



*Between
Fire & Ice*

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By

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Ciro Augusto Dominguez (Cy) is heir to the powerful mining empire of his parents in Chile, South America. Now their future depends on *his* ability to produce an heir, a daunting prospect, as the human race is becoming infertile. At thirty years of age, Cy is instructed to marry Elena, a fertile virgin who was artificially inseminated by his parents' scientists and raised in secret for one purpose only – to have his baby. A woman he has never seen holds the key to his future, in ways he could never have imagined. And maybe the prophesies will come true... if only Cy can outrun the fate that is thrown upon them by his parents' cold-hearted experiment.

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For Julie

Chapter One

Ciro Augusto Dominguez laid his palms on the desk and rose stiffly from his chair. His body tensed in defiance. He did little to hide his anger from his parents, facing him.

“I am supposed to marry this woman, who you have adopted, and make her pregnant?” he said bitterly, directing his annoyance at his mother.

Francisca stood—her arms crossed, her chin lifted—in that dominant posture she took whenever she was heading for a clash with her only child.

“You always knew, Cy,” she said pointedly, arching an eyebrow, as if she didn’t expect his outburst.

Cy turned his gaze to his father. Mauricio stood two steps behind Francisca. His lips were sealed in a firm line, his arms crossed too. There was no point in looking at his father for support. Of course Mauricio would back his wife. He always did. Francisca was the dominant one. The alpha female. She stood there, cold and calculating, dressed in her tight-fitting Italian suit and high heels, looking at least twenty years younger than she should, thanks to cosmetic surgery. Cy sneered. His mother was artificial in every way. The designation didn’t fit her. She had never been a mother to him. They stood watching him, contemplating his next move.

His knuckles turned white as he clenched the edge of the expensive cherry wood desk, trying to control the rage that swept through him. He was tired of being a pawn in their struggle for power, for wealth. It was true that he had always known. He had been told since childhood, like other children would be told a bedtime story. He just never thought about it. Up to now, it had been some kind of distant knowledge pushed to the back of his mind. Now the time had come, and though he should have expected it, it was dropped on him like hot oil.

“You talk as if we are animals, chosen for breeding,” Cy said, his eyes accusingly on his mother. Even her French perfume made him sick.

Francisca took a step closer to his desk, her voice turning cold. “You know that our empire depends on it. On you producing an heir. Your father and I did our duty. Now it is your turn.”

Cy straightened and gave her an icy smile. Francisca had never made him

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feel like more than a duty. “A high price to pay for power,” he snarled. “Is it worth it, Mother?”

Francisca didn't flinch at his sarcastic inclination on “Mother”. Leaning toward her son, she put her hands on the desk in front of him, challenging him to defy her superiority, piercing his gray eyes with her cold, black ones. “Nothing is more important. All the luxury you live in, you owe to us, to our enterprise. The people, our employees, the towns we support with our money, are looking at us for the answers. Fertility is being wiped from the face of the earth. It is up to us to give them hope, to ensure human survival.” She narrowed her eyes. “Your father and I have invested more money than what most royal families can afford to create you a fertile wife. Most sons would die for an opportunity like this. You should show us the gratitude we deserve,” she hissed, “even if you are not capable of showing the respect.”

Cy held his mother's gaze, unblinking. “This is not exactly what I want for my life, or what suits my lifestyle, Mother dear. You didn't bother to ask me what I wanted.”

Francisca straightened. Their eyes were level. In her heels she was as tall as her son, a head taller than her husband. “What we want is beside the point. I never suggested that you change your way of life. All you have to do is make her pregnant. For as long as she is fertile, she will serve us. It has been decided. The two of you will...” she searched for a word, waving a manicured hand in the air, “... breed, as you so delicately put it. Don't worry,” she added smugly, “she has good DNA. We have been thorough. Our scientists have done an outstanding job. You will make very clever, if not pretty, babies.” Her lips twitched into a smile. “We ran all the tests. She is definitely fertile.” Her eyes glittered at her own brilliance.

When Francisca saw Cy's frown deepen in further disapproval, she said, rolling her eyes, “And it doesn't mean that she has to be involved in your life, or in anything for that matter, not even in raising the children, as long as you keep up the show. The children, pray that there will be,” she said dramatically, “will be well taken care of. When she has no more purpose, you can simply let her retire to wherever you wish. She will not inhibit your lifestyle.

“But as far as the media is concerned, you will be the perfect, happy couple. You will keep up appearances. Here, you can do with her as you wish. See her, or not see her. Have your lovers, or not have them. But you will fertilize her when she ovulates.” She added hastily, “Of course you cannot maltreat her, because the Bureau of Female Rights is stricter than ever. The world is hungry for fertile females. One wrong move from your side, and she will be taken from us.” Her voice turned softer, masking manipulation. “Besides, I met her twice. It shouldn't be that difficult. She is not unappealing.”

Cy listened in silence, all the while feeling the injustice of his mother's

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suggestions growing, stinging at his heart. As soon as he had been born, he had been cast aside, sent away to private institutions to be trained for his future role as president of his parents' empire, Dominguez Enterprise. They owned all the copper mines from the most northern tip of the Atacama Desert to the Chilean midlands. His childhood never included love or acceptance. And now his parents were asking, no— instructing—, him to do the same.

His father moved from the shadows into the morning sunlight that fell through the big window in Cy's home office, speaking for the first time. "We sought out the best female egg and male sperm we could. It wasn't easy. Neither was it cheap. Our scientists have put considerable effort into this, from the day that you were only ten years old. This woman has been created and surrogated for you. She is fertile. You will take her as your wife and have legitimate children to ensure our empire survives. I will hear no more of this." As always, Mauricio had little to say, but when his decision was made, there was no turning back.

Cy felt the pinching headache he had woken with worsening. Damn, he needed to instruct his pharmacist to increase the dose. The pills didn't help anymore. He was on edge this morning, having again been tormented by the strange, reoccurring dream that stole his sleep and left him strangely agitated. Political and social problems were never-ending, the mines under his management were on the verge of a strike, his headaches getting more severe by the day, and now this. God knows, he didn't need this complication in his life. He rubbed at his temples.

He knew this day was coming. They had always told him. That she was there. A child made in a test tube, carried by a surrogate mother, born to his parents, and hidden in some cloister in the southern glaciers. Just last month his mother had told him that they had done more tests to be sure. Just last month she had told him that the woman was fertile and how lucky they were that their investment had worked. He had known. Still, he battled to accept what was laid down in front of him, how his future was to be molded like clay in the hands of his parents. At least up to now he had lived with the illusion of freedom. He was an independent bastard and hard to live with. He had his share of women, and he was happy with that. He wanted no wife.

"Why don't I just jack off, give you some semen, and you can fertilize your virgin's womb right there, wherever it is that she lives? That way we will have an immaculate conception," he said with a wry smile, sarcasm and anger tainting his tone.

Francisca brought her face a few inches closer to his. Her eyes reflected the blackness of her long, straight hair, expertly twisted into curls this morning. "You know it doesn't work that way, anymore. Do you seriously think we haven't considered that? The fetuses are being rejected by the female bodies,

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more and more. The risks are getting bigger. And after every miscarriage the chance of falling pregnant again gets slimmer. Our best chance is at natural conception. You are familiar with the reports. You've seen them." She threw her hands in the air. "There is no reason why this shouldn't work. You are fertile, so is she. Just get on with it, for God's sake!"

Cy started to feel the effects of the sleepless night and the headache that refused to ease. It was wearing him down. He sighed, running a hand over his face. "Do we have to get married?"

His mother jumped at his first sign of weakness. She went around the desk and placed her hands on the tense muscles of his upper arms. "An illegitimate child will not be eligible for the inheritance. You know the law." He didn't miss the fleeting look that passed between his parents. His mother had never forgiven his father for his half-brother, Mauricio's illegitimate child.

Cy sighed heavily again, desperation starting to win over anger. He was running out of arguments. "She is only a child."

Francisca spoke softly now, her voice soothing. "She is twenty. And she is fertile. She is ready."

Cy shook his head. "Ten years younger than I am. Why the rush? Most fertile women aren't married off before twenty-five these days, at least."

Francisca shot her husband another look. Irritation at her son's stubbornness made her purse her lips together. She let go of Cy, walked to the window and turned her back on him.

Taking her cue, Mauricio said, "We paid a lot of money to create her and keep her, to educate her. She has been well taught, on all subjects. She knows what is expected from her—publically, as well as in your bed. She will not embarrass you, or this family, in her role as wife. Now, don't you embarrass us. This is our family's only chance. There are no more fertile women out there to arrange another marriage for you. If you keep up this stubbornness, she will soon slip from our fingers."

Cy massaged the back of his aching neck. "Meaning?" he asked wearily.

Mauricio's gaze turned dark. He lowered his voice. "Meaning that word has gotten out. Someone leaked information about her existence. Time is of the essence now, before the media gets hold of the story. We have prepared a public statement, created a false history for her, to be sent out with the wedding announcement. We intend to turn this into positive publicity for our family. But your mother and I had secret offers from other royal families. They are willing to match our investment to acquire her for their own heirs. They are desperate for fertile women, Cy. They are desperate for what we can give you."

Francisca turned back to Cy. "Of course we cannot do that, dealing into their hands like that. We cannot give her to them. If we don't produce an heir, and they do, they will eventually take over what is ours. But we will not lose.

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The Council of Fertility Research has offered us twice the amount of money we have invested in her, should you choose not to marry her.”

Cy felt his dislike for his mother flare up, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth. He was no fool. Despite how well the Council kept it hidden, he knew what they did in secret, of the experiments and the torturous tests under their humane banner. He felt his anger rising again, worsening his headache. “You created her. You even adopted her. You are responsible for her. And yet, you are willing to send her to a laboratory as nothing more than a lab rat, her eggs to be distracted until she produces no more, only to be submitted to torturous tests and God knows what, until there is nothing left of her?” His voice lowered dangerously. “Don’t think I don’t know what the Council is, what they really do.”

Francisca arched an eyebrow. “You are well informed. Getting sentimental now, Cy? She is just a means to an end.”

Cy was caught between a rock and a hard place. Inside, he fumed. His mother had played the ultimate trump card. She knew him too well. He could never stand by and watch them send an innocent girl to such hell. He drew his hand through his thick, black hair. “So, if I refuse to marry her, you will deliver her to the Council?” His voice had an air of angry resignation.

Francisca couldn’t hide her irritability now. She sighed and checked her wristwatch. They had another appointment lined up. “You will leave us no choice.”

Cy turned and looked through the window at the garden oasis of his Atacama Desert estate, not wanting to look into his parents’ eyes in his moment of defeat, not wanting to give them that pleasure. “When are you going to bring her here?”

“She is already here,” Mauricio said. “Has been for the past two months for her body to acclimatize. Having grown up in the glaciers, her body has to get used to the heat. The desert was a shock to her system.”

Cy flung around in fury. How much could they hide from him? “So much deceit. Two months! Before I even agreed to anything. How do you expect me to trust you, when you act like this? You sicken me,” he spat out. “Where are you keeping her?”

Mauricio’s brow gathered in a warning way. “Watch your tone, son.”

It took every drop of Cy’s self-restraint to keep his temper under control. “Where?” he repeated evenly.

Mauricio looked at him warily. “It’s better that you don’t meet with her before the wedding. You’re too... explosive... right now. She hasn’t had much contact with males. No need to frighten the girl before the marriage.”

Francisca, seeing her son’s dark face, said, “Don’t fret. She is at the hot springs with her midwife who traveled with her. She is guarded. For her own

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safety. And of course, for ours. We don't want to take any chances. There have been incidents of abduction in similar cases. There are a lot of powerful, desperate families who wouldn't bat an eye in arranging a kidnapping. No one, besides us, our trusted scientists, and the nuns, naturally, knew about her existence until yesterday."

Mauricio moved forward and leaned with his back against the desk, his hands in his pockets. "We have no reason to distrust our people. Despite all our precautions, someone else, maybe at the springs, knows about her. Whoever that person is, he didn't waste any time in selling the information. We started getting requests for her acquisition yesterday, which is why we cannot delay the matter of your wedding any longer."

Cy ignored his father's last comment, frowning disapprovingly. "You mean acquisitions as in buying her, like a horse, or a cow?"

"Don't make it sound like we trade in humans," Mauricio said irritably. "It would have been a legal donation for our costs suffered. You know that."

Cy pinched the bridge of his nose. Reality was slowly but surely sinking in. "This wedding, when is it to take place?"

Francisca straightened her tailored jacket. Now that her son had submitted, she was back to her old, formal self. "Friday."

"Today is Tuesday!" Cy exclaimed. But he understood what his parents were doing. They wanted to get it over and done with as soon as possible, before he had time to change his mind, or to find a way of backing out.

Francisca took on a professional tone. "It will take place here. Your estate. This is the best option from a security point of view. We'll have more control. I have already liaised with your Security Secretary."

Of course she had, Cy thought. "We haven't had any attacks, or even attempted attacks, on our family for years," he pointed out. "Do we really have to go overboard?"

Francisca ignored his question. "Security will run pre-checks for everyone that needs to pass the gates. The Head of Security will put the procedures—that I will communicate to him—in place, and will ensure that all staff is duly informed. I have given a list of the wedding service suppliers and coordinators to the security personnel. We'll sharpen up our checks before and after the ceremony, to be on the safe side. Can't take any risks. And press releases are going out today." She tapped with her long, red fingernails on the desk. "That pretty much rounds it up," she said perkily, happy with herself.

Cy's steel gray eyes narrowed. "Press releases?" He hated publicity. It was a necessary evil, as far as he was concerned. He was hoping to keep this whole farce as quiet as possible.

Francisca smiled, pouting her glossy, red-painted lips. "Of course. The public loves an uptown wedding. We have to optimize on this. Get all the value

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from the public's goodwill that we can. Don't worry, son. I have everything under control. Your father and I are heading back to Santiago now, but I'll monitor everything from there. We'll be back on Friday morning." She walked around the desk and gave him a peck on the cheek. "And try to co-operate, will you?" She shot him another dashing smile from over her shoulder as she turned to leave, self-assured like someone who always got her way.

Cy groaned inwardly as he watched his parents leave his office. This was the last thing he needed. A virgin bride. Damn his birthright and all that came with it. He punched a touch-button on the communication screen and blasted into the microphone, "Get hold of my pharmacist and tell him to prepare a shot. I'll be in the lab in ten minutes. I need something stronger than pills today. And tell him to increase the dose when he makes the next batch. The damn pills are not working anymore."

* * * *

Cy's horse galloped through the red canyon called the Valley of Death. The animal protested under him, sweating as he drove it relentlessly through the deep sandstone labyrinth that had first been carved into its strange shapes and imaginary statues by water over thousands of years, and in later centuries, after the disappearance of the water, by dry wind. He turned from the canyon, bypassing the small oasis of San Pedro de Atacama, and then headed north in the direction of Victor's ranch, toward the hot springs.

His loyal old childhood teacher and guardian, Ignacio, had insisted he take one of the Jeeps when he left, but the shot of caffeine and chemicals that the pharmacist had given him for his headache now surged through his body in a hard rush of adrenalin, and he preferred to take the horse. He was breathing as hard as the animal, flying over the bare land stretching to the white-tipped volcano on the horizon, but this time he didn't feel the freedom that it usually ignited in him. His thoughts were burdened.

His parents had created a woman in a laboratory, a woman who grew up in an icy convent, on the most southern tip of the continent, who had almost never had contact with anyone except for the nuns, and if he wasn't to see her before the wedding, he feared that his parents had more to hide. What he was going to do when he arrived at the springs, he didn't know, but he steered his horse in that direction, anyway.

What if they had created a monster? Women, most willing to share his bed, had always surrounded him and they had never fooled him. None of them ever loved him, and he loved none. They liked his money, and his body, mostly in that order. He was always honest and upfront. He never made promises he didn't intend to keep. His women knew that he wasn't up for the taking. Not in the commitment kind of way. But he was known as a kind and generous lover, and he enjoyed his short-lived affairs. He was damned if he was going to give

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them up over an ice virgin. He needed no wife.

He only reigned in his horse when he neared the solitary river that cut away from the oasis. Not far from here, the river disappeared deep into the earth where it was warmed by the active volcano. Where the warm water resurfaced, it accumulated into several natural rock pools, resulting in the hot springs. He left the tired animal to drink from the river before tying it to a lonely tree. From there he made his way on foot along the riverbed. He was approaching the hot springs holiday bungalows from the back, not wanting to advertise his approach from the main dirt road. He was certain that his parents had guards set up at the gates, patrolling the road. He clambered onto the highest point of a rocky outcrop, from where he could see the wooden cabins built next to the river, and the rock pools that formed in the river bends. Each pool was fitted with a wooden deck and bench. In the cooler months the pools were crowded. It was out of season. Too hot. The camp was quiet. A perfect place to hide a virgin, Cy thought.

He was just about to start his careful descent when his eye caught a movement on the deck of one of the pools. Tall weeds sheltering the deck and the pool gave it a measure of privacy, but from the hill where he now crouched, he had a clear view of the wooden bench on the deck. On it sat a woman, her face wrinkled. She wore a nun's tunic and she was reading a book. The midwife. He quickly lay flat on his stomach on the warm rock to remain hidden. He took his binoculars from the pouch around his neck, and adjusted the lenses.

And then he saw her. The girl. She was floating in the hot water on her back, naked, her long, silver hair fanning around her face, her eyes closed. Cy was hit by a strange feeling that he couldn't place. It was as if a bolt of lightning had struck him, and ignited sparks in his insides. There was a foreign surge in his blood, and yet there was something familiar about it, although he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He caught his breath. She was pale, paper white, with full, firm breasts, her nipples sitting hard and pink upon them, stiffly contracted by the breeze that rippled the water. Her legs were long and shapely, her delicate ankles touching. Her slender arms were held out from her body, the palms of tiny hands turned up to the sky. Within a second he felt his body pulsing in arousal. The sight of the delicate female, crucified to the water, had the effect of a thunderstorm in a desert on him. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

She stirred. Her eyes shot open. They were blue, so light, that he could see the darker midnight blue flecks sparkling around the dilation of her black pupils through his powerful lenses, as a look of alarm flickered in her eyes. Her head turned. For a split second he thought that she was looking straight at him, but then a branch cracked on the other side of the rock pool, and they both turned

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their heads in that direction. A form moved behind the weeds. A whimper of alarm fell from her lips. It was soft, almost inaudible, but the wind carried it to his ears. In an instant, the old woman was on her feet, a white sheet that she held out blocking Cy's view as the girl quickly stepped into it, wrapping it around her body. It obstructed Cy's view, but not the figure's on the other side of the water. Cy's body tensed, one hand going to the pistol that he habitually carried on his hip, but then a male voice called out and the two women looked up.

"Elena!"

Cy knew that voice. His eyes narrowed. The man came into view. Victor. His half-brother. Elena. He had never bothered to ask for her name. Victor knew her name. With a dismay that he couldn't explain, Cy noticed that Victor wasn't a stranger to the girl, because he saw her tensed shoulders relax at the sight of the man approaching. A sudden rush of unknown possessiveness flushed through him. Victor had stalked her. He had watched her, naked. Cy had to clench his teeth, fighting the urge to scramble over the rocks and wring Victor's neck.

"Elena." His blond half-brother smiled as he crossed a narrow wooden bridge. "I was looking for you. I'm sorry, I didn't see you until now."

Foul lie. Cy tasted blood on his tongue as he bit down, exercising a great measure of constraint to prevent himself from coming forward. The bastard had crept up on her. How did they meet?

The girl didn't answer. She lowered her eyes shyly, in a manner that Cy found so provocative that he cringed.

It was the old woman who stepped forward. "Senor Augusto, Elena was bathing. Please, some privacy will be appreciated," she said sternly.

"Of course." Victor bowed in Elena's direction, a tight smile on his lips. "Forgive me, I didn't intend to stumble on you in this way. I just wanted to know if you wanted to visit the water-purifying project with me today. You said that it interested you."

Cy clenched his fists. Victor was the engineer in charge of the new dam that was being built for the water purifying project a few miles up north. How long had Victor's friendship with his virgin fiancée been going on?

Elena didn't answer. Instead, she looked toward the outcrop where Cy was hiding.

The midwife spoke again. "Please, senor Augusto, you have to go now."

Victor seemed reluctant, but he didn't argue. "Let me know, Elena, when you wish to go." He lifted her hand to his lips. He barely brushed his lips over her skin, but once more it took all Cy's self-control not to jump from his hiding place and knock his blond brother out.

His eyes followed Victor until he disappeared behind the reception area of

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the cabins. When he looked back, he saw, to his disappointment, that Elena was already dressed in a loose, white robe, following the old witch who guarded her, the women making their way back to the camp.

* * * *

If Cy brooded over what he had seen at the hot springs, he couldn't give it enough of his undivided attention to find out what Victor was up to behind his back, because not only was he swiped with interviews and arrangements for his upcoming wedding, but he also had to deal with the strike that finally materialized at his copper mines. The negotiations took every last bit of patience and resolve from him, the long hours of working leaving him little sleep in his tormented nights, where his reoccurring dream stole what was left of his peace. In the moments he lay awake, he thought about the woman who was called Elena, and the feelings he had experienced when he had seen her floating in the water, her arms outstretched, palms open, like a lamb to be slaughtered, a virgin sacrifice.

His mother had meant it when she had said that she had taken care of things. It was going to be the wedding of the year. Vans and delivery trucks poured through his gates, offloading tables, chairs, cutlery, table linen, crystal glasses, flowers, food, wine, and champagne, along with a large group of artisans responsible for the feast, each of them boasting better credentials than the next. His signature was required on more pieces of paper than what he had ever signed, and the endless interruptions and questions about where he wanted what, drove him insane.

Being the typical male that he was, he never considered that a suit had to be prepared for his new bride, until his mother had informed him that she had given orders for the suite in the west wing, adjoining to the main rooms that he occupied, to be aired, cleaned and readied.

Elena's belongings were sent a day ahead of her. His mother's private transport company arrived with trunks filled to the brim with strange, dried herbs, seeds and plants, flasks full of liquids and books, over which Ignacio—the old wizard, as Cy referred to him affectionately—got extremely excited. There was only one small suitcase with clothes. She owned nothing else. Security checked everything upon arrival, as instructed by his mother. His Head of Security, Sebastian Alvarez, informed Cy that there were no dangerous substances or poison in her possessions, only herbal medicine and tinctures. Great, Cy thought. The last thing he needed was for his future wife to be some kind of a witch. Like everyone else, he had heard the rumors: that the strange place where Elena was hidden and educated in icy Patagonia was some kind of cloister where the old witches were reputed to perform an ancient and forbidden magic in secret.

* * * *

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Elena herself was brought to Cy's Atacama estate on the morning of their wedding ceremony only. She was to be married to a man whom she had never seen. She was filled with fear for a future that seemed foreign, and longing for the only home she ever knew. Even if the cloister wasn't much of a home, it was known to her. For two months she had slept in a strange place, in a strange bed. Her cold, stony chamber had been swapped for a hot, wooden cabin. And now she stood in her new bedroom, where she will become senora Ciro Augusto Dominguez, in so much luxury, thick wool carpets, heavy wood furniture and antique embroidery, that her throat tightened.

Not only did she feel disorientated, lost and terribly doomed, but her body was still suffering from severe heat attacks. It was difficult to find an appetite. The smell of food alone was enough to make her sick. There was something in the purified water that made her stomach clench. She constantly felt like fainting from the altitude. Her head ached and her muscles were slow. The fertility treatment didn't help. Francisca's doctor injected her with hormones to stimulate her ovaries into producing eggs, and it made her feel sick—a natural reaction to the treatment.

On top of that, the never-ending blood tests to monitor her hormone levels left her anemic and weak. And standing in the air-conditioned room, she shivered thinking about the visit that she had had from Francisca Augusto Dominguez. She had only seen the woman twice. Once when she was ten years old, and the week before she left Patagonia. There was no doubt about her future mother-in-law's darkness. It dripped from her sugar coated words. Elena could almost smell it on her, oozing from the other woman's pores. Francisca had been clear on what was expected of Elena, although that she already knew. She had been raised to understand and submit to her destiny from the day that she was born.

She was terrified of her wedding night, although her midwife had ensured her that her future husband was a kind lover, known to be gentle, and that she had nothing to fear. Yet, she feared. She feared him. She had never seen him, but now, being in his house, she felt his dark, male strength, and his disapproval. She feared Victor's words about the monster her future husband was. She feared that they held truth. She had been well trained on her future husband's person, his likes and dislikes. She knew all there was to know about the man they lovingly called Cy, except his face. The nuns had never shown her any photos. They argued that the physical was of no importance. Only the spiritual mattered.

Elena wondered about men, what they were like. She had had very little dealings with men. She had met a few travelers who passed through the convent, and some who supplied their food and other living commodities, but the nuns never allowed her to speak much with them. Even in the fleeting

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greetings, she could feel their difference. The first man to ever befriend her was Victor. He seemed kind and bent on showing her favors, but her strongly developed instinct warned her that he wasn't to be trusted. Yet, she couldn't help but to fear his detailed description of her husband-to-be's dark character.

She had never been loved. She didn't know the emotion, but she knew that it lurked in the deepness of her soul; that she, too, was capable of loving, like the stories that she had read. She didn't fantasize about her wedding day. She was realistic. But she was hoping, even if it was only a flutter in the depths of her being, that she would be measured and not found too light by the man who was, from that day on, taking legal responsibility for her future.

A renewed sadness filled her senses. She wanted to go home. She missed the eerily illuminated blue glaciers, the familiar iced paths under her feet, the coldness of the nights, and the long darkness in which she got accustomed to dream.

She feared for her new imprisonment. But she knew it was only her mind reacting to the unknown. She refused to give in to pitiful feelings, to feeling sorry for herself. She was lucky to have been chosen, created, for such a privileged purpose. She turned her practiced mind to consciously counting her blessings. She never went hungry. She always had a place to rest her head. She had clothes. Now, she will have family.

She stood in the room that was hers, looking out over the garden—a small speck of green in a vastness of sand—which was lavishly decorated for the wedding reception. Subconsciously she rubbed her arm where the fresh feeling of the needles that had probed and pricked her skin still ached. By now she was used to the weekly tests. But they had been relentlessly drawing her blood and taking every imaginable kind of sample daily for the past week. The test results had made Francisca happy—it confirmed that her mother-in-law had timed the wedding perfectly. She was ovulating. And tonight she would perform her duty, the very thing that she had been created for. She should not fail. She shivered at both thoughts—duty; and failure.

She had been bathed by a maid, coiffured by a hairdresser, dressed by the wedding dressmaker, and her pretty features expertly highlighted by a professional make-up artist. Francisca herself, wearing a breathtaking figure-hugging burnt orange silk dress, had come to hang her family diamonds on Elena's neck, and to clip the teardrop earrings onto her ears. Now, with all these precious stones, Elena had two armed guards at her side. The maids and the dressmaker milled around her, pulling at the fabric of the bodice, tucking a curl back into place.

She looked down into the green garden, where everything was drowned in an abundance of imported roses. Her eye caught a tall, dark figure, dressed in a black silk suit, talking to someone. He had pitch-black hair, a tanned skin, and

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his broad chest was tight with an air of agitation that emanated from him. There was anger in the way his long, muscled legs stalked around the area, and something disturbing in the way he waved his arms about in an unsatisfied manner. His strong features were distorted with an unhappy growl. The servant in front of him cringed. She knew instantly that it was him. She felt it. Her soul recognized him. It was *Ciro Augusto Dominguez*. Her destiny. *Elena* suddenly felt weak with the strong reaction that electrified her body. She felt her knees trembling. His rejection of her rang through the dry air. She could hear it as clear as a bell. If she had any hope before, her future now looked as dark as the man who tainted it with the force of his unhappiness.

She aimed for a stuffed chair in front of the dresser, but the dressmaker, who was taking a veil from his assistant, prevented her.

“No, darling,” he said, alarmed, “you’ll crease the dress.”

Instead, she held onto the dresser to prevent herself from sliding to the floor, and prayed for strength to get through the day, and the rest of her life.