everything. "Thank you," I tell him sincerely.

He watches me carefully when he says, "Pick out something nice to wear. We're going to a dinner party this evening." And then he adds, "It's for charity," throwing me for a loop.

Charity? God, I didn't think Mateo had a charitable bone in his body. Considering what he does for a living, I wouldn't imagine humanitarian endeavors being on the top of his list. I want to ask him a million questions, but I already know he won't answer them. So, I tell him, "Okay. I'll wear something nice."

An appreciative sound slips from his lips before he turns and leaves.

Turning back to the dresses, I pick out one that I've been dying to wear ever since one of the seamstresses showed me a picture of it several days ago. It's an Oscar de la Renta crystal floral-embellished halter mini dress. The beige lining of the dress gives the illusion that the person wearing it is naked underneath all the flowers, and the thought of Mateo seeing me in it and his reaction makes me grin from ear to ear.

I have something similar at home, but it was a full-length gown that turned many heads at the Met Gala a few years ago. This dress is a little more risqué. Before I can question my decision to wear it, I grab the hanger and take the dress into the bathroom with me. I need to get ready. Not only am I excited for the party, but I'm also eager to see this new, unfamiliar side of Mateo I haven't seen before.

As I'm showering, realization dawns on me. I'm going to be outside of Mateo's compound. If it's a dinner party, I'm assuming we'll be at someone's house. And all houses have phones.

I swallow hard as I shampoo my hair. This could be my chance. My chance to call home. Maybe even my chance to escape.

I could leave Mexico, go back to my family...and never see Mateo ever again.

Closing my eyes, I sigh before slipping my head into the spray, allowing the water to cascade over me in an attempt to drown my worries. I've wanted nothing more than to escape this entire time. So, why does the thought of leaving Mateo behind scare the hell out of me?

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CHAPTER 29



Mateo

WHEN I FIRST saw Aria in the dress she decided to wear tonight, I almost told her to go back upstairs and change. But then my cock chose in that moment to override my brain, and I simply led her outside to the waiting car without demanding she put on something more appropriate and...less sexy.

Fuck, with her smooth, tan legs crossed in front of her, my eyes feast upon them, all the way down to the nude pumps on her feet. She looks like a wet dream. She did her hair and makeup, and it makes me regret buying her everything on her damn list. She's too damn enticing, and the thought of me not being able to just have her, taste her, fuck her has my blood on fire with liquid lava coursing through my veins. I want her. She's *making* me want her. And that pisses me off even more.

I skim my coin across my knuckles anxiously, staring out the window. Perhaps bringing her along tonight is going to be a mistake. I trust Cristóbal, but there are going to be a lot of people at his house; a lot of people that I don't know or trust. I've never taken a woman to a gathering like this before. Aria is making me do a lot of *firsts*. And I don't know if I like that or not. Although, having her in my bed every night hasn't been terrible.

Needless to say, I have a car full of guards following behind us. Anything could happen, and I don't want anything bad occurring while Aria is with me. So, I took every precaution necessary.

"Who is hosting the dinner?" Aria asks, drawing my attention back to her.

Eyeing her suspiciously, I hesitate in answering. Is she making small-talk, or is she perhaps plotting against me? This is the first time she'll be at a public place where she isn't under constant supervision. "An old friend. His name is Cristóbal Espinoza."

"And you said this is for charity. What's the charity?"

I relax a little. It's not like she's asking how many floors and exits are in the place. This is a safe, normal question. "Money to support the orphans and families that have been recently deported into the country."

"Oh," she says in surprise. "Do you donate a lot of money?"

Curious little kitten. "Yes," I tell her.

"Wow, that's so..."

"So what?" I prompt, dying to hear what she was going to say.

"So human of you," she blurts out.

Okay, so I wasn't expecting that. "Human of me? Are you saying I usually act like an animal?" I point out derisively as a smirk tugs at my lips.

"No, that's not what I meant." She covers her mouth with her fingertips, suppressing a grin. "I just mean that it's very *kind* of you to donate to charity."

"Ah," I mutter in understanding.

The rest of the ride is filled with a comfortable silence. I watch Aria as she stares out the window. She looks like a beautiful, caged bird. And I have to admit, if she were mine, I would do everything in my power to keep her safe. Even clipping her wings, so to speak, if I had to.

"We're here," the driver announces from the front of the car.

Aria's eyes widen when she takes in the grounds. I remember the first time I ever saw Cristóbal's estate. I was a young teen and had never seen such opulence before in my life. I knew within the first five seconds that the man had more money than God. I still don't know what he saw in me back then, but he helped to shape me into the man I am today.

The driveway is a mile long with flowering trees and shrubs lining it. The perfectly manicured lawn is vast and dark green beyond it. I swear Cristóbal spends most of his money on his yard. He prides himself in the

landscaping. Many times, I would swing by only to be told he was out in the garden tending to his treasured roses.

When we finally reach the mansion, I hear an audible gasp escape Aria's lips. "Wow," she breathes.

I can't help but grin. The place Cristóbal calls home is one of the grandest manors I've ever stepped foot in. But the outside doesn't even compare to the luxury inside. I can't wait to see her reaction once we enter through the front door.

"So, what does your friend do for a living?" Aria questions.

"He's in the same business as I am," I answer.

"Which is?" she asks, genuinely interested. Aria doesn't know what I do, and I'd like to keep it that way. The less she knows, the better. It's safer that way. For both of us.

"We deal in what people desire the most," I explain. Then I add, "And we murder anyone who gets in our way."

CHAPTER 30



Aria

WHAT MATEO TOLD me right before we exited the car gnaws at me until it feels like a festering wound in my gut. *We deal in what people desire the most. And we murder anyone who gets in our way.*

I know Mateo is a bad man. Deep down I know he does bad things. So maybe it's for the best that I don't know exactly what it is he does.

It could be drugs. It could be arms dealing. It could be anything really.

And this friend of his that I'm about to meet, the man who is hosting this party for *charity*, of all things, is corrupt too. Just as devious as my very own captor.

Mateo's hand is on my lower back as he guides me toward the grand entrance of the house complete with marble pillars and tall, intricately hard-carved arched doors. A man in a suit opens the door for us, and we enter.

And if I thought the outside of this place was nice, it didn't even prepare me for the inside. A huge, beautiful crystal chandelier is above us in the round entryway with two grand staircases on either side of the room leading up to the second floor. A small oval table in the center features a delicate vase with fresh cut roses and greenery, and the smell is divine.

"This way, Mr. Navarro," the man, who let us in the front door, says, and we follow closely on his heels.

I glance behind and realize Mateo brought several of his guards along with us. Their eyes canvas the area, searching for trouble. And when none of them seem on edge or spooked, it puts my nerves at ease. Even though it might thwart my plans of making a phone call, I do like the fact that we'll be protected. Mateo has let on before that people are constantly trying to knock him off his proverbial throne and take away his empire. He has enemies everywhere, or so he alludes to frequently.

Lavish art and paintings litter the hallway as we're led to a big open room. There is a string quartet playing music softly in the corner as people mill about, talking and laughing. Everyone is dressed to the nines in designer dresses and tailored suits.

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't this. I figured all sorts of mafia men would be standing around with their guns out, having pissing contests, but none of that is here. This looks like a reputable event for charity, and I couldn't be more pleased.

An older gentleman approaches us with a huge smile on his face. He must be in his seventies with thinning, gray hair and a trimmed white beard. "Mateo," he declares with open arms.

I'm taken aback when Mateo actually hugs him. "Cristóbal, good to see you," he says.

The man's blue eyes lock onto me. "And this must be your plus one," he says with a knowing grin.

"Ah, yes. This is Aria," Mateo says, his dark eyes locking onto mine. "Aria, this is Cristóbal."

"Nice to meet you," I say to the man. He holds out his hand, and I take it.

"*Ella es hermosa*, Mateo," he comments while placing a kiss on the back of my hand. "*Bien hecho*."

"*Gracias*," Mateo replies.

"The two of you should go mingle. Enjoy the party," Cristóbal says before walking away from us.

"What did he say?" I whisper when he's not within earshot.

"He called you beautiful," Mateo tells me.

I can't help but smile. "How long have you known him?"

"Since I was a teenager. He helped me build my empire," Mateo explains.

And then I realize there's something I never asked Mateo before. Since he seems open to questions, I guess now is the perfect time. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-five."

I look up at him and take in his handsome face and strong features. I wouldn't have guessed he was over thirty, so I'm surprised at the age difference between us. "You don't look thirty-five," I assure him.

"And you don't look twenty-one," he counters.

"Do I look younger or older?" I ask.

"Sometimes both."

"Both?" I ask with a quirked brow.

"Yes." He leans in close, his arm caging me against the nearby wall, while murmuring in my ear, "Younger when you're lying on your stomach on my bed with your hair up, reading. You look so damn innocent." His warm breath skates across my neck, and I shiver. "And then, on nights like this, you look older, sophisticated, and sexy."

"You think I'm sexy?" I whisper conspiratorially.

"Oh yes. Very sexy," he whispers back.

Mateo pulls back slightly, his mouth merely inches away from mine. My tongue darts out to wet my lips, and his dark gaze focuses on the movement. It feels like electrical currents are flowing between us, like what you might feel right before lightning strikes. My heart is racing overtime as his lips grow closer to mine. Time seems to stand impossibly still as I feel him ghost his lips across mine, teasing in a barely-there kiss. I could stop this if I wanted to, but I don't want to. The lines have been blurring for a while, my resistance waning with every passing day that we spend together.

Just as his lips brush over mine, someone calls out, "Mateo!"

And just like that, the spell has been effectively broken. Mateo squeezes his eyes shut before reluctantly pulling away from me. He turns to the man who called his name and flashes him a strained smile. "I'll be right back," he tells me before walking away.

I stand there, plastered against the wall, trying desperately to calm my erratic heartbeat. I swear I'm going to end up with a murmur.

I surreptitiously watch from the other side of the room as Mateo mingles with a group of people. They all seem enthralled by his presence, and I hate to say it, but I know exactly how they feel.

The kiss we almost shared not only thrilled me and scared me at the same time, but also solidified in my mind what must be done. I need to call my family before I grow too attached to my captor and never want to leave.

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CHAPTER 31



Aria

MATEO IS STILL in the middle of a large group of people when I slowly begin to slink away. I try to appear calm and demure on the outside as I nonchalantly check out the artwork on the walls; but on the inside, I'm a nervous wreck; my heart pumping a hundred beats a second as I try not to freak out.

I eventually escape into the hallway without anyone stopping me. Glancing back, I see Mateo engrossed in conversation, not even realizing I'm gone. Watching him from afar gives me a different perspective. He's so brutally handsome, and I can tell why everyone who talks to him is instantly captivated. He's taller than most of the people in the room, towering over even the tallest men. Add his height with his commanding presence, and he's one powerful man.

Giving Mateo one last look, I steel my nerves and set out to do what I promised myself I would. My heels click in the empty corridor as I find my way back to the entrance. And then I go down a new hall filled with doors. The first door I check is a half bath. The second contains a small office. I peer around the room, but there's not much in there and definitely not a phone.

I'm walking out of the office when a deep voice says from the shadows, "Are you lost, little lamb?"

A chill runs down my spine as I turn, searching the dark hallway for a face. And when the man walks into a ray of sunshine casting in from the far end, I take in every detail of him. Tall, lean, muscular in a designer suit that probably cost thousands of dollars with an expensive watch on his wrist. His dirty blond hair is styled perfectly, not a hair out of place. He adjusts the cuff of his suit, and I stare at his manicured fingernails. At first glance, this guy is the ultimate perfectionist.

“Uh, no, just looking around. I was bored,” I tell him, the lie slipping out of my mouth easily enough. What I’m really after is a telephone, so that I can try to call my brother, but I can’t tell anyone here that.

“These types of events bore me too,” he confesses, his gaze never wavering from mine. I don’t know who this man is, but his blue eyes creep me out. They’re deep, like the ocean, but cold, giving me the feeling that I could drown in the dark water while he watched from the shore, never bothering to offer me a lifejacket.

While he looks like he belongs on the cover of a GQ magazine, there’s something off about him. The same chill from before runs up my spine, and I know that it’s time to leave. “Excuse me. I’m going to get back to the party,” I mutter before walking in the opposite direction from him back towards the main entrance.

“Have you seen the library?” he calls after me. “It’s quite exquisite.”

I stop in my tracks. *The library could have a phone.* I turn to look at him. “Not yet,” I answer warily.

“Oh, then you must see it,” he says, plastering a wide smile on his face, showcasing his perfectly straight, overpoweringly white teeth. God, this guy could do a toothpaste commercial.

“Come with me.” He begins walking, not even looking back to see if I’m following.

Swallowing hard, I glance back towards the party. The prospect of finding a phone or using this as my opportunity to reach out to my family or escape Mexico is too great for me not to do it. Straightening my spine, I begin to walk after him like the good, little lamb that I am, even though I’m beginning to wonder if I’m following the big, bad wolf into slaughter.

The man leads me down a series of hallways until he stops before a large door. He grips the handle and pulls it open, revealing an expansive library. I gasp at the sight. I’ve never been in a library of this size before. I turn around and around, looking at all the wooden shelves with ladders that

stretch up to the ceiling. There is a reading corner by a huge bay window where I could see myself tucked away for hours at a time. I've been doing a lot of reading as of late. Mateo brings me lots of books to keep me busy while he's working. I was never into books back home, always deciding early on that they were just a waste of time. But now I have newfound respect and love for them when I figured out that every book can let you escape reality and leave all your troubles behind, even if it's only for a little while.

"It's lovely, isn't it?" the man asks me.

"Oh, yes," I agree emphatically.

"I knew you'd like it," he tells me with a grin, those teeth beaming brighter than the damn sun. "My name is Damion Tuffin, by the way. And yours is?"

"Aria," I tell him, offering my first name only.

There's a glint in his blue eyes when he realizes I'm not going to give him more than that. "Just Aria? Like Cher or Madonna," he jokes.

"You could say that."

"I see. Mysterious. And I like a little mystery," he says with a small shrug.

Damion goes over to the mini bar and starts reading over the various labels on the bottles and decanters. "Cristóbal keeps the good shit in here. Would you like some?" he asks while popping the cork off of what looks like an expensive liquor.

"Ah, no thanks," I tell him with an adamant shake of my head. He seems disappointed by my answer, but then he turns his back on me and begins pouring a drink.

While Damion is distracted, I find a large desk in the opposite corner of the room and start searching for a phone. There's a laptop resting on top next to a cup full of pens, along with some papers, a paperweight and some little sticky notes. The laptop is locked with a code, so I give up right away. Finding nothing else on the desk that can help me, I carefully pull open the top drawer, searching its contents.

"Are you trying to find all of Cristóbal's secrets?" Damion asks.

His voice makes me jump almost out of my skin, and I whirl around to face him. I had no idea he was right behind me. "N-no," I stammer.

He grins. "Here you go. It will help calm your nerves," he tells me before shoving a small glass full of dark liquor into my hands. When I go to

refuse, he holds up a finger and tuts at me. “Now, now, this is the most expensive scotch in the world. The least you can do is try a sip or two,” he says, watching me closely.

I stare down at the glass, wrinkling my nose at it. I don’t want to drink it, but I have a feeling this guy isn’t used to women telling him no, and I’m scared of what will happen if I’m the first. A sip won’t hurt, I tell myself as I bring the glass to my lips. I take a very small sip, the liquid warm and burning my mouth and throat as I swallow it down quickly. It’s strong with an extremely bitter aftertaste. If that’s what the most expensive scotch in the world tastes like, I can’t imagine what the cheap stuff tastes like. Putting the glass down on the desk beside me, I return my eyes to him, letting him know that I’ve tried it and I’m done.

“What did you think?” he asks with curiosity in his eyes.

“I think it sucks.”

That earns me a bark of laughter. “My, my, beautiful *and* funny. Quite the combination. You know, Mateo is a very lucky man.”

My eyes narrow on him. He knows who I came here with, and he still lured me into the library, knowing what will happen if Mateo finds out. Red flags are flying all over the place, and I realize I need to get the hell out of here. “I wonder if dinner is going to be served soon? I better get back,” I tell him as I take a few steps towards the door.

“But we’re just getting started,” the man says before grabbing my arm in a vice grip.

“Let me go,” I seethe at him, trying to shake off his grasp.

“There’s that fight! There’s that anger I saw on stage at The Island,” he says with a maniacal laugh.

I jerk and suck in a harsh breath as my eyes search his, my brain going into overdrive.

He brings me in closer and whispers, “I told you I’d be seeing you soon, little lamb. And I never break a promise.”

That voice. I don’t know how I didn’t recognize him earlier when he called me by that strange nickname. He had kept his tone just above a whisper on The Island, and so it never clicked until right now.

“I wanted you that night. And I never let go of something that I want,” he tells me through gritted teeth. “I eventually let Mateo outbid me, because I knew I’d get my chance to get you for free.” His hold tightens on my arm, no doubt leaving finger-shaped bruises behind. “Let me ask you this, little

lamb,” he whispers before forcing me against his body and putting his mouth to my ear. “Are you still a virgin, or did Mateo pop your little cherry?”

Disgusted, I muster all the strength I possibly can to finally pull away from him. I stumble backwards, falling into a nearby shelf. Books go tumbling to the ground around me as I try to regain my balance. The room spins violently around me, and I clutch my stomach as I lay there, sick and vulnerable.

A dark chuckle escapes his lips, but it sounds like it’s on repeat as I try to get up. “It’s okay, little lamb. You only had a sip, unfortunately, so you should get over the side effects rather quickly.”

“You...you drugged me,” I say, my vision clouding over as my mouth tries to cooperate with my brain.

“Usually, I take my time breaking my new acquisitions down over an extended period of time, but, you see, my time with you here, unfortunately, is very limited. I needed to make sure that you were broken quickly before I take everything from you, little lamb. And believe me when I say, I want *everything* you have to give.”

I search the large room for something I can use as a weapon, but my limbs are getting heavier by the second. I doubt if I’ll be able to move fast enough in time to get away from him or fight him off if it comes down to that. I’m quickly running out of options.

Mateo’s face flashes in my mind, and so I do the only thing I can do at this point. I scream out my captor’s name because I know deep down he’s my protector and he wouldn’t let anything bad like this happen to me. “Mateo!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

My scream echoes through the room, and I watch in horror as Damion’s face immediately morphs from calm to enraged.

“Stupid little lamb,” he says before eating up the distance between us in a few strides. He bends down and grabs my face, squeezing my jaw until I cry out in pain. “If you were mine, I would have cut out your tongue on the first night,” he snarls, suddenly transforming from a man into some kind of savage animal.

He releases my jaw and pushes me to the ground. I watch in horror as he unzips his pants and takes out his semi-hard cock. He strokes it a few times while looking down at me. “I’m going to show you how a real man fucks,” he tells me before he tackles me to the floor.

I struggle against him as he manhandles me, my dress ripping in the process. His knee forces its way between my legs, and I cry out in anguish, desperately trying to keep my thighs clenched together. If he wants to take something from me, he's going to have to fight me for it.

"I knew you would be fun. That's why I wanted to win you at the auction," he seethes, wrestling my hands down to my sides.

"No! Stop!" I cry out, tears blurring my vision.

I manage to get one of my hands free, and I reach up, scoring his cheek. Streaks of red form on his skin as he rears back, hollering in pain. He touches his cheek, and when his fingertips come back crimson, he glares at me and says, "You're going to regret that, little lamb."

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CHAPTER 32



Mateo

I 'M TALKING TO several men gathered in a circle at the edge of the party when the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Call it sixth sense or intuition, whatever you want to call it, but I know in that moment that something isn't right.

Looking up at the place where I left Aria, I find it empty. My eyes then quickly scan the party, looking for her. Several women are wearing similar dresses and colors as her, but none of them even so much as get a second glance from me.

"What is wrong, Mateo?" someone asks, clearly concerned over my sudden, erratic behavior.

"Nothing. I...I'll be right back," I tell the group before bowing out of the conversation and heading towards one of my guards. "Where is Aria?" I ask him.

He shrugs his shoulders.

"Find her," I snarl at him, and his nonchalant manner suddenly turns stiff and serious.

I look back to the party, searching the room hastily once more, hoping that I simply just missed her the first time around.

Did she run from me?

The possibility has my hands curling into fists, my knuckles bleaching white from the force. If she did run, she's made a grave mistake. I will go to the ends of the earth to find her and bring her back to me. And then I will beat her little ass so hard she won't be able to sit for a week. She will truly know the definition of what it means to be mine. And I realize in that moment that she is most definitely mine.

Fuming, I walk down a hallway towards the bathrooms, thinking maybe she's just powdering her nose. If she doesn't want my anger raining down on her, that better be all she's doing.

Cursing under my breath, I blame myself for not keeping her with me the entire night. I should have been more careful. This is our first outing. I wouldn't blame her for trying *something*, for running.

But if my little captive wants to run, I hope she's prepared for me to chase her. Just the thought of chasing her down has my blood coursing through my veins as my heart triples its rhythm inside my chest. A part of me in that moment hopes that she did run. But another part hopes that, for her sake, she's still at this party.

I check the bathroom and then walk the length of the hall but don't see her. I'm about to turn around when I hear a noise that draws my attention instantly. And when I hear Aria screaming my name, I know it's a sound that will haunt me for the rest of my life.

My feet are carrying me fast towards the noise before my brain can even catch up. I hit a button on my watch, alerting my men to my location. They know that signal means to drop everything and rush to where I am.

The manor is massive and full of halls and rooms, something I never minded before right now. Standing in the silent hallway, I listen carefully, waiting for any kind of sign to point me to where Aria is. Then, suddenly, a man cries out, and I know exactly which room they're in — the library. I turn the doorknob slowly, wanting to get a jump on whoever is behind the door, but it's locked from the inside.

Pulling out the Glock from behind my back, I position myself in the hall. Three of my men are running towards me, and I motion for them to break down the door.

Two swift kicks, and the door is breaking off its hinges and falling inwards. My eyes survey the room. There's a man on top of Aria, assaulting her. He's too focused on her to even care about us.

And with one look at Aria, I see fucking red. Her dress is disheveled with a large tear at the top, exposing the top of her breast. Tears are streaming down her beautiful face, her makeup running alongside them.

Her honey-colored eyes lock onto mine, and a sob of relief escapes her lips. *Fuck, that look completely guts me.*

“Get the fuck away from her!” I roar, pointing my gun at the man.

Now I have his attention. He slowly stands, puts his hands up and turns to us. His jeans are undone, his little flaccid cock sticking out of his underwear.

A darkness I’ve never felt before consumes me in that moment, and I pounce on him like a wild animal, tackling him to the ground while my fists and the butt of my gun repeatedly collide with his face. I beat him until he’s nothing but a bloody lump of tissue, bones, and broken teeth. One of my men manage to pull me away from him, and I stand there, my breathing ragged, my knuckles stained in crimson.

Aria’s attacker opens his mouth to say something, maybe to plead for forgiveness or his life, but he doesn’t get to even speak before I raise my gun and squeeze the trigger. The shot rings out, temporarily deafening me. The room looks like it’s straight out of a horror movie with blood and pieces of his skull and brain splattered all over shelves of books and expensive bottles of liquor in the mini bar.

Aria’s designer dress is covered in blood as she stares up at me in shocked silence. I tuck the Glock behind my back and reach my hand out for her. She comes willingly to me, throwing herself into my arms as she trembles.

I hold her tightly to me. “Ready the car,” I tell one of my men. He gives me a nod before running down the hallway.

My eyes follow him, and I can see several party guests have come to see what all the commotion is about. They stand there with wide eyes, staring at the dead body on the floor of the library.

Cristóbal stands behind all of them, a look of displeasure on his face. I’ve shot someone in his home during a party that he was hosting. Even more so than that, I destroyed his beautiful library, something he takes a lot of pride in. He’s definitely going to be upset with me, maybe even want me dead after all is said and done, but I would do it all over again. I would do anything to protect Aria.

Stripping off my suit jacket, I wrap Aria tightly inside of it. I don't want anyone to witness her in a vulnerable state. "Take her to the car," I tell Ignacio.

He goes to protest, probably wanting to stay with me in case shit goes down with Cristóbal, but I give him a look that lets him know I'm fucking serious and it's not open for discussion.

Aria's fingers grasp my shirt tightly, not wanting to let me go. And, fuck me, in that moment, I don't want her to let me go. But I have shit to take care of right now, and I want to know that she's safe while I'm conducting business.

I give Ignacio a nod, and he grabs an unwilling Aria and pries her hands from my shirt. She looks hurt and scared as she's led away from me, but it's for the best.

I watch until she disappears around the corner, and then Cristóbal steps forward and says, "Let's go have a little chat, Mateo."

I follow him past the group of people, who stare at me with curious and frightened looks. Once they leave this party, word will spread fast that Aria is my one and true weakness. That she is mine. That I would kill and have killed to protect her. And even though I haven't taken her virginity yet, everything will change after tonight, whether we want it to or not.

CHAPTER 33



Aria

I 'M STILL IN shock as I sit in the back of the car, my hands trembling uncontrollably as I stare down at the blood soaking into my Oscar de la Renta dress. Mateo shot the man who hurt me. He saved me.

Damion was going to rape me.

My first time would have been with a man I didn't know and by force. Just the thought of it has fresh tears building up in my eyes, and I can't even stop them from spilling down over my cheeks.

And now Mateo is dealing with the consequences of his actions. They could be in there torturing him...or killing him. And if Mateo dies, then what happens to me?

A violent shiver of fear runs through my entire body, and I can't stop shaking. The adrenaline is wearing off, and now I'm just left with the overwhelming sense of fear of what could have happened. I wrap Mateo's jacket tighter around me, inhaling his familiar scent of expensive cologne and tobacco, and it seems to ground me somehow.

Just then, the car door opens and Mateo climbs into the backseat beside me. He barely acknowledges my presence as he tells the driver to go. I watch carefully as he pulls the coin out of his pocket and rolls it over his knuckles in restrained agitation. Once we're about a mile down the road,

Mateo finally turns his attention to me. “Are you alright?” he asks, his voice a guttural whisper.

I open my mouth to answer, but nothing but a high-pitched, mournful cry comes out. I fling myself into his lap, and to my surprise, he holds me. His arms envelop me in the warmest, most tender hug I think I’ve ever had in my life. I bury my face into his chest, wanting to be impossibly closer, wanting to literally crawl inside of him. His hand soothingly rubs circles on my back as he shushes me.

“It’s okay, Aria. You’re safe now,” he assures me.

I feel so small, so vulnerable in his arms. He allows me to cry, soaking his shirt in the process while he holds me. I seek comfort in his embrace, in his touch, in his soothing voice even though I know I shouldn’t. I watched him kill two men in front of me now. Two men that laid their hands on me, and Mateo protected me from both. *He will always protect you*, a voice in the back of my mind reminds me.

And if there’s one thing I’ve learned while being with Mateo, it’s that there are worse monsters out there than him.

“Why were you in the library, Aria?” he asks, his voice measured and controlled even though I can feel his muscles tensing.

“I...I was looking for a phone.”

“You were trying to run away,” he says accusingly, pulling back to search my eyes for any deceit.

“No!” I say quickly before adding, “I don’t know. Maybe.” Sniffling, I tell him the truth. “I wanted to call my family. Let them know that I’m okay.”

He huffs in disapproval but doesn’t say a word.

“I made a mistake,” I cry. “And I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have left your side.”

He stares at me, his dark eyes assessing me and making me feel completely exposed. “My life is dangerous, Aria, and now you’re a part of it. After tonight, people will see you as my weakness, and they will try to expose that to get to me. Do you understand?”

I nod slowly.

“You can’t ever run away from me again.”

“I-I won’t,” I stammer, struggling to promise what I know is ultimately wrong. I should want to keep fighting, keep running away, keep trying to escape. But after today, I think my burning desire to leave Mexico, leave

Mateo is going to be extinguished. It's safer for me to stay with him. For now.

"Cristóbal told me the man who attacked you was Damion Tuffin. Did you know him?" he questions.

"No, not really. He was on The Island. I remember him coming up to me after the auction was over. He told me he would see me soon. I didn't recognize his voice until it was too late. He tried to drug me. He tried to..." My voice trails off as fresh tears flow down my cheeks.

Mateo wraps his tattooed hand around mine and squeezes gently. "He can't hurt you anymore."

"Damion told me he was the one bidding against you on The Island and that he let you win because he knew he would have a chance to get me for free."

"That son of a bitch," he grinds out, his entire body vibrating with anger. "If I had known he would be at this party, I never would have brought you here. You have to believe that, Aria."

"So it's true?"

"It's true. I'd only heard rumors about The Island before Thiago, my former friend, took me there. Probably as a sick joke on his part. He was like that," he says with an exasperated sigh. "I knew I wasn't going to bid on anyone. I wanted to leave straight away. But then I saw you..." His voice trails off as he looks off into the distance out the window, perhaps lost in memory. "Thiago told me how the top bidder treats the virgins he purchases. Rapes and beats them until the life is gone from their eyes. And so, when Damion began bidding for you, I knew I had to counterbid. I had to win you no matter the cost, no matter the consequences," Mateo says, his voice deep and steady. "I had no idea who was behind the glass, though. I would have killed him a long time ago had I known."

I rest my hand gently against his stubbled jaw and force his gaze to mine. His dark chocolate eyes are filled with emotion, probably reflecting back some of the same ones I'm feeling right now.

He saved me from a horrible fate on The Island. He saved me before he even knew me.

"What?" Mateo whispers as I stare at him, taking in every detail of his brutally handsome face.

And then he gently cups my cheek, his thumb grazing my bottom lip. My breath catches in my throat. It's almost like a switch has been flipped.

I'm not seeing Mateo as my captor but as my savior. A man willing to do anything to protect me. A man willing to *kill* for me.

I don't know what possesses me, but the next thing I know, my lips are seeking his out. The kiss is awkward at first; both of us shocked by the unexpectedness of it. But then his hand moves to the back of my head, fisting my hair as he pulls me closer, consuming me and incinerating the last of any resistance left in me.

A whimper escapes my mouth as he kisses me like no other man has ever or will ever kiss me. He kisses me like he owns me — mind, body, and soul. And in this moment, he does.

And then just as quickly as the kiss starts, he ends it, pulling back. "It's the adrenaline," he tells me with a ragged groan. "It will wear off soon."

He thinks I'll regret kissing him. I want to tell him it's already worn off, but I don't say a word. I move to return my lips to his, but he turns his head at the last second, staring out the window, dismissing me.

Tears fill my eyes, and I quickly scramble from his lap and go back to my seat. Feeling rejected by him is a jagged, little pill to swallow. Weeks ago, I never would have gone to him willingly, and now I'm upset because he doesn't want me? A psychiatrist would have a field day with me at this point.

We're riding in the car for a long time before Mateo finally breaks the deafening silence. "When you come to me again, Aria, I don't want it to be because you're sick with fever or because something bad has just happened to you. I want you to come to me because you want me. Only me," he says quietly.

His intense words permeate the air and stay with me for the remainder of the trip home. And once we reach the compound, I'm left confused with no clearer answers than before.

CHAPTER 34



Aria

I'M LYING IN bed late that night, still reeling from everything that happened earlier today. Mateo killed a man for touching me, for hurting me. He risked his business, *everything*, even his own life for me.

I know it's wrong, and maybe I'm sick, I don't know, but the way Mateo protects me turns me on. I've been lying here, waiting for him to finish up his shower, my clit throbbing at just the thought of him touching me with those bloody, murderous hands. Oh god, maybe I'm losing my mind. I can't help how I feel, however. My thighs are so slick from my arousal; it's almost embarrassing.

The rational side of my brain is telling me that I'm taking my power back. I'm choosing who takes my virginity. Living in this dangerous, foreign land surrounded by bad men, I could lose my innocence at any point unwillingly. At least this way I get the choice. And I'd rather lose it by my own volition than by force from a total stranger.

And so, when Mateo climbs into bed, I can't stop myself from inching closer to him in the darkness. He's on his side, facing me, and I slowly press my backside against him.

His body goes rigid, stilling to the point where I wonder if he's even breathing. "What are you doing, Aria?" he asks in a growl, his warm breath

caressing my neck and sending a shiver through me. “Are you burning up with fever again?” he accuses.

“No,” I whisper. Gathering up all the courage I can muster, I grind my ass against his hardening length.

His hand immediately goes to my hip, clutching it in a bruising grip. “I only have so much restraint, *cariño*,” he breathes. “So, if you tempt me too much, know that I won’t be able to stop...no matter how much you beg,” he threatens.

“I don’t want you to stop,” I tell him.

In a sudden movement, he flips me onto my back, causing me to cry out in surprise as he pins me to the mattress, his hard length pressing up against my bare pussy.

Reaching over, he turns on the lamp beside the bed and stares down at me in awe in the soft light. “You’re wearing one of my shirts.” Then his eyes drag down the length of my body, and he corrects himself by saying, “You’re *only* wearing one of my shirts.”

It was a last-minute decision on my part. When I was getting ready for bed, I grabbed one of his black t-shirts that I found in the back of the closet. It smells like him, and the scent made me feel safe.

Mateo breathes in deeply and then lets out a low hiss. “Fuck, you’re already wet for me.”

I lick my lips, and his dark eyes track the movement.

“This is your last chance to tell me no, Aria,” Mateo warns. “Tell me to stop, and I’ll go back to bed and we’ll pretend none of this happened.”

I know I should tell him no. I should tell him to stop. But I can’t. I blame all of my decisions tonight on temporary insanity fueled by everything that transpired today. I can worry about everything tomorrow. But for tonight, I want him. I need him. Damn the consequences and regret I might be feeling later.

“I want you, Mateo,” I whisper.

His eyes close as if he’s savoring my words. And when his eyes open once more, I can see the fire inside of them; like two endless molten lava pools of desire. “I need to taste you again, *mi pequeña cautiva*,” he rasps.

Heat pools between my legs from his dirty words. “What does *mi pequeña cautiva* mean?” I ask, desperate to know the answer.

“It means...my little captive.”

Oh god, why does that turn me on?

Gripping my hips, he lifts my lower half off the bed, and then he dives between my thighs, his tongue finding my clit. I choke out a cry of surprise and then moan in pleasure. From this angle, I'm wide open for him, and I can see every little thing he does to me. The sight is so erotic that it has my heart stuttering inside my chest.

"I've been craving your taste ever since that night at the club," he confesses before he licks me from ass to clit, sending tiny electric shocks to every nerve ending in my body. His thick finger circles my entrance before dipping into my channel, testing, teasing as his tongue flattens over my clit, licking, sucking.

My head thrashes from side to side at the indescribable amount of pleasure he's giving to me. "Mateo!" I cry out.

His name escaping my lips seem to please him, because he growls low in his throat, sending a vibration straight to my swollen little nub. My thighs begin to quiver in his grip, and the orgasm washes over me before I can even prepare for it. With a choked cry, my back arches, pushing me harder against his talented mouth. I almost scream as he tortures my clit with his mouth, wringing out every ounce of pleasure he can while I ride out the violent waves, unabashedly bucking against his face.

With a final lick, he tells me, "You taste so sweet. Just like heaven." Releasing me, I plop down on the bed as he places kisses on my inner thighs. Then, his eyes meet mine. "I need to see you, Aria. All of you," he says, desperation dripping from his tone as he reaches for hem of the shirt, gripping it in his hands and ripping it. I gasp as the material tears easily in his strong hands all the way up to the collar, leaving me completely naked and vulnerable underneath my captor.

His intense gaze drifts lazily over my naked body, taking in every detail. And then his tongue drags over his bottom lip as he hums in approval.

Self-doubt begins to creep in, and I quickly grab the remnants of the shirt, pulling it together as best I can, hastily trying to cover myself.

Mateo clicks his tongue in displeasure. "You are the most beautiful fucking creature I've ever seen on this earth, Aria. Don't ever hide from me," he says vehemently. "Let me see you." And then he adds, "Please," his voice strained, raw and deep.

I stare at him, searching his face for any signs of deception. After finding nothing there, I slowly strip out of what's left of the t-shirt, tossing it aside before lying down again. My chest rises and falls quickly as my

breathing becomes unsteady while he stares down at me with a predatory gaze.

Lying down beside me, Mateo gently trails a finger along my hip and then over my stomach, circling my bellybutton. I shudder beneath his demanding touch. Gently, he cups my breast, thumbing over my nipple until it's taut. And then he leans down, capturing the stiff peak inside his hot, wet mouth. The feeling is so intense. He takes his time with each one of my breasts, sucking, licking and biting until I'm writhing under him. Oh my god, I think I could come just from this.

"You're close again, aren't you?" he whispers before returning his mouth to my nipple, sucking hard. I moan, my body becoming rigid as small tremors erupt inside of me. His hand cups me between my legs, and he grinds his palm against my clit, the added friction drawing out my orgasm as I shudder under him.

Mateo laves his tongue over my breast as he watches me with an intense gaze. "You're so responsive," he breathes against my skin. "Fuck, I love that."

I watch as he climbs off the bed, unfolding his tall form as he stands at full height. Reaching down, he grabs the waistband of his boxer briefs and pulls them down, revealing a thick, hard cock curving up to his ridged, tattooed-covered abdomen.

I gasp in surprise. I haven't seen a lot of dicks in my lifetime, and my limited knowledge is mostly from porn, but his is *huge*. Long and thick and perfect, but...so, so big. And suddenly, the achy want and need I had earlier to feel him inside of me is replaced by pure, undiluted fear.

Mateo notices the change in my demeanor, and he narrows his intense gaze on me. "What's wrong, Aria?" he asks before getting back on the bed and kneeling between my thighs.

"You're not going to fit," I utter in a panic. "You're too big." I scramble away from him, digging my heels into the bed and pushing until my back hits the headboard.

A dark chuckle rumbles low in his chest. Well, I'm glad *he* finds this amusing at least.

I cry out when Mateo snatches my ankle, wrapping his hand around it and dragging me down the length of the bed until I'm right back where I was before. "Trust me, *cariño*, I will fit," he assures me with a confident smirk. "Relax," he murmurs before notching his cock at my entrance.

Clamping my eyes shut, I brace myself for the pain that I will ultimately feel. I expect him to push inside, roughly, with no warning, but he doesn't. Instead, he softly drags the crown of his cock up and down my slit before he rocks in and out of my channel, shallowly, teasing all of my nerve endings until I can feel my pussy practically flooding around his cock. Slowly, I open my eyes and watch in awe as he reaches down, his thumb circling my clit and bringing me to the brink of mind-numbing pleasure with the combined sensations.

"You're so nice and wet for me," he hisses through clenched teeth as he dips the crown inside of me once more. "Your greedy, little pussy wants to take all of me."

He continues to tease me, rubbing his cock all over my pussy and clit before pushing inside, giving me only an inch at a time before pulling out again. He repeats the action over and over again, taking me right to the precipice but not letting me fully topple over the edge until I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. "Please," I finally plead, and I don't know whether I'm begging for him to stop or for him to take me and put me out of my misery.

His dark eyes meet mine. Perhaps he can sense my internal conflict, because he says, "Tell me what you want, Aria."

"I...I need you inside of me. Please, Mateo!" I nearly shout.

"Mmm," he grunts. "My new favorite sound is you begging for my cock, Aria." Then, he tenderly grips my hip and stares down at me. "This is going to hurt, *cariño*, but only for a moment. I promise," he tells me before he drives his hips forward, entering me and tearing through my virginity.

I whimper from the sudden sensation, but the pain is brief, just like he said it would be. Mateo's eyes roll in the back of his head before he focuses on me with a lustful gaze. He grabs my hip and pulls me closer. "So tight. So wet," he breathes. His hips flex as he begins to fill me inch by glorious inch.

The intense pleasure mixed with pain as my body desperately tries to adjust to his girth feels so wrong but so damn good. My head falls back as I let out a soundless scream.

"Open up for me, Aria. Be a good girl and take every inch of my cock," he demands.

It feels like he's trying to destroy me, but then I notice a bead of sweat is on his forehead. He's restraining himself, taking his time to make sure

he's not hurting me. I didn't know my captor was capable of being gentle. And for some reason, it makes me want this even more. I force myself to try to relax, slowly breathing in and out.

When Mateo is finally buried inside of me to the hilt, he groans low and deep. "That's it. Such a good fucking girl," he rasps.

I'm practically melting from his words. Hearing this normally rough and guarded man praise me and be tender does strange things to me. I thought our first time together would rough and over quickly, but now I see that he has other plans. The fact that he's not trying to hurt me or scare me away speaks volumes. Mateo wants my first time to be pleasurable. Maybe even memorable. I don't know what's happening between us, but I'm just going to blame it on the endorphins clouding my judgment.

"I'm gonna move now, *cariño*," Mateo warns, holding me by the hips as he withdraws partway before plunging back in with a hard thrust, causing me to gasp. "Fuck, your pussy was made for me," he murmurs.

With a low groan, he cages me in under him, securing his weight on his muscular, tattooed forearms planted on either side of my head. Mateo's dark eyes stare down at me, and we share this intense connection in that moment that I've never had with anyone before. It's like he's looking through me into my very soul. It thrills me but scares me all at the same time.

When my tongue darts out to moisten my lips, Mateo watches the movement with rapt attention. "Kiss me, *corazón*," he pleads, and there's a hint of vulnerability in his voice.

Corazón? That's different from what he usually calls me. I absently wonder what it means. But all my thoughts go right out the window when his mouth suddenly crashes down on mine, stealing the breath right from my lungs. He tastes like mint from his toothpaste with a hint of tobacco, and it drives me insane. His tongue urges my lips open, and I willingly grant him access. His tongue strokes against mine, swallowing my moans as he flexes his hips, taking everything he wants all at once. I can taste myself on his tongue, and the erotic combination of both of us is intoxicating.

My hands explore his muscular back, and I feel the roughness of his skin under his tattoos. *Scars*, I realize. I don't get to touch him long before he suddenly breaks the kiss and pulls back, kneeling between my thighs once again. Gripping my hips, he drags my pussy down onto his cock. This new angle hits a sweet spot inside me that I never knew existed before, and I groan out loud at the new, overwhelming sensation.

He stares down at our connection, his thumb circling my clit as his thick cock pumps in and out of me. My pussy clenches uncontrollably around him as an orgasm begins to unfurl deep within my belly. It all feels like it's too much. Like I'm dangling on the edge of a cliff, about to fall to my demise.

"Please, please," I beg. "I'm scared," I confess as my gaze meets his.

"Don't be scared, *corazón*. Just let go. Allow yourself to feel... everything...I'm giving to you," Mateo says in between thrusts.

I moan in desperation as my climax washes over me suddenly and violently. My legs begin to tremble until my toes curl and my entire body trembles under him.

"*Dios mío*. Come for me, *mi pequeña cautiva*," Mateo hisses as my pussy clamps down on his cock like a vice. He continues fucking me relentlessly, pumping brutally into my pussy, and I meet him thrust for thrust, prolonging my pleasure as I cry out his name.

Mateo leans down, caging me in once more, his lips finding mine as he fucks me. Hard. Gone is the tender lovemaking from before. I wrap my hands around his biceps, feeling his body shuddering with the need to come as he ravages me with his cock.

Suddenly, he pulls his mouth away from mine, his breathing ragged. His entire body trembles as he buries himself into my pussy one last time. And then he lets out a primal roar as he releases inside of me.

His hair falls rebelliously over his chocolate eyes as he trails kisses across my face and lips. Then, he slowly pulls out of me and collapses onto the bed beside me. He whispers something in his native tongue. I don't understand a word of it, but the grin on his face is pretty telling. He enjoyed our first time together as much as I did.

I relax next to him, my whole body aching but sated, with my brain swimming in a fog of endorphins. I never knew sex would feel like that. I've heard my girlfriends talk about it before, bragging how good it is with their boyfriends, but I doubt if they've ever gone through what I just did. It was almost like an out-of-body experience. A spiritual awakening of sorts.

My bliss is short-lived, however, when I glance over at Mateo's softening cock and stare at our mixture of juices...and my blood. He didn't wear a condom. We weren't safe, and I'm not even on the pill.

The harsh reality of the situation crashes down around me, and the overpowering feeling of regret hits me so violently just then that I almost

double over from the phantom pain. I just willingly gave my virginity to my captor, and I could end up pregnant with his baby.

What have I done?

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CHAPTER 35



Mateo

I CAN SENSE the moment the switch flips in Aria's brain. One minute, she's lying there in post-coital bliss, smiling and happy. And the next, she's freaking the hell out. She seemed to be fine until her eyes locked onto my cock, seeing her blood and my release coating it.

So, I didn't wear a condom. I know I should have, but I had to feel her with nothing between us for the first time. I swore to myself I would don one after I started, but then all logical sense went right out the window when I felt her pussy wrapped around my cock. It was like dipping my dick straight into heaven, and I just didn't want to leave.

Standing, I scoop Aria up in my arms and take her to the walk-in shower. She doesn't even protest, further worrying me. Setting her down on the tiled floor, we stand there under the spray of warm water. She's so still and quiet that it's starting to scare the fuck out of me. I'm used to her smart mouth and scrutinizing gaze. I don't like this new, docile version.

"Aria," I whisper, reaching for her.

Her face suddenly crumbles, and big, fat tears stream down her face. She tries to run from me, but I grab her and pull her up against my chest. I hold her as she cries, whispering sweet affirmations in Spanish in her ear as I let the warm water cascade down her back, soothing her.

This is all new to me. Usually, I fuck somewhere, either private or in public — let's face it, I don't mind an audience — and then I send the girl on her way, never hearing from her again. I never fuck the same woman twice, not wanting to have her perceived as something more than a casual fuck and becoming a casualty in the wars that I constantly seem to be in.

But I've never taken a woman's virginity before. Especially not one that I purchased like a prized possession and that's been in my captivity. I'm not used to all this warm and tender shit, but I'm trying. For Aria. I didn't want her first time to be traumatic, so I forced the demons inside of me down and took her nice and slow even though I wanted nothing more than to fuck her so hard she saw stars and couldn't walk for days.

I hold Aria tighter in my arms and kiss the top of her head, but her sobs only grow louder.

Fine, if she doesn't want gentle, then I can give her my true self. Angrily, I pull back from her, roughly grasping her chin and forcing her eyes to meet mine. Her honey-colored orbs are shimmering, and my god, her tears do something to me. A shock of lightning shoots right down to my cock, my length hardening against her stomach. Aria steps back suddenly, her face full of alarm and then horror as she stares down at my cock growing to epic proportions between us.

"You...you're sick!" she shouts at me. "You're getting off on my pain?"

I grab her, twisting her around in my grasp, so that my hard cock is situated in the crack of her ass, and loving how she struggles. "What can I say? Your tears obviously turn me on, *mi pequeña cautiva*." My lips find her neck, and I gently nip at her with my teeth. "Maybe you can cry for me next time," I tell her darkly.

"There won't be a next time. I'm never doing...*that* again," she hisses with angry, little breaths puffing from her mouth. I'm surprised steam isn't coming out of her ears at this point.

"Doing what?" I question her. "Begging for my cock like you did earlier when you were coming all over it?" I ask with a roguish grin stretching across my face.

I can see the dark pink blush spreading from her chest to her cheeks at my filthy words. "I'm never having sex with you again," she clarifies, but her tone holds no conviction.

"Oh, on the contrary, Aria. Now that I've had a taste for you, I will have you again and again, whenever I want. Make no mistake of that." I lick the

side of her neck, chuckling when she tries to pull away from me in disgust. “Don’t worry, you’ll be begging for me soon enough, *mi pequeña cautiva*.” I pitch my hips forward, letting her feel how hard I am for her just for good measure.

Then I release her, allowing her to escape to the other side of the walk-in. I grab my body wash from the recessed shelf and lather up, taking extra care to soap up my cock, stroking my hand up and down my length several times. Aria sits down on the bench and watches me. Her plump lips part, and I swear she’s getting turned on by watching me caress my cock. “Little voyeur,” I tease her. Aria’s gaze immediately leaves my cock and goes to my face, glaring at me through narrowed eyes. Ah, she’s back to pretending to hate me. And, fuck, I’d be lying if I said I haven’t missed that.

I rinse off and motion for her to join me under the spray. “Your turn,” I say. Aria adamantly shakes her head, but then I tell her, “I wasn’t asking.”

With a sexy, little pout on her face, she reluctantly stands and joins me under the hot water. I squeeze a handful of body wash in my hands and then I start washing her. This is the kind of intimacy I never thought I would share with a woman, but I don’t exactly hate it. It’s actually sort of...nice having someone to take care of. She stays quiet as I wash her until I brush over her perky breasts. That gains me a stifled groan, and the sound goes straight to my aching cock.

I know she’s probably sore after her first time, and that’s the only thing keeping me from sinking my cock into her pussy again. She’s lucky I’m feeling generous tonight and not like my typical uncaring, asshole self.

My hand drifts down between her legs, massaging her tenderly. Her head falls back on my chest as I stroke her clit. Even though Aria’s mind is telling her she doesn’t want me; her body certainly didn’t get the fucking memo. I bring her to orgasm in record time, her little nails digging crescent moons into my forearm as she rides out the pleasure against my hand.

Fuck, I’ve lost track of how many times I made her come tonight.

I can feel her muscles begin to tense as she begins to come down from her high. She’s back in defense mode already. Sighing, I stop touching her and take a step back. “Rinse off,” I tell her before stepping out of the shower, giving her the space she obviously wants.

My dick is practically weeping as I dry off and go to the closet to slip into a pair of clean boxers. Searching one of the drawers, I grab one of my shirts for Aria and take it to the bathroom. She’s just emerging from the

shower as I walk in. And when she sees me, she quickly grabs a towel and covers herself.

“I’ve seen every inch of you, Aria. No sense in getting shy now.” I love watching the angry blush that spreads across her chest and up to her cheeks from my words.

She glares at me before turning her attention to drying off while simultaneously trying to keep as much of her body covered as possible, making me grin. When she’s done, I throw a clean t-shirt at her. She catches it, staring down at it with a confused look on her face.

“You will wear one of my shirts to bed every night,” I inform her. And then I add on quickly, “And only one of my shirts.” Just thinking about her wearing something of mine night after night while she lies in bed beside me causes my cock to jerk in my boxers. And having such easy access to that sweet, silky pussy every night has me biting back a groan.

“No,” she says with a vehement shake of her head, throwing the shirt back at me.

“You act like you have a choice in the matter,” I say with a devious grin. “Don’t make me burn all of your clothes, Aria, until you’re left with absolutely no options.” I thoughtfully rub my chin with my forefinger and thumb. “You know, on second thought, I bet the guards would love to see you walking around naked with your bare pussy and tits on display for them every day. Maybe I should do them all a favor and just burn your wardrobe right now.” My threat holds no real value. I would cut out any man’s eyes for even looking upon Aria’s naked body. But she doesn’t know how deep my obsession for her truly runs, and so I hope she finds the warning credible.

Snatching the t-shirt from my hands, she drops her towel and pulls the material over her head, angrily punching her arms through the short sleeves.

Fuck, I love it when she’s mad at me.

She leaves the bathroom in a rush like her ass is on fire. I follow behind her, biting back a chuckle when I see her under the covers and tucked into the bed as far away from me as she can be. I’ll give her some breathing room tonight, because I know that’s what she needs the most after the day she’s had, but I won’t be able to stop myself from taking her again soon. She gave me her virginity, and so she’s mine now...whether she likes it or not.

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CHAPTER 36



Aria

I'M IN THE kitchen angrily eating a piece of bread and glaring at Mateo — or as I now call it, my new favorite pastime. I still can't believe I willingly offered my virginity to him last night. It all feels like a strange, vivid dream. But when I clench my thighs together, I can still feel him down there, and I know it wasn't a dream at all.

And when the bastard looks in my direction, he gets an indecipherable look on his face. His eyes are dark and hooded as if he's remembering being inside of me. And when he licks his lips, my core clenches when I think about how his mouth was on me...down there...only several hours before.

I gasp, almost choking on the bread in my mouth. Coughing, I stand up and scamper out of the kitchen, leaving him and my dirty thoughts behind.

I need space. I need time to think. I need... Well, I don't know what the hell else I need, but I know that I definitely need to get away from Mateo for a while.

So I lost my virginity. Big deal, right? But the more I think about it, the more of a big deal it actually becomes. I didn't just lose my virginity last night. I voluntarily gave it up to my captor. The very man who is holding me hostage.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I ask out loud as I round the corner and run smackdab into the middle of a hard chest. I bounce backwards,

barely managing to catch my balance and save myself from falling.

“Did I do something to offend you?” a deep voice with a thick Spanish accent asks.

When I look up, I see someone who looks like an older version of Mateo. In fact, they could almost pass for father and son, but I know that Mateo’s father is dead. He told me before that his family was murdered, so who could this man be who looks almost like a carbon copy of him? “I’m sorry. I was...talking to myself,” I admit.

“Oh. Then you did something to offend yourself?” he asks with a smirk. He runs a hand through his perfectly styled hair, which is gray at the temples, as his dark brown eyes study my face.

I shift my weight nervously from foot to foot, feeling suddenly very vulnerable under his heavy, scrutinizing gaze. I open my mouth to answer him, but then I hear Mateo call out, “Domingo,” from down the hall. Mateo approaches us, his intense gaze glued to me for an instant before he plasters a forced smile onto his face and greets the man I now know as Domingo. “I thought you weren’t coming until tomorrow.”

“What? I can’t visit my nephew a day early?” he asks with a strained grin.

So, this is Mateo’s uncle. Why do they seem to be forcing their affection towards each other then? I don’t understand the mechanics of their relationship, but even an outsider can feel the obvious tension in the air between them.

“Introduce me to your new...*friend*,” Domingo says, emphasizing the last word while turning his attention back to me.

“This is Aria,” Mateo offers. “She was just going to her room,” he says, narrowing his eyes on me.

I know better than to make a scene or question him right now. Instead, I nod in agreement and practically run away from the two of them towards our bedroom.

When I finally reach the safety of the room, I close the door behind me. Something isn’t sitting well in my stomach after meeting Mateo’s uncle. The way he looked at me. The way they spoke with each other. The overwhelming sense of tension between them. And the way Mateo said about me going to *my* room as if we don’t sleep in the same one.

Something’s not adding up, and I intend on finding out the truth.

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CHAPTER 37



Aria

I 'M GETTING READY for dinner with Mateo's uncle. Mateo told me to "dress demurely" — his words, not mine. A defiant part of me wants to find the raciest dress in my closet and put it on, but I'm afraid of the consequences from defying Mateo, especially when he's in a bad mood. And he's been in a terrible mood ever since his uncle arrived.

As I look through my clothing options, I have so many unanswered questions in my head. Mateo had mentioned before about his parents and sisters being murdered. How did Mateo and his uncle survive an obvious attack on their family? Why is there so much friction between the two of them? And why is his uncle here now?

Frowning, I pick out a dusty rose A-line scoop neck chiffon cocktail dress and slip it over my head. It's knee length, and I won't be showing too much cleavage, so I'm sure it's about as *demure* as it can get. My makeup and hair are already done, so I just need to find a pair of shoes to match, and I'll be ready to go downstairs for dinner, which will no doubt prove to be volatile but hopefully insightful.

I settle on gold, lace-up heels and put them on my feet, carefully crisscrossing the tie-up laces up my legs before securing the ends in bows to make sure they stay put.

I'm tying the final bow when the bedroom door opens and Mateo walks in. He's dressed in a black suit with a black shirt and black tie. He's the literal definition of tall, dark and handsome, and I have trouble tearing my eyes away from him. He has a pissed off look on his face; but as soon as his eyes find me, his entire demeanor changes.

I watch his Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallows hard. His dark eyes scorch my skin as he stares intently, looking me up and down and taking in every single detail. "What are you wearing?" he asks, his voice suddenly turning dangerous.

"What? You told me to dress *demurely*," I say, dragging out the last word and mimicking him. "This is about as modest as I can get."

His eyes drift down to my feet. "You look like a pretty package begging to be unwrapped."

I stare down at my heels. "Do you have a foot fetish or something?" I ask him with a cocked brow.

"I didn't before tonight." He rubs his thumb across his bottom lip. "Seeing any part of you tied up does strange things to me, Aria," he confesses.

The thought of him tying me up and taking what he wants causes my thighs to clench together. Oh my god, why does that turn me on? It definitely should not.

"Stand by the edge of the bed and bend over," he demands as he slips his belt out of the loops.

Thinking I'm about to get the beating of my life, I put my hands up in protest. "No, please, Mateo. I didn't do anything wrong!"

He stares at me and then down to his belt before he tosses it to the ground. "I'm not going to hurt you, *corazón*. I'm going to give you pleasure, and then I'm going to fuck you."

"B-but dinner," I protest weakly, stammering as every nerve ending in my body lights up from his dirty words.

"Fuck dinner. We'll be late." He stalks across the room over to me. Swiftly, he grabs my arm, twists me around and pushes my chest down on the bed. I'm dizzy from the sudden movement, not even realizing what's happening until the skirt of my dress is lifted up, and I feel a rush of cool air against my backside.

I squirm under his palm on my back that's pressing me into the mattress. "Mateo," I breathe out. I know I gave him my virginity, but I

wasn't planning on having sex with him so soon after — or ever again, if I had it my way. I need time to think. I need time to somehow get away from him; not give myself to him again.

But then he drops to his knees behind me, pulls my thong to the side; and the moment his tongue finds my clit, common sense flies right out of my thoughts. I moan, loudly, all rational thoughts and prior protests dying in my throat as he licks me into oblivion.

"I'm fucking addicted to you, *mi pequeña cautiva*," he breathes against my sex.

"Oh god," I sob against the bed, my hands fisting the sheets as his tongue flicks over my clit in torturous circles. His mouth is sinful, creating pleasure that should be considered illegal. I never knew something could ever feel so good.

My thighs begin to quake with my pending orgasm, but then his tongue suddenly disappears, abruptly stopping my pleasure-filled ride. I then feel him teasing my entrance with one of his fingers, dipping it into my wet channel and fucking me slowly. All too soon he adds another thick digit, completely filling me, stretching me. His fingers curl and stroke the front wall of my pussy, and I unashamedly grind against his hand, wanting more, needing more.

He withdraws his fingers, and then his mouth is back on my center. His talented tongue laps furiously between my legs, and I cry out as pleasure begins to wash over me, my core tightening to the point of it almost being painful. I'm so close to coming, but then he stops again, making me cry out from the sudden loss. He keeps taking me to the edge but is forcing me to stay there, not letting me topple over, and it's frustrating the hell out of me.

"I want you to come on my cock. Do you want that too, *corazón*?" Mateo asks, his voice strained.

I bite my lip and nod emphatically against the mattress. My mind is screaming no, but my body...my body wants him and everything he's going to give me. It's almost like I crave his touch and the pleasure only he can give me so much so that I'm like an addict looking for their next hit.

"Tell me you want my cock. Tell me you want me inside of you." When I don't answer him, he grips my hair, wrapping it around his fist and twisting my neck back to pull my mouth to his. "Tell me, Aria," he orders roughly, his breath on my lips.

“Yes, please. Please fuck me, Mateo,” I shamefully beg. I can’t deny him anything when I’m this needy, and I hate that and love it all at the same time. It feels like I’m constantly being torn in two — my sanity and dignity on one side and my libido and irrationality on the other. And it seems like the latter is always winning the fight.

My words seem to please him, and he places a rough kiss on my mouth before releasing me. “That’s my good girl,” he rasps. And then I feel his cock notched at my entrance. A surge of heat rushes to my core in anticipation of what’s to come. I know this is wrong, but I need him. The bliss he gives me takes me to another place; one where I’m not his captive and he’s not my captor. One where I’m not being held against my will with the possibility of never going home. In this subliminal place, all of the bad things seem to disappear until there is only mindless pleasure.

He enters me slowly, stretching me to the point of it being painful. I groan out loud as my body attempts to adjust to his thick, hard cock.

“You’re such a good girl for me, Aria,” he praises me as he drives his steel length inside of me. “You took all of me before. You will take me again.”

My wetness coats him, allowing him to ease inside until he finally reaches the hilt; and we both moan in unison when he reaches that point. I feel full. So damn full.

“That’s it,” he says, rocking in and out of me. “Your greedy cunt is gripping me so tightly,” he growls. “Doesn’t want to let me go.”

His fingers reach under me and find my clit. The combined sensations have him bringing me to the brink once more. My thighs begin to quake right before he pulls his hand away and stills behind me. This time, I groan out loud in frustration, and that earns me a deep chuckle.

“So impatient, *mi pequeña cautiva*,” he says. Then, I feel his fingers prodding at my lips. “Make them wet for me, Aria,” he commands.

I suck on his fingers, moaning around them as he begins to fuck me again. He pulls his hand away from my mouth after a minute, and then I feel pressure at my back hole. Instantly, my body locks up, and I attempt to crawl away from him. But Mateo pushes his hand firmly down on my back, holding me down, not allowing me to escape. “Don’t fight me, Aria. I promise it will feel good.” And then he whispers, “Just trust me.”

I whimper as he touches the tight ring of muscle between my cheeks, and then I feel an intense amount of pressure as he pushes one of his fingers

inside of me to the first knuckle. A tortured cry escapes my lips as I fist the sheets.

“Touch yourself for me, *corazón*,” he demands as he continues to drive his cock into me.

My hand snakes under me until I find my aching clit. I rub the swollen little nub, moaning from all the different sensations. I feel like my brain is short-circuiting, trying to keep up with everything I’m feeling simultaneously. My clit throbs as I rub it, my pussy and ass are stretched and full. Every muscle inside of me is clenching with desire until it all becomes too much.

“That’s it. Feel me, Aria. All of me,” Mateo growls.

His thick cock pumps in and out of me, my pussy clenching around him as my orgasm unfolds in a rush. I sob into the sheets as I suddenly let go, allowing the liquid pleasure to flood my veins and devour me from the inside out.

My name is a rough exhale on his lips as Mateo pulls his finger out of my ass, grasps my hips and begins to fuck me deep and hard. His cock slams into me again and again, hitting that sweet spot inside of me, and I can feel my channel spasming as I suddenly shatter around him with no warning.

Crying out, I collapse onto the bed, no longer able to hold myself up. Mateo continues to fuck me until he comes with a shout, gripping my hips and holding me tightly against him. “Fuck,” he groans. His hips flex one last time, and I feel every spasm of his cock as he releases into me.

I lay there, unmoving, trying to catch my breath as he plants kisses up my spine. That was...incredible. Just like the first time but better. How is that even possible? If it keeps getting better, I’ll never be able to tell him no. I’ll never be able to resist him...or his monster cock and talented tongue.

Mateo slowly pulls out of me as I groan in frustration, hiding my face with my hands.

“What’s wrong, *corazón*?” he asks as he fixes my thong and my dress.

I part two of my fingers, staring out at him in the space between. And just seeing his heavy, long cock hanging between his powerful thighs and the way it glistens with our combined juices has me squeezing my eyes shut.

“Nothing,” I lie. And then I confess, “Everything.” Sighing, I stand up, my legs feeling like jelly.

“Well, while you decide, we’re late for dinner,” he tells me while pulling up his pants. He glances at his watch and then says, “Very late actually.”

“Fine.” Scowling, I walk past him and towards the bathroom.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he asks me, and it feels like a loaded question.

I turn, facing him. “To the bathroom to clean up,” I explain even though it should be obvious.

Mateo shakes his head and closes the distance between us in a few strides. “No, Aria. I want you to wear my cum inside of you to dinner,” he orders, his voice low and deep.

I open my mouth to protest, but he puts a finger under my chin and forces my mouth shut. “Do this for me, Aria.” And then he says, “Please,” and I can see the intense fire behind his dark eyes.

I want to ask him why, but I don’t. Instead, I simply glare at him and make my way out the door on shaky legs, cursing him and his cock internally the whole way downstairs.

CHAPTER 38



Aria

AS I WALK towards the dining room, I can feel Mateo's release coating my thong and thighs, and I squirm uncomfortably. This is such a bad idea, but it's too late to turn back now. I don't know why I gave in to him. There was just something in his eyes and the way he begged that made me surrender. I'm sure Mateo has never begged for anything in his entire life. And once again, it gave me a sense of power over him.

Mateo catches up with me, guiding me into the room. And when we enter, I see his uncle and some of the staff milling about. Paranoia instantly hits me, and I suddenly worry that everyone *knows*. Knows what we just did. And maybe they can even smell his cum between my legs. Embarrassed...and a little aroused by that fact, I can feel the heat of a blush coating my chest and making its way up to my ears.

"It's about damn time," Domingo says, his words slurring. I see a myriad of empty glasses in front of him at the table. "I drank your most expensive whiskey. Hope you don't mind, but I was getting bored."

Mateo flashes him a grin, but I can see the shadows flickering in his eyes. "You could have started dinner without us," Mateo suggests as he pulls out a chair for me.

"Bah, I wanted to wait," Domingo says with a shrug.

I watch as Mateo rounds the table and sits opposite of me. His uncle is seated at the head of the table, and I don't like the fact that he's basically in between us. The man gives off a creepy vibe. I felt it the first time I met him.

Domingo turns to one of the staff members and says, "You may serve us now."

The staff get to work, rushing back to the kitchen and bringing out our meals — juicy steaks with rice and grilled vegetables.

We're just beginning to eat when Domingo asks, "So, is this the woman who was on the plane?"

My eyes dart to Mateo, and I can see him tense up in response to the question. He takes a sip of red wine before he answers with, "Yes."

"Ah, so you've been with Mateo for a while now. Interesting," Domingo says with a vigorous nod as he cuts into his steak. "Has Mateo told you about his family yet?"

This gets a bigger reaction from Mateo. I watch as his hands curl into fists on the table. His eyes shoot invisible daggers at his uncle before he turns his gaze to me. "Aria knows that they're dead," he says.

"She doesn't know anything about your past other than that, though, does she?" Domingo says, looking towards me with amusement lacing his features.

"You're drunk," Mateo says, dismissing his uncle with a wave of his hand.

"Did you not tell her what happened, Mateo?" Domingo starts. Instead of letting Mateo answer, he just continues. "Mateo was just a boy. They left him alive," he says, taking a swig of liquor. And then he adds, "Well, barely. They whipped and beat him within an inch of his life." He looks in his nephew's direction. "Do you still bear the scars from that night?"

Mateo's eyes flicker to mine for a split second. I remember feeling the scars on his back that he's tried to cover up with numerous tattoos.

Domingo continues. "Did you not tell your new, little whore about what they did to you? What they did to our family?" he asks, raising his voice.

Mateo slams his hands down on the table, causing me to jump. "That's enough!" he shouts. I've never seen him this angry before, and it's scaring me.

"No, I think she should know. She should know that your mother and sisters were beaten and raped in front of your eyes while they executed your

father and cousins!”

The room grows still and quiet, the silence stretching on until it eventually sharpens to a sharp point. The tension is so intense and thick that I’m afraid to even breathe or move.

“Get the fuck out of my house,” Mateo finally says in a low growl.

Domingo chuckles sinisterly. “I’m the only family he has left. And see how he treats me?”

“I said get the fuck out!” Mateo roars. “You can come back when you’ve sobered up.”

I watch as Domingo stands and stumbles out of the room. And then the room grows quiet once more.

I stare across the table at Mateo, who is seething, his shoulders rising and falling with every ragged breath. Tears fill my eyes when I think about what he endured as a child. To witness his family being brutally murdered. To see his mother and sisters beaten and raped. A lot of what he told me when we first met makes sense now. He told me he would never rape a woman. That’s why he never took anything from me, and why he’s always making me say out loud what I want before he takes anything. He doesn’t want to be like those men. Although he’s not a good man, he’s not evil like them.

“Mateo,” I whisper, my voice wavering with soul-breaking disbelief.

Mateo raises a hand to stop me. And then he orders roughly, “Come here.”

I slowly get up and walk over to his side of the table. When he finally meets my eyes and sees the tears in them, his face morphs into anger. Before I can even blink, he stands, grabs me and bends me over the table. “I will not have you pitying me like some pathetic creature,” he growls into my ear as he lifts the back of my dress. I hear his belt whooshing through the loops as he pulls it free. And even though I’m trying to mentally prepare for what happens next, I simply can’t...until the first blow hits me.

I scream as sudden, intense pain blooms over my backside. I fight to get away, but Mateo pins me down to the table with his free hand. He strikes me over and over again with his belt while I squirm, trying to escape. Each hit is like fire licking at my skin.

After a while, I begin to realize that the more I fight, the harder he hits me. So, I decide to do the opposite. I force myself to relax and just take it. I rest my cheek against the table and silently cry, my tears soaking into the

linen tablecloth as the fight inside of me slowly dies. I know he needs this right now, as fucked up as that is. I also know deep down his anger doesn't reside with me; however, he's taking it out on me. It's not fair. But nothing has been fair ever since I arrived here.

Mateo is panting by the time he's done, and I hear his belt clatter to the floor beside my feet. I'm a blubbing mess when he leans down and whispers raggedly into my ear, "I need you, Aria."

I feel him gripping the material of my thong before he rips it with his hands, the shreds falling down my legs. The air hits my wetness, and I hide my face against the table in mortification. How am I turned on by all of this? I must be sick. Sicker than he is.

Mateo runs his finger along my seam and groans in approval. "I think you like the pain as much as the pleasure," he says in awe. And then I feel his cock notched at my wet entrance. He enters me roughly, filling me to the hilt without hesitation. I cry out in anguish when he presses against my sore ass and then moan in pleasure when he begins to move inside of me.

I curse my body when I feel my inner walls clenching around his thick cock. He knows what I need more than I do myself, and it infuriates me. I've never known this type of pleasure before, and I hate to admit it, but it's addicting. When we're in these moments together, I forget about everything else in the world and just focus on the copious amounts of pleasure he ultimately gives me. I now know what an addict must feel when they get the perfect high. I'm taken to a place where all the bad things are suddenly forgotten, and all I can focus on are the good things about to happen.

Mateo pistons his hips, fucking me so hard against the table that it moves half an inch every time he pounds into me.

One of the staff suddenly walks into the room, and we both look up to see him at the same time. The young man's brown eyes widen as he takes in the sight before him. "*Perdóname*," the server says quickly.

Mateo holds up a hand when he tries to leave. And then, he leans down to my ear and whispers, "Should I have him stay and watch as I fuck your tight, little pussy?" before he punctuates the question with a flex of his hips.

A violent shudder runs through me at the idea of someone watching us, but I ultimately shake my head. "Please, Mateo," I beg.

He shouts something in Spanish to the man, and the server takes off running from the room. Mateo pulls his cock almost the whole way out of me before ramming himself in to the hilt again, causing me to cry out. "I

felt your pussy clench around my cock when I asked the question, *corazón*. I think you were turned on by the idea.” He fucks me nice and slow then. “I...don’t...share,” he says, enunciating each word with a pump of his hips. “I will never share you with another man, but I would love to see the jealousy in his eyes while he watches me fuck you.”

My hands fist the tablecloth, and I squeeze my eyes shut, telling myself to not give in to him. But my body betrays me once again. I begin to tremble uncontrollably as a wave of emotion hits me all at once. My orgasm crashes over me like a tsunami, and I sob through it.

Mateo rolls his hips, grinding his pelvis against my clit and prolonging my pleasure. Desperate hands dig into my soft flesh as he fucks me, chasing his own release.

Suddenly, he pulls out of me, and I feel ropes of his come landing on my bruised ass and thighs. The room is quiet then except for our ragged breaths as we come down from our highs and the realization of what just happened dawns on both of us.

I expect Mateo to apologize or take me into his arms and comfort me. But instead, he leans down and whispers against my ear, “Don’t cry, Aria. You fucking loved every second of it. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying the pleasure....and the pain.”

And then he walks out of the room, leaving me there, bent over the table with his release coating my sore, bruised ass and a myriad of emotions flooding my veins.

CHAPTER 39



Mateo

A RIA COMES TO bed not long after I do that night. I watch her closely and grow angry when she refuses to meet my gaze even once. She's mad at me. But, hell, I'd be mad at me too. I lost my temper with her earlier. When my uncle opened his fucking mouth about my past, spilling my secrets, it pissed me off. But when I saw the look of pity in Aria's face, well, let's just say the rage inside of me overtook my emotions. I don't want her fucking pity. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. But least of all, her.

She changes in the bathroom and comes out wearing what looks like a silk blouse and matching shorts. I don't even have it in me to remind her that I want her wearing one of my shirts to bed. She can wear whatever she wants tonight. But just for tonight.

With a pained whimper, she climbs into bed and lays down on her stomach as far away from me as she can.

Reaching for a special numbing cream on the nightstand that I used on her whip marks, I get up on my knees and go to her.

She immediately tenses up when I reach for the waistband of her shorts. "Please, no," she begs with fear flooding her voice.

She thinks I'm going to take her again. And while I would love to do just that, I know I went too far tonight. "I'm going to put some cream on

you,” I explain. “It will help with the pain.”

When she visibly relaxes, I pull down her shorts. Her plump ass is covered with my belt marks, and just the sight of them has my cock roaring to life. She looks so damn sexy with my marks on her, but I force myself to settle down and focus on the task at hand.

After scooping some of the cream out of the container and into my hands, I begin to gently rub it into her backside. At first, she flinches with every movement, but eventually she just learns to accept my touch.

This reminds me of when I was taking care of her after she was whipped, and a deep frown tugs at my lips. I didn’t want her to be in pain like that ever again and just look at what I did to her tonight.

I fucked up. *Royally*.

“I should have taken my anger out on my uncle,” I tell her by way of apology. I’m new to this shit. Apologizing for my actions. I’ve never had to account for any of my fuckups before. I’ve always either fought or killed my way through them as a solution.

Aria doesn’t answer me. I suspect she’ll be mad at me for a while. And why does that thought upset me? I never cared before who liked me or who hated me. But I suddenly care what she thinks? I want her to like me?

I shake my head. She shouldn’t like me. Just look at what she’s endured since she arrived here. I’d hate me if I were her.

And the brutal realization of that hits me like a massive tidal wave, threatening to drown me altogether. She’s just trying to survive in my world here. And she’s been such a brave girl in doing so. Hell, she tried to kill me the first night here. And if our roles were reversed, I would have tried the same damn thing.

It’s too late to take back what I’ve done. And I know I’ll inevitably fuck up in the future with her. It’s not like I can just change overnight. What I can do, though, is *try*. I can try for her. Try to be a better man, someone she can learn to care for. And maybe, someday, I could learn to care for her too. I’ve already killed for her. That was the easy part. I’d do it a thousand times over. I’d kill anyone who tried to hurt her or so much as looked at her the wrong way. But the idea of falling for her scares the ever-living hell out of me.

When I hear Aria’s soft snores, I realize that I put her to sleep with my soothing touch. That makes the future of our relationship seem possible. As

long as there is some gentle aftercare, she can perhaps handle everything I give to her. And there is so much more I want to do to my little captive.

I rub the rest of the lotion in as gently as I can before pulling up her shorts. Then, I cover her with a sheet and lay beside her, watching her sleep for a while before I eventually drift off.

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CHAPTER 40



Aria

I WAKE UP the next morning alone and confused. I barely remember falling asleep last night. Mateo's soothing touch on my bottom somehow caused me to slip into a peaceful slumber. God, I'm so messed up. He beat me with his belt, but I ended up craving his touch afterwards. I seriously think I'm losing my mind here. And the longer I stay, the worse it will no doubt get.

After I take a shower and get dressed, I debate whether I even want to go downstairs and face him. My stomach chooses that moment to grumble loudly, though, reminding me that I can't stay in this room forever and starve to death.

Sighing, I make my way downstairs and to the kitchen. When I grow closer, I can hear loud, boisterous voices and laughter. But as soon as I enter the room, all the chatter seems to die. Mateo is surrounded by a group of his men on the far side of the kitchen.

Feeling his burning stare on me, I glance in his direction, barely acknowledging him before I grab some food from the center island and turn to leave.

"Aria," I hear his deep voice call for me.

I stop and squeeze my eyes shut, hoping that somehow I can disappear or that he'll just miraculously forget that I'm here.

“Aria,” he calls again, forcing me to acknowledge him.

Slowly, I turn, and it takes every ounce of strength inside of me to meet his gaze. He looks brutally handsome in a black three-piece suit with dark stubble lining his strong jaw, and somehow that pisses me off even more. It’s not fair to be that beautiful, especially when I’m mad at him.

“Come,” he demands, moving his index and middle fingers in a come-hither motion.

I glower at him. “I’m not a dog,” I spit out.

His men around him sit in shocked silence, and then they burst out in laughter. Mateo smirks and says something in Spanish to them, causing them to laugh even harder.

Fuming, I stalk out of the room, not giving a care in the world. But when I hear the door swinging open behind me, I realize I messed up.

“Aria!” he calls.

My steps falter, but then I decide to act like I don’t hear him. Maybe he’ll just go back to his cohorts and leave me the hell alone.

In a few strides, he’s on me, grabbing my shirt in his fist, spinning me around and pinning me against the wall. My breakfast falls to the floor, and I stare at it longingly. And then I raise my head and glare at him. “Hey, I was going to eat that!” I say furiously.

“Are you hungry, *corazón*? I doubt if you even know what true hunger is,” he says, seething.

I can tell in his expression and in his dark chocolate eyes that he does. Tearing my gaze from his, I stare at the wall beyond us, ignoring him. Look what my pity for him got me last time. I’m not falling for that again.

He grips my hips in his large hands and then he leans down, his mouth at my ear when he whispers, “Are you always such a brat when you’re hungry?”

My hands curl into fists at my sides, and I defiantly raise my gaze to his. “No. I’m always like this after someone beats me with their belt!” I snap.

My words have their desired effect because he visibly flinches. “Aria,” he starts. “Last night was...wrong,” he confesses, shocking me. His fingers slowly drift down my hips and around to my backside. He gently touches me there, and I wince. His dark eyes study my reaction, and he frowns. “I’m sorry, Aria. I won’t ever do that again out of anger. Do you understand?”

I carefully dissect his words. “You won’t do it again out of anger, or you won’t ever do it again?” I question him.

“I must confess,” he starts, his mouth so close that I can feel the heat of his breath against my skin. “You were so very wet after I took my belt to you. I swear I can still feel your tight cunt pulsing around my cock.”

I shudder and let out a small gasp when he places a kiss to my neck, and I curse my traitorous body. Why do I always seem to melt when he talks dirty to me? *I have to stop reacting this way to him*, I mentally chide myself.

He pulls back slightly, his eyes meeting mine. “Go soak in a hot bath. I will bring breakfast to you. And then I’m going to feast on your pussy for hours until you finally forgive me,” he says, stepping away and leaving me breathless.

His threat has me clenching my thighs together, and I hate when I see the knowing glint in his gaze. He already knows my body so well. I’m like an instrument that he has fine-tuned. And he’s the maestro, constantly playing me and knowing exactly which strings to pluck to get the sweetest sounds.

On unsteady legs, I walk away from him, inwardly cursing at myself for being so completely and utterly turned on and perhaps the stupidest girl on the planet right now.

CHAPTER 41



Aria

“A GAIN,” MATEO DEMANDS.

“Please! No!” I cry out, shaking my head vehemently. I feel like I’ve been wrung dry of every sensation and any sane thought I’ve ever had in my entire life.

I took a bath earlier, just like Mateo asked me to. And he did bring me breakfast, which I ate with a smile on my face. But after the bath, when I walked into the bedroom, he was waiting for me.

He didn’t even give me a chance to protest. He simply threw me on the bed and dove between my thighs, the exact same spot he’s been for what feels like hours now.

“I...can’t,” I say, struggling to catch my breath.

“You can. And you will. Come for me again, Aria,” he demands before sucking my swollen and extremely sensitive clit into his mouth.

“Oh god!” I scream as I feel the buildup fast approaching deep inside my belly.

“Yes, I am. I’m your fucking god,” he says right before I shatter around his mouth for what feels like the hundredth time since I got out of the bathtub.

I shudder violently, my entire body quaking with the mind-numbing release. I can’t even form a single coherent thought or sentence — hell, not

even a single word at this moment.

Mateo keeps softly licking me until I come down from the high. “Do you forgive me, Aria?” he asks before placing a kiss to my mound.

Even though I’ve denied his forgiveness since he first began, now I’m ready to concede. It’s either that or perhaps die from too much pleasure. I swear it feels like my heart is going to give out any second. It’s beating a terrible rhythm inside of my chest. “Yes, yes, yes! I forgive you!” I practically scream.

His tongue teases my slit, and my back bows off the bed. I’m so sensitive down there now. “Are you sure?”

“Yes! Please! Fuck!” I cry out.

“Mmm, I love when you curse. It sounds so filthy coming from your mouth.” He places a kiss on my thigh and then climbs off the bed. He slips out of his suit jacket and shirt. And then he unzips his dress pants, allowing them to fall to the floor along with his boxers. I watch in awe as his erection bobs to his stomach. He looks impossibly hard and long and so thick.

“See something you like?” he asks with a knowing grin as he grips his cock with his large hand and begins stroking his length.

I swear something in my brain short-circuited with all of those orgasms, because all I’m capable of doing is lying there and staring at him, watching him like some sort of creep.

“Have you ever sucked a cock before, Aria?” he asks me.

My eyes meet his as I shake my head no. Mateo hums in satisfaction as his eyes flutter closed for a moment. When he opens them again, there is a fire burning behind their dark depths. “I would love to fuck that virgin mouth of yours too,” he comments.

He’s not demanding I suck his cock. He’s giving me a choice. I could easily tell him no. I could simply sit here and watch him get off.

But I only lie there for a few moments before I crawl over to him like a lost puppy. I suddenly want to feel him inside my mouth. I want to give him the same mind-blowing pleasure he’s been giving me for hours.

He continues to stroke his cock as I lick my lips, staring at him. “Tell me you want to suck my cock, Aria,” he demands.

“I want to suck your cock.”

He closes his eyes for a moment as if he’s savoring my words. “Fuck. You’re such a dirty girl.”

Tentatively, my tongue darts out of my mouth. And when I lick around his perfect, thick crown, Mateo releases an unintelligible curse. His hand grasps the back of my skull, his fingers spearing through my long hair. I lick down the length, the vein on the underside of his hard cock throbbing against my wet tongue.

Mateo's hand tightens in my hair. "Open your mouth, Aria," he commands, his voice rough and deep.

I do as he says.

He clicks his tongue in disapproval. "Gonna have to open it wider than that, *corazón*."

I open as wide as I can, and then Mateo gently feeds his cock into my mouth.

"Don't use your teeth," he says in warning.

I wrap my lips around my teeth as I take as much of his length into my mouth as I can, which isn't much.

His hips flex as he fucks my mouth slowly, groaning loudly. "Yes, such a good girl," he praises me. A muscle jumps along his clenched jaw as he stares down at me. He guides his cock in and out of my mouth, controlling the depth and speed. A few times he hits the back of my throat, causing me to gag and my eyes to water. Saliva instantly pools in my mouth, coating his cock and allowing him easier access.

His thumb brushes away a stray tear from my cheek. "Look at me, Aria," he orders roughly. When my gaze meets his, he tells me, "You look so pretty with my cock stuffed in your mouth."

His tattooed arm flexes as his grip on my hair tightens. He's losing control, his hips pistoning erratically as he slides himself between my lips. I place the palms of my hands on his muscular thighs, and they tremble under my touch as he groans loudly.

"Yes, Aria. Please," he raggedly whispers.

It feels good to have him begging me for pleasure for once. And having this powerful man pleading for something only I can give him makes me feel powerful.

"I'm going to come in your mouth," he warns before the salty taste of his release hits my tongue. He groans deeply, gutturally. "Swallow me," he demands as he slowly fucks my mouth.

I swallow quickly, and he hums in approval. And when he pulls his cock out of my mouth, my tongue darts out to lick up every single drop as the

last of my sanity flies right out the window. In that moment, I feel like I've been fractured into two different people — the old Aria and this new Aria, whom I don't even recognize anymore.

Mateo bends down, and then his mouth descends on mine. His tongue delves into my mouth, tasting me, tasting himself, possessing me, claiming me. And when he finally pulls back, his dark eyes are filled with an emotion I can't decipher. Something is changing between us. I can feel it, and I know he feels it too. This is a dangerous, losing game the two of us are playing, and I can only hope that I survive in the end.

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CHAPTER 42



Aria

LATE THAT NIGHT a strange noise startles me awake. I try to remember the dream or nightmare that the sound must have come from; however, I can't remember a thing. But when I hear moaning coming from beside me, I realize I didn't wake up because of a bad dream.

I glance over at Mateo as he stirs. I can barely make out his features in the dim light coming from the cracked door of the bathroom, but I see that his eyes are screwed shut and realize he must be in the midst of a nightmare. He groans softly, his face twisting in pain as he fights imaginary demons in his mind.

Sitting up on my knees beside him, I watch and wait. I don't know what to do. Should I let him fight through it, or should I try to wake him? When a tortured sound comes from the back of his throat, I make a decision. "Mateo?" I call out. I gently place my hand on his chest, and it only takes me a split second to realize I made a horrible mistake.

Before I can even blink, my entire world is turned upside down as he flips me onto my back and tackles me onto the mattress. His hand is wrapped around my throat, and his dark eyes bore into me as he pants and growls like a feral animal on top of me.

"Mateo," I gasp as I struggle to breathe.

It takes a few seconds, but his eyes finally clear and he quickly pulls his hand away. "I'm sorry, Aria," he apologizes before sitting on the edge of the bed. The lamp by the bed turns on, and he scrubs his hands down his face while muttering something in Spanish that I can't understand.

"It's okay," I tell him.

He draws in a rough breath between his teeth before slowly releasing it. "It was just a nightmare," he says out loud, but I think he's trying to convince himself rather than explaining it to me.

"What was your dream about?" I ask.

Several long minutes of silence stretch between us. And just when I think he's not going to answer me, he finally says, "*Mi familia.*"

"Your family?" I ask.

He nods.

I don't know what possesses me, but I find myself saying, "Tell me about them. Before everything that happened. I want to hear what they were like before." Even though Mateo and I don't have a conventional relationship, by any means, it still would be nice to know about his past and where he came from.

"My father was born in Colombia. He met my mother while visiting America." He reaches up and touches a strand of my hair. "She was Italian, like you." He drops the lock and continues on. "They fell in love and got married within a week of meeting."

"Wow. That was fast," I comment in awe.

"They knew the moment they met that they were destined to be together. Fate had brought them together for a reason."

His words sink in slowly, giving me goosebumps. Did fate bring Mateo and I together? I guess, in a way, it did. But I can't dwell on that when I'm still under lock and key with no real promise of being able to leave or going home anytime soon.

"Nine months later, my oldest sister Isabella was born. A couple of years later, Gabriela came into the world. And then me, their only boy. We all thought my parents were done having kids after me. And then Lucita was born. We all called her Little Lucy. She was the youngest. Only eight years old when she...when they..." His voice trails off, and I reach over to squeeze his hand.

"So, you lived in Colombia or America?" I ask in an attempt to change the subject.

“We lived everywhere. Colombia, Portugal, America, Rome, Athens. My father’s business took us to a lot of places. We traveled the world.”

That explains why he speaks multiple languages so well and why he has a lighter accent than everyone I’ve met, including his uncle.

“What brought you to Mexico?” I question.

“After my family was...gone, I had to run. My uncle had his own business set up in California, and he suggested that I hide in Mexico. We had no idea who sent the hit out on my family,” he explains. Then, he pauses for a beat and says, “We still don’t.”

That sends a shiver up my spine. After all these years, Mateo has never gotten his revenge for his family. I’m sure that weighs on him every day of his life. No wonder he still has nightmares about it. I can’t even imagine how that feels.

“I lived on the streets from the time I was eleven until I was a teen,” he goes on to say. “Then I began working for a Bolivian drug cartel, making my way through the ranks. I met Cristóbal Espinoza soon after, and he helped me to fund what you see now,” he says, waving his hand.

“Your uncle should have taken you in. He should have protected you,” I say angrily. It’s not fair that he was an eleven-year-old boy fending for himself on the streets while his uncle stayed happy and healthy in his fortress in California.

“Probably. But maybe it was my destiny. Maybe all of that happened and led me to this point. If my uncle had taken me in and babied me, I wouldn’t have developed the work ethic I have now. I also wouldn’t have the empire I have now,” he concedes.

I sit beside him on the edge of the bed, and he turns to me. “I don’t like your uncle,” I confess in a hushed whisper.

“I’m not so fond of him myself,” he says with a harsh laugh. “I’ve only ever told my uncle about what happened that day. And even he doesn’t know all the details.”

“If you ever need to talk about it, Mateo, I’m here to listen,” I tell him gently. I rest my hand on his arm, and his muscles flex under my touch.

He nods a few times, and I think he’s going to dismiss me, shut me out like he normally does. But instead, he says, “The day started like any other normal day. We were living in Colombia at the time. Had only been there for a few months. My father was dealing with a lot of new cartel bosses, so we always had our guard up, but we thought we were safe.” His voice is

thick with overwhelming emotion as he speaks. “They murdered my father last. They wanted him to watch everything that was happening to his family and carry that over into the afterlife to make his soul suffer the burden.” He spears his fingers into his thick, dark hair. “My mother and sisters were beaten and raped. I was held down, forced to watch. I could see and hear everything.”

“And you were eleven years old?” I ask, my voice just above a whisper.

“Yes,” he breathes out. “I was weak. I couldn’t fight back.”

“You were just a boy.”

“I should have done something. I should have helped them somehow!” he says, his voice raising an octave.

“It’s not your fault, Mateo,” I tell him, trying to calm him down. I stand up and straddle his lap, cupping his face in my hands. “It’s not your fault,” I say again, more forcefully this time.

His hands grasp my hips and hold fast. “They beat and whipped me until I was unconscious. Left me for dead.”

“But you survived.”

“I survived. But my soul and my humanity were gone,” he admits. His hands grip me tighter. “That’s why I never wanted to grow attached to you, Aria. You would only become too much of a liability in my fucked-up world. People will always try to get to me through you. This life is not something I would wish on my worst enemy.” He pulls me closer, his mouth only an inch away from mine, as he stares into my eyes. “If I were a good man, I would have set you free a long time ago, *mi pequeña cautiva*.” Then he confesses, “But now it’s too late. I’ll never let you go.”

His words should scare me. They should make me run, screaming from the room in terror. But instead, they calm me.

I press my lips against his in a soul-searing kiss as he crushes me against him, holding on to me like I’m his only salvation. I don’t know what’s happening to me, to him, to *us*, but it’s too late to turn back the hands of time. Even though none of this makes sense and we don’t make sense, I can’t help how I feel. When we’re together, we share this inexplicable bond that I never want to break.

Maybe this is what fate had planned for me all along. Maybe Mateo is my destiny. Only time will tell. But I know one thing is for sure — I think I’m falling for my captor.

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CHAPTER 43



Mateo

A FEW DAYS later, my uncle calls to apologize. He's already back in his secure stronghold in California, not wanting to stir the pot any more so than what he did down here in Mexico. Even though I'm still upset with him, I can forgive him...to an extent. Whether I like it or not, he's the only family I have left. And if my parents taught me anything, it's that you always forgive family. Even when they fuck up.

"It's in the past," I tell him through the receiver, lying through my fucking teeth as I roll my lucky coin across my knuckles. Domingo's behavior ultimately led to my outburst, which in turn caused me to hurt Aria. If I had to do it all over again, I would have taken my anger out on his face.

"Good, good," he says. A pause, and then, "And what happened to your *friend* after I left?"

I grind my jaw. "Nothing," I growl out. He doesn't need to know my business, especially not when it comes to Aria.

Domingo chuckles darkly on the other end of the line. "I don't believe that for a fucking second, nephew." He whistles low and long. "She is quite the beauty. Honestly, one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen."

I sit up straighter in my chair, gripping my coin in my hand and squeezing it tight. His words are pissing me off. "Your point?" I prompt

through gritted teeth.

“Many men will try to take her from you. Keep her close,” he warns, but it almost sounds like a threat.

“I intend to do just that,” I inform him. Just the thought of someone trying to take Aria from me has my inner beast roaring to life. In the short time we’ve been together, she has grown to become the most important person in my world. A man looking in her direction would easily lose his eyes. And I would kill anyone for laying a hand on her. I’ve already proven that level of possessiveness with the number of bodies that have been piling up around her. First, with Thiago, then Constantine, and finally with Damion. I’m sure they won’t be the last men I have to kill because of my little captive, but I’m not complaining. I would kill a thousand men if it meant keeping her safe.

It's funny how this is exactly what I didn't want to happen when I acquired Aria. I didn't want this level of commitment or insane jealousy. But, let's face it, my sanity train derailed a long fucking time ago. I'll do whatever it takes to protect her. She is mine. And I pity any poor soul who would ever try to get between us.

After some boring chitchat about business, I finally end the phone call with my uncle. Relieved to be done with him and his bullshit apologies, I tuck my coin into my pocket. And then I delve back into my favorite pastime — creeping on Aria's social media.

I'm on her Instagram profile, looking through her photos and trying to see if there are any new comments alluding to any updates about her or any recent searches that have been conducted, when I notice something up at the top of the screen. Aria's birthday is tomorrow. I doubt if she even realizes that. Probably doesn't even know what month we're in now. It's not like I allow her access to a phone or a computer, and I don't have any archaic calendars hanging around.

I realize I want to make her day special here even if she won't feel like celebrating. I'm sure the whole thing will make her miss her family and friends even more, but I don't care. I can't just let her first birthday with me go by without doing *something*.

Wanting an idea on what to buy her, I glance through her photos until one catches my eye. I recognize the heels right away. They were the same ones she wore at the auction and the night out at the club. I remember her telling me they were a gift from her mother, and sure enough, the caption of

the photo rings true. They obviously hold a spot in her heart since she stuffed them in the back of the closet and refused to throw them out.

Leaving my office, I go to our bedroom where Aria is quietly sleeping in my bed. I fucked her until the wee hours of the morning, not being able to quench my thirst for her, and I doubt if she'll be awake for another few hours. I should probably feel bad for putting her into sex comas every day, but I don't. Her body was made for sinning, and I'd gladly and willingly follow my little temptress straight into hades time and time again.

Searching the closet, I discover the pair of Louboutin heels. They are scuffed badly with one of the heels cracked almost to the point of falling off. I can remember her stumbling around in them at the club. No wonder she almost fell getting out of the car that night.

Feeling inspired, I carry them back to my office and call Ignacio. When he walks in a few minutes later, I tell him, "I want you to take these to the city and see if anyone can restore them."

His brow creases as he stares at the heels like he's trying to figure out a puzzle, but he smartly decides to keep his opinions to himself. Instead, he asks, "Can I take Flora?"

I roll my eyes and wave my hand, dismissing him. "Yeah, sure. Just don't let your fucking her get in the way of what I want you to have done today. I need them finished by tomorrow morning. Pay extra if you have to."

"Alright," he agrees before taking the shoes with a confused look on his face.

He's probably wondering why the hell I want a pair of heels repaired, but I don't have time to explain. I have a birthday party I need to prepare for.

CHAPTER 44



Aria

WHEN I WAKE up, I notice the bed is empty, but there's a note resting on Mateo's pillow. I read the masculine script over and over again, trying to make sense of it. He wants me to stay in the room until he comes to get me later this evening and also to look nice for something special he has planned.

I set the note down, wondering what the "something special" could possibly be. Yesterday, Mateo let me sleep most of the day away while he was holed up in his office, acting all secretive and shit. Something is definitely going on, but I have no idea what he's up to. Not like he would even tell me. He obviously wants this to be some sort of a surprise.

I spend most of the day racking my brain and trying to figure it out, but then ultimately give up and end up distracting myself from *the thing that shall not be named* by soaking in the clawfoot bathtub for hours until my fingers turn prune. After I'm done, I dry off, do my hair and makeup and go to the closet to pick out an outfit. I end up settling on a cute, navy blue eyelet embroidered patchwork shirtdress with a belt. I complete the look with a pair of strappy heels and pop some red lipstick on my lips before patiently waiting. Since I don't have a clock, time has no real sense here. I could be waiting for ten minutes or a half an hour and not really be able to tell the difference unless I count the seconds down inside my head.

Eventually, though, the door opens, and Mateo steps in, looking debonair in a black suit with his hair perfectly in place. Although I love the unruly look he always seems to be rocking when it comes to his hair, this put-together style is hot too.

“You look gorgeous,” he tells me, his eyes devouring me.

“You don’t look so bad yourself,” I remark. “So, are we leaving the house for this special occasion?” I ask, desperately wanting to know what is so unique about today.

“No, we’re staying home. I have everything ready downstairs.”

“Oh.” My curiosity is piqued. Maybe he planned a dinner party? I just hope it goes better than the one we went to in the past. I guess if I don’t end up being assaulted by a stranger, I’ll call that a win.

“What’s wrong?” Mateo asks, perhaps sensing my discomfort from my inner thoughts.

“Nothing. Just wondering what’s going on.”

“You’ll see,” he says cryptically before reaching out his hand for me to take, which I do. He leads me down the stairs, and the first thing I notice is how many balloons there are. Arches of balloons above all the doorways, balloons covering the floor and helium balloons dancing across the ceiling. “Is it someone’s birthday?” I whisper conspiratorially to him right before I see several people jump out from the next room and yell, “SURPRISE!”

Ignacio, Flora, Esmeralda, and most of the staff are standing at the bottom of the stairs looking expectantly up at me. Confused, I glance at Mateo, who has a roguish smile stretched across his handsome face. “It’s your birthday?” I question.

“No,” he answers. “It’s yours.”

Suddenly, I feel the sensation of dropping down a very steep slope of a rollercoaster. I have trouble breathing as my chest tightens with anxiety. If it’s my birthday, then that means that months have passed. Months without seeing or hearing from my family and friends. Months that have passed with events and parties and special occasions that I will never get to experience or relive. Months that I’ve been held captive against my will with no promise to ever be let go.

I’m barely aware that we’ve made it to the bottom of the steps until Mateo grips my chin in his hand and forces my gaze to his. “Aria, what’s wrong?” he insists, confusion and worry thick in his voice.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?!” I mimic him, giggling before laughing hysterically. *Oh god, I think I’m finally losing my mind.*

Mateo turns to Esmeralda and tells her, “Take everyone to the kitchen. We’ll be there shortly.”

Once we’re alone, Mateo grips my arms, shaking me gently. “Talk to me, Aria,” he orders.

“How long?” I blurt out.

“What?” he questions.

“How long have I been here, Mateo? How long?” I demand.

He checks his watch, and then quickly says, “Three months, eleven days, six hours and twenty-eight seconds.”

I’m stunned speechless by his words. He knows down to the very second? “Wait...” My voice trails off as all of my panicked thoughts are suddenly consumed by one burning question. “How do you know that?”

His dark eyes pierce mine as he states, “I keep track of the important things in my life. The things that matter.”

It takes a moment for his words to slowly sink in. Mateo isn’t the kind of person who comes right out and says exactly how he feels. You have to constantly read between the lines when it comes to him, but this is the most precise he’s ever been with me.

I matter to him. I’m important to him. And he knows how long I’ve been here down to the minute and even the second.

Gripping the stair railing, I take a seat on the first step, needing a minute to calm myself down. I was on the verge of a breakdown with the startling news of how long I’ve been here, but now...now I’m just trying to process everything.

Mateo doesn’t push, doesn’t try to pry into my thoughts. He simply just stands there; a comforting force even if I don’t want him to be.

“I wonder if my family thinks I’m dead,” I ponder aloud. I can imagine my mother sick with grief; my father angry beyond words that he hasn’t been able to find me yet. My brother and Renato would definitely be sharing in the rage and guilt. And Selina... Oh, Selina is probably distraught, blaming herself for everything. She couldn’t have known about the tracker that Constantine had inserted into her body. Had she known, she would have told someone, and she would have never left the sanctity of our home.

Mateo is quiet for a beat before he offers, “I can put out word that you’re alive and well, if that would make you feel better.”

My eyes lock onto his, searching his face for any signs of deception. He’s been so against me contacting my family since that phone call where I spilled a lot of information to my brother out of fear. “You would do that?” I ask, my voice just above a whisper.

“For you, yes,” he responds.

Again, I’m reading between the lines with him. I don’t know exactly when I became the woman he cares for instead of the woman he purchased and was forced to take care of. But more importantly, I don’t know when he became the man I want to be with instead of the man I’m trying to run away from.

“Consider it one of your birthday presents,” he offers. And then he reaches around the corner and pulls out a pretty, white box with a bright pink bow. “Along with this.”

Tentatively, I take the box and open it. There’s a layer of matching pink tissue paper, and I carefully pull it back. My eyes widen at the pair of metallic gold Louboutin heels nestled inside. They look exactly like the same shoes I was wearing the night I was kidnapped. The pair of heels that my mom had given to me as a present.

Slowly, I pull out one of the heels and study it. It looks new, but I suddenly have to know. “Are these...?” My voice trails off as a lump forms in my throat.

“Yes,” Mateo says. “They’re the same ones. I had them restored.”

Tears fill my eyes as I hold one of the heels to my chest. I know it’s stupid to cry over a pair of shoes, but these were a gift from my mother. Quite possibly the last gift I’ll ever receive from her. I wore them when I thought my life was over. I endured so much with them on my feet, and they made me feel powerful. Unstoppable.

Mateo could have gone out and bought me something new, something meaningless like a piece of jewelry or brand-new shoes. But instead, he went above and beyond and did something he knew I would love, something I would cherish.

And now I’m crying for a whole different reason.

Mateo frowns, studying my reaction. “I hope they didn’t fuck them up. I paid a lot of money to —.”

I don't let him finish his sentence. I set the box down and throw myself into his arms, practically tackling him as my mouth claims his in an intense kiss. He wraps his arms around me, pulling me closer and deepening the kiss. When he pulls back, his eyes search mine. "Do you like them?"

"I love them," I confess in a rush. "Thank you."

A smile graces his sexy mouth, and it takes my breath away. Shaking my head, I slowly step away from him and take a deep breath. I went from my lowest low to my highest high in a matter of a few minutes, and I'm still trying to play catch-up. All these new feelings are bombarding me, but I'll deal with them later when I'm alone and have time to think.

"So...is there cake?" I finally ask.

"Of course," Mateo says, his expression softening. "Esmeralda makes the best chocolate cake you've ever tasted in your life," he promises.

"I'll hold you to that," I tell him before I let him lead me into the kitchen and to my birthday party that goes well into the night.

CHAPTER 45



Aria

MATEO HOLDS TRUE to his word, and he even lets me sit on his lap while he types out an encrypted email, informing his contacts in the United States that I'm alive and well and to put out the word to my family.

After that's done, he takes me on the surface of his desk. He fucks me slow with emotion hidden behind every thrust. I think he's scared of losing me. And honestly, I'm scared of losing him too. I know deep down we shouldn't be doing any of this for a billion different reasons, but I can't seem to slow down or stop. And maybe I don't want to.

Mateo gets a phone call shortly after our lovemaking, and I retreat to our room to take a hot shower. The water feels so good cascading over my sore muscles. It feels like I just did an hourlong cardio session. Sex with Mateo is just like doing a workout, but better. I get to come afterwards. And I don't remember that happening in my old spin class.

Stepping out of the shower, I go to the sink and comb out my long hair and brush my teeth. I stare down at my flat stomach, studying it in the bathroom mirror with a frown on my face. The thought of getting pregnant with my captor's child should scare me. The part of my brain with rational thought is definitely terrified, but then there's a curious part that wonders... what if. What if I get pregnant with Mateo's baby? Would he be a good father? Would he take care of us?

I think the answer to those last two questions would be yes. I think he would be an amazing and extremely protective father. But the thought of having a baby down here in Mexico away from my family and in captivity scares the living hell out of me. The realistic part of my brain overrides all curiosity. And that is why when I emerge from the bathroom and see Mateo, I tell him, "I need to take Plan B. Do they have that down here?"

"No," he simply answers as he goes to the walk-in closet, ignoring me.

I follow him. "No as in they don't or...?" I ask, my voice trailing off.

"No as in you are not taking it," he says as he begins stuffing clothes into a black duffle bag.

"But...but what if I get pregnant?"

He turns and looks at me. I can practically hear the gears in his mind working as he looks down at my stomach. I bet he's imagining me pregnant with his child right now. And I can't help but wonder what he's thinking. Self-consciously, I wrap my arms protectively around my naked body; and as if the spell has been broken, he blinks and tears his eyes away.

"I have to go," he says, dismissing me, as he grabs a few suits on hangers, loading his hands.

"Mateo, we need to talk about this," I say urgently. "Do you not understand how babies are made?" I ask incredulously.

He stops and pins me with narrowed eyes. "I'm not an idiot."

"I didn't say you were," I say exasperatedly, throwing my hands up in the air. "But it's like you're not understanding me right now. Maybe I need to get on birth control or something," I spit out, rambling.

"We'll discuss this after I get home."

"Where are you going?" I ask, annoyed.

I don't expect him to answer me, and I'm amazed when he does. "There was an explosion at one of our warehouses down south. I need to go and make sure everything is all right. Should only take a day or two at the most."

So, he's leaving...for a day or two? I should feel relieved, but I don't. I feel quite the opposite. Mateo has never left me alone for that length of time before.

"Ignacio will watch over you," he assures me, and I'm not sure if that's supposed to make me feel better, but it doesn't. Ignacio isn't exactly the friendly type, and we haven't really gotten along ever since I arrived. I

think he feels like I have some kind of powerful ulterior motive when it comes to his boss and friend, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

Mateo walks over to me. Placing a finger under my chin, he tips my face up to his. And then he leans down and places a searing hot kiss to my lips, leaving me breathless.

"Behave yourself while I'm gone," he tells me before he walks out the door, closing it behind him.

I stare after him in disbelief. My fingertips sweep over my lips, reliving that kiss in my mind for a long time after he leaves.

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CHAPTER 46



Aria

MATEO'S TRIP TURNS from one day into two, and then from two into three. On the third day, Ignacio lets me know that Mateo ordered him to take me shopping so that I don't die of boredom. It's funny how Mateo knew exactly what would cheer me up and make me happy. Even though I've been helping Esmeralda in the kitchen and enjoying my time with her — she even taught me how to make concha — I must admit that getting out of the house is exactly what I need.

We're in our fifth department store of the day when Ignacio hands me a small, black flip phone. "It's Mateo," he explains when I look up at him in confusion.

I put the phone up to my ear and ask, "Hello?"

"*Buenos días*, Aria," Mateo's deep voice answers. "How are you?"

I chew on my bottom lip. It's so nice to hear his voice. What's that old saying? Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Yeah, well, it's completely true. I miss him. Way more than I ever thought I would or could. And much more than I should. "I'm okay," I tell him. "How are you?"

"I've been better," he grinds out.

"What's wrong?" I ask, concerned.

"Nothing, Aria. I'm just missing a certain little captive of mine."

His words steal the breath right out of my lungs. Mateo isn't the type to confess his true feelings, so him admitting that he misses me is a big deal. And I find myself foolishly blushing like a silly, lovesick teenager.

"How's the shopping trip?" he prompts.

I sigh deeply and stare across the store at Ignacio and Flora. They're practically having sex against a shoe rack while nearby employees look on in surprise and horror. "You didn't tell me Ignacio and Flora are, like, a *thing*," I hiss conspiratorially. I wondered why Ignacio was so adamant about her coming along. Now I know.

"I wouldn't exactly call them a thing," Mateo muses. "But they're definitely fucking."

"Yeah, no shit," I say sarcastically, and that earns me a dark chuckle on the other end of the line. "They can barely keep their hands off each other, so it's been hard to get any shopping done when I'm trying not to see...all of *that*." I have seen Flora's boobs and butt cheeks more times than I can count since Ignacio is constantly lifting her skirt or pulling down her shirt and pawing at her like some kind of wild animal.

There's silence on the other end of the phone, and I wonder for a moment if Mateo grew tired of my complaining and simply hung up. But then he says, "I took care of the problem."

I glance up at Ignacio, who is looking down at his cell phone with a heavy frown on his face. He quickly backs away from Flora, straightens his back and glares in my direction. And if looks could kill...

"Yeah, I see that," I tell Mateo, tearing my gaze away from Ignacio, who looks like he wants to strangle me for messing up his playdate with his fuckbuddy. "So, this should be fun," I groan, rolling my eyes.

"Try to enjoy yourself. I know how much you love shopping."

I grin. I do love shopping. And I love the fact that he doesn't care or set limits on my obsession. Several nights ago, I sat on his lap in his office while I shopped for hours online, ordering whatever I wanted. His cock was hard the entire time, and I loved teasing him. And when he finally had enough of the teasing, he took what he needed, fucking me on top of his desk for hours.

I bite my lip, shaking my head to clear my naughty thoughts.

"I have to go, Aria," he informs me.

"Okay. I..." My voice trails off, but then I decide to suck it up and just tell him how I feel. He's been gone for three days, and I have an ache in my

chest that I don't think will go away until he returns. "I miss you," I whisper.

He's silent for a beat before he eventually says with a contented sigh, "I miss you too, Aria."

"How much longer?" I ask, and even I'm surprised by how needy my voice sounds.

"Two more days at the most. I promise I'm hurrying." And then he adds, "Have fun spending my money."

"Oh, I will," I say with a grin.

"That's my girl."

He hangs up, and I immediately miss the sound of his sexy, deep voice. I stare down at the phone, sighing and wondering just what the hell is wrong with me. Mateo and I have come a long way since he first bought me on that island.

I don't know what the future may hold for both of us, but I hope that we can find a way to be together. I just pray that when the time comes to make a choice, that it won't end up in me having to decide between him and my family. Because I'm not sure who I would choose. And that scares me more than anything.

CHAPTER 47



Mateo

I GRIT MY teeth as the doctor sews up the gaping wound in my shoulder. I've taken a lot of bullets in my lifetime and survived them all. I don't plan on letting this one be any different.

What started out as an argument over land for my new warehouses soon turned into a fucking bloodbath with one of the local cartel leaders in Guatemala. Needless to say, he shot me first...and missed, catching me in the shoulder instead of my head. I returned fire and didn't miss. And as he lay there on the floor with a bullet between his eyes, I almost felt sorry for him. His reign was over. Everything he had been fighting so hard for only moments before was gone in an instant.

If he had just given me what I wanted, none of the violence would have ensued. Now his men are my men, and his precious land is mine as well. Such is the life in the cartel. You die, and the world keeps moving on. The war and violence continue until no one even remembers your name. We're all ghosts here.

"Done," the doc tells me.

I move my shoulder, grimacing. It's going to hurt like a son of a bitch the next few days, but I'll live. And through the pain, I grin, knowing just how concerned Aria will be.

It's been too damn long since I've been inside of my little captive. Blood rushes to my cock as I leave the medical room and go straight to my bedroom, knowing that she'll be there, waiting for me. My fascination with her has twisted and morphed over the past few months into a full-blown obsession. She is my life now. I live and breathe only for her. And if I were to lose her in some way, I would find a way to leave this earth, because I wouldn't be able to bear an existence without her.

When I walk into the room, there she is — my reason for living — lying on her stomach, reading a book with her hair pulled on top of her head in a messy knot. My shirt that she's wearing is riding up her thighs, exposing the bottom of her ass cheeks. And I have an almost overwhelming urge to sink my teeth into them.

But when she looks up at me, her eyes widen with shock. "What happened?" she asks, her voice trilling with anxiety.

I can only imagine seeing myself through her eyes right now — shirtless, covered in blood with a freshly sewn wound on my shoulder. I must be quite the fucking sight.

"I was shot," I explain as my cock presses painfully against the zipper of my pants. *Dios mío*, Aria has no idea what is about to happen to her. I feel like a beast ready to be unleashed; ready to ravage her until she begs for mercy. When I take a step towards her, Aria gets on her knees and holds her hands up in surrender.

"Mateo," she whispers, my name dying on her bee-stung lips.

I stalk over to her and stand at the foot of the bed. "You have been running through my mind for days, *mi pequeña cautiva*." *My little captive*. And that's exactly what she is. What she'll always be, because I will die before I ever set her free.

"You're hurt," she softly protests.

I chuckle darkly at her weak excuses as I tower over her. God, she looks so young and innocent on her knees like this. "Aria, I haven't seen, touched, licked, or fucked you in five days. Nothing on this earth could stop me or keep me away from you." I grip her chin in my hands and stare into those honey-colored eyes that I've been fantasizing about all week. "Tell me you haven't thought about me at all while I was gone. Tell me you haven't thought about my mouth between your legs and my cock inside of your wet pussy. Tell me, Aria, and I'll leave you alone."

She opens her mouth, but nothing comes out but a disgruntled groan. Ah, so my little captive did think about me. Thought naughty things about me too. I wonder if she touched her perfect, pink pussy while thinking those thoughts? *Fuck*. Just picturing her touching herself makes my cock turn into pure steel.

“Lose the shirt,” I command forcefully.

She cocks a brow, and I expect her to argue, but she does what I say. She’s completely naked, having decided to forgo panties as well. I swallow hard. “Fuck, you really were waiting for me to come home today, weren’t you, *corazón*?” I told Ignacio to let her know hours ago that I would be home, wanting her ready for me. But nothing could have prepared her for what is about to happen.

Aria gives me a shaky nod.

“Lay down and spread your legs. I want to see what’s mine,” I instruct her.

I can see the apprehension in her gaze, but her chest rises and falls with rapid breaths and her pupils are blown. This is turning her on already. She hesitates but eventually obeys me. I watch with rapt interest as she lies down on her back and slowly spreads her legs. My god, she’s fucking beautiful.

“Touch my pussy for me,” I demand possessively. “I want to watch you.”

Her hand is practically trembling as she skates it over her flat stomach and down to her shaved mound. Her pointer finger dips between her folds, and the moment she finds her clit, her mouth opens up into the perfect O.

My cock throbs inside my pants, begging to be released. Popping open my button, I tug my zipper down and slip out of my restraining clothes. Naked, I kneel on the bed before her, watching as she touches herself.

Her eyes move to my shoulder and then back to my eyes. “Who...who shot you?” she asks breathlessly.

“A rival cartel boss,” I explain. “He shot at me first.”

“Did you kill him?”

I cock a brow at her, wondering if this conversation is turning her on or off. “Yes, I killed him,” I tell her truthfully.

“Good,” she whispers, her fingers working her clit harder. And then she releases the sweetest fucking moan I’ve ever heard in my life.

So she is turned on by the violence. Fuck, she's going to be the death of me. "I need to taste you," I murmur before gripping her ankle and dragging her down the length of the bed closer to me. And then I lift her hips, pulling her sweet pussy to my mouth while I lick, taste, suck, bite and nibble on her. I've been craving her taste for days, and I intend on getting my fill of her.

Her moans turn to whimpers and then screams as I ravage her with my mouth and tongue. There isn't an inch of her pussy or ass that I leave untouched. Fuck, I've missed her body, her scent, her taste. But most of all, I missed her. Even though I enjoy fucking Aria, since it feels like nirvana every single damn time, I missed her company more than anything while I was gone. I missed the looks she always gives me with what can only be described as the worst poker face in the world. I can always tell what's going on in that mind of hers with a single look or glance. I missed the way she looks fresh out of a shower with no makeup on and her hair undone. I missed the way she throws invisible daggers in my direction whenever I piss her off and the smile on her face that's more beautiful than the rising sun.

When Aria's thighs begin to shake, I stop my ministrations. I want to feel her come around my cock. No, I *need* to feel it. It's like a craving that's so strong I could never fight it. I would never want to. She's my obsession, a bad fucking habit, and I only want more of her. Damn the consequences.

I toss her down on the bed, my shoulder throbbing. Fuck, I must have pulled some of the stitches out already. I quickly run my hand over the sore spot; and when I pull away, my palm is covered in fresh blood. Aria watches as I reach down and fist my cock. I expect her to cringe or shy away, but I think even this is turning her on. And now I know that she was made for me.

I stroke my cock and let out a low growl while she plays with her clit once more. I can tell she's getting close again by the sounds she's making. "Don't you dare come, Aria. I want to feel you come on my cock," I demand.

She slows down her ministrations, practically pouting. She really thought I was going to let her get herself off when I've been thinking about her tight little cunt milking my cock for five days straight? I don't fucking think so.

Hovering over her, I grip her delicate neck with my bloody hand. I squeeze gently, testing her, loving the feel of her erratic pulse under my thumb. Her eyes grow wide, but she doesn't try to escape. And when I pull away, the bloody handprint left behind with my unique fingerprints marring her beautiful skin does things to me. I marked her as mine. *Only mine*. And suddenly, I want to bathe her in my blood. "Hands on the bedframe," I instruct her.

She slowly raises her arms above her and grips the metal bars. I stare down at her beautiful body. Gripping my cock, I seek her entrance and enter her. She moans loudly as I fully seat myself inside of her wet channel. Her body trembles under me as she works to take all of me. I give her a moment to adjust to me before I'm moving inside of her. I can't hold back. Not now. I want her too badly.

My hand wraps around her neck as I stare into her eyes. There are so many things running inside of my mind right now. So many things I want to say to her. But the only thing that actually comes out of my mouth is, "You're mine, Aria." Okay, so not really romantic, but I'm not exactly the type.

I stare down at our connection, watching my cock move in and out of her tight pussy, stretching and filling her to the brim. "*Dios mío*, that's so fucking hot," I rasp. Pressing my chest against hers, my blood coats her skin as I flex my hips, fucking her hard. Her hands strain to keep hold of the bars as she moans loudly.

Her thighs clench and quiver around me, her liquid heat coating my length as I pound into her with vicious, unforgiving thrusts, eliciting the sweetest sounds from her throat. She loves the way I fuck her, and I'm happy to give her what she wants. What she desperately craves.

We fuck like animals, time having no place here as my blood coats our skin and the bedsheets. Aria begs me to let her come, and I realize this is my new favorite thing. Making her beg for it does something to me. Having control over her has the beast inside me rearing its ugly head. I make her beg until her voice is hoarse and her entire body is trembling uncontrollably. I edge her to the point of no return until finally I demand, "Come for me, Aria."

A scream tears from her throat as she ultimately lets go, her body succumbing to the unsurmountable buildup of pleasure that I've been giving her. Sobs wrack her body as her cunt grips my cock so tightly, I

wonder if it will leave behind bruises. Hot tears leak down her cheeks, and I'm quick to lick them away, savoring the salty taste. "Cry for me, Aria. You're so fucking pretty when you cry," I praise her.

I bury myself deep inside of her and allow myself to give in to my own bliss. My balls tighten up as the pleasure hits the back of my spine, traveling all the way up my body. I shiver as my orgasm takes over, every nerve ending firing all at once. I roar with my release, flexing my hips and giving her all of me, as I fill her up to the brim with my seed.

I know it's risky as hell, especially when she was asking me about birth control before I left for my trip. But when I think about her belly swollen with my child, it unleashes a different kind of beast inside of me. I want to see that. No, I *need* to see it. I root myself inside of her, staying there, making sure she gets every single drop as her sweet, tight pussy grips me hard, pulling my cum right in.

Out of breath, I slowly pull out of her and collapse onto the bed beside her. I gather her into my arms, her head resting on my heaving chest. "Mine. You're mine," I murmur. Swallowing hard, I then confess, "And I'm yours."

She lifts her head and stares at me, an indecipherable expression on her face. "You're mine," she agrees.

A smile graces her lips then, and she suddenly looks ethereal to me. Too beautiful to be real. And I realize in that moment what a lucky bastard I am to have found her in this fucked-up world. Our meeting wasn't conventional by any means, but we still managed to find each other. Call it fate, call it whatever, but I'm never going to let her go. We belong together. In this life and the next. I'd gladly follow her into the afterlife and make her mine all over again until the end of time.

CHAPTER 48



Aria

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up to the sound of voices shouting in the hallway outside of the door. I blink, taking in my surroundings; confused at first but then quickly remembering last night. Mateo and I stayed in a spare bedroom, because his bedroom... Well, let's just say things got a little messy.

The voices get louder, drawing my attention, and I can hear Mateo arguing in Spanish with a woman. Covering myself modestly with a sheet, I wrap it around myself and get out of bed. I need to find out what's going on.

Just then, the door opens and Mateo peeks in. When he sees that I'm decent, he swings open the door wide and says with a dramatic wave of his hand, "See, I told you. Aria is alive and well."

Esmeralda peers into the room and sighs dramatically with relief when her eyes land on me. She makes the sign of the cross against her chest and says something in Spanish while looking up towards the heavens.

"When Esmeralda changed the bedsheets in our room this morning, she got it in her head that I murdered you last night. You know, because of all the blood," Mateo says with a roguish grin. "She didn't believe me when I said you were all right." He turns to her. "But now you see that she's fine."

Esmeralda glares at Mateo before looking at me with a much softer but worried look. “Hungry?” she asks.

I give her an emphatic nod.

She says something quickly in Spanish to Mateo and then disappears down the hall. Mateo walks into the room and closes the door behind him. “She’s going to make us a big breakfast.”

“So, we’re celebrating the fact that you didn’t murder me in my sleep last night?” I ask him sarcastically.

“Basically,” he answers with a chuckle.

I stare at his shoulder. It looks way better than it did last night with a fresh bandage. “The doctor stitched it back up?” I ask.

He nods. “A few minutes ago. Told me to take it easy this time.”

“Are you going to listen to him?” I question with a cocked brow.

“Of course not,” he answers before stalking towards me like a lion would with its prey. He’s the ultimate predator, but I wouldn’t have it any other way. He tackles me onto the bed, making me yelp in surprise.

“Mateo, your shoulder!” I protest as he places kisses down my neck and over my chest.

“I pay him a lot of money. The bastard can sew it up again later,” he says gruffly before he trails his hot, wet mouth down my stomach. And when his tongue sweeps over my slit, all former protests quickly die in my throat.

CHAPTER 49



Mateo

AFTER ANOTHER ROMP in the sack and a nice, long, hot shower, we finally made our way down to breakfast. And Esmeralda wasn't kidding when she said she was making us a big breakfast. The spread is immaculate, including all of our favorites and then some.

We eat, talk and laugh over the meal, and for a minute, I forget who I am. Aria always makes me feel...normal. Like we could be just a normal couple doing mundane things like having breakfast together without a care in the world.

But that feeling is short-lived, however, when my cell phone suddenly rings. When I see my uncle's name come up on the caller ID, I frown. "Give me two minutes," I tell Aria before disappearing outside.

It's early afternoon, and the sun is beaming down. It hits me full force as I answer the call. "Domingo."

"Mateo, how are you this morning?"

"Fine," I grumble. I hate when he tries to make small talk. He knows I like to get straight to the point and not beat around the fucking bush.

"There's a deal here in Cali that needs your attention."

I swipe my hand down my face and glance back at the compound. I can see Aria through the window, and it hurts my soul to think I have to leave

her again so soon. Those five days away from her almost killed me. “Right now?” I growl. “I just got home from a trip.”

“It will only be for a few days. Four at most,” he says. When I hesitate again, he then adds, “Hell, bring your whore with you, if you want.”

It takes everything in me to not throw my cell phone. Instead, I grip it tightly in my hand until I hear an audible *crack*. “She’s not a whore. And she’s not involved in our business,” I explain.

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” he says quickly. “Aria can stay at the mansion under guard while we conduct said business,” he offers in an attempt to pacify me.

I pause. “I’ll think about it.”

My uncle chuckles on the other end of the line. “I think we both know you’ve already decided.” And then he ends the call.

When I walk back into the kitchen, I can hear the melodic sound of Aria’s laugh as she jokes around with Esmeralda. The thought of leaving her so soon for almost another week tears me up inside.

Aria’s attention turns to me, and the smile on her face quickly drops. “What’s wrong?” she asks, the little crease between her brows making her look cute and fuckable.

“My uncle needs me to go to California.” And then, without second-guessing my decision, I blurt out, “And I would like for you to come with me.”

Aria’s gaze meets mine in surprise. But I can practically hear the gears turning inside that pretty, little head of hers, as she thinks about what a trip to the States could mean for her. Even after everything we’ve shared and all of our time together, she still wants to go home. Not that I can blame her after everything that’s happened and what she’s gone through...but the thought of losing her does strange things to me. It feels like a possessive beast deep within me is rising to the surface, latching its long claws into Aria before dragging her into the deep, dark depths of my world, claiming her, and refusing to let go.

She’s mine.

She’ll always be mine.

And I’ll never let anyone take her from me.

“Maybe...maybe I could visit my family,” she offers, her voice just above a whisper and her eyes so full of optimism.

“Visit or go home permanently?” I ask, barely containing my anger. She would leave me so easily? Never looking back? It’s not like I could simply walk into the front door of her parents’ house and present their daughter, who I’ve been holding captive for the past several months. I would probably be shot dead on the spot. But I’m sure Aria is not thinking about that. She’s only thinking about herself and being reunited with her family.

“Mateo,” she starts, but I don’t let her finish.

I stand up, fuming. “We’re going to California, but under no circumstances will you see or have any contact with your family,” I snap in a heated growl.

Aria’s face instantly falls, her eyes glittering with unshed tears.

I leave the kitchen after that, busying myself with work in my office for hours. I try to do anything and everything to distract myself from my little captive, but my thoughts always go back to Aria — her hopeful face when she thought she might be able to see her family — and it guts me all over again.

I stay away for as long as I physically can before I go to bed late that night. Aria is curled up on her side of the bed in one of my shirts. She’s pretending to sleep, but I can hear the occasional snuffle, letting me know that she’s been crying.

I lay there for a while, telling myself to just go to sleep and not comfort her. But my dark heart somehow overtakes my logic, and I find myself reaching for her. I pull her into my arms and hold her as she cries. She misses her family. I understand that more than most people. But I can’t let her go.

I pull back and stare down at her. Tears fill her eyes, the amber shining like melted honey as she looks up at me. In that moment, she’s the most beautiful creature I’ve ever seen in my life.

“You know what your tears do to me,” I tell her before my mouth crashes down on hers. I kiss her until her whimpers turn into soft moans. And when I slide into her wet channel, I lick away the salty tears on her face and whisper beautiful words to her in my native tongue. I take my time fucking her. She reaches the precipice of orgasm several times before I wean her off, not allowing her to tip over the threshold just yet. I want to savor this moment with her. I want to keep her on the edge until she’s mindless with lust under me. Until I’m the only thought on her mind. Until only the two of us exist in this fucked-up world.

We fuck slow, like time has no value here in this room. Our lips explore each other's mouths and necks and chests. I memorize every curve of her body with my hands. She touches my scars, and I let her. Her soft touch and kisses against my rough skin hidden under tattoos feel like nirvana, like she's somehow healing me from within.

And when the buildup of pleasure becomes almost too much, I stare down at her beautiful face. "Tell me you're mine, Aria. I need to hear the words," I beg. I've never needed something so badly before in my fucking life.

"I'm yours," she whispers just before a violent shudder rocks her body. And then she's coming, her tiny nails carving crescent moons into my skin as she cries out the sweetest sounds.

Her pussy milks my cock, squeezing so tightly that I can't resist any longer and I give in to my orgasm. I chant her name like a benediction as I rock in and out of her slowly, making her take every inch of me until I'm completely and utterly spent. My head feels like it's going to split in half from the insane amount of pleasure I just overloaded my body with. My lungs ache as I try to catch my breath as my heart beats like an angry war drum inside of my chest.

Sex has never felt like this with anyone before. Aria is different. She completes me somehow. It's like I was living in a black and white world before her, and suddenly my entire life is a myriad of vibrant colors. I can't remember ever smiling before her, ever having a happy moment before her, ever...loving anyone else before her.

And I do. I love her, more than I ever thought possible. Just the thought of confessing that out loud; however, feels like falling out of a plane without a parachute. Because if she wouldn't say the words back, if she didn't confess the same back to me, I would want to do just that — take a header off a tall building without looking back. I couldn't bear her rejection, and so I gently pull out of her and don't tell her about a single thought in my fucked-up head.

Aria cuddles into my arms as we lay there in comfortable silence. And just before she falls asleep, I tell her, "You can call your family when we're in California. Hell, maybe we can even arrange a video call." My uncle has the technology to make that happen. And if it's going to make her happy, well then, I'll fucking do it.

I can feel her smile against my chest. “Thank you, Mateo,” she whispers.

Kissing the top of her head, I pull her impossibly closer to me. My hands begin to tremble as a horrible thought hits me hard in that moment. This could very well be the beginning of the end for us, but I refuse to let her go without a fight.

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CHAPTER 50



Aria

THE PLANE RIDE to California is nerve-wracking, to say the least. Mateo has been in a horrible mood all morning, and now he's pacing the aisle of the small private jet, speaking in Spanish on the phone. Well, more like shouting in Spanish on the phone.

He's been on edge ever since he told me he wanted me to go to California with him...and ever since he told me I could call my family. Maybe even a video call. That's all I've been able to focus on since the words left his mouth. Seeing my family, even if they're thousands of miles away, would mean everything to me. I just want to see them, talk to them, and let them know that I'm okay now. My last phone conversation with my brother was at a very rough point in my life, and I want to let them know that things are better so that they aren't in constant worry about me. They need to know that even though Mateo bought me from an auction, he saved me from an even more horrible fate, and I've grown to love him.

My eyes widen at my inner thoughts, and they suddenly flicker to the man responsible for them.

Mateo stops pacing immediately, and his eyes fixate on me. He holds the phone away from his ear and asks softly, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I say quickly, shaking my head and desperately trying to get rid of those sudden, clearly insane thoughts.

After a beat, Mateo resumes his conversation, turning his back on me. I shrink down in my seat, my face flaming hot. I've never been in love before, but is this what it feels like? Is this what it's supposed to be like?

Probably not considering our beginning. But just the thought of losing Mateo or something happening to him destroys me beyond repair. And I know he would protect me at all costs, even with his very own life since he's proved that time and time again to me. So, if that isn't love, then what is?

My thoughts drift to Renato. Did I ever love him? Sure, we shared some great memories and a friendship that will last forever, but I now know that I never felt this kind of deep connection with him. He was always there. A safe option. But I definitely didn't love him as more than a friend. And that realization makes me feel significantly better; because up until now, I always felt like deep down I was betraying him somehow.

Now all I feel is lighter, like a huge burden has been lifted from my shoulders. Everything has changed, and Renato deserves to know the truth. I know someday I'll have to make him understand that our friendship can never be more than just that — a friendship. I just hope I don't end up hurting him or losing him.

I'm struggling with my inner thoughts when Mateo ends his phone call and comes to sit down next to me. He takes my hand in his and places his lips on my palm. "My uncle's men are picking us up at the airport. We won't be going through security or anything like that."

Just like when we boarded the plane, everything was done in secrecy. I don't know how much power Mateo holds in the U.S., but I know he's very powerful in Mexico. Maybe his uncle is pulling the strings in California.

"Don't worry, Aria. Everything will be fine." He kisses my hand again before dragging it into his lap.

He thinks I'm nervous about the flight and about security when we land. He has no idea about my internal struggle, and I want to keep it that way. I'm not worried about what will happen in California, because I know he'll take care of everything. That's just what Mateo does.

"How much longer?" I question.

His eyes are glued to his phone in his free hand, and he flips through the screens with his thumb. "An hour or so," he answers, distracted. He's been tense ever since we woke up this morning, and I know just what he needs to relieve some of that stress.

I glance down through the rows of seats. Ignacio is still sleeping, snoring loudly in the back row. My fingertips twitch in Mateo's lap. He barely acknowledges me, too engrossed in whatever is happening on his phone. Feeling bold, I graze my hand over the bulge in his pants. That gets his attention.

His dark eyes snap to mine. "Don't awaken the beast unless you intend on entertaining him, *mi pequeña cautiva*," he warns, his voice an octave deeper than normal.

My little captive. Heat instantly pools between my thighs. It turns me on so much when he calls me that.

When I casually brush over *the beast* again, Mateo groans low in his throat. "Fuck, you're so bad. It turns me on." He leans out the aisle and glances down at a sleeping Ignacio. "Can you be quiet?" he asks, focusing his attention back to me.

I bite my lip, nodding and shaking my head because I'm not so sure.

With a salacious grin, Mateo tells me, "Fuck, I don't even care if we wake him up at this point. I need to be inside of you." He tosses his phone into an empty seat and pats his lap with his large hand. "Come here, *corazón*."

I scramble out of my seat, and that earns me a hearty laugh from Mateo. "So eager. So horny. Fuck, Aria, you were made for me, weren't you?" He pulls me into his lap, pressing my backside against his growing hard-on. "See what you do to me, baby?" he whispers into my ear, his tongue licking around the shell of my ear.

I nod, practically panting at this point and clearly incapable of speech.

His right hand grabs my breast while his left hand travels under the skirt of my dress. The moment he finds my hot, wet core, I let out a loud moan.

"I thought you were going to be quiet?" he says with a soft chuckle.

I press my lips shut and whimper when he continues his ministrations. God, he's so talented with his hands, playing me like a finely tuned instrument only he knows how to control.

My ass grinds against his erection, and he grunts against my neck. "I was just going to make this about you, but you're making it very *hard* for me to concentrate on that, Aria," he says in a dark tone.

"I need you, Mateo," I beg. I don't know what's been going on with me lately, but it's like I can't get enough of him. This past week I've turned into some kind of nympho. Maybe I'm getting my period soon or something and

my hormones are all out of whack. And when I add on, "Please," that is his breaking point.

One second, I'm in his lap; and the next, we're both standing, and he's suddenly bending me over the armrest of an aisle seat. He unceremoniously lifts my dress and pulls my thong to the side. I feel his thick head move between my folds, caressing my wet slit, up and down, up and down, teasing me, testing me. I shift my hips backwards, wanting him to enter me, but he simply *tsks* at me and continues to tease, driving me to the brink of insanity.

"Look how wet you are for me, Aria. It's running down your thighs," he says in awe.

In any other circumstance with any other man, I would probably feel embarrassed or ashamed, but I know that Mateo likes it; that it turns him on.

He teases me, running his crown up and down the length of my slit until I cry out in frustration. I hear his dark chuckle right before he eases an inch of his dick inside of me. He rocks in and out of me shallowly, causing my nerve endings to fire all at once. I almost orgasm just from that, but he quickly stops moving altogether. "Not yet," he warns.

Trembling, I grip the seat and hang on for dear life. It's going to take everything in me not to tumble over that precarious edge, but I know it will be worth it in the end. Every time he makes me wait, the orgasm I experience is a thousand times stronger and mind-blowing.

He eases another inch inside of me before withdrawing, and I want to scream in frustration. Instead, I bite my lip, not wanting to disappoint Mateo or wake up Ignacio. He continues the torturous rhythm until I'm a panting mess.

"Please," I plead hoarsely, unable to hold back any longer.

"Did you ever think you'd be begging for your captor's dick, Aria?" he questions, and his dirty words have my mind spinning.

"Please, Mateo. Please fuck me," I beg in a whisper-yell.

"You've been such a good girl," he says, gripping my hips in his strong hands. "I'm going to give you exactly what you've been craving. What you've been begging for." And then he enters me and doesn't stop until he reaches the hilt.

My mouth opens on a silent scream, and I can't even stop the rush of pleasure that courses through my veins. He fucks me fast and hard, and I

ride out the violent orgasm, trying desperately not to cry out. I bite my bottom lip so hard I taste blood. The pleasure is indescribable, just like I knew it would be. I'm a weak, boneless mess by the time I reach the end of the roller coaster ride I was just on when Mateo suddenly demands, "Again."

I mumble incoherent excuses, feeling too drained, but then I feel his fingertips stroking my throbbing clit, and my body awakens to his magic touch. Tears fill my eyes as the pleasure begins to rapidly build inside of me once more.

Suddenly, Mateo pulls out of me and returns to his seat. He's still dressed in his suit, but his pants are undone and pulled down with his boxers over his hips, his huge cock jutting up towards his abs. "Come here, *corazón*," he tells me, watching me carefully through hooded eyes.

I walk over to him on unsteady legs, my breathing ragged as I straddle his lap. He grips his cock, lining it up with my entrance before pulling me down onto it, effectively impaling me. My head falls back as a loud groan escapes my throat and my thighs tremble as they clench around him.

"Ride me, Aria," he commands. And then his free hand grips the back of my neck, forcing me to look at him. "Eyes on me. I want to see you come." His thumb skates over my bloody lip before he sucks the digit into his mouth. "Every part of you tastes like mine," he whispers darkly before capturing my mouth with his.

His tongue presses up against my lips, demanding access, which I gladly give him. He devours me then as I ride him, my legs quivering and my inner walls gripping him like a vice, not wanting to let go.

He breaks the kiss, panting as his left hand grips my hip. "You take my dick like such a good little girl," he praises me. "So tight. So wet," he groans. His pupils are blown as he stares into my eyes, and we share this indescribable connection in that moment, neither of us talking, both of us moving as one.

"I..." I begin, but the words quickly die in my throat. I want to tell him how I feel, how I *really* feel, but I'm scared. Terrified of his reaction, of what he might say in return. Most of all, I'm afraid that he won't return my affection. We never talk about the future or what is really going on between us, and now isn't exactly the right time to have this conversation...but soon. Soon we'll have to discuss everything. Right now, I just want to focus on the present and the immeasurable amount of pleasure that he is wringing

from my body. Gripping his muscular shoulders, I ride his cock like my life depends on it, and the tension slowly melts away, giving way to new feelings, new emotions.

“Fuck, Aria,” he hisses. His right palm slaps my ass before gripping it, hard. “Your body was made for sinning. Made just for me,” he tells me before his mouth finds my neck, kissing and biting and licking my heated skin. “I know you’re close. I can tell by the way your pretty, little cunt is gripping my cock. Come for me, *mi pequeña cautiva*.”

His dirty words are my undoing, and I shatter, my orgasm washing over me with violent crescendos. His hand wraps around my throat, forcing me to look into his eyes as I come. He whispers to me in his native tongue as I detonate around him. My thighs quiver uncontrollably, and I bite my sore lip again so that I don’t scream out.

“*Voy a mantenerte para siempre*,” Mateo groans before he stills under me. He pumps his hips once, twice, three times before shuddering through a powerful orgasm. He pulls me close to him, cradling me against his chest and filling me up with his release.

We stay like that for a long time in each other’s arms, our heartbeats racing one another, until we finally come down from the high and realize we’re on a plane...and we’re not alone. Thankfully, Ignacio is still snoring away in the back of the plane when we part and start fixing our clothes.

“I’m going to go clean up in the bathroom,” I say before walking up the aisle. When I pass by Ignacio, he suddenly stirs and wakes, yawning and stretching. I shake my head in amusement. My footsteps woke him up...and not the loud fucking that occurred just moments earlier.

“What did I miss?” he asks.

I turn and stare at Mateo as he answers with, “Some, uh, in-flight entertainment.”

Ignacio glances around the plane, curiosity etching his features. “Yeah? Was it any good?”

“Oh, yes. It was excellent,” Mateo tells him before glancing up at me and winking.

CHAPTER 51



Mateo

THE PLANE TOUCHES down on U.S. soil without incident. We're immediately escorted from the tarmac into a private car and are on our way to my uncle's home within the matter of a few minutes. The drive won't be long; I've made it many times before.

Aria stares out the window, and she's practically buzzing with curiosity and nervousness. If Ignacio wasn't seated across from me, I would pull her into my lap and have my way with her again. Even though I was inside of her less than an hour ago, I want her again. I always want her. She's like a bad habit I just can't kick, but, fuck, I don't know that I want to. I could happily be addicted to her for the rest of my life with no regrets.

When we were fucking earlier, she started to say something. I think I know exactly what she was going to say — the same thing I've been longing to say to her, but I don't know if either one of us is ready for that right now. Maybe when we get home.

Home?

Closing my eyes for a moment, I release a steady breath. I haven't had a place to call home in a long time, but, yes, I suppose I do consider my compound precisely that now that Aria is part of it.

Everything I'm feeling with her needs to be put on hold; however, until we're safely back in Mexico. When I'm at my uncle's place, I need to wear

my usual, stoic mask and be cautious of my surroundings at all times. It's even more crucial that I'm on constant guard this time around since Aria is with me.

Once we reach my uncle's compound and are checked in with security, I lead Aria straight to his office. I want to get the phone call with her family out of the way so that she is not thinking about it when I'm sinking my cock inside of her later. Even though this is a business trip, nothing will stop me from fucking my little captive while she's here with me.

Moreover, I don't want either one of us distracted about the call. I need us both to be focused, alert and on guard at all times.

I knock on the door to Domingo's office, and he shouts for us to enter. "*Buenas tardes*," he says with a huge smile on his face.

"*Buenas tardes*."

"How was the trip?" he asks.

"Good. Best plane ride I've ever had," I say, squeezing Aria's hand gently in my hand.

I hear her breath hitching in the back of her throat, and I have to cough to mask a chuckle.

"I see," my uncle says, suspiciously eyeing us both. "I had the staff make up your usual room on the second floor," he informs me. "They should be taking your suitcases there now if you want to freshen up before our meeting later," he offers.

"Actually, there is one thing I wanted to discuss first," I tell him before clearing my throat. "Perhaps you have a secure line we could place a call or maybe even a video call to Aria's family on?" I inquire.

He seems flustered by my question. He stalls for a few moments, making a big show of clipping the end off a cigar and lighting it up before answering with a stern, "No."

Aria shifts uncomfortably next to me, and I lean towards my uncle with a discerning gaze. "She wouldn't be long, if that's what you're worried about. Two minutes tops. She just wants to let them know that she's all right."

"We've been having trouble with the satellite line lately. I don't trust it," he says, and I can't tell if he's lying or not. I trust my uncle...to an extent. But over the years, that trust has been slowly waning. At one point, I trusted him with everything, even my life. But I'm no longer the naïve, little boy he found on the brink of death that horrific day.

“Maybe Ignacio could take a look at it,” I press.

“I’m assuming you obtained Aria in not so legal ways since she’s so desperate to contact her family,” he presses back. “I already have the FBI breathing down my neck. I don’t need any more reasons for them to investigate my compound.”

“Fair enough,” I concede, not wanting to further argue on the matter, especially since I can tell the whole conversation is making Aria nervous. I gently squeeze her hand reassuringly. “We’ll go to our room, and I’ll be down later for the meeting,” I tell him before leaving the room and taking Aria with me.

Once we’re in my room on the second floor, I turn to Aria and tell her, “We’ll figure out something when we’re home.”

“Home?” she questions. “Oh right. Back in Mexico,” she corrects herself.

Even she’s struggling with the prospect of my compound being our home. Maybe I could build a separate house on the land, a place for just her and me. It would have to be beautiful, something filled with books and art and all the things she likes, including a huge walk-in closet full of designer clothes. Shaking my head, I almost chide myself for being fucking pussy-whipped, but then I decide I don’t give a single fuck. I would give Aria the entire universe, all the stars and the moon if I could and not regret it for a fucking moment, because I know that she deserves it and so much more.

“It’s okay if your uncle doesn’t want me to call. I understand,” she says softly, but I can hear the sadness in her voice.

Putting my finger under her chin, I force her gaze to mine. “As soon as we’re home, I’ll work something out.” The word comes easier to me now. And while that should scare me, it doesn’t. I like considering any place Aria is in my home.

Gently, I tuck a strand of her chestnut brown hair behind her ear. A smile graces her lips then, and it causes my cold, dead heart to begin beating again. It beats for her. Only her.

CHAPTER 52



Mateo

THE NEXT DAY, Domingo sends Ignacio and I to take care of some business matters. He's buying some new docks and buildings to support our import and export business side of things. But honestly, it all feels trivial, like busy work. And I don't like leaving Aria behind, especially with my uncle milling about. I don't think he would touch Aria, and I would hope he would protect her in my absence. But I still feel something in my gut that's telling me to be careful. And my gut is never wrong.

"What the fuck are we even doing here?" Ignacio asks, and I can't say the thought hasn't crossed my mind several times since we arrived.

"Not sure. Let's just get this over with," I tell him before looking over the contract one last time before applying my John Hancock to the bottom.

The owner made us tour the buildings and docks for hours only to have us come in for an early lunch to go over some contracts. My uncle definitely could have handled this, and I can't seem to find a logical reason as to why he needed us to do it.

When I get back to his place, I'm going to question his motives. There must be an underlying reason why he wanted me here, and I know it wasn't to spend quality time with his nephew. My uncle and I aren't that type of family. We tolerate each other, at best.

I push the signed contract across the table towards the owner. "We done here?" I grind out.

He scratches his bald head and asks with a crooked grin, "You in a hurry all of a sudden?"

My palms itch with the need to shoot that fucking grin off of his face. I want to get the hell out of here and go back to the compound. I don't like knowing that Aria is alone. Even though she'll be under constant guard while I'm gone, I still worry. I'll only feel better when she's in my sight and in my arms.

"Shit," Ignacio says as he looks down at his cell phone, drawing my attention to him. "Another explosion in one of our warehouses," he informs me.

"*Que mierda?*" I mutter under my breath. The timing couldn't be worse.

"Suspicious," Ignacio says with a severe look on his face.

"Very," I agree. I've never had an explosion in one of my warehouses since I started my cartel business. And now I've had two in the span of a week? Something is not adding up, and it's making this whole trip feel... wrong. "Go back home early. Find out what's going on," I tell him.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Aria and I will fly back tomorrow," I explain.

"Alright. Whatever you say, boss," Ignacio says before packing up his stuff. "Call me if anything happens," he says, giving me a pointed look.

Even he is feeling like something is amiss, and it makes my anxiety grow. Standing, I button my suit jacket and say goodbye to the owner.

The drive to my uncle's place feels like it takes forever. I'm about two feet in the door when I hear a group of men whispering about a hot woman on the beach. Thinking nothing of it, I keep walking until I hear one of the guards say, "You know, they say the short girls have the deepest pussies. I'd like to find out if that's true."

Are they talking about Aria? Curiosity has me going to the window. Hoping, for their sake, that I'm wrong, I look out over the beach. And that's when I see her.

Aria is lying on a towel in a bikini that looks like it was made two sizes too small for her body.

"I bet you a hundred dollars I could make that little bitch moan my name in five seconds."

“Bullshit. Your little dick wouldn’t make that bitch moan,” another says with a loud laugh.

“Little? Have you seen the size of my *cojones*?” he jokes.

“Who cares about the size of your balls?” one retorts. “She’s only gonna care about the size of your cock when you’re laying the pipe!” he calls out.

The four of them are laughing, but all that laughter stops the moment I step into the room. “Something funny, gentlemen?” I ask.

“No, sir,” the youngest one says. “We were just talking about the woman on the beach.”

“Ah. Yes. Funny thing about her.” I glance around the room, meeting all of their nervous stares one by one before I tell them, “That’s my girlfriend.” Aria and I have never staked claim on each other in the sense of putting titles on our relationship, but she’s the closest thing to a girlfriend I’ve ever had. And I must admit it feels good calling her that.

After I drop that little bombshell, you could fucking hear a pin drop by how silent the room gets. No more joking. No more laughter. Just nervous glances and clearing of throats.

If they were my men, I would have killed them all. Fortunately, for them, they don’t work for me. And I can’t go into my uncle’s house and take out his security detail without a better reason than because I wanted to. But that doesn’t mean I can’t teach them a very valuable lesson.

“So, which one of you said you could make her moan your name in five seconds?” I question.

One of them steps forward. “I’m sorry, Mr. Navarro,” he spits out. “I didn’t mean —.”

Pulling out my Glock, I shoot him in the shoulder. It’s merely a flesh wound, but it will hurt like hell and teach him some fucking manners.

The man screams in pain as he cradles his fucked-up arm.

The rest of the guards stand there in shock with their mouths hanging open as they look upon their now wounded colleague.

“Now, did anyone else want to talk about my girlfriend out there?” I ask.

They all shake their heads.

“Good,” I say with a wicked grin spreading across my face. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, I have an urgent matter to address.” Then, I walk out of the room and make my way towards the beach.

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CHAPTER 53



Aria

I'M LYING ON the beach just minding my own business when a huge shadow engulfs the sun I was trying to bask in. Squinting, I look up and see Mateo standing above me with a pissed off look on his face.

"What the fuck are you wearing?" he growls.

Rolling my eyes, I spit out, "A bathing suit." Of course, I knew Mateo would be upset by the tiny bikini, but I'm not letting him ruin my time outside. I haven't so much as felt the sun on my skin in months since he's been keeping me under lock and key. This is my one day I get to do something like this, and you better believe I'm going to enjoy it. Consequences be damned. I'll deal with his wrath later after I'm tan and full of vitamin D that I've been desperately deprived of.

"Where did you get it?" he demands.

"One of the maids let me borrow it." When he doesn't budge, I sigh. "It's just a bathing suit, Mateo," I huff. "I am on the beach after all." I'm so close to rolling my eyes at him again, but I refrain at the very last second because the dark and stony cold look on his face is frightening.

A muscle jumps along his locked jaw. "Your smart, little mouth is going to get you in trouble, Aria," he warns before running a thumb over his bottom lip, stewing in his anger. "I overheard some of my uncle's guards

talking about you and your choice of bathing suit. I almost scooped out their fucking eyes with a spoon and cut out their tongues.”

“So, why didn’t you?” I ask boldly.

“What?”

I clearly caught him off-guard for once. “Why didn’t you scoop out their eyes and cut out their tongues?” I ask. I’m sure he’s killed men for less.

“Because they aren’t my men. It would be disrespectful to my uncle, taking out some of his top men in his own home.” His gaze darkens as he adds with a smirk, “I did shoot one in the shoulder, though. He was bragging about how he thought he could make you moan his name in five seconds.”

I’m not sure if he’s telling the truth or not, but then I decide that I don’t want to know. Maybe I’ve just become so accustomed to his violence that it just doesn’t faze me anymore. “Can you move, please?” I ask. “You’re blocking the sun that I was enjoying.” I lie back down on the towel and close my eyes, effectively shutting him out.

“Run, Aria,” he says in a deep whisper.

“What?” I ask, thinking I must have misheard him somehow.

“Run. And you better pray I don’t catch you, *mi pequeña cautiva*.”

My eyes snap open, and I stare up at him. He’s serious. Dead serious. I’m about to say something sarcastic, but my fight or flight senses suddenly catch up to my brain. Scrambling to my feet, I take off running down the beach.

It’s a private beach, and there are no other people down here, but I know Domingo has his men stationed around the perimeter. They’re going to see me running like a crazy woman and stop all of this. Right? *Okay, maybe not.*

My legs pump furiously as my feet dig into the sand. I run as hard as I can, but it’s not fast enough. Mateo gains ground on me within the matter of a few seconds, and I can almost feel his breath on my neck.

Suddenly, he grabs my arm, twists me, and we tumble into the sand together. It reminds me of the first time I ran from him at the airport. I was terrified last time, but this time...it’s exhilarating.

He flips me onto my stomach and crushes me under his weight. “You’re a psychopath!” I scream at the top of my lungs as he grinds his hard dick into the crease of my ass through my bikini bottoms.

“I’m *your* psychopath,” he tells me with a dark chuckle before he raises his hand and slaps my ass cheek. Hard.

I’m about to yell something else, but suddenly he hauls me up out of the sand. I’m hoisted over his shoulder like a lifeless doll, and then I’m being carried off towards a small surf shack on the end of the beach.

It’s open on one end, housing surfboards and swimming gear. Mateo pushes me up against the wall, locking my arms behind me, my face grinding against the hard wood as he sinks against my backside. Speaking of *hard wood*...

“Fuck, you drive me crazy, Aria,” Mateo says, grinding against me. My bikini bottoms are pulled down my legs even as I attempt to wrestle against him. “I love when you fight me, *corazón*.”

I instantly stop fighting just to spite him, and a small bout of laughter erupts from his chest.

“You can’t be mad at me for wearing a bikini on the beach, Mateo. Do you know how messed up that is?” I ask accusingly.

I feel him fumbling with something, and then I feel his cock pressing against the crack of my ass. He runs the velvet steel over my skin, caressing me. “I’m mad because you wore it for others to see. You’re mine, Aria. All mine.”

Keeping my arms locked in one large hand, his other hand reaches around my hip and teases my clit. I sink my teeth into my lip to stop myself from moaning out loud. I’m not going to give him the satisfaction. His thumb dips into my pussy, and he sucks in a harsh breath. “You’re already wet for me.”

I hang my head in embarrassment. The chase down the beach gave me such a thrill. And the thought of him catching me turned me on. *Oh god, I’m so screwed up.*

He fingers me until I’m panting hard. And then his hand suddenly stops. I let out a soft sigh of displeasure, and it makes him chuckle. “Don’t worry, *corazón*. I’ll have you seeing stars soon enough.”

I feel his cock notched at my entrance, and then he enters me, taking me roughly. I cry out from the intrusion as my pussy desperately tries to adjust to his girth. He doesn’t allow me much time before he’s shoving up to the hilt, claiming me. Owning me.

He feels impossibly thick inside me, and I groan as he stretches me, my fingernails digging into the wooden wall as he drives his cock in and out of

me in a relentless rhythm.

My legs begin to tremble, but Mateo clicks his tongue. "Not yet, Aria." And then he pulls out of me and turns me around. Lifting me, he props me up on a narrow bench and drops to his knees. His tongue licks over every inch of my pussy and ass until I'm panting harshly. Clutching fistfuls of his hair, I pull his face closer to my center needing more. Wanting more.

I feel a finger sink into my wet channel and then another prodding at my back entrance. I gasp from the intrusion as he pushes his fingers deep within me. It doesn't hurt. It just feels different. But when he adds his tongue to the mix, it feels absolutely mind-blowing.

"Yes, yes, yes," I chant. My thighs clench around his head, and I don't even care if I suffocate him at this point. He deserves it for ruining my beach day.

"Come for me, Aria," he whispers against my flesh before flattening his tongue against my clit.

I detonate around his mouth, coming on command; my body so attuned to him and the pleasure he gives me. I cry out his name as he continues to lick me until I'm a quivering mess in his arms.

I'm barely aware of him standing until I feel the thick crown of his cock resting against the rim of my puckered hole. I watch in awe as a trail of spit travels from his mouth down to his cock. His dick is so wet from my pussy and his added lubrication that he pushes in the first inch with no resistance.

"I want to claim all of your holes. I want to ruin you for all other men," Mateo grinds out as he presses in slowly.

"You've already ruined me for anyone else. I'm yours," I confess, my breath hitching in my throat.

"And I'm yours," he says before his mouth claims mine. He kisses me then, his tongue delving into my mouth as his cock pushes past the tight rings of muscles in my ass. He takes his time until he's fully seated and there's no resistance. "That's my good girl," he rasps. He gives me a few moments to adjust before he begins fucking me deeply and slowly.

His fingers travel to my heat, dipping into my wet channel. He curls his fingers, softly stroking against my front wall as his thumb tortures my clit with rhythmic circles. My nails dig into his muscular ass as I pull him closer to me as he rolls his hips lazily.

"Such a good girl," he says against my ear before licking the side of my neck. His mouth places a kiss against my skin before it's replaced by his

hand. He wraps his hand around my neck and gently squeezes.

Panic instantly sets in, and I try to fight him off. He shushes me, holding me still. "I told you I wanted you to see stars. Do you trust me?" he asks, his voice thick with desire.

I think about it for a moment. Do I trust Mateo? My brain is shouting obscene things at me, because I know I shouldn't. But my stupid mouth opens and I say, "Yes."

He drives his hips up into me, fucking me while his hand grips my neck. Every nerve ending in my body lights up as he continues to finger me and rub his thumb against my clit. All of the sensations are driving me crazy with desire.

Mateo squeezes my neck harder, taking my breath away. Black dots appear in my vision, and I see an explosion of the night sky. He wasn't kidding about seeing stars. Just when I fear I'm going to black out, Mateo releases his hold, and I scream as the rush of oxygen hits my lungs and my orgasm slams into my body. I violently spasm around him, and he holds me close to him as he whispers into my ear, "That's it, Aria. Come all over my cock like a good little girl."

It's the most powerful orgasm I've ever had in my life, and it feels like it's going to destroy me from the inside out. I shatter into a million pieces, and I know I'll never be the same after today.

Mateo's fingers tighten on my hips almost to the point of pain as he thrusts into me, chasing his release. I can feel his cock spasming inside of my ass as he growls, slamming a hand onto the wood beside us to steady him and filling me up until his release spills out around his thick cock.

"Fuck, you were made for me," he breathes against my neck.

We stay in that position for a while, our ragged breathing competing with the sound of the ocean beyond the shack. Mateo places a kiss on my bare shoulder before gently pulling out of me. I can feel his cum leaking down my thighs as I shudder from the sudden cold of not having his warmth pressing up against me.

My brain is trying to process everything that just happened as I stand there, shocked. Tears instantly form in my eyes, and I think all of my emotions are finally catching up with me. My body and mind have been on a rollercoaster in the past half an hour. A sob suddenly escapes from my mouth before I can stop it.

Mateo's dark brows draw tight as he reaches for me. He wraps his arms around me, holding me as I cry against his chest. "It's all right, *mi corazón*," he whispers as he strokes my back soothingly.

I've never heard him call me that before. Sniffling, I look up at him and ask, "What does that mean?"

He hesitates. And just when I think he's not going to answer me, he finally says, "My heart."

I open my mouth to speak, but he shuts me up by sealing his lips over mine. He pours all of his emotions into that kiss. And he doesn't need to say anything else because that kiss tells me everything I need to know.

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CHAPTER 54



Mateo

DOMINGO IS WAITING for us when we get back to the compound.

Aria and I spent a long time on the beach after our little fuckfest. We even watched the sun set like a *normal* couple. If someone would have told me even a few months ago that I would be watching sunsets on beaches with a woman I have feelings for, I probably would have shot them for even suggesting such blasphemy. I never thought I would be doing these things...or feeling the things I am. Aria has changed me. For the better, I suppose. I know now that I wasn't *living* before her. I was merely existing.

She's still my greatest weakness, but I can't let her go. The only thing I can do is become even more possessive, keep her close and hope that nothing ever tears us apart.

Pressing my lips to Aria's ear, I whisper for her to go upstairs and change. I can't stand the thought of my uncle ogling her when she's wearing next to nothing.

Domingo clears his throat, having trouble wiping the smirk off his face. "My men told me you gave them quite the show this afternoon. They were just disappointed that you fucked her in the shack instead of on the beach. They could only hear her cries and not actually see her."

"Your men are lucky to be alive," I growl at him. "I overheard them talking about Aria."

“One of my guards said you shot him in the arm for saying something inappropriate?” he prompts, his eyes narrowing. He’s pissed off. With good reason.

“Just a flesh wound,” I say with a small shrug. “I consider it a small inconvenience considering the alternative of being six feet under,” I tell him.

“So possessive of your little prisoner, aren’t you?”

Even though his use of the word prisoner irritates me, I guess deep down she is. Would she be free to leave anytime she wanted? No. I wouldn’t be able to let her go. I’m going to keep her for as long as I can and pray to all that is holy that it’s forever. “She’s mine,” I tell my uncle through clenched teeth.

“But for how long?” he says cryptically. I stare him down, wondering what he means by that, but then a smile appears on his face, and he changes the subject by saying, “Dinner will be served soon. I expect that the two of you will be joining me?”

I give him a nod before I go upstairs to seek out Aria. There’s something off about my uncle, and it’s been continuously sending up red flags in the back of my mind. Ever since his visit down in Mexico, he has been acting differently. It’s making me question...well, everything. Even the past. Why he wasn’t at my parents’ estate the day my family was murdered. How he escaped it all unscathed and then conveniently showed up in the aftermath. I can still remember the look on his face when he realized I was still alive while I laid in a pool of my own blood. It wasn’t one of relief. It was almost like he was surprised.

Moving my neck from side to side until I hear a few satisfying cracks, I push my way into the room. Aria is standing there naked, and she turns quickly, grabbing the comforter from the bed to cover her body. When she realizes it’s me, she drops the blanket and gives me a shy smile.

And I don’t know what hits me just then, but it feels like a ton of bricks slamming into my body all at once. I realize that I’ve fallen head over heels in love with my little captive. It was gradual, her slowly filtering into my veins, infecting me to the point of no return. And now I know there is no cure for my obsession with her nor do I want one. I will possess her until the end of time and well into the afterlife. I have no doubt of that. She is mine in every sense of the word, and I am hers. Utterly and completely hers.

“What did Domingo say?” Aria asks as I approach her.

I ignore her question and press my mouth to hers. “Let’s shower,” I breathe against her lips before leading her into the bathroom.

Under the cascade of warm water, I take her gently, fucking her against the tiled wall until she cries out my name. Our lovemaking lasts for hours until the water begins to turn cold and her teeth begin to chatter. Even then I don’t want it to end, but I don’t want her to get hypothermia.

Drying her off with a towel, I realize something has changed. No, *everything* has changed. I’ve never felt this way about someone before. I know that I would do anything to protect her even if that meant giving my own life in exchange for hers. And if that isn’t love, then I don’t know what is.

As I stare down at Aria, I can imagine us walking down the aisle. I can imagine her pregnant with my child. I can imagine us growing old together and me carrying her to bed when she’s too tired to walk.

I never thought about any of those things before Aria. The person I was before her was cold, distant and cut off from the world around him. I only cared about revenge for my family and my empire. This new version of me is capable of loving her, taking care of her, protecting her at all costs.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” Aria asks me as she stares up at me with those familiar honey-colored eyes that I’ve grown to love. She can perhaps sense the change in me. I’m sure my conflicting emotions are written all over my face.

“Nothing,” I lie. “We’re late for dinner,” I say instead, hating myself for being too much of a coward to tell her how I really feel.

CHAPTER 55



Mateo

ARIA AND I join my uncle in his great dining hall. The room boasts high cathedral ceilings with a ridiculously large and expensive chandelier hanging from the center over a long table that can seat fourteen.

Domingo stands when we enter, and he holds out a chair for Aria to his left. Grumbling under my breath, I allow him to seat her next to him as I take the chair to his right.

We're all dressed casually tonight. My uncle is wearing a tropical print shirt and khakis. Even I decided to forgo a suit and tie and just went with a black button-up shirt and trousers while Aria is wearing a strapless, sage green sundress that exposes her sun-kissed shoulders.

I watch closely as Domingo pushes Aria's chair in once she's sitting, and I don't miss the way his hand brushes her bare shoulder before he goes to his own seat.

My eyes narrow on him before I glance around the room and notice something blatantly obvious and perhaps alarming. Ever since we first arrived here, Domingo has had guards stationed in every room of his home and almost every fucking inch of his property. It's been so noticeable and suffocating. But tonight, I barely noticed anyone standing guard.

"No security detail tonight?" I question him.

He shrugs and waves his hand in nonchalance. “Sometimes even they need a break. Unless you’re planning on something happening tonight during dinner?” he throws back at me with a suspicious gaze.

I stare at him, watching him closely for any sense that something is off, but I see nothing. His face is relaxed, his demeanor calm. Sitting back in my chair, I allow myself to loosen up a little, but I’m still not totally convinced. Something is off; I just can’t put my finger on it. I’ve spent almost my entire life having my senses trained to be on high alert at all times. I am always prepared for the worst in all situations. And just because I’m in my uncle’s home and he’s the only person I have left to call *family* does not mean I will completely be at ease in his company. If anything, the fact that he is my only remaining family member makes me even more on edge. And suddenly, I’m wishing I wouldn’t have sent Ignacio back to Mexico early.

The first course is served promptly, consisting of a mixed green salad and gazpacho. I carefully take a bite of each, and then I, perhaps irrationally, wait to make sure it’s not been tampered with. But I know deep down if I really thought something was wrong with the food, I wouldn’t have allowed Aria to eat hers. Although maybe he would just poison me...

“Not hungry?” my uncle asks in between mouthfuls of his salad.

I shrug my shoulders. “I guess not,” I offer.

He wipes his mouth with a napkin and nods. “Perhaps we can talk then.” He gives me a pointed look as he questions, “So, you never did tell me the truth about how Aria magically appeared in your life almost overnight. How did that all come about, if I may ask?”

I cock a brow at him. He wants to bring this up tonight? I can’t help but question his motives behind it. Clearing my throat, I answer him with the partial truth. “A former associate of mine introduced us.”

“So, a blind date?” he asks, his eyes shifting back and forth between Aria and me.

I notice Aria growing uncomfortable across from me. She doesn’t have to speak or move. I know her body so well now. It’s like we’re connected on some kind of subconscious level. I hate that my uncle insisted we sit on either side of him. I want her by my side, so that I can calm her down. And I know just what would calm my little captive down — making her purr by stroking her soft pussy under the table.

“Rumor has it you bought her at an auction,” my uncle announces, pulling me from my dirty thoughts.

I glare at him, wondering how he could have heard that. "Rumors are simply just that. Rumors," I quip.

"Aria, perhaps you will tell me the truth about my nephew acquiring you," Domingo urges, turning his attention to her and causing my hackles to rise.

She stares at him with doe eyes before her gaze darts across the table at me. She doesn't want to upset me, and I can see the fear in her eyes. Even after all this time she still fears me. And fuck, does that make my cock rock hard.

"Go ahead, Aria. Tell him the truth," I urge her. I want to hear the origin of our story coming out of her pretty, little mouth. And then later, when we're alone, if she disappoints me, I'm going to spank the hell out of her ass before I remind her of who she belongs to.

"We...we met at a...charity auction," she says, and I can't help but smile at her little fib.

"A charity auction," Domingo repeats before laughter bursts from his chest. "I don't believe that for a minute, my dear. The only thing charitable about my nephew here is how many women he has bed in his lifetime."

I slam my fist down on the table, causing the crystal stemware to rattle against the force. "What game are you fucking playing at?" I ask him through gritted teeth. Why does he want to know the truth? And why now? That niggling feeling that's been in the back of my mind ever since I got here is getting bigger and louder like a warning beacon.

"I just want to know how my nephew came to obtain such a beautiful woman," he says with a soft chuckle, playing it off as if it's all fun and games.

"Are you saying I can't possibly get a beautiful woman? Are you calling me ugly?" I ask, my voice full of anger.

"Of course not. You look like your handsome uncle, after all," he says with a salacious grin.

I grab the wine glass in front of me and stare at the liquid. And when the thought that it might be poisoned crosses my mind, I put it back down without taking a single drop. The hair on my arms stands on end. The only thing I had after my family was murdered was my instinct. I never question it. Something is definitely not right here.

"Why did you want us to come to California? You were so urgent about it on the phone, but we have barely conducted business since I arrived." I

glance across the table at Aria. She shifts slightly in her seat. Perhaps she can sense that something is off as well. She's so intuitive, my girl.

I turn and look pointedly at my uncle. "Is this about Aria?" Is he planning on trying to take her from me? He'll have to pry her out of my cold, dead hands first.

"I'm just trying to make conversation," he says, dismissing me. "Let's just enjoy our meal."

I push my plate away, untouched. "I'm not hungry." I stand and look to Aria. "We're going to return to Mexico. Now, in fact," I say.

"Sit the fuck down, Mateo," Domingo says through gritted teeth. "We are not done here yet."

I tower over him and stare him down. He doesn't fucking scare me anymore. When I was a little boy, he was a cruel man, and I feared him greatly. But now, he is nothing but a foot soldier underneath my boot. "Who the fuck do you think you're talking to? I am head of the *familia*," I remind him.

"Oh, I'm aware of that. Trust me, I think about it every fucking single day of my life. How you managed to survive and take *my* rightful place," he scoffs.

I narrow my eyes at him and wave a hand in his direction. "Enlighten me, Uncle. Tell me again how you also managed to survive unscathed when the rest of my family was brutally raped, tortured, and murdered." For years, I've been wanting to know the truth. "I still remember the look in your eyes the moment you realized I was still alive. It wasn't one of relief. It was one of surprise."

He glares at me. "What are you trying to accuse me of, Mateo?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I just want the truth."

"I was out of town that day," he starts, repeating the same story he has told numerous times over the past fucking decade.

"Enough! No more lies!" I shout. I rarely remember a day when he wasn't by my father's side. And then he chose that day to take a business trip. I might have been a naïve little boy back then, but he can't pull the wool over my eyes anymore. Slamming my fist down on the table before pointing an accusing finger at him, I demand, "I want the fucking truth!"

"You want the truth?" he spits out as he stands, gripping the edge of the table until his knuckles turn white. "That empire should have been mine! Your father didn't know how to run it! He ran it into the ground is what he

did!” He’s seething now, and I can see the true hatred in his eyes when he stares at me. Maybe it’s always been there, but I never wanted to see it before now. “Your family deserved to die!” he blurts angrily, spittle running down his chin. “The men I paid were told to leave no survivors, but you made it. You survived,” he says with a shake of his head in disbelief. “I should have killed you myself back then with my own bare hands, but the doctors were so convinced you wouldn’t last more than a day.” He shakes his head with regret. “I should have twisted your little neck until it snapped. Then everything would have been mine, and I wouldn’t have been working for a sniveling little fuck like you all these years!”

His revelations hit me hard, but somehow deep down I think I always knew the truth. “You’re right,” I tell him with a wicked grin. “You should have killed me that day. Because I am going to be your reaper now, Uncle. I am death, knocking on your fucking door!” I yell before reaching down and grabbing a small pistol from its holster on my ankle. It’s not my Glock, but a bullet is a fucking bullet. It will still kill him.

I cock the gun and point it at him. “You shouldn’t have told your guards to take the night off,” I say with a sneer, relishing the fear in his eyes.

“Red,” he says, and I cock my head as I try to understand what he means.

Less than five seconds later, I realize it was a code word. I hear the metallic cling of the smoke bombs being thrown down the hallway and into the room before they explode. My only thought in that moment is to keep Aria safe as the room begins to fill with thick, gray smoke.

I clamber over the table, managing to find her in the sudden darkness. I grab her hand and pull her tightly to me. I force her to the ground, hoping that the smoke is less dense down there. Her panicked coughing fit has my heart beating in a terrible rhythm. If anything happens to Aria, my uncle will not only die, but I will make sure it’s slow and torturous.

It takes several minutes for the air to clear enough to see through it. And then that’s when I see the men in black filing in with rifles raised.

“FBI!” someone announces. “Put your hands up!”

In that moment I realize my worst fear has come true. They will no doubt take Aria away from me forever. They’re going to take my little captive, and there is not a damn thing I can do about it. I will never see her again after this night.

“Aria,” I groan as we slowly stand. I stare into her glittering, honey-colored eyes, memorizing every detail of her beautiful face. I wet my lips, wanting to tell her how much she means to me. How much I love her. But I realize that wouldn’t be very fair, confessing my feelings in a situation like this, giving her no choice in the matter. So, if I can’t say the words, I can at least show her how much she means to me.

Turning her in my arms, I force her back against my chest, and then I hold the gun in my hand against her temple. “I’m sorry, Aria,” I whisper in her ear.

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CHAPTER 56



Aria

“I ’M SORRY, ARIA,” Mateo whispers.

My entire body trembles at his words. What is he sorry for? He’s sorry because of the situation we’re in, or he’s sorry that he has to kill me now? With the gun poised against my temple, it’s hard to not think the latter.

No, Mateo would never hurt you, I internally assure myself. Deep down in my gut I know that’s the truth. And so, I relax in his grip, fully trusting him even if I shouldn’t, considering he has a weapon pressed against the side of my head. But I know he’s scared. Scared of so many things right now. Afraid of the FBI taking me away from him. Afraid of losing everything he’s ever worked for.

Mateo holds me tightly against him, his familiar scent enveloping me. As the smoke dissipates completely, I stare at the large group of FBI agents, and I can feel Mateo’s muscles flexing. I don’t think either one of us expected this. The front line is dressed in full tactical gear with numerous weapons pointed right at us.

“Drop the gun!” one of the men yells.

Mateo’s arm tightens around my waist, holding me closer. He keeps the gun trained at my temple, and I close my eyes, focusing on our breathing and our racing heartbeats. The devastating realization slowly dawns on me

that there's no easy way out of this situation. The FBI is going to take me and arrest Mateo. That is the only possible outcome here. The only variable is dependent upon whether Mateo cooperates or not. And if he doesn't, I fear they will shoot him or even kill him.

As far as the FBI is aware, Mateo kidnapped me and held me captive in a foreign country. While that was true in the very beginning, I eventually became a willing captive. But they don't know that and probably wouldn't even believe me if I told them. Any way we try to spin it, none of this looks good for him.

"Drop your weapon or we'll shoot!" another agent calls out.

"Don't shoot!" I call out. "We'll surrender. Please don't shoot him!" I cry. Turning to face Mateo, he slowly lowers the gun, staring down into my eyes. "I don't want to go, but I have to," I explain. Tears stream down my cheeks as he cups my palm, swiping away the rivulets with his thumb.

"I'll find you, Aria," he vows.

I close my eyes, savoring his words. "Promise?" I ask, opening my eyes once again.

His dark gaze burns into mine as he says, "Yes."

Then, I hear his gun clatter to the floor beside us as he drops it. Nothing will stop them from taking me away from him now. And just the thought of being taken from Mateo and never seeing him again has me panicking. I know this is the way it has to be, but I hate it.

I always wondered what I would do in this kind of situation when I made up this sort of scenario in my head. Would I run away screaming from Mateo, or would I run towards him, never wanting him to let me go? What would I choose?

And as a set of hands grabs me, hauling me away from Mateo, I know exactly what choice I would make. *I would choose him. I will always choose him.*

"Don't hurt him!" I call out as I watch four FBI agents descend upon him, knocking him to the ground with force. I watch one kick him with his boot, and it sets me off. Fighting against the agent holding me, I scream, "Leave him alone!"

I wrestle with the man who has his arms wrapped around me in a vice grip. I fight him like a wild animal as I have an overwhelming need to get to Mateo, to protect him somehow. "Let me go!" I scream. "Let me go!" We wrestle, and he suddenly twists me at an awkward angle. I cry out when I

feel my shoulder popping out of its socket. The man immediately loosens his grip, and I stand there with my arm dangling by my side, gritting my teeth from the intense pain.

When I find Mateo's darkened gaze, I can see the switch being flipped. One moment, he's calm, accepting his fate. And the next, he's seeing red.

"Get the fuck off of her!" Mateo roars, stalking towards us.

The agents swarm him then, tackling him down to the ground, and I watch in horror as he fights them. Two of the men fall to the ground with bloody noses and a third is cradling a broken arm. And then Mateo is coming for me again, his face bloody, his shirt torn, his visible tattoos flexing as his muscles tense with rage. His steps are determined, his gaze unwavering.

And that's when the first shot rings out. It's almost deafening, and I gasp when I see Mateo jolt from the force of the bullet hitting him. Crimson blooms through the hole in his shirt, and yet he's still standing. His eyes meet mine, and I can see the resolve inside of them. Gritting his teeth in pain, he steps towards me again. He's willing to die to get to me, to protect me.

"No!" I scream just as I see another agent raise his gun and shoot.

This time I see Mateo's shoulder tearing open from the bullet. He staggers backwards, but doesn't fall.

"Mateo, stop!" I cry out. "Please!" He's going to get killed trying to come for me.

But he doesn't stop. He takes another step, and then another.

A third shot rings out, and this one causes Mateo to crumble to the ground. He roars like a feral animal, but his gaze never leaves mine. He's willing to take bullets for me. He's willing to die for me.

"Please!" I beg him with tears rolling down my face. "Please stop."

I can see a myriad of emotions in his piercing gaze as he studies my face. He's probably wondering if I want him to stop because I want to be rescued or if I'm telling him to stop because of my feelings for him. I wish I could tell him it's because...I'm in love with him. Lord help me, but I love him with every part of my heart and soul.

I finally manage to pull out of the agent's grip and run to Mateo. He's broken and bloody, but he manages to grab me and hold me.

"Are you okay?" he asks before drawing in a rough breath between his teeth.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. He's been shot three times, and he's asking if *I'm* okay? Before I can even answer, I'm suddenly being picked up and dragged away from him. I scream, kick and fight while calling out his name.

The last thing I see before I'm taken out the door is Mateo's eyes slowly rolling into the back of his head before he collapses to the floor in a pool of his own blood.

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CHAPTER 57



Aria

“THIS IS GOING to hurt,” Nico tells me before he grips my arm, pulls and effectively pops my shoulder back into place.

I cry out before gritting my teeth. It definitely feels better than what it did, but it still throbs painfully. Tenderly, my brother wraps a makeshift sling around my arm as I sit in stunned silence. We’re in a blacked-out SUV cruising down the highway at a high rate of speed, trees and houses blurring in my peripheral vision, on our way to the nearest hospital, according to Nico.

“We’re just going to get you checked out,” he had told me earlier.

But I know what’s really going to happen there. They’re going to run a bunch of tests on me, both physically and mentally. They’re going to think I’m traumatized from being held captive. I saw the look on my brother’s face when I first got in the SUV. He thinks I’m broken, damaged psychologically.

Maybe I am.

I’m still trying to process everything that just happened.

I’m safe. My brother is here with me. *I’m free.*

But I don’t feel free. I feel like a thousand-pound weight is sitting on top of my chest, threatening to suffocate me at any given moment. I should be happy. I should be thankful. But I can’t feel any of those things; because

every time I close my eyes, I see Mateo lying on the floor of his uncle's dining room, bleeding and dying.

My eyes snap open, and a shuddering breath escapes my lungs as I slowly come back to reality. Nico's brows furrow as he stares at me with a concerned look on his face.

"Is Mateo okay? Did they call an ambulance for him?" I ask, but he refuses to answer, just like the twenty times before when I asked the same exact questions.

"I'm glad you're safe, Aria," he says instead. "Everyone has been worried sick about you."

I stare down at my knotted fingers, anxiety tightening my ribcage. "I missed everybody," I confess. The only downside to being with Mateo was that I couldn't see or speak to my family. Maybe someday we could have remedied that, but now I'll never know how or if that would have even worked. "Where's mom and dad?" I ask.

"They're waiting at the airport with Selina. After we're done at the hospital, we'll all fly back home."

Home.

I was supposed to be returning home with Mateo. Tears fill my eyes, and I angrily blink them away. This isn't fair. I shouldn't have to choose between my family and the man I love. My hands tremble as I glance over at my brother. He's the spitting image of our father with dark hair and gray eyes. And they both share the same expressions when they're upset or worried, like right now. "Nico, you have to understand that when I called you months ago, things were very different then. Everything changed. Mateo and I..." My voice trails off as I swallow hard past the lump forming in my throat.

Nico reaches over and places his hand over mine, squeezing it gently. "Hey, let's not talk about what happened just yet. Okay?" he offers with a kind smile on his face. "I think it might be better for you to speak with a psychiatrist before anyone else."

He's been down this road before with his girlfriend. When he rescued Selina from human trafficking, she wasn't in the right state of mind for a while. I'm sure he's thinking I'm in the same boat, needing to talk to professionals first.

Instead of fighting him on it, I stay quiet for the rest of the ride to the hospital. He helps me out of the car. And when we enter through the

emergency room entrance, we have to pass through an archway metal detector. When I walk through and it beeps, I stare at the security guard in surprise.

He doesn't look impressed; however, sighing heavily before asking, "Do you have anything in your pockets, ma'am?"

Staring down at my sundress, I realize I have two tiny pockets in the front that I didn't even know were there. "No," I tell him before I reach into one of the pockets. And when my fingers touch the edge of something metal, I gasp. I pull out a coin and stare at it, recognizing it immediately. *Mateo's lucky coin*. He must have slipped it into my pocket earlier right before I was taken away from him.

"What is that?" my brother questions, and I can hear the apprehension in his voice.

"Just a coin," I lie.

"You have to put it in the basket, ma'am, and walk through again," the guard instructs.

Reluctantly, I place the coin in the small, black, plastic bin and then stroll through the archway again. This time, the sensor doesn't go off.

As soon as the security guard pushes the bin towards me, I snatch up the coin, holding on to it like a lifeline. It's the only connection I have to Mateo, and it somehow makes me feel minutely better.

I'm led to a room shortly thereafter where I sit and wait by myself. Nico wanted to come with me, but I told him it's probably better if he stayed in the waiting room. My emotions are all over the place, and I don't need him seeing me in this current state that I'm in. My mind is completely obsessed with wondering if Mateo will survive his gunshot wounds. Every time I hear the police scanner going off at the nurses' desk, I wonder if it will be a call about him. But I don't hear anything about trauma or gunshot wounds; and eventually, what little hope I had of seeing him here dies inside of me.

Of course they wouldn't take my captor to the same hospital. It's probably protocol or some shit.

Sighing heavily, I open my palm and stare down at the coin. It's scratched and worn but still beautiful. Carefully, I run my fingers over the edges. I know Mateo treasured this more than anything, treating it like a talisman; the very last connection he had with his father. And the fact that he gave it to me makes my chest hurt. He loves me. Even though he never uttered the words, I know he does. Just as much as I love him.

As I sit there waiting for the doctor, all the dark doubts begin to creep back into my mind.

What if Mateo doesn't make it?

No. I shake that bad thought right out of my head. He's going to make it. He *will* make it. He vowed to come find me, and I'm holding him to that promise. Squeezing the coin in my hand, the realization dawns on me as to why Mateo gave me his most treasured possession. It's because he's going to come for me as soon as he can.

While that should scare me, it doesn't. It gives me hope and fills me with an overwhelming sense of peace.

I make a silent vow right then and there that I won't let him go to prison because of me. If I can help his fate in any way whatsoever, I will do just that. And then I'll figure out a way for us to be together. I refuse to give up on him, because I know he would never, ever give up on me.

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CHAPTER 58



Aria

I AM HOME. I'm finally home. I should be happy. I should be overjoyed. I should feel blessed beyond measure. But I don't feel any of those things, because Mateo is not here. He's in a hospital somewhere, fighting for his life. My father finally updated me after pleading and begging for hours on end. He finally relented and let me know that Mateo is alive but in critical condition.

I can't sleep, eat or breathe without thinking about him.

Staring out the window of my old bedroom, which feels foreign to me now, I sigh deeply. I'm being held against my will by my own family. I haven't been able to leave my room, let alone the house since I've been here. They all think I'm suffering from severe PTSD and Stockholm syndrome, and they're patiently waiting for me to snap out of it. But what they don't realize is that there's nothing to snap out of. I know all of this sounds insane, but I fell in love with my captor. And I won't be able to rest until I know that Mateo is okay.

A knock sounds at my door, startling me out of my inner turmoil. "Come in," I call.

My father walks into the room. He looks worse for wear, his face etched with worry, and I feel awful my family had to go through so much while I

was gone. I'm sure the constant concern and not knowing what was happening to me all this time got to everyone, emotionally and mentally.

Dad stands a few feet away from me, and I realize he's holding a piece of paper in a vice grip in his hands. He's wearing a suit, but the tie is undone, and his shirt is wrinkled. His dark hair is disheveled like he's spent some time running his hands through it. This is so unlike my father's usual appearance that it's scary. He's always so put together and in control.

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. "What is that?" I ask, although based on my father's reaction to it, I'm not sure I even want the answer.

His gray eyes lock on mine before he glances down at the paper, gripping it so hard I swear he's trying to bleed the ink from the typed words. "Your blood tests came back," my father starts. "Aria..." His voice trails off, and I'm suddenly anxious.

God, with the way he's acting, did I contract some kind of incurable disease or something? "Dad, what is it?" I press.

"You're pregnant, Aria."

I stare at him, blinking rapidly like I'm attempting morse code with my eyes or something. "What?" I ask even though I heard him loud and clear.

"You're pregnant," he says, his voice strained with emotion.

My eyes drift down to my flat stomach. I'm not even showing yet. Haven't experienced any obvious symptoms. I had no idea...

My father clears his throat and says, "Now, we have a few options here. We can take you to a clinic —."

I hold up my hand to stop him. "I'm keeping the baby, Dad," I explain vehemently.

He nods solemnly. "It's your choice," he says, his voice full of anguish. And then he adds, "I just didn't know if you would want to keep it."

"Why would I not want to?"

"Because you think you're in love with the man who held you captive for months," he explains adamantly.

"No. I don't think that, Dad." I can see the sense of relief in his face, and I almost hate to burst his bubble with what I'm about to say. "I don't think I love Mateo. I *know* that I love him. I fell in love with him." Steeling my spine, I continue with, "Dad, I don't have Stockholm syndrome or whatever the hell else those people think I do. I'm not delusional or in denial of what happened to me. I'm well aware of how crazy all of this sounds, but I don't care. My feelings are my feelings, and I won't pretend

that they just don't exist." I take a few seconds to calm down before I add, "Did you know Mateo was the one who had Constantine Carbone murdered in prison?"

A surprised look is on his face, so I know he wasn't privy to that information.

"When Mateo found out Constantine had kidnapped me and hurt me, he put out the word to take Constantine out. He did it for me, Dad." My breathing stutters when I think about all the times Mateo protected me. "That wasn't the only thing he did for me. He kept me safe. He always kept me safe." No one has let me tell my side of the story yet, and it feels freeing being able to tell them something *good* about Mateo.

My father takes a few minutes to absorb my words. Clearing his throat, he says, "You do realize Mateo's going to prison for the rest of his life."

My head protests with a vicious throb when I think about not ever being able to see him again except for when he's behind glass or bars. "There has to be something we can do. I can testify on his behalf or something! Tell the FBI that it wasn't his fault; that I wasn't there against my will." I'm near hysterics, but I don't care. I don't want the man I love going to prison because of me.

"I wish it were that simple," my father starts. "You have to understand that it's not just the kidnapping charge, Aria. Mateo is not a good man. The FBI has had him on the top of their most wanted list for a long time. He is the head of a very dangerous cartel. His rap sheet is a mile long. They are going to prosecute him to the fullest extent and never let him out of prison."

A sob attempts to escape, but I press the back of my hand to my lips to silence it. I can't break down right now. Mateo needs me even if he doesn't realize it.

Sitting down on the edge of my bed, I put my head in my hands. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I know our story can't end like this. I think about the beginning of our relationship and how my horrible fate on that island led me to him.

The Island.

And then an idea hits me like a freight train, and my head snaps up, my gaze meeting my father's. "What if Mateo offers the FBI something that they really want?"

My dad cocks his dark brow. "Tell me more."

And so I do. I tell him everything, knowing that this is my last chance to save the man I love...and the father of my unborn child.



THERE'S A KNOCK on my door the next morning, and then a second later it opens. I expect to see my parents or my brother, since they've been checking on me religiously, but instead it's Renato.

My breath leaves my lungs in a rush when I see his familiar, handsome face. Months ago, I would have run and jumped into his arms. But everything changed the moment I met Mateo. I'm not the same person I was before I was kidnapped. And I doubt if I'll ever be the same again.

Renato used to make my heart skip a beat whenever I saw him, but my rhythm is steady now, unwavering. It only beats for one man, and he's not in this room.

"Hi," he whispers, his green eyes searching my face carefully. "How are you feeling?"

I'm not sure if my father and brother told him about the pregnancy or many details surrounding what happened to me, so I decide to play it safe. "I...I'm okay," I say quietly.

"How's your shoulder?" he questions, motioning to the sling.

"Not too bad. I've had worse pain," I admit before cringing. That probably wasn't the best thing to say, but it doesn't seem to faze Renato much. I feel like he's not really accepting of what happened to me, or maybe he just doesn't want to. It's probably easier that way. He seems full of anxiety, and I watch as he nervously shifts from foot to foot. He doesn't know how to act or what to say, and I can definitely say the feeling is mutual. The last we were together, we were making out in the hallways of the compound, trying not to get caught by the security guards. And now it feels like we're total strangers.

"How have you been?" I ask, not knowing what else to talk about.

Renato quickly swallows up the distance between us with a few big strides across the room. "It's been hell without you here. I barely slept. I couldn't eat. Fuck," he rasps, taking in every detail of my face as if committing it to memory. "I've missed you, Aria. So much."

Before I can even blink, he's gathering me into his arms and holding me tight. At first, it's innocent. Just a friendly hug. But when I feel his mouth on my cheek and my neck, placing kisses as he whispers how much he's missed me, I quickly push him away with my good arm.

My breathing is ragged as I stare up at his wounded face, and it kills me a little inside. Even though Renato and I never discussed a future together, I know he definitely wanted one. He always wanted more than I was willing to give. I never really had a definite reason as to why I was always holding back with him, besides the possibility of losing our friendship, but I have one now. I have *two* actually.

"Renato, we can't do this," I try to explain.

His dark brows furrow, and he begins pacing the floor a few feet away from me, dragging his hands through his hair and pulling at the ends in frustration. "I've been sitting here for months, Aria, waiting for you to come back to me. I was sick to death worrying about you every minute of every day. Don't you get that?"

Tears fill my eyes as I try to come up with words that will make this whole situation better, but I can't. There's nothing I can say that will make any of this okay.

He stops pacing and looks at me. "I think after you've had some time to think, you'll realize what that monster did to you. You'll realize that what you went through was trauma and —."

"I love him, Renato," I blurt out, ripping off the band-aid.

He winces at my words, shaking his head in disbelief. He doesn't want to accept anything that doesn't involve him and me. I get it, I do. Renato and I have been friends and more for years. He assumed nothing would ever change that. Maybe I did too. But fate unexpectedly intervened and set me on a different path, one that forks away from Renato and what we had. I never had to question if it felt right with Mateo or if we were better off friends. And that only solidifies my true feelings and that I'm doing the right thing. With Renato, our friendship came first, and I never wanted to ruin that. I still don't.

"Why, Aria?" he finally asks.

"Because Mateo protected me. Because he sacrificed himself over and over again for me. Because..." My hand drops protectively over my stomach.

"You...you're pregnant?" he asks incredulously.

Shit. So, no one told him. I had just assumed someone had. Groaning inwardly, I look up at him. “I’m sorry, Renato. I’m sorry for everything.”

“Yeah. So am I,” he says before leaving and slamming the door behind him.

I stand there for a long time afterwards, hoping that he’ll come back, but he doesn’t. I could try to go after him and fix things, but that won’t make anything easier. It will only make things harder, for the both of us.

The bottom line is that we were destined for very different things. My only hope is that, in the future, when Renato meets the girl of his dreams, he’ll finally realize the same thing that I did — that what we shared was special but only temporary.

I want him to find somebody that makes him happy. Somebody he doesn’t have to hide his relationship with. I want that for him so badly, even over my own happiness. And if that isn’t true friendship, then I don’t know what is.

CHAPTER 59



Mateo

I 'M LYING IN a hospital bed, barely aware of my surroundings. I've been in and out of consciousness for days, I think. Maybe longer. But even though my body is stationary, my brain is moving at a million miles a minute. The events that occurred and led me here are plaguing my mind in a torturous, never-ending loop.

My uncle betrayed me. I should have known all along, but I was just a young boy when he came to get me in the aftermath of my family's death. I clung to him like a lifeline, never knowing that he was the one who had orchestrated the whole thing to begin with. He deceived his own brother for power and money, hurting and killing a lot of innocent people in the process. I was supposed to die along with them, but I survived. I was able to thrive, much to his dismay.

Now that I know the hard, cold truth, everything is starting to make sense. I have no doubt in my mind that he coordinated the attacks on my warehouses as a way to distract me. And who knows how long he's been working with the FBI. Maybe from the first moment he laid eyes on Aria. He probably recognized her from media coverage and devised a plan to easily take me down without even getting blood on his hands. He always did take the easy way out; letting others do his dirty work for him.

My uncle not only cost me my family and childhood, but he also set the plan in motion for me to lose the most precious thing in my life, my only reason for breathing — Aria.

The image of the last time I saw her beautiful face will be engrained into my memory until I die, and her tortured cries when I fell to the ground, my body finally succumbing to its injuries, will haunt me well into the afterlife.

I still remember the moment I slid my lucky coin into her pocket. It was a goodbye message. I was prepared to die in that room, because deep down I knew I was going to lose her. And if I truly lost her, then there would be no reason for me to continue on. I simply can't imagine a world without Aria in it. Life has no meaning without her light breaking through all of my darkness.

While I stew in my inner turmoil, I vaguely realize the sedatives they've given me must be finally wearing off, because suddenly I can hear everything around me more clearly. It no longer feels like my head is under water. However, now that my senses are returning, the incessant beeping of the machines keeping me alive is driving me up the wall with madness. Growling, I force my eyes open and try to raise my hands, but quickly realize that they're cuffed to the bed rails.

"Good. You're awake," comes a voice.

My eyes snap to my right where a man in a suit presently sits. He's tall with dark hair and gray eyes. I recognize him immediately from my extensive research on Aria. This is her father. I don't know whether to feel relieved or not. But I suppose if he wanted to kill me, I would be dead already. So, I look him straight in the eye and say, "Mr. Vitale, I presume."

He nods once as he sets his calculating gaze on me. "Mr. Navarro."

"Now that the formalities are over with, maybe you can tell me what the fuck you are doing here," I snarl. A migraine is blooming behind my eyes, and I squeeze my eyes shut, internally trying to calm myself down. I'm desperate for information about his daughter and starting off our conversation this way won't help matters at all. Opening my eyes again, I keep a steady tone and ask him, "How is Aria?"

"I was hoping you would ask about my daughter since you're all that she seems to care about at the moment," he says bitterly. The man is like a statue, not giving anything away. But I can see the subtle hints that being in

the same room as me is bothering him. Like the way he adjusts the cuffs of his suit jacket before he says, "Aria is fine."

I study his face for a moment, but I don't find many similarities between him and his daughter. Thinking back to the photos I scoured through; Aria is a younger version of her mother. And, fuck, just thinking about her causes my migraine to intensify. I miss my little captive. It's hard to even breathe without her here by my side. "How long was my uncle working with the FBI?" I ask, curiosity eating away at me. He's the reason Aria was taken from me. He's the reason for all of my misery and pain my entire life, in fact. And I'm still trying to process the depth of his betrayal to my family and to me.

"Months," Mr. Vitale admits. "When he saw Aria at your compound in Mexico, he recognized her from the news. Her face has been plastered all over TV ever since she was kidnapped by Carbone." He sits up straighter in his chair. "We set up a plan for Domingo to get you to bring Aria to the U.S. where it would be easier for the FBI to intervene."

I grunt. "I'm assuming my uncle sold me out for some kind of deal or compensation?"

"Reward money," he says. And then he adds, "Ten million dollars, to be exact."

I shake my head. "It's always been about money for him. He'd sell his own fucking soul for the right price."

The room is quiet for a while after that. And then finally, Aria's father stands and moves closer to me. "You have to understand, as her father, it's taking everything in me to not kill you right now with my own fucking bare hands," he says, his voice dangerously low and full of barely restrained rage.

"I wouldn't expect anything less," I tell him with brutal honesty.

"But I promised my daughter I would hear you out before I did anything...impulsive," he says before returning to his seat in the corner of the room. After he sits down, he moves his head from side to side and then straightens his back. When he's done, he's noticeably calmer, the anger inside of him simmering but not boiling over. "Aria has told me her side of the story, painting you as some kind of *savior*," he says, punctuating the last word. His tone suggests he doesn't believe that for a fucking second. "And now that I'm here, I want to hear your side. How did you come to learn of the auction island?" he questions.

“A former associate of mine took me there. He thought I would enjoy it, I suppose, but he was wrong. Dead wrong. I had no idea what was happening until the auction actually started.” I close my eyes, thinking about the first time I saw Aria out there on that stage. She was a fighter even then. So fucking strong.

“*Former* associate?” he questions with a quirked brow.

“I killed the bastard the moment our plane touched down in Mexico for putting his hands on Aria.” I open my eyes and stare at Mr. Vitale. “I may be a bastard, but I draw the line when it comes to men hurting innocent women and children.”

My words seem to have a visible effect on him. Even though we are polar opposites, we do share one common bond. We’re both bad men, but we have a soft spot when it comes to women and children.

“When I was just a boy, I watched several men brutally rape and murder my sisters and mother,” I explain. “And that son of a bitch had me in a bidding war with a man named Damion Tuffin, who rapes, tortures and maims every woman he purchases from that auction. That very man was infatuated with Aria, determined to win her, take her home and do vile things to her.” My heart races inside my chest at just the memory of it. “I didn’t go there looking to purchase a woman or women, but I simply couldn’t allow Damion to take Aria, violate her and snuff out her life. So, I outbid him and purchased her.”

“And Damion was the same man who ended up attacking my daughter at a dinner party?” he asks, anger changing his tone to menacing.

I nod. Curling my hands into fists, I tell him, “He hurt her. And I killed him for it. I would do it all over again too. The only thing I would change is that I would take my time and make him suffer longer.”

“And how the hell did you get to Constantine Carbone?” he inquires.

“Let’s just say someone in prison owed me a favor.”

He shakes his head with a smirk on his face. “So, Aria was telling the truth. You have been her saving grace,” he says. I can still see the skepticism in his eyes, but it’s less prominent now. He sighs heavily, folding his arms across his chest. “The FBI has told me all about your laundry list of offenses. You’re on their most wanted list. And in their eyes, you’re one of the most dangerous men on the planet. They want you locked up for a very long time.”

I lie back on my pillow and stare up at the tiled ceiling. I did a lot of horrible things to make my way to the top of the food chain. A lot of people were hurt. A lot of people died. And I can't expect Aria to wait for me while I spend most likely numerous life sentences in prison for my crimes.

What I'm about to say next to her father is not only going to gut me from the inside out but is also going to haunt me for the rest of my life. I can't even look at her father when I say my next words, because they aren't the truth. They aren't how I truly feel, but they need to be said. "I want you to tell Aria to forget about me and move on," I say, my voice guttural and raw.

I've already made up my mind that I'll get revenge on my uncle, for the sake of my family. And then I'll find a way to leave this earth. Because without Aria, I wouldn't want to continue living.

"That's what you really want?" her father questions, standing.

I close my eyes for a moment and nod, unable to even voice the lie again. Just the thought of never seeing Aria again makes me feel like my entire world is falling apart. But the truth of the matter is, I have to let her go. I love her too much to make her wait for me. I want her to live a good life, and this is the only way for her to have it.

The alarm on my heart monitor begins beeping out of control behind me. "I want her to be free of me and all the bad memories of our time together," I tell him. My blood pressure is going through the roof with every lie I tell myself and her father. And then, I decide to tell him the truth. "I don't want this kind of life for her."

"You love her that much?" he prompts.

My eyes snap to his. He sees right through my bullshit. "I do," I confess. "I love her so much that I'm willing to let her go. To let her be happy without me."

His brows furrow as he stands there, thinking, deciding. On what? I don't know. But then he asks me, "Do you remember where The Island is?"

I'm taken aback by his question and the sudden change in direction, but I tell him, "I'm sure I could figure it out."

He nods and considers my words for a few moments. "What if I told you that information was invaluable to the FBI, and I managed to secure you a plea deal that would let you walk away from all of this a free man?"

I stare at him before I burst out laughing. "There is no way you pulled that many strings."

Mr. Vitale takes a few steps towards me. “What if I told you I pulled every fucking string I could for the sake of my daughter and her happiness?”

The laughter dies in my throat. His face and tone are so serious. Could what he says be true? “How? What would I have to give up?” There has to be a catch. A big one.

“Would you give up your life for my daughter?” he asks.

“In a heartbeat,” I say without hesitating.

“Then that is what they require. Your life — past and present and future. After the deal is made, you would cease to exist. The records will indicate that you died in that raid on your uncle’s home.” He takes one more step until he’s right beside my bed, staring down at me with narrowed eyes. “You give them everything they want, including your drug suppliers, traffickers, warehouses, and the location of The Island. Then you and Aria can be together, if that’s what she still wants.” He turns and walks away. “I’ll give you a little while to decide,” he calls over his shoulder before leaving the room.

I stare after him in stunned silence. There’s a way to be with Aria...but only if I give up my entire life for her. My worst fear has been exactly this — losing the empire that I built from the ground up. It will all have been for nothing. Everything that I worked so hard for and fought for over the years will be taken and seized by the American government.

On one hand, I’d be losing my identity, my power, and my empire. But on the other hand, I would be gaining the most important thing in the world to me.

The choice is easy.

Too damn easy.

And so, when her father returns a half an hour later, I have my mind made up...with one small stipulation.

“There’s one thing I need to do before I agree to this,” I tell him. “And then I can be out for good. Mateo Navarro can die after I finish what needs to be done.”

“And what is the one thing?” Mr. Vitale questions.

“Retribution,” I tell him.

Aria’s father slowly nods. “Okay,” he agrees.

CHAPTER 60



Mateo

THE DOCTORS WERE amazed with my progress. I should have been bedridden from the bullet wounds I suffered for weeks. But with the promise of revenge coursing through my veins, leading me to my end goal — being with Aria again — it gave me the strength I needed to strive toward a fast recovery. I only laid in bed for four days before I began grueling physical therapy to get me back into shape. If I was going to accomplish what I wanted, I would need to be in top form.

And two weeks later, I'm finally ready. I'm making my last stance as Mateo Navarro. And then, after today, he will no longer exist.

When I stroll into Domingo's house on a beautiful, sunny morning, I have a smile on my face. I'm not smiling because I'm happy. No, I'm smiling because vengeance has finally been able to rear its ugly head after all these years and the day for retribution is upon us.

My uncle is sitting at the dining table, eating breakfast. I'm sure his morning went as normal as possible. He probably woke up a couple of hours ago, brushed his teeth, maybe took a shit, read the newspaper and then came downstairs for a meal consisting of over-easy eggs, bacon and fresh squeezed orange juice.

When his gaze rises and rests upon me, I watch in amusement as his face grows pale like he's just seen a fucking ghost. "M-Mateo," he stutters

in disbelief. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Oh, Uncle. You’re not happy to see me alive and well?”

Domingo clears his throat, wipes his mouth with a napkin before tossing it down on the table beside his now forgotten meal. “Of course I’m happy.” I can see him reaching for his phone to alert his guards, and I don’t stop him. “Listen, Mateo, you have to understand that I only did it for the money.”

“You only did what exactly for the money, Uncle? You only had my entire family slaughtered in front of my eyes for money? Or you had my only reason for living taken from me and thus almost killing me in the process for the second time?” I shrug nonchalantly. “You’ll have to be more specific.”

“Money is the root of all evil, and people will do almost anything for it,” he tells me, as if I didn’t already know that.

“No shit,” I tell him with a smirk.

I can see his eyes shifting, glancing around the room as beads of sweat gather on his forehead. I’m not telepathic, by any means, but I can read his precise thoughts in this moment.

“Your guards are not coming,” I inform him. “You were right about people doing almost anything for money. Pay your guards enough and offer them asylum back in Mexico, and they will leave their master in a heartbeat.”

He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. “Mateo, please. I’m the only family you have left.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.” I pull out the Glock behind my back and point it at him.

“Please! Don’t kill me, Mateo!” he begs, groveling and sniveling like the pathetic, little weasel he is.

The coward.

“My mother, my father, my sisters. Little Lucita,” I say, my voice breaking with her name. I close my eyes briefly, trying to block out the memory of her screams. “Lucy was only eight years old,” I tell him through gritted teeth. “She was the most innocent.”

“It was wrong!” he says, throwing his hands up in surrender. “I know what I did was wrong, but I can’t take it back, Mateo. And none of this will bring them back.”

“You’re right. None of this will bring them back. But maybe their souls can finally rest knowing the man who betrayed them is finally six feet under.”

I squeeze the trigger and shoot him right between the eyes.

He slumps forward, his cheek landing in his plate of food. I watch the life drain from his dark eyes before I breathe a sigh of relief. After all these years, the retribution I was seeking is finally finished.

I tuck the Glock behind my back and leave the house. My mind is laser focused on one thing and one thing only — finding my little captive.

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CHAPTER 61



Aria

I'M PACING THE floor, waiting for my father to return from California. His flight landed an hour ago, and he still isn't home. He's been across the country for months, trying to work out a deal between Mateo and the FBI. Nothing was even set in stone before he left. He simply told me he would try.

He used his connections in the agency to try to set Mateo free from his crimes, but even my father has his limitations. What if they backed out of the deal and sent Mateo to prison?

Tears stream down my cheeks as I think of the worst possible outcome. Damn these pregnancy hormones. My hands drift down to my baby bump. I've really started showing over the past several weeks. And thinking about Mateo not being here with me during the birth of our son or daughter has a wave of fresh tears cascading down my face, and I furiously try to wipe them away.

"Don't cry, Aria. You know what your tears do to me," says a deep voice from the doorway.

Gasping, I turn and see him. He's wearing his normal attire of a dark suit and dark shirt — black on black. His hair is shorter, and he has a thicker beard, but he's still as brutally handsome and intimidating as ever.

My tears blur his face as he approaches and scoops me up in his arms. He buries his face in my neck and says, “*Dios mío*, I missed you.”

I sob against his chest. “I thought I would never see you again,” I confess.

“It almost didn’t happen,” he tells me. He pulls back and stares into my eyes. “Choosing you was the easy part. Working everything else out is what took forever.”

Slowly, I climb down out of his arms. There’s so much we need to discuss. But first thing’s first. Grabbing his hand, I pull it towards me and place his palm over my swollen belly.

Mateo’s eyes widen before narrowing. “What...” And then he surprises me by getting on his knees. He lifts my shirt and stares at my stomach.

We never discussed having children...or having a future together, really. So, I’m not sure if he even wants this baby. “Mateo,” I start.

“Do you have any idea how happy I am right now?” he asks, interrupting me. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy before,” he tells me before gently placing a kiss above my belly button. “I’ve dreamed of this moment with you, *mi corazón*.”

My shoulders sag in overwhelming relief, and I wipe away a stray tear as I stare down at the man I love adoring our baby that’s currently growing in my belly.

“Your father never told me,” he whispers in disbelief with a slight shake of his head.

“Knowing my dad, he probably wanted to make sure you were making the choice you wanted to make and not the one you thought you had to make.”

Mateo nods in agreement, nuzzling his thick beard against my sensitive skin. “He’s a smart man. I know now where you get your intelligence from.” His big hands wrap around my baby bump. “Pregnancy suits you, *mi corazón*.” And then one of his hands drifts lower under the waistband of my pants and thong. “I’ve missed you so fucking much. Your face. Your smile. Your body.” The moment his fingers touch my clit, I can’t help but groan out loud. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard those noises coming from your throat.”

I stare at the door and wonder out loud, “Someone could come in.”

“Let them come in. Nothing will stop me from tasting you right now, Aria.”

And with those words spoken, he pulls my pants down and moves my thong to the side before his tongue delves in between my folds. I ground myself by digging my fingers into his hair, and he growls from the sharp bite of my nails into his scalp.

He eats me like a man starving for my taste, and it turns me on even more. I can feel my wetness coating my thighs. I've been so desperate for his touch over the past few months.

"Tell me I'm the only one who's ever tasted you."

I can't help but smile at his possessiveness. "You're the only one. No one touched me while we were apart." And then I confess, "I didn't want anyone else. Only you."

My words seem to spur him on, and he flicks his tongue rapidly over my clit, sending me soaring.

"Oh god, Mateo!" I groan.

Suddenly, he pulls his mouth away and stands at his full height, towering over me. I swallow hard as I stare up at him, his eyes dilated and full of hunger.

He moves me over to the bed in the center of the room, ridding me of the rest of my clothes as we go, and then gently pushes me down onto the comforter. I sit there patiently like a good girl while I watch him undress. And when he frees his cock from his boxer briefs, my mouth practically waters at the sight.

"See something you like?" he asks with a smirk as his hand closes around his thick shaft, stroking himself.

I grin widely. "Oh yes."

He steps in between my open thighs and draws me closer to him before he teases me with his cock running up and down the length of my slit. "Have you been aching for my cock, *mi corazón*?" he asks.

"Yes!" I cry out, biting my lip to keep from cursing him for teasing me and not giving me what I truly want.

"Then let me give you what you've been craving."

When he enters me, the feeling is almost indescribable. It feels so familiar but so strange at the same time. We've been apart for far too long, but my body still remembers his.

He doesn't take me softly or slowly, and I don't expect him to. No, he's already gone, lost in his pleasure as he fills me to the hilt and takes what he

wants, rutting inside of me and groaning against my neck before sinking his teeth into my skin, marking me.

“Mine,” he growls against my skin before soothing the sting with his tongue.

“Yours,” I agree with a sigh.

“And I’m yours, Aria,” he breathes. He pulls back, and I watch his eyes go to my baby bump. A possessive look is in his eyes as he runs his hand over it. “Fuck, you’re so beautiful, so fucking sexy.”

I can’t help the blush that rushes to my cheeks. Most days I feel bloated and disgusting, but the fact that he finds me sexy and beautiful makes my heart soar inside my chest.

“I want you pregnant. Always,” Mateo confesses as his hips flex.

“Let’s have this baby first and then see what happens,” I try to compromise.

He frowns at my response but then nods his head in agreement. Leaning down, he places his lips against mine and kisses me, putting all of his emotions into that kiss. When he pulls back, I can see an undecipherable emotion written all over his face right before he confesses, “Aria, I love you.”

Tears fill my eyes as I desperately try to blink them away. “I love you, too, Mateo. So much.”

A deep moan rumbles from inside his chest as he captures my mouth with his again. He fucks me slow and deep then, sending me closer to the edge. “Come for me, *mi pequeña cautiva*.”

His words are my undoing, and I break apart, shuddering underneath him as he holds me through my bliss. He whispers terms of endearment in his native tongue while I cry out his name. And then he finds his release, his body trembling against mine.

Then, he gently pulls out of me and lays down on the bed, motioning for me to join him. I eagerly go to him, placing my head on his chest as I listen to his racing heartbeat. Just hearing his beating heart has my own soaring. I thought I lost him forever. And just having him here, having him a free man who can be with me and our baby is almost too good to be true. It’s almost like a dream.

Wanting to be absolutely sure, I reach over and pinch my arm. “Ouch.”

“Did you just...pinch yourself?” Mateo asks me.

“I wanted to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

A deep chuckle rumbles through his chest. "Maybe I should pinch myself too." I watch with a smile on my face when he does it. "Nope. This is real, baby," he says with a satisfied grin.

We lay there in silence for a while until our breathing and racing heartbeats return to their normal rhythm. And then Mateo tells me, "I'm never leaving you again."

Sitting up, I stare down at him. "Promise me," I say in all seriousness.

He reaches up and gently pushes a stray hair behind my ear. "I promise. I'm all yours."

"Forever."

"Forever and always," he swears.

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EPILOGUE



Aria

Seven months later...

I WALK INTO the backyard of my parents' compound. It's beautifully decorated with earthy tones, tulle, lights and a wooden wedding arch right in the middle of the butterfly garden. When my brother told me about wanting to get married in my parents' backyard, the pessimistic side of me never thought it would work. But now, after seeing everything put together, it's absolutely perfect. This is the place where he and Selina met and fell in love, after all.

A familiar cry has me turning my head and looking in that direction. Mateo is holding our daughter, bouncing her and cooing, trying to get her to settle. She'll be three months tomorrow, and she's brought nothing but love and light into our lives.

After Mateo was legally declared dead, for all intents and purposes, we moved to the suburbs in Eastern Pennsylvania where life has been calm and quiet — the complete opposite of what we'd both been accustomed to.

And while I don't see Mateo buying a minivan anytime soon, he's taken to the suburban life better than I thought he would. We regularly visit my family, and Mateo even works remotely for my father as part of his team that helps women and children escape human trafficking. I know he's not

used to being on the other side of the law, but he doesn't complain. In fact, I would even venture to say he actually loves his work and enjoys the slower pace of things most days. I know he definitely likes not having to look over his shoulder all the time.

"I think Little Lucy misses her mommy," Mateo says as I approach. He's dressed in a black suit with a black shirt and matching tie. I swear he'll never own any other color, but I definitely don't mind and never want him to change. The tall, dark and handsome look suits him so damn well.

I happily open my arms and take our daughter. I hold her close to me and stare down at her adorable face. She has my eyes and her daddy's smile — a perfect mixture of the both of us. We named her Lucita after Mateo's youngest sister, and I think the name suits her perfectly. And considering her name means *little light* in Spanish, it's even more fitting.

I calm our baby down, having learned a few tricks over the past month or so thanks to some parenting forums I've become obsessed with; and soon she's back to smiling and being the little angel she normally is.

"I thought I heard Lucy crying," my brother says as he approaches us with Selina following close behind.

Selina looks absolutely radiant in her ivory, full-length vintage gown. And my brother looks as handsome as ever in his dark brown tux.

"Lucy is so adorable in her little purple dress," Selina says with a huge smile before putting her hands out to hold her.

"What if she spits up on your wedding dress?" I worry.

"So what's a little vomit from my niece? Hey, maybe it will be good luck," she quips.

"We don't need luck," Nico reminds his bride to be. He looks upon Selina so adoringly that I would be jealous if I didn't, in fact, get that same look from Mateo every time I see him glancing in my direction. It's a look of pure, undiluted love. The kind of love I only ever read about in romance novels or saw in the movies before I met Mateo.

I hand Lucy over to Selina, and she's a natural. I don't know if the two of them are planning on having children or not, but they would make great parents. And even if they don't have any of their own, they're going to be an amazing aunt and uncle to their niece. I'm so lucky to have them in our daughter's life.

Just then, a flash of navy blue catches my eye, and I see Renato walking into the backyard with a blonde on his arm. She's tall and insanely

gorgeous. And I can see the diamond on her ring finger glistening in the sunlight from here.

Renato looks in my direction, and I give him a smile. He nods over to the corner of the property, wanting me to join him. So, I tell everyone I'll be right back before heading over to a secluded part of the party where people are going to be taking pictures under a giant weeping Willow tree.

"Hey," Renato says in greeting.

"Hey."

I haven't spoken to Renato much over the past several months. After our talk when I got home, he decided to take another job for my father, no longer wanting to be my bodyguard. I didn't blame him for not wanting to be around me, but I must admit that I missed him.

I'd still consider us friends, but we're definitely not as close as we once were. I think the time apart did us both good; however, because he ended up finding a girlfriend, whom he adores and proposed to a few weeks ago. She said yes, of course, because she'd be crazy not to. Renato is quite the catch. He just wasn't meant for me.

"I heard you and Leona got engaged. Congratulations," I say with a smile.

"Thanks." He stares at the ground with a shy grin on his face before he looks up and meets my gaze.

"I'm glad you're happy," I tell him. And I mean that wholeheartedly. Renato and I were on the same path for a long time before fate intervened and we went down very different paths. And now that we've both found our way out on the other side, I'm thrilled, for the both of us.

"I feel the same way," he admits. "And you are, right? Happy?" he asks.

I glance back at Mateo, who is currently staring invisible daggers into Renato. I can't help but grin at my boyfriend's jealousy. I'm sure he'll take it out on me in the bedroom later...and I can hardly wait. Blushing, I turn back to Renato and bite my lip to contain a laugh. And then I tell him, "Yes, very happy."

"Good. That's all I ever wanted for you, Aria."

And maybe I'm throwing fuel on the fire, but I don't care. I lean into Renato and hug him tightly. He hesitates, but eventually puts his arms around me. "Thank you for being there for me every time I needed you," I whisper into his ear.

“Of course. That’s what friends are for,” he tells me with a grin when we part.

And that’s exactly what we are. What we’ve always been. At the end of the day, we were always friends before anything else.

“Go back to your girl,” I say. “I’m sure she’s wondering where you ran off to.”

“Yeah.” He gives me a nod, and it feels like something settled between us. I can’t explain it, but I think we needed to have this little talk to clear the air. “See you around, Aria,” he throws over his shoulder as he walks away.

“See you.”

I return to a deceptively calm Mateo. As soon as I’m within arm’s length, he wraps his hand around my elbow and pulls me in close. “Friend of yours?” he asks.

“That was Renato,” I explain.

Mateo’s eyes narrow in understanding. He knows everything about my past. “Ah, I see.” And then he leans down and whispers into my ear, “If we weren’t surrounded by all these people and if this wasn’t your brother’s wedding, I would bend you over my knee, spank your ass red, and then show you who you belong to.”

I gasp, my heart stuttering in my chest. “Can you show me later?” I question breathlessly.

A growl rumbles low in his chest as he stares down at me with a look that screams I’m a delicious meal and he’s a ravenous man. “Oh yes, *mi pequeña cautiva*. Definitely later,” he promises.

He hasn’t called me *his little captive* in a while, and I can’t help the shiver that runs through my body and straight to my core. Mateo smirks and then winks. The bastard knows exactly what his words do to me.

The string quartet begins to play, and someone announces that the ceremony is about to begin. Selina rushes Lucy back into my arms before instructing us to take our seats in the front row.

Watching my brother and Selina get married has me crying more than Lucy ever has in the time since she’s been born. Just seeing them up there, exchanging their beautiful vows and staring into each other’s eyes has my heart pitter-pattering. It took them so long to get to this point.

Who knew that when they met as teenagers, they would someday reunite, fall in love and get married. Their love is the kind of love that people write about or only dream of. They have endured so much to get

here. But it was all worth it in the end, because now they will finally have the happily ever after that they both deeply deserve.

When the preacher announces them as husband and wife, everyone cheers and claps. After the ceremony is over, all of us, including the newlyweds, move to the giant tent that's decorated with lights. We eat, drink and enjoy each other's company as the party goes on in the background.

All too soon it's time for Selina to throw the bouquet, and the DJ calls out on the microphone for all the single ladies. Mateo eagerly takes Lucy from me and tells me to join them.

Technically, I'm not single, but I guess not being married yet qualifies me. I feel like an idiot standing there with several cousins that look like they're half my age. One young girl beside me, who can't be more than twelve, scoffs at me and says, "I'm catching that bouquet."

"Game on," I challenge her, suddenly feeling very competitive.

And when Selina turns her back on us and whips that bouquet in the air, I go for that thing like my life depends on it. I almost take a nosedive but save myself at the last second and hoist the bouquet up in the air as people around me applaud my valiant effort. The twelve-year-old beside me huffs in disappointment, and that makes it all worth it.

The DJ announces, "Looks like the sister of the groom will be the next one getting married!"

Suddenly feeling embarrassed, I stare down at the bouquet. I just wanted to catch the damn thing. I didn't even think about the meaning behind it all.

Mateo hasn't even proposed yet, and I don't know if he ever will. Not that I even expect him to or want him to. Everything has been perfect the past several months. And if nothing changes, I would still be as happy as I am right now.

"That was amazing," Mateo says with a grin when I approach him. "I thought you were going to tackle that little girl and make her cry."

"I would have if she would've gotten in my way," I declare.

That earns me a dark chuckle. "Savage," he says.

When I set the flowers down, I notice that Lucy has a small box in her hands she's fumbling with. "What is that?" I ask.

"Open it and see," Mateo says cryptically.

Taking the small box, I open it and stare at the diamond ring inside. It's beautiful with a huge diamond in the middle surrounded by tiny little diamonds on the gold band. My eyes shift from the ring up to Mateo's gaze. "Are you doing this because I caught the bouquet?" I question.

A smile twitches on his lips. "No, it's not because you caught the bouquet, *mi corazón*. I've had that ring for months. I was going to wait until the perfect moment...but the timing just hasn't been right."

"Now is perfect," I inform him.

"Yeah?" he asks with a cocked brow.

I nod my head.

He slips the ring out of the box with his free hand and holds it out. "Will you marry me, Aria? Will you be mine forever?"

I watch as he slips the ring onto my finger. Tears fill my eyes as I blink up at him. "Yes and yes."

He leans down, and we hold Lucy between us as our lips meet in a heated kiss. She begins to squirm, and we laugh, breaking our embrace. I look up at him and then down to our daughter. *Our little family*.

"I love you," I tell him, meeting his dark eyes once again.

"I love you, too." He cradles Lucy in his arms and stares down at her with such adoration that it almost takes my breath away.

"I wouldn't change a thing, just so you know," I confess.

His eyes meet mine. "Me either," he agrees.

We exchange a knowing look with one another. Even though our relationship started off tumultuous and unconventional, it all led us to this very moment. Who knew that being kidnapped and sold at an auction to the highest bidder would turn into this? Just when I thought my entire world was coming to an end, it was actually just beginning. Mateo turned my life upside down for the better. And I can't imagine going on this crazy journey called life without him by my side.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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