

My-Ex Watches Me Marry His Rival -

☐ Full Story Below!

For three long years, I loved only one man my silent protector, Xander Thorne.

I gave him everything: my trust, my secrets and one night, my body.

But when morning came, so did his betrayal.

Don't pretend it meant something, Athena. You were never that innocent.

He threw me out. Broken. Humiliated. With nothing but his cruelty ringing through the hollow corridors of the compound like a gunshot that never stopped echoing.

Worse?

He belonged to her.

Jessica Valcruz. My stepsister. The golden girl with a crown of lies and a heart carved from black ice. The bastard daughter my father's mistress bore him in secret, then smuggled through our gates like contraband. The one my father raised as his principessa while I scrubbed marble floors in silence, invisible as the ghosts that haunted the servants' wing.

So when Jessica rejected a blood-alliance marriage to the most dangerous man in Europe, I took her place.

"I'll marry Killian Arrows."

"I agree to marry Killian Arrows."

The words fell like spent casings onto the polished obsidian table.

The study was dim, curtains drawn against the afternoon light, the way my grandmother preferred it. Old oil paintings of Valcruz patriarchs lined the walls, their dead eyes watching from gilded frames. The air smelled of bergamot and cold authority.

My grandmother, Victoria Valcruz, didn't look up. A silver spoon clinked against bone china as she stirred her espresso with the unhurried precision of a woman who had survived three assassination attempts and two federal investigations without ever raising her voice.

"You are bluffing, aren't you?" she said, finally glancing at me. Her voice could have frosted the rim of her cup. "The other families will love it. The press will worship the fairytale. You will wear the ring, play the Don's bride. But behind closed doors?"

She finally met my eyes. Hers were the pale grey of a winter sea, and just as merciless.

"You will be nothing but a broodmare. A vessel to carry the heir. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"I know," I replied, and my voice did not waver. "And I accept."

She tilted her head, something close to disgust passing through her expression, the way one might regard a stray dog that had wandered into a formal dining room. "So that's it. You will warm the bed of a killer just to buy your name into a legacy that never wanted you?"

I met her gaze, unfazed. "Wasn't it you who once suggested marrying me off to that eighty-year-old real estate mogul whose last wife mysteriously drowned in a champagne bath? Gregory Carson, wasn't it? The one whose own son can't stand to be in the same room with him?"

I let the silence do its work, then added, "I am making it easy for you. Selling myself off to the highest bidder."

Killian Arrows. Il Diavolo in Dior. The Don of the Arrows Dynasty, the oldest and most feared crime family in Europe, with tendrils that reached into every continent, every port, every shadow where power changed hands. He had walked out of a maximum-security federal facility just three weeks ago, on charges no witness had dared testify to confirm. The photographs of his release had made front pages from Rome to New York: the immaculate charcoal suit, the eyes like polished obsidian, the faint indentation on his wrists where the silver cuffs had been.

They called him the Devil in Dior.

And now he would call me wife.

His family wanted a marriage to maintain their bloodline, to forge a transatlantic alliance with the Valcruz name. But my father's beloved daughter, Jessica, had refused. She had wept and screamed and thrown crystal against the walls of her bedroom like there was no tomorrow, and my father had folded like the weak, dissolute man he had always been.

She always had the luxury of saying no.

Unlike me.

Victoria finally leaned back in her leather chair. The study creaked around her, old wood settling, as if the house itself deferred to her movements. "You are that desperate for attention? Trying to prove your worth?"

"No," I said. "I am doing this because you need the Arrows Empire. And I am the daughter no one noticed until you needed a name to sign on the dotted line."

She studied me. Cold. Calculating. The way a consigliere studies a deal before deciding whether it's worth the blood it will cost.

"This could work," she murmured, more to herself than to me. Her fingers traced the rim of her cup. "A noble sacrifice. The other families will respect it. The press will adore it, and soon the Valcruz holdings will recover. The Arrows' protection alone would keep the wolves from our door." Her eyes sharpened. "Yes. Very well."

"I want compensation."

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Excuse me?"

"I want half of your private estates. Thirty percent of Valcruz shares. And fifty million dollars. Cash."

Victoria's mouth twitched, just slightly, the only crack in a mask she had worn for sixty years. "That would make you richer than your uncles combined."

"I am not asking." I rose from my chair. The leather sighed beneath me as I stood, and for the first time in my life, I looked down at the woman who had ruled this family from the shadows. "Even if you refuse to recognize me, I am still the legitimate daughter. The one born of the bloodline. Jessica is an illegitimate bastard my father's mistress smuggled through the gates."

My voice cracked but did not falter.

"If I am going to chain my body and soul to a man who may never love me, just to save your crumbling empire from being absorbed by every rival syndicate circling this family like vultures, then I will be paid. For every year you made me invisible. For every year I slept in the servants' quarters while the bastard wore my mother's jewels."

"You ungrateful brat"

"Ungrateful?" I let out a breathless laugh, one that sounded far too close to a sob. The sound of it surprised even me, raw and jagged in the stillness of that dim study.

"I was raised in the servants' wing, scrubbing dirty floors on my knees while Jessica wore diamonds to galas and kissed the rings of men who didn't even know my name.

Don't talk to me about gratitude, Grandmother. You wouldn't recognize it if it kissed your hand."

I turned to leave. My heels clicked against the hardwood, each step deliberate, measured. Then I paused at the threshold, one hand on the carved mahogany doorframe.

"One more thing," I said, and my voice was bitter and choked, thick with something I refused to let fall. "Reassign Xander to Jessica."

"The soldier?" Victoria asked. There was a flicker of something behind her eyes. Curiosity. Perhaps amusement. "The one you shielded with your own body when your father tried to have him whipped? The man for whom you once refused to eat for four days until his punishment was lifted?"

She gave a short, dry laugh, the sound of old cruelty dressed in silk. "I thought you were in love with him. Even when he used you like a tissue and threw you aside."

My throat tightened. Unshed tears glistened in my eyes, catching the dim light of the chandelier above like shards of something broken.

"I thought that too."

With that, I left.

Three days ago, a bottle of wine and a reckless, aching heart had led me to Xander's quarters on the far side of the compound. The hallway had been dark, the guards rotated to the east wing, and the silence was the kind that made bad decisions feel like fate.

The next thing I knew, his mouth was on mine, searing and desperate, and I was confessing everything. Every word I had swallowed for three years. Every look I had memorized. Every moment his hand had brushed mine and I had told myself it meant something.

And then, in one of the most vulnerable moments of my life, I gave him everything. My love. My soul. My virginity. I surrendered it all to him in the dark of his room, believing with every fractured piece of my heart that he felt the same.

I woke to an ice-cold bed the next morning. The sheets beside me were already smoothed flat, as if no one had ever lain there. As if I had dreamed the whole thing.

Xander stood near the mirror on the far wall, his broad back toward me, already dressed in his tailored black suit. He adjusted his cufflinks with the slow, mechanical precision of a man preparing for a routine day. Composed. Emotionless. As though the night before had been nothing more than an entry in a logbook, already filed and forgotten.

"Now that you are up, get dressed and leave." His voice cut the silence like a blade drawn across stone. "You are not supposed to be in my room."

That was it.

No worry. No tenderness. No whispered words of love or a careful hand asking if I was in pain from the night before.

Nothing.

I sat up slowly, clutching the sheet to my chest. My heart pounded so violently I could feel it in my throat, in my wrists, behind my eyes. The room felt enormous and airless at the same time, the walls pressing in while the distance between us stretched into something vast and uncrossable.

"Xander" My voice was barely a whisper. "I told you I love"

"Love?" He turned slowly. The morning light from the narrow window caught the hard line of his jaw, the flat emptiness in his eyes. His muscles were taut beneath the suit jacket, coiled, as though even facing me required restraint. "Yesterday was a drunken mistake, Miss Athena Valcruz. I would advise you not to throw a tantrum over it."

The words landed like a fist to the sternum.

I stared at him. The man who had wiped my tears in the garden when I was seventeen. The man who had stood between me and my father's belt without flinching. The man who had remembered my birthday with a single white rose left on my windowsill when my own blood forgot I existed.

That man was gone. Or perhaps he had never been there at all.

My knees buckled slightly as I rose from the bed. Each step toward him was like walking barefoot across shattered glass, every fragment cutting deeper than the last.

"Was it all nothing to you?" I asked, reaching out. My fingers trembled in the air between us, but he wouldn't even look at me. His gaze stayed fixed on his reflection, adjusting a collar that didn't need adjusting. "You stayed by my side for three years. You wiped my tears when I had no one else. You remembered my birthday when even my own family didn't"

"I did all of that because it was my job." His voice was flat. Final. The voice of a man reading terms of a contract. "I am your bodyguard. Nothing more."

His eyes met mine at last. Sharp. Distant. Unrecognizable.

"Don't romanticize this, Athena. I never saw you as anything but a responsibility. A duty I was assigned. A body I was paid to protect."

My breath caught. The room tilted.

"And the way you dress the way you act" He added, and now his words turned to knives, each one forged with deliberate, surgical cruelty. He looked at me with something worse than anger. Disdain. "Don't pretend last night was some sacred moment. You flirt like it's second nature. It's not like you were a goddamn virgin to begin with."

I reeled.

The air punched out of my lungs as if he had driven his fist into my chest. The room blurred. The blood drained from my face so fast that my vision darkened at the edges, and for one terrible moment I thought I would collapse right there on his floor.

He didn't know. He didn't even care enough to notice.

Without warning, his hand closed around my wrist. His grip was bruising, fingers digging into the thin skin over my pulse, and he dragged me toward the door like I was something foul he needed to remove from his quarters. Like dirt beneath his polished shoes.

"Don't confuse attention for affection, Athena." His voice was quiet. The quietness was the cruelest part. "That's where women like you always go wrong."

The door slammed shut behind me.

The sound echoed down the empty corridor of the compound like a gunshot, and then there was nothing. Just silence. Just the cold marble beneath my bare feet and the faint smell of his cologne still clinging to my skin like a brand.

I crumbled. Right there, on the floor outside his door, I shattered. Sobs tore out of me in ragged, animal sounds I didn't recognize as my own. I pressed my forehead to the cold stone and wept until there was nothing left, utterly used and discarded, a thing that had served its purpose and been thrown away.

But somewhere beneath the wreckage, beneath the humiliation and the heartbreak and the taste of salt on my lips, something else stirred. Something harder. Something that had been forged in twenty years of silence and neglect and sleeping in the servants' wing while the bastard daughter wore my mother's pearls.

Everyone had chosen to abandon me.

My father, who loved his illegitimate child more than the daughter of his own blood. The man who had used my body and thrown me out like refuse. The family who had never once, in all my years under their roof, considered me their own.

This time, I would be the one to decide.

This time, I would be the one to walk away.

My grandmother Victoria Valcruz had always given Jessica everything. The billion-dollar inheritance. A perfect coming-out ceremony at the annual Syndicate gala, her photograph placed in every society column from New York to Naples as "The Valcruz Principessa." A curated rise through the criminal aristocracy, draped in Valentino and dripping with lies.

So I knew, with the certainty of a woman who had learned to read the cruelty in silence, that she would finally give me this: a wedding full of thorns.

As anticipated, an envelope arrived the next morning.

It was delivered not by post but by a man in a black suit who said nothing, placed it on the table in the servants' wing where I took my meals, and left without meeting my eyes. The envelope was heavy, cream-colored stock, sealed in blood-red wax bearing the Arrows crest a coiled serpent wound around a crown, its fangs bared, its body forming the letter A.

I stared at it for a long time. My fingers trembled as I broke the seal, the wax cracking like a small bone.

MARRIAGE CONTRACT

Athena Valcruz and Killian Arrows

Status: Approved

Along with the contract was a letter addressed to me. The handwriting was severe and precise, each letter formed with the discipline of a man who had signed death warrants with the same hand.

I will come to receive you in three days. A private villa has already been prepared. Bridal fittings are scheduled. Our marriage is in two weeks.

Killian

The wedding ceremony. In two weeks.

I placed the letter down on the desk, my hand numb.

So this was it.

I had been sold. Again.

Just this time, it was my own voice that had sealed the bargain and that single act of supposed agency made me realize what I had always known but refused to name: this family never accepted me from the beginning. I was not a daughter. I was inventory. A name on a ledger to be traded when the accounts ran dry.

I left the servants' wing and walked down the long hallway of the Valcruz compound, the corridor lined with oil paintings of men who had built this empire on blood and loyalty virtues my father possessed neither of. My footsteps echoed against marble floors that I had scrubbed on my hands and knees as a child while Jessica ate breakfast in the sunroom. I was walking through the architecture of my own erasure, reminiscing on the life I was about to throw away, when I came across Xander's room.

And the noises stopped me cold.

Low pants. Masculine moans. The sound ignited the atmosphere of the hallway like a match touched to gasoline raw, ferocious, shameless. The kind of sound that belonged behind locked doors in the dark hours, not bleeding through the walls of a family compound in the pale light of morning.

My hand reached for the door handle.

I opened hell.

Xander was sitting shirtless on the edge of his bed, his back partially turned to me, muscles taut beneath skin that gleamed with sweat. His hand was buried between his legs, his eyes half-closed, his jaw clenched, lost in a pleasure so consuming he hadn't heard the door. The room smelled of turpentine and musk and something feral.

Papers were scattered everywhere. The floor. The bed. The desk. Sheets and sheets of them, some crumpled, some pristine, all covered in charcoal and graphite.

My eyes widened as I stumbled back.

Jessica.

He had drawn her face in every angle. Laughing, her head thrown back. Looking over her shoulder with that coy, practiced expression she wore like armor. Hair tousled like she had just rolled out of someone's bed. Profile. Three-quarter view. Close-up of her lips. Close-up of her eyes.

And then there was something more.

Sketches of her nude.

Not crude or pornographic, but intimate. Soft curves rendered with a reverence that made my stomach turn. In one image, she was lying on her back, her head turned slightly, mouth parted as if mid-whisper. In another, her arms stretched above her head, a silk sheet barely covering her thighs, the graphite smudged where his fingers had lingered over her form.

I stood frozen as Xander lifted one particular sketch Jessica topless, back arched, one hand resting on her collarbone and kissed the paper softly. His lips pressed against the charcoal image of her throat, and a moan of pleasure filled the room, guttural and aching.

"Jess Jess"

I felt everything inside me sink. Collapse. Not like a building falling, but like the ground itself opening beneath my feet, swallowing me into a darkness that had been waiting patiently for years.

He hadn't just used me.

He had never even seen me.

Then his phone buzzed on the nightstand. He reached for it with his free hand, his breathing still ragged, and answered without looking at the screen.

"No," he said gruffly, his voice thick. "I can't return to the Family until she's mine. I want her at my side as my queen. Jessica is my everything."

I choked on my breath.

The Family.

Xander Thorne.

My heart froze completely. The blood in my veins turned to ice water, and for a moment the hallway tilted, the paintings on the walls blurring into smears of gold and shadow.

Xander Thorne. The Don of the Thorne Syndicate. One of the most powerful crime families on the Eastern Seaboard.

My once-betrothed. The man I had been blood-promised to through an old family pact sealed before I could walk a man I had never seen, whose face had been kept from me by design. The man who had shown up at my mother's funeral not to mourn but to make a public declaration, standing before the gathered families and calling me "unworthy of his blood." He had broken the pact in front of every Don, every Consigliere, every

soldier who mattered, and I had stood there in my black dress with dirt still under my fingernails from the grave, and I had said nothing.

A tear escaped my eye.

He had been beside me this whole time. Three years. A new name. A new face or perhaps the same face I had simply never been shown. He had walked into the Valcruz compound disguised as a low-ranking soldier, a bodyguard, a nobody, and I had welcomed him like a lamb to slaughter.

"I am only here for Jessica," he continued into the phone, his tone dropping into something casual and dismissive, the way men in this world spoke about things that didn't matter. "Always was. Athena? Still throwing herself at me like a dog in heat. You think I would waste three years on Athena if it wasn't for the bigger picture?"

Tears streamed down my face as a dagger twisted in my heart, driven deep and turned with precision.

"She is useful and lonely. That's what makes her easy. Always trying to seduce me, wearing those clothes it is almost like she is a prostitute."

I couldn't breathe. Couldn't feel my legs. The wall was the only thing holding me upright, and even that felt like it might give way.

Three years. Three goddamn years. I had let him into every corner of my life. My schedule. My insecurities. The location of my mother's ashes, which I kept in a small urn hidden in the back of my closet because no one in this family would give her a proper place on the memorial shelf. He knew when my panic attacks came, knew the triggers, knew the way my hands shook before they started. He knew which vintage I reached for after brutal sit-downs with the family's associates, and he had poured it for me in silence, and I had mistaken that silence for loyalty.

I thought he was stone. Unmoved by glitz and glamour. A soldier who saw through the gilded corruption of this world and chose to stand beside me anyway.

But all this time, he had been chasing her. The reason my mother died of heartbreak.

The day my mother found out that my father had kept a mistress had fathered a second child and hidden her in an apartment across the city something in her snapped. I was there. I witnessed it. She stopped eating first. Then she stopped speaking. Then she began scratching at her own skin until she bled, dragging her nails down her forearms as if trying to claw her way out of her own body.

I was eight years old when they took her to the psychiatric wing of a private hospital. The men who came for her wore white coats, and they held her arms gently, but her

eyes found mine over their shoulders broken, hollow, already gone. She looked at me for the last time, and I didn't understand then that it was the last time.

One day, she walked into the sea wearing pearls and never came back.

They called it "an accident." The family released a statement. Victoria Valcruz wore black for exactly one week.

Jessica moved into the compound the following Monday. Took my room. Slept in my bed. Called my mother "that unstable woman" at the dinner table while my father said nothing and my grandmother poured more wine.

She framed me at ten for trying to push her down the stairs. My father slapped me across the face in front of the servants the crack of his hand against my cheek echoing through the foyer, and not a single person in that house moved to stop him. The soldiers looked at the floor. The housekeepers turned away. I learned that day what Omert truly meant. It was not just silence about the Family's crimes. It was silence about everything.

I should have walked away. Should have screamed when Xander chose her. And yet I stood in the doorway, frozen, my tears still wet on my face, my breath still caught in my chest.

Xander turned.

Our eyes met.

He didn't flinch. There was no shock in his expression, no guilt, no flicker of recognition that I had just heard every word. He looked at me the way a man looks at a servant who has entered without permission mild irritation, nothing more.

He saw that I had looked at his body, and he dressed himself without a shred of shame or haste, pulling a shirt over his shoulders and buttoning it with steady fingers, his eyes never leaving mine. Not with heat. Not with cruelty. With nothing. Absolute, devastating nothing.

"Even if I am your guard, knock before you enter, Miss Valcruz."

Miss Valcruz.

As if he hadn't memorized the sound of my footsteps in every hallway of this compound. As if he hadn't learned the pattern of my panic attacks the way my breathing shortened first, then my hands, then the tunnel vision. As if he didn't know exactly how I liked my wine after sit-downs that went badly: a Barolo, no more than two glasses, poured in silence.

As if he hadn't held me when I collapsed on the bathroom floor the day I lost my mother's estate in the probate courts the last thing she had left me, the only proof she had ever existed outside of my memory. He had found me whimpering on the cold tile, thrashing like a ragdoll, and he had gathered me into his arms and held me until I went still. I had thought it meant something. I had thought it meant everything.

He moved to pick up his sketchbook from the bed, wiping the cover carefully, reverently, as if it were a holy relic, before tucking it into the drawer of his nightstand.

I could no longer bear the silence. My voice came out steadier than I expected, a mask I had learned to wear in a house that punished weakness.

"Tomorrow is an event I am organizing. You have to follow me as my bodyguard."

"Will Miss Jessica come?"

My heart shattered completely. I looked at him with my eyes wide, and for a moment the room blurred, the scattered drawings swimming in my peripheral vision like ghosts.

"W-What?" My voice cracked. "It's a tribute for my mom for her death anniversary! Do you think I would invite that wench?"

As soon as my words reached his ears, Xander's face darkened instantly. His jaw tightened. His eyes went cold, not with anger directed at the memory of my mother's suffering, but with something protective and territorial a wolf hearing its mate insulted. Not for the mother who had raised me in a back room of the servants' wing while Jessica had nannies and riding lessons and a closet full of designer gowns. No. His darkness was for Jessica. Always for Jessica.

"Follow me tomorrow. It is an order." I turned to leave, my throat burning with acid and unshed screams.

Then, as if to make sure the knife twisted fully, as if the universe demanded I understand the completeness of my humiliation, I heard him mutter under his breath as I walked away.

"She's still chasing me." His voice was low, almost amused. "Thinks one night in my bed changed anything. It's pitiful."

I stopped walking.

He didn't know I heard.

Didn't care if I had.

For him, I was just the stepping stone. A lonely, desperate girl from a powerful family, useful for proximity, useful for access, useful for the intelligence I unknowingly fed him about the Valcruz operations while he positioned himself closer and closer to the woman he actually wanted. I was the unlocked door. Jessica was the treasure behind it.

I left the door open behind me.

Let the cold air from the hallway blow through into his room, scattering the edges of his precious drawings, and I told myself as I walked back toward the servants' wing that everything was coming to an end.

The contract was signed. The Arrows crest was pressed into wax. In three days, a car would come for me, and I would leave this compound and never return.

I was going away from the chaos.

And if the place I was going was worse if the Devil in Dior was crueller than the devils I already knew then at least it would be a different kind of darkness.

At least it would be mine.

The next evening, Xander stood waiting at the bottom of the marble staircase, his hand extended the way it had been every night for three years steady, expectant, a gesture that had once made my heart stutter with foolish gratitude.

I walked past him without a word.

It was the first time. The first time in three years that I had not placed my fingers in his palm, had not let him guide me down those steps like a porcelain thing he owned. My heels struck the marble with a sound like small, deliberate gunshots.

He froze. It lasted only a second a flicker of something unreadable moving behind those dark eyes before the mask settled back into place, smooth and impenetrable as polished stone.

He said nothing. He simply followed, sliding into the car opposite me like a stranger sharing a cab. The partition between us and the driver was already raised. The leather interior smelled of bergamot and cold money. Neither of us spoke.

It was my night.

The Valcruz Legacy Showcase.

REVIVE.

My first collection. Six gowns that had taken me years to create years of stolen hours in the servants' wing, years of fabric hidden beneath floorboards, years of sketching by candlelight because the electricity in my quarters was cut after ten. Every thread was a wound I remembered. Every stitch held a name I could not say aloud.

The collection was my love letter to a woman the world had tried to erase.

To a girl who was eight years old and utterly alone when she watched her mother stop wanting to live.

At the showcase the most anticipated event of the season, held in the gilded ballroom of the Valcruz family's waterfront estate with every Don, Consigliere, and connected name in attendance my gowns began to appear one by one beneath the crystalline chandeliers.

Ariadne. The dress in pink, soft as a blush, soft as the youthful love my mother had once carried for my father before she understood what he truly was.

Descent. A bird in a cage of ivory silk. The moment my mother realized that Don Mason Valcruz had married her for her fortune, for the money that would fund his crumbling syndicate, and nothing more.

Unspoken. Cerulean blue, the color of bruises hidden beneath long sleeves. The season my father's mistress was discovered and my mother was locked in her rooms for creating a scene as if grief were a breach of Omert.

Inheritance. Midnight-black, embroidered with barbed vines that crawled up the bodice like living things. Strength passed through pain, passed through blood, passed through the silence of women who endured.

Resurrection. A scarlet blaze cut high and fierce, the neckline slashing across the collarbone like a wound that refused to close. The fire she lit in me before she was gone.

The applause swelled with each reveal. I could feel it in my chest the validation, the vindication, the proof that I had survived and made something beautiful from the wreckage.

But then the clapping intensified into something thunderous as my final piece appeared, and thousands of guests rose to their feet, cheering and applauding and my face went pale as a ghost.

My stepsister Jessica stepped onto the stage.

She was wearing the final masterpiece.

Love.

A gown I had stitched with trembling hands, tears slipping onto the fabric in the dark hours before dawn. It held a piece of my mother actual strands of her hair, the last I possessed, sealed inside the antique brooch at the collar. Her heartbeat lived inside that gown. The last physical trace of the woman who had given me life, who had fought for me, who had died with my name on her lips.

My mother's dress.

On her killer's daughter.

My ears rang. The ballroom tilted. The chandeliers above swam into streaks of gold and I could not breathe, could not think, could not do anything but stare at the way Jessica moved across that stage in my mother's gown like she had been born to wear it like she had any right to touch something so sacred.

"No!" I choked out, stumbling forward through the crowd toward the stage. Bodies parted around me. I could feel the stares, the whispered judgments, the weight of a thousand eyes belonging to people who had never once looked at me with kindness. "She's not supposed to wear that she can't! No!"

A hand seized my wrist.

The grip was bruising. Precise. The kind of hold a man learns when he is trained to restrain without leaving marks that show above a cuff.

I whipped around, on the verge of shattering completely, and saw him.

Xander.

His fingers dug into my skin, pressing against the thin bones of my wrist with a pressure that would leave violet fingerprints by morning. His gaze was unreadable that terrible, beautiful face carved from something harder than stone, those dark eyes watching me the way a handler watches a dog that has slipped its leash.

"Let go of me!" I hissed, my voice shaking with a rage so immense it felt like it would split me open. "That dress has my mother's hair in it! My mother's killer is wearing a piece of her do you understand that? Do you understand?"

But Xander didn't flinch. Not a muscle moved in that jaw. Not a shadow of remorse crossed those eyes.

"Don't cause a scene, Miss Valcruz." His voice was low, controlled, and cold enough to freeze the blood in my veins. "This isn't about you."

I staggered back, snapping my wrist from his hold with a violence that sent me stumbling. My entire world collapsed inward like a building detonated from within the walls falling, the floors giving way, everything I had built crumbling into dust and silence.

That was when a voice boomed across the ballroom.

A man stepped forward in an immaculate black uniform, his bearing military-precise, his shoes polished to a mirror shine. The crowd parted for him the way water parts for a blade.

"My name is Pietro." He bowed with an elegance that belonged to another century. "I serve as head of household for Don Xander Thorne, of the Thorne Syndicate."

A murmur rippled through the ballroom like a shockwave. Glasses stopped halfway to lips. Conversations died mid-syllable. The Thorne name carried a weight in these circles that bent spines and silenced rooms.

Pietro continued, his voice carrying to every corner of the gilded space. "The Don believes that all beautiful things in this world should belong to their rightful owner. These gowns can only have one master, and that is Miss Jessica."

Jessica pressed a gloved hand to her chest, her eyes widening with practiced surprise, her lips parting in a performance so flawless it could have fooled the saints themselves.

"Oh..." She breathed into the microphone, her voice trembling with manufactured humility. "I had no idea Don Thorne would show me such favor. I'm just... I'm honored. I've never had the privilege of meeting him in person, but I would dearly love to arrange an audience. To thank him for such extraordinary generosity."

The crowd swooned. Camera flashes erupted like artillery fire, strobing across the ballroom in blinding white bursts.

"Xander Thorne?" The whispers spread like wildfire through dry brush. "Everyone knows the name, but he's never made a public appearance never shown his face at a single gathering. And to think Miss Jessica already has him wrapped around her finger?"

"The Don of the Thorne Syndicate must be completely taken with her. To think she caught the attention of that kind of power..."

My steps faltered. The floor beneath my heels felt like ice slick, treacherous, ready to give way.

"What the hell is this?" I asked, low and sharp, barely breathing. The words scraped out of my throat like broken glass.

Before I could reach the stage, event staff emerged from the wings and wheeled out chrome racks. My five remaining gowns Ariadne, Descent, Unspoken, Inheritance, Resurrection were shoved onto cheap plastic hangers. Not handled with gloves. Not even handled with care. Fabric that I had spent years perfecting, that I had wept over and bled for, treated like clearance rack castoffs.

Pietro's voice rang out once more, each word a nail driven into my coffin.

"All six pieces have been exclusively gifted to Miss Jessica by our master, Don Xander Thorne." A pause deliberate, surgical. "The Don has also instructed me to convey that Miss Athena should learn her place and cease her persecution of the innocent Miss Jessica."

The ballroom gasped. A collective intake of breath that sucked the air from the room and left me standing in a vacuum. Every eye turned to me not with sympathy, not with curiosity, but with the cold, appraising calculation of people deciding which side of a war to stand on. I was a specimen in a cage. An object lesson. A woman being publicly dismantled by a man whose name alone could end bloodlines.

Jessica looked around the room, her expression a masterwork of wounded innocence.

"Sister?" Her voice was small, fragile, perfectly pitched to carry. "Please don't... don't be angry, okay? I'm sorry. I never wanted to steal your spotlight." Her eyes were wide and glistening, and every person in that ballroom believed her. Every single one.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to tear the gown from her body with my bare hands and cradle it against my chest and run until there was no one left to watch me break.

But Xander stood behind me, close enough that I could feel the heat of him, watching me with the detached precision of a judge passing sentence. He did not speak. He did not need to. His silence was its own verdict.

He looked at me like I was an eyesore. Like I was a stain on the evening that needed to be wiped clean. Like this was a necessary punishment for not inviting Jessica, for calling her a wench, for daring to have something that was mine and mine alone.

His wrath was precise.

Public.

Humiliating.

I bit my tongue so hard I tasted blood. It pooled hot and copper against my teeth, and I swallowed it down the way I had swallowed everything else for twenty years silently, completely, without a trace.

The event ended. The lights dimmed. The guests filed out in their furs and their diamonds, already composing the gossip they would spread across every family table by morning. And just like that, all my gowns were gone. My name erased from the program, from the credits, from the story entirely. As if I had never existed. As if Revive had never been mine.

I had nothing left.

Turning away, I did not watch Xander looking at Jessica like a lovestruck man his dark eyes softening for the first time all evening as she approached him with that practiced, trembling smile. I did not see the sly curve that replaced her innocence the moment she thought no one was looking, the viper's grin of a woman who had won again and knew it.

I drove alone.

The car wound through darkened roads, past the city lights, past the last of the streetlamps, into the countryside where the old farmhouse stood on the edge of collapse its roof sagging, its windows dark, its bones held together by nothing but stubbornness and memory.

I went to the garden.

My mother's garden. The one she had fought to keep when the family wanted to demolish it for an underground vault a storage facility for weapons and product that would have buried her roses beneath concrete and steel. She had stood in the doorway of the greenhouse with her arms spread wide and refused to move, and for once for the only time I could remember my father had relented.

The jasmine had bloomed early.

I stood beneath it in heels and ruin, the white petals catching the moonlight like scattered pieces of a life that would never be whole again. I looked like a woman who had been left with nothing. Because I was.

And I cried.

Not polite tears. Not the silent, dignified weeping of a woman who knows she is being watched. These were the deep, wrenching sobs that shook the body from its foundation the kind that crack ribs and steal breath, that come from the deepest, most lightless corner of a girl who was broken before she ever had the chance to be whole.

Not because I had loved Xander like a fire in winter like warmth, like survival, like the only light in a house full of shadows and he had taken that very same fire and used it to burn me alive.

Not because the crowd had adored Jessica like she was the heroine of this story and marked me as the villainess, the jealous sister, the bitter woman who could not bear to share.

But because I was letting go.

Of all the love I had ever held for anyone in that place. Every scrap of devotion I had stitched into those gowns, every prayer I had whispered into the dark, every time I had reached for a hand that was never there. I was letting it go all of it and the emptiness it left behind was so vast and so complete that it felt like dying.

The screams that echoed through my mother's garden went unanswered.

The jasmine swayed in the night wind, indifferent and beautiful, and no one came.

No one ever came.

Two days.

That was how long I remained sealed inside my room on the third floor of the servants' wing, folding what little I owned into a single leather valise and preparing to disappear from the Valcruz compound forever.

I ate nothing. The water I drank tasted like rust. My body hollowed itself out until the hunger became indistinguishable from the grief both just dull, constant pressure behind my ribs. But the strange mercy of those forty-eight hours was this: the wounds that had been screaming since the night my legacy was signed away to a stranger had gone quiet. Not healed. Numbed. The way frostbite kills the nerve before it kills the limb.

A knock came.

"Athena?" Jessica's voice drifted through the oak door, honeyed and precise the tone she reserved for moments when she knew someone might be listening from the hall.

I didn't move. Didn't speak. My hands continued folding a wool cardigan that had belonged to my mother.

The door creaked open anyway.

Jessica stepped inside as though the room belonged to her as though every room in this compound belonged to her, which, by now, it effectively did. She wore a champagne-colored dress that caught the low light from my single window, her dark hair pinned with a jeweled clip that I recognized. It had been my mother's too.

"Sister, I know you have been going through things," she said, each word measured and sweet as candied poison, "but it's my birthday, and everyone is asking where you

are. You have to come downstairs and greet the guests. Even if Father is angry with you you are still his daughter."

I said nothing. I pulled another blouse from the wardrobe and laid it flat on the bed.

"Athena please?" She tilted her head, and the jeweled clip caught the light like a wink. "I'm just trying to keep the family together."

And then another voice followed.

Deeper. Colder.

His.

"Where are you going? Why can't you act normal for once"

"You are my servant, not my master." The words left me before I could measure them, cutting through the stale air of that room like a stiletto drawn from a sheath. "No need to forget your place."

Xander froze in the doorway. His face emptied of expression the way a man trained in violence learns to empty it not calm, but controlled. A mask pulled tight over whatever seethed beneath. He stood in a dark suit with no tie, his shoulders filling the frame, and he looked at me with the flat, assessing gaze of a soldier who had decided I was not worth the ammunition.

I hadn't seen him since that night. The night he sat in my father's study and watched my birthright get bartered away like contraband at a dockside auction.

"Miss Athena, you have everything," he said finally, his voice dropping into the formal register he used when others could hear. "The Valcruz name. The fortune and legacy. You don't need to compete with your sister or bully her." A pause. His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "The least you can do is show up for one night. Just behave."

I laughed.

It broke out of me bitter and raw and more painful than a sob, scraping against my throat like broken glass. The sound didn't belong in that room. It didn't belong anywhere.

Behave.

Jessica sniffled on cue, her lashes glistening with tears so perfectly timed they might as well have been choreographed. "Xander, you are my sister's bodyguard and friend, so please help me I just want Athena to come downstairs. Everyone's talking"

I turned my face toward the window.

If I looked at either of them for another second, I was going to scream and if I screamed, I would not stop.

"Get out," I said. My voice was hoarse and dull, scraped hollow. "I will be there."

Because the only thing worse than being broken was letting them see it.

The ballroom of the Valcruz compound had been transformed.

Soft pink and gold draped every surface silk bunting cascading from the vaulted ceiling, walls dressed in arrangements of pale roses so thick their perfume hung in the air like a narcotic. Crystal chandeliers cast their light downward in shimmering curtains, and the marble floor gleamed like the surface of a frozen lake. Laughter floated through the room, thick and sickly sweet, mingling with the clink of champagne flutes and the low murmur of men whose smiles never quite reached their eyes.

Every family of consequence on the Eastern Seaboard had sent someone. Capos and their wives. Consiglieri in bespoke suits. Associates who ran legitimate fronts restaurants, import companies, construction firms all gathered under the Valcruz roof to celebrate the birthday of a girl who had no true blood-claim to the name embossed on the invitation.

And then I heard him.

My father.

Laughing.

Proud.

"So, the Thorne heir himself came chasing after my Jessica!" Don Mason Valcruz beamed to a circle of men in black tuxedos, a tumbler of aged scotch catching the chandelier light in his hand. His face was flushed with the particular glow of a man who believed his own mythology. "Xander Thorne, of all people. The Don of the Thorne Syndicate, right here in my house. I always knew my daughter was special."

Someone in the circle a silver-haired Capo whose name I didn't catch asked about me.

My father didn't hesitate.

"Athena?" A wave of dismissal passed over his face, casual as brushing lint from a lapel. "She is a troublesome child. Not like Jessica. Incomparable to that well-behaved girl. Always in conflict, always needing attention. A headache since the day she was born."

I froze. The words sank their claws into my throat and held. Still, I stood there in the shadow of a marble column at the far edge of the ballroom, invisible to everyone, listening to my own father erase me from the family portrait with the ease of a man crossing a name off a ledger.

Then Jessica's voice rang out over the microphone at the front of the room.

"Everyone!" she sang, her tone bright as a bell in a cathedral. "I want to say something before the cake!"

The crowd gathered, drawn like moths to her manufactured glow. Men straightened their ties. Women tilted their heads. Even the soldiers stationed along the walls shifted their attention toward the small stage where Jessica stood bathed in rose-gold light, a vision of innocence in her champagne dress with my mother's clip glinting in her hair.

She smiled sweetly, her gaze sweeping over the assembled faces until it landed on me in the shadows. She beckoned me forward with a delicate wave of her fingers, as though I were a prop she had positioned for this exact moment.

"I know things have been tense," she said into the microphone, her voice soft and saintly, pitched to carry just the right tremor of vulnerability. "But I want you all to know that my sister and I have made amends."

I blinked.

She turned to me, her eyes wide and glistening with false emotion. "I am sorry if I made you angry and jealous, sister. My intention was never to compete with you. No matter how much you hated me, I have always looked up to you" She pressed a hand to her chest. "Because at the end of the day, we are sisters."

The guests murmured. Heads nodded. Women dabbed at their eyes. The narrative was perfect the gracious, forgiving younger sister extending an olive branch to the bitter, jealous elder. Jessica had always understood that in this world, perception was the only truth that mattered.

She smiled like she had just performed a miracle. "I just want us to be a family again." Her eyes found mine across the room, luminous and lethal. "Don't you, Athena?"

My lips parted, but I had no voice. The words were trapped somewhere beneath the rubble of everything she had already destroyed.

She turned back to the cake a towering confection of white fondant and sugar roses and sliced it with elegant precision before lifting the first bite on a silver fork.

"To my sister," she said sweetly, raising the fork like a toast. "May she one day find peace and purpose."

She stepped closer and offered the fork to me.

I didn't take it.

Her whisper reached only my ears, so close I could smell her perfume jasmine and something darker, something chemical.

"That's the last thing you will ever taste as part of this family, bitch." The sweetness evaporated from her voice like steam. What remained was ice. "First your mother was thrown out, and now it's time you follow her. Your father isn't your own. Your ex-fianc is running after me like a man possessed. And even your bodyguard the one you loved has chosen me above you. You are nothing."

My eyes burned bloodshot red, the tears pressing against them like a tide held back by crumbling stone. Every instinct in my body screamed at me to break to shatter in front of all of them, to give Jessica the satisfaction of watching me crumble on the marble floor of her birthday celebration.

I would not.

I spun on my heel, ready to walk out of that golden hell, to disappear through the service corridor and never look back.

And that was when it happened.

My dress tugged a sharp, violent pull at the base of my spine, as though a hand had seized the fabric and wrenched.

Then

SNAP.

Air hit my bare back like ice water.

Gasps tore through the ballroom a collective intake of breath that silenced the string quartet, the laughter, the clink of crystal, everything.

The weight of silk slid down my body in a merciless wave, the fabric pooling at my waist and then lower, baring my skin to the chandelier light. My breasts were exposed. My arms. The vulnerable architecture of my ribs.

I clutched the fabric to my chest, but it was too late.

Cameras flashed. The sharp, staccato bursts of light exploded from every direction phones raised like weapons, capturing the moment with the hungry precision of vultures descending on a carcass.

A low whistle cut through the silence. Then another. Men openly gawked, their eyes crawling over me with a lecherous hunger that made my skin feel like it was being peeled away strip by strip.

My arms shook as I tried to pull the ruined dress back up, my fingers scrabbling at the fabric, but the clasp was gone. Not broken. Cut. The severance was clean, deliberate, and cruel a razor's work, executed with surgical precision sometime before I had put the dress on, or in the press of the crowd when I hadn't felt the hand at my back.

I knelt on the cold marble floor, tears spilling down my face, the dress gathered against my chest in a desperate bundle.

Behind me, Jessica gasped as though she were the one who had been attacked.

"Oh no, sister!" she cried, her hand flying to her lips with practiced horror. "Athena why would you do something like that? Is this for attention again?"

The crowd turned.

Their faces melted together shock, curiosity, disgust, amusement a carousel of expressions spinning around me as I knelt on the floor of my father's ballroom, half-naked and trembling, while two hundred guests watched and did nothing.

And then

He moved.

Xander.

From the far edge of the room, his tall frame cut through the frozen crowd like a blade through still water. His gaze locked onto mine. Cold. Distant. He came forward with the measured stride of a man performing a duty he found distasteful, and yet he did not shield me. Did not step between me and the cameras. Did not raise his voice to silence the room.

He shrugged off his jacket a dark, beautifully tailored thing like he was shedding an inconvenience.

And then he dropped it at my feet.

Not on my shoulders. Not around me. Not with any gesture of protection or tenderness.

At my feet. Like it was a choice I didn't deserve but was being granted anyway.

A gesture that said: Cover yourself. You have embarrassed us all.

I knelt there and grabbed it with shaking hands, tears tumbling down my cheeks in absolute devastation, pulling the jacket over my trembling frame. It smelled like him sandalwood and cold air and something metallic, like gunmetal and the scent nearly broke me more than the humiliation had.

The room fell away in blurred edges and muted laughter as Xander guided me toward the exit. No words. No comfort. Just the pressure of his hand at my elbow, firm and impersonal, as though I were a disturbance to be escorted out quietly before I caused any further embarrassment to the evening's proceedings.

We reached the hallway, and I tore away from his grip and rushed into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind me and locking it with fingers that could barely close around the bolt.

My back hit the cold tile wall, and I slid to the floor. The marble bit into my bare thighs as I clutched Xander's jacket around me like a makeshift shield, pulling it tighter, tighter, as though I could disappear inside it. My breath came ragged and broken. My hands wouldn't stop trembling. Shame crawled up my spine like something alive a colony of fire ants marching beneath my skin, burrowing deeper with every heartbeat.

Hot tears traced burning paths down my face, and I pressed my forehead to my knees and wished with a desperation that bordered on prayer that the earth would open beneath me and swallow me whole.

Then I heard Jessica's voice outside the door.

The crying. The trembling, theatrical sobs of a woman performing grief for an audience.

"W-Why would my sister do that?!"

"The way she acts" Xander's voice came next low, clipped, and cold as a blade laid flat against skin. "Like it means nothing. Like stripping in front of hundreds was a performance she was proud of. That is something an innocent person like you will never understand, Miss Jessica."

Then came the words that pierced my heart like knives driven slowly between the ribs.

"I can't believe a woman could act with so little self-respect," Xander muttered, his voice carrying through the door with merciless clarity. "Who takes their clothes off like that? For what attention? Sympathy? A moment in the spotlight?"

I stared at the bathroom floor. The tiles blurred. The walls pressed inward.

"I mean, she has always been an attention-seeker framing you, acting like a" He paused, and the pause was worse than the word that followed. "A prostitute." His voice was flat. Final. The verdict of a man who had already closed the case. "But tonight

proved it. No woman with dignity would do something like that. She exposed herself in front of everyone."

The words were bullets.

One.

After.

Another.

Each one punching through whatever was left of me, shattering bone and marrow and the last fragile membrane of hope that maybe maybe someone in this compound saw me as I truly was.

He truly thought I chose this. That I had planned the humiliation. That I wanted eyes crawling over my skin, wanted to be reduced to something less than human in front of a ballroom full of made men and their wives and the soldiers who would carry this story to every corner of the underworld by morning.

I pressed Xander's jacket to my face and breathed in the scent of the man I had loved the man I had given my heart to in the foolish, desperate belief that someone in this family of vipers might protect me.

To think I loved this kind of man.

To think I gave him my heart.

I was full of regrets each one heavier than the last, stacked inside my chest like stones in a drowning woman's pockets.

Loving him was the biggest mistake of my life.

Inside the bathroom, my breaths came in shallow, ragged bursts, each one scraping against the walls of my throat like broken glass. But with the last shred of strength left in my body, I forced myself upright, my trembling legs threatening to buckle beneath me.

The mirror offered no mercy.

The woman staring back was hollowed out. Foundation cracked along the lines of dried tears. Mascara bled in dark rivulets down cheeks that had gone the color of ash. The bones of her clavicle jutted against skin pulled too tight, and her lips were bitten raw.

But her eyes. Her eyes were on fire.

Something ancient and furious had crawled up from the deepest pit of her humiliation and set itself ablaze behind those irises. It was the look of a woman who had been pushed past the point where pain could touch her, into that cold, luminous place beyond it.

I smoothed the ruined dress around my body as tightly as it would go, pressing the fabric against my skin like armor. Then I pushed the bathroom door open and walked out.

The hallway stretched before me, dimly lit by sconces that threw long amber shadows across the marble. The distant thrum of the ballroom still pulsed somewhere below, but up here, the silence was thick enough to choke on.

Xander stood ten feet away.

His body had gone rigid the instant I appeared, every muscle locked beneath the tailored lines of his charcoal suit. His arms were folded across his chest, jaw clenched so hard the tendons in his neck stood out like cables. He was positioned beside Jessica, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched, and the sight of them together sent a fresh wave of nausea rolling through me.

He was watching.

Waiting.

And for one fractured moment, something shifted behind those cold, calculating eyes. A hairline crack in the mask. The faintest tremor of doubt, surfacing against his will.

What if she didn't plan it? What if the dress tearing wasn't deliberate?

The thought rose unbidden, sharp as a blade pressed to his own throat.

No. That can't be true.

He buried it.

"Miss Valcruz."

His voice was measured, controlled. The voice of a man accustomed to giving orders and having them obeyed without question. The voice of the Don of the Thorne Syndicate, even when he stood disguised in the borrowed skin of a soldier.

I walked past him as though he were nothing. As though he were a piece of furniture. As though the man who had once been blood-promised to me had ceased to exist entirely.

In the very next motion, without breaking stride, I peeled his ink-black jacket from around my shoulders. The jacket he had draped over me. The jacket that still carried the warmth of his body and the faint, infuriating scent of sandalwood and gunmetal.

I held it out at arm's length.

And dropped it into the large waste bin at the side of the corridor. Right in front of him. The expensive fabric crumpled against coffee grounds and discarded napkins with a soft, damning sound.

Silence cracked open like a bone.

Xander's lips parted. Just barely. A fraction of an inch. Something moved through his expression, fast and unreadable. Confusion. The ghost of regret. A flash of something that might have been annoyance or might have been the first sting of shame. His hand twitched at his side, fingers curling inward as if he wanted to reach for the jacket, or for me, and couldn't bring himself to do either.

I didn't care anymore. I was past caring. I had crossed some invisible threshold and there was no returning to the other side of it.

"Miss Athena!"

The voice came from behind me, breathless and worried. Paolo. The old butler who had served the Valcruz compound since before I could walk. One of the few people in this godforsaken estate who had ever spoken my name without contempt. He came hurrying down the corridor, his aged face creased with alarm, his eyes taking in the mascara, the ruined dress, the trembling of my hands.

"Paolo." My voice came out low. Eerily steady. "What happens to insolent servants who gossip behind their masters' backs?"

The old man straightened, his expression shifting to something careful and grave. He understood the weight of the question. In this world, in our world, words carried the same weight as bullets.

"They are punished, Miss Athena."

I didn't answer him. My heart wasn't calm. It was a furnace, stoked by hurt and rage and a sorrow so deep it had no bottom. Every humiliation, every whispered insult, every year spent in the servants' wing while Jessica wore my name and my birthright like stolen jewelry, all of it was fuel, and it was burning now, burning white-hot behind my ribs.

I turned.

Xander was still standing there. Still watching me with those unreadable eyes, arms folded, jaw set, the very picture of cold authority. A man who commanded an empire from the shadows. A man who had once been promised to me by blood.

A man who had called me a whore.

I didn't hesitate. Not for a heartbeat.

My hand flew.

CRACK.

The sound of my palm meeting Xander Thorne's cheek split the hallway like a gunshot. It rang off the marble walls and the vaulted ceiling, louder than the ballroom music still pulsing below, louder than Jessica's theatrical gasp that followed half a second later, her manicured hand flying to her mouth in a performance so rehearsed it was almost art.

Xander didn't flinch.

He stood frozen, his head turned slightly from the force of the blow. The mark bloomed across his cheekbone, vivid and red against his skin. A handprint. My handprint. Branded onto the face of the most powerful Don on the Eastern Seaboard.

The air in the corridor turned to ice. Somewhere behind us, I sensed Paolo go absolutely still, as if his body understood before his mind did that he was witnessing something that could never be undone.

Xander's jaw clenched. A muscle jumped beneath the reddening skin. His eyes, when they finally cut back to mine, were dark and turbulent, a storm system building behind glass.

But I leaned in. Close enough to see the individual flecks of amber in his irises. Close enough that my breath ghosted across the mark I'd left on his face.

My voice shook. Low and full of venom, each word a blade I'd been sharpening for years.

"Who the hell are you to decide my worth?" I hissed. The words came from somewhere deeper than my throat, somewhere deeper than my chest. From the marrow. "Who gave you the right to determine my character and then call me that?"

My voice cracked on the last word, splitting down the middle like a fault line. But I didn't break. I refused to break. Not here. Not in front of him. Not in front of her.

"A prostitute?" The word tasted like poison leaving my mouth. "Really? After everything I gave you? After every time I protected you, after every blow I took that was meant for you, after every secret I kept and every lie I swallowed to keep you safe... you humiliate me like this?"

Something shifted in his eyes. A flicker. Guilt, maybe. Or the first tremor of recognition, the dawning awareness that he had made a catastrophic error. His lips parted as though he wanted to speak, wanted to offer some defense or explanation.

But I wasn't done.

I wasn't anywhere close to done.

"Out of everyone who has ever hurt me," I whispered, and the bitterness in my voice could have corroded steel. I stepped closer, close enough that the heat of his body pressed against the cold of mine, my breath trembling against his jaw. "Out of every person in this family who beat me, starved me, locked me in the dark, told me I was nothing... you?"

I let the word hang between us like a noose.

"You are my biggest regret." My eyes burned into his. "Because even a dog never bites the hand that feeds it. But you... you are worse than a dog, Xander Thorne."

The name landed like a slap of its own. His real name. Not the alias he wore in this compound. Not the borrowed identity of a low-ranking soldier. His true name, spoken aloud in a corridor where anyone might hear, and I watched the shock register across his face like a crack spreading through stone.

"This house has never been a safe haven," I continued, my voice dropping to barely a whisper, trembling with the weight of truth. "And the woman you are chasing so desperately, the woman you have thrown everything away to protect... you have no idea who she is."

I looked at Jessica. Just for a moment. Just long enough to see the flicker of panic behind her carefully composed expression, the reptilian calculation in her eyes as she tried to assess how much damage I could do.

I turned back to Xander.

"But you are a fool who will never believe it. Not until she makes you fall to the very depths of hell."

Xander's eyes, those eyes that always remained so perfectly calm, so maddeningly indifferent, so controlled that they might as well have been carved from marble, now

blazed with something raw and unguarded. Shock. And beneath the shock, something worse. The first cold tendril of doubt wrapping itself around his certainty and squeezing.

"Athena..."

My name in his mouth. Spoken softly. Almost involuntarily. As if it had been pulled from him against his will.

I turned around and left.

My heels struck the marble with the finality of a judge's gavel, each step carrying me further from the man who had destroyed me and closer to the only sanctuary I had ever known in this prison of a compound: the small, bare room in the servants' wing that they had graciously allowed the legitimate daughter of Don Mason Valcruz to call her own.

The door closed behind me.

And I shattered.

The composure I had held together with nothing but fury and spite collapsed the instant I was alone. I crumpled against the door, sliding down until the cold wood pressed against my spine and the floor met my legs, and the sobs came, violent and ugly and uncontrollable. Every muscle in my body convulsed with the force of them. The humiliation replayed behind my closed eyes in merciless detail: the dress tearing, the flash of cameras, the laughter, the gasps, Xander's face as he called me a prostitute, Jessica's satisfied smile glowing like a lit match in the dark.

I pressed my fists against my eyes until I saw stars, trying to push the images out, trying to claw my way back to that cold, burning place where the pain couldn't reach me. But it was gone. The fire had burned through its fuel and left only ash and ruin.

Minutes passed. Or hours. I couldn't tell.

When the worst of it had subsided, when my breathing had gone from ragged sobs to the hollow, hitching rhythm of someone who had simply run out of tears, my mind spiraled toward the inevitable.

The media.

With trembling fingers, I reached for my phone. The screen swam before my eyes, blurred by residual tears, and I blinked hard until the icons sharpened. I opened the news feeds. Social media. The gossip channels that circled the elite families like vultures, always hungry, always watching.

My stomach clenched with preemptive dread. I was certain, absolutely certain, that every feed would be flooded with images of my exposed body, with mocking headlines

and vicious commentary. The legitimate daughter of the Valcruz family, stripped bare at her own father's gathering. They would make me the joke of the century. The humiliation at the party was just the beginning; the real destruction would come from the photographs, shared and reshared until every person in every family from New York to Palermo had seen what was done to me.

I braced myself and scrolled.

Nothing.

I scrolled again.

Nothing.

My brow furrowed. I switched to another news outlet. Then another. Then the underground channels that trafficked in syndicate gossip, the ones that no amount of money could usually silence.

There was not a single mention of the incident. Not a photograph. Not a whisper. Not even a blind item. It was as if the entire event had been surgically excised from reality, cut out of the evening's narrative with the precision of a scalpel and discarded.

My phone buzzed in my hand.

A message. No sender name. No number. Just a block of text from an anonymous source, the encryption so sophisticated that even the notification looked different from any message I had ever received.

[Anonymous: No pictures. No traces. No news. Not even a single thing will leak outside. Those who wronged you today, remember their faces. They will pay their debt in blood.]

My tears stopped.

My eyes widened.

I read the message again. And again. And a third time, each word searing itself into my memory like a brand pressed to skin. The language was precise. Deliberate. The phrasing carried the cadence of someone accustomed to issuing death sentences with the same casual authority that other men used to order dinner.

They will pay their debt in blood.

Not a promise. A statement of fact. As though it had already been done.

With shaking hands, I opened the news channels again, scrolling with new purpose, and this time I saw what I had missed before.

[BREAKING: Media House CV Declares Bankruptcy After Sudden Asset Seizure.]

[BREAKING: Renowned Reporter Jason Barrow Arrested on Multiple Counts of Sexual Assault. Court Orders Immediate Trial. No Bail.]

[BREAKING: Valcruz Principessa Jessica Valcruz's American Business Venture Collapses. Estimated Losses Exceed Ten Million Dollars.]

My breath caught in my chest.

I scrolled further. The reporters who had swarmed the event, the ones who had jostled for position with their cameras raised, fighting to capture the most humiliating angle of my exposed body, every single one of them had been dealt with. Some were in prison, suddenly accused of crimes so serious that no judge would grant them bail. Others had simply... vanished. Their social media accounts dark. Their phone numbers disconnected. Their bylines erased from their publications as though they had never existed.

Gone. All of them. In the space of hours.

A chill ran through me, so deep it reached my bones.

This wasn't the work of money. Money could suppress a story. Money could buy silence, could bury an article, could make an editor reconsider. But this was annihilation. This was the systematic dismantling of every person who had witnessed my humiliation, executed with a speed and thoroughness that spoke of limitless resources and absolute, terrifying power.

There was only one organization on earth that operated like this. Only one family whose reach extended into every media house, every courtroom, every police precinct, every shadow where a man might try to hide.

The Spanish syndicate.

The Arrows Dynasty.

My hand pressed against my mouth as the realization settled over me like a shroud.

Killian Arrows.

The Don of the oldest and most feared crime family in Europe. The man they called Il Diavolo in Dior. The man who had just walked out of a maximum-security federal facility as though the walls themselves had opened to let him pass. The man whose blood-bound marriage contract bore my name.

He had done this. All of it. In a single evening. Without being asked. Without being present. From wherever he was, he had reached out with that vast, invisible hand and erased every trace of my suffering from the public record, and then he had turned that same hand into a fist and brought it down on every person responsible.

The media house that would have published the photos: bankrupt.

The reporter who would have written the story: in chains.

Jessica's American venture, the pride of her fraudulent empire: reduced to ash and red ink.

And the photographers themselves, the men who had aimed their lenses at my bare skin like weapons: silenced. Permanently.

I stared at the phone screen until the light blurred and swam before my eyes.

But why?

We had never met. I had never spoken to him, never seen his face outside of the grainy surveillance photographs that circulated in whispered conversations among the families. I was nothing to him. A name on a contract. A political arrangement. A means of securing an alliance with the crumbling Valcruz empire.

Why would a man like Killian Arrows, a man who held the lives of thousands in his hands, who commanded loyalty through terror and respect in equal measure, who had no reason to care whether one discarded daughter lived or died...

Why would he do this for me?

I read the message one final time, my thumb hovering over the words as though I could feel their weight through the glass.

The phone trembled in my grip.

And for the first time in as long as I could remember, the tears on my face were not from pain.

The next morning arrived draped in silence.

Every servant in the Valcruz compound knew what had transpired the night before. Word traveled through these walls the way blood traveled through stone invisibly, inevitably, staining everything it touched. Not one of them dared meet my eyes. They moved around me like ghosts navigating a minefield, their gazes fixed on the floor, their hands trembling as they set down plates of food I had not asked for.

In that eerie, suffocating quiet, I sat at the long mahogany breakfast table, flipping through a magazine without reading a single word, eating my breakfast with the mechanical precision of someone who had long ago stopped tasting anything.

"The Arrows Dynasty has sent word. They will not wait any longer. In three hours, they are dispatching someone to collect you."

The words fell across the table like a verdict. My father Don Mason Valcruz, head of a crumbling empire he no longer deserved to lead had been sitting across from me for half an hour without uttering a syllable. His own plate remained untouched, the eggs congealing, the coffee growing cold. Now he slid a leather-bound folder across the polished wood toward me, his fingers retreating quickly, as though the document itself might burn him.

I opened it.

TRANSFER OF ASSETS

SHARES: Athena Valcruz 30% of all Valcruz holdings

COMPENSATION: \$50 million

PROPERTY: Seventeen estates

I studied the numbers with the detachment of a coroner reading a death certificate. This was the price of a daughter. This was what the Valcruz name had been reduced to a transaction.

"I didn't know," Mason said softly, his voice cracking at the edges like old plaster. "I didn't know you were going to be married to Killian Arrows. Your grandmother made the transfer official and informed every allied family just this morning. It was already done before I" He stopped. Swallowed. His hands lay flat on the table as if he needed the solid wood to steady himself. "I don't hate you, Athena. If you would just be a little more obedient"

"I will not be here anymore to stop you from bringing your mistress into this house."

My voice cut through his like a blade through silk clean, final, and without mercy.

"So go ahead. Bring Jessica's mother here. Install her in my mother's rooms. Give her my mother's place at this table. Give her every last thing that belonged to a woman you destroyed."

Mason Valcruz flinched as though I had pressed a loaded gun to his temple. The death of my mother was a wound this family had cauterized with silence. No one spoke her name. No one acknowledged that she had ever drawn breath within these walls, that

she had loved, suffered, gone mad, and died in the very room where her husband's bastard daughter now slept on her sheets.

They had erased her.

But I had not.

"With this," I said, closing the folder with a quiet, definitive snap, "we are no longer father and daughter, Mr. Valcruz. I am severing all ties. Every bond of blood, every obligation of family. Consider it done." I met his eyes those weak, watery eyes that had looked away from my suffering for twenty years. "Live well with your mistress and your chosen daughter. I release you from the burden of pretending I ever mattered to you."

My tone sliced through the atmosphere of that dining room like a stiletto drawn across a throat. He opened his mouth. His jaw clenched shut. Something flickered behind his eyes guilt, perhaps, or the ghost of it but it was too late and too small and far, far too convenient.

His shoulders stiffened. But he did not argue.

He did not fight for me. He never had.

At the threshold of my room, Xander Thorne stood like a shadow that refused to dissolve in daylight.

The Don of the Thorne Syndicate one of the most powerful crime families on the Eastern Seaboard lingered in my doorway with the stillness of a man who had been trained to command rooms but found himself, for the first time, uncertain of his footing. The slap I had delivered the night before should have made him rage. I had dared to lay a hand on him on him, the heir to an empire built on the bones of men who had shown him far less disrespect. In any other circumstance, that transgression would have demanded an answer.

But my words from the night before had landed somewhere deeper than his pride. Something I had said had breached a wall he kept fortified, and for that for that alone he had taken the slap without complaint.

Now his dark eyes narrowed as they swept across my room. The boxes stacked against the wall. The folded clothes laid in neat rows. The empty perfume trays, stripped of every crystal bottle. His gaze caught on the picture albums I had thrown into the waste bin years of memories discarded like contraband alongside the journals where I had once poured out the small, desperate details of a life no one else had cared to witness.

His voice came low. Frustrated. Edged with something he would never name.

"Athena, you could have at least told me you were leaving. Now I have to wrap everything up in a rush."

I didn't respond. I continued folding.

"You always do this," he muttered, the frustration brewing hotter now, pressing against the restraint he wore like armor. "No warning. No schedule. Just disappearing like the world is ending." He took a half-step into the room, his broad frame filling the doorway. "What's going on, Athena?"

I folded my last scarf a deep burgundy silk, the color of old wine and placed it gently into the trunk. Then I turned and faced him fully.

He was tall. He was powerful. He was the man I had once believed love looked like.

And he was nothing to me now.

"I am leaving for a vacation," I said. My tone was void of emotion, scrubbed clean of every tremor, every crack, every fragment of the girl who had once written his name in those discarded journals. "You don't have to follow me anymore."

His brow furrowed. His voice rose with disbelief.

"What are you talking about?" He knew my history the medical files, the panic attacks that could drop me to my knees without warning, the fragile body that years of neglect and cruelty had hollowed out. He had been assigned to shadow me, to keep me breathing. The idea of me alone, unsupervised, unprotected it went against every protocol, every arrangement. "We had a contract, Athena. It's my duty to follow you around the clock and protect you from any sort of harm"

"And yet you have failed."

The words landed in the space between us like a body hitting marble.

"I don't trust you to protect me anymore." I held his gaze without flinching, without blinking, without offering him a single thread of warmth to cling to. "So the least you can do is follow my orders."

Silence.

Then I reached for the small velvet box resting on my vanity wrapped in navy ribbon, the kind used for gifts between families of standing and held it out to him.

"Bring this to Jessica. From me."

Xander took the box. His fingers pulled the ribbon loose. He lifted the lid.

His body went rigid.

It was as if I had struck him again harder this time, in a place where the bruise would never show. His breath stopped. His jaw locked. His eyes fixed on the contents with an expression I had never seen him wear before.

Inside the box lay a single ornate key forged in old gold, engraved with the Valcruz family crest. It was the key to the heirloom jewelry chest, the one presented to the legitimate daughter of the Valcruz bloodline at her christening. It was more than jewelry. It was recognition. It was proof of lineage. It was the one possession that declared to every family, every ally, every enemy: this is the true heir.

I had guarded it with my life.

"This chest," Xander said slowly, his voice stripped of its usual command. "I remember you crying when Jessica wanted to so much as look at it. You swore you would die before you handed it over." His eyes lifted to mine. "And now you're giving it away?"

"I was foolish to think such things held any value," I said. "Since Jessica wants it so badly, she might as well have it."

Xander stared at me.

His gaze moved over my face bare of any cosmetics, stripped of every artifice and down to the stark black dress that covered every inch of my skin. No jewelry at my throat. No rings on my fingers. No trace of the fiery reds and golds I had once worn like war paint, the bold colors that had been my mother's legacy and my only remaining defiance.

I looked unrecognizable.

I looked like someone who had already left.

For a second just a second his mask cracked. Something shifted behind those dark, guarded eyes, something raw and disoriented, like a man who had been staring at a painting for years only to realize it was a mirror. His heart, that organ he kept locked behind iron and protocol, contracted with a sensation he could not name. A premonition. A wrongness. The feeling of watching someone slip through his fingers while they stood perfectly still in front of him.

"You can send me the location where I need to join you," he said stiffly. His voice had gone formal, clipped the way men spoke when they were fighting to maintain control. "I'll deliver this to Jessica first. And then I'll come to you."

He stood there. Searching my face for an answer that was not coming. Reading the silence for a code he did not possess.

I gave him nothing.

"Go."

And he did.

An hour passed.

I stood before the cemetery gates wrought iron twisted into shapes that might have been angels or might have been thorns, depending on how the light fell. Behind me, a private jet sat on the narrow airstrip that bordered the Valcruz estate, its engines humming with quiet readiness, the kind of mechanical patience that suggested it had been waiting for this moment far longer than I had.

The headstone was simple. My grandmother had wanted marble and gilt. I had insisted on granite plain, unyielding, honest. The only honest thing left in this family.

My mother's photograph was set into the stone, her face caught in a moment of rare, unguarded beauty. She was smiling. I could not remember the last time I had seen her smile in life.

I laid the roses down deep, blooming red, the color of passion and sacrifice, the color she had loved above all others. They looked like small flames against the gray stone.

"Mom," I whispered. "I'm getting married to the man they call the Devil."

The wind stirred the roses. Somewhere beyond the cemetery walls, a bird called out and received no answer.

"And yet," I continued, tears streaming freely down my face, each one falling onto the cold granite like a confession, "it feels half not bad."

I knelt there for a long moment, letting the tears come without shame, without restraint, without the careful composure I had worn like chainmail for twenty years.

"I used to believe love looked like Xander," I said softly. "But it was an illusion. A beautiful, poisoned illusion, and I have discarded it completely." I pressed my fingers to the photograph, tracing the curve of her smile. "From now on, I will be happy. No matter what. I swear it on your name, Mama. I swear it on your blood that runs through me. I will be happy."

The wind answered. The roses trembled. And the dead, as always, kept their silence.

I rose to my feet and pulled out my phone.

Five missed calls from my grandmother, Victoria Valcruz the iron matriarch who had brokered this alliance and was now, perhaps, realizing the full weight of what she had set in motion. Seven from my biological father, each one more desperate than the last, the calls of a man who had never fought for me but could not bear the optics of being seen to let me go. And more than a hundred messages from my younger brothers the boys who had chosen Jessica as their favorite sister because I was too strict, too serious, too much like the mother they had been taught to forget.

Then, at the bottom of the screen:

[Xander: When are you leaving?]

[Xander: When is your flight, Athena?]

[Xander: Send me the address.]

I smiled.

It was not a warm smile. It was not bitter. It was the smile of someone standing on the far side of a bridge they had just set ablaze watching the flames with perfect, terrible calm.

I ejected the SIM card from the phone. Held it between my thumb and forefinger for a moment, this tiny sliver of plastic that contained every thread connecting me to the people who had called themselves my family. Then I tossed it into the grass beside my mother's grave, where it disappeared among the roots and the red petals.

Every contact. Every connection. Every chain.

Severed.

The pilot appeared at the foot of the jet's stairs, tipping his cap with the practiced deference of a man who served families where discretion was not a courtesy but a condition of survival.

"Miss Valcruz, we are ready for takeoff."

I climbed the stairs without hesitation. Without looking back at the cemetery, or the compound beyond it, or the life I was leaving to burn in my absence.

Farewell.

I no longer need you to follow me, Xander.

For I was leaving forever.

