

**Sofia Cruz**

**The Cartel**

**Book I**

**1969-1976**

**Calí, Colombia**

**CHAPTER ONE**

Emilio Espinoza traced the scars across the undersides of his wrists, now white with time, but still visible. Not like the ones that remained on his heart.

Moving to the ornate wooden armoire, he picked up a framed photograph of his brother Antonio and his lovely young wife Lydia. He stared at his brother's face, his eyes becoming slits of hatred. He closed them, and threw the picture across the room, smashing the frame against the wall, his hands balling into fists as his vision clouded with tears. Glass shattered into small splinters across the adobe-tiled floor. Pulling the photograph from between the shards of glass, filled with rage and despair, Emilio ripped it into pieces.

Antonio was the reason the scars upon his heart never faded. What a fool his brother was! Antonio had no idea of his brother's true feelings toward him and Emilio planned to keep it that way—for now. But when he struck, Antonio would know. He would feel nothing but pain; the kind Emilio felt everyday of his life.

Emilio's plans were long term. They had to be. He knew the desired effect might not come to fruition for years, perhaps even a decade. But he had plans and they had been brewing for nearly five years, since he was merely a boy of fifteen. He had been patient for this long. He would be patient for as long as it took.

He remembered that day five years ago so very clearly.

\*\*\*\*

Emilio came home early from school, ditching because he hadn't studied for a test. He did not want Antonio to find out that he'd left school early, so he crept quietly up the outside back steps to the guesthouse, which was several yards away from the main quarters, a place where he knew he could hide out until the appropriate time.

He smelled the candles first. He smiled, knowing he was about to get a show from his Don Juan of a brother and some beautiful young thing. Antonio was known to bring women to the guesthouse and light a few rose scented candles, put on some soft music, and then, having set the mood, complete his conquest.

Emilio crawled along the balcony of the small villa, carefully rising up to peek into the window. The music playing--soft, low, romantic--the woman's back toward him. Antonio held her close, stroking her long black hair, whispering something in her ear.

That hair, the lithe body. A shiver of delight slithered through Emilio as he watched in awe.

Antonio placed his hands on the woman's shoulders and easily slipped off her dress, letting it fall to the ground. Emilio closed his eyes, ashamed to be watching. But curiosity and raging hormones opened them. The woman stood completely naked. Antonio swept her up and carried her to the bed and laid her down on the red sateen comforter.

Emilio felt the first painful tug on his heart when he saw her face as Antonio put his hands on either side of it and kissed her. Emilio blinked his eyes, shook his head and looked again. Antonio pulled back, reached over to the nightstand by the bed and poured her a glass of wine. It was then, as Emilio watched her drink the velvet liquid that he saw, understood and learned of betrayal of the worst kind.

There, drinking wine, falling under his brother's seductive spell, laid Marianna. His Marianna. The girl of fourteen who was destined to be his wife, his lover. Emilio loved this girl and she'd sworn her devotion to him. They had been nothing but lies.

His body, which had shivered with delight watching the show, now, shook with rage. The sweat trickling from his brow ran down his face and into his mouth tasting salty and bitter. He made himself turn back to the window and watch.

After he watched the two people he'd loved more than life do the worst imaginable to him, he ran into the cacao fields and vomited, ached and cried. His clothing wet from sweat created from his anger and the intense humidity sweeping across the overgrown fields. Finally, he stopped, and falling to his knees he threw back his head. "Marianna!" He bellowed her name over and over again in such agony that it silenced the birds across the valley set in between two mountain ranges.

How could she have done this? His Marianna? How could Antonio have done this? Emilio had loved Marianna since they were seven years old. Even as a child, he'd known that God had placed her here on this earth for him, only him. Seeing them together, watching as they grew into young adults together, Antonio knew this, and still, he had stolen her from him, betraying them both.

Brokenhearted and filled with vengeance, Emilio waited for her to leave the villa. He stalked her path until she reached the edge of the fields where he grabbed her from behind, covered her mouth with a hand stronger than even he realized. Knocking her to the ground, he wrapped his hands around her tiny neck and strangled her to death as she struggled, watching him with knowing and terrified eyes. Then, snatching her up, he carried her to the river where he weighted her body with large rocks and tossed her into the rushing waters. She had never been found.

Emilio had sobbed, distraught, filled with remorse, anger, and fear. His brother, unaware that Marianna lay at the bottom of the river, consoled him saying they'd find the lost girl and urged him to move on with his life. No. Emilio wanted no life at all. He was beyond caring for anything life could offer him. A few days after killing his love, filled with irrevocable guilt, desperation, and hatred, he slit his wrists.

Antonio found him lying in a pool of blood by the river, and frantically sent for the doctor, begging him to save his brother. Emilio lost a great deal of blood, but with time and care, was healed. When he was well enough and out of danger, Antonio screamed at him, "You are a fool! There is not a woman in this world whose life is worthy of taking your own."

\*\*\*\*

Now many years later he understood why he had watched the entire seduction take place. He now knew why he had not bolted away at the first glance of her beautiful face, and why he bore the pain of seeing her in his brother's embrace. He had to completely fill his heart with his hatred of Antonio, fill it with the rage of betrayal. He'd succeeded, and he'd learned to hide that hatred. Emilio was as smart and conniving as his older brother. After all, it was his older brother who had taught him how to be evil.

As he looked out the large, paned window that faced the main house, Emilio vowed to seek revenge. He lived in that same dreaded guesthouse, the place where he'd watched his reality being pulled out from under him. But he didn't mind. Living there meant he could never forget. And living there meant he had a good view of Antonio and Lydia's bedroom, where he watched Lydia every morning as she took her coffee out onto the balcony. She dressed in sheer negligees, unaware of his watching eyes. She was gorgeous, truly magnificent. And she was part of Emilio's plan.