Chapter 9

By: Romualdo R. Chavez

Veronica observed Charlotte with a critical eye, her disappointment grew with each passing minute. The silent matriarch remained stationary near the large bay windows in the back of Villa Teresa’s empty parlor for the past half-hour. Her face a mask of despondence and eyes permanently locked on the busy streets of Havana.

The heated exchange between her children left her a selective mute. Despite Veronica’s best efforts to get her to engage in small talk, she refused to speak. Charlotte did her best to quell the argument, but failed. A valiant effort, but futile nonetheless.

Charlotte’s problem was her innate ability to overlook the cracks in the Blackthorne family foundation. Why she bothered trying to repair them was beyond Veronica’s understanding.

Edward tended to get the brunt of the blame for the family’s current state, but he was not the only one who contributed to this mess. Charlotte was the cause of a major rift, namely her abrupt abandonment. Veronica’s affairs with Nicky and Edward were a mere blip in the grand scheme of things. The ramifications caused more damage than anything else Edward could have done, especially with Ashleigh. Meanwhile, Charles and Nicky were stuck in a constant battle of wills, each one vying for the Blackthorne fortune.

Veronica turned her back on Charlotte and moved toward the serving cart. She picked up one of the full martini glasses, bringing the rim of it to her red plush lips, and gulping down the fruity orange cocktail. The drama between Charles and Nicky left her exhausted, yet relieved it ended as quickly as it started. Neither of them could have subdued the men if it had come to blows. Yet deep down, a fight between the two men enticed her.

*Who would win? Charles? The stocky build, former high school quarterback with an air of arrogance? Or, Nicky, the younger, fit, and surprisingly agile secret lover?* The last thought brought on a flashback of their previous encounter in the library. It was not the first time they had fooled around in there. If it had not been for Ashleigh, they might have made the menacing portrait of Edward Blackthorne blush.

“Thank God Ashleigh had the foresight to send pitchers of alcohol.” She set the empty glass down on the cart and reached over the pitcher.

“A woman of your stature should be mindful of the amount of alcohol she consumes,” Charlotte said, breaking her silence. “It’s not very lady-like.”

“Ah, she’s speaks,” Veronica mused, while pouring. “I was afraid you were—”

“Finish your drink.”

Her words were icy and completely out of character, but not surprising given the circumstances.

Veronica drained her second glass. She turned to face her mother-in-law and expected be greeted with some kind of acknowledgment. Instead, her gaze remained fixed outside. Veronica rolled her eyes.

*What’s going on in that head of yours, Charlotte?* She wondered.

Veronica returned to the pitcher and filled up an additional glass. She wandered over toward the matriarch and extended her arm with the drink in hand.

“If anyone needs a drink, it’s you,” she said.

Charlotte pursed her lips and sighed. “While I appreciate the gesture, I must decline.”

Refusing to take the drink back like one of the manor servants, she clucked her tongue, set the glass down on the window ledge, and returned to one of the antique wing-backed chairs.

“No one would judge you for taking a drink,” she said between sips. “After what we just witnessed, you might find a cocktail is just what you need take the edge off.”

“I prefer to keep myself alert and prepared for whatever Edward might throw at us next.”

*Are you threatened by the possibility of Edward returning?* She wondered.

Veronica turned and set her drink down on a mahogany candlestick table nearby. “Do you really think he’s alive?” She pulled her auburn hair back and put it up in a makeshift bun.

“Five years ago I would’ve said absolutely not.” Charlotte crossed her arms, never taking her eyes away from the window. “Between the embezzlement, the death of his secretary, and the trial, he couldn’t bare another blow. I prayed to whomever was listening that none of us would find him dead one day.”

“You thought he might kill himself?” Veronica winced at the thought.

She chuckled. “No, of course not. Edward may have been a lot of things, but suicidal was not one of them.”

“Then what exactly?”

Charlotte pulled her gaze away from the window and turned towards Veronica. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

“Murder—it’s what I feared the most.”

“You think someone wanted to kill Edward? Why? Who?” The questions rattled off one by one as Veronica tried to wrap her head around the idea of murder. “What could the man possibly have that would make him a target, besides money?”

“Skeletons, Ronnie. The man had more skeletons in his closet than I could count. It was all I could do to draw attention away from him with my own antics, at the cost of my relationship with Ashleigh.”

*Another piece of the puzzle*. Veronica could not help but delight in Charlotte’s revelations. The information pouring from her lips was sweeter than any cocktail.

“Powerful men and their secrets,” Veronica said with a shake of her head.

“Yes, but don’t discount us,” Charlotte said. “We have our secrets, too.”

Veronica giggled. “I’ll drink to that.”

“Women’s secrets cut deeper than any blade and can have lasting consequences. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh?” Veronica said with a raised eyebrow. “Such as?”

“I think you know.”

Veronica sat unperturbed, but inside her anxiety had formed a pit in her stomach.

*Could Charlotte be insinuating that she knew about the infidelity?*

*No. She knows nothing. This is all over-dramatic nonsense*.

The woman’s eyes narrowed and Veronica could feel a sudden heat radiate in her cheeks. She refused to believe that Charlotte was aware of her brief time with Edward. Besides, the man was meticulous at covering up their tracks. Even after his disappearance, Veronica ensured no evidence remained that could shatter the allusion of their relationship being anything more than familial.

“I’m not sure what you’re implying.”

Charlotte crossed her arms. “Think harder, Ronnie. Dig a little deeper into that devious mind of yours and come clean.”

“Devious? Wow...”

“Just stop!” she snapped, startling Ronnie. “Come clean!”

*These accusations were abhorred and it was interrupting my buzz*. *I need to put the woman in her place.*

Charlotte turned toward the bay window and picked up the martini glass Veronica left on the ledge.

“Perhaps you should go back to your room. I’ll have Charles fetch you when we’ve located Ashleigh and Danni…”

Without warning, Veronica was hit with a face full of alcohol. She jumped up out of her seat squealing. She could feel the sticky orange liquid drip down her face onto her favorite blouse.

“Son of a bitch!” she hissed. “What the f—”

“I gave you the opportunity to come clean and you didn’t.” Charlotte walked past Veronica towards the beverage cart, where she set the martini glass down. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper and turned to a disheveled Ronnie.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You slept with Edward!” Charlotte blurted out.

“I most certainly did not—”

The folded sheet of paper flew from Charlotte’s hands towards Veronica’s face. She snatched it out of the air, opened it, and nearly gasped. It was a copy of a photograph of her and Edward in an uncompromising position.

*Well, fuck,* Veronica thought.

“Let’s see how you explain your way out of all this one.”

What could she say? There wasn’t an explanation for this other than to come clean. *How could this photo even exist?* *We were so careful.*

Charlotte crossed the distance between them, grabbed the woman by the shoulders and shook her.

“Why, Ronnie? Why did you do it?”

The sound of glasses clinking together startled both women. One of Villa Teresa’s staff members appeared at the entrance of the parlor dressed in a black pantsuit. She had platinum blonde hair with youthful-looking porcelain skin. Veronica thought she looked completely out of place, especially with that hair. In fact, she was sure it was a wig. There was even a hint of familiarity.

The woman’s arms shook as she tried to balance a tray with another pitcher and clean glasses. It was clear to both women that she hadn’t seen them yet. Sensing something was amiss; she looked up at Charlotte with her hands still clutching Veronica’s shoulders. Her eyes widened. The tray began to shake violently in her hand, so the woman hurried toward the serving cart and set the tray down haphazardly, bumping into the other half-empty pitcher, nearly knocking it over. The glass clanked loudly as she scrambled to get out of the room, mumbling an apology on her way out.

Charlotte let go of Veronica and took a step back, sighing heavily and gazed down at the floor. She straightened out her clothes and ran a hand through her pink tipped hair. The interruption helped her regain composure, giving Veronica time to mull over a plausible alibi.

“This isn’t over,” Charlotte whispered, before suddenly snatching the copy of the photo off the floor, which had fallen out of Veronica’s hand during the confrontation. She folded it back up and stuffed in her pocket. “Charles needs to be informed of this—”

“We never slept together!” The words blurted out before Veronica had a chance to get her thoughts in order.

“Don’t…” Charlotte cast an accusatory finger in her direction. “Don’t lie...you owe me that much.”

“The photograph is doctored. I’m sure of it.” Veronica stood up and crossed her arms. “Whoever sent you this photograph wants you to think I slept with Edward.”

“Oh give me a break—”

“No!” Veronica shouted. “It’s all a lie. This game of whether Edward is truly alive or not is intentionally sowing doubt within us. Whether or not it’s truly Edward that left these clues for us remains to be seen, but the photograph you were sent is the perfect a way to throw people off track.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “Is sleeping with Nicky included in that hypothesis?”

This validated what Veronica feared. The only solution was to ensure she did not waiver from her own lies. *If you tell lies long enough eventually you begin to believe it, right?* Yet, she knew she needed to give her newly self-assured mother-in-law a crumb of truth in order to cast doubt over the photograph.

“You’re right.”

“First my husband and now my son…”

“No, you’re wrong about Edward. I never slept with him. Whoever knew about Nicky also wanted to keep us from solving the mystery of Edward’s disappearance. What better way to do that than to introduce a red herring?”

“So let me get this straight, you’re implying this photograph I received is a fake?”

Veronica nodded.

“Do you have any idea how ridiculous that sounds?”

“Does it, though?”

Veronica brushed past Charlotte and headed toward the cart. She grabbed a clean glass and glanced at the two pitchers. Why the Villa Teresa’s staff member didn’t take the half empty pitcher away was unprofessional. Despite her irritation, she was not one to waste alcohol. Veronica emptied the pitcher and prepared a fresh drink for Charlotte. She turned back around and approached her with extreme caution.

“If I were trying to throw someone off…” Veronica began. “I’d be doing everything I could to—”

“Enough with the theatrics and spit it out,” Charlotte said.

Her grip tightened around the glasses. “Nicky and I had history prior to my marriage with Charles. We both got caught up in the past one night and had a moment of weakness.”

Charlotte smiled. “A moment of weakness implies it only happened one time.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “I’m trying to be honest and upfront.” She handed the fresh cocktail over. Charlotte took it, but did not drink it.

“Honesty is not your forte,” she said.

Letting out a heavy sigh, she responded with, “You’re never going to let me explain.”

“I respected you, Ronnie.”

“I know, which is why I need for you to see that I’m not hiding anything. I admitted my infidelity. However, I refuse to accept that doctored photograph. It’s designed to throw you off from what’s coming.”

Charlotte chuckled. “I honestly don’t know if I have the strength for what’s to come.”

“Yes, you do.”

Her mother-in-law retreated toward the bay window, seemly on the edge of falling into another silent abyss. Veronica wondered whether anything she said would have an affect or at the very least, buy her some time. She needed to dispose of the photograph before anyone else laid eyes on it. Convincing Charlotte that she was given false information proved difficult enough.

“Will you tell Charles?”

*Are you insane? Of course, I’m not telling him*! She thought. The last thing she wanted to do was open that can of worms. Besides, if Charles knew, there’s no way he would allow her to see Nicky again or worse, she could be cut off from the fortune. There’s too much at stake and that was not something she was ready to jeopardize.

“Eventually...”

“My son deserves to know the truth.”

“Are you going to tell him if I don’t?”

Charlotte smiled. “I’m his mother. His protection is my number one priority.”

“Oh I see,” Veronica said. She drained the contents of her glass. “Is that what you tell yourself at night when you’re thinking about Ashleigh?”

Watching the color drain from Charlotte’s face delighted Veronica. The doting mother act didn’t suit her any more than the ridiculous hair style she presented.

“You’re dangerously close...”

“To what?”

“My relationship with Ashleigh is none of your concern.”

“Oh but it is,” she said. “As someone newly married into the family, you preyed upon my naiveté. When you came knocking on our door all those years ago, with no explanation for your absence other than it was ‘in the best interest of the family,’ you swore us to secrecy.”

Veronica recalled how difficult it was in the beginning, keeping secrets from her sister-in-law. After two or three martinis, Ashleigh would turn into a sobbing mess, revealing her true feelings about Charlotte. These nights prompted an overwhelming sense of guilt. The entire time Veronica could do nothing, but play along. Eventually she grew cold towards Ashleigh, sabotaging their relationship to keep the guilt at bay. It worked too well and now Ashleigh can barely stand to be in the same room.

It wasn’t long before Veronica turned to alcohol. Charles and Nicky never said a word and refused to acknowledge how the secrets were affecting them, but she knew. There used to be a period of time when Charles smelled of old spice and designer colognes not Jack Danniels. As for Nicky, he was never cutthroat nor would he have ever contemplated adultery. She often wondered whether the three of them ended up in this debacle because of the burden Charlotte placed on them.

Charlotte needed to be held accountable for the part she played.

“Ashleigh wasn’t strong enough.”

“You never gave her the chance to be,” she hissed. “And you wonder why she hates you so much…”

“Back off—”

“I’ve been more of a mother to her than you ever were—”

Charlotte’s eyes grew wide. She chucked the contents of her drink at Veronica. It missed her face by mere seconds, but caught the side of her blouse. “Go to hell, Ronnie.”

“Apparently I struck a nerve,” Veronica said, brushing off the remaining liquid. “Good!”

“You forget about me being in your corner,” she said, heading towards the exit. “Charles will hear about the infidelity and the photograph. He can decide whether you’re telling the truth or not.”

“No! You can’t tell him yet. Our focus should be trying to figure out where to go from here regarding Edward’s estate and tracking down Ashleigh and Danni. Adding this drama to the mix will only make things worse.”

“Ha! Worse for whom? You? You don’t give a shit about this family except for which of Blackthorne men you like best between your legs.”

“Screw you!”

“Charles has a right to know,” she said moving towards the exit.

“No, don’t tell him…”

“Tell me what?”

Both women stopped short of the parlor exit as Charles Blackthorne entered the room. His eyes darted between them as he waited for someone to explain.