CHAPTER 14: THE GHOST WAS THE MAYOR

It didn't strike Elena Cruz all at once.

It seeped in slowly, a poisonous tide rising by inches—scents, sounds, fragments of memory floating like splinters in her mind, waiting for a spark to ignite them into clarity.

The photograph arrived unmarked, slipped beneath her apartment door like a secret confession.

Black and white. Grainy, distant, captured from a fire escape vantage.

Vivien. Mayor Falco.

Outside The Pyramid Rose—a jazz club with a reputation dirtier than the alley behind it. Vivien stood against the brick wall, cigarette between two fingers, her eyes distant, fixed inward on a private worry. Falco leaned close, mouth near her ear, his hand barely grazing her spine. He wasn't caressing her. He was instructing her, guiding her toward whatever performance he expected inside. Vivien looked bored, annoyed—not intimate, but compliant. Oblivious to the subtle ring glinting on Falco's finger, the faint scent of expensive cologne he wore like armor.

Elena stared for a long, frozen moment. That faint, expensive cologne drifted into her memory, subtle yet lingering. Not Old Spice or some cheap aftershave—it was refined, discreetly powerful, something worn by men who wielded control. The same subtle scent had haunted her sheets after that night tangled with Vivien. She'd assumed it belonged exclusively to Falco, but now doubt crept into her mind. It wasn't unique to him—it belonged to all the men Vivien hunted.

Her heart hammered, panic surging. She remembered the file she’d secretly reviewed—the file on Ellis Monroe’s murder. The vague references to an unidentified cologne, a distinctive ring described by one frightened witness. Pieces of a puzzle she hadn’t yet solved—until now.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for the phone, her breath ragged, desperate for answers.

Vivien answered quickly, voice quiet but tense. “Elena?”

"Vivien," Cruz started, her voice edged with accusation. "The cologne, the ring—I saw a photo of you and Falco. Were you working with him? Was he involved with Ellis?"

There was a sharp silence. “Falco?” Vivien sounded confused, caught off guard. “No, Elena. I wasn’t working with him. Ellis borrowed money—from Falco’s people. It was supposed to be simple, to help us get out of this city, build something new. But Ellis got in too deep. He found things he wasn’t supposed to see—corruption, crimes Falco and his circle committed. We started gathering evidence to protect ourselves, to expose Falco’s hidden life. I never thought Falco would be the one to...” Vivien’s voice broke, grief cutting sharp.

Cruz’s voice tightened, realization dawning. “All these men—the ones you've killed—they're all connected, aren’t they? The cologne, the ring—you've been following a trail, hunting them down, trying to find Ellis's murderer. But you didn’t know exactly who it was.”

“Yes,” Vivien whispered, voice thick with sorrow. “I’ve been chasing shadows. Each man led me closer, but never close enough. Ellis gathered evidence against them all—photos, documents, recordings. It's hidden safely in my apartment. After losing him, I couldn't face it again. I couldn’t bear hearing his voice, seeing his handwriting. It was too much.”

Cruz’s breath shook, urgency rising in her voice. “Vivien, you have to show me the evidence. I can help. We can end this.”

“No, Elena,” Vivien said sharply, desperation clear. “If something happens to me, you’ll know where to find it. But right now it’s too dangerous. These men won’t hesitate to kill to keep their secrets buried.”

Cruz's heart clenched with raw emotion. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“You might not have that choice,” Vivien answered quietly, the line falling dead, leaving Cruz alone in aching silence.

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Tony Marchello’s burnt motel room reeked of ash and ruin. The bed was blackened, sheets charred, a crucible of violence and loss. Tony’s scorched body sprawled grotesquely, silk bindings melted into his wrists. A smear of lipstick survived, miraculously untouched, a vivid red kiss on his ruined cheek—Vivien’s signature.

Gallagher stood beside Cruz, tie undone, sweat staining his collar, eyes narrowed, watching her every move with suspicion. His posture radiated impatience, a man unaccustomed to real work, someone who preferred comfortable answers and quick conclusions.

“This feels different,” he muttered, irritation evident in his voice. “More personal. Like you know something you’re not telling me.”

“It was personal,” Cruz replied, forcing calmness into her tone, keeping her eyes deliberately neutral.

Gallagher stepped closer, lowering his voice, a note of menace creeping in. “You know, Cruz, lately you've been running your own show a bit too much. And I’m starting to wonder why. What's got you so wrapped up in this one?”

Cruz met his gaze evenly. “I’m just doing my job, Ray. Maybe you should try doing yours.”

Gallagher’s eyes flashed angrily, his voice dropping to a growl. “Careful, Elena. There's talk, whispers from upstairs. Falco wants answers. Fast. I’ve seen him looking at you—looking at me. He thinks someone in our house isn't playing fair.”

Cruz stiffened, a surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins. Gallagher’s connection to Falco had always been rumored, his laziness and complacency more sinister now that suspicion bloomed. She chose her words carefully. “Maybe Falco should worry less about cops and more about who he's spending his time with. Plenty of dangerous men wear his cologne, don’t they?”

Gallagher stared at her, hostility evident. “You’d better watch your step, Elena. You're stepping on the wrong toes, and soon enough, there won’t be anyone around to help you.”

He turned abruptly, storming out and leaving Cruz alone in the wreckage. She stared at the lipstick mark, vivid and accusing. The faint cologne lingered, memories of Vivien’s words tumbling through her mind. She saw the masked figure clearly now—expensive scent, glinting ring, Vivien’s expression frozen in horror and recognition.

Her pulse quickened with grim determination. Every instinct screamed urgency—time was running out.

She had her clarity now. Falco had always been the ghost haunting their steps.

It was time for her to confront him directly—to end the haunting once and for all.